Working Paper Series

Working Paper Number 3

THE PLASTIC CEILING PROJECT: USING CREATIVE METHODOLOGIES OF PHOTO ELICITATION AND SOCIAL MEDIA TO EXPLORE SHARED EXPERIENCES OF WORKING MOTHERS WHO STUDY

Sarah Misra, Staffordshire and Chester Universities

Everyday life, particularly that which is lived out within the home has been described by Pink (2012) as mundane, routine and unnoticed. By contrast she has described activism as public and explicit arguing that a dichotomy or separation often exists between the two. The Plastic Ceiling Project aims to link these two spaces by using social media to offer an opportunity for women to share their everyday (private) lived experiences of balancing responsibilities for mothering, work and study and thus to (publicly) highlight participants' collective perceived inequalities and provide a platform for activism. This initial small-scale pilot study explores the methods of photo-elicitation and blogging in order to create such a platform, allowing participants to highlight and discuss commonalities within their experiences. Rather than aiming to "solve" problems for participants, this methodology aims to empower individuals by allowing them to create a shared reality together, co-create knowledge and to give them a vehicle to discuss and resolve difficulties and challenges collectively. Thus, the following working paper reports on this project to draw further attention to issues in parenting, work and emotion as well as to stimulate debate around the development of creative methods to reach a wide range of participants from a variety of backgrounds (linked by common challenges) and to explore and compare their experiences.

Since the publication of the Dearing Report in 1997, the UK Government has consistently promoted social mobility and fairness as part of its rhetoric. Yet as Brooks (2012) and others have pointed out, compared with other groups of 'non-traditional' students, student-parents have been given limited consideration, both in terms of policy intervention and research. Despite the drive for inclusivity in our Higher Education institutions, those with parental responsibility, particularly if they are also in employment, often need to overcome considerable challenges in order to complete the course requirements (Brooks, 2012, Moreau, and Kerner, 2012).

The Plastic Ceiling Project, which is the subject of the current working paper, was developed from research undertaken over several years and initially aimed to investigate and understand perceived barriers for trainee teachers who also had parental responsibility. Over time, however, participation in the project extended more generally to working mothers who studied. I – as leader of this project - had become increasingly aware from research data that although most of the issues cited were similarly challenging for both mothers and fathers, it was exclusively female participants (mothers) who described "emotional" barriers. Why this is the case remains unclear and will require further investigation in future research. As a researcher, participants' stories of struggling to juggle study, employment and motherhood resonated strongly with my own circumstances and I was interested in developing ways of allowing for a better understanding of their situation, not least to find solutions to mitigate some of the likely challenges and thereby improve the situations of future cohorts. My intention was that my research should, through the building of networks and communities, facilitate opportunities for participants to be active in influencing social improvement through support, protest and campaign.

For many feminist theorists, everyday domestic life - particularly that which is played out within the home - has generally been identified as the site of much hidden oppression of women. The everyday, the domain where we make our worlds (and are made by them) has always been a fruitful area for researchers seeking to understand how we are defined and define ourselves culturally, sociologically and economically (see Moran and Tegano, 2005, Casey and Martens, 2007, Shove, 2007 and Pink, 2004). Changes in how we live those lives

have resulted in the development of continuities between the everyday and activism, particularly in terms of the rise of social media which has created new potential for communication, protest and campaign. Following such feminist literature, the main principle of the research project, which is described in what follows, was to allow its participants a "public" space in order to explore and compare "private" everyday, lived experience. In this regard, it aimed to be emancipatory in nature. Participants were invited to express and share their feelings in terms of managing three different roles; that of employee, student and parent. By comparing reported experiences, themes emerged which highlighted particular barriers faced by participants. By discussing them openly here, it is hoped that I can empower participants to perceive commonalities, to reflect upon and possibly even resolve challenges and difficulties. I was not simply exploring the experiences of participants in order to try to "fix their problems".

Overview of Methodology

The research commenced with a series of interviews and focus groups organised over a one-year period. Participants were selected from women that I knew had experienced the complexities of juggling work, childcare and studying. I purposely chose women from a range of backgrounds although many were working in education as this is my background and this is how I had met them. Others were from a variety of backgrounds and nationalities. Rawlins (2006) maintains "by considering intergenerational relationships it is possible to gain a greater depth of understanding since one can compare different versions of the same story" (Rawlins, 2006:42). Following Rawlins, I also chose to ask women from different generations as I was interested about how varied their perspectives might be, so ages of participants ranged from early twenties to late seventies.

A constant theme that became apparent throughout this exploratory phase of the work was that although many individuals described very similar experiences, many of them also described themselves as being "the only one who felt like this". Hence, for the main Plastic Ceiling Project, I aimed to design a methodology that supported an exchange and co-creation of knowledge; a dialogue which would enrich knowledge for mutual benefit, rather

than a simple knowledge transfer. By coding existing data collected over the previous year of interviews and focus groups, I found that several emotions; those of guilt, shame, frustration, isolation, judgement, resentment and exhaustion were consistently cited by participants as barriers to success by female participants. As well as being regularly described throughout research interviews and focus groups, some participants had spoken at length about the negative effect they had on their studies and had given examples of scenarios where these emotions typically played out in their everyday lives.

I contacted 40 female past-participants to help in the main research project. I initially anticipated that about 10 would agree but in the end 37 of the 40 were keen to take part and it turned out that they showed friends and colleagues what they were doing and other women then contacted me to ask to be involved so the final figure rose to in excess of 50. I felt that this was a positive advantage of the methodology and also showed that the topic was something that women were keen to talk about. In the end, three participants, Val, Louise and Clemmie did not fulfil my original criteria in that they did not have children of their own but were keen to offer their perspectives and this ultimately provided some fascinating alternative viewpoints. In my research with all the participants, I asked them for more detail regarding instances where they had cited negative feelings about juggling family, work and study. I then used that information to create seven photographic images to depict the scenarios as described (one for each emotion).

The images that I created were then privately shared with those contributors to ensure that they were happy with each representation. When the images were approved by participants, they were uploaded to a purpose-built website for The Plastic Ceiling Project (www.theplasticceilingproject.co.uk). This took the form of a virtual exhibition with invited participants being asked to comment on each image via a blog. Instructions regarding the nature of the comments were left deliberately vague to allow commentators to be able to express themselves without restriction. There was much deliberation regarding the level of explanation that should accompany the photographs and consideration of whether to present extracts from the interview data to describe and help contextualise the scenarios that were illustrated. Rose (2012) discusses this issue, differentiating between supportive information (where the image is displayed in addition to the research material) and

supplemental (where photos are presented without explanation) allowing participants to draw their own meaning. Eventually I decided to present the images with a simple title obliging participants to be more active in making meaning. Additionally, I made a conscious decision to release the images separately (with one image released each night over the course of a week). I felt that if I released them all together participants would be overwhelmed and would not contribute as fully for as Harrison (2002, p.864) has stated, "the idea of audience remains the most underdeveloped and problematic area for the visual sociologist".

Photo elicitation and blogs require a large amount of collaboration between the researcher and the participants (Liebenburg, 2009; Mannay, 2010; White et al, 2010; Rose, 2012). Bolton et al (2001) contend that there is often a communication impasse in qualitative research and Harper (1994) argues that photo-elicitation interviews "serve as a model of collaboration between the participant and the researcher with the dialogue stimulated and guided by the images" (p. 410). I felt that it was important not to comment on posts and lead the discussions but I also recognise that I had done this to a large extent by selecting the images and thereby framing the conversations.

Why use Barbie?

In this project I did not want to present the scenarios using real characters. This was for several reasons. The first was practical; I would need to find characters that would be prepared to pose in the images. The second was that although I knew I could use myself and persuade others to act as the characters, there were certain inherent endangerments in that these images would provide a permanent record of an experience that might be attributed specifically to the person rather than the character out of context, for example by their own children. Finally I wanted the images to be generalised – to represent working mothers not a particular working mother.

There has been much concern about the use of media images of women in the construction of dominant feminine stereotypes (see, for example, Motz, 1983, Owen, 2007, Thomas-Banks, 2003, Urla and Swedland, 1995). This has been problematic with the constructed

stereotype presumed to be false in opposition to the more truthful 'real woman'. However, the category 'real woman' does not refer to a homogenous social grouping either and is in effect simply a different "kind of mechanism by which the protagonists of fiction articulate with reality" (Hall and Nixon, 2013, p. 342). Rogers argues that Barbie erases the category of woman by being hyper-feminine or emphatically feminine; she reveals nothing about real women existing as an "unbound signifier" (Rogers, 1999:112) with Tofoletti categorising Barbie as a "posthuman prototype…who embodies the potential for identity to be mutable and unfixed" (Tofoletti, 2007:59). In other words, she is literally and metaphorically plastic; she can be who you want her to be.

Although (or because) Barbie has been decried as an anti-feminist icon, the list of artists who have used Barbie and what she represented for them in their work, is long and includes Andy Warhol, Mariel Clayton, Peter Max, Kenny Scharf, Peter Engelhardt and many others. Botz-Bornstein (2012) has stated that what is striking is that Barbie's frozen smile persists and describes her as; "an optimistic, positive spirit that is neither against nor in favour of progressive feminism or conservative motherhood values but simply exists beyond both" (p. 36). Many mothers reported to me that they hid feelings of being under pressure from their children, adopting a fixed smile just like Barbie. This observation, drawing from the long history of artistic engagement with Barbies, convinced me that this was a point worth investigating further. Using Barbies as the characters in my project also solved several issues. Firstly, the characters were easy to procure and manipulate. Secondly, Barbie was able to represent the feminine and as such 'every woman'. Thirdly, I felt that subverting my overtly feminist research with an anti-feminist icon gave the project some humour and made it more appealing and enjoyable for the participants. This was important, I felt, as the subject matter of the project was serious and could have been rather intense for participants.

The Role of Photo Elicitation

By using photographic data, the aim was to represent the everyday. Although it is where we live, it remains elusive, as it is dynamic and constantly shifting and may be experienced differently by each individual and even by the same individual at different times. The

challenge then, was to find a methodology that had the ability to capture these organic events and make sense of them. Images are everywhere in today's world, inseparable from our identities and narratives, with Schroeder (2003) describing the camera lens as a defining technology of our age. Visual methodologies are becoming increasingly popular in social research practice (Schneider and Wright, 2013; Pink, 2009), due to a recognition of their potential to promote empathetic understanding of the ways in which other people experience their worlds (Pink, 2007; Rose, 2010; Mannay, 2013). Van Auken et al (2010) have also argued that, in an era where people understand their world more and more through images, using visual representations as stimuli for reflection would appear to be a logical development in social science research.

Photo elicitation is described by Harper (2002) as "the simple idea of inserting a photograph into a research interview" and involves using photos (either created by the subjects or the researcher) to elicit comments. Its main purpose is in analysing how participants respond to the images attributing social meaning or personal values. Advocates have found that the meanings and emotions elicited often differ from those obtained through traditional verbal methods. According to Banks (2001) one important characteristic is that rather than using found images, photo elicitation creates images as part of the research project. They are not then an image of something already described in the text but are used actively in the research process (Banks, 2001; Rose, 2012).

Tinkler (2013) has argued that images can be integral to research in three ways; by generating visual data, as a tool for generating data and as an aide memoir to be incorporated into the research. In this instance the images needed to both generate visual data (as they were a representation of the scenarios described in the interviews) and also become a tool for generating further data. For me, it was important that the images were a primary data source and formed an integral part of the project design, facilitating an active process of seeking meanings and revealing understanding - rather than just a visual image to illustrate understanding arrived at through other means (Bolton et al 2001; Drew, 2010).

If the images presented allowed participants to share experiences, the blog allowed them to discuss them, giving them the chance to communicate and establish communities of their own. Davies (2011) contends that the internet is embedded in lived experiences and is now fundamental to the way that "real-life" is negotiated, experienced, constructed and re-shaped. Harricharana and Bhopal (2013) note that some researchers have advocated the use of private group blogs as a replacement for more traditional qualitative research methods. Unlike many other social research approaches, one particular advantage of a blog is that it enables and encourages rich reflection because the contributors have to put their thoughts into writing which gives them time to reflect deeply on their experiences (Scott and Morrison, 2006; Buckingham, 2009). Once the blog went live it was available to participants throughout the seven days of the online exhibition and, from the dates and times on the posts, it was evident that participants returned to posts over time. Unlike a focus group or interview, participants were free to comment at a time that was convenient to them.

This was particularly useful for the participants who were time-poor and also for overseas participants such as those from the USA who were working in a different time zone. Although participants could contribute to a blog at the times that suited them, it was also acknowledged that reflecting on an image and writing a post may have taken a lot of time as participants may have perfected the post before sharing it with others. It may potentially have also created a sense of insecurity as it may have been difficult for participants to put their thoughts 'out there' for feedback and possibly criticism. Not all participants felt comfortable contributing to the blog. This is an area worthy of further consideration in its own right, although it is not the aim of the current paper.

Results: Understanding the Specific Power of Visual Images

The principle aim of The Plastic Ceiling Project was to develop a methodology that allowed for the creation of a "space" that facilitated discussion and communication of participants' shared experiences of juggling the three roles of motherhood, employment and study. The

data that was produced were plentiful and even richer than I had hoped. I felt that the methods used provided certain opportunities not necessarily afforded by other methods. These are discussed in this section.

Photographic images have been widely valued for their ability to carry a lot of information including the sensory element of an experience (Grady, 2004; Latham, 2004; Tinkler, 2013). Although Tinkler has debated whether this can be done more effectively with images than words, my experience throughout this project has been that asking participants to explain and elaborate on given images is an opportunity to gain different insights than those provided by other research methods. In commenting upon the image below for example, Susan wrote;

> Barbie looks nice doesn't she? She's handing out sweets…to sugar the pill…she's not bending down to see the world from their point of view. House is clean too!


"Mummy Has to Work" (guilt)

In this example, Susan is "reading" the picture, looking at its surrounding context to make meaning and has inferred significance that I, as the maker of the image, had not consciously intended. Banks (2001) discusses this. He argues that each image has its own "internal

narrative" or story that is communicated and that this may not necessarily be the same story that the maker aimed to communicate.

Banks (2001) argues that traditionally, art therapists have referred to a diagnostic manual to give an insight into what a patient's artwork actually means. Today they would be more likely to use the image as a starting point to stimulate discussion. The most important part of the process, then, is what the participant interprets from the image. It is worth noting that there is also a debate around formal aspects of the visual materials such as perspective, composition and lighting. These can be conscious or unconscious decisions on the part of the maker but they carry the potential for effect upon the viewer. In her visual research around women and their relationships with children, for example, Steiger (1995) states how she felt it was vital to consider every technical decision, arguing that the use of lighting, for example, had major implications for the detail captured and the interaction portrayed.
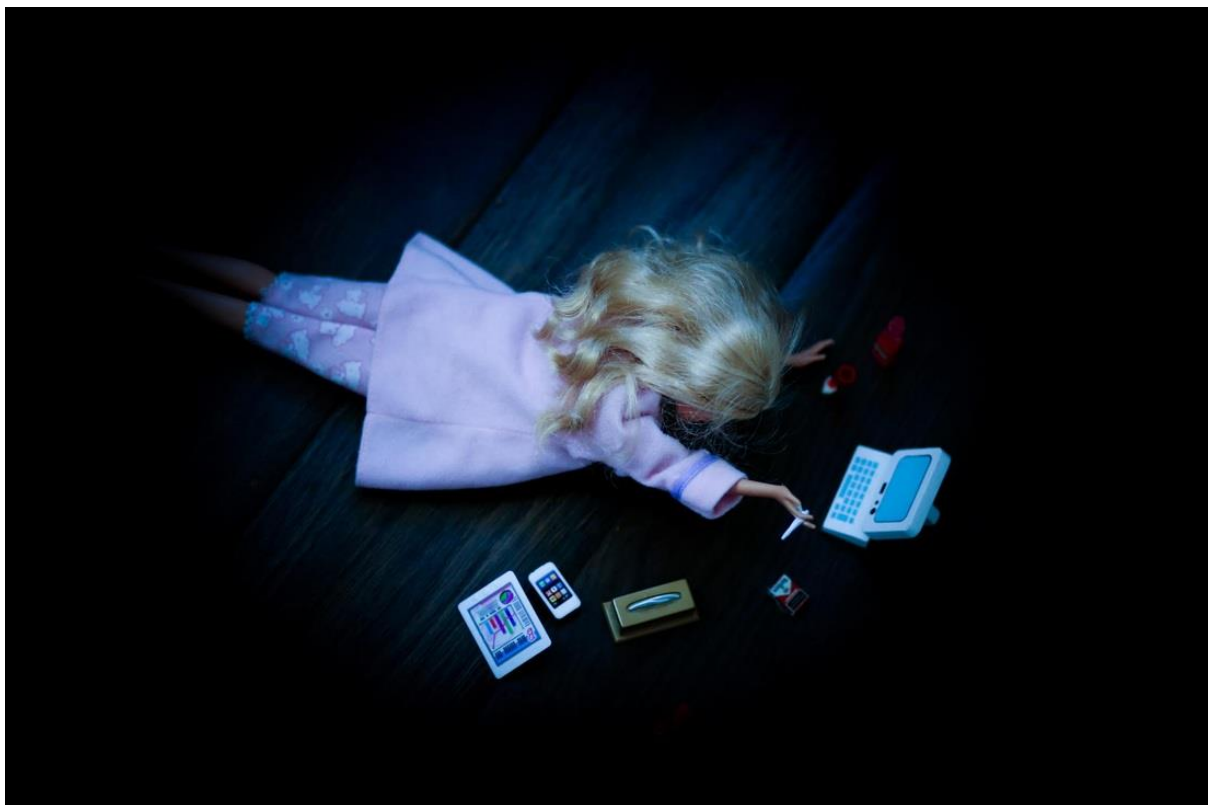
"Working Late Again" (exhaustion)

In this image I spent a long time trying to get the lighting correct as I wanted to portray an image of someone working late into the night. I intended this to be read by the viewer and

manipulated the image to ensure that this was part of the internal narrative. As with all social research the researcher is not a neutral observer. Rose contends that; a non-reflexive researcher does not acknowledge that the visual data they generate is inevitably shaped by their subjectivity and photographic practice" (Rose, 2012:13).

Despite such attempts to vary the effects conveyed in the images, I had to make several readjustments in terms of developing realistic expectations for my own technical and artistic abilities. In the first place, I had decided to create dioramas to represent the scenarios and was inspired greatly by the work of Mariel Clayton (who depicts Barbie within dioramas) and Dina Goldstein (who replicated scenarios using humans as Barbie Dolls). In the end this wasn't realistic in terms of time or money or in terms of skill. I eventually found inspiration in the work of artists such as Brian McCarty and Mike Stimpson who make the toys the focus and simplify the background. This was the most pragmatic solution and I was able to purchase props for the characters and photograph them in situ using a variety of softened backgrounds.

Advantages of the Methodology as Empowering and Enabling

Pink (2007) and Van Auken (2010) contend that visual methodologies are enabling, not only because they capture the everyday more effectively but because they can be used to invoke life as it is lived. Buckingham (2009), Gauntlett and Holzwarth (2006) expand on this by contending that visual methods give participants a "different way in" and allow them to overcome the rational, logo-centric tendencies required by verbalisation in order to access regions in the brain that are evolutionarily and developmentally older, broadening the scope of data access and offering insights into authentic information that are less self-conscious and more complex and insightful. One participant commenting on the image below for example stated;

> Major frustration! Like being torn in multiple directions, but just wanting to be with my son, taking the time to play, read, listen to him, chilling out etc. At one point, I was working full time in a job I hated, doing my MA, and being a single parent. I

sometimes question what that was all about. What was I trying to prove? And to who? Why didn't I just chill out and do all those nice things? Oh yes - Money!!

The participant here talks about her feelings as invoked by the image rather than the image itself.

"The Challenges of Multi-Tasking" (frustration)

Photo elicitation has successfully been used in a range of studies within marginalised communities as it encourages the empowerment of participants, emphasising a clear and central role and allowing them to become the "expert" in the interview (Joanou, 2009; Packard, 2008; Rose 2012). Traditionally, researchers have held the dominant role, but in recent years there has been a growing emphasis on collaborative production and the participant's role in the creation of images (Samuels, 2007). This is also beneficial in that all contributors can cultivate a sense of involvement which may be empowering and this may give a voice to those that might not otherwise be heard. Supporters of photo elicitation also argue that it may also allow participants to confront difficult emotions. Guillemin and Westall (2008) give the example of women who participated in research on postnatal

depression and used images to express a sense of vulnerability that they could not put into words. One participant for instance commented;

> More important to me than feelings of guilt was my sense of feeling jealous of the care-givers who got to spend time with our previous daughter!! She was the only one of the ten babies we conceived who survived to term. The others died in my womb. I just wanted to have the fun of watching her grow.

Yet the question remains as to whether such data is necessarily more "truthful" than data gathered using more traditional qualitative approaches. Buckingham (2009) argues that all research creates positions from which it is possible to construct an identity of oneself or to present oneself as you would like to be seen by others. It was interesting to see that as relationships on the blog developed, participants often used humour. In response to the idea of multi-tasking for example, Anne says;

> I think this applies to all people who care enough about what they are doing. We are our own worst enemy sometimes by setting our own high expectations because we don't want to fail at anything. I was told once by someone that they like to do one thing at a time, but do it very well. This was, of course, a man!

Prosser and Schwartz (1998) claim that this method is also useful in exploring a participant's beliefs and attitudes by triggering supressed memories and understanding of social systems through the evocative power of images and context-specific photographs. One of the participants who was a working mother and is now a retired grandmother, for example, told me that "this takes me back I'd forgotten how hard it all is".

Bignante (2010) makes the point that visual methods can be useful in challenging the difficulty that the researcher may (unconsciously) seek specific pre-conceived replies from contributors. An image mitigates this, particularly with little prompting. Flower (2008) states that visual images are more accessible and regarded as less intimidating by the participant stating that "when town and gown try to work together, the gown possess the dominant discourse and typically assume that their language, concepts and forms of

argument are the most effective for understanding these problems and should be learned and used by everyone else" (Flower, 2008: 102).

Also valuable in this context is the idea that images can portray the intimate dimensions of the social family or workplace and as such may be helpful in exploring everyday, taken-for-granted experiences and allowing participants to reflect on their mundane activities by providing distance from something that they are usually immersed in. Images provide the space to consider, articulate and make explicit that which is normally implicit (Liebenberg, 2009; Mannay, 2013; Rose; 2012). This is demonstrated in a participant's reflection on the image below:

"The Charity Cake Sale" (judgement)

This image need not be about cakes, it could be about being asked to do something which you may not be good at, at a time when you lack the time, resources and skill. It is also a commentary on the way that participants expressed that those requesting such actions (usually a school) tended to frame it in such a way that 'you are made to feel that the individual should be able to provide the service, according to a rather out of date model' (comment made by Anne).

Fundamentally, blogs are designed to be interactive (Warlick, 2007) and give participants the opportunity to meet virtually and interact with one another; learning about other people and their experiences while being able to share their own thoughts, feelings and experiences and receive feedback. It was important to me to have a forum where participants were able to interact and possibly influence the feelings and behaviours of other contributors as I believe that a sharing of experiences could and should promote understanding and build empathy between communities of people. For example, one of the participants, who now has grown up children commented; "I'd forgotten how hard all this was!"

A really valuable aspect of this research project was in its inclusivity. As the images led the conversations, many people felt that they were "expert" enough to comment. Several contributors who came from non-academic backgrounds said that they were pleasantly surprised as they had felt that they had something useful to say. Some expressed concerns that they may have felt intimidated by others in face to face situations and that the blog mitigated this. This methodology was not only empowering, then, but also created empathy with one participant noting "we may come from all walks of life but first and foremost we are mothers and love our children before anything else".

"The School Run" (Isolation)

As the week passed it was interesting to note that participants began to comment on each other's posts. Commenting on the image above for example, Val made a comment at 12.11pm arguing that non-members of the school run can also feel isolated by not having children. Maggie at 12.38pm responded; "Well said Val. I agree that isolation comes from 'clubs' where you are either in or out and the baby club is the biggest!" with a further comment directed to Maggie from Elaine at 3.24pm; "Living up to other people's expectations re the number of children in the family is a difficult one Maggie. My favourite one is the open mouthed incredulity on people's faces when I tell them I have six children".

I noted that certain participants admitted that they had begun to see situations from different perspectives such as Viv on Thursday's post "The Charity Cake Sale (judgement)", who initially commented at 9.59am; "I love baking so this is the perfect justification of me allowing myself time to play and my children love helping out!" and then returned to the conversation the next day at 8.33am; "Just looking back over these comments, so many people seeing it as a competition. This did not enter my head at all!" Pink (2007, p.235) describes such situations by referring to participants in her photo elicitation project as "partners and collaborators in the negotiation of experiential meaning. Capturing cultural experience with visual text therefore allows for a transformative potential."

For Philo (2014), selecting groups of people to become audiences reflects a commitment to the belief that meanings are socially and culturally produced, rejecting an idea of the audience being a collection of distinct, unique individuals and instead arguing that social interaction mediates a collective understanding of specific issues. During the project, I noticed that the first commentary each day often set the tone of successive posts. However, there were also many instances of participants disagreeing with others for example, commenting on the image below Sue writes; "Trust me to read this differently to everyone else! My resentment comes in the form that my ex never has the girls overnight!"

"I Couldn't Get the Time Off" (Resentment)

Blogs can also inspire feelings of community among group members making it easier for participants to lose their inhibitions (Gumbrecht, 2004; Hookway, 2008). At the end of the project for example, Lynne commented; "Really enjoyed reading all the comments and I feel as if I joined a group of like-minded people for a week". There were also many examples of

participants providing support to one another. This can be seen where Sue commented on the following image:
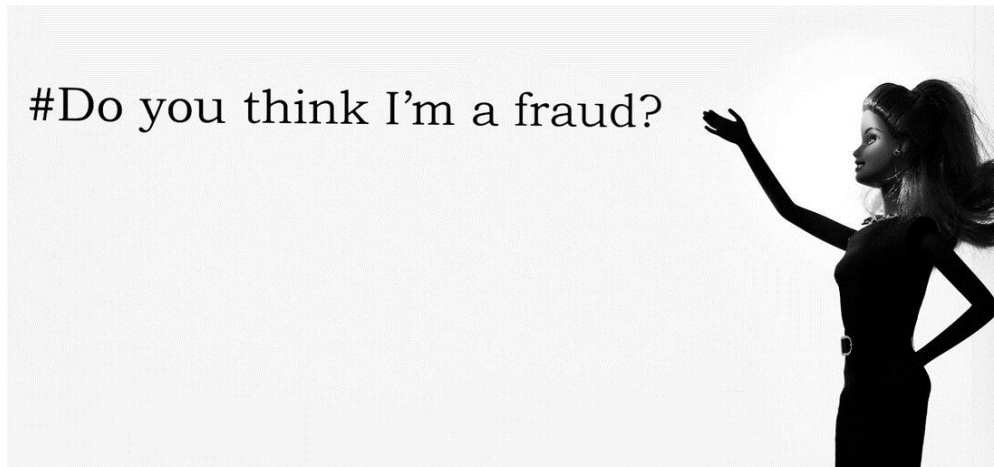
"Am I Doing This Well Enough?" (shame)

> Sue: This is a big one for me. I very often feel shame that I'm not doing a good enough job. Especially if I haven't handled something very well. My ex said I always over-complicate things. Probably because I'm always trying to think ahead and not just dealing with the thing at the time. I worry a lot!
>
> Lynne: I suspect your ex might have under complicated things.

A Word on Ethical Considerations

I have tried to conduct this research as ethically as possible but I am also aware that using a blog to create data does raise important ethical issues. At the outset, all participants were contacted separately with an email explaining the project, directing them to the website and asking them to contact me (providing written consent) if they would like to be involved. Prosser (2008) discusses the importance for all participants and researchers to agree on ethical principles and practices in image-based research. Following Prosser, participants were all made aware that the website was public and may possibly be viewed by others outside of the project and all knew that data would form part of this working paper. It was also made clear that there was no pressure to post every day or at all. There were different levels of engagement. Many participants did post regularly, some just posted on certain

days, perhaps because they related more to the topic and some read posts and didn't comment. One participant told me that she had used the daily images as the foundation for lunchtime discussions with colleagues and all had looked forward to the topic each day although she never actually commented on the posts.

An inevitable objective of using a blog is to make the private public. In this case there were no obviously vulnerable participants, women were willing to take part with some even asking to be invited in, yet I am aware that despite making it as clear as possible that there was no pressure to contribute, people may have wanted to 'please' me as they enjoyed the project and wanted to make it successful. For example, I received several emails along the lines of, "have just posted; hope this is what you want". I would also admit to concern about privacy, anonymity and confidentiality with certain participants revealing very private aspects of their experiences. The anonymity provided by the Internet has also been shown in some studies to reduce anxieties about feeling judged and can increase self-disclosure motivating deeper introspection and reflection (Joinson, 2001; Bargh, McKenna and Fitzsimons, 2002; Tidwell and Walther, 2002). However, an important aspect in most academic research is the participant's right to withdraw from the project. When using a blog it is certainly possible to decide not to contribute anymore but it is not possible to withdraw a comment once it is posted. If a participant were to regret sharing a private matter publicly there is no way to delete that comment and it is likely to remain in the public sphere indefinitely.

Mann and Stewart (2000) found that anonymous online contributions had the potential to create richer and deeper thought than face-to-face conversations and yet divulging personal information in any forum can make participants feel vulnerable, as highlighted by Vicky who in responding to the post "Working Late (Exhaustion)" wrote, "I have not read the other comments before writing mine - but I am aware that my words will be exposed - that makes me slightly vulnerable as I am letting strangers into my world". I was careful to make all participants aware that they were to use a pseudonym. For example, one participant who shared her feelings of guilt because her daughter was below age-related expectations at school signed herself as "X", another asked to be known as "Clemmie". However, several participants used their own names. One told me that she valued the chance to be frank and

honest about her feelings and experiences and for her this involved "owning" the posts by giving her real name. Asking participants to reflect on certain images must have invariably shaped the responses so it was also important for me to acknowledge my own position as a working, studying parent. As Pink (2012) contends, researchers are always part of the worlds and lives that they are researching. Ethics around new and creative methods of qualitative research are constantly evolving and it is my intention that this will be the next focus in my research.

Conclusion

Using creative methodologies can yield highly applicable, rich data and can energise and empower participants. Several contributors in this project who came from non-academic backgrounds said that they were pleasantly surprised as they had felt that they had something useful to say, whilst a colleague from an academic background said that she could see a deep value in shared conversations around these images and had enjoyed the light-hearted nature of the images. I have discovered a real pleasure in exploring both photo elicitation and blogging as creative methods of data production and collection. Perhaps this comes from my own personal interests in photography and social media sites. I feel that I have been able to capture aspects of the everyday lives of many women and this has been borne out by the responses of the participants. The use of social media has been an exciting way to stimulate debate, promote understanding of emotional barriers as perceived by many women, to capture data and to bring people together (albeit in a virtual environment) who would not normally be able to share a physical space. Thus, a key finding of this project has been that such methods create a bridge between the everyday lived experience and opportunities for activism, giving participants a chance to share, discuss and co-create knowledge.

Creative approaches offer possibilities that other methods do not. They can prove to be more enjoyable and engaging than many traditional methods of qualitative research. Feedback from participants suggested that they loved being involved in the project and were keen to repeat the experience. But I would contest the idea that creative methods such as those drawn on here provide more accurate data in terms of cultural beliefs and

attitudes. Like other methods they have limitations and all data needs to be understood and analysed within the very specific context that it is collected.   In the future I would strongly consider combining these types of creative methods with other, more traditional, methods of data collection such as surveys or interview. More research into the possibilities of taking such a blended approach is now required.

References

Banks, M. (2001) *Visual Methods in Social Research*, London: Sage

Bignante, E. (2010) "The Use of Photo-Elicitation in Field Research" *EchoGéo*, (11)

Bargh, J. McKenna, D. and Fitzsimons, G. (2002) "Can You See the Real Me? Activation and Expression of the "True Self" on the Internet." *Journal of Social Issues* 58:1 pp. 33–48

Bolton, A. Pole, C. and Mizen, P. (2001) "Picture This: Researching Child Workers" *Sociology*, 35:2 pp. 501-518

Botz-Bornstein, T. (2012) "Barbie and the Power of Negative Thinking: Of Barbies, Eve-Barbies, and I-Barbies" *Kritikos: Journal of Postmodern Cultural Sound, Text and Image*, (*9*)

Brookes, R (2012) "Student-Parents and Higher Education: A Cross-National Comparison" *Journal of Education Policy* 27: 3 pp. 423-439

Buckingham, D. (2009) "Creative Visual Methods in Media Research" *Media, Culture and Society*, 31:4, pp 633-652

Bugos, E., Frasso, R., FitzGerald, E., True, G., Adachi-Mejia, A.M. and Cannuscio, C. (2014) "Peer Reviewed: Practical Guidance and Ethical Considerations for Studies Using Photo-Elicitation Interviews" *Preventing chronic disease* (*11*)

Casey, E. and Martens, L. (2007) *Gender and Consumption: Commercialisation and the Consumption of Everyday Life* Aldershot: Ashgate

Collier, J. and Collier, M. (1986) *Visual Anthropology: Photography as a Research Method* Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press

Davies, J. (2011) "Discourse and Computer-Medicated Communication." in Paltridge, B. and Hyland, K. (Eds) *The Continuum Companion to Discourse Analysis* pp. 228–242 London: Continuum

Drew, S.E., Duncan, R.E. and Sawyer, S.M. (2010) "Visual Storytelling: A Beneficial but Challenging Method for Health Research with Young People" in *Qualitative Health Research*, *20*(12) pp.1677-1688

Emmison, M. et al (2012) *Researching the Visual* London: Sage

Flower, L. (2008) *Community Literacy and the Rhetoric of Public Engagement* USA: Southern Illinois University Press

Gauntlett, D. and Holzwarth, P. (2006) "Creative and Visual Methods for Exploring Identities" *Visual Studies*, 21:1 pp. 82-91

Grady, J. (2004) "Working with Visible Evidence: An Invitation and Some Practical Advice" in Knowles, C. and Sweetman, P. (eds.) *Picturing the Social Landscape: Visual Methods and the Sociological Imagination* pp. 18-32 London: Routledge

Guillemin, M. and Drew, S. (2010) "Questions of Process in Participant-Generated Visual Methodologies" *Visual Studies*, 25:2, pp. 175-188

Guillemin, M. and Westall, C. (2008). "Gaining Insight into Women's Knowing of Postnatal Depression Using Drawings" in Liamputtong, P. and Rumbold, J. (Eds) *Knowing Differently: An Introduction to Experiential and Arts-based Research Methods* pp. 121-140 New York: Nova Science Publishers

Gumbrecht, M. (2004) "Blogs as Protected Space" Workshop on the Weblogging Ecosystem: Aggregation, Analysis, and Dynamics, May 17–22, New York: ACM Press

Hall, S. Evans, J. and Nixon, S. (2013) *Representation* Milton Keynes: The Open University

Harper, D. (1994) "On the Authority of the Image; Visual Methods at the Crossroads" pp. 403-412 in NK Denzin and YS Lincoln (Eds.) *The Handbook of Qualitative Research*

Harper, D. (2002) "Talking About Pictures: A Case for Photo Elicitation" *Visual Studies*,17:1, pp13-26

Harricharan, M. and Bhopal, K. (2014) "Using Blogs in Qualitative Educational Research: An Exploration of Method" *International Journal of Research and Method in Education*, 37:3 pp. 324-343

Harrison, B. (2002) "Seeing Health and Illness Worlds–Using Visual Methodologies in a Sociology of Health and Illness: a Methodological Review in *Sociology of Health & Illness*, *24*(6), pp.856-872

Hookway, N. (2008) "Entering the Blogosphere: Some Strategies for Using Blogs in Social Research" *Qualitative Research* 8:1 pp. 91–113.

Joanou, J. (2009). "The Bad and the Ugly: Ethical Concerns in Participatory Photographic Methods with Children" *Visual Studies* 24:3 pp.214–223

Joinson, A. (2001) "Self-Disclosure in Computer-Mediated Communication: The Role of Self-Awareness and Visual Anonymity." *European Journal of Social Psychology* 31:2 pp. 177–192

Latham, A; (2004) "Researching and Writing Everyday Accounts of the City: An Introduction to the Diary-Photo Diary-Interview Method" in Knowles, C. and Sweetman, P. (eds.) Picturing the Social Landscape: Visual Methods and the Sociological Imagination pp.117 – 131 Routledge: London

Liebenberg, L. (2009) "The Visual Image as Discussion Point: Increasing Validity in Boundary Crossing Research" *Qualitative Research*, 9:4 pp.441-467

Magno, C. and Kirk, J. (2008) "Imaging Girls: Visual Methodologies and Messages for Girls' Education" *Compare: A Journal of Education Comparative and International*, 38:3 pp. 349-362

Mann, C. and Stewart, F. (2000) Internet Communication and Qualitative Research: A Handbook for Researching Online London: Sage

Mannay, D. (2013) 'Who Put That on There … Why Why Why?' Power Games and Participatory Techniques of Visual Data Production" *Visual Studies*, 28:2, pp. 136-146

Moran, M. and Tegano, D. (2005) "Moving Toward Visual Literacy: Photography as a Language of Teacher Inquiry" *Early Childhood Research and Practice*, 7:1, pp. 1-20.

Moreau, M. and Kerner, C. (2012) *Supporting Student Parents in Higher Education: A Policy Analysis* Bedford: University of Bedford

Motz, M.F. (1983) 'I Want to Be a Barbie Doll When I Grow Up': The Cultural Significance of the Barbie Doll" in *The Popular Culture Reader*, pp.122-136

Owen, A. et al (2007) *Bad Girls: Cultural Politics and Media Representation of Transgressive Women* New York: Peter Lang

Packard, J. (2008) "'I'm Gonna Show You What it's Really Like Out Here': The Power and Limitation of Participatory Visual Methods" *Visual Studies*, 23:1 pp.63-77

Philo, G. (2014) *Seeing and Believing: The Influence of Television* Oxford, Routledge

Pink, S. (2004) "Making links: On Situating a New Web Site" in *School Leadership & Management*, *34*(2) pp.211-222.

Pink, S. (2007) *Doing Visual Ethnography* London: Sage

Pink, S. (2009) *Doing Sensory Ethnography* London: Sage

Pink, S. (2012) *Situating Everyday Life* London: Sage

Prosser, J. (2008) Introducing Visual Methods National Centre for Research Methods NCRM Review Papers London: NCRM Publications

Prosser, J. and Schwartz, D. (1998) "Photographs within the Sociological Research Process" in Prosser, J. (ed.) *Image-based Research: A Sourcebook for Qualitative Researchers* London: Falmer Press

Rawlins, E. (2006) "Mother Knows Best?" in *Children's Geographies* 4:3 pp. 359-377

Richard, V. and Lahman, M. (2015) "Photo-elicitation: Reflexivity on Method, Analysis, and Graphic Portraits" *International Journal of Research and Method in Education* 38:1 pp. 3-22

Rogers, M. (1999) *Barbie Culture* London: Sage

Rose, G. (2010) *Doing Family Photography: The Domestic, the Public and the Politics of Sentiment* Oxford: Ashgate Press

Rose, G. (2012) *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to Researching with Visual Materials* London: SAGE

Samuels, J. (2007) "When Words Are Not Enough: Eliciting Children's Experiences of Buddhist Monastic Life through Photographs" in Stanczak, G. (Ed) *Visual Research Methods: Image, Society and Representation* London: Sage

Schroeder, J. (2003) "Visual Methodologies and Analysis" *Visual Anthropology* 16:1 pp.81-88

Schneider, A. and Wright, C. Eds (2010) *Between Art and Anthropology* Oslo: Berg Publishers

Schneider, A. and Wright, C. Eds (2013) *Anthropology and Art Practice* London, Bloomsbury

Scott, D. and Morrison, M. (2006) *Key Ideas in Educational Research* London: Continuum

Shove, E. (2007) *The Design of Everyday Life* London, Berg Publishers

Shove, E. et al (2012) *The Dynamics of Social Practices* London: Sage

Steiger, R. (1995) "First Children and Family Dynamics" *Visual Sociology* (10) pp.28-49

Stewart, W. and Floyd, M. (2004) "Visualizing Leisure" *Journal of Leisure Research*, 36:4 pp.445–460.

Tidwell, L. and Walther, J. (2002) "Computer-Mediated Communication Effects on Disclosure, Impressions, and Interpersonal Evaluations: Getting to Know one Another a Bit at a Time." *Human Communication Research* 28:3 pp.317–348.

Tinkler, P. (2013) *Using Photographs in Social and Historical Research* London: Sage

Toffoletti, K. (2007) *Cyborgs and Barbie Dolls: Feminism, Popular Culture and the Posthuman Body* London: I.B. Tauris

Thomas-Banks, J. (2003) *Naked Barbies, Warrior Jones and Other Forms of Visible Gender* Urbana: University of Illinois Press

Urla, J. and Swedlund, A, (1995) "The Anthropometry of Barbie: Unsettling Ideals of the Feminine Body in Popular Culture" in Terry, J. and Urla, J. (eds.) *Deviant Bodies: Critical Perspectives on Difference in Science and Popular Culture (Race, Gender, and Science)* Bloomington: Indiana University Press

Van Auken, P. et al (2010) "Visualising Community: Using Participant-Driven Photo-Elicitation for Research and Application" *Local Environment: The International Journal of Justice and Sustainability*, 15:4, pp. 373-388

Warlick, D. (2007) *Classroom Blogging: A Teacher's Guide to Blogs, Wikis, and Other Tools that are Shaping a New Information Landscape* North Carolina: The Landmark Project

White, A. et al (2010) "Using Visual Methodologies to Explore Contemporary Irish Childhoods" *Qualitative Research* 10:2 pp.143-158

Biographical Note

Sarah Misra is a Senior Lecturer in Education and Award Leader for the Primary PGCE at Staffordshire University, UK. Her research is primarily focused around developing more creative and inclusive methods of research and feminist issues of social justice in education such as perceived barriers facing working mothers. She has a passion for improving creativity in teaching and promoting a rich and varied curriculum in primary education and

has presented and published research around strengthening the delivery of the foundation subjects in Primary and Early Years Initial Teacher Training.