Shifting the focus: Children's image making practices and their implications for analysis

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Abstract

This paper provides analytic focus on the productive and editorial contexts of children and young people's image-making and its implications for a theory of photography. Drawing on participatory research in which children and young people worked alongside researchers to create a visual narrative of their lives, the paper suggests that greater attention to children's image-making brings an important dimension to the interpretative challenges generated by the visual. Through a focus on image making and its productive and editorial contexts, the paper shifts the analytic focus away from the image as a site of meaning-making to encompass the ways in which photographs acquire multiple meanings through the lived experience of their creators.

Key words: childhood, visual methods, interpretation, context, production, creative process

Introduction: Interpretive dilemmas and possibilities

The starting point for this paper is the interpretative dilemmas encountered by a set of images generated during the course of a participatory ethnographic research project with children and young people. Part of a larger project exploring residents' experiences of living in an economically disadvantaged neighbourhood (Fink, 2012; Lomax et. al, 2011; Lomax, 2012) the research was underpinned by a participatory epistemology through which children and young people were supported to determine the research questions, methods and dissemination. In common with others working within the sociology of childhood and more particularly in children's geographies and

education (Clark, 2010; Morrow, 2001; Prosser, 2007; Sewell, 2011) the research was framed by a commitment to understand children's lives from their perspectives and informed by their particular insights, to engage in a visual dialogue with policy and practice. For many working in this field this has involved including children and young people in the analysis and interpretation of images, a practice which, it is suggested, offers a more nuanced and rigorous approach to understanding image-based data (Luttrell, 2010; Mannay, 2010; Orellana, 1999; Sewell, 2011). As Orellana (1999) notes, an analytic approach which encompasses the intentions of the child-photographer makes visible children's lives from their perspectives, rendering meaningful what might otherwise be invisible to adult viewers and including adult co-researchers.

This emphasis on image-makers' perspectives denotes a significant move in interpretive emphasis away from the image as the primary source of meaning (Edwards, 2009) to one in which images are theorised as 'icons' through which 'a range of different meanings may be invested' (Rose, 2001). However, while this constitutes an important epistemological shift through which images are understood not as simple truth revealers but as slippery, contested and subject to multiple readings (Banks, 2001; Pink, 2001; Radley, 2010), the notion that meaningful interpretation is contingent on knowing its creator's intentions is nonetheless problematic, not least because these are not always available to viewers (Lomax and Fink, 2010). Moreover these 'intentions' must themselves be translated by researchers, a process which is itself suffused with differences of status and power. As Grosvenor and Hall (2012) elaborate, the relationship between text, image and context is a complex one, not least because of the immediacy and seductiveness of photographs, more so when these images are of children and young people (Holland, 2004). Indeed, as Thomson (2008:10) reminds us, children's viewpoints may be marginalised precisely because of their status as children whose lives and images are 'not amenable to straightforward adult readings.'

These interpretative dilemmas were brought into focus in this research project through the particular ways that (adult) viewers articulated their responses to the images in ways which revealed 'a complex structure of looking' (Holland, 2004: 14). This had little to do with the image itself (Banks, 2001) but appeared to be connected to viewers' expectations framed by cultural conventions around the representation of economically disadvantaged children. Rather than seeing this as a problem for the interpretative process, the idea that viewers 'bring their own social and cultural understandings' (Thomson, 2008: 10) to the interpretative act is a helpful one as it enables us to see the ways in which images can be repositories for multiple meanings.

However by further extending this analysis to encompass image-makers' expectations and understandings we can begin to develop an approach in which contexts of production (intentions, conventions, genre etc) can be theorised as framing image meanings too. The second part of this paper articulates such an approach by building on Trachtenberg's (1989) suggestion that the intelligibility of images requires a consideration of the "internal dialogue" between images . …. and their "external dialogue(s) with their times". It argues that an elaboration of the context of image production, which encompasses the ways in which image-makers themselves orient to, acknowledge and resist external dialogues (including public anxieties about poorer places and the lives of poorer children), offers a more nuanced understanding of the various readings that these images offer.

Research contexts, data and methods

The research took place in an economically disadvantaged neighbourhood with high levels of income-poverty and ill-health and low levels of child well-being (Index of Multiple Deprivation, 2011; Social Policy Research Unit, 2010) but more particularly in a neighbourhood which is stigmatised locally as a 'failed estate' (anonymised source) subject to media and public stereotyping framed

by a 'geography of lack' (Rose, 2006) and a 'reputational geography' burdened by 'the deadweight of past and present stigmatizing representations' (Parker and Karner, 2010: 1464).

Fourteen children took part as co-researchers, generating a number of visual outputs including over 600 photographs. These included images of the natural and physical environment (parks and green spaces; plants and pets, play equipment, phone booths, community art work, houses and street signs) as well as images of themselves and other children from the estate posed and at play. The remainder of the paper draws on three of these images ('Shrubs' 'Hands' and 'Camera') to consider children's reflexive engagement with image-making as a process, analysis which is made possible by the children and young people's visual record of the research which included filming themselves during fieldwork and in their editorial discussions. In this way and reminiscent of Edwards (2009:34) plea for a 'corrective anthropology' which incorporates an 'ethnographically grounded consideration of the functions and expectations that make photography meaningful' these data give scope for an analytic approach which can encompass and make visible the ways in which photographs acquire meanings through the lived experience of their creators.

Productive and editorial contexts: Mediated images

The first of these photographs, (figure 1, 'Shrubs') depicts the child-researchers playing in shrubbery in one of the estate's parks. From my viewpoint as adult researcher, this image captures the children's playfulness (with each other, the digital technology and the natural landscape) which is evocative of Colin Ward's (1977:86) observation that 'children will play everywhere and with anything' and the importance ascribed to play and its spaces in the wider literatures (Hendrick, 2003; Holloway and Valentine, 2000). However, my interpretation, while empirically grounded and theoretically driven, is not immediately available to others who will bring a different set of

knowledges and assumptions but rather is filtered through my particular recollections of working with these children. Reviewing the video the children made, I am reminded of their playfulness as they chased each other through these shrubs and, moreover, the ways in which these activities were performed in response to and 'for the camera' (Lomax and Casey, 1998). These themes are observable in the children's talk about how to compose their images framed by their understandings of what might work visually ('figure 2, 'Hands') and a developing sense of the narrative they are creating and how it might be interpreted by potential viewers:

Martine[1]: I like this one, it shows how well we work together.

Chloe: Yes, it's a funky photo, I like it too.

(Martine, aged 14; Chloe aged 14)

This reflexivity is also evident in Jade's discussion of 'Camera' (figure 3), one of several photographs in which the children are posing with the camera and film-making equipment. Her comments:

'I like that one because it's saying we that we actually took it and it's part of it (the film-making)' (Jade, aged 12)

reveal a sense of collective ownership of the image-making whilst also making visible an awareness that film-making is itself a mediated process, open to multiple interpretations.

Lived contexts: Childhoods

An important theme which is revealed in the children's photo-production is their significant attachments and pride in their neighbourhood, themes which I suggest are intimately connected to

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[1] All names are pseudonyms.

and observable in their pleasure in the creative process and their deployment of particular media (captions, drawings and still-photography) and visual tropes (skipping, bouncing and humorous 'talking' sticks) which collectively and powerfully convey the significance of where they live and its importance for their friendships. This includes a potent sequence in which they take turns to glide down a slide, proclaiming 'we love *Estate*[2]' and another in which they worked together to create a living diorama in which their own bodies spell out the estate's name.[3] Similarly, the creation of a 'photo tree' included captions which proudly proclaimed their pride and social connectivity:

> 'Go us! We are amazing!' (Chloe, aged 14)
>
> '*Estate* is not just an estate. We are a <u>TEAM</u>! (Hope, aged 13)

In this way then, these images appear to capture the children's friendships and connections to the estate including the importance of outdoor and peripheral spaces (park edges; grassy areas) which adult residents identified as significant for their own social connectivity and well-being (Fink, 2012) but whose significance for the children is observable in their embodied engagement with place captured ethnographically. But perhaps more important are the ways in which these images appear to resist and challenge negative stereotypes about life in economically disadvantaged places which are predicated on the problematisation of children and young peoples friendships and 'lack of community' (Morrow and Mayall, 2009; Rogaly and Taylor, 2011). This includes the ways in which the children take ownership of, celebrate and re-inscribe the estate's name in ways which might be understood as a powerful, visual reclaiming of place. As the final

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[2] 'Estate' is a pseudonym.

[3] These images are not included here as they would identify the children.

section considers it is this reading that some adult viewers can find particularly obtuse or problematic, schooled in media mages in which economic disadvantage is symbolised in particular stigmatizing and reductive ways (Connor and Huggins, 2010; Krase, 2004) and which further attest to the importance of thinking beyond the image in a way that acknowledges the significance of context.

External contexts: Resisting narratives of poorer places

The previous section suggested ways in which an understanding of the contexts in which images are produced may helpfully inform the interpretative process. In this final section I consider the 'external dialogues' (Trachtenberg, 1989) that framed the research in order to suggest that children's image-making might be understood as a dialogue with broader public narratives about 'disadvantage'. As Callum (aged 12) explained 'people don't think much of *Estate*', a comment which reveals his attentiveness to the ways in which the estate is stigmatised in the local press and by policy interventions predicated on revealing the 'place as the problem' (Popay et al, 2003).

In contrast to the routine depiction of poorer children as the passive recipients of welfare (Holland, 2004:162) the children's image-making appears to challenge the ways in which statistics and media representations may diminish their experiences (Morrow and Mayall, 2009). This is not to suggest that the children are not materially 'disadvantaged' but rather to bring in to view the ways in which children themselves understand their lives within this discursive and socio- economic context.

A second subtlety is also at play here, concerning the 'popular imagination of the slum' (Rogaly and Taylor, 2010:51) and ways in which poorer places can look pleasant. As Rogaly and Taylor reveal in their encounters with economically deprived communities:

'None of the visual signs which serve as a shorthand for 'deprived council estate' immediately jump into view: no threatening concrete alleyways, no swirling litter and plastic bags, no boarded shops or houses. (Rogaly and Taylor 2011:50)

Rather, as the children's images attest, it takes a closer look to notice the signs of disadvantage as well as the ways in which poorer communities strive to 'keep up appearances.' As Rogaly and Taylor (2010) explore, 'being seen to be dealing with poverty' (through attention to children's appearance for example) is one way in which poorer families avoid moral judgements about their lives and are able to present themselves as 'respectable'. Paradoxically then families' awareness of the social stigmatization of poverty and children's own agency and visual sophistication may render these experiences invisible and leave them 'little room for manoeuvre' (Holland, 2004:14). In contrast, by exploring the subtle ways that children themselves attend to these contexts in their image-making, the important ways they and their communities resist negative stereotyping within the face of disadvantage are brought in to view.

Concluding remarks

This paper has suggested that the interpretive process is enriched by a focus on the ways in which images are produced. Attention to these contexts makes visible the ways in which children's productive and editorial decisions are themselves shaped by the broader socio-economic and discursive context of their lives. Foregrounding these in the analysis offers the potential for a more nuanced understanding of images and childhoods. As Trachtenberg reminds us:

'the relation between images and imputed meanings is fraught with uncertainties, for like opaque facts, images cannot be trapped readily within a simple interpretation. They have a life of their own which often resists the efforts

of photographers and viewers (or readers) to hold them
down as fixed meanings.' (Trachtenberg's,1989:xv)

An interrogation of these 'uncertainties' through an examination of the productive context of image-making may help to make clearer this opacity which may otherwise gloss over the complexities of children's lives and elide their capacity to articulate them.

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Appendices

Figure 1: 'Shrubs'

Figure 2: 'Hands'

Figure 3: 'Camera'