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# Issues of collaboration, representation, meaning and emotions: utilising participant-led visual diaries to capture the everyday lives of people in mid to later life

Katy Pilcher<sup>a</sup>, Wendy Martin<sup>b</sup> and Veronika Williams<sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup>School of Languages and Social Sciences, Aston University, Birmingham, UK; <sup>b</sup>College of Health and Life Sciences, Brunel University London, London, UK; <sup>c</sup>Nuffield Department of Primary Care Health Sciences, University of Oxford, Oxford, UK

## ABSTRACT

In recent years there has been an increasing use of visual methods in ageing research. There are, however, limited reflections and critical explorations of the implications of using visual methods in research with people in mid to later life. This paper examines key methodological complexities when researching the daily lives of people as they grow older and the possibilities and limitations of using participant-generated visual diaries. The paper will draw on our experiences of an empirical study, which included a sample of 62 women and men aged 50 years and over with different daily routines. Participant-led photography was drawn upon as a means to create visual diaries, followed by in-depth, photo-elicitation interviews. The paper will critically reflect on the use of visual methods for researching the daily lives of people in mid to later life, as well as suggesting some wider tensions within visual methods that warrant attention. First, we explore the extent to which photography facilitates a 'collaborative' research process; second, complexities around capturing the 'everydayness' of daily routines are explored; third, the representation and presentation of 'self' by participants within their images and interview narratives is examined; and, finally, we highlight particular emotional considerations in visualising daily life.

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## Introduction

There has been much interest in the use of visual research methods in recent years, with researchers documenting both benefits and tensions for utilising various visual techniques in a variety of social arenas and to analyse different social practices (for example, see Back, 2009; Harper, 2002; Mizen & Wolkowitz, 2012; Pink, 2007). Visual methods have been argued to facilitate more participatory approaches to research, and have been cited as a means for including conventionally marginalised groups within the research process (Pilcher, 2012; Wang & Burris, 1994). In this respect, visual methods are increasingly being adopted to explore experiences of ageing, including everyday life, embodiment and key aspects of the life course (Martin, 2012, 2015; Orr & Phoenix, 2015). A plethora of visual techniques are being drawn upon for this endeavour. For example, Phoenix's (2010) research utilises self-directed photography to look at the experiences of women and men bodybuilders in mid to later

life, and Rolph, Johnson, and Smith (2009) explore the use of photography as a means to uncover histories of residential care. Within these analyses, there is an argument made that visual techniques might offer something different for research participants themselves in taking part in qualitative research projects, as well as eliciting richer types of data through these research processes.

There is also a sense in these works that the visual enables the researcher to explore issues that are very much grounded in participant's own understandings of their life worlds. For instance, Fitzpatrick et al.'s (2012, p. 49) participatory photography project with older people utilised their photographs to uncover scenes which promoted or hindered the facilitation of particular health needs. They argue that this method ensured future health promotion would be driven by community understandings. Some research also advocates using the visual to resist against dominant stereotypes of people in mid to later life. Richards, Warren, and Gott's (2012, p. 65) research, for example, utilises a combination of photographic, art therapy and video techniques, and highlights the tensions involved in attempting to 'create 'alternative' images of older women which defy established modes of categorisation'. Visual methods within ageing research have therefore been a key means for examining stereotypes and the representation of age in popular depictions; the nature of the (in)visibility of ageing bodies (Martin, 2015); as well as what an alternative visual representation of ageing might look like.

This paper directly interrogates the methodological possibilities in utilising visual diaries and photo-elicitation interviews, drawing upon insights from our research which sought to explore the everyday lives of 62 people in mid to later life in the UK. We highlight how participant-led photography and subsequent photo-elicitation interviewing has allowed us to explore meanings of everyday life, and make visible the rhythms and patterns that underlie our habitual and routinised everyday worlds. It has, to an extent, provided a means of capturing the 'ordinariness' of daily living; and the day-to-day practical activities and personal meanings embedded within personal, domestic and working lives that have been described by Holstein and Gubrium (2000). In particular, this method enabled an exploration of key themes underpinning aspects of daily life including: time and routines; public and private space; health, risk and the body; social connections and relationships; and work, volunteering and leisure.

After an explanation of the methods utilised in the research project and an insight into our research sample, the paper discusses four key issues emerging from our attempt to visualise the daily lives of people in mid to later life. The paper first highlights some of the opportunities that visual methods enable for facilitating, to some extent, a collaborative research process, and discusses how participants' characterisation of undertaking visual diaries as an 'enjoyable' endeavour impacts upon research rapport and motivations for research participation. Secondly, it explores the extent to which the 'everydayness' of daily life can be captured through participant-led photography. We then move on to discuss some of the issues with image representation and the 'presentation of self' (Goffman, 1959). It is argued that whilst images cannot represent a 'truth' about participants' lives that is somehow fixed or possible to 'know', this is not necessarily a hindrance for research. Rather, participant-generated images and their accompanying narratives are a very particular means through which participants construct and represent both their identities and their daily lives, which, in itself, is sociologically and methodologically significant. In the final section of the paper, we attempt to address an issue which is common in qualitative research, but which is sometimes assumed to be somewhat mediated against by the participatory nature of visual methods (Pink, 2007, p. 55); namely, emotional experiences in the research process. This paper therefore aims to explore both the possibilities and dilemmas of the use of photography as a means of analysing the daily lives of people in mid to later life, as well as wider methodological implications.

### **Visual diaries and photo-elicitation interviews**

Our research aimed to explore the use of participant-led photography, combined with photo-elicitation interviews, for providing insights into the rhythms, patterns and meanings that underlie habitual and routinised everyday lives. The research involved 62 participants (42 women and 20 men), aged 50 years

and over (age range 52 years to 81 years). The majority of participants were retired; some were in paid employment (working in a variety of roles including, for example, educational sectors; administration; health; sales); many were undertaking voluntary work, or participants carried out a mixture of these roles. We asked participants to self-identify in terms of their ethnicity, and the participants identified as: White British = 46; White English = 4; White Irish = 2; Caucasian = 1; East African = 1; African Caribbean British = 2; British Indian = 2; British Pakistani = 1; British Sikh = 1; White European = 1; Prefer not to say = 1. Participants took photographs of their different daily routines to create a visual diary over the course of one week. We sampled participants in the South of England, through a variety of organisations aimed at people in mid to later life, as well as a range of workplaces, leisure centres and community groups. A total of 4471 images were produced by participants across the project, and interviews lasted on average for 46 minutes.

There were two main stages to the research process. The first stage involved the researcher meeting with the participant to explain more about the project, to provide a digital camera and give guidance on camera functionality. Participants then took photographs depicting their daily lives (of any aspects that they wished) for one week. In this sense the photographs act as a 'visual diary' of a participant's life across one week. The diary technique has been shown to be effective in research with older people (for examples see Jacelon & Imperio, 2005; Milligan, Bingley, & Gatrell, 2005). As we will indicate in this paper, participants in our study discussed the benefits of creating a visual, as opposed to a written, diary. Importantly, we did not stipulate to participants exactly what to photograph (aside from documenting their daily lives), nor did we tell them how many photographs to take. Participants were therefore in control of the cameras and they could decide what to photograph (or not). As Allen (2012, p. 448) argues, limiting the direction given to participants in a self-directed photography project is important '[s]ince the strength of the method lies in its ability to hear the voice of the research subject' and thus the researcher stipulating what to photograph, or how many photographs to take, would 'inevitably impose [the researcher's] idea of what was important enough to shoot'.

After participants had completed their visual diary, a researcher met with them (usually in their home, office, or a quiet meeting room), to undertake a photo-elicitation interview. Photo-elicitation entails 'inserting photographs into a research interview' (Harper, 2002, p. 13). Our approach could also be characterised as similar to the 'photovoice' tradition, as participants themselves were given cameras and encouraged to 'photograph their own worlds', and these images were discussed within the research interview (Harper, 2012, p. 155). It is also akin to the 'photo novella' technique, in the sense that the visual diaries and subsequent discussion of them are essentially 'picture stories' that enable 'people to document and discuss their life conditions as they see them' (Wang & Burris, 1994, p. 171). Yet, our approach diverges from Wang and Burris' (1994, p. 171) emphasis upon the photographs serving as a 'code' that functions to 'reflect the community back on itself, mirroring the social and political realities that influence people's lives'. Our analysis in this paper seeks to question the extent to which photographs and accompanying narratives represent a straightforward 'reality', or a 'mirror' of reality. We have thus adopted the term photo-elicitation as a means of characterising our use of participant-produced photographs to elicit narrative responses. The photographs provided a reference point to facilitate conversation and to focus and 'prompt' discussion during photo-elicitation interviews. Looking at the images together on a laptop computer with participants enabled us to explore, in detail, meanings of daily life; activities; roles; relationships; space; time; participants' reasons for taking the photographs; and the context of image production.

Attentive to ethical concerns, we attempted to facilitate informed consent, privacy, confidentiality, and to prevent harm and exploitation (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995). Ethical approval was sought from Brunel University London, and research participants were told of our research intentions, both verbally and in a participant information sheet, and gave their written consent to participate in the study. Participants were given the right to consent to their images being used for academic research and publication purposes, and were also briefed to obtain consent, wherever possible, where other persons were present in a photograph that they took. Participants were asked to sign photograph reproduction rights forms to negotiate copyright of the images. The privacy of participants was respected, and we





deleted photographs that participants had taken that they later decided they wanted to omit from the project. Participants were also given the right to specify which photographs they wished us to utilise for analysis (as opposed to publication and presentation) purposes only. Participant names throughout this paper have been anonymised through pseudonyms, and where participants are themselves visually depicted in the photographs, these images have only been reproduced with their consent.

In our analysis of the intersection of the photographs and textual data, we utilised ATLAS.ti software as it enables the incorporation and comparison of visual and textual data. Photographs were initially sorted within a word document according to the day and time taken (am, noon, pm, night time) to provide a weekly overview of routines and structure of the day and week. This enabled us to 'see' the photographs not only in a weekly layout but also daily occurrences, and thus to visualise recurring routines. It also allowed us to more easily make comparisons across different participants' diaries, as well as enabling participants' images to be linked to and coded alongside the corresponding interview text. Interview transcripts were imported into the same ATLAS.ti hermeneutic unit as the photographs and analysed using line-by-line coding to create short phrases summarising what a particular section of text conveyed. Textual and visual data were initially coded separately and then analysed concurrently to ensure that images were analysed within the context of the interviews, and in order to not just take the images at 'face' value. As is evident from Figure 1, which depicts a view of our project on ATLAS.ti, we were able to code and thematically analyse the photographs and textual data alongside each other. A reflexive research diary was also kept during the analytical process to document the researcher's initial interpretations of the photographs, and to reflect upon how the interview narratives confirmed or troubled these initial analytical ideas. Through this process, we also learnt something quite interesting about the fluidity of meaning apparent from still images, which we will return to reflect upon later in this paper.

### **Enjoyment and 'collaboration': the opportunities that visual research enables**

This paper now moves on to discuss some of the opportunities that utilising visual methods in ageing research can enable, specifically the enjoyment of the research process for participants, and the collaborative research approach it can engender. As Shenk and Schmid (2002) argue, photography is a medium with which many older people are familiar and feel comfortable talking about and working with. This 'comfortableness' can also stem to enjoyment of the research process where photography is incorporated, or be a means of encouraging participants to engage in research in the first place. Many participants spoke of their enjoyment of the research process (sometimes to their surprise or more than they imagined they would enjoy it), and of the visual diary being a motivational factor in their research participation. The extracts from participant interviews below convey these points:

After, say, a couple of days I was quite enjoying myself. (Annabel)

It was easy. After the first couple of days I didn't think about it at all. I'd just suddenly be doing something and think ah I need to take a photograph, you know, and I'd go and get it. But I didn't feel it was an imposition or anything. And I quite enjoyed it actually. (Jolene)

Other participants spoke about the photographic element being a novel or exciting element which motivated them to participate in the project, sometimes to a greater extent than if the project had utilised different techniques. Phillip, for example, compares his participation in this research to the diary-method:

If I'd seen this research project and the methodology had been writing a diary I would have said no, erm, because I would have found that boring and difficult to do. I mean if somebody said to me, actually, write down a timetable of your day, you know, day by day, week by week, I'd have given up by the second day actually. But doing or recording things with photography ... it's slightly more relaxed. (Phillip)

Some of our participants' views therefore confirmed, as Richards (2011, p. 2) argues, that '[v]isual methods can actually aid participation because images ... have a novelty factor which is likely to keep people stimulated and engaged in the research process'.

The enjoyment experienced by research participants in our visual project may also have stemmed from the fact that it enabled a collaboration between participant and researcher in which they 'try to figure out something together' (Harper, 2002, p. 23). As Harper (2012, p. 190) notes, '[m]ost photovoice studies involve empowerment'. As participants took their own photographs and themselves 'clicked' through the photographs on the laptop computer, guiding the researcher through the images at their own pace, participants were able to communicate their own meanings. Through building up a week-long diary of images, akin to written diary research methods, participants were also given 'leeway' to document 'what was important to them' and to structure their visual diary as they 'felt appropriate' (Elliott, 1997, 4.2).

### Capturing the 'everydayness' of daily life?

One of the key opportunities of utilising visual methods in a project concerning daily lives, is that it not only elicits vivid testimonies about participants' lives, but giving participants a camera enables the researcher to 'see' that which is often 'unseen'. Visual methods can facilitate access to spaces and routines that may not be uncovered during a conventional interview encounter; those that may usually be considered to be 'back stage' (see also Pilcher, 2012), private, or indeed considered too 'everyday' or even mundane to discuss. As in the diary method, where participants may write about events and moments that the researcher cannot 'observe' first-hand, participants generated images portraying what might conventionally be 'hidden' from the eye of the researcher, for example, images of waste disposal (Figure 2).

Participants can therefore take photographs of spaces and routines that the researcher may not be physically present in that moment to witness, and arguably these are moments which may not always be possible to uncover through other research methods. Certainly, as Croghan, Griffin, Hunter, and Phoenix (2008, p. 345) argue, the photo interview itself, through providing a platform for discussing participant-generated images, 'offers participants an opportunity to show rather than 'tell' aspects of their identity that might have otherwise remained hidden'. Further, as Brady and Brown's (2013, p. 99) important research found, utilising the visual – in their case – using storyboards, story booklets and film, enabled their participants to re-tell, and thus challenge, dominant stereotypes about their identities as young mothers. In our research, this aspect of the visual facilitating participants to tell 'hidden' aspects of their lives had interesting implications regarding the opportunities that it provided to visualise the ageing process. As Hepworth (2000, p. 40) argues, 'the look of age' is 'considered



Figure 2. 'Putting out the bins' (Jonathan).

unwelcome and undesirable.' Yet in our research, some participants documented aspects of the ageing process that might remain largely invisible from dominant, stereotypical images of ageing, such as dyeing grey hair, or photographing and critically discussing their engagement with products to 'defy' the ageing process. What we are perhaps seeing, then, is the 'counter visual', in Schept's (2014, p. 211) sense; seeing what might usually be 'cropped out' from depictions of daily life, or indeed, from portrayals of mid to later life.

Photo-elicitation interviews may also reveal other aspects of participants' daily life, that are not immediately part of the interview focus, but that are also pertinent to their everyday worlds. Within the interviews, participants sometimes sought out photographs or other objects, 'to employ as part of the narratives that they are also developing verbally' (Pink, 2007, p. 88). Particularly as many interviews took place in the participants' home, in some instances the images prompted participants to show the researcher other images, objects and spaces that proved meaningful for their daily lives that they otherwise might not have thought to mention. To cite a few examples, one participant showed the researcher recent photographs taken at her daughter's wedding to indicate both the closeness of her relationship with her daughter, and how much time preparing for the wedding had taken up of her daily life in the lead up to the 'big day'. Another participant showed the researcher photographs of his late wife engaging in charity work to indicate her kindness and generosity, and another participant took her around his garden to explain which sections his wife attends to and which sections he does. These examples arguably enable participants to convey their own meanings as well as enabling the researcher to visualise what they mean.

Another interesting dimension of conveying the 'everydayness' of participants' lives through the visual, was how it not only gave the researchers a deeper insight into daily practices which are potentially 'invisible', but how some participants characterised the research process as enabling them to bring to light potentially 'unseen', or 'unnoticed' elements of their daily lives and relationships. This resonates with other research which discusses how the visual enables participants to make their familiar environments or daily practices seem different or 'strange' (for example, see Dodman, 2003; Mannay, 2010, p. 94). Some participants mentioned that photographing and discussing their daily lives had resulted in them thinking reflexively, and in some instances, to think differently about their daily lives. Jolene, for example, reflects upon her daily routines and her relationship with her husband: 'We do do a lot together. We share interests ... I was surprised that we did as much together as we did'. Similarly, Martin reflects upon his experiences of photographing his daily life:

I did find taking the photos and the interview a worthwhile experience. It made me realise how much I organise my life around routine; it's something which was pretty important when I was working, but now I'm retired I seem to have carried on living with a lot of routine. I feel I ought to be more flexible in doing some unplanned and unexpected activities, but I suspect that I would end up thinking (for example) I'll reserve Tuesday's for this and then it would become a routine in itself! ... It was a useful way to look back on things and what I do on a daily basis, as I wouldn't normally think about it. (Martin)

These examples indicate, as Harper (2002, p. 21) argues, that 'photographs can jolt subjects into a new awareness of their social existence. As someone considers this new framing of taken-for-granted experiences they are able to deconstruct their own phenomenological assumptions'.

Further, interviewing with images not only provides a context for discussing daily routines, but participants constructing a visual diary of their week makes it easier to recall what routines they engaged in on different days, meaning that the images also function as an 'aid memoire' rather than certain routines being omitted from an interview because they have been forgotten or considered insignificant to mention. As Chaplin (2004, p. 35) argues, photographs capture aspects of daily life that consist of 'a sequence of ... frozen moments, each of which is exceptional by the fact of being singled out' by a participant, and so we become presented with "heightened" ordinary moments' in which people's patterns, rhythms and routines can be discerned. A visual diary can not only generate a picture of the patterns and rhythms of participant's lives over the week that the diary is completed, but it can also prompt a participant to reflect on how their routines have changed over a longer period of time. For instance, Verity took many images of construction work that she encounters near to her



home on a daily basis. Looking at this imagery enabled Verity to reflect on her struggle over a number of years to stop this area of land being built upon to provide transport links, and she reflected on the success of her campaign that has occupied a lot of her time over a number of years. This suggests, we argue, that photographs can reveal important connections to daily experiences in the past, as well as the immediate context evident within the still image itself. Interestingly, the more we spoke with Verity about her collection of images, we gained a further insight into Verity's changing perspective in her daily encounters across time. Verity discussed how she now finds there to be 'something beautiful about cranes', which she attributes to having coming into contact over a number of years with construction sites near her home. Through discussing these images, a recognition of a change in her opinion was elicited regarding her encounters 'out and about' from having spent so many years looking at and walking past construction sites. This therefore highlights the salience of the visual both for the *researcher* who may be studying a 'familiar' context within which they are already an 'insider' to render the context 'more perceptible', but also for the ways in which this 'defamiliarization' can also shape potentially new perceptions for participants in their *own* understandings of their daily lives (Mannay, 2010, pp. 91, 95).

Thus far we have highlighted some of the ways that our research supports and in some instances extends, existing merits discussed in relation to the use of visual methods, particularly with regards to research with people in mid to later life. However, the next two sections will problematize the notion that visual research is somehow necessarily 'collaborative', or indeed 'empowering' for participants, and will highlight the tensions around meaning and the representation of 'self' in participant-led photography.

### **Representation and the presentation of 'self' through images: what can images 'mean'?**

As Hall (1997, p. 16) argues, representation is 'the production of meaning through language'. Photographs come to 'represent', to describe or depict the meaning of what is visibly evident within the image. Yet, once captured, the meanings of photographs are not, in fact, fixed but their meanings, or what they are claimed to 'represent', are contingent upon who is viewing them and in what context they are received. Photographs are given new meanings, or meanings are attempted to be 'fixed' upon then, depending upon both the context of their production and their reception. Therefore, while a participant may take a picture to convey a particular meaning, it will still be interpreted in different ways by different people. Our own positionality as three academics, who are women, white, and younger than the participants, will have inevitably shaped our interpretations of the images and the resulting narratives, and it could also have shaped participants' decisions of *what* to photograph. The knowledges that can be produced, and what gets 'represented', is thus a particularly 'situated' knowledge (Haraway, 1991). Photographs are therefore partial views of the world rather than the 'truth' about it, with their meanings being socially constructed by both the image maker and those who view the image, and are inevitably shaped by both the researchers' and the participant's own social worlds.

Yet Banks (2001, p. 11) argues that we can still analyse two 'stories' about an image's meaning, considering an image's 'external narrative', namely, 'the social context that produced the image and the social relations within which the image is embedded at any moment of viewing', and, secondly, the 'internal narrative', which is 'its content, the story that the image communicates'. Yet it is impossible to 'know' a singular meaning of that 'story' that is being communicated in the sense of it having a fixed or definitive meaning. While there are multiple possible meanings of a single image (Pink, 2007, p. 125), then, through utilising Banks' strategy, what we *can* uncover is the meanings participants themselves place on their decisions of what to photograph and how they talk about the content within the image. Thus our approach resonates with Rose's (2001, p. 22) discussion of auteur theory, in which we are concerned with the 'intentionality' behind the image, of how participants themselves construct meaning through what they intend to portray. This is, therefore, not so much a straightforward discussion of the 'data' produced – the image – but an understanding shaped by the context of image production.

As Back (2009, p. 474) points out, photography ‘betrays the choices made by the person holding the camera.’ Yet, to push this point further, as Radley (2011) argues:

[t]he ways in which people talk about photographs they have taken themselves is not simply a description of what is given on the print. It is a justification of the act of picturing, in which what is claimed is sustained or supported by reference to features pictured. (Radley, 2011, p. 24)

This pushes us to question, as Radley (2011, p. 27) argues, the assumption that the content of an image conveys a straightforward reality, and instead suggests that *picturing itself* is a ‘constructive act’. What is depicted in a participant-produced image is thus not so much about what is pictured, but is an active process of making an experience or a moment ‘a momentous one’ (Radley, 2011, p. 27). This attention to both the production and reception of images can therefore be an important insight into participants’ identity construction and how they want themselves and their lives to be seen by the researcher and represented in the images. What we need to remember, also, is that participants’ own meanings attributed to photographs, or to specific content within the photographs, are also continually changing, and are not fixed, as evidenced through participants’ in our study’s reflexive accounts of the different meanings they attributed to their routines from the photographs.

Linked to this issue of the meaning of images not being fixed or definite, is the issue of participants being very aware that the images they take are for the purposes of a research project, and how this may potentially affect the ways that they represent their lives. There are a number of notable issues here. Firstly, some participants appeared to want to show that they were aware that this was a research project and to demonstrate that they were participating fully, or ‘doing it properly’ as some participants phrased it. This resulted in some images being taken by participants that represented them reading our project ‘participant information’ guidelines’ (an example is shown in Figure 3).

Further, some participants also put the researcher ‘in the frame’, and took photographs of the researcher during briefing or interview encounters. As Pink (2007, p. 82) notes, ‘we can learn much by attending to how other people use photography to insert us into their categories, projects and agendas’. This use of photographing researchers may also be a part of participants indicating that they can ‘do’ the research project properly. Indeed, it was also found by Pilcher (2012) in a previous project that research participants invoke their own uses of the visual to meet their own agendas for research participation.



Figure 3. ‘Participating in research’ (Catherine).



Figure 4. 'Tesco bag' (Sally).

Yet perhaps one of the most vivid examples of how images taken by participants are not a fixed account of 'reality' or a straightforward representation of 'truth', is in the way that participants sometimes construct an image to represent something they had done in their daily routine that they had forgotten to photograph in the particular moment that it took place. The example of Figure 4 illustrates this point succinctly.

The exchange between the researcher and Sally regarding this image proceeded as follows:

Sally: Oh there's the shopping again. Now why's that there? Don't know. Right that was Sunday.

Interviewer: Right, so the biscuits you bought?

Sally: Yes, yes, oh no, I did some more shopping, that's right. That was, yes, they were the biscuits, but I put that in because I forgot to put in that I went shopping on Monday morning ... And I thought oh gosh I haven't photographed those and the biscuits were on the table, so I shoved them in the Tesco bag to show I'd been to Tesco's.

This highlights that the image is a particular construct, as it was taken to represent a shopping trip rather than being a photograph taken during the actual moment of the trip. This reminds us that an image does not convey a straightforward truth or reality of an event or moment. The image is also a particular product of the context in which it is taken, highlighting an awareness again of taking part in a research project – an activity which is already not part of the participants' daily life ordinarily. It reminds us, in a sense, of Bourdieu's observation in relation to photographs in which people are required to 'act naturally' for a photograph, which of course results in them feeling embarrassed and acting far from 'naturally'. In this example also, the participant is attempting to recreate and represent a 'natural' occurrence, but all that we can be presented with is a 'simulated naturalness' (Bourdieu, 1999, p. 166), because it represents a moment that is different from that which is depicted. This example again challenges this idea of there being a 'fixed' meaning of images, and the photo-elicitation interview in particular, as Croghan et al. (2008, p. 351) argue, enables the generation of a narrative which questions this 'uncompromising fixity and seeming authenticity of the photographic image'.

There was also a tension evident in some of the images taken by participants and in the photo-elicitation interviews about how they wanted to be seen or represented. This ranged from specific comments over particular images to the whole visual diary being a very particular way of constructing a participant's daily life. For example, Beatrice took images to 'justify' various domestic

routines, commenting on her images that ‘that’s just proof that I’m cleaning’, and of the image that followed as ‘more proof’. As Allen (2012, p. 452) discusses, although giving participants a camera gives them the chance to document their lives as they wish, this does not prohibit against ‘stereotypical self-representation’, or the possibility that participants might align themselves with ‘dominant discourses’. In two participant’s visual diaries, for example, nearly all of their photographs were focused around exercise, taking vitamin supplements, eating healthily, or reading health literature. This could represent either that a lot of their routines are focused around issues of exercise and diet, or that this is one particular aspect of their daily lives that they want to photographically portray. In this sense, they represent themselves as being ‘active agers’, thus positioning themselves at one end of the ‘heroes of ageing’/‘bodily decline’ binary (Featherstone & Hepworth, 2005). This is not necessarily problematic, as what is of interest in our research is how people manage their time and space in their daily routines, but also how people visually and narratively construct their selves through the use of a visual diary.

Linked to this is the question of whether we can really capture the ‘ordinary’ or what is considered ‘normal’, through giving participants cameras. Indeed, Phoenix and Brannen (2014, p. 11) argue that ‘attempts to research everyday life often fail to capture the complexity of the mundane’. As noted above, what participants photograph, and the narratives that they invoke to describe their daily routines, are very particular versions of how they view and portray their daily lives. Interestingly, some participants discussed that the very act of taking a photograph, in some instances, *prohibited* them from documenting the ‘mess’ and ‘dirt’ of their daily lives, as it would not aesthetically be a ‘nice’ photograph. Jonathan, for example, was very concerned that his life would appear ‘boring’ and therefore he did not take too many photographs of himself partaking in domestic chores. Similarly, Phillip says that:

I did find myself thinking about what to record and then whether that’s actually bad in this case because you tend to leave out the dross, as it were ... There’s no photographs of stacking the dishwasher or cooking the food or things like that which get done everyday. (Phillip)

Further, some participants mentioned how some aspects of their lives had become *so* entrenched or habitual that at the time of completing the visual diary they did not remember to take a photograph. For example, at the end of the researcher’s interview with Shirin they walked to the train station together. As they were walking, Shirin noticed a poster for a yoga class pinned to a tree. It reminded her that she has engaged in yoga classes and exercise in her home for around 40 years but that it has become so much a routine part of her daily life that she forgot to photograph it or even mention it. Some participants also spoke of forgetting to photograph routines that had become so normalised in their daily lives that they do them on ‘auto-pilot’ and thus forget to take a photograph to signify they are doing it, for example, brushing their teeth or combing their hair. This points again to the fact that visual diaries are a very specific construction of a participant’s daily life, that are not only a representation of the ‘self’ that the participant wishes to represent, but also a product of what routines are a part of the participant’s everyday world that are not seemingly so entrenched and habitual as to be visually documented.

## Emotions in visual research processes

We want to raise one final issue; emotions in discussing visual diaries, and the implications of this for visual research processes and research relationships. It has been argued by some that photo-elicitation interviews, due to their collaborative and ‘participatory’ approaches, represent a much more ‘empowering’ research process. For instance, Pink (2007, p. 55) argues that ‘[a]nxiety and harm to informants can be avoided through a collaborative approach to visual research’. She further asserts that ‘the idea that informants may find the research process distressing is usually based on the assumption that the informants are having the research done to them’ (Pink, 2007, p. 55). We suggest, on the other hand, that even if the researcher *does* attempt to ensure a collaborative research process is undertaken, and assumes that informants are full participants rather than the ‘objects’ of research, whilst ‘harm’ may not be ‘done to’ a participant, this cannot prohibit emotional encounters in the research process, or feelings of distress, that do warrant attention. We argue that participant-generated photographs produce a



unique interview encounter in which the researcher cannot possibly predict or mediate what feelings and memories a photograph will elicit from the participant. So whilst the researcher can sympathise with the participant at the moment of their distress, this emotion cannot be avoided completely, no matter how 'collaborative' the research is. To elaborate, there is much advice for researchers on approaching sensitive topics in an interview. Brannen (1988), for example, suggests that sensitive topics should be introduced gradually into an interview encounter, to reduce the likelihood of distressing the interview participant. In a photo-elicitation interview, however, participants have created the images themselves and the researcher has never seen them until the interview encounter. Further, in order to make the interview situation more collaborative, participants in our study themselves very much guided the pace and flow of the interview by 'clicking' through their images on the laptop computer. The researcher therefore cannot 'know' or plan for what the next image will be, of whether it will be a sensitive topic, or the feelings and meanings it will generate.

Particular moments of distress have arisen in interviews in our research project in relation to 'absence' in photographs. Whilst Pink's (2007, p. 94) work has discussed 'absent' photographs in the sense of images that are deleted or omitted by participants, we have found that what is absent *from* an image is an element that can cause distress for participants. For example, in two participants' interviews they became upset by what was *not* in the images – namely, people close to them who had passed away. In these instances, looking at photographs of family meals in restaurants or images in the home reminded participants of the absence of those people who used to be a significant part of their everyday lives. Further, a degree of distress arose in discussing images which signalled something that was *soon to be* 'absent' in a participant's life. In Figure 5, a participant took a photograph of a 'for sale' sign to convey the fact that her house would soon be sold and she would no longer live in the place that she felt to be 'home'. Therefore, even contemporary images can remind us of, or give us a sense of, an absence, of 'something we once knew' (Berger, 1980). These emotional encounters in the interview situation could potentially act as a cathartic 'release' for participants, yet we must remember that they may not.

Yet, if we consider Ahmed's (2004) work, which questions the assumption that emotions themselves are caused *by* the object (in this case, a photograph), this further complicates the issue. Ahmed argues that emotions are always already being experienced, and are thus shaped by, rather than caused by,



Figure 5. Absence.



the photograph. As Ahmed (2004, p. 7) argues, '[e]motions are both about objects, which they hence shape, and are also shaped by contact with objects.' Thus the photograph is not ultimately the 'object' of concern – the ultimate source of distress or emotion, but rather it is the social significance attributed to it, by already felt emotions, that shape the meaning of the particular photograph in a given moment. We would suggest, then, that the collaborative nature of the interview itself does not and cannot somehow preclude or avoid the distress that participants may experience as a result of memories and emotions that are experienced, or shaped by, photographs. Thus, while we collaborate with participants during the research process, and we have engaged in shared knowledge exchange in the form of workshops and visual exhibitions post-interviews with participants, it must be remembered that participatory visual methods at times bring to the fore emotional responses that the researcher can merely negotiate, rather than prevent entirely.

Further, as Gabb (2010, p. 461) argues regarding qualitative empirical research concerning family life, and we argue applies also to research regarding everyday life, 'the researcher inevitably becomes embedded in the personal worlds of those being researched'. To this end, we argue that while we cannot omit emotional encounters from research relationships, we need to address the *impact* of emotions, including those of distress, during visual research processes, rather than assuming that they are somewhat precluded. Further, addressing how the researcher *responds* to emotional interactions within the research process is of key importance (Gabb, 2010, p. 471). This also entails considering the ways in which, as Holland (2007) and Hubbard, Backett-Milburn, and Kemmer (2001) recognise, researchers themselves experience emotions within their research encounters. Such a position recognises, as Hubbard et al. (2001, p. 126) argue, that '[k]nowledge is not something objective and removed from our own bodies, experiences and emotions but is created *through*<sup>1</sup> our experiences of the world as a sensuous and affective activity'. As researchers we were moved by the experiences of our participants, and in some instances, had to work greatly to 'manage' our emotional responses in the field. As Doucet and Mauthner (2012, p. 164) argue, managing emotions in research relationships, such as 'not crying' if a participant becomes upset, and the documenting of such reactions, is in itself part of acknowledging the ways that the knowledge construction process are shaped by research encounters. In this sense, it is crucial that in invoking visual methods we are also attune to the ways in which emotional experiences of research participants, and of researchers, are very much a part of both the data collection and analysis processes – in that they shape our perceptions and interpretations of what 'knowledge' is being produced – of what meanings we are making. This therefore turns the problematic around somewhat – for if we cannot eradicate emotional encounters within visual research encounters, then we must instead continually consider the pertinent question of the function of emotions in shaping data construction, or as Ahmed (2004, p. 4) asks, considering the question of 'what do emotions *do*'?

## Concluding thoughts

Within our discussion we have raised some crucial concerns with the collaborative potentials of using visual methods, the meanings that are possible to elicit through photographic depictions and interviews, and the necessity of considering the emotional implications of visual research encounters. We have highlighted the specific ways in which visual methods can, and do, offer a rich insight into the sometimes habitual elements of daily life, as well as providing and enjoyable research encounter for participants. We have particularly sought to question the meanings that can be made from visual research, and to trouble the notion that combining visual and textual responses necessarily produces more 'truthful', or 'real', knowledges. It certainly seems that to an extent, 'photography can communicate what is outside language' (Back, 2007, p. 18), yet we must be mindful of making the assumption that the visual and the verbal necessarily 'strengthen one another' (Croghan et al., 2008, p. 346). While for some participants the visual diary enabled them to perhaps slow down and to look closely at their daily routines, visual diaries cannot always convey those aspects of daily life that are so deeply routinised that participants do not even think to photograph them, and we have argued that the visual diary is a very particular representation of 'self'. Visual diaries and their accompanying narratives are

thus *performative*, in that through ‘doing’ the photographs, and constructing a narrative to explain them, participants actively perform or bring in to being their daily life for the researcher. What visual diaries and their accompanying photo-elicitation interviews do offer, however, is the opportunity for participants to trouble potential meanings and readings of the images. It offers, as Croghan et al. (2008, p. 351) phrase it, an opportunity to do the ‘explanatory or repair work’, of explaining their own image intentions and meanings of their lives. As we have argued, this is particularly important in research with people in mid to later life to provide a counterbalance to dominant, stereotypical depictions, of ageing.

In our consideration of the emotional implications of visual research, we argued that the camera also betrays those everyday aspects which are not ‘there’ to photograph, that can no longer be ‘seen’. These instances in particular, we found, may engender particular emotional exchanges within the research process. We thus suggest that feelings of anxiety, distress, or other emotional experiences are not possible to eradicate through participatory visual approaches, but must rather be carefully mediated. Further, we argue that these emotional encounters will have particular consequences for the knowledge produced, resulting in what Hubbard et al. (2001, p. 119) call knowledge that is ‘emotionally-sensed’. Yet what we would also argue is that this does not suggest the need to abandon interviewing with photographs, for fear that they produce emotive responses. We have highlighted the need to reflexively focus on the ‘point’ or function of emotions within the research process and the relationship with photographs – what they do, how they are shaped by and through photographs, and what meanings this in turn might produce. This once again reminds us of how participant-led photography and resulting photo-elicitation interviews are knowledge construct(ing) encounters, in which meaning does not pre-exist in an image. Rather, it is socially shaped by image production and reception (namely, the research relationship) and emotions intersect in and influence these processes of knowledge production.

Despite our notable reservations, we argue that the participant-led element of the visual project is important, particularly for people in mid to later life. We live within a ‘visual culture that systematically devalues and erases age’ (Twigg, 2013, p. 101). To this end, participatory visual research is particularly pertinent for providing (at least in principle if not always in practice), an opportunity to potentially challenge ‘dominant narratives of decline in older age’ which populate the cultural imaginary (Phoenix, 2010, p. 167). Through this participant-led visual research process then, knowledge has been generated that is not only much closer to ‘the point of view of those being studied’ (Bryman, 1988, p. 46), as is the case with much important qualitative research, but which also has the direct potential to (re)shape what everyday experiences of ageing ‘visually’ mean.

## Notes

1. Italics, our emphasis.
2. Italics, our emphasis.

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## Notes on contributors

**Katy Pilcher** is a Lecturer in Sociology at Aston University. Her research interests centre around gender, sexualities, ageing, embodiment, and visual research methods. Katy has completed research projects relating to erotic dance, sex work, and ageing and everyday life. She has publications relating to her erotic dance research in *Sexualities*, *Sociological Research Online*, and *Leisure Studies*, and her latest work includes a co-edited collection entitled *Queer Sex Work* (Routledge, 2015, with Dr Mary Laing and Dr Nicola Smith). Katy is an executive committee member of the *Feminist and Women's Studies Association (UK and Ireland)* and is an Editorial Board Member of *Sociological Research Online*.

**Wendy Martin** is a Lecturer in the College of Health and Life Sciences, Brunel University, UK. Her research focuses on ageing, embodiment and daily life and the use of visual methods in ageing research. She was Principal Investigator for the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) research project 'Photographing Everyday Life: Ageing, Lived Experiences, Time and Space' and is co-convenor of the British Sociological Association (BSA) Ageing, Body and Society study group.

**Veronika Williams** is a qualitative researcher at the Nuffield Department of Primary Care Health Sciences and currently works as part of a multi-disciplinary team on the EDGE COPD trial (Self-management and support programme for COPD), and previously worked as a research fellow on the ESRC research project 'Photographing Everyday Life: Ageing, Lived Experiences, Time and Space'.

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