
The visual image as discussion point: increasing validity in boundary crossing research

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ABSTRACT This article is based on a larger study exploring the use of visual methods as a communication tool in research where the researcher is often a 'border crosser' (Giroux, 1992). To illustrate the value of this methodology, particularly in instances where power imbalances are heightened in the research context, a case study was conducted with five teenage mothers from a sub-economic community outside Cape Town, South Africa. This article will explore how use of visual methods contributes to increased validity of data. Specifically, this discussion will consider how the use of images as a communication tool, increase participant control over the research process, and incorporates participant self-representation via a period of self-exploration, improving contextual accuracy and relevance of data.

KEYWORDS: boundary crossing, teenage mothers, validity, visual research methods

As we continue to review relationships between the researcher and the researched, we simultaneously continue to reflect on available research tools, exploring their positioning in the research process as well as their ability to contribute to valid data. Incorporating a case study of the experiences of five teenage mothers in a sub-economic community in Cape Town, South Africa, this article explores the use of participant constructed images as a communication tool in instances where the researcher is crossing heightened boundaries (Giroux, 1992) of age, culture, race, and role as mother. After reviewing existing arguments for the use of visual methods as a communication tool, and describing the context of the study, the contribution of this method to increased validity in research is explored. Arguments presented point to the space created for participants to reflect and communicate on their lives as well as the shift of focus possible when incorporating visual methods in research designs. Specifically, participants are invited to step back from their lives and reflect on their context and experiences. The process of making images encourages participants to consider why it is that the moment captured on film is important to them. This reflection in turn enables participants to better articulate these

experiences during interviews, using images as reminder notes, directing the research focus. The combination of reflection using images means that participant narratives are more representative of how they themselves interpret their context, relationships, decisions and realities. Situating visual methods within a phenomenological paradigm, the argument is made that by incorporating images into research conducted with the 'Other', contextual accuracy and relevance of data are improved, heightening validity of the data analysed.

Communication in boundaried research

As has been argued in recent years, the research environment is, more-often-than-not, compounded by the 'biologically situated researcher' (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998: 23), who necessarily works from a position of privilege imposing the perspectives of her 'own historical research tradition' on the 'Other' (see also Fine, 1994; Fine et al., 2000; Naples, 2003; O'Connell Davidson and Layder, 1994). Furthermore, those researched, often exist within a complex web of systemic oppression and are studied within a research context that is heavily impacted upon by the politics and ethics surrounding research (Denzin, 2006; Kotze and Kotze, 1996; Spivak, 1993). The impact of the researcher-participant relationship on the research process and subsequent findings has been argued across an array of disciplines. For example, in their post-colonial critique of methodologies, Mohanty (1984) and Smith (1999) accuse social researchers of voyeuristically studying indigenous societies, not fully understanding individual communities, yet holding the 'power to define'. Smith (1999: 44) points to the 'cultural system of classification and representation' that underlies research findings, based on views regarding human nature, morality and virtue; conceptions of space and time; and of gender and race. Dominant ideas surrounding these constructs determine what counts as real. This is also seen in youth studies where an increasing number of researchers are challenging notions of 'childhood' (James and Prout, 1990; Lee, 2001; Lesko, 2001; Morrow and Richards, 1996). Traditional approaches to research are further criticized for ignoring the self-determining nature of the individuals being studied. More recent studies of youth resilience exemplify this (Boyden and Mann, 2005; Fraser, 1997; Leadbeater and Way, 1996; Pipher, 1994; Rutter, 1985; Ungar, 2008; Werner and Smith, 1992), demonstrating how seemingly destructive behaviour is often a means of thriving in the absence of healthier alternative options.

Overlooking the value of personal experience has important consequences for those researched, as even sympathetic researchers may fail to fully appreciate the complexities of specific groups. Authors such as Chow (1993), Smith (1999), and Swartz (1998) have argued how research findings have a propensity for reinforcing discriminatory and oppressive practices. When 'authorities' and outside 'experts' have the final say in the validity of indigenous claims to cultural beliefs, values, and ways of knowing, there are important implications

for policy and services (Blackstock and Trocmé, 2005; Kotze and Kotze, 1996; Lee, 2001; Nsamenang, 2002). Research findings encapsulated in these constructs of classification are incorporated into existing systems of power and domination, often through vigorous debates that ultimately silence and continue to make invisible the presence of marginalized groups (Bernard and Este, 2005; Blackstock and Trocmé, 2005; Smith, 1999). In this way, the process of generating descriptions of the 'Other' has very real consequences for researched communities. Such developments in understanding the positioning and impact of research in communities underscores the need for a critical consideration of both the substance of data and how data gathered ultimately contributes to the nature of research findings.

Many researchers argue for an alternative sociological method that 'makes the everyday world its problematic' (Smith, 1990: 28), acknowledging individual experiences within unique contexts, as they are truly lived. Human experience as opposed to abstract systems is increasingly the focus of social science studies, where the body, emotions, and senses are viewed phenomenologically, together with an increased focus on representation (see, for example, Blackbeard and Lindegger, 2007; Daniels, 2003; Leadbeater and Way, 1996; Rolling, 2004a, 2004b; Wright, 2005). Exploring the taken-for-granted and common place – especially those aspects of society that contradict and maintain oppressive structures along racial, cultural, gendered and age boundaries – then becomes the focus of much of our work (Comstock, 1994; Reason, 1994). Ever more the question arises as to how we as researchers produce richer data based on more valid accounts of human lives; how do we improve the connection between ourselves as privileged and those with whom we interact in the field who are so-often marginalized? As Banks (1998: 9) explains,

new ethnographic approaches are historically grounded and politically aware, recognizing the colonial or neo-colonial underpinnings of the relationship between anthropologist and anthropological subject, recognizing the agency of the anthropological subject and their right as well as their ability to enter into a discourse about the construction of their lives.

It is suggested that engaging participants in a process of self-exploration and understanding, research data and findings can become meaningful, potentially contributing to social reform.

At the heart of any discussion on the positioning of research in the lives of communities is a consideration of validity: the extent to which our knowledge claims correspond to the reality of those to whom they pertain (Marcus and Fisher, 1986). If, however, the very basis of our research, that is the questions asked in the research setting, are based in existing 'knowledge' formulated by dominant voices, how valid then is the data we analyse, and by extension, the findings of our research? Such questions go to the heart of discussions around transactional validity, 'an interactive process between the researcher, the researched, and the collected data that is aimed at achieving a relatively higher level of accuracy and consensus by means of revisiting facts, feelings,

experiences, and values or beliefs collected and interpreted' (Cho and Trent, 2006: 321). While much has been written in this regard on the actual *analysis* of data (see for example, Denzin, 2000; Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995; Lincoln, 1995; Lincoln and Guba, 2000), generating data that circumvents pre-existing notions remains more challenging.

Asked differently, do we, as researchers not impose our perceived reality of the 'Other' right from the start of our research, in the questions we pose to participants? How do we raise the voice of participants above our own from the beginnings of the research process? Furthermore, if we are to follow the urging of Fine (1994: 77) to 'hear subjugated voices not as Others but as primary informants', how do we begin unearthing the voice of groups marginalized and silenced for so long? How do we prompt narrative that best describes the lived experience of the silenced as it is relevant to *those* lives? Qualitative visual methods may provide researchers a tool with which to address some of these questions. A reflective method such as elicitation, where researcher and participant discuss images created by participants, situates participants as authorities on their lives, better controlling research content.

An argument for images as prompts in narrative research

Many researchers now attest to the value of incorporating images in interviews, arguing that they facilitate the interview process, bringing greater depth to topics discussed, and enhancing the quality of data gathered (see for example Daniels, 2002; Gloor and Meier, 2000; Harper, 2002; Pink, 2001; Schwartz, 1989). As Kellehear (1993), Prosser (1998) and Weiser (1983) assert, images can serve as signifiers of culture, highlighting values and expectations of individuals as well as groups. Research incorporating images can therefore provide important information regarding the cultural reality of the community studied. The emergence of visual culture as a subject disrupts and challenges attempts to define culture in purely linguistic terms (Mirzoeff, 1998). The visual transcends pre-conceived notions of life, reflecting greater representation and contextual knowledge. Combined with other qualitative research methods, this field of inquiry provides an opportunity to reconsider some of today's most complex problems from a new angle. Such an opportunity aligns well with the outcomes of constructed knowledge. As Rogoff (1998: 14) explains, '[m]uch of the practice of intellectual work within the framework of cultural problematics has to do with being able to ask new and alternative questions, rather than reproducing old knowledge by asking the old questions'.

When researchers include images that participants themselves have created, an opportunity is established for researchers to literally see what participants are talking about. As Harper (1989: 91) says 'the photographic form communicates more specific detail as well as a more complete overall statement'. When research participants *actively re-construct* their reality through images in the research process, they use a powerful medium to help the researcher

understand their reality. Experiences and meanings become tangible through visual representation and may be understood in ways that other conventional forms of communication may not necessarily allow. In this way, images may facilitate participant articulation of lived realities in a manner that brings a focus to research results better aligned with participants' lives. Similarly, through use of visual material, researchers may discover and demonstrate components of community lives that may be subtle or easily overlooked.

The use of images within the research process, and as part of a larger narrative process, may also serve to inspire new collaboration between participants and researchers. Indeed, [Pink \(2003\)](#) asserts that ethical use of visual methods requires of researchers to engage in a collaborative process with participants. Images are not unequivocal records of reality. Authors such as [Ball and Smith \(1992\)](#), [Barndt \(1997\)](#) and [Orellana \(1999\)](#) explain that photographs have no meaning in and of themselves; they take up meaning from the contexts in which they are inscribed or which we inscribe to them. How images are created and the sense viewers make of them, depends fundamentally upon cultural assumptions, personal knowledge, and the context in which the picture is generated and presented. How images are seen and read, is shaped by the values, beliefs, assumptions, and experiences that both photographer and viewer bring with them (see also [Dicks et al., 2006](#); [Edwards, 2002](#)). This subjective nature of the meaning of images underscores the importance of researcher-participant interaction in the research process. The collaboration that images inspire prompts new insight into different cultures ([Harper, 2002](#)). As researcher and participant become collaborators in the construction of accounts and meanings, both personal and theoretical understandings of cultural realities are magnified ([Harper, 2003](#)).

Understanding the multiple meanings of images offers the opportunity to reformulate the relationship between researcher and participant into a more mutual initiative ([Chaplin, 1994](#); [Harper, 1998](#); [Pink, 2001](#)). Understanding the meaning images hold for participants within the interview process reformulates the relationship between researcher and participant into a mutual initiative as opposed to a hierarchical, one-way flow of information ([Harper, 1998](#)), reducing power imbalances within the research context ([Chaplin, 1994](#); [Harper, 2002](#); [Pink, 2001](#)). Because images are argued to be visual *representations* of subjective experiences, rather than objective statements, the exploration of visual meanings not only helps us 'see', but also asks us to slow down and consider, to think about what it is we *are* seeing and what it is we *don't* see, and *why* ([Beloff, 1985](#); [Blyton, 1987](#); [Braden, 1983](#); [Duff, 1981](#); [Grimshaw, 2001](#); [Pink, 2001](#)). [Chaplin \(1994\)](#) believes that this means seeing in a manner that is radically different from the voyeuristic, asymmetrical mode of research that has for too long been dominant, allowing participants to clarify a researcher's understanding of a community's lived reality.

Various studies suggest the value of incorporating visual methods into research with marginalized groups, where communication may be problematic,

increasing the possibility of cultural misunderstandings and misrepresentations (Alldred, 1998; Blackbeard and Lindegger, 2007; Larson, 1999; Young and Barrett, 2001). Niesyto (2000: 139), for example, argues that the use of subjective forms of representation provides 'adequate possibilities of expression' to exactly those people who have difficulties with verbal or written tasks. By using methods where participants have greater control over data gathering and interpretation, data gathered is more closely aligned with lived experiences.

Context of the study

Research contexts, such as those found in South African society, present a complex and diverse environment to social researchers. Within immense economic stratification; a multitude of cultures and classes; languages and their dialects; and varied racial groups, researchers attempt to produce information that contributes constructively to policies and programs. Many communities continue to be marginalized and oppressed due to factors such as illiteracy, low levels of education, age, gender and poverty. These groups more often than not comprise women and youth (Daniels, 2003; Fussell and Greene, 2002; Laird, 2003; Nsamenang, 2002).

To illustrate the value of using visual methods in instances where the researcher is crossing multiple boundaries in highly stratified societies, a case study was conducted involving five teenage mothers from a sub-economic, coloured¹ community in Cape Town, South Africa. The case study occurred within the New Ways project, Stellenbosch University. This community-based, 24-hour service model works with youth living in high-risk contexts. In order to design services relevant to the target population, research forms a central component of the project. Methods that enhance youth voices and allow these voices to remain central to analysis (Oakley, 1994; Tyler et al., 1992; West, 1996; Whitmore and McKee, 2001; Young and Barrett, 2001) are crucial to this process.

Numerous reports made by project staff, as well as personal experience in the field, highlighted the central role of mothers in these communities. Many women, however, become mothers in their teens, when social stigma decreases support and resources available to these young women and their children. Furthermore, at the time of the original study, teenage mothers were predominantly positioned as 'threatening economic security by disrupting the production of the economic self and by fracturing population control' (Macleod, 2002: 649). Furthermore, most research was framed in either a bio-medical or economic model that did not consider teenage mothers or the realities of their contexts (see Macleod, 2001 and 2002 for a full review of the South African research literature on teenage mothering). Consequently, the need to have an improved understanding of these women from which to better align services with their self-identified needs was noted and became the catalyst for research of young motherhood.

Methods

As this was the initial exploratory phase of a larger process, it was decided to work with a small group of participants. The purpose of this phase was to highlight issues central to young mothers in this community that could serve as catalysts to larger and more focused studies (see, for example, Nel, 2004). Consequently, an outreach worker² of the New Ways project purposively selected five young women³ between 15–19 years of age to participate in the study.⁴ All five young women agreed to participate in the study when contacted.

At the outset of the research, three of the participants were already mothers whilst two were pregnant. Three of these young women were still attending school, although one left school during the course of the study. It was argued by the youth worker that these young women represented the variation in experiences of young mothers in this particular community. Being for example pregnant and still attending school, allowed a particular young woman to reflect on her immediate experiences of negotiating social stigmas surrounding her pregnancy whilst trying to establish a means of completing school once her child was born. Conversely, a mother of two who was no longer attending school could discuss her experiences of negotiating a home and sustenance for her two children, whilst simultaneously trying to raise her children in a hostile environment.

In many ways, this group of young women represents a community where visual methods used as prompts to communication are well suited for research (Liebenberg, 2005). The participants represent a culture that is quite different from the researcher's by way of language, race, class and education, presenting numerous boundaries to understanding. More importantly, literature points to the extreme marginalization of teenage mothers within such communities, both within their immediate setting and the broader society of the country. Many of these young women experience personal disempowerment and silencing (Carolissen, 1993; [Lesch and Kruger, 2005](#); Potgieter and Fredman, 1997; Swartz, 2002; [Wood et al., 1998](#)), heightening communication complexities. The case study presented here was further supported by the broader documented need for a contextualized understanding of teenage mothers ([Davies et al., 2001](#); Flanagan, 1998; [Jewell et al., 2000](#)), together with the understanding that these women exist within a 'matrix of domination' (Collins, 1991) that continues to silence them ([Spivak, 1993](#)).

Given the realities of the research context it was decided to incorporate visual methods into the design (see also Liebenberg, in press). Visual media offers marginalized groups an opportunity to reproduce and understand their own world as opposed to dominant representations ([Goffman, 1979](#); [Hammond, 1989](#); Press, 1991). Furthermore, personal representations may offer an alternative image of participants as they themselves wish to be presented ([Schratz and Steiner-Löffler, 1998](#)). The idea of producing a desired representation of self is discussed by Beloff (1985), who talks about the need

to control cameras and the images produced: we will pose in ways that produce the desired image we wish to project outwardly. Images by implication then, also speak of the qualities valued in various communities and societies. Beloff bases this argument on Susan Sontag (in Beloff, 1985: 206), who wrote, '[e]ven when photographers are most concerned with mirroring reality, they are still haunted by tacit imperatives of ... conscience'. Therefore, by encouraging participants to make images of their own experiences, we can assume that we obtain an impression of their underlying 'conscience'. An aspect such as this may assist the aims and goals of certain types of research: What do the images participants produce say about both their realities and their dreams? How do visual messages correlate with the verbal stories participants relate about their lives while viewing the images (that is, the stories the images unlock)?

The incorporation of self-made images by participants also created an opportunity for the researcher to enter into participants' private worlds – worlds to which the researcher would ordinarily have no access (Karlsson, 2001). Access was important in this study, considering first the complex and violent nature of communities such as the one in which the participants live (see, for example, Spangenberg and Pieterse, 1995; Steenkamp and Sidzumo, 1996; Steyn, 1996) and second, the limitations of language (or more specifically dialect) in the research relationship. As Walker (1993: 72) argues, photography 'touches on the limitations of language, especially language used for descriptive purposes'. This is reiterated by Daniels (2002: 7), who found in her work with Black women from informal settlements, that 'photographs became a source richer in data than the interviews because they overrode linguistic constraints that some of the women had in expressing themselves'. Furthermore, because photography can be regarded as a form of 'social exchange' (Beloff, 1985: 206), it is proposed that the discussion of images creates a link between the differing realities of the researcher and the participant (Pink, 2001).

It is important to highlight that images were included in the study to serve not as data, but rather as prompts and supports to participant narrative. In this regard, communication may also be heightened by the process of reflection participants engage in as they produce images. Stemming again from the argument of images as subjective representations of perceptions, Beloff (1985: 7) explains, '[s]ometimes we have the chance to see what is all around us, but that we've never "seen" because we've never looked at it'. In making photographs, participants would potentially consider the reason behind the images, their 'gaze' and the subsequent meaning thereof (see also Dicks et al., 2006). It was important to the study that these young women understand their own lives before interview discussions.

On a more practical level, photographs were used because of the ease and simplicity offered by a photographic camera. Cameras used were small and light, increasing the likelihood that participants would have them at hand. Furthermore, they were easy to use and capturing data in the course of a day

or a week was simpler than would be with, for example, video data. Stated differently, the likelihood was greater that participants would have the camera on them and be able to simply point and shoot in significant moments (Liebenberg, in press).

Although not a participatory action research design, the hope was that by using participant made images to direct interview questions, emerging narrative data would be more closely linked to the realities and central aspects of the participating young women's lives.

Specifically, participants were asked to make images for a week, according to scripts (Suchar, 1997) of 'things that are important to you – good and bad' (Graham, 1995: 136). Individual photo-elicitation interviews (Collier and Collier, 1986), incorporating participants' images, explored the meaning of these photographs to participants. As a result of each participant's own story, personal questions were again posed to participants, along with new roles of film (following member checks of initial data). The fieldwork process was then repeated with a more individualized focus. A focus group interview was also conducted with participants at the end of the first round of research, exploring their experiences in the research process itself. Verbal data was transcribed and both text and image-based data entered into ALTAS.ti where it was analysed using grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss and Corbin, 1990; Suchar, 1997).

In this study, a primary concern in using visual methods regarded participant safety (see also Liebenberg, in press). The research setting in which this case study occurred is characterized by extremely high levels of crime. The presence of visual technology automatically introduced the possibility of participants being put at risk of being the victim of perhaps even a violent assault in the course of the fieldwork. To address this issue, cameras were taped up and brand names scratched out (see also Rich and Chalfen, 1999). The end result was equipment that looked worthless. The added benefit to this was that film and battery compartments could not easily be opened, protecting both images captured and participant ability to continue photographing. Participant safety was of further concern, in terms of who or what was photographed. For example, what would the implications be for photographing gang members? It could be argued, however, that researchers exercise caution in the assumptions made about a community in which research is to be conducted that may ultimately reflect judgements about participant competency. In this study, participants were trusted to know their own context enough to make sound decisions. The importance of their own personal safety was emphasized to them, and it was explained that images placing them in harm's way were not necessary to the study. They were to be the judge of what that would be. No participants were ever threatened nor harmed in the course of the fieldwork. Only one camera was stolen and the participant concerned did not have the camera in her possession at the time.

Lessons learnt from the field

This case study has demonstrated several advantages to the incorporation of visual methods in research settings where the researcher is crossing boundaries. Specifically, images used as a communication tool in a context where participants create their own photographs, (1) afford participants the opportunity to explore the taken for granted in their lives, reflecting on personal experiences through the process of image production; (2) opens up a space for personal voice where participants are better able to talk about their lives following a process of reflection that has highlighted the taken for granted; and (3) generates personal narratives that enhance data quality, validity and subsequent research findings.

PARTICIPANT REFLECTION ON THE PERSONAL

As previously stated, participants were asked to create photographs of their experience of motherhood over a period of seven days. It appears that while making these images, participants thought about their circumstances, reflected on their feelings and desires, and identified fears and sources of happiness. In deciding to physically pick up the camera and capture a moment or incident for discussion, participants were motivated to reflect on that decision, thereby gaining deeper understanding of their experiences.

Following Brenda's narrative through the entire research process exemplifies how the process of making the photographs in general encouraged her to think about her attachment to education. At the outset of her first individual interview discussing the experience of making the photographs, she explained,

This was something new for me, and I also learnt that I should be happy about having a child and that there are not only negative things that have come from my being a mother, but also positive things ... and I can talk a lot about these things and that is important to me, because I have never been able to do this before.

In spite of her positive comments regarding such personal reflection and seeing the good in her life at the start of the first interview, much of her narrative during this meeting is spent highlighting the barriers she perceives, what she cannot accomplish because of her role as mother. She comments for example on how she is really struggling at school, she feels like giving up, and questions her motivation: 'It feels to me like I can just fail, because who am I doing this for?' By the third interview, however, Brenda has gained new perspective on her abilities, goals and motivations:

At first I thought it must be this way, this is my life, this is how it must be, and I must just go with the flow. But now that I have taken the photos, now it is different for me. I see things in a different way. [My life] isn't going to stay this way. It is going to change.

Later in the same interview, she reiterates this experience when discussing her school work: 'It is going better. At first I thought [the quality of] my work was



FIGURE 1.

going down and down, and that is probably just how it is. But now I am trying. I am going to do this.' In exploring her reason for making particular images, Brenda gains new insight into the context of her own 'gaze' (Beloff, 1985; Dicks et al., 2006).

A discussion around an image that Nici, a mother of two, created of her son when she was 'stressing' because of his crying (see Figure 1) illustrates the process of reflection with regards to a single image. Reviewing the photograph, Nici spoke at length about the tensions between her and the paternal grandmother of her children – with whom they were living at the time, along with their father and paternal grandfather. Nici felt that the family indulges her son and that as a consequence he will grow up to be like his father, an abusive gang member:

... his grandmother and them spoil him. Now he wants to be like that around me as well. If he wants something then they give it to him. Now I'm not like that – I don't just give him things. Because he cannot always just get what he wants. Later on when I don't have anymore, then they grow up with those manners and then they are rude to people.

Nici's narrative throughout the interviews often include comments about how 'rude' her son is and how he will grow up to be like his father. Her words also often reflect her connection with her daughter and her disconnect with her son, to the point where she admits that if she could leave the home she is in, she would, 'but not without Valentine [her daughter] ... Thembo [her son] can stay with his grandmother, but not without her'. In a later interview she

reiterates, 'even though I am young, I would rather struggle on. But not actually with Thembo, because he is with his grandmother, but I will struggle with her [Valentine]'. While this particular image in and of itself does not reflect Nici's actual words, again self-understanding of her 'gaze', prompts her narrative. Conversely, many of her images as a set, clearly demonstrate the way in which her daughter is the pivotal point of her life. The strength of the connection with her daughter to the exclusion of her son is reflected in the 18 of 24 images that focus exclusively on Valentine.

Including participant made images in data collection provides participants a means of distancing themselves from their own experience, inviting them to reflect on the familiar in their lives, encouraging greater depth in the interview material (see, for example, [Daniels, 2003](#); [Dell Clark, 1999](#)). As can be seen in both examples presented here, it is not so much the content of the image itself that matters but rather the process of making the image and the self-reflection that is initiated as a result. By constructing visual representations of a particular experience over a period of time, participants are able to consider – if only for a moment – *why* it was they are making particular photographs and the meaning these images hold of their lives. As Lucy says during the focus group interview, 'For me it was every photo that I took, there was a purpose to the photo – I must talk about it', suggesting that the process of making images has provided her an opportunity to think about her experiences. In this way, important, yet taken-for-granted aspects of participants' day-to-day lives are flagged and introduced to the research. When looked at later, images evoke feelings, reminding each participant of what she was thinking or her experience at the time, providing a retrospective view.

PERSONAL VOICE

In exploring the meaning of their own perceptions, or 'gaze', what participants see in the taken for granted aspects of their experiences as pregnant or mothering teenagers before participating in interviews, better prepared participants for the research. Being better equipped to discuss pertinent issues in their lives, research narratives become more meaningful. This is particularly important in a community where young women seldom have a voice. As found by authors such as [Abdool-Karim et al. \(1992\)](#), [Jewkes et al. \(2005\)](#), [Kaufman et al. \(2001\)](#), [Mfono \(1998\)](#), and [Wood and Jewkes \(2006\)](#) South Africa teenage girls and teenage mothers in particular, are often instructed on how to view their bodies, sexuality, and experiences by parents, teachers, and other community 'authorities' such as nurses at local health clinics. Moreover, their lack of voice is embedded in the systemic oppression that remains following colonization and apartheid ([Kruger and van der Spuy, 2007](#); [Lesch and Kruger, 2004](#)). For people who have been denied the opportunity to speak for so long, individually or as a community, expressing themselves 'in the moment' may then present challenges. As [Ross \(2003: 330\)](#) argues with regards to the South African Truth and Reconciliation process:



FIGURE 2.

In ... contexts where relationships between people are sundered and their sense of place and time fractured, where the possibility of exercising the kinds of effort that go into forging and maintaining social relationships over time are limited and the grounds on which sociality are built are yet unstable, the possibilities of sustaining the ordinary through conversation and routine are circumscribed.

Incorporating self-made images into the research process facilitates initiation of discussion, and more importantly, difficult research topics.

Commenting on their experiences using photo elicitation, Blinn and Harrist (1991: 189) observe how the interviews in their study, 'served as an opportunity for the informants to share ideas and feelings which were already well thought out. ... Conducting the interviews without this prior cognitive processing would have provided data which was at a much more superficial level'. They explain that,

if these women had been asked in a straightforward manner what was most difficult about being a re-entry student, without having taken the photos, they would probably not have verbalised the dilemma of being caught between traditional and non-traditional roles; most of them did not seem cognizant of this conflict. The photos helped both the researchers and the participants understand the experience of being a re-entry student and focus on key issues. (p. 189)

In the teenage mothers study, LouAnn for example (pregnant at the time), discusses an image of her 14-year-old sister (see Figure 2):

Well, this photo, this is something for me, um, when I think back: When I was this age, I never knew that I would have a baby or that I would become pregnant.

And then at the age of 17 it happened to me! Many people say that it is not something to feel guilty about or to think that you don't want to live anymore because many people, there are a lot of young girls today who do not know if they can have children or not, and now you have the choice to bring a child into the world. But I still always think this girl is still at school, she still has her whole future ahead of her. It's not that I don't have a future anymore, I will always have a future, it is just now that, now there is the baby.

LouAnn suggests that there was a definite reason making this photograph, and that the meaning, thought and reflection attached to it are important in how she is approaching her new role as mother. She can now articulate her understanding of the naivety her sister may experience, and the lack of preparedness this may hold for her as she enters into sexual relationships, implying her own truths.

LouAnn's use of the image underscores the use of the visual as a discussion prompt. Specifically, participants may use particular images as tools with which to initiate discussions around topics that may not be so easily articulated. LouAnn can use this same image to acknowledge that her baby was unplanned and perhaps even unwanted at this stage of her life:

[This is another obstacle], I cannot just rely on my mom and boyfriend. I must count on myself. I am the mother. I must first deal with that and then I can go on.

She can use the discussion around the image to verbalize her contradictory feelings and perceptions of the enormity of the task that lies ahead, the impact this will have on her life, and to explore these tensions further:

Like now – this is definitely not me (pointing to self)! Really! I can feel it and I can see it. ... Before I was pregnant, I always thought I would not sit at home over the weekends. Everyday would be different. I did not want to be like other girls. I was going to be someone different. But like now, I sit at home everyday. I can no longer think that I can go do something tomorrow, because I am alone. Now I must remember that when I have the baby, I can't just do as I please. I first have to take care of the baby. ... When I sit at home over the weekends, then I can see the other young girls – how they are dressed, and then I think, could that not have been me? I was better – not better, but I always wanted to be something different. I feel down about this, but I will be who I was again. So when I look at these photos, then I am very regretful.

The photograph allows LouAnn to wrestle with the conflicting emotions of gratitude for her baby and knowledge of the responsibility that goes along with motherhood, as well as the impact this will have on the paths she will be able to take in life. Such personal conflict presents quite a different expression than the social norm of excitement around the coming birth, one which LouAnn acknowledges as well.

PERSONAL REPRESENTATION

The participant produced images and interview format driven by participant choices enabled these young women to represent their lives as they perceive it.

Kotze and Kotze (1996), Narayan (1992) and Smith (1999) all explain the need for research that accounts for participant control of at least research content. Use of visual methods that allow for greater self-representation aligns well with such aims. The process of generating images, exploring perceptions by reflecting on experiences and context, allows participants to introduce topics onto a blank research slate. In the case of PAR that slate may be unconstrained. In an instance such as this, the slate is delineated to motherhood. In making their images, and selecting those they wish to discuss in the interview setting, participants control topics that are or are not introduced to the research.

The range of data gathered during the first component of this study substantiates the manner in which visual methods allow research participants to introduce topics central to their own lives. The range of questions emerging from the initial data set resulted in five distinct questions for participants to pursue in their second week of image making, reflecting the diversity in what these young women felt were most central to their experiences of motherhood:

1. Could you illustrate your relationship with your son?
2. How do you see the role your mother plays in supporting you as a mother?
3. How do you define yourself? Where does this definition come from?
4. Has your understanding of motherhood changed since the birth of your son?
5. What does 'respect' mean to you and how does this fit in with your relationship with your children?

Although participants were not directly involved in the continued analysis of the data, emergent themes and second interview questions were discussed and checked with participants (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995; Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Use of images in this manner introduced topics based on the representation participants wished to produce of themselves, directing the additional research focus. As previously discussed, Beloff (1985) reviews the idea of representation in detail, explaining the need to control cameras and images produced: people create images of what they want seen. Images speak to the qualities valued by individuals as well as their communities. This is seen in a discussion with Nici regarding the photograph that for her best represents 'being a mother' (see Figure 3):

NI: I badly wanted a photo with her [her daughter, Veronica]. So I quickly showed grandma how the camera works so that I could quickly get a photo with her, because I don't really have any photos yet of my children and me. So I felt that I would take a photograph of my own child, because I am her mother!

I: So this photo reflects your relationship with your child?

NI: Yes.

I: Describe this relationship to me – what is it like?

NI: I love my children and I want to do everything that is best for them – I want to be able to give them the best and so.



FIGURE 3.

I: What do you think is best for them?

NI: I give them love and don't want them to grow up to be rude and curse and so. I don't want them to grow up raw. They must have respect for me. They must always respect me and so!

I: So they must grow up decently?

NI: Yes. Even if they are not in a decent place, they must be decent.

Nici clearly conceived of this image to demonstrate not only her role as a mother, but as a good and committed mother supporting the argument of alternative representation made by [Schratz and Steiner-Löffler \(1998\)](#). This is seen in both the overt meaning of her words as well as the subtleties in what she says. For example, the fact that she 'quickly' asks of her mother-in-law to 'quickly' take the photograph suggests the acknowledged luxury or even selfishness inherent in wanting the image given her context, reflecting the 'selfless mother' who would 'do everything that is best for' her children. Her words also demonstrate Nici's clear feelings of ownership of both her role as mother and 'her' daughter: '*I felt that I would take a photograph of my own child*' (italics added). Most striking about both the image and her words is the alignment of mother and child: although Nici refers to both her children in her use of the word 'them', her focus is really on her daughter, '*I badly wanted a photo with her ... my own child ... I am her mother*' (italics added). This disparity in Nici's alignment with her children is pervasive throughout both her narrative and images. As previously mentioned, 18 of Nici's photographs focus exclusively on her daughter. Furthermore, her narrative contains many instances where

she catches herself talking of her child, in the singular, and then correcting to the plural. Analysis of the data concluded that for Nici, her family is comprised of only her and her daughter. For Nici, her relationship with Veronica exists in isolation of others and it is the bond between them that allows her to stay positive and focused, at times even alive ([Liebenberg, 2005](#)). Because Nici and Veronica are both marginalized and pushed aside by their immediate 'family' and broader community, it is by identifying with Veronica's vulnerabilities that Nici finds purpose and reason as a mother. She then uses her images to reflect her daughter as her life line. Given the silenced nature of Nici's experiences, it is perhaps understandable that she would make use of this forum to reflect her true feelings regarding her alignment with her child.

Furthermore, Nici's portrayal of her role as mother in her images and her subsequent narrative of what her relationship with her children looks like, is far removed from the social perception that teenage mothers are irresponsible and negligent of their children. Nici selects an image that she has deliberately had made to reflect her role as the 'good mother'. In addition to highlighting her relationship with her daughter, her discussion around this image on one level reflects her concern for who her children will grow up to be as individuals, and how they will interact with others in their community, their values and how this will impact on their functioning as adults.

Validity, contextual accuracy and relevance of data: images as prompts

Working from the critique against the social sciences in general calling for increased focus on personal experiences and lived realities (see, for example, [James and Prout, 1990](#); [Lesko, 2001](#); [Mohanty, 1984](#); [Smith, D., 1990](#); [Smith, L.T., 1999](#)) and with regards to mothering ([Collins, 1991](#); [Glenn, 1994](#); [Naples, 1991, 1992](#)) and teenage mothering in particular ([Davies et al., 2001](#); [Flanagan, 1998](#); [Jewell et al., 2000](#); [Phoenix, 1991](#)), this study moved to centre the voices and experiences of participants, to bring localized knowledge to the fore. It was recognized, however, that participants in the study would have experienced personal disempowerment and silencing ([Carolissen, 1993](#); [Lesch and Kruger, 2005](#); [Swartz, 2002](#); [Wood, et al., 1998](#)). Consequently, the concern existed that participants, as the 'subaltern', would not articulate their experiences with ease due to multiple layers of oppression ([Spivak, 1993](#)). A method would therefore be required that would facilitate exploration of personal lives and generation of narratives that could be articulated with some degree of comfort. To this end, the use of participant constructed photographs and elicitation interviews seemed well aligned. Given the process of personal reflection, enhanced voice and opportunity to represent lives as personally experienced and understood, it is argued that the quality of information emerging from the interviews in this study was enhanced and made more relevant.

An increasing number of authors argue the merits of images (be they photographs, video or drawings) as a tool for heightening communication and thereby data quality (Cavin, 1994; Gloor and Meier, 2000; Niesyto, 2000). Blinn and Harrist (1991: 188), for example, explain how 'without the photos to use as the basis for the interviews, the study would not have provided the kind of rich and intimate data that it did'. Young and Barrett (2001: 147) also found that '[t]he pictures themselves worked exceptionally well as a tool for discussion and on many occasions the dullest and most technically poor pictures elicited the richest information from the photographer'.

Narrative in this study emerged from a process where the taken for granted now had value attached to it, and where the practical task of making photographs encouraged participants to explore the meaning of the 'everyday'. This research was embedded in a social context where photographs are assigned value. The economic poverty of the community means that cameras and the ability to purchase, develop and print film images are a scarce commodity. When images are produced they are done so only on very special and celebratory occasions and by someone with the status of being a camera owner. Furthermore, these young women live in a context that, like many others, consumes North American media and its focus on the stars and the politically or economically powerful. Considered in this light, the impact of asking participants to *photograph* as opposed to merely talk about their lives (often constructed as failures because they are teenage and unwed mothers), and more importantly *record* the mundane and everyday of their lives, establishes a new framework for participants in which to position their experiences (see Edwards, 2002). Additionally, the physical act of making images (often a brief moment of spontaneously pointing and shooting a camera), seems to have flagged for participants, moments and events that demanded later reflection and processing; to slow down and consider why they had made particular images (Beloff, 1985; Chaplin, 1994; Dicks et al., 2006). This then becomes the foundation of a dialogical process where participants are not responding to interview questions on the spur of the moment. Rather, on returning to the interview, participants were able to speak of their reality, on topics of importance to them, as opposed to aspects of teenage mothering couched in pre-existing theoretical conceptions.

Authors such as Lathar (1986, 1993) argue for increased opportunity for self-reflexivity in the research process to allow for the exploration of the unique meanings of events and issues that are often taken for granted by participants. It goes without saying that such reflection on the part of both the researcher and participant would increase specifically the transformational validity (Marcus and Fisher, 1986) of actual data gathered, in that topics reviewed are those that participants themselves have identified as important and central to their lives. As informants control the detailed focus of the research (albeit not the broader research topic), from very early stages, and are able to articulate their experiences following a period of self-exploration, the accuracy of findings drawn from data gathered is enhanced.

Socially constructed ideas tell us for instance that teenage mothers, and especially teenage mothers from sub-economic communities, are irresponsible and will be negligent of their children, the proverbial, 'bad mothers' of society (Geronimus, 2003; Macleod, 2002, 2003; McDermott and Graham, 2005). Furthermore, they will have poor economic and employment outcomes, particularly as a result of curtailed schooling (Geronimus, 2003; Macleod, 2002, 2003). Emerging research may then be inclined to focus on outcomes for children and mothers, possibly ignoring more textured understandings of young mothers and their contexts. Young women in this study spoke of their deep commitment to their children, their concerns for personal safety, education, future, and values. Their words and images demonstrated the challenges they face in raising their children in ways they consider appropriate, given social barriers; the sacrifices they are willing to make in order to be the best mothers they can be; and the deep love and commitment they have for their children. Furthermore, participant narrative highlighted what was of critical importance to these mothers, given their context, and by implication where we may consider focusing applied research with populations such as this. They spoke of the lack of community safety and the constraining impact this has on their ability to mother. They raised concerns about lack of access to administrative resources that would ensure future opportunities for their children (such as being able to obtain birth certificates that would then later enable their children to be registered for school).

Conclusion

Considered from both an epistemological and a methodological perspective, visual methods may enhance the tool-kit of researchers working in many boundary crossing settings (Banks, 2001; Harper, 2002; Liebenberg, 2005; Pink, 2001). Various examples discussed here demonstrate the value of an image-based interviewing process (see also Collier, 2001; Daniels, 2003; Karlsson, 2001; Niesyto, 2000). In this case study specifically, the combination of visual data and qualitative interviews proved an effective means of facilitating an exploratory research process where the researcher was crossing multiple and heightened boundaries. The combination of the two substantially enriched data gathered in this study as well as, and perhaps more importantly, the research process for participants.

The texture of participant responses during this field work was markedly different from previous experiences, in working with members of this community. In a sense, images provided these young women substance to work with, to generate their narrative, heightening the subtleties of the data. Images provided a central point of reference in interviews that focused on issues of importance to these five young women. These explorations also gave rise to new personal perspectives within a community subjected to established concepts of personal lives: teenage mothers were able to see and represent their strengths, reformulating identities as capable mothers. As Rogoff (1998: 15) argues,

'by focusing on a field of vision and of visual culture operating within it, we create the space for the articulation of – but not necessarily the response to – difficult cross-cultural research questions'.

Discussed previously, the use of images as prompts is also important due to the collaboration and communication required. Pink (2003: 190) argues that 'things become visible because of how we see them rather than simply because they are observable' (see also [Banks, 2001](#); Berger, 1980). Stated differently, the content of photographs is relevant to participants because of how participants interpret the meaning attached to the content. As such we cannot understand the meaning of an image in isolation of the context from which it emerged. Drawing on the work of Hastrup (1992), Dicks et al. (2006: 92) argue that images 'provide the big picture ... that ethnographic photography and film give us maps ... while written accounts give us itineraries'. In this research, images participants made provided the map of their experiences, while their voices provided the detail of their journey. The field work process demonstrated how meaningless participants' images are to researchers prior to interviews. Similarly, interviews on their own would possibly have missed some of the richness and clarity that images brought with them. The combination of the two, however, provided for a fascinating, rich data set where visual representation of lived experiences 'allow communication to occur in the worlds we study' (Dicks et al., 2006: 79).

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NOTES

1. Racial categories, particularly within the South African context, are recognized as controversial social constructions (Swartz, Gibson and Gelman, 2002). These categories are, however, important to social research, highlighting the impact of Apartheid on specific groups (Shefer, Strebel, and Foster, 2000; Swartz, et al., 2002). The category 'Coloured' refers to South Africans of mixed racial origins, most noticeably Black and White.
2. Outreach workers with the New Ways study were local members of the communities in which the program operated. These young people engaged with youth in the community, establishing stable trusting relationships with them. Outreach workers were therefore seen as ideal individuals to understand the dynamics of the community and facilitate participant selection.
3. All participants' names have been changed so as to protect their identity.
4. The community in which the research took place has a population of approximately 34,000, covering an area of 2.4 sq. km. This Afrikaans speaking community has an unemployment rate of 60 percent. Thirty one percent of the population

is less than 15 years of age and 43 percent less than 20 years, which is similar to the age distribution of many developing African nations (McVay, 2001).

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