Reflection/Commentary on a Past Article: “The Integrated Use of Audio Diaries, Photography, and Interviews in Research with Disabled Young Men”

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The study described in The Integrated Use of Audio Diaries, Photography, and Interviews in Research with Disabled Young Men (hereafter Integrated Methods) was an extension of a program of research that I began in 2001 as a doctoral student. My dissertation investigated the sociospatial and technological mediators of identities with young men with Duchenne muscular dystrophy. The 10 study participants created videos about their identities, lives, and life circumstances. I was particularly interested in how place, health-care technologies (e.g., ventilators, wheelchairs), and bodies intersected in mediating how masculinity and disability identities were produced and/or resisted (Gibson, Young, Upshur, & McKeever, 2007). At the time, visual research was much less pervasive than it is today. I was indebted to two papers by Holliday (2000), and Lomax and Casey (1998) that helped me to develop an analytical frame that was consistent with my critical Bourdieusian approach, and which was outlined in an earlier paper in this journal (Gibson, 2005).

The Integrated Methods article of 2013 was published at a time when visual methods were quickly becoming almost de rigueur in qualitative research, particularly in work with children and young people. Video, photography, drawing, and other creative methods continue to be promoted alongside pervasive claims that the data are somehow more “authentic” compared to, for example, interviews; that the methods can increase “engagement,” “empower” participants, and give them “control of their narratives.” Although audio diaries are less common than visual methods, the same claims regarding “capturing” or “giving” “voice” are made. In the Integrated Methods article, our team argued that there is no one authentic voice waiting to be captured but rather that narratives are produced within a set of social relations that include the research context. Instead, we suggested that, like interviews or other traditional methods of data generation, photos and audio diaries can be viewed as “reality constructing, meaning making occasions” (p. 386). Our point was not to see this as a problem but rather as a resource. The data could be analyzed both in terms of substantive content and a process in which participants claimed and performed their identities. We drew on Bourdieu’s sociology of practice to suggest that participants’ choices of what to record or photograph reveal the myriad forces that intersect in producing accounts. We found that participants actively worked to construct preferred identities and resist others but did so in response to the context of the study and their broader social relations in everyday life. In mapping these processes, our analyses revealed participants’ understandings of the identity categories ascribed to them by others (e.g., as disabled, as men, and as adults in the making), and how they worked to claim a place in the world (Gibson et al., 2014).

We learned a number of valuable lessons in conducting this work. Our participants for the study were 11 young men aged 16–27 years who had a diagnosis of Duchenne muscular dystrophy. We asked them to take photographs and audio-record their thoughts regarding their lives as men, as disabled, and as transitioning to adulthood, which we explored further in subsequent interviews. Because of their varying physical abilities, we adapted cameras and recorders to enable each participant to independently produce photographs and audio diaries. Our intended use of these multiple methods was to gather rich and varied information from each participant and to provide

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participants with some independence in generating their data. Moreover, consistent with the literature, we were hopeful that participants might enjoy creating their narratives through talk and pictures. For the most part, this was successful. Many participants particularly liked taking photos, and even used the cameras to produce unsolicited videos. For some, the adapted camera enabled them to take photos independently for the first time in their lives.

Nevertheless, we also noted that these supposedly “fun,” “less intrusive,” and/or “child friendly” methods could be anxiety producing. The open-ended nature of the instructions caused some participants to worry about not “getting it right,” and/or they were uncomfortable making choices regarding what or how much to reveal about themselves. This was particularly true for the audio diaries, wherein participants were asked to comment on potentially sensitive topics. We thus had considerable variations in the data produced among the participants, including one participant who did not produce any photos or diaries. The lesson reiterated for our team was the need for maintaining methodological flexibility. No one size fits all, and we were reminded that choosing among a toolbox of techniques is more likely to produce rich, ethically sensitive, data than adherence to structured “protocols.”

Building from these lessons, our team has continued to utilize flexible designs and multiple creative methods in our research with disabled young people. Moreover, we have done additional work to problematize the still-common assumption of the production of “authentic voices” with these methods (Gibson, King, Teachman, Mistry, & Hamdani, 2017; Teachman, McDonough, Macarthur, & Gibson, 2018; Teachman & Gibson, 2018). We concur with McLaughlin and Coleman-Fountain (2018) who in a recent paper noted that creative methods are valuable not because they are “child friendly” or “more authentic,” but rather because they can be used to better understand how social relations and contexts mediate how young people re/present their identities.

The importance of conceptual coherence cannot be overstated. Research examining sociopolitical mediators of people’s lives, experiences, and/or identities cannot be aimed at “giving voice” to participants. Moreover, any attempt at producing “authentic” accounts will inevitably miss out on the opportunity to understand the mediators of re/presentation and can even perpetuate systemic harms by encouraging young people to reproduce processes used to regulate their behaviors (Gallacher & Gallagher, 2008). Creative qualitative methods have been used effectively to produce rich accounts and new knowledge, but, like any research approach must be applied mindfully, rigorously, and sensitively. I am grateful to the participants of our research and my wonderful colleagues on the Integrated Methods article for their wisdom in pursuing this goal.

Author’s Note
Barbara Gibson holds the Bloorview Kids Foundation Chair in Childhood Disability Studies.

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