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Capturing visual metaphors and tales: Innovative or elusive?

(word count = 7,500)

Abstract

Despite the exponential growth of visual research in the social sciences in the last three decades, continuing empirical enquiries are arguably more relevant than ever. Earlier research employed visual methods primarily to investigate distinct cultural practices, often seeking the views of marginalised, challenging or hard-to-reach participants. In this study, non-British postdoctoral academics took photographs that visually or symbolically represented the highlights of their academic acculturation experience as international PhD students in the UK. The semi-structured interviews of academic and non-academic related experiences that made a significant impression revolved around participants' visual metaphors. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, a widely employed inductive qualitative technique, was utilised, with visual data complementing the narrative evidence. This innovative method both aesthetically and insightfully enhanced the representation of participants' lived experiences and was instrumental in validating participants' narratives. Additionally, this article examines the pragmatic utility of employing metaphors in a photo elicitation technique (also critically reflected upon by the participants who are academic researchers themselves). The paper therefore offers a collective reflection not only on the features and advantages of this approach, but also on the key challenges and some recommendations to inform contemporary visual methods practice.

Keywords

Visual metaphors, creative photo elicitation, informative and symbolic photos, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, academic acculturation.

Introduction

At the outset, visual research was a conventional domain within social anthropology (Pink 2003), which latterly became prevalent in sociology, even claiming to provide 'intellectual leadership' during its earlier period (Wagner 2002, 160). The exponential growth and interest in visual research methods across the social sciences, e.g. education, health and social work among others, manifests itself through increased scholarship via publications and conferences (Prosser and Loxley 2007; Rose 2014; Wiles et al 2012b). This presents an ideal opportunity for contemporary visual researchers to build upon the considerable contribution offered by more established 'parent disciplines' and learn from each other in their continuous pursuit of visual research, irrespective of disciplinary areas (Pink 2003; Wagner 2002). In so doing, they then form a small community of visual research scholars who share and develop a 'disciplined approach to enquiry' (Wagner 2002, 170; Wagner 2011) and seek to 'redefine theory and refine methods' (Prosser and Loxley 2007, 55) possibly to lead visual research in new directions (Banks 2007, 120).

In the context of education, Prosser (2007, 13) asserts that in the last three decades, 'visual studies have come to play a particularly meaningful role in educational research'. It is suggested that educational researchers are well placed for studies using an interdisciplinary approach due to 'a potentially rich array of

theoretical and methodological frameworks'. Yet, it is also argued that circumstances constrained the flourishing of visual research (Prosser and Loxley 2007, 56):

Educational studies, being typical of applied research, is traditionally and generally accepting of an esoteric mix of techniques, methods, perspectives and theoretical frameworks, drawing on them as and when necessary. Despite research in education providing a potential site for multi-modal visual research, the paucity of exemplars suggests that researchers in education have yet to recognise the advantages offered by visual methods.

Both Wagner (2002) and Prosser (2007, 14) suggest that the underlying issue stemmed from governmental policies and political ideologies that surreptitiously shape research agendas and priorities. The heavy reliance on 'number and work-based methodologies and their different epistemological assumptions to shape education policies' had an impact on research funding allocations, and subsequently in recognition and flourishing of innovative enquiry approaches. With further calls, 'the marginalisation of visual methodologies in education which have traditionally struggled to gain recognition and a reasonable share of public funding' (Prosser and Loxley 2007, 56) gradually changed the research landscape (Rose 2014). It is contended, however, that there are several areas that still require attention. For example, contemporary visual researchers argue for 'a more complete understanding of the theory and practice of visual research' (Wall et al. 2013, 3) e.g. how visual data sets can be managed in conjunction with large quantitative data. Likewise, calls for more specific guidance regarding usage and interpretation of visual data (Hryniewicz et al. 2014; Wiles et al. 2009; Wiles et al. 2012a) prevail in the literature. Particularly, Wiles et al. (2012a) highlight the rather 'general and limited' ethical guidance provided by the British Sociological Association to researchers using visual methodologies. In addition, only general guidance is stipulated in both the British Psychological Society's Code of Human Research Ethics (2014) and the British Educational Research Association's Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (2011). Despite mention of such methods as experiment, observation, survey, intervention and pilot test in BPS's prescribed guidelines, and likewise, action research, survey research, experimental or quasi-experimental study, stated in BERA's ethical guidelines, no specific mention of the term 'visual' is found. Although solely focused on the UK context, both sets of ethical guidelines' seeming oversight of distinct issues confronting visual researchers supports the argument that visual research-related issues remain deserving of further discussion.

Photographs in visual methods research

Although photography is only one example of visual imagery, photographs dominate and receive most attention when compared to films, video recordings or television broadcasts because still cameras are more commonly used (Bryman 2004; Rose 2014; Van House 2011; Wagner 2002). Banks (2007, 3-4) asserts the two good reasons for employing photographs in research: a) the ubiquity of images in society; and b) photographs 'reveal some sociological insight that is not accessible by any other means' (see also Rose 2014; Wiles et al. 2011), possibly because visual methods 'provide access to thoughts, feelings and beliefs, which are difficult to express verbally' (Hryniewicz et al. 2014, 32). Rose (2014, 28-29) adds that through reflection, visual research also helps participants to expose what is 'hidden' and to make explicit what is 'implicit'. The process also involves a 'collaborative

participation' between the researcher and the participants making the latter 'co-constructors of knowledge (see also Clark 2013, 77). Notwithstanding that Wagner (2011, 64) identified potential 'commodity fetishism' (where visual materials 'displace attention to the phenomena they are intended to represent'), the aesthetic quality of photographs that makes 'visual data so appealing' also supports the notion of images being 'both the object of scientific analysis and subject to aesthetic appreciation' Clark (2013, 74). Taken together, the act of taking photographs is a personal, creative, collaborative and reflective mode of meaning-making through visual construction, often to communicate one's innermost thoughts and feelings or to capture a meaningful element in participants' worlds. In the social sciences, the photo elicitation technique is regarded as one of the most popular visual research methods in recent years (Croghan et al. 2008) since it was first used in a psychological context by John Collier in 1957 as he explored the contributory role of the environment to psychological stress (Harper 2002; Lapenta 2011). Under the banner of photo elicitation, exist methodological variations, distinctions in terminology and even differing underpinning political ideologies, e.g. photo interviewing, photo novella, photovoice, photo production, etc. (Elliot and Gillen 2013; Hurworth 2003; Karm and Remmik 2013; Radley 2011). For this article, we will employ a universal definition of photo elicitation from Hurworth (2003, 1): photographs are primarily employed during interviews 'to provoke a response'; this reflects the definition and rationale offered by Harper (2002, 13):

Photo elicitation is based on the simple idea of inserting a photograph into a research interview. The difference between interviews using images and text, and interviews using words alone lies in the ways we respond to these forms of symbolic representation ... images evoke deeper elements of human consciousness than do words....

With the increased availability of inexpensive cameras, often in phones and tablets, images have become everyday objects (Banks 2007; Van House 2011); they are now embedded in people's social lives, frequently used for communicating, informing, inspiring and self-expression. Technological advancement promotes use of visual images in social interactions (Reavey 2011) and equally, opens new possibilities for theoretical development and usage in visual methodologies (Prosser and Loxley 2007). By continually employing photography in research, further insights can be generated particularly in enhancing appreciation of cultural and social lives (Wagner, 2011); it is in this spirit that we aim to make a modest contribution to the discourses surrounding contemporary visual methodologies, especially when photographs as visual metaphors are utilised in empirical research.

Visual metaphors: a powerful means for discovering participants' 'lifeworlds'

Wagner (2011, 53-54) proposes four areas of objects of enquiry in visual studies: a) visually interesting materials and activities; b) how people see things; c) the lives people live; and d) visual representation. Examining 'visual representation', particularly the characteristics and depictions of photographs is essential to our discussion. Notably, the idea of genre in photographs affects how the photographs are set, presented and framed in particular interpersonal, social and cultural contexts (Croghan et al. 2008; Wagner 2011). In her photographic theory in the seminal book 'Image-based Research', Cronin (1998, 69-77) distinguishes two aspects of the lack of neutrality of photographs: a) photographs that simply contain information, and b)

photographs that ‘provoke an emotional reaction’. Moreover, photographs can be treated as a copy of something that previously existed (mirroring reality) or ‘a blank canvas’ whose meaning becomes apparent after it is interpreted. Cronin stresses that although the photographs may contain ‘clues’ about the event being depicted, ‘the meaning of a photograph arises in a narrative context’. Photographs may present multiple, even confusing messages but in combination with the narrative, clarity and specificity is likely to be obtained (Karm and Remmik 2013; Rose 2014). Hurworth (2003) and Lapenta (2011) further argue that the combined use of visual and narrative data can lead to new perspectives and bridge physical and psychological realities. Predictably, there are two potential types of narratives, i.e. narratives based on the explicit, factual information or narratives about the implicit or hidden meaning of the photograph. Therefore, mere reliance on the form, content or facts presented in a photograph can be misleading without the accompanying narrative from those whose perspectives we are seeking to understand (Wagner 2002), which is also regarded as a collaborative effort with research informants (Clark 2013; Pink 2003). With the narrative being synchronised with the intention for which the photograph is presented, this arguably provides an element of ‘analytical rigour and authentic validation’ or triangulation, improving overall rigour (Clark 2013, 73; Hurworth 2003).

In several photo elicitation studies, when participants are tasked to take photographs for research, they produce apparently mundane objects and activities, e.g. a blank page, scrambled egg, a nestling (Elliot and Gillen 2013; Karm and Remmik 2013; Lorenz 2010). Yet, these very ordinary photographs channel not only participants’ views and experiences but also the meaning behind them, often revealing ‘even their innermost thoughts – joys, struggles and fears’ (Menter et al. 2011, 182). According to the Oxford Dictionary of Psychology, a metaphor is ‘a figure of speech in which a word or phrase is stated to mean something that it resembles but does not literally denote (Colman 2001, 445). A *visual metaphor*, in our study, refers to a visual or symbolic image, e.g. a photograph, intended to resemble a participants’ concept or experience produced in order to stress, explain or make sense of an idea. The visual metaphor serves as a tool for discovering participants’ thoughts and the meaning behind the images. Lorenz (2010) asserts that creating visual metaphors entails reflection on experiences and abstract portrayal through images; the process of capturing photographs involves critical thinking leading to distilling and clarifying the meaning of an experience; this tends to be fitting for research with phenomenological orientations – since the emphasis is on ‘captur[ing] as closely as possible the way in which the phenomenon is experienced within the context in which the experience takes place’ (Giorgi and Giorgi 2008, 28). As Ashworth (2008, 12) puts it, in phenomenology, ‘the individual is a conscious agent, whose experience must be studied from the “first-person” perspective. Experience is of a meaningful lifeworld.’

The study

The principal aim of this phenomenological research was to investigate and understand the pedagogical, sociocultural and psychological related conceptions and challenges typically encountered by international doctoral students owing to the complexities arising from differing curricula, learning and teaching styles, academic culture and environment, and general university practices following their distinct academic journeys. The focus of the research is important for the institution, being a

UK Russell Group university with one of the highest rankings in student satisfaction (see <http://www.gla.ac.uk/studentlife/theglasgowexperience/>).

Embarking on a phenomenological study of academic acculturation through international education is a fascinating pursuit for a number of reasons: its timeliness, its challenging and thought provoking nature, and its potential methodological innovation, among others. The topic itself is deemed pertinent considering the increasing internationalisation of higher education (Leask, 2015; Schweisfurth and Gu 2009). Secondly, involving exceptionally busy early-career academics as research participants requires both a topic and an approach that can inspire sufficient enthusiasm and scope for expression to encourage meaningful participation. Owing to the study's retrospective focus, the third facet of the research entails employing a reflective approach that captures participants' educational experiences, specifically those that made a significant and lasting impression; this means endeavouring to understand the underlying meaning of such experiences. Fourthly, exploring the nature of academic acculturation (acquisition of appropriate learning behaviour in a new culture) is inherently complex, as it requires simultaneous appreciation of participants' academic enculturation (learning behaviour obtained from the first culture) (He 2002). Fifthly, recognising that our research participants are professionally trained to become reflective academic researchers (Cotterall 2013), the study presents an ideal opportunity to seek young academics' views on the use of visual metaphors. Capitalising on this fifth element, this paper offers a collective reflection on the research method deemed most fitting for our research, i.e. photo elicitation with emphasis on the visual metaphor component.

After satisfying the College of Social Sciences' ethical requirements, an email invitation was sent by the Research Development Officer to all postdoctoral academics in the university. The invitation outlined the two-stage process of the research: 1) participants being given disposable cameras for taking photos that reflect their educational experiences; and 2) participation in an individual interview where they select core photographs for discussion. This email contained the link to a designated website detailing the research project [<http://www.gla.ac.uk/researchinstitutes/adamsmith/research/seedcorn/heexperience/>] and the contact details of the research team. Participation was sought from non-British post-doctoral academics who completed their PhD in a British institution between 2008 and 2013. Two members of the research team were allocated a table at the University's Annual Research Staff Conference in Spring 2014; this afforded another opportunity to speak to conference delegates leading to more invitations and clarification regarding the research process. Several participants shared the email invitation with potential participants either by word-of-mouth or closed online social groups. One participant disclosed that the research advert from the original e-mail invitation plus the link to the research project website was reposted on one of the university's online social clubs (Oliver, personal communication, March 31, 2014).

[Table 1 near here].

Fourteen non-British postdoctoral academics from very diverse disciplines participated in the study (see Table 1). They were each sent a package containing a disposable camera (24 exposures), a return envelope and information about the study as well as ethically-approved instructions and considerations regarding the use of

photographs in research. Plain Language Statements and consent forms for the participants and their photo subjects were included. Participants were asked to take photos that reminded them of their PhD experience – scenes, people or objects that made a deep impression on them, using general guiding themes previously adopted in visual research: puzzling or confusing, amusing, surprising or annoying (see Elliot and Gillen 2013). In seeking respondent-generated photographs as opposed to researcher-created images (Hryniewicz et al. 2014; Prosser 2007), participants were given discretion regarding the number of photographs to take; employing participants' personal photographs was an option (so long as these photographs satisfied the ethical requirements). Processed photographs were saved in an iPad for flexibility during interviews. Audio-recorded interviews were undertaken either at the researchers' or the participants' offices, with each interview lasting between 50 and 90 minutes. The interviews' emphasis was on acquiring an in-depth understanding of the phenomenological 'lived experience' of the participants during their PhD study sojourn (Giorgi and Giorgi 2008, 29); the less structured interview questions prompted both a photographic and a narrative response. After selecting photos from the iPad, participants also provided photo captions and corresponding narrative in response to the question, e.g. 'Please choose a photograph that made a deep impression on you because it represents an amusing experience'. Participants' narratives expanded on how the metaphor is used and/or the concealed significance underpinning the visual element. This process helps fashion an interweaving of the photograph as metaphor and narrative (Clark 2013). The discussion also involved participants' approach to the photo-taking/visual metaphor task. Seeking participants' reflection on the technique employed was strategic (Hryniewicz et al. 2014; Prosser 2007), which was underpinned by an aspiration to capitalise on participants' analytical and critical skills towards a collective reflection on the method.

Interviews were transcribed verbatim. A copy of the transcript was sent to the participants to afford them an opportunity to correct factual errors. Using NVivo software, i.e. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith and Osborn 2008) that conforms to the phenomenological nature of the study was employed. Despite IPA being widely used in qualitative psychological research, adding the visual element to the approach is considered an innovative venture, especially since the visual IPA approach is almost non-existent¹. Following an inductive IPA process, three transcripts were independently read by two members of the team to generate the initial loose themes of significant acculturative experiences, which were the vital first steps in inductively building a hierarchy of themes. This led to reflective team conversation aimed at establishing a catalogue of preliminary themes or codes initially based on the three transcripts, which were subsequently employed in coding all the transcripts while staying sensitive to any emergent codes during analysis. A complete round of analysis (n=14 manuscripts), led to forming the final hierarchical structure of superordinate (main) themes and subthemes (Reid, Flowers, and Larkin 2005; Smith and Osborn 2008), which was then employed for the second round of analysis. Concurrently, matching photographs for these themes were classified, i.e. informative or symbolic, by the research team (see Cronin 1998). Superordinate themes and subthemes and corresponding photographic data were reflected upon by the team in the light of the study's theoretical framework, i.e. bio-ecological systems, for further interpretation of the participants' 'lifeworlds' (Giorgi and Giorgi 2008). This accords with Prosser and Schwartz's (1998) proposition that a theoretical framework should guide the analysis and interpretation of photographic data since

photographs are recognised as ‘data in their own right’ while also being ‘sources of data’ (Banks 2007, 12; Rose 2014). A synthesis of the connections between the superordinate themes and subthemes helped create a schematic model of international students’ academic acculturation experiences (Elliot et al. 2015a; 2015b; Elliot et al. 2016).

Whereas ethics permeate overall research design and methods, the extra layers of complexity with visual research pose extra ethical challenges (Mitchell 2011; Rowe 2011). Even outwith the strict scrutiny by the College of Social Sciences’ Ethics Committee, the research team carefully upheld the research protocols concerning clarity and transparency, voluntariness, anonymity and informed consent, storage, research dissemination and avoidance of harm, to address the complexities and tensions concerning confidentiality and anonymity that are prevalent when images are used (Clark 2013; Reavey 2011; Wiles et al. 2012a). Heeding what Clark (2013, 68) refers to as ‘cautious reflexivity’ as inherent to researchers’ professional duty contributed to our team’s confidence that risks were duly minimised. Following Wiles et al. (2011, 699-700), we employed our ‘own moral compass’ and adopted the ‘ethics of care’ approach, which meant that each decision made throughout the research process was informed by ‘care’, ‘compassion’ and ‘benefit’ towards our participants and photo subjects. Nevertheless, we strongly agree that improving ethical awareness deserves further discussion specifically in ‘grey areas’, e.g. inability to seek consent, copyright ownership of images and researchers’ rights to use and reproduce photographs, often informed by numerous factors (Clark 2013; Mitchell 2011; Rowe 2011; Tilley and Woodthorpe 2011; Wiles et al. 2011). As Rowe (2011, 709) puts it ‘[t]he more the researcher and author know about rights and permissions, the better they can communicate and negotiate to insure that intended uses are accurately described, potential risks are moderated and the decisions made are as reasonable as possible’.

In the following sections, we will discuss the combined critical reflections from research participants and the research team highlighting features that are fundamental when incorporating visual metaphors in research. Starting from embodying participants’ thoughts and translating them into photographs, through to participants’ continuous reflections and evaluation of their thoughts and experiences during research, eventually leading to further reflections on inherent principles that could effectively guide the overall use of visual metaphors (Prosser 2007; Rose 2014).

Embodiment of reflected thoughts via visual metaphors

Responding to research task instructions: as participants and co-researchers

As shown in Table 1, a total of 254 photographs were originally received for the photo elicitation interview component. Starting with the *Research task instruction*, the whole process was intended to be purposeful and reflective (Hryniewicz et al. 2014; Lorenz 2010), as opposed to a mere aesthetic endeavour, when participants were instructed to revisit their experiences as international PhD students. Although the instructions were not too specific, sufficient guidance was provided to help participants focus on their meaningful experiences and capture them visually. The task itself (instructions below) was the first step in prompting participants to ruminate on past experiences.

We would like you to reflect on your educational experiences during your PhD studies within the last five years. Consider taking photographs, which you feel represent these experiences. These could be symbolic representation of objects, places or anything that you feel is important and linked to your educational experiences. Please also consider experiences that made a deep impression on you because they are puzzling or confusing, amusing, surprising or annoying.

Please use your own discretion when taking photos. For example, if you do not feel comfortable taking a photograph of a framed picture of loved ones, you do not need to do so. Please take photographs of items that you consider meaningful to your learning journey; it does not matter how 'insignificant' it appears to be at first sight.

Since taking photographs typifies everyday life activities (Bank 2007; Rose 2014; Van House 2011), extending this to research fieldwork is deemed a highly manageable task, but with the addition of a contemplative element among participants. Employing a personal strategy as part of the visual metaphor exercise was evident through such comments as 'a few days of thinking' and 'my planning process'. Participants' reflection on the visual metaphor task helped elucidate our understanding of the process (Hryniewicz et al. 2014; Prosser 2007). When participants were initially probed on how they approached the task, responses varied from 'kind of fun', 'really straightforward', 'interesting to reflect', and 'a little overwhelming'. Overall, the task was deemed neither exceedingly onerous nor complicated. Nevertheless, whereas the use of cameras brought joy and excitement to the task, searching for objects to use as metaphors posed challenges. Although the instructions were sufficient to trigger recollection of specific thoughts and experiences, the act of embodying or representing the idea or an experience in a photograph sometimes proved elusive.

...in the beginning I was quite excited and I think that's a very good approach to collect data and I like photography myself ... but when I started to look around ... I struggled a bit and I think [the photograph I just took] was not really exactly what I wanted ... I was really frustrated. (Norah)

I don't have a picture here [of something] really amusing. Maybe, my pronunciation of ... words ... There were two older ladies ... I asked my way and on the sign it says 'That way goes to [a town with an unusual pronunciation]' ... it took them about ten minutes to find out what I was on about. (Nigel)

In crystallising the notion of 'the act of picturing', Radley (2011, 17) explains that there is a difference between 'making sense with pictures' and 'making sense of pictures'. A lack of coherence between what the image in the photographer's mind is and the actual photograph produced can lead to confusion (even frustration), as reflected in Norah's experience. Likewise, a non-visual or non-tangible experience like pronunciation brings its own 'embodiment' challenge in visual research, as in the case of Nigel's struggle to depict in a photograph his difficulty in pronouncing a town's name. As for Oscar, having lived in a small town for several years, the whole town characterised his PhD experience but when challenged to 'pick a single place', he opted for 'a very symbolic picture' to depict this. These exemplify that 'the act of picturing' demands more than simply framing a scene and pressing the button. Instead, it either requires creatively expressing a tiny segment of the participants'

world or encapsulating an enormous image in one's mind into a photograph – both of which may prove to be less than straightforward.

Participants' challenges when capturing photographs

Employing a photo elicitation technique demands greater caution from the outset due to potential ethical issues and/or perceived danger, particularly anonymity and dissemination of identifiable images (Banks 2007; Mitchell 2011; Prosser and Schwartz 1998; Rowe 2011; Wiles et al. 2008; Wiles et al. 2012a; Wiles et al. 2012b). Participants were furnished with clear explanations and instructions regarding the use of their own photographs and photographs depicting other people. Similarly, it was mandatory for participants to give a) the 'Plain Language Statement' to photo subjects which detailed the purpose, procedures, publications, consent, confidentiality requirements, and contact details of the research team; and b) consent forms for photo subjects to sign regarding usage (interview only and/or wider public dissemination), storage and destruction of these visual data. In the instruction document, participants were also advised to consider 'no face' photographs by focusing on a body part or by taking a photograph in such a way that conceals the identity of the photo subject(s). All relevant documents were signed and sent to participants as part of the package and collected during the interview appointment. Even with the necessary precautions in place, participants tended to exclude people in their photographs, since only seven (<3%) of the 254 photographs were of 'only other people' in their PhD world. Participants highlighted potential issues when seeking photo subjects' agreement.

My plan ... was to take pictures of landmarks rather than people. Most people I knew have already left or were probably not willing to [participate]. (Calum)

I talked to friends about it. It was a week that Marcus who is my PhD supervisor ... was in town ... I kind of joked that I was going to take his picture, and he said you're not going to do that.... (Ella)

[As for the annoying or problematic experience], I think that would be people's attitudes towards me. ... I didn't have [associated photographs] because I tried not to take pictures of people. (Norah)

Even for some who mined archived photographs from personal collections, the same restriction was an issue, albeit to a lesser extent. For Kelly, having an extensive collection of archived photographs stored in a 'digital library' was ideal. She disclosed that she had a collection of 'photos in mind' immediately after reading the instructions; likewise, getting the consent form signed by her family members was not an issue. By contrast, Oliver who also incorporated a number of archived photographs felt unable to include photographs of other people, as getting permission could be a 'constraint'. There is fear expressed over combined visual and narrative data reducing the possibility that identities will be protected.

Finally, there was a technical restriction posed by the inexpensive disposable cameras as they did not at times lend themselves to sharp photographs able to capture the detail that helped set the context for the visual metaphor. Faith explained: 'This one [is meant to be] a view of [an old building] on a day which was raining ... I tried to capture the water on the window, but because of the light especially with those cameras, [it did not come out clearly]'.

Research team's reflection on participants' reflected thoughts

The reflective process commenced with the participants 'thinking' and 'planning' what photographs to take for the research task. Reflection continued during the interviews, as participants were asked to evaluate and select visual metaphors they considered represented their most meaningful experiences. About two-fifths, i.e. 101 photographs out of the original 254 were selected during interviews (see Table 1). The research team classified these photographs into two categories: informative and symbolic. Employing Cronin's (1998) photographic theory, informative photographs are visual representations aimed at mirroring reality and complementing the tales provided during interview. By contrast, symbolic photographs are figurative representations intended to resemble a concept or an experience; these photographs are portrayed in such a way that their connection with the narrative is not apparent, even detached. Cronin's theory resonates with Roland Barthes' analysis of still images, where he identified two levels of meaning: a) 'communication' (i.e. 'informational' containing everything that can be learned from the image itself) and b) 'signification' (i.e. 'symbolic' containing 'referential, diegetic, and historical references demanding an expanded repertoire of approaches'). Barthes purported both levels to be critical in understanding still images (Oxman 2010, 78).

Informative photographs

Predictably, the photographs that we considered informative tended to introduce the central point or a critical element of a significant experience. The visual element served as a segue to assist understanding the extended version of the story. Participants' photographs focused on objects and places that were directly related and vital to their educational experiences. Examples included:

- a) PhD process – thesis, a published paper, a special device, graduation day, a statue conference venue
- b) university facilities – university library, a workstation, long corridor
- c) local areas and amenities – a public bar, local shops, tennis court, a cash dispenser, a supermarket, a bridge, public spaces
- d) hobbies and personal interests – the park, a winding road, clubbing, a squirrel, dilapidated buildings, oriental food.

[Figure 1 near here]. As an illustration, Piers' photograph of the university library was significant to him because it contained strong elements characterising his experiences of academic acculturation and its contribution to his educational experiences. Piers provided the contextual background of his earlier experiences of learning enculturation concerning library usage in his country and where his initial attitude of being reluctant to seek help originated.

... the use of the library [was puzzling] ... We're not used to asking people for help because most times if you go to a ... library attendant and say 'Please I need your help', it's not very forthcoming ... so I pretty much had that attitude. ... I had come from a small university where the library was about twice the size of this room and you could look at everything. This was a big, big library and when I needed to write, do an assignment or something and I needed journals because I wasn't very good at surfing the web. ... I was pretty new to computers [at that time], so I would go to the library, look for stuff, I could spend hours and hours and hours. Some of my friends would ask

me what I was doing in the library all day. They wouldn't know that I wasn't studying all day. Half of the time I spent looking for stuff. I didn't realise that you could easily just go to people and ask them and then one minute, you get what you want. It was a challenge the first few months.... (Piers)

[Figure 2 near here]. Oscar selected a photograph of a conference badge with the words 'Poster Presenter – Neuroscience 2009' as a way of narrating his first experience of an international conference. The experience behind the badge was meaningful as it was instrumental in boosting Oscar's confidence about his PhD and eventually stimulated Oscar to consider a post-doctoral academic career.

... this was a major conference in neuroscience.... It was very exciting ... the conference lasted four or five days ... more than 30,000 neuroscience researchers, students came. ... The biggest meeting in neuroscience ... I presented a poster and then people kept coming to my poster ... [I was] in front of the poster for three hours ... talking to people and that was something very exciting. (Oscar)

Symbolic photographs

Conversely, there is a sense of detachment with symbolic photographs and 'the intention of the photographer was not always apparent to others' (Lorenz 2010, 215; see also Rose 2014). The meaning of the photograph remains hidden until the participant/photographer discloses the symbolism and its significance. Examples of photographs categorised as symbolic are: keys, post box, a twig and flowers, a bridge, an arrow, a yacht, a ring, a statue of Sisyphus, a pink wig and a packing box.

[Figure 3 near here]. A simplistic interpretation of Oliver's scuba-diving photo as a hobby that he adopted as a PhD student is hugely misleading. The photograph may provide subtle cues on how Oliver used the photograph as an allegory of his perception of his PhD experience; the photographers' narratives are indispensable in deciphering the real meaning of the photograph (Cronin 1998; Rose 2014; Wagner 2002). Oliver's tale behind his scuba-diving photograph is, in fact, an allegory to the importance of taking a break when one is doing a PhD.

This is in the northwest tip of the island of Pemba in Zanzibar ... I was scuba diving. My wife ... was doing a course learning to dive, I was doing a refresher course. I didn't do that well. I was coming up a lot. This was the time I needed to surface early. It started to drizzle a little bit, so it was quite rough up top, but below it was great. I just had to go up for air and once I did that it was okay. The instructor took a picture of me doing that. ... The context was me coming up for air, otherwise, I would just have drowned ... but having come for air, it was fine even though it was drizzling. It's okay to just break away from everyone else if you have to and just come up and it's fine. ... I guess most of the time, it feels like one is drowning doing a PhD. (Oliver)

[Figure 4 near here]. It was argued that language and cultural competence are a foundation for a successful study sojourn (Cotterall 2013; Walsh 2010). As expected, language intelligibility made Kelly apprehensive due to the unfamiliar and difficult to grasp local accent. This made her select a photograph that conveyed her initial struggle. As in other symbolic photographs, despite the subtle cues there tends to be a disconnection between the image and the photographer's tale.

...when I first came [to the UK], I didn't understand the people talking ... my supervisor ... didn't have the thick [local] accent ... there were only maybe two to three persons [in our group] with the thick [local] accent and every time ... they had to repeat what they said because I just didn't understand ... that book was given to my husband ... he was told 'Just read it and maybe you would understand what people say.' (Kelly)

Research team's further reflection on the use of visual metaphors

Since the interviews entailed the use of visual elements, it was necessary to gather participants' views and explanations of both the discernible content of the photographs and their concealed significance through the accompanying narratives. Taking this into account, the interview questions guided the research team in generating factual descriptions of the photographs, ascertaining if the photographs were informative or symbolic, and exploring the stories behind them as part of the research rigour and ensuring validity of the data while making 'ethical judgements' on the interpretation of the images (Clark 2013). The question relating to the 'opportunity to go back' was a practical attempt to explore participants' feelings towards an experience, which is insightful in detecting meaning.

Please choose a photograph that made a deep impression on you because it represents a puzzling or confusing experience.

- Please describe what is in the photograph and relate it to your experience.
- What makes the experience significant to you?
- If you had an opportunity to go back to this time in your life, is there anything that you would have done differently?

Our interviews were characterised by a pattern of questions, e.g., more specifically 'puzzling or confusing' is replaced with 'amusing' or 'surprising' or 'annoying/challenging/problematic' or 'three most significant experiences as an international PhD student'. Recognising the probability that participants might exclude significant experiences because they were unable to depict these in a photograph (Wagner 2011), the last question in the interview schedule attempted to cover this eventuality. On two occasions, this final question assisted and enabled participants to appraise their previous responses and provide more detail:

Is there any aspect of your experience that we have not covered but is represented/not represented in your photographs?

Discussion and concluding remarks

Considering other visual researchers' recommendations, research engagement and debate within the community of visual scholars served to deepen our evolving understanding of visual methodologies, especially as they are applied in new contexts (Banks 2007; Prosser and Loxley 2007; Wagner 2011), e.g. when our team used visual research in conjunction with Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis – an established research framework.

Pragmatic and theoretical contributions

As identified in the literature and in our own study, visual research poses anonymity-related threats and constraints on researchers, participants and photo subjects (Wiles et al. 2012a; Wiles et al. 2012b). Against this backdrop, visual metaphors also offer considerable opportunities – enlivening the research process (Clark 2013; Wagner 2002), giving an insightful understanding of participants’ ‘lifeworlds’ that is only accessible through photographs (Banks, 2007) and affording an enhanced knowledge of the meaning behind participants’ experiences via participants’ ‘deeper reflection’ of experiences (Prosser 2007; Wagner 2011), to appreciate the experienced phenomenon in phenomenological research (Giorgi and Giorgi 2008). It has to be recognised, however, that participants’ capacity to reflect on their experiential world seemingly requires a set of instructions that are clear, considerate and sufficiently detailed; focused yet giving participants’ discretion to take photos and emphasising that there are no ‘wrong’ photos; and designed in a non-threatening manner. This accords with the suggestion that ‘reflexivity should be integrated fully into processes of fieldwork’ (Pink 2003, 189); tailored design leads to better quality, authentic and more meaningful research evidence. The intended plan to get academic participants’ views on the processes entailed in the visual metaphor task implicitly conveyed the duality of their role: as participants and co-researchers, and this proved valuable (Clark 2013; Rose 2014). Combined strategy and reflection concerning the research question, design and processes generally matters in research, but arguably more so in visual research.

Our analysis supports a theoretical distinction between visual metaphors, i.e. informative (containing visual clues for an extended story) and symbolic photographs (representing a concealed meaning) (see Cronin 1998; Oxman 2010). Regardless of the category, Radley (2011, 23) explains that ‘a ‘link [is] forged between the world of the investigator and the world of the respondent’ when researchers asked participants to discuss their photographs; this is due to the shared understanding not only of the intended content presented in the photographs, but also of the stories revealing the significance of the photographs in the lives of the participants (Wagner 2002; 2011). But, one may ask – what are the implications for conducting visual research? We argue that understanding these distinctions prompts caution in the analysis of visual data, especially with ‘symbolic photographs’ to avoid mismatched or inaccurate multimodal evidence and instead leads to appropriate interpretation that also shows how photographic, metaphor and narrative evidence can complement and validate each other (Clark 2013; Elliot and Gillen 2013; Hurworth 2003; Karm and Remmik 2013; Lorenz 2010). Suitably represented meaning, is arguably more critical in studies like ours, which focuses on participants’ ‘lived experience’. We contend that whatever framework, e.g. IPA, is selected to guide the analysis, categorising visual metaphors as either informative or symbolic needs to be integral to the process. We further argue that such categorisation is critical for it is only when the narrative is synchronised with the intention for which the photograph is taken and presented that ‘analytical rigour and authentic validation’ or triangulation (Clark 2013, 73; Hurworth 2003) can truly be realised in visual research.

Collective reflection: Challenges and ways forward

It might be atypical for researchers to consult the participants on the research method of the study they participated in but our experience strongly endorses that integrating this element into the research (if applicable) is worthwhile. Participants’

critical reflections richly contributed to our own reflections on visual metaphors. Their firsthand involvement enabled concrete appreciation of the challenges visual metaphors pose. The three main concerns raised by the participants included: a) the strain involved when depicting an image for their reflected thoughts (embodiment); b) shying away from taking photos of people because of concerns over photo subjects' identities; c) technical restrictions owing to the use of inexpensive disposable cameras.

How should we respond to these genuine concerns? Firstly, stressing that there is neither a correct nor wrong photograph is imperative. Perhaps, it is worth highlighting (as part of the instructions) that this need not be a concern because photographs often contain only an 'approximation' of what people intend to show (Radley 2011). Besides, photographic data as used in photo elicitation interviews are not analysed and interpreted in isolation due to a high risk of subjectivity (Karm and Remmik 2013). Concerns about embodiment should be seen to be less important than thinking critically about meaningful experiences. Secondly, the unpredictability of research is well known. This makes it important for research teams to build their defences prior to the attack, so to speak. As shown in this study, rigorous procedures were followed to gain ethical approval. Still, several participants shied away from inviting people due to anonymity concerns or inconvenience involved in seeking consent from photo subjects. Encouraging creative photographic techniques (Mitchell 2011) designed to conceal the identity of their subjects (e.g. a photo of a pair of hands), did not sufficiently address participants' concerns. Therefore, we contend that it is crucial to embed a mechanism for cases where participants have difficulty depicting a significant experience in a photograph, as we did by asking our final interview question inviting participants to comment on a significant experience they failed to capture visually. In Karm and Remmik's (2013) study, they permitted participants to draw a picture instead and so preserve people's identities. Supplementing photographic data with another medium was appropriate in that context; caution is nonetheless needed because openness to alternative techniques unlocks not only potential solutions, but also challenges of a different type, especially during analysis. Thirdly, the quality of the inexpensive disposable cameras proved restrictive in producing well-defined photographs especially when cameras were used inside a building or at night. Allowing participants to include personal snaps (taken with a high resolution camera or mobile phone) from their digital collection helped resolve some of these concerns. In an age when people typically take photographs and normally have an archive of personal photographs, Van House (2011) suggests that visual research should consider using participants' own collection as the principal source of photographs, taking additional photographs as a supplementary resource, if required.

Are visual metaphors and tales innovative or elusive?

In summary, what are the key lessons we acquired from undertaking phenomenological research with visual metaphors at its core? In conducting complex studies, in which emphasis is strongly placed on participants' social and cultural lives or 'lifeworlds', that also require simultaneous reflection from the participants in terms of: a) behaviours they acquired from the first culture and b) behaviours they learned from the new culture, visual research is arguably a fitting methodology (Wagner 2011). As we argued elsewhere, seeking a retrospective view from participants brings

its own challenges, primarily because memory lapses can breed erratic and unreliable findings. In so doing, our decision to adopt an innovative means of investigating phenomenological and psychological notions through a visual methods and metaphors approach (Reavey 2011) proved not only appropriate but robust and instrumental in generating richer, deeper and more meaningful data. Our research supports the idea that the visual metaphors processes encouraged multiple levels of reflection and critical thinking from the participants (Lorenz 2010; Prosser 2007; Rose 2014). Further, the interweaving of the narrative, metaphor and photographic evidence contributed in elucidating a clearer and fuller depiction of participants' 'lifeworlds', enriching the narratives, and enabling validation of the narrative data (Giorgi and Giorgi 2008). The enhanced quality of the evidence, characterised by in-depth personal meaning of participants' experiences, assisted the research team's appreciation of participants' acculturative experiences; this led to more analytical, in-depth and exciting analysis of the narrative and photographic evidence using the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis framework. Such pursuit of a new usage of a well-established analysis framework, i.e. visual IPA, is arguably innovative and useful as it extends knowledge and brings forth a greater understanding of the framework's applicability in a new context. When the richness, extent of reflexivity and rigour in the analysis of the data obtained for our phenomenological research are all considered, appropriate credit goes to the central role played by visual metaphors.

Visual metaphors research has its fair share of challenges and so earns a reputation for being 'elusive'. Conversely, the high quality multi-modal evidence being generated demonstrates methodological strengths, as exemplified when employed in conjunction with the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis framework. Time is arguably ripe for potentially realising other 'novel' applications of visual metaphors!

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Notes

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Table 1. Participants' photographs.

Pseudonym	Geographical region	College	Photographs taken (n= 254)*	Photographs used during interviews (n=101)
Faith	Western Europe	Arts	15	8
Helena	Eastern Europe	Social Sciences	16	8
Ella	North America	Social Sciences	12	6
Nigel	Western Europe	MVLS+	7	7
Oscar	East Asia	MVLS	11	8
Piers	West Africa	MVLS	20	7
Ophelia	Central Asia	Science & Engineering	30	10
Kelly	South East Asia	Science & Engineering	10	5
Calum	South Asia	Science & Engineering	26	6
Nancy	Western Europe	Social Sciences	15	4
Norah	East Asia	University services>	18	8
Toby	South Asia	Science & Engineering	22	6
Nadine	South America	Arts	32	11
Oliver	South East Asia	Science & Engineering	20	7

* Archived photographs are used in conjunction with photographs taken for the research

+ Medical, Veterinary and Life Sciences

> The unit is not a part of any of the colleges

Figure 1. University library.



Figure 2. A conference badge.

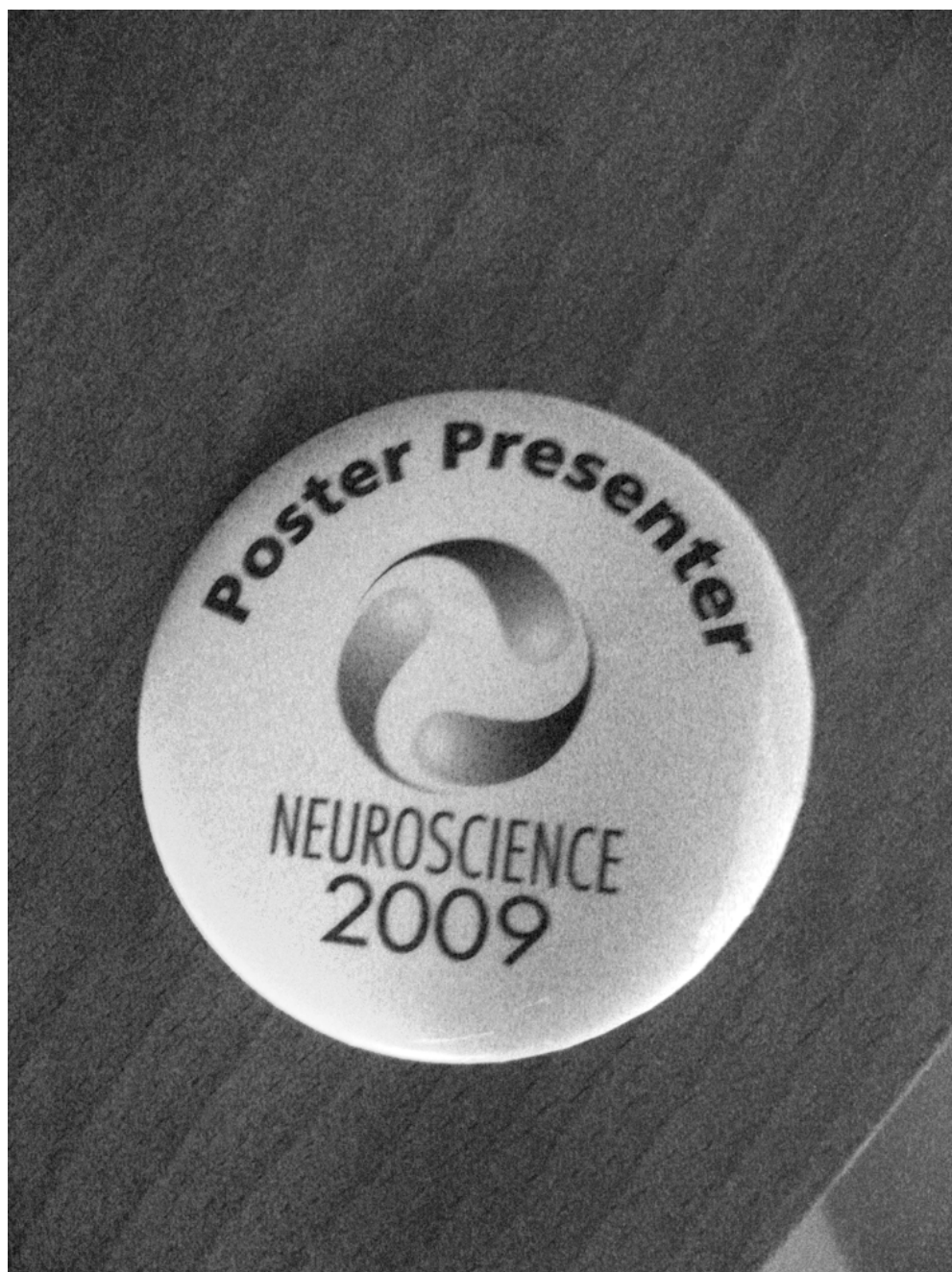
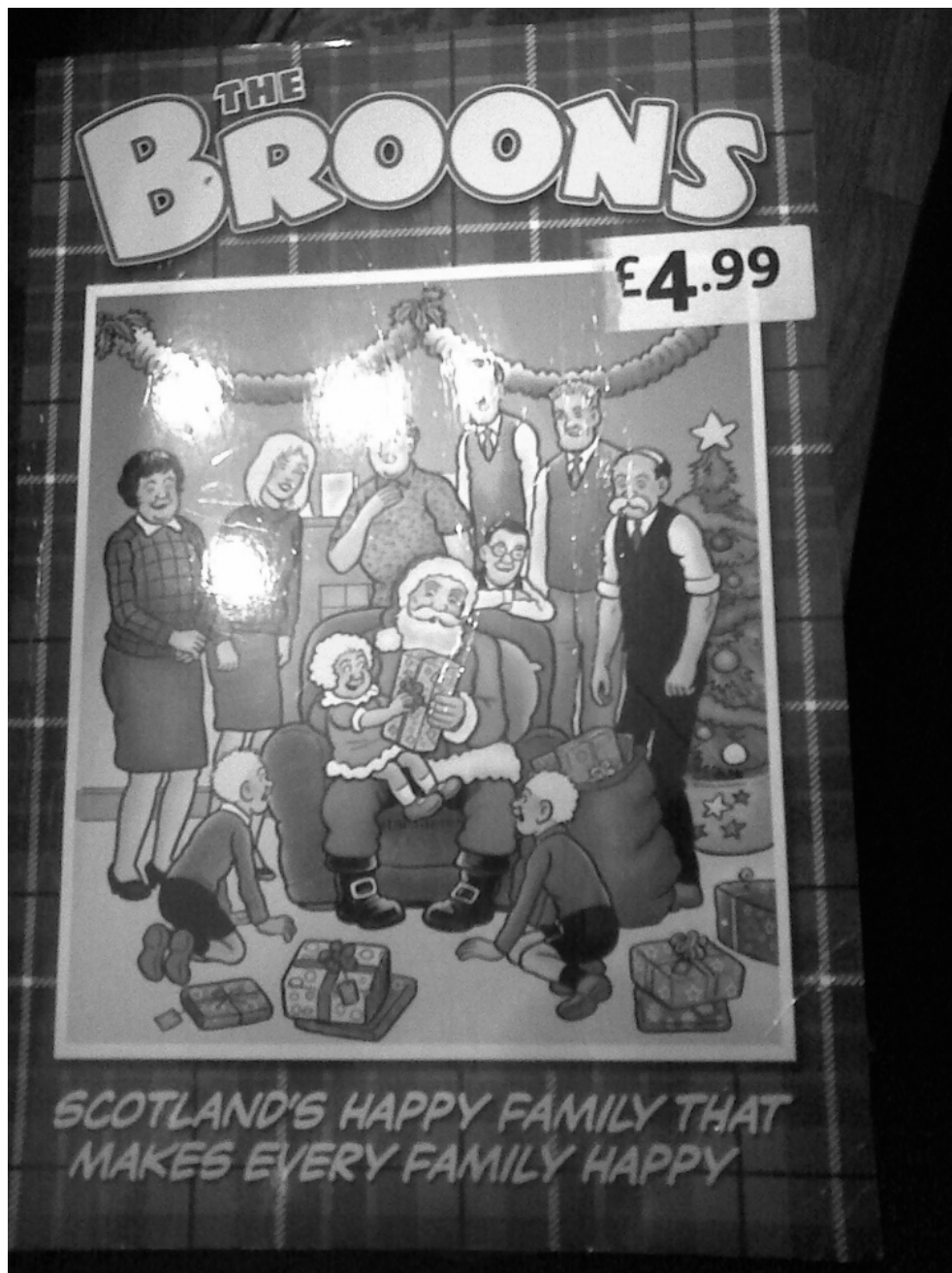


Figure 3. Scuba diving.



Figure 4. Broons.



ⁱ Following a recent EBSCOHOST multi-database search from 1935 to 2014 of huge databases in medicine, psychology, education and sociology, research studies undertaken where the key word 'Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis' was employed yielded 2,622 studies. When photo elicitation* was added as another key word, this resulted in only five studies. Although the search does not include book publications, the small number of studies is an indication that very little visual research has been undertaken in which IPA was used.