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Eco-maps and photo-elicitation: Reflections on the use of visual methods in social work research with children and young people

Introduction

This paper reflects on the methodological approach adopted during a study which explored the experiences of young people in foster care in the United Kingdom (UK). The study used a novel combination of visual methods, which included eco-maps and photo elicitation. The paper begins with a brief account of the context of foster care in the UK, and provides an overview of the theoretical framework that underpinned the study. The two main sections of the paper provide an overview of the two different visual research methods that were used, **eco-maps** and then **photo elicitation**. These sections include examples where these approaches have previously been used in research, as well as reflections on their application in this study. The challenges and the benefits of using visual research methods with children and young people in foster care are considered throughout. The paper concludes by arguing that these chosen methods were of value as they enabled the collection of important data that may otherwise have gone unobserved.

The context of the study and the theoretical framework

This study explored the experiences of young people growing up in foster care in the United Kingdom. In the UK, there are over 90,000 children and young people in public care and the vast majority, over 79%, are placed in foster care (The Fostering Network 2016). The reasons children and young people enter care often centre on concerns of abuse and/or neglect and this is often combined with having parents who have substance misuse and/or mental health difficulties (Biehal 2010). The study focused on the social networks of young people in foster care, as the experience of care has the potential to significantly disrupt a person's relationships. For example, the initial move to foster care disrupts their familial relationship and this is then often compounded with multiple placement moves, which can also mean multiple school moves.

To explore this experience of network disruption the concept of social capital was

chosen as a theoretical framework to underpin the study. Social capital is a concept that highlights the resources that are inherent in a person's social network (Halpern 2005). Our relationships in our networks can help us to get by in day to day life by providing valuable emotional support (Putnam 2001). Our relationships can also enable us to get ahead by linking us into opportunities, for example, by highlighting job vacancies. These linking opportunities in a network are described as representing bridging social capital (Putnam 2001). Bourdieu (1984) argued that social capital is reproduced through the practices and processes that people engage in within social networks. The value of Bourdieu's approach is that it recognises power and acknowledges that social capital is a key element in the reproduction of inequality. This is of relevance to young people in foster care as it is reported that they are a stigmatised group that often face social exclusion (Stein 2012). The research design that follows was developed in order to examine how young people in foster care engaged in practices to maintain and build social capital.

Research design

Bourdieu (1992) argues that the 'construction of the object' to be studied is key in research design as it leads to the process which determines the most appropriate methods to employ. In this instance the constructed object of study is the social capital of young people living in foster care. Therefore, in order to explore how young people in foster care engage in day to day social practices in their social networks, a qualitative methodology was chosen. This approach generated rich data about young people's interactions with their families, peers and communities, which subsequently highlighted how they are preserving, maintaining and building their access to social capital. The choice of a qualitative approach is also supported by a growing consensus within the social capital literature that suggests the concept's greatest value is as an analytical device in qualitative study (Coleman, 1988; Morrow 2001; Holland 2007; Schaefer-McDaniel 2004).

Qualitative research is also used widely in the field of social work research; it has been described as a methodological approach that fits well with social work practice (Gilgun 1984, 1994; Gould and Shaw 2001). This is evident when one considers how a qualitative researcher tries to uncover and understand social phenomena by examining

peoples' interpretation of their experiences. This description has similarities to the ways that social workers attempt to undertake assessments in practice. Furthermore, Denzin and Lincoln (2011, p.3) describe qualitative research as 'a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible'. However, one difference between the two is that social work practice aims to directly improve the situations of people receiving the service in a timely manner, as opposed to research, which does not directly aim to improve the situations of research participants within a given timescale (Padgett, 1998).

Alongside the visual methods used in this study a semi-structured interview schedule was devised. Burgess (1984) describes semi-structured qualitative interviews as 'conversations with a purpose'. Hemming (2008, p.153) describes how 'generally they start from a number of predetermined questions or topics, but then adopt a flexible approach for discussion with the interviewee'. The interview schedule consisted of a range of areas and possible questions to cover during the interactions with the young people. The purpose of using the semi-structured interview schedule was to provide a framework to specifically explore the research questions but which allowed sufficient flexibility to follow relevant areas of interest that the young people might raise during the interviews. After two small pilots, I began the substantive period of data collection.

Visual Methods

Bryman (2008, p.424) argues that 'one of the most striking developments in qualitative research in recent years has been the growth of visual research methods'. However, the use of images is not a new phenomenon with the early social scientists, in particular anthropologists, using photographs to explore and explain cultural practices. For example, Bateson and Mead (1942) took over 2500 photographs in their visual ethnography of Balinese cultural life. Becker (1974, p.89) describes how during the 1960's the use of visual methods declined, which he believes coincides with the rise of positivism and prioritising what is seen as objective, hard data. Recent years have seen a renewed interest in visual research methods.

Visual research methods were employed in this study predominantly as tools to assist with communication and organise data. However, the purpose of engaging with the young people was to capture their experiences, so whilst the methods were for the most

part useful tools, if during an interview a participant became uninterested or reluctant to take photos or draw an eco-map they were put to one side. For example, Chrissie was one such participant who engaged with the eco map exercise, but struggled to take photographs for the photo elicitation part of the study. In this instance the focus then became about developing a rapport and having a discussion using the semi-structured schedule for guidance.

Interviews with children and young people

Power differentials have the potential to negatively influence the interview process with children and young people (Hemming 2008). Westcott and Littleton (2005) describe how this may become evident with the emergence of a model of teacher initiation-child response-teacher feedback, a process that children expect from adults. Punch (2002, p.7) explains that this occurs as children and young people 'are not used to expressing their views freely or being taken seriously by adults because of their position in an adult dominated society'. It has been argued that in order to minimise this power imbalance, researchers need to maximise the children's participation in the research process, with methods that encourage their active participation (Hill 1997; Williams & Rogers 2016). Punch (2002) argues that researchers need to do this in a reflexive and sensitive way to ensure they do not patronise children and young people by underestimating their competence. Punch (2002, p2) goes on to suggest that a way to build on participants' competence is by combining traditional 'adult' research methods, for example interviews (which demonstrates equal treatment), with more creative 'task-based methods' that may help children feel more comfortable with an adult researcher. This approach is also in keeping with the anti-oppressive values of social work, which should be reflected in social work research (Rogers 2012).

The study aimed to strike this balance by adopting research methods that recognised the participant's competence and avoided patronising the young people, whilst negating the power dynamic and promoting participation. Eco-maps (Hartman 1978) and photo elicitation (Drew et al. 2010) were chosen as methods in order to achieve this. Eco-maps have been used in qualitative research settings with adults, for example Ray and Street (2005) and children, for example Hunt et al. (2008). Photography has also been used with children, for example Rasmussen (2004) and adults, for example, Schwartz (1989). The methods chosen in this study could therefore be described as 'participant

friendly' and as such they avoid the potentially demeaning term 'child friendly' (Punch 2002). The use of photography provided a more holistic picture of their day to day lived experience, specifically the activities that they are involved in and their relationship with places and spaces. The photography element was adopted in order to add to the research data and to glean another perspective of the ways that young people access social capital. This approach is also participatory and enabled the young people to become actively involved in the data collection.

Eco-maps

Eco-maps were utilised to focus on social networks, which is the site of social capital; they also provide an opportunity to explore activities and places that were important to the young people. Hartmann (1978) is credited as devising the first eco-map as a tool for assessing the family system. It remains a key assessment tool in social work, particularly in the field of family placement (Cournoyer 2010; Wilson et al. 2011). The eco-map allows practitioners to explore people's social networks and their relationships with their families, friends and communities (Coulshed & Orme 2006). This focus on social networks and people's interactions and participation in their environment has a natural synergy with the concept of social capital. Themes from social capital theory such as sense of belonging and community participation (Schaefer-McDaniel 2004) have a clear fit with the 'person in their environment' (Kemp et al. 1997) approach, which is intrinsic to the form of eco-map used in this study. Despite the initial intention of the eco-map to map family units, it provided the opportunity for the young people in this study to include and discuss family that they no longer live with, and the carers that they now live with, as well as their interactions with their wider community.

Eco-maps are grounded in systems theory, which is a functionalist approach that attempts to explain how human behaviour exists within an interconnected system. Bertalanffy (1950) devised systems theory to explain self-regulating systems in the field of biology, arguing that the natural world is an interconnected system that in his view changes through a systematic process of feedback. Bateson (1972) was influential in introducing the systems approach to the social sciences and this subsequently became central in the field of family therapy as it is noted as providing a useful theory base for therapeutic assessments and interventions with families (Dallos & Draper 2000). Burnham (1986) highlights how systems theory is also useful for social work

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interventions with families and described how adopting a systemic approach to social work practice means that practitioners can understand presenting problems within the context of a wider system.

Although Hartmann's (1978) eco-map is underpinned by systems theory it is also a practical assessment tool which involves the process of mapping the person in their environment. This allows an assessment of potential conflicts of power in their relationships as well as their interactions with their wider community. Hartmann's version of the eco-map consists of drawing interconnected circles to represent the person in their environment. This exercise starts by drawing a circle in the middle of the paper and writing the person's name inside of it. Circles are then drawn to represent people, places and services that are considered important to the person. The eco-map is intended to generate discussion about the strength of relationships and the importance of places and activities. This can then be represented visually by lines that connect the circles, for example, by using a strong dense line between circles to represent strong relationships, or by drawing a jagged faint line to represent stressed or weak relationships. Arrowheads on the lines also indicate the flow of energy and support. Kemp et al (1997) describe how maps can highlight acts of reciprocity between a person and their network. This directly relates to Putnam's (2001) work on social capital where he argues that reciprocity is a key element of social capital. It is important to acknowledge that a potential limitation with eco-maps is that once the information is drawn up it becomes static and as such it represents a snapshot of that time.

In this study, I initially tried the arrows and lines in the first pilot interviews with young people; however, it seemed to add a level of unnecessary complexity for the young people to grasp. I therefore adopted a free form mapping approach asking the young people to use stencils and coloured gel pens to draw the people important to them in circles on the large sheet of paper. They were initially instructed to draw themselves in a circle in the middle then draw the people and places which were most important to them, closest to them on the map. The recorded conversations that took place about the people and places generated detailed data that was vital in capturing the context of the relationship being represented.

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The existing literature on eco-maps predominantly focuses on their use in direct social work practice; however, they have also been used in research and specifically with young people in public care. For example, Farmer and Moyers (2008) used the eco map to gather quantitative data about the social networks of young people in kinship foster care by recording numbers of people and frequencies of contact. Hunt et al. (2010) also used eco-maps in their research with young people in kinship foster care using a model based on concentric circles and predetermined domains.

A potential limitation of using eco-maps in in this social work research project was that it is a tool widely used in social workers in practice. Some of the young people were aware of it and this may have identified me as a social worker instead of a researcher, which potentially could have impaired the young people's openness. However, familiarity with the tool may also have been a benefit, as the young people's previous experience of eco-maps may have meant they were more practised and adept at completing the map and thus able to more easily provide information. For example, they may have had the opportunity to reflect on people and places that they left off the last time they completed an eco-map, allowing them the opportunity to rectify omissions that they made in the past.

By visiting the young people on two occasions I was also able to minimise important people being omitted from their eco-maps, as at the start of the second interview I was able to reintroduce the maps and review them with the participants. This was valuable as it allowed me to seek clarification on information that was unclear in the first interview, and it also allowed me to ask more probing questions on issues that I had reflected on and felt were pertinent and relevant for the study. For example, towards the end of the first interview with a young person called Anna, she spoke about her Mother being in prison and then quickly shifted the conversation to her friends at school. In the following interview, I was able to review the eco-map with Anna, which provided me with the opportunity to ask about her relationship with her Mother again in more detail.

In practice, I was unsure how the participants were going to respond to the task based methods. I had an initial conversation to arrange an interview with a young person called Jack. After the call, I was prepared to abandon the eco-map in favour of making attempts to building a rapport and developing a conversation, as Jack presented as being

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a streetwise young person and I was concerned that he may have found the idea of drawing a map with a researcher, patronising. How wrong was I? Jack was a keen artist, he was a huge fan of rap music and had a love of street art. I sensed that seeing the large A2 artist sketch pad under my arm and the pens and stencils I was carrying sparked an immediate interest from Jack. Therefore, what I thought may have been seen as a potentially patronising barrier turned out to be a real bridge that quickly allowed me to build a rapport with Jack. Jack went on to produce a really creative and visually stunning eco-map that charted his social network and enabled him to talk in detail about the people and places that were important to him.

The following excerpt gives an example of how the method enabled a conversation about the important people in Jack's social network.

Int: *Have a think, are there any other people that are important to you that you would want to put on the map?*

Jack: *There was a girl at school called Jess, she was older than me. And she was in care and me and her, we treat each other like family, so I was her cousin, she's my cousin.*

Int: *Right. Even though you weren't cousins, you called each other cousins?*

Jack: *Yeah, yeah. And then she's related to a girl called Sharon she is in care as well and they're just down the road, and again we just say, "Yeah, we're family." We're not blood, we just say we are sort of like cousins. We call each other Cuz..., me and Ricky, he's in care as well. And me and him we just get along, we're two peas in a pod. We're just like best buds.*

From these data, the following analysis, through the analytical framework of social capital, was made. This excerpt highlights the value that Jack places on his relationships with his friends, who he feels are so close to him that they are family. The closeness he shares with these three friends, who share his stigmatized status of being 'in-care', is evident and they were privileged above his other friends, by virtue of him giving them the status of family. Jack went on to explain that Ricky is in a foster placement on the same estate that he lives on, they attend different schools but they spend most evenings

together and meet up every weekend. Jack recently gave up playing for the local rugby team because he said it meant he could not spend enough time with his friend Ricky. The phrase he used to describe their relationship, 'two peas in a pod', encapsulates the level of homogeneity that he feels he shares with Ricky. Homogeneity is the key to bonding social capital, which Putnam (2001) refers to as sociological glue; it's what holds networks of social relationships together. Close family relationships are often cited as being a source of bonding social capital. Given the current physical absence of family in Jack's life and his disrupted network, typified by numerous placement moves and abrupt unplanned school moves, the relationships with those he feels closest to, his peers 'in care', are as close as family and are the source of his bonding social capital.

In summary, the eco-map was used in this study to explore interactions within social networks, alongside a semi structured interview schedule. Although the map is intended to organise the data, the conversations that took place whilst creating the map were viewed as being most important, as they provided the context and the rich contextualised data in keeping with a qualitative study. Therefore, the maps themselves were not utilised as data to analyse, instead the transcribed discussion that took place whilst completing them was analysed. One of the ethical challenges of this approach is that it is difficult to use the original maps in publications due to confidentiality, as they recorded a wealth of identifying information.

Photo elicitation

Drew et al (2010) provides an example of the use of cameras in a research project when they explored young people's experiences of managing chronic health problems. They felt that using photographs in their research challenged potentially negative power relationships with young people and promoted active participation. In doing so it meant 'the adult researcher was able to develop rapport and build up a relationship of trust' (Drew et al. 2010, p.1678). They (2010, p.1681) also found that the use of cameras acted as an 'enticement in recruiting', with one participant reporting that the camera was 'better than a normal survey'. They found that the camera was a positive influence in the research process and particularly with girls as they felt it encouraged their active participation.

There is also a precedent for using visual methods in social capital research with young people. For example, Weller (2006) employed a range of qualitative methods that included diary writing, interviews/discussions and photography. Morrow (2001, p.257) also used a range of methods in a social capital study that explored 'young people's perspectives on their social context and environments'. These methods included young people drawing maps of their local community and taking photos of places important to them. Morrow (2001, p.257) argued that 'using photography is one way of eliciting views, it is cheap, easy to do, fun and it generates visual data that can be used to stimulate further data and debate about neighbourhood environments.' However, Punch (2002) highlights that there are potential limitations in using photography in research, which centre on how representative the images are of the participant's day to day experiences:

A photograph taken of boys fighting in the village square shows a particular moment in time, but does not necessarily mean that fighting is a very important aspect of their lives. Also, the children might have been more tempted to take pictures of what they wanted to keep as a photograph afterwards. Alternatively they may have taken pictures of what they considered makes a 'good' photograph. (Punch 2002, p.322)

In order to negate these limitations, it is important to listen to children describing their reasons for taking the photographs. Becker (1974) describes how the camera can be used to distort the truth with both researchers and participants' selecting what is photographed and what is not photographed and what is included in the research and what is not included. For example, the young people in this study may have been reluctant to take photographs of personal or intimate spaces such as their bedrooms. However, it could also be argued that other research approaches face this problem with the research participant holding the power to disclose or not to disclose the personal and intimate, regardless of the research methods used.

Despite these apparent limitations, Hemming (2008) argues that the use of photos can provide the opportunity for adult researchers to be taken into unknown environments. Rasmussen (2004) highlights the potential of photos to uncover 'children's places' spaces and activities often hidden to adults. Rasmussen's research includes photos of a

camp built in the woods that the children described in detail as cities that they had created. The research provided insights that followed the children's experiences and went beyond describing 'places for children' such as the school and the playground, to revealing 'children's places' where experiences and interactions may often be obscured from the adult world (Rasmussen 2004).

Morrow (2001) utilised an approach to photography in her social capital research with young people that frames the photos as being both visual data to analyse and for use as a tool to elicit discussion and detailed information. This approach emphasises the young people's descriptions of the photograph and the meanings participants attach to them (Collier 1957). Becker (1974, p.5) is noted as a key theorist in visual sociology and he draws attention to the importance of recognising how meaning is attached to images; he states; 'just as paintings get their meaning in a world of painters, collectors, critics, and curators, so photographs get their meaning from the way the people involved with them understand them, use them, and thereby attribute meaning to them.' Harper (2002) describes how photo elicitation approaches are undertaken in two differing ways. First, a researcher can bring along photographs that they have taken to show in an interview in order to elicit responses from participants. Second, participants can be given photography equipment and encouraged to take the photos that are then discussed during an interview at a later stage. This approach has been adopted in previous social capital research with young people (Morrow 2001; Weller 2006). Harper (1988) highlights the strength of this participatory approach and asserts that photographs can be useful as they are a presentation of emotion; as well as being a useful tool to elicit information in interviews.

Towards the end of the first interview the photo project was fully explained to the young people and they were asked if they wished to take part, which every participant chose to do. They were then given an instruction sheet about how to use the camera and with some advice to take photos of things and places that were important. The use of cameras seemed to be of real interest to the young people, with positive comments from them about the activity. Most of the participants took ten photographs, which they were asked to do, however one young person lost the battery charger to the digital camera and only took three photographs, this resulted in a hypothetical photo elicitation approach with us talking through what he would have photographed if he had a working

camera! In total some eighty photographs were taken from the 10 young people who participated in the study.

The study adopted visual methods to promote a participatory approach, whereby getting the young people to take the photos aimed to involve them in the process of data collection. Although the photographic images undoubtedly influenced the analysis of the data, the predominant analysis in this study stemmed from the discussions recorded in the interview transcript, where the young people explain the meaning behind the photographs that they chose to take. An example of how photo elicitation generated such valuable data in this study follows.



INT: So that's a close up on the teddy bears.

Nicola: All my teddies. I've took them everywhere I gone....

INT: So where do they all originate from?

Nicola: *That Chelsea bear is important to me because that's my first ever bear...I had it when I was a baby... my Mum's always supported Chelsea. I used to have a little Chelsea football kit. I think my Mum's still got it. It was like diddy. The shorts are like that big... and she got me that teddy and that was in my baby photos next to me all the time. So I've kept that Chelsea bear because my Mum gave it to me to take with me when we left and came into care... and this one was last Christmas – my teddy. That one I've had since I was a baby. That one I got from my granddad when I first met him. That one I got this Christmas. It's like an elephant teddy but the elephant was in my bed. This one was my brother's teddy and he gave it to me when I left his house. So he's got like a teddy that he gave me.*

INT: *So you were living together in foster care?*

Nicola: *Yeah... Leon because he thought I was going to forget him.*

INT: *Right, so he made you take his teddy with you?*

Nicola: *Yeah. This one I got from my first carer when she went to Australia. It's like a teddy and you press its hand and you talk to it, and it says it back to you in a weird voice. This one was my Nan's teddy. She gave it to me when we first came into care. I don't know why. And this one I got for my 9th birthday and it sings 'Happy Birthday' to you.*

INT: *So every one of these teddies – it's not like you could go down the shop and replace all these teddies.*

Nicola: *I couldn't replace them. I have to keep them... teddies and photos are my special things.*

INT: *What about when you're 40 years old Nicola, where would these teddies be?*

Nicola: *They'd be still on my bedroom shelf. They're not going anywhere.*

This excerpt shows the benefit of the photo elicitation approach for this project. Through the image, we get to see an important place for Nicola, her bedroom. Nicola's explanation of the photograph then enables us to understand that this shelf full of teddy bears can be seen as a memorial to her relationships from across her social network. A traditional interview approach may have meant this data could have gone unobserved. The data was of particular relevance for this study, as it shows ways that young people

in foster care engage in practices of memorialisation, in order to preserve their relationships, networks and subsequently their access to social capital.

A number of scholars have commented on the tension in presenting rich qualitative data and the ability to ensure complete anonymity (Saunders et al. 2015). The challenge is to assess whether the published data means the participant has become too easily identified. It is also important to consider who could potentially make that identification and what the risks are for the participant if they are identified. This concern about risk also needs to be balanced with the participant's wishes and feelings about the photograph being used. This may need specific consideration in research of a participatory nature, where participants are framed as key-contributors or co-researchers (McLaughlin 2006) and as such they may well want their contribution to the research recognised.

In this example from the photo elicitation interview with Nicola (pseudonym) above, she is a competent young person with agency and when the intended future use of the photographs was explained to her, she was clear that she wanted her photographs to be used. Therefore, it has been reproduced here. The decision to do this is based not only on her wish to be included but also by assessing that even if Nicola was identified from this data presented in this specialist publication, there are no apparent risks to her. However, there could be other projects exploring sensitive research topics, where the risk of identifying participants would prohibit the use of such methods.

Conclusion

The visual methods of eco-mapping and photo elicitation have previously been utilised separately in both practice and research, across a range of settings with children and young people. However, the combination of these methods in research appears to be a novel approach, particularly for research that focuses on children and young people in foster care. These methods were employed to explore with the young people their relationships and their interactions in their network in a qualitative way, and in so doing they helped to identify subtle nuanced practices that enabled them to access social capital.

Eco-maps promoted open conversations with participants about the people, places and activities that were most important to them. The use of photo elicitation enabled the

young people to create images that provided insights into the otherwise hidden experiences of their journeys through foster care. Darbyshire et al. (2005) argue that using a combination of qualitative methods can lead to rich and detailed insights into children's experiences in the social world. This was certainly the case in this research, the different methods did not just duplicate findings but instead offered a fuller, more holistic picture of the participant's day to day lives.

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