HOL08978 Creating Interpretive Visual Texts
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Abstract
Lieblich (2006) contends that transcription of interviews is the ‘best way to listen carefully to the interview and learn its content and form’ (p. 65). In a four year study of young rural women from under-represented areas who had accessed an elite university, I was trying to better understand the complex amalgam of agency, imagination, and personal experience that took these women from small towns to a city-based university. Alongside the 200 digital photographs the participants took to explain their move and the transcripted interviews I had based around those photographs, I felt that to ‘listen carefully’ to them and their stories, I needed to also present what they saw when they were speaking. Experimenting with the two texts of my own research, one of words—the transcript—and one without words—the photographs, I began to juxtapose photographs I was using for analysis with the transcripts that went with it. Shirato and Webb (2004) call this ‘intertextuality,’ which they define as ‘the process of making sense of texts by reference to other texts, or to meanings that have already been made in other texts’ (p. 28). First motivated by Gee’s (1985, 1991) insistence that language has poetic features coupled with inspiration from St. Pierre’s (2000d, 2002a) model of writing as a way of analysis, I began placing transcripted words into poetic stanzas, noting changes of tone and repetition of certain words and phrases as I heard them on the tape. Working with the two forms of data as interdependent, I discovered an evocative and powerful form of data presentation while trying to write about it, a ‘radically interpretive form of representation’ (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005, p. 964). By this time, I was not looking for ‘true’ or ‘valid’ interpretations, but useful interpretations (Crotty, 1998, p. 47). The photographs paired with the poetic transcripts as an interdependent visual text offered more robust and complex ways to both interpret and to represent the young women’s knowledge and experience. Placing the photographs and transcripts side by side, I found a profound visual representation of subjectivities, complex and differentiated as they are represented in the words and images the participants use to describe themselves. I call these ‘interpretive visual texts’ and will demonstrate their power of performing identity stories.

Qualitative research about educational experience is most often represented from interview data based on the researcher’s questions, that is, a text of words (Walker & Wiedel, 1983). In a four year study of young rural women from small towns on Access scholarships to the University of Melbourne, I sought to see the participants’ experiences of mobility and higher education from their own vantage point by asking them to take photographs of their rural places and their encounter with the city rather than answer a set of prescribed questions. Indeed, they agreed to participate in the study in order to show policy makers what they were really like. As Steedman says, there is a human urge to ‘tell the self’ (Steedman, 2000, p. 26).
At the time, I had no intention to use the photographs as more than a prompt, a data generator’ (Schwartz, 1989, p. 119) for the students in the interviews that followed, and as the source of prompting conversation of a planned focus group. My intentions were ‘to produce different knowledge and to produce knowledge differently’ (St.Pierre, 1997a, p. 175). What I discovered in the process of knowledge production and presentation was that ‘visual data’ constituted much more than the photographs and that I would need to develop new methods of (re)presentation in order to do justice to the myriad of photographs and transcripts the study generated.

**Seeing and making research**

I had plans to only use the ‘real’ data in the thesis—the interview transcripts—and file the photographs away, perhaps for future reference in later interviews. It did not occur to me how important the visual representations of the young women in the photographs were to the intentions of the project until I started preliminary analysis of the transcripts in 2005, noting how often I found I was referring back to them. Within weeks, they became primary data that allowed me to ‘assemble the complications of lived experience and cultural meanings’ (Moss, 2008, p. 52).

As Eisner argues so pithily, ‘seeing is central to making’ (Eisner, 1998, p. 1). Making (in this case, a way of reading visual data) is also central to seeing. Representing the women in the study required my own research construction, my own design. In designing the research, I was faced with the difficult task of representation, something I found paralysing for some time. In my representation of the participants’ experiences, I ‘transform lived experience into a textual expression’ (Van Manen, 1990, p. 36).

Feminist research assumes an embodied researcher—I wanted to illuminate a more embodied and visual methodology (Thomson & Holland, 2005, p. 203). I came to accept that instead of a survey or a brilliant set of interview questions, I was the research instrument (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005). Feminist methodologists such as MacLure (2006) who makes a case for a baroque method in qualitative research and St. Pierre (1997a) who argues that data is sometimes transgressive and unbowed to methods, encouraged me that perhaps I did not have to follow a linear research design. Further, I have found very compelling feminist arguments for being eclectic.
in methods across research paradigms (see for example St Pierre and Pillow, 2000, and Skeggs, 1997, 2004c). Thus finding a single research approach that was just the right fit for this project (Clough & Nutbrown, 2002b) proved unnecessary, if not impossible.

**Representation of the research**

Chaplin’s (1994, pp. 1-2) claim that sociological research is most often a visual representation of reality, whether it includes photographs or not, resonates with my own experience. In writing about our objects of research, we paint a picture, we tell a story. We attempt thick descriptions, or ‘pen portraits’ (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000) of those we interview, trying to recreate the moment, demonstrating their pauses and sighs, building a visual representation of those we research. The visual, whether remarked upon or not, is particularly present in qualitative research. However, in my project, I could not escape how central the visual products of my research were to my own interpretation of the transcripts. How to represent this visually became a challenge.

That acknowledged, representing this knowledge, particularly in a way that would honour the photographs and the interviews as reciprocal artefacts, left me stymied for some time. There were no clear-cut examples from educational literature that represent photographs and longitudinal interview data in interdependent relationships. Almost without exception, the photograph represented in educational research is present as an illustration of the written text or as the narrative itself without words (for example, see Bach, 1998 and Walkerdine, 1990).

**Creating interpretive visual texts**

Experimenting with the two texts of my own research, one of words—the transcript—and one without words—the photographs, I began to juxtapose the 2004-2005 photographs I was using for analysis with the transcripts that went with it. First motivated by Gee’s (1985, 1991) insistence that language has poetic features coupled with inspiration from St. Pierre’s (2000d, 2002a) model of writing as a way of analysis, I began placing transcribed words into poetic stanzas, noting changes of tone and repetition of certain words and phrases as I heard them on the tape..
The result was several hundred pages of poetic transcripts that I paired with their corresponding photographs. Working with the two forms of data as interdependent, I discovered an evocative and powerful form of data presentation while trying to write about it, a ‘radically interpretive form of representation’ (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005, p. 964). By this time, I was not looking for ‘true’ or ‘valid’ interpretations, but useful interpretations (Crotty, 1998, p. 47). The photographs paired with the poetic transcripts as an interdependent visual text offered more robust and complex ways to both interpret and to represent the young women’s knowledge and experience. Placing the photographs and transcripts side by side, I found a profound visual representation of subjectivities, complex and differentiated as they are represented in the words and images the participants use to describe themselves.

Chaplin (1994) advocates for a way of bringing both image and text together in an interdependent relationship, a ‘visually aware sociology’ (p. 279). However, Chaplin argues, the positivist insistence on distancing the researcher from the researched has meant we often miss the interdependence of the verbal and visual text and the possibilities for social critique when the visual and verbal are coordinated (p. 12). Her thesis is that both photography and feminist critique have contributed to the blurring of the boundaries of ‘verbal/visual, theory/practice, art/photography, subject/object of research’ (p. 156) so that social research is ripe for a new kind of sociological practice. Pink (2001) supports Chaplin’s contention that the verbal and visual must be interdependent. Here, the visual and verbal contextualise each other, ‘forming not a complete record of the research but a set of different representations and strands of it’ (p. 96). Shirato and Webb (2004) posit that both words and photographs work as visual texts (p. 17).

To briefly recount the interpretive visual method I have modified from others, as I read the reams of transcripts from each interview I noticed the metaphors and poetic cadence of each person’s response. The first transcript analysed was Christie’s. I decided to take Christie’s direct words in the transcript and arrange them in a poetic form in order to ‘see’ her words next to her photographs. As Richardson and St. Pierre (2005) argue, writing is a method of data analysis. Richardson models poetic representations that capture the essence of the story, rather than the exact words on
the transcript (Richardson, 1992). I have not followed this model. Instead when I arrange the transcripts in a poetic manner, I have changed nothing but style.

I have placed the transcribed words alongside the photographs as another way of visually representing the participants’ responses. By doing this, I construct a visual text that will affect the way her words are read. Therefore the reader is able to see the photograph, or her ‘text without words’ (Holt, 2008) she has taken and is responding to, as well as the spoken text in a poetic, visual form.

**Presentation styles**

I illustrate this method with one of Christie’s photographs and the accompanying transcript as an example, which I have first presented as a visual text, then the following where the photograph and transcript are represented separately.

![That’s me and mum. That’s a big part of home. That's where my family is. In fact, that is the biggest bit about home for me is that my family is there. Even if they moved into the city (and they wouldn’t, because they are not city people). Even if they weren’t there, it would still pull me home.](image)

**Figure 1: Christie and her mum, July, 2004**

I will now take the same photograph and the same transcript, and for the sake of contrast, demonstrate other choices I could have made to present the data.
“That’s me and mum. That’s a big part of home. That’s where my family is. In fact, that is the biggest bit about home for me is that my family is there. Even if they moved into the city (and they wouldn’t, because they are not city people). Even if they weren’t there, it would still pull me home” (Christie, July 2004).

In the first representation of Christie’s photograph of her and her mum, I juxtaposed the photograph and transcript together in an interdependent form. By boxing the photograph, the poetic representation of the transcript and putting a caption underneath it and naming it as a figure, I have created a visual text. In the second representation, the photograph is privileged and the transcript serves as an explanatory caption.

Following Eisner (1997), I was looking for representational tools that were ‘illuminating rather than obscuring the message’ so that the reader would feel empathy for the participants (p. 8). I wanted the participants’ stories to be taken seriously, and in order for that to happen, I felt they needed to have their own particularities to appear as authentically as possible.

Textual devices such as italics, captions and boxes worked well to present some of the data visually, particularly when the transcript did not relate to any photograph. In other cases, the photograph from the initial interview becomes irrelevant to the participants, and is simply no longer needed for the narrative to continue. When this happened, I would sometimes represent the conversation as a visual text in poetic form, boxing these poetic texts without any photographs and captioning them as a figure, giving them equal status as a photograph to represent a person and her story.

It was necessary to do this with one participant in particular, Paula, who took very few photographs. Paula’s narrative is built around her goals of finishing optometry, moving to wherever she believes will give her the best monetary opportunity, and somehow, to ensure her mother’s costly investment in her is not wasted. Unlike her mother, Paula has had the opportunity to go to the university, and her gratefulness for the opportunity her mother has given her is sincere and heartfelt. As Paula had no photographs of her mother, I have taken what she said about her in two places of the same interview and created a visual text in Figure 2. By representing her story this
way, it is easier to see the ways her mother connects and influences Paula’s narratives.

Mum was really smart.
I know she got into uni
but she couldn’t go,
because her parents didn’t really have the money
to pay for her to live…
she’s very smart.

I mean, mum would never have forced it on me,
she would never have made me go to uni,
but because I wanted to go,
she helped me get there.
She definitely influenced me to enjoy school.
But I have a fire in me…

My mum had put away money since I was young in shares,
and when I went into uni,
she sold all her shares in order for me to go here.
Which is really good.
She’s definitely the best mum in the world.
Mum cried when I got into Optometry.
She never cries.
She’s a very strong woman.
Would never cry.
But we cried.
I was so excited.
I couldn’t even speak.
She would do anything in the world for me and my brother.
That’s awesome what she has done there.

I know they have to pay so much money for me to be here, and they
have so many bills of their own.
And I’m having the time of my life, so yeah, I do feel guilty.
I don’t know.
My mum knows I appreciate it.
And I will look after them.
I’m a very independent person.
I like to say I am very strong and very down to earth.
That is what I want people to say about me.
And that is basically my mum.

Figure 2: Transcription poem, "My Mum", from Paula's rural transcription, February 2005

Another presentation style I utilised was taking two or three poetic transcriptions and placing them in tables so that they could be read concurrently for interpretive
purposes. For instance, in trying to represent Kerri’s interrelated narratives about her own mother, her expectations for a partner and for a career, I found placing those expectations next to each other in columns was quite powerful.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I always wanted someone who I could talk to about very complex ideas. I never went out with anyone at high school… I wanted my life partner to be on the same wavelength. There weren’t many people in Bordertown on the same wavelength… Someone who is capable of getting excited about intellectual things. Someone who reads. Similar political views. Environmentally aware and socially aware. A friend.</th>
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<td>Yes, I want to get married and have kids. I have studied biology and I have a chronic illness, so that’s not good. I want to have kids before I am 30, because that is sensible. After 30, the risk of Down’s Syndrome goes up, and not that it is necessarily a problem for the kid, but I don’t want to live risking chronic illness. Younger parents, too, have more energy. I don’t want to have my first kids when I am 40. I want to be married when I have kids, and Lance told me he won’t marry me until I finish my course. And I thought, “Oh, Ok. Righto!”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>But it is so obvious that I belong at a University. My mum often says, “Oh Kerri, why don’t you come home and be a check-out chick?” That is pretty much how it is in Bordertown, and I don’t think I’d be real happy doing that! I want to do honours. I want to do a PhD. And even if the PhD didn’t happen, I’d be a research assistant, or I’d change track and do linguistics. I’d go and research the Aboriginal languages dying out.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 3: Feminist expectations for marriage, children and a career, June 2006

Here, the juxtaposition of Kerri’s desires are interpreted in the caption: ‘Feminist expectations.’ Further, the reader gets a glimpse of Kerri, her youth, her excitement, her reflexivity and her deep intellectual interests. If these transcripts had been separated and placed under their own headings of ‘partner,’ ‘children’ and ‘career,’ it would not have worked in the same way.

**Issues of reliability**

Poetic transcription has its critics. Jessop and Penny (1999), while searching for more creative ways to represent the relational context in which stories are told, dismiss poetic transcription as a sense-making tool with transcription data. They argue that it lacks in ‘detachment, abstraction and critical distancing’ (p. 221). For them, poetry is ‘risky precisely because it uses emotion and stark imagery, and interposes authorial
voice explicitly’ (ibid.). I used a more literal form of poetic transcription in interpretive visual texts as a way of analysis and interpretation, but also as a way of representing the uncodable ‘transgressive’ data (St. Pierre, 1997a), the emotion of memory, transition, and an imagined future. Lincoln (2002), defending the validity of phenomenological data as qualitative ‘evidence,’ points to the politics of knowledge production:

- data from interviews, from documents, diaries, observations, and other frequently non-quantifiable sources … are considered by hardline conventional researchers as anecdotal, subjective, and given to multiple interpretations. These words are highly coded discourses for non-rigorous, unsystematic and therefore, invalid (p. 7).

Establishing credibility in this project has been important to me because I wanted the participants’ narratives to matter to policy-makers. More important to me however, was that the participants themselves would feel that their identity narratives were a robust and valid representation of the stories they told.

Truths that were experienced by the participants ‘issue from real positions in the world—the passions, desires, ideas and conceptual systems that underlie life as lived’ (Josselson, 1995, p. 32). Narrative truths emanate from ‘good-enough’ narratives that ‘contain the past in terms of the present and points to a future that cannot be predicted, although it contains the elements out of which the future will be created’ (p. 35). As each participant read her narrative, there was a strong connection between my representation of her and her own self-understanding. Each participant responded differently, but without exception, felt that the sections about them were ‘true.’ From an intersubjective standpoint, they felt the knowledge I had produced about them was ‘a credible depiction of the situation’ (Kenway, Kraack, & Hickey-Moody, 2006, p. 41).

Further, for the women in the study, poetic transcription of their (own) edited words served as a powerful tool for them to ‘see’ their stories over the four years. One by one, each participant read their completed stories in this thesis, and repeatedly spoke of their emotional response to feeling so well represented and understood. It is important then to unpack some of the insights I found in using data visually.
Visual is a representation of reality

Arguing for an ‘enlightened’ way of seeing in research, Eisner (1998) reasons that visual representations, especially photographs, ‘can say things that not only would require pages and pages of words to describe, but in the end could not be adequately described with words’ (p. 187); photographs are able to ‘display’ another’s reality. Interestingly, Eisner compares the validity of a photograph’s ability to reflect reality to other visuals commonly used in educational journals—that of flow charts, graphs and trend lines. Eisner notes that while visually represented statistical data is commonly accepted as scientific, photographs are held in suspicion. Harper is more explicit when he describes photographs as ‘similar to all forms of data—both qualitative and quantitative…both true and constructed’ (Harper, 2006, p. 749).

In my study, rather than travelling to my respondents’ rural roots, they metaphorically brought them to me in the form of photographs. As an example, I have placed two of those photographs together as way of illustrating how powerfully they work to bring about a ‘real’ encounter with the participants. As the reader, you obtain some insight into the world of the participants. Further, by placing a caption under the photographs, they are presented as evidence of places the participants thought significant to their own understanding of identity. Without a caption, there would be no explanation of where the photograph came from, when it was taken, or who took it. This is also an example of a photographic vignette, where photographs are presented without words as data.

**Figure 4:** Real-world “home” places of Belle and Christie, 2004
All at once, the photographs gave me so much and so little information. Without the photographs, I doubt that I would have been able to elicit the same depth of narrative. Clearly, the photographs provided evidence of the reality of the participants’ life-worlds. They were a visual demonstration of the participants’ stories of rural identity. The photographs work as tangible evidence of the participants’ places of origin and a visual point of reference in their perceptions of the city. Further, this ‘realist’ visual evidence provides a richer lens that provided by a collation of statistical data on the participants’ hometowns—population, socio-economic status, primary industry and the like. However, the research story would be a very different one than the one that follows had I only used a realist interpretive framework for the photographs.

**Visual data as cultural documents**

*Thus photographs should be seen in terms neither of scientific description nor of artistic aesthetics—although many critics have done and continue to do this—but as cultural documents offering evidence of historically, culturally and socially specific ways of seeing the world* (Rose, 2000, p. 556).

As Rose argues, photographs are cultural documents that give insight into another’s way of seeing. Such a critical visual methodology (Rose, 2001) takes photographs seriously as cultural artefacts of the researched. It also acknowledges that the researcher and her perspective are enmeshed in the ways photographs are reproduced and used to illustrate reality.

Although the participants’ photographs—some 200 of them—were wide-ranging and varied, there is a tale of rural identity and its complex amalgam of gender, class, and subjectivities throughout. I wanted to hear how the participants interpreted their images as a way of understanding their own sense of mobility and identity. I was attempting to get to something hidden, deeper and more subjective.

The rural photographs served as historical emblems of their rural selves and interpreted after their ‘mobile moment’ of leaving home. Even though the temporality of their photographs was clear—the rural was ‘then’ and the city was ‘now’—the photographs elicited interviews that amplified the issues of subjectivity and its complexities. It became evident that even though the city was ‘here and now’ their mobility issues were not resolved. Narratives of the
self emerged from the photographs in very different ways, demonstrating that each of them drew on their past rural lives to explain their perceptions of their future mobility.

As I explained earlier, I have often taken the transcribed words about a photograph and placed it in poetic form, providing another visual representation of the participant. Both texts interdependently engage the reader with each participant’s way of seeing. Shirato and Webb (2004) argue that the sort of visual texts our participants create bring insight to their habitus, particularly in the ways our cultural histories naturalise what we value and how we evaluate the world (p. 17).

This is best illustrated with a visual example. What follows is a visual text of Belle’s rural home, Haybale, and her rendition of what her town is like. There is much that can be said about the photograph itself as well as what she says about it. However, I will present the visual text as way of illustrating her subjectivity. I note here that Belle has no intention of ever living in Haybale again, and that the story of a seven-year-long drought and its effects is evident in the visual text that follows.

Figure 5: Main street in Haybale, Belle, October 2004

Pink’s asserts that photography has an ‘ethnographicness’ (Pink, 2001, p. 50). Unable to travel to Haybale, I can study Belle’s photograph and words about it to experience what Haybale is like. Now that she is out of Haybale for good, Belle believes having only one café in town is ‘enough.’ Pink’s approach to a ‘visual
ethnography’ pays careful attention to the ‘subjectivities and intentionalities of individual photographers, coupled with the cultural discourses, social relationships and broader political, economic and historical contexts to which these refer and in which they are enmeshed’ (p. 55). In this case, Belle’s photograph of Main Street, can be read on many levels: as a narrative about a dying small town gripped by a devastating drought, as a place that Belle has outgrown but fondly remembered with nostalgia, or many other ways. As readers, we see what we want to see.

**Visual is always a narrative**

St. Pierre considers the ‘crises of legitimisation and representation’ a cause to urgently ‘rethink our understanding of both knowledge and its production’ (St.Pierre, 1997a, p. 175). The researched are never as straightforward as we hope to present them. Our evidence of their participation will always contain data that are ‘uncodable, excessive, out-of-control, out-of category’ (St.Pierre, 1997a, p. 179); interpretation is messy, problematic, and sometimes ‘violent’ (St.Pierre, 1997b, p. 377).

The participants’ texts of images and words represent individuals as both a ‘site and subject of these discursive struggles for identity and for remaking memory’ (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005, p. 961). Feminist researchers problematise memory work with young people (Biklin, 2004) and the empowerment of any participant by a researcher (Ellsworth, 1989; Lather, 1991). Such data can only be viewed, not as Truth frozen in time, but as illustrations of how the women have chosen to make sense of their university education in the city, what symbols are meaningful to them and the possibilities for new, emerging stories as they imagine their futures. Knowledge is produced, but that knowing must be identified, described and explained by me, grasping my own sense of their experiences (Fay, 1996).

**Conclusion**

In this paper, I have described my approach to an interpretive visual methodology: deploying a feminist perspective informed by social theories and choosing tools for representing narrative identity, I produce different knowledge about rural young women in an urban university.
On one hand, I have wanted the photographs of the women in this study to be taken seriously, to be understood as records of the research that represent the realities of the women in the study. On the other hand, I understand that reality is constructed based on our social and cultural understandings of the world; we are classed and gendered, and those serve as powerful filters in the ways that we see and speak. Nevertheless, the visual texts give us powerful insight into the habitus of each person in the study. They provide insight into the complex amalgam of rural ideology, gender and class as symbols of identity. Further, informed by both the feminist and postmodern critique, I am aware that any knowledge produced in this thesis is situated and storied. It is not set in time and will change.

Holding these paradigms together, both with words and without words, helps me see the projects’ data stories as layered and complex. This approach serves as a bridge between what could be viewed as quite disparate research paradigms. It allows the number of methods I used: photo-elicitation, focus groups, ethnography, semi-structured interviews for life stories and life narratives, as well as casual conversations around a coffee to inform the representation of the data stories as visual texts. My research of the women in the study and their subjectivities is much more evident as real and credible when viewed as a disjunctive affirmation of multiple approaches across multiple disciplines. I believe that the result is new knowledge about rural women at an elite university.
References Cited


