Haunted by images? Ethical moments and anxieties in visual research

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Abstract
This paper focuses on some of the ethical challenges of working with visual material. I present a reflective discussion of ethical moments in two research projects that made use of visual materials and techniques to demonstrate how research ethics invariably play out differently depending on context and situation. In doing so, a situated ethic offers a useful position from which to address the seeming dissonance between universalist and particularist ethics. However, I argue that situated ethics are not a panacea to the ethical issues raised by visual research but rather enable resolution situated within the contexts they arise. By reflecting on the anxieties and emotions evoked in doing visual research we can begin to see how power, trust and emotion underpin the ethical decisions we are required to make.

Keywords: Visual research, Ethics, Image-based research, Situated ethics, Ethical regulation.

Introduction
In this paper I focus on the ‘ethical moments’ (Guillemin & Gillam, 2005) and ‘ethical anxieties’ (Usher, 2000) that can emerge when researching with visual materials, techniques and methodologies. My intention is to advance debate about how to situate ethical protocols within the contexts researchers find themselves working within, and to highlight the ways in which this is entangled in issues of power and trust. I reflect on the ways different ethics-related decisions were made in two research projects that made use of visual materials in data collection, analysis and dissemination. In doing so, I position my own ethical practices within what may be loosely termed a situationist ethical tradition; a stance that is increasingly adopted, albeit implicitly, by those who may label themselves (or are labelled) visual researchers. However, adopting a situated ethics does not offer a panacea to ethical dilemmas, and in the final part of the paper I outline the difficulties and challenges of disregarding ethical principals as unnecessarily absolutist or contextually inappropriate. Nonetheless, a cautious reflexivity can offer a more ethically appropriate visual methodology.

The development of innovative and/or creative methodologies, as well as new ways of using and adapting established approaches has led to debate not only about how established ethical principles might be achieved in research practice, but also about whether they constitute ethically appropriate guidance at all. While not wanting to compartmentalise different modes of data, the development of methodologies that deal with visual materials has been described as sitting particularly uneasily within established ways of assuring ethical standards and conventions (Prosser, 2000; Wiles et al., 2012; Wood & Kidman, 2013). In response, a body of literature has emerged to help researchers navigate the ethical terrain of visual research, usually with reference
to particular cases and contexts (e.g. Allen, 2009; Clark et al., 2010; Papademas, 2004, Pauwels, 2006; 2008; Perry & Marion 2010; Pope et al., 2010). Discussion of ethical issues relating to visually orientated materials and techniques can also be found in texts dealing with visual methodologies more broadly (Emmerson et al., 2012; Mitchell, 2011; Rose, 2007; Pink 2012; Spencer, 2010) and codes of ethical conduct formulated explicitly for visual research practice are also available (Papademas and the IVSA, 2009; VSG/BSA, 2006).

This literature highlights, in places somewhat implicitly, the need for contextually appropriate and situationally attuned ethical conduct that can deal with ethical questions and challenges as they arise from the context within which visual research is conducted. Elsewhere, I have summarised these challenges as threefold (Clark, 2012): One, that visual research methods and the data they produce raise particular ethical issues because the visual is seemingly somehow different in production, content, form or function to word- and number-based data. Second, that existing institutional ethical review procedures, ethical frameworks, and codes of practice are unsatisfactory for visual material. Third, that there is possible uncertainty about how to proceed when ethical conventions applied to other methods and data seem inappropriate for visually-orientated techniques and materials. These challenges go beyond issues of how to ‘do’ visual research ethically and require reflection on, and clarification of, how ethically appropriate practices are recognised as such. Consequently, while my discussion here focuses on a somewhat narrow set of visual approaches and techniques, the wider significance of situating ethics in practice is of relevance regardless of methodological focus.

Taking my cue from calls for greater reflection on ethics in practice, I focus here on selected ‘ethically important moments’ while researching with the visual. Ethical moments emerge at the interplay of relationships (including power inequalities) within research, when ethical quandaries cannot be resolved by resorting to pre-determined universalistic principles. Rather, their resolution emerges from the situated and contextualised practices within which research happens. While on the surface visual research approaches and methodologies provide seemingly unique ethical challenges to deal with, they are certainly not particular to visual material alone. However, I suggest that it is at the point where visual methodology and ‘conventional’, or well established ethical practices diverge, that is, those moments of ethical anxiety when we are required to question the processes and assumptions underpinning our practices, that a visually-appropriate, situated ethical praxis can emerge.

**Research context**

My reflections are grounded in experiences of developing and using visually-orientated approaches in two projects. One, *Connected Lives* investigated how social networks, neighbourhoods, and communities are perceived and represented in a heterogeneous inner city neighbourhood. It sought to understand how social networks are built, maintained, and break down within particular geographical and temporal contexts. In doing so, the research team was interested not just in what networks are for, but also in the ways in which social relations are situated within, and reproduced through, the local and global spaces and places that constitute community life (Emmel & Clark, 2011). The second, *Landscapes of Dementia Care* focussed on how carers for people with dementia understood and experienced their neighbourhood, and how carers and people with dementia are supported through locally situated networks of formal, informal and occasional care (Ward et al., 2012).

In both projects a creative blend of qualitatively driven methods were developed to investigate the multi-dimensionality of real-life experiences, including walking interviews, participatory mapping, and day-diaries of communication practices. These made use of the visual, including diagrammatic representation of social networks, archival images, researcher-produced and participant-produced photography and photo-elicitation interviews. Both projects culminated in a photograph competition inviting people to submit images to be
displayed as part of our dissemination practices. Towards the end of the Connected Lives project we held workshops for stakeholders and policy makers to discuss findings as well as a Community Exhibition. For Landscapes of Dementia Care a series of engagement activities were also attended by several stakeholders, participants and other interested parties. Consequently, some of the more pressing ethical issues to address concerning the use of visual materials included protecting participant confidentiality and anonymity; ensuring appropriate use of materials for dissemination; and gaining appropriate informed consent for the production, analysis, storage and display of materials.

**Ethical decision-making and its consequences**

Although a cornerstone of good practice, gaining informed consent is not necessarily so straightforward in visual research (Allan, 2009; Davies, 2008; Rolph et al., 2009). Issues arise about who can give consent and to what it is that are people consenting. For instance, while the intended subject of a photograph may give consent prior to an image being produced, how can consent also be best obtained to allow the subsequent analysis, storage, and possible display of that image by the research team? Similarly, and again as others have noted, gaining informed consent at the beginning of an interaction with a respondent erroneously implies that as researchers we know to what purpose data will be put. Yet is it possible to inform respondents, beyond reference to somewhat abstract ideas about analysis, storage and display, what will happen to the data we gather?

In both projects the research teams relied on participants taking responsibility for the ethical collection of images in the day-diary technique without a researcher being present. Although provided with advice about the implications of photographing others, respondents developed their own techniques for obtaining (or not obtaining) consent from others. Of course, we could have avoided some of these issues by instructing participants not to take photographs of other individuals, but then our intention to use visual-based techniques to understand better people’s views of neighbourhood and community, would have made for a rather dehumanised set of representations. Instead, participants were asked to obtain permission from anyone they wanted to photograph. As a result, some discussed the research before asking for permission to take their photographs, having been guided by their prior discussions with the research team about the nature and importance of gaining such consent. Others deliberately avoided taking photographs of people because they were not sure it was ‘fair’ that they could be included in the research without their explicit consent, or because gaining consent was deemed an overly complicated process. A few produced photographs of family and friends, but specified that they were not shown beyond the research team and requested that they were only used for analysis purposes. One took photographs of several individuals but decided not to hand the photographs over, maintaining control (and outright ownership) of them by showing me the images but taking them away afterwards (see also Clark, 2012).

While these examples indicate an awareness of the ethical possibilities of producing images, the caution some participants demonstrated in managing this also indicates hesitancy toward the potential uses to which the images may be put, and an uncertainty about why images are required at all for research purposes. In the Connected Lives project participants’ uncertainties and anxieties provided opportunity for discussion of the possible uses to which the images could be put. More importantly though, hearing them reflect on their own attempts to negotiate consent on the research team’s behalf reminds us that these sorts of issues can be addressed and determined by participants as well as ethical committees and institutional protocol. Participants were capable of recognising some of the ethical consequences of image-based data, and seemingly at least, appeared to offer tacit consent to the fair and just subsequent use of the images without, necessarily, being fully informed beforehand what that use might be. Of course, tacit agreement is not explicit and when I (as the researcher) was absent when an image was created I am dependent on participants remembering, or being prepared, to request consent to take an image; I can only assume a participant asked for permission. Our
experiences and discussion with participants in the Connected Lives study suggest that participants were able to do this. However, while I feel confident in using such images in the data for analysis, I am less confident I necessarily have explicit permission to display participant produced images depicting other people to other audiences. This is not because participants are not to be trusted to ensure consent themselves, but rather, as I comment later, because as researchers we have a duty of professional ethics to ensure we have done all we can to engage in ethically appropriate conduct.

Two further issues covered in the visual ethics literature concern *anonymity and confidentiality*. Axiomatically, it becomes difficult to assure anonymity in visual depictions, yet this sits at odds with the normative position for most ethics review panels, if not discipline specific ethical guidelines, to preserve the anonymity of participants. In response many have developed various creative (and not so creative) techniques for managing participant anonymity. A more prescient critique, though, lies in the assumption to anonymise visual material at all. Anonymising data can defeat the purpose of gathering explicitly visual data and ‘disguising’ images can ‘dehumanise’ those represented in them. Anonymising respondents also serves to hide, marginalise or silence the voices of groups and individuals for whom engaging in research may be intended to be an emancipatory experience, and who perhaps did not expect to see themselves disguised in pixelated images.

Instead of adopting a blanket approach to anonymity then, and like other visual researchers, we adopted a varied strategy to anonymity. In some instances, such as those depicted in Image 1, I am able to portray images devoid of recognisable individuals: this may be appropriate for our work around neighbourhoods where, perhaps, it is the place rather than the individual that is being depicted in the image. Yet such humanless landscapes can appear sterile or curiously objectified. While conscious of not wanting to view our images as ‘real’ rather than constructions or representations, such images strike me as a somehow less adequate representations of the reality they aim to depict. At the same time, relying on images devoid of people does not mean anonymity cannot be broken if material is aggregated. For example, the cumulative display of a series of images taken as part of a walking interview for the Landscapes of Dementia Care project provides several indicators for internal members of the local community to recognise these places visited (Image 1), which when combined with other forms of data could combine to break ‘internal confidentiality’ (Tohlich, 2004).

*Image 1: Sites of dementia care*

A potentially more satisfactory tactic involves the selective production and display of images that, we hope, do not render subjects identifiable through the crafted use of the camera lens (see Image 2).
As this implies, a contextually appropriate approach to anonymity informed by a process of *negotiated* informed consent can offer a more satisfactory solution. In the case of researcher-produced material for the Connected Lives project we requested consent for images to form part of the dataset for analysis, and/or then whether they could be used for dissemination purposes. This enabled participants to distinguish visual material they were happy to have included in the research but not shown or displayed beyond the research team, from that they were willing to be included in public display and other public-facing outputs. For the most part, and since the reasons to display an image were in order to make a more abstract argument that drew upon a range of data and analysis rather than to describe a particular story or individual experience depicted in the image, participants were prepared to provide consent. However, because of the practicalities involved in identifying and returning to those who were the subjects of participant-produced images we did not display images of individuals from whom we could not obtain direct consent ourselves (Clark, 2012). Instead, we arranged for photographs to be produced specifically for the exhibition that, we felt, represented important findings, including a theme around the rather generic title of ‘people make places’. For these images, we were keen that a number of individuals were featured and obtained verbal consent for permission to produce and display the images un-anonymised, in a similar way to how documentary and street photographers may request consent to photograph strangers in public (see Images 3 and 4). In the case of Image 4, this strategy worked particularly well in enabling a variety of individuals to be depicted in the research and its public display of findings.

*Images 3 & 4: Visual ethics and the politics of recognition*
The deployment of visual methodologies implies that we should strive to not only tell but also show others the knowledge we have generated. So, it is increasingly commonplace for researchers to display data and findings in public forums. Although important in their own right, the complexities surrounding consent and anonymity are heightened in the context of debate about the ownership and public display of visual materials and relate to questions about who owns visual data and who has the ‘right’ to use, display and reuse it (Rowe, 2011). This though is an issue about more than copyright laws, but also about who can consent to the inclusion of images in research, and about who has a say in how images are used.

As part the Landscapes of Dementia Care project we accumulated images of people with dementia and their carers. While we have permission to display these images in a variety of contexts I am reluctant to do so for two reasons. One, which, as Rolph et al., (2009) demonstrate, is surmountable, concerns the ways in which to obtain consent from people with dementia. The other, and which I am less sure how to resolve, concerns the potentially stigmatising impact of being associated with dementia. It may be that a person with dementia, and their carer, is happy to be recognised as having a connection to the illness within a particular context (such as a seminar of practitioners), but to what extent does this translate to recognition in the wider public sphere? What happens if consent to display is subsequently withdrawn? What if a researcher believes some potential harm or distress may come to a participant in the future because of previous associations through disclosed images? To be clear, I am not suggesting here that those affected by dementia should be rendered invisible in the name of being more ethical, or because we are unable to control stigmatising and potentially discriminating practices towards illness (indeed, images can provide powerful counter-discourses to stigmatising situations). Rather, the decision to display images should be considered not only within contemporaneous circumstances, but also with respect to future, admittedly unknown and consequently hypothetical ones too.

For the photograph competition for the Landscapes of Dementia Care project we asked people with dementia, their friends, and carers to submit images of ‘their place called happiness’. One image submitted (from a person with dementia) depicted an older male and female couple accompanied by the statement “my place called happiness is beside my wife”. My abstract, and not to mention inadequate, description here makes the image sound somewhat clichéd, but this is not how I read it. For this is an image that has lingered after the interview transcripts have been filed away and conference and seminar papers completed. Since a proviso of competition entry specifically requested consent to use any of the images that were submitted in other contexts, I could display the image in various outputs but I have chosen not to. For me, there is something deeply personal about not just the image but also the accompanying text that continues to affect how I think about the private lives and experiences that are told to us through images that, somewhat ironically given the participatory power of much visual research to co-construct data, I feel an over-riding responsibility for. I am not sure what purpose I would put the image to, other than, perhaps, to hope to bring alive the research, or perhaps to provoke particular reactions among an audience or readership. Yet I worry that any display would strip the image of the reason for its existence, becoming instead a sort of emblem for the research rather than representative of the personal stories it tries to represent, or perhaps more troublesome, provoking alternative readings by viewers unfamiliar with the intentions and meaning its depicts. So, I chose not to present this publicly, or any of the other images that explicitly identify individuals with dementia, or their friends and carers.

Reflecting on when, where and why to display visual material thus invokes consideration of the implications of relinquishing control of not only the material, but also its intended meanings and desired reactions. Of course, we know that viewers’ interpretations of visual material may be quite different to our own but while visual researchers have moved beyond debates about the ‘truth’ depicted in an image (Goldstein, 2007), the issue of ‘more and less appropriate’ readings and interpretations remains. Assessing the appropriateness of our analysis and interpretations of images is not just a question of analytical rigour and authentic validation, but
also about making ethical judgements about how images are (or could be) interpreted. In other words, it is important to consider the effect of the image and the way it can move an audience or viewer or evoke certain reactions and that in turn prompt further response and actions.

When reflecting on his images of human suffering due to war, drought, famine and poverty, the documentary photographer Don McCullin (1990) comments that “I have been manipulated, and I have in turn manipulated others, by recording their response to suffering and misery. So there is guilt in every direction”. That images are constructed through manipulation, and that a plethora of images of suffering has come to desensitize its audiences (Sontag, 1979) has led to much debate about image ethics more broadly than the somewhat empirical-dominated discussion presented so far (e.g. Kilby, in press). While my own images are not what these and other visual theorists and documentary image-makers have in mind when they think of guilt, suffering and image ethics, their ideas serve as reminders of why we might want (or feel the need) to photograph or film someone or something, and to consider the impact such images have on those engaged in the process. Mitchell (2011) for instance has reflected on the power of the image to ‘haunt’ us, lingering in our memory, encouraging us to return for repeated viewings, and of the more general effect images have on us. If our images can haunt us as researchers, analysts and documentary photographers, so too will they haunt their participant-producers, their subjects and their audiences. This does not mean that some images should not be shown but that we need to be attuned to the possible ‘haunting’ consequences of their production, display, and viewing.

The haunting quality of images, or even the assumption that they can somehow reveal dimensions of the social world seldom revealed calls into question what we expect from the images we generate or work with. It is important to question why we find visual data so appealing, and accept (perhaps candidly) that it may be that we are drawn to visual methods because we aesthetically appreciate them, perhaps because they appeal to a latent objective certainty, or because we want people to ‘show and tell’ us about their lives, and in turn, we want to show and tell others what we have found. Such desires render images both the object of scientific analysis and subject to aesthetic appreciation. The re-assembling by researchers of participant-produced or provided images in a show-and-tell vein implies a re-telling of visual narratives. This is an ethical as well as interpretivist endeavor in so far as it implies that researchers can seemingly better re-present those images than the original (participant) makers. This is not that the display, or even analysis, of images is in some way unethical, but rather that it is part of a wider debate about who can, and who ought, better show – and consequently represent – to others the social worlds we purport to understand. So, we need to be able to critically justify to ourselves, and not just research participants, the need for the production as well as the display of visual material. As I suggested earlier, it is rarely possible to know, ahead of its production, what we intend to do with an image (and in this respect, visual data is not much different from other forms), but we can think through what we could do with those images once they are in our possession, including how we reject or dispose of visual materials we consider superfluous to, or unhelpful for, analysis.

My own work does not follow a documentary photography tradition, but I am still open, occasionally, to the lure of the image as an aesthetic and a somehow more evocative medium for understanding the social world. Trying to be more attuned to these issues can contribute to the decisions about which images to display, which to archive and which to use only in analysis. It also means that research does not suffer if a participant chooses not to hand images over to me for analytical or display purposes, for in this respect, a second image that ‘haunts’ me is one that never existed. When explaining a variety of images produced as part of a photo-elicitation exercise, one participant admitted, that he did not photograph an individual whom he considered among the closest in his social network because, to borrow his expression, he could not understand “why I wanted a picture of his dad eating his breakfast?” I recall this seemingly trivial episode in order to take stock of the relative value of images. It serves as a reminder of the power we attribute to the image, considering it as ‘real’ evidence of an event or happening, rather than a representation. We should avoid being seduced by
either the aesthetic or the haunting qualities of photographs or any other visual media, and stay alert to our demand for images because we hope they will somehow render the life they depict more tangibly ‘real’ than they are capable of doing.

The final ethical moment I reflect on concerns the ways in which the issues discussed so far are always open to negotiation within a wider framework of power, responsibility, and autonomy for researchers and participants alike. As part of the Connected Lives project I accompanied Sheila (not her real name) on a walk around the neighbourhood where she has lived since the 1950s. During the walk Sheila was eager to be photographed beside the street-sign on the street where she lived when first married. Sheila’s house, like those of her neighbours, had long since been demolished as part of an urban regeneration initiative. But perhaps in homage to the area’s past the original street-sign remained. Sheila requested that I take her photograph beside this sign, which I did while she recalled life in the street some fifty-odd years ago. Later, when assembling images for the community-life exhibition and selecting images that would depict key stories emerging from the research, I wanted to use Sheila’s image to make a point about the ways in which the material spaces of the neighbourhood are replete with memories and meanings. The point is not particularly sophisticated, but nor was it intended to be. It was more that I wanted to display the photograph of Sheila standing on the street where she used to live. Sheila’s biography, and her history of the neighbourhood, intertwine to such an extent that it is difficult to unravel what becomes the story of Sheila’s life from the story of Sheila’s neighbourhood, and this may well hint at some insight of interest to those viewing the exhibition.

But it was not Sheila’s story, but Sheila herself who I wanted represented. Sheila was a familiar figure, known to many in the neighbourhood. She had also been an important part of the research project: and while not outwardly championing it, had always expressed an interest in it and how I was getting on. Being candid, I also wanted to display Sheila’s image because, to use Mitchell’s (2011) phrase, it ‘haunted me’. This was an image I returned to and which reminded me of Sheila’s story, as well as all the other stories I collected over the course of the research. Finally, and while I am not claiming any great photographic prowess, I thought as an image this one had some form of aesthetic quality which I thought might look ‘good’ at the exhibition.

Given I had not obtained consent to show the image to others, let alone include it in a public display, I discussed with Sheila the prospect of using the image. Her initial response was to refuse. I returned some time later to try to persuade her to reconsider when she again refused. Undefeated, I had the image enlarged and printed to about 1 metre in height in preparation that it might be displayed. I visited Sheila a third time to show her the now considerably larger photograph and to which she reacted with understandable surprise, and perhaps a little shock. More discussion followed, including critical questioning from Sheila about why this image was so important for the exhibition, until she consented to its display. After the exhibition, I returned the image to Sheila while she was volunteering at a community café. I told her the exhibition had been a success, that I was really pleased she had been a part of it (Sheila did not attend), and that everyone had commented on how good her photograph looked. I then offered Sheila the large-scale photograph to keep. She promptly took this photograph and displayed it on the public wall of the café for everyone to see, telling me she thought it was a ‘good photograph’.

For me, this episode demonstrates the value of practising a situated visual ethics. Determining consent for the production, use, display, and even ownership of images is a fluid, negotiable process. It hints at how ethical decisions are enmeshed in power dynamics, and emerge from the relational context between researchers and participants. It also reveals some of the ways in which the ethical challenges presented by visual materials do not lie in an abstract, academic domain but rather are a part of an everyday realm of decision making. Sheila’s querying and reflecting on the implications of the display of ‘her’ photograph were grounded in her own experiences and understandings of visual ethics. Determining the fate of an image becomes a question of negotiation. The image of Sheila is neither owned exclusively by me (as the researcher) or even Sheila (as a participant), but rather is the product of the relationship that exists between us, albeit set within the research
context. Perhaps I went too far in coercion of Sheila into agreeing to her image being part of the exhibition and, again perhaps, in going against her initial wishes I acted in an ethically inappropriate manner. Others may view this as an instance of a more powerful academic researcher seeking to convince a less powerful participant, set amidst a wider constellation of class, gender, and age differentials. Yet Sheila’s reaction when I returned the image to her possession makes me think that a reading of coercion or even exploitation is not necessarily correct. I maintain that Sheila was happy to consent to being part of the display, and that my persuasion here was not about getting my own way, but rather about reassuring Sheila that I could be trusted to put the image to appropriate use. It should be recognised that my relationship with Sheila was on-going over the three years of the research project and I had seen her regularly (I estimate 2 or 3 times a month over a two and a half year period). This interactional history means that this was more than a one-off instance of gaining consent. So, while I suspect I did push the boundary of my own ethical comfort zone, just as I pushed the boundaries of my relationship with Sheila, in doing so I maintain that I was able to negotiate the use of a powerful image in ways that were appropriate to me and to Sheila, and in a way with which Sheila felt comfortable. Such situated ethical practice remains appropriate in its contextual specifics.

Beyond relativist (visual) ethics

The reflections presented here bridge the procedural-ethics and ethics-in-practice dualism (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004; Pope et al., 2010). Those who work with visual materials and methodologies often highlight the importance of contextually appropriate ethical actions and decision-making, recognising research ethics as part of an on-going process of negotiation, reflection, and experimentation (Clark et al., 2010; also see Allan, 2009; Pink, 2007; Wood and Kidman, 2013). Such practices are largely, albeit often implicitly, positioned within a situated ethical framework. Situationism rejects the absolutist positions that ethical decisions can, and should, be derived either logically from predetermined procedures or generalist principles by basing ethical judgement on a case-by-case basis (Simons & Usher, 2000). It is a stance that does not “ignore all principles but at the same time it insists that rules cannot tell us conclusively what is good or right to do in particular cases” (Hammersely & Traianou, 2012: 26). So, it offers a potentially attractive route for those researchers grappling with the restrictions imposed by a principle-based set of ethical ‘rules’ or regulations, and appears particularly attractive for those who research with the visual.

Situated ethics provides space for dialogue between researchers and participants. Participants can, of course, contribute to how ethical decisions are made, and a situated ethic encourages researchers to negotiate these issues with participants. ‘Everyday’ visual practice, including photographing and filming in public, uploading, viewing, and downloading material to the internet, and the sharing of images and film across social networking sites concern many of the same ethical issues that visual researchers grapple with. Outside the research domain these issues are being worked through, albeit in contradictory, ambiguous, and sometimes ‘unethical’ ways. To recognise that the display, production and ownership of visual material are being addressed in a realm we might term ‘everyday ethics’ is not to imply that such issues are unproblematic, but rather to recognise that ethical resolutions may not lie solely in the practices of social researchers or institutional guidelines. Indeed, reflecting on how others deal with these issues may enable a more ethically appropriate set of research practices to develop.

However, acknowledging that some participants may be familiar with these issues as part of their everyday visual cultures does not mean researchers should hand-over responsibility for decision-making. If one of the challenges of understanding the ‘everyday’ is that it is uncritically taken for granted, then researchers may need to worry even more on behalf of those who only rarely (if at all) consider ‘everyday image ethics’. Situated visual ethics may also encourage a charge of “an individualistic laissez-faire approach with no wider accountability than the researcher’s conscience” (Plummer 1983: 141). Plummer has warned of the danger of descending into ethical relativism. Taken to a logical extremity, rejecting universal ethics and their associated
guidelines as overly protectionist or unfit for specific contexts may lead to permissive use of unprincipled or unscrupulous practices conducted in the name of situated ethical practice. More likely though, a lack of guidance can make for a somewhat disparate set of ethical choices that could result in unequal and disproportionately unfair treatment of different individuals.

Wary of such critique, I do not claim that a situated ethics is necessarily a panacea to the ethical challenges in visual research material (Clark, 2012). Arguing that ethical issues will be resolved not through adherence to protocol but to sensitive appreciation of context does not fit well with researchers bound by institutional regimes and ethics regulations that expect strategies to resolve ethical dilemmas worked out in advance. But there are wider issues at stake here than negotiating institutional regulations and how to work within pre-determined ethical frameworks. Where I depart from the charge of situated relativism is with respect to how situated ethics are arrived at. Involving participants in ethical decision-making is not to shift responsibility away from researchers and onto participants, nor is it to render ethical protocols restrictive, irrelevant, or part of the armoury of regulation and surveillance. Rather, it is about recognising how those who take part in research are more than passive subjects, or even the ‘co-constructors of knowledge’. They are also individuals participating in an everyday ethical realm beyond that prescribed by social researchers and the institutions they represent. If we are to act in more ethically appropriate ways, regardless of whether we use visual or other methodologies and materials, we need to recognise participants as active, ethically reflexive agents who negotiate the ethical conundrums of everyday life. Situated visual ethics can encourage more reflexive attention to the relational, power-laden contexts in which these issues are played out. As Sheila’s story suggests, negotiating ethical decisions with participants is not immune to power differentials, but situated ethics can help to bring them more fully into focus and produce outcomes that both researchers and participants can be satisfied with.

Doing ethically appropriate visual research requires balancing participants’ rights to autonomy and self-determinism with a duty to protect them from possible harm. As my negotiations with Sheila imply, this is a balance that is imbued with the power and status of the researcher-researched relationship where we cannot ignore the status imbalances that structure this negotiation. Concerns about ‘faking friendship’ and ‘methodological grooming’ (Bengry-Howell & Griffin, 2012) remind us that researchers are at risk of exploiting the relationships we develop to achieve our research ends. Certainly we need to remain conscious that ethical negotiation does not become coercion. Engaging in ethically reflexive scrutiny of our practices within a wider framework of professional ethics may offer a way of keeping this in check, or at least of enabling ethical negotiation with participants whilst not ignoring the unequal distribution and potential misuse of power in the research process.

Research requires making ethical judgements and these will always be compromised. What is deemed right in one set of circumstances may not be so in another; indeed, some researchers may disagree with some of the decisions and practices I have reported here. Nonetheless, given the potential for a relativist creep here, it is important to recognise that some individual, institution, or body, still has final responsibility for the research endeavour. When participants are unable to agree on an appropriate course of action, or (as with our images of individuals with dementia), a researcher chooses a different course to participants, the final decision rests with the researcher. Should things go ‘wrong’, if assurances of confidentiality or anonymity are broken, or (emotional or other) harm should come to a participant as a result of negotiated ethical judgements, it is not sufficient defence for a researcher to argue that their decisions were based on what that participant wanted. Researchers need to be prepared to have the final ‘ethical’ say in these decisions, not because they are necessarily more or less ethical than anyone else, but because deferring or circumventing ethical decisions – either to participants or institutional bodies - may come back to haunt them.
Conclusion

There is much to consider when working ethically with visual materials and techniques. While researchers can argue about the ideologies of ethical review and institutional regulation, or about the utility of ethical protocols and regulatory frameworks for their own particular research circumstances, there inevitably comes a point when many will need to stop debating ethics and start doing them. At that point, however valuable ethical codes are as guidance, they will never be able to accommodate the myriad of circumstances encountered in the research field. Thinking more reflexively about how ethics are practised moves debate beyond the visual and what might be considered issues of technique and method. Of course, issues of consent, anonymity, confidentiality, display, ownership and legalities all come into play when considering how best to protect participants form harm and promote a more just sense of visual research. But in striving to act appropriately, it is important to consider the situations within which these actions take place which inform such actions.

My aim here has been to reflect on ethical moments in a wider framework of situated ethics. The issues that I have presented will no doubt be familiar to many who have conducted face-to-face empirical research in areas beyond visual methodologies, and established visual researchers have been dealing with, and resolving in their own ways, these issues for some time. Yet as visually focused research moves out of the methodological margins then greater numbers of researchers will begin to face them so it is also likely that those practices and techniques for dealing with ethical issues will become subject to greater scrutiny. Visual methodologies raise a number of issues regarding ethical practice, from the production to analysis and display of materials, as well of course, as long standing discussion about the ethics of representation. While the ethical situations I have reflected here may highlight issues specific to visual research, their implications go beyond the confines of that particular domain and speak to a much wider project about what constitutes an ethically sound way of doing social research.

The ethical conundrums facing visual researchers are not necessarily unique or new. Many are about much older ethical questions being asked of new methodological circumstances. Accommodating a situated visual ethic is not simply about enabling the pragmatic relativism of deciding ‘what is the right thing to do in this situation’, but also about reflecting on the certainties of wider political, moral and epistemic positions we are situated within. While situated ethics may appear intuitively attractive to researchers working with visual materials and methodologies, they are not immune to the power differentials in this, or indeed any other form of research. More reflection on the ethical moments and anxieties underpinning our research practice can bring these to the fore, so transforming how we do ethical social research.

Acknowledgements

*Connected Lives* was funded by the ESRC as part of the National Centre for Research Methods: Real Life Methods node. The PI was Nick Emmel. *Landscapes of Dementia Care* was funded by the Manchester Interdisciplinary Centre for Research on Aging and was completed with Richard Ward and Matthew Hargreaves. Images 3 and 4 were produced by, and remain the copyright of, Jon Prosser. Thanks to Nick, Richard, Matthew and Jon for helping to develop my thoughts on the issues discussed here.

Biography

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