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The photo-survey research method: capturing life in the city

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Recent promotion of city centre living within UK policy has led to a commensurate interest in city centre conditions and the opinions and experiences of the people who live there. An opposite, straightforward method to capture city centre residents' experiences and views is described in this article. We successfully combined a novel, under-utilized visual technique (self-directed photography) with qualitative methods (log-sheets and interviews) in the form of a 'photo-survey'. A background to visual methodologies is presented in this article, alongside a critique of using the photo-survey with 84 city centre residents to investigate environmental conditions and perceptions within three of the UK's major cities. The method provided a rich, detailed set of data, but also brought a number of noticeable benefits to the data collection process. The photo-survey not only effectively captured and documented life in the city but also acted as an 'agent for change', evoking thoughts and feelings which ultimately encouraged participants to reflect on their existing perceptions and urban experiences. The study also raises some important considerations for future work undertaken with this method and with using photographs as a set of data, and proposes techniques for minimising potential problems.

INTRODUCTION

The experiences of those living in urban environments are currently of particular interest to academics and policy makers due to the recent promotion of urban living in UK government policy (DETR 2000). Researchers have highlighted the importance of local knowledge, urging the involvement of city dwellers in urban research. However, limited research has been undertaken on how residents' views, experiences and memories can be captured effectively. Understanding people's experiences and feelings about their environment can be fraught with difficulties. The human–environment relationship is complex; observations and experiences of the environment are filtered through personal values, beliefs and attitudes. Nothing within the urban environment is experienced in isolation; observations and experiences relate to their surroundings, the sequence of events leading up to them, alongside the memories and imprints of past experiences (Lynch 1960). Living in the city is, also, very much a sensory experience; the city is host to a cacophony of sounds, an array of sights, a range of smells and an assortment of tastes which bombard the senses 24 hours a day. The urban planner Kevin Lynch describes this impeccably in his seminal book The Image of the City: 'at every instant, there is more than the eye can see, more than the ear can hear, a setting or a view waiting to be explored' (Lynch 1960, 1). It therefore seems appropriate to use a research method that taps into people's sensory experience – particularly their visual imagination. Crang (1994, 1997) emphasizes that the process of envisioning is a key part in the way people engage with and make sense of the world, and suggests that this process is used as a research method. Roland Barthes (1987) revealed the importance of understanding the everyday cultural landscape through images and music. For instance, a photograph can be considered as a social construct; it obtains meaning like...
all other cultural objects from its context, and this can be abstracted and read (see Aitken and Wingate 1993; Becker 1998).

This article presents a useful fieldwork method drawing upon these ideas, developed during a multidisciplinary project to investigate the environmental conditions in city centres, alongside residents' perceptions of these conditions. The project, titled Vivacity2020: Urban Sustainability for the 24-hour City, is described in detail in subsequent articles (Adams et al. 2006, 2007). A multi-method approach combining qualitative and quantitative data-collection techniques including interviews, sound-walks, photo-surveys, questionnaires and pollution monitoring was employed in this project. However, this article focuses on one specific part of the project: the photo-survey. We successfully combined a novel, under-utilized visual technique (self-directed photography) with qualitative methods (log-sheets and interviews) in the form of a photo-survey.

Residents of three of the United Kingdom's major cities (Manchester, London and Sheffield) were asked to take photographs of their local environment, showing both positive and negative aspects, and were subsequently interviewed about their photographs in an attempt to capture and understand their experiences of urban living. In summary, the specific aims of the photo-survey were to:

- provide an insight into the way city centre residents perceive, understand and interpret their local environment;
- explore social/spatial relationships within city centres;
- develop a participatory research method; and
- provide a mode of expression, trying to capture life in the city.

This article reflects the use of this methodological approach, with reference to the theoretical background to using photography as a research method. There are many debates surrounding the use and rigour of visual methods; thus we begin with an exploration of the historical and theoretical framework to offer an understanding of the benefits and limitations visual methodologies may bring.

BACKGROUND

Photography has been used as a research tool throughout a range of disciplines (anthropology, psychology, sociology and human, cultural and urban geography) and at a range of scales to engage diverse individuals and communities. However, despite its utility in specific cases, it has mostly remained a marginalized, fragmented, under-utilized methodological tool. The history and evolution of visual methods has been outlined by many authors, and may help to explain why visual approaches have rested on the periphery of many disciplines. Edwards (1992) and Harper (1998) provide thorough accounts of the historic and theoretical framework of visual methods. During the 1960s the sub-disciplines of visual sociology and visual anthropology emerged, resulting in a growing use of photography, films, maps and diagrams in social research. Visual techniques were predominantly used for recording researchers’ observations (e.g. providing fieldwork memory aids) or for the dissemination of research findings. The milestone study by Mead and Bateson (1942) led the way for visual anthropology; they used a process of photo-observation, combining images and text to share their insight into the cultural practices of the Balinese. Other studies followed this approach, yet these initial studies seemed to present a partial view of the subject(s), perhaps highlighting more about the academic ‘gaze’ than anything else.

Within this study we use self-directed photography as a photo-elicitation method. Photo-elicitation was first described by Collier in 1967; however, both Harper (2002) and Hurworth (2003) offer more recent accounts of the method. Photo-elicitation is the process where photographic images are used to stimulate and guide an interview. The photographs used can be existing images or those taken by the researcher or by research participants. Clark-Ibanez (2004) clearly distinguishes between researcher-driven and participant-driven photographs, stating that the former is useful for conducting theory-driven research whilst the latter provides a more inductive research approach for gaining insight into the personal realms of participants. It is this participatory approach (self-directed photography), in which the research participants take the photographs, that is of particular interest to this study.

A review of studies using the technique of self-directed photography has shown that it has been applied predominately and successfully with young people, but has yet to be employed as widely in studies with adults (Aitken and Wingate 1993; Yamashita 2002; Dodman 2003; Tunstall, Tapsell, and House 2004). Young and Barrett (2001) used a self-directed photographic method (photo-diaries) alongside three other visual methods (mental maps, thematic and non-thematic drawings, and daily time lines) to gain an insight into Ugandan street children’s interaction with their social-spatial environment. They gave 15 young people a disposable
camera each for 24 hours and asked them to keep a photo-diary of their daily activities. Compared with the other visual methods used they concluded that the photographic method was particularly useful in eliciting information about the young people’s behaviour. Control was given to the young people; they could take photographs of what they wanted, when they wanted, and in doing so they provided access to places, activities and lifestyles the researchers would not normally have access to. Dodman (2003) also used a self-directed photography method with young people. Instead of asking the young people to document their day, he gave specific instructions regarding the type of photographs to be taken. Forty-five young people from Kingston, Jamaica were each asked to take ten photographs for an imaginary penfriend (who had never visited Jamaica), showing them the surroundings and what the young people’s lives were like, and 10 photographs to illustrate a magazine article on the environment in Kingston. Participants were given the cameras for 10 days (comprising two weekends), which, unlike Young and Barrett’s study, gave the young people time to think about the aspects they wished to capture. However, similar to Young and Barrett’s study, Dodman found that using a photographic method revealed parts of the city and aspects of life that are seldom seen by outsiders, particularly academic researchers. Dodman concluded that the results obtained provided an insight into the human–environmental interactions taking place in the city, as well as how gender, social class and age can influence the perception of the environment. With regards to the method itself Dodman points out that the assumption that the photographs taken are reflective of people’s relationships with their environment is less problematic than the assumption that the information given during an interview or questionnaire is unbiased and accurate.

Blinn and Harrist (1991) combined self-directed (‘native’) photography and photo-elicitation to understand the experiences of female re-entry students. Through combining photography, interviews and questionnaires (focusing on the content and meaning of the photographs), Blinn and Harrist collected a rich, intimate and informative set of data. Many pictures taken by participants were of situations and moments that would have been very difficult for the researchers to otherwise observe (e.g. participants’ interactions with their family and friends). They argue that the methodology not only enabled access to these intimate, personal moments, but also helped to build and strengthen relations between them (the researchers) and the participants. Further support for self-directed photography comes from Markwell, who argues that ‘it narrows the epistemological gap between the lived experiences of those being studied and the subsequent interpretation by the researcher’ (2000, 97). Self-directed photography can therefore help prevent many of the problems associated with representing the viewpoint of another person. Citing Ziller and Smith (1977), Dodman points out that ‘the camera is able to document the subject’s perceptual orientation with a minimum of training and without the disadvantages of the usual verbal reporting techniques’ (2003, 294). Another reported strength of self-directed photography is the power and control the method gives to the subject (as they are the one who decides what and when to photograph). This unique aspect has appealed to some researchers who have noted that the camera can empower the subject, promoting self-esteem, autonomy and competence (see Wang, Burris, and Ping 1996, who used the photo novella approach with Chinese village women). Hence, self-directed photography can bring a number of advantages to the research process related to accessing and accurately documenting subjects and their life worlds. We wished to explore these ideas within this study, through using self-directed photography with eighty-four city-centre residents to investigate environmental conditions and perceptions within three of the United Kingdom’s major cities.

THE PHOTO-SURVEY

Eighty-four city-centre residents were involved in the photo-survey and subsequently interviewed. The residents were recruited, via a self-selecting process, from three UK city-centre case study areas: London (Clerkenwell, Islington; 34 residents involved); Sheffield (Devonshire Quarter; 20 residents involved); and Manchester (city centre; 30 residents involved). As the project concentrates upon the experiences of city-centre living, the areas targeted for study were mixed-use areas with housing located near the main daytime and nighttime commercial and leisure activities. Within each case study area there are a variety of amenities (shops, offices, entertainment facilities) located within close proximity to residential areas, which themselves are varied, incorporating social housing, privately owned flats and houses. The environmental conditions were also rather varied, with mixed traffic and pedestrian levels and a number of small open spaces within each case study. Approximately two weeks before the scheduled interview dates a disposable camera (27-exposure, 35mm film, 400 ISO with flash), a log-sheet, prepaid envelope and instruction letter were sent to each participant. Participants were asked to take photographs of their local...
area, noting the time, date, location and a short description of the photograph on the log-sheet provided. We did not want to be too prescriptive in telling participants what to photograph, so the instructions simply stated: ‘we would like you to take photos that record both the positive and negative aspects of your area. Please bear in mind how things sound and smell when taking the photos as well as what they look like’. This gave participants freedom to take photographs of whatever they wanted at times and locations convenient to themselves. Once the photographs were developed, a semi-structured interview was conducted with each participant. The interview was based upon the participants’ photographs and a number of general questions about the urban environment, made specific to the resident’s locality. Participants were asked to refer to their photographs at any stage during the interview.

A total of 1894 photographs were taken by participants and therefore available for interpretation and analysis. Due to the vast number of photographs, a content analysis approach was considered the most appropriate way to manage and ultimately analyse the data. Image interpretation and analysis is a fundamental stage of the research process; however, the main focus of this particular article is the methodology itself.

**METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS**

Within this section we wish to reflect upon the methodology employed, drawing upon the experiences of the participants involved, with reference to theoretical frameworks discussed. Our specific aims were to create and employ a participatory research method that provided an insight into the way residents perceive, understand and interpret their local environment – trying to capture life in the city. First, we wish to illustrate, with examples, how these initial aims were met; second, we seek to demonstrate how the method exceeded our expectations. The methodology brought a number of noticeable changes to the research process, with regards to both contact between the participant and the researcher, and the interactions between the participants and their local environment. We wish to illustrate how the photo-survey method not only captured, but also shaped the social-spatial experiences of the city.

**Capturing Life in the City**

In concurrence with Blinn and Harrist (1991), we found the use of photography complemented the log-sheets and interviews extremely well, enabling a rich, detailed set of data to be collected. Participants captured social, economic and environmental aspects of urban living, all of which appear to have vital roles in influencing the way they perceive their local environment. With the camera the participant became the voyager; in taking the photographs and completing the log-sheet, the participant immediately let the researcher into their life, allowing themselves to be followed around their neighbourhood during the process of recording and inscribing local knowledge. The log-sheet enabled a basic

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**FIGURE 1. Extract from log-sheet.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Photo Number</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Content of photo</th>
<th>Location (e.g. address or name of building, park etc)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>15/6</td>
<td>Noon</td>
<td>An ugly building. My view!</td>
<td>The Holiday Inn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>15/6</td>
<td>Noon</td>
<td>And in the other direction, the lovely 'lorry park'</td>
<td>Mount Pleasant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>15/6</td>
<td>5 pm</td>
<td>Home Sweet Home</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>15/6</td>
<td>5 pm</td>
<td>The tree gives the 'v' to yuppification</td>
<td>Was the Penny Black Pub until recently. Cnr of Rosebery and Farrington Roads</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>15/6</td>
<td>5.30 pm</td>
<td>A No 19 Routemaster – always a welcome sight, but not for much longer</td>
<td>Rosebery Avenue, Tysoe Street bus stop</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>16/6</td>
<td>3.45 am</td>
<td>Light pollution taken from bedroom window</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>18/6</td>
<td>10.15 am</td>
<td>Public square and former flower beds</td>
<td>Wilmington Square</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>18/6</td>
<td>10.15 am</td>
<td>Road works – these have been here for months – but I've never seen anyone working there!</td>
<td>Cnr Tysoe ad Rosebery Ave</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Downloaded by [University of Glasgow] at 13:36 13 June 2013
FIGURE 2. The love bus.

FIGURE 3. The Penny Black pub.
understanding of the photographs taken, as each participant supplied essential information about the photographs, including the general content, the location and the date and time. Unexpectedly, many participants wrote captions on their log-sheets, extending the meaning of the photographs (Figure 1, an extract from one participants log-sheet, illustrates the level of detail provided). The log-sheet narrative therefore not only allows the researcher to follow the participant’s journey with the camera, but also enables the images to become part of a statement elaborating on the participant’s feelings and arguments. Thus the log-sheet text became an essential component for image interpretation. Within their study (combining photographs and questionnaires), Blinn and Harrist (1991) similarly demonstrate that text has the power to place the photograph on a different, higher plane of reflection, enriching its content and increasing its depth.

The narrative provided by the interview also gave a clear insight into the participant-photographer’s position on the photographs and their thoughts, feelings and relations to them; this in turn enabled an understanding of how they perceive the area they live in. It was also felt that the use of photographs during the interview led to the expression of thoughts and comments that would not be accessed through answering the semi-structured interview questions alone (observed previously by Harper 1998, 2002). The conversation below with Julie, London, talking about her photograph shown in Figure 2, illustrates this. She refers to a specific unique, quirky feature of her neighbourhood:

Julie: And then number ten [Figure 2] is the Love Bus which goes to Glastonbury and things like that, but I don’t really know who owns it or anything at all, but it’s just a rather noticeable feature of the area.

Interviewer: And so where is that parked?
Julie: Always, always in Myddelton Square.
Interviewer: Really?
Julie: Yes, yes. I just imagine it’s someone with terribly rich parents who live in Myddelton Square and they’re just, you know this is the, this is the children going off to rock festivals the whole time, but I’ve no idea at all, it could be anything you know.

The quotes below from Stephen in London, referring to the photograph in Figure 3, similarly highlight the way detailed local knowledge was documented and captured through the photographs and interviews:

Stephen: And that pub there used to be a nice welcome pub [Figure 3]. Was Clerkenwell Tavern, and then it
became the Penny Black. It was famous as the Penny Black because of the post office right opposite. These people taking it over they’ve matt blacked it, all the front matt blacked it. Look you can see how dull it is. And the sign, a dollar sign bar, $ Bar. What’s it mean to local people?

Interviewer: Did you yourself used to go to it?
Stephen: Oh yea with the post office. All the clubs around here with the post office, oh loved it.

The semi-structured interview consisted of a series of open questions about the residents’ experience of city-centre living. We did not specifically ask about historical or unique features of the environment but found that the photographs enabled us to access detailed local knowledge on these subjects, and many others, which may have otherwise been missed by undertaking the interview alone. Similar to what has been reported by other researchers, we found the method an effective way to capture local knowledge, revealing parts of the city and aspects of urban life unknown to non-locals (e.g. Young and Barrett 2001; Dodman 2003). Nevertheless, like Blinn and Harrist (1991), we strongly advocate the triangulation of methods (e.g. linking interviews and log-sheets) to enrich the data collected and ultimately avoid any presumptions being made about the contents and meanings of images.

Roles

Due to the open nature of the instructions, participants had complete control over what to photograph, as long as it represented city-centre living. Thus, participants guided and shaped their interview through the photographs they took, determining the topics and concepts for discussion. The photographs taken were relevant to them, to their lived urban experiences; however, this process led to a noticeable change to the interview structure. It was evident that the photo-survey procedure enabled a shift in the traditional ‘interview roles’ between the interviewer and interviewee. The following extract from Gareth referring to the photograph in Figure 4 reveals this:

And, and outside Farringdon Station, I mean you, you can’t quite see it from there, but it’s basically that all these, all this street furniture here, and when we walked through there weren’t many people coming through then, but it’s really difficult to navigate your way through there in the mornings, and they’ve got all these ridiculous boxes and there are some old phone booths which are now derelict. And in the morning it’s, it’s mayhem down there so everyone walks in the street and then and then you know gets nearly run over. (Gareth, London)

Gareth had taken the photograph in Figure 4 to illustrate a specific point; in doing so, he had set the agenda for the interview. The photo-survey provided every participant the opportunity to do the same. This ‘freedom’ encouraged the diffusion of any existing power structures between the researched/researcher. Social and power relations and practices within photographic images are well documented within the literature (Pink 2001; Rose 2001). Some feel that the presence of a camera can reinforce existing power struggles between the observed/observer and the researched/researcher (Rose 2001). Postmodern thought encourages the diffusion of ‘boundaries’ between the researched and the researcher, and calls for a rethink of the representation of others in research methods. A collaborative approach is seen as desirable, where both the researcher and the researched are cooperatively involved in the process of knowledge production. Photographic methods can help to achieve this goal. The photo-survey used within this study certainly gave rise to an opportunity for any existing power structures or boundaries to be broken down between the researched and the researcher, as it was the research participant (not the researcher) who determined the key topics for discussion through the photographs they took. This collaborative, participatory approach enabled a rapport to be built between the participant and the researcher through a shared connection to, and interest in, the photographs.

Within this study it seemed that the presence of the photographs gave the participants confidence to express their thoughts, feelings and beliefs about certain subjects. We noticed that all participants were eager to show and explain their photographs. Participants used photographs to illustrate points and confirm feelings (an experience also noted by Wang, Burris, and Ping 1996). Frequent comments to the interviewer, such as ‘you can see it is disgusting’, ‘you can see how beautiful it is’ and ‘you can see what I mean’, highlight participants reliance on photographs to support claims and gain recognition. It was evident that the photographs enabled participants to clearly articulate their feelings about their local area whilst assigning meanings to specific places, issues, buildings and streets; a powerful tool for a research method.
FIGURE 5. The International Magic Shop.

FIGURES 6. The soup kitchen.
Reflecting Upon Life in the City

The majority of participants commented upon how they determined what to take photographs of; interestingly, in doing so, they illustrated how the methodology not only captures life in the city but acts as an ‘agent of change’, evoking thoughts and feelings which ultimately encouraged participants to reflect on their existing perceptions and experiences. For instance, the following quote from Eddie reveals the thought processes and choices behind his images:

When you, you said on your form please be, try and be positive and negative, and I’m going round with the camera trying to look for some rubbish and I found some litter behind, behind these bushes and I thought shall I photograph them, shall I, shall I photograph that, and I thought no I can’t go out of my way to like ‘urgh I’ve found some rubbish, oh shame about the mess’. There, there’s isn’t, I mean go down, if you get up early enough on a Sunday you’ll find the leftovers from, from Saturday, don’t get me wrong, the street cleaners soon come along and clean it all up. (Eddie, Sheffield)

This is significant not only for what it reveals about methodology, but also for the insights it provides into the environmental conditions and Eddie’s perceptions of those conditions; perceptions which were challenged as a result of his participation. Thus, the methodology not only enabled Eddie to document the environment, but also led to new thoughts and changes in opinion. Other participants specifically reflected on how the methodology made them feel about their environment. The quote below from Joanna describes how her feelings about a certain issue were challenged:

Actually I found taking the pictures that was a really interesting experience cause I sometimes experience litter or vomit on the streets in a certain way, and when you go out to take pictures you had to look for it, and realise where’s the vomit gone, I can’t find any vomit. So, so it wasn’t as bad perhaps as, as/certainly the, the vomit problem wasn’t as, as bad as I perceived it to be, which is interesting. (Joanna, Manchester)

The following quote, taken from Mary, illustrates this further; through her participation in the photo-survey she gained a new perspective on her neighbourhood and the urban developments taking place:

One of the things that I noticed actually from doing this was the number of buildings in Manchester that have been converted from one use to another, so we’ve got all sorts of things,
and even from the corner shop, Olive, lovely old building but it’s now mixed use, they’ve got a swimming pool leisure centre underneath, they’ve got a corner shop, they’ve got flats above. (Mary, Manchester)

A methodology’s ability to evoke thoughts, feelings and reflection within a participant will obviously have a significant influence over the ‘data’ collected, and ultimately the research findings. Before discussing this aspect of the methodology any further we wish to illustrate how the photo-survey encouraged some participants to be involved in ‘new’ experiences.

‘New’ Experiences

Through undertaking the photo-survey, participants were forced to look around (and become involved in) their local environment; in doing so, many encountered ‘new’ experiences. The following quote by Ben demonstrates this:

And then I took a picture of the International Magic Shop [Figure 5], which is just up, up on Clerkenwell Road. And I had never spotted before, it was only cause doing this I saw it. And it’s hilarious, I went in and they were having the most amazing conversations in there about, people were talking about you know getting a, trying to get a video about levitation and, and how, you know someone was asking about videos for levitation and about you know pulling off stunts with ropes and things. And it made me think again there’s this vibrancy to the area there’s so much going on. (Ben, London)

The quotes by Stuart and Fred illustrate this further; in undertaking the photo-survey both participants noticed something new about their local area:

Photo seven is a soup kitchen [Figure 6]. But I’ve not actually seen one before until I went to take these photos ‘cause that was on a Sunday early evening, just in the car park down there. I know, I knew they went on around in Sheffield but I’d not seen one before, so I took. (Stuart, Sheffield)

Fred: This area round behind us on, on Clerkenwell Road, where just before it becomes Theobald’s Road, is very Italian. And there’s an Italian Deli there, and there’s an Italian church which is beautiful, and in fact I went into for the first time as part of this, ‘cause I thought I’d go check it out, and there’s some really lovely frescos in there, and one of which I did manage to sort of half capture [Figure 7].

Interviewee: No, that’s come out quite well.
Fred: And there’s an amazing organ. It’s just it’s, it’s a beautiful church. And I like again that. And on Sundays it’s, unfortunately, I meant to try and catch it, but you get all these Italians who, who go there for church on Sunday and they all park up outside, it’s mayhem with the traffic and stuff. But it’s a wonderful scene . . . Sort of it just adds a little bit of colour to the neighbourhood, you know you’ve got these sort of quite glamorous looking people kind of coming out of the church. (Fred, London)

For some the experiences reported were not only observational but involved their interaction and participation. The quote below, from Dan, describes a conversation which took place whilst he was undertaking the photo-survey:

When I was out taking photographs this gentleman, a fairly recent arrival, come from a war zone, and came out and said to me take a picture of my garden, and wanted me to take a picture of his. Asked me what I was doing and I told him, and then he wanted me to take a picture of his garden, and so I took a, this, this picture, which is photo three, which is a picture I took at the request of the tenant . . . And then the next door neighbour put his head out and said what about mine. (Dan, Sheffield)

Many participants recognized that it was their involvement in the research project, and the undertaking of the photo-survey, that led to certain experiences, which were subsequently documented so well by the photographs. This was summarized very eloquently by one participant, Joseph, who commented upon being involved in the whole project:

It’s like being asked to look at something that, that you walk passed every day. It’s like a picture on a wall that you have had for years and years, you never look at it, and then someone says to you well that’s . . . and you stop and look at it for five minutes and you suddenly realise you’ve never really looked at it properly. (Joseph, London)

The concept of seeing your local area in a different light has recently been dissected by Alain de Botton, who
decided to ‘travel’ around his local area; in doing so, he describes how his ‘neighbourhood did not just acquire people and defined buildings, it began to collect ideas’ (2002, 252). Previously ‘walks along the street had been excised of any attentiveness to beauty, or any associative thoughts, any sense of wonder or gratitude, any philosophical digressions sparked by visual elements’ (de Botton 2002, 251). For de Botton, travelling around his local area released ‘latent layers of value’, evoking the simple idea which this study touches upon: to ‘notice what we have already seen’ (de Botton 2002, 254). This appears to be something that the photo-survey triggers. The power and control given the participants by the method (they decide what, and when, to photograph) encourages them to contemplate their experiences of urban life and how best to document it to another person (who is, importantly, an ‘outsider’). The result is a thoughtful set of photographs, with particular meaning and relevance to the participant. The photo-survey is a powerful tool evoking thoughts, feelings and reflection, genuinely revealing the perspectives of the residents being studied. The method therefore strongly contributes to an understanding of how residents perceive, interact and relate to their local environment. For this particular research project this aspect of the methodology is a considerable strength, as we aimed to view the urban environment through the eyes of the participants – interpreting it from the perspective of those being studied. We found that the methodology is particularly useful to understand socio-environmental processes; how experiences and perceptions unfold over time. By giving an element of control to the participants the methodology has flexibility, allowing alternative avenues of enquiry and ways of thinking (e.g. within this study we noticed the influence of historic features to avenues of enquiry and ways of thinking (e.g. within this study we noticed the influence of historic features to urban living, a question which was not included within our original interview schedule). However, we recognize that for other fields of research this method may be inappropriate – potentially compromising research outcomes (e.g. some researchers may prefer more structured, comparable, replicable research process where the researcher is in the driving seat).

**METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

Despite the method’s potential utility and adaptability, some methodological limitations are evident, raising important considerations for future work undertaken with this method and using photographs as data. It is naïve to think that all urban issues can be represented and understood through one technique alone. Some aspects of city living can be sensitive (e.g. crime, anti-social behaviour), personal (e.g. family, friends) or non-visual in nature (noise, air pollution) and therefore cannot be ‘captured’ by this method. For instance, one participant, Jack, from Sheffield, explains how it was impossible to get close enough to capture some subjects without endangering his own well-being:

Jack: It’s very difficult to take the worst aspects.
Interviewer: Why’s that?
Jack: Because a lot of it is people, the tramps and so on and the beggars and the street vendors. You can’t really take photographs of them in safety. You know you’re likely to get abuse or, or whatever, and I think that’s one of the worst parts of city living.

Jack’s comment not only highlights a methodological limitation, but also raises a number of ethical and safety issues relevant to participatory methods in general. Participatory researchers often train and engage others to undertake research with groups and in environments that they otherwise could not reach (Young and Barrett 2001). However, these people and places might be dangerous, or might become so for the participant precisely because of the activities researchers have asked them to carry out. For example, Young and Barrett’s study, which gave disposable cameras to street children and asked them to photograph aspects of their everyday lives, raises a number of serious methodological ethical issues. Young and Barrett do instigate a discussion regarding the ethics of working with street children; however, they neglect to explore the ethical considerations that the methodology itself imposes. For instance, some activities might be illegal, and photographic evidence might incriminate participant researchers or those photographed. There is a need to be aware that engaging participants as ‘researchers’ may change their status in the eyes of other community members and lead them to face hostility as ‘outsiders’. Thus efforts to share research design and blur roles and responsibilities via methodologies should not lead researchers to abrogate their responsibilities for participants’ physical and emotional safety.¹

Another methodological consideration relates directly to using photographs as a set of data. Photographs provide a snapshot of reality; the knowledge a photograph shows is partial and situational, ‘recording the surface, rather than the depth’ (Harper 1998, 25). A photograph captures a particular moment – a slice in time and space, held in time and space. There is no knowledge of what happened before or after that moment, or what the
complete picture may be. This concern is emphasized by many authors, including Sontag (2001), who argues that photographs are evidence not only of what’s there, but also of what an individual sees; they are not just a record, but an evaluation of the world. It is therefore important to consider a number of aspects when analysing photographs. Chalfen (1998) proposes a comprehensive descriptive framework to understand the structure and make comparisons of images. The framework looks at the communication process and content of the images, enabling patterns and regularities to be identified within and between images. Chalfen presents a 25-celled grid to represent the relationship between different ‘communication events’ (e.g. planning, shooting, editing and display of images) and image ‘components’ (e.g. participants, settings, topics, message form, code). This is an excellent starting point for the reading of images generating useful questions for image comparison (see Chalfen 1998). Rose (2001) offers a comprehensive guide to methods of image interpretation; without suggesting the superiority of one analytical method over another, Rose, like Chalfen, illustrates that the narrative context of an image has several important implications for interpretation. Context can be multifaceted, as a photograph can have many different viewpoints – the taker, the viewer, and the taken all have positions, interests and relationships to the image, but will have different ways of seeing. Banks (2001) terms this the ‘internal’ and ‘external’ narrative of photographs. This study relied heavily upon the photographer’s narrative, provided by interviews and log-sheets. Hence, we strongly advocate the triangulation of methods to avoid any presumptions being made about the contents and meanings of images.

CONCLUSION

Ruby (2005) reports an explosion of interest in visual anthropology within the last two decades. The methodology developed and used within this study, combining a visual technique (self-directed photography) with qualitative methods (log-sheets and interviews), contributes to this trend. Photography brought many benefits to the research process and the data collected. The photo-survey research method we hope to encourage other researchers to push, mould and experiment with visual methods. As multidisciplinary work thrives, innovative methods of data collection, measurement and evaluation are emerging within many disciplines. We certainly feel this presents an exciting opportunity to use visual images ‘to reveal what is hidden in the inner mechanisms of the ordinary and the taken for granted’ (Knowles and Sweetman 2004, 7).

Through presenting a thorough, critical reflection of the photo-survey method we hope to encourage other researchers to push, mould and experiment with visual methods. As multidisciplinary work thrives, innovative methods of data collection, measurement and evaluation are emerging within many disciplines. We certainly feel this presents an exciting opportunity to use visual images ‘to reveal what is hidden in the inner mechanisms of the ordinary and the taken for granted’ (Knowles and Sweetman 2004, 7).

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NOTE


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