Reflecting on a photo-elicitation project linked to a major exhibition of Shirley Baker’s photos of Manchester and Salford in the 1960s and 1970s, this paper explores relationships between people and the photos that purportedly represent the communities of their childhoods. It addresses neglected questions about how documentary photos contribute to the construction of memory and about how personal memories might animate found photos. The article proposes that it is useful to describe relationships between people and photos using terminology that characterises connections between people. ‘Intimate’ relationships are the focus of this discussion; these occur when people have a personal connection, and feel close, to a photo. Intimate relationships were forged with Baker’s photos in part because of their mnemonic power. Their utility as memory materials was not simply that they prompted remembering, including re-enactment of belonging in place, but that they did important work for participants by facilitating the composition of narratives about the self, past and present. Baker’s photography collection is one of several, typically underused photographic sources in local archives, representing everyday life in post-war Britain. Understanding how people relate to documentary photos that purportedly represent their lives, enables more effective use of found photos as sources in academic and community history contexts.

Between 1960 and 1981, Shirley Baker (1932–2014) photographed street life in inner-city areas of Manchester and Salford as they were undergoing a drastic council-led ‘slum clearance’ programme. Her huge photographic portfolio extensively featured children, also teenagers, young mums and the elderly; working age men were marginal figures. Dismissing postmodern critiques of the evidential status of photos, Baker 2000, 8) described her work as ‘unashamedly documentary’: Streets were disappearing and I hoped to capture some trace of the everyday life of people who lived there. I wanted to photograph the mundane, even trivial aspects of life’ (p.6). By 2000, Baker noted that her photos constituted an isolated record, and evidence, of this inner-city landscape and social life: ‘without such a record the people of that time and those places would apparently have never existed’ (p.4). Although overstated, it is true that the terrain no longer exists as the streets were razed and the residents relocated; many have since passed away. The children, now grown up, have few personal photos of their youth, and their experiences are largely absent from popular and academic studies: in many respects, their personal and collective histories have been invisible. For decades Baker’s photos have been on the periphery of academic and public consciousness, but a major exhibition of her work in London (2015) and Manchester (2017) – ‘Women and Children; and Loitering Men’, curated by Anna Douglas (see Douglas 2015) – is making these disadvantaged inner-city communities visible again. Prompted by the Manchester exhibition, I collaborated with Anna Douglas on a project to interview people that had a direct connection to the areas Baker photographed in the 1960s and 1970s: they lived, worked and played in them. It explored how people related to photos that purported to represent their communities and local landscapes, and in some cases, them as children.

How people relate to photos shapes the meanings and significance they have individually and collectively, and their contribution to practices of remembering. This important insight has been pursued unevenly in studies that address photos in the context of memory or that use photos to stimulate memory. Unsurprisingly, relationships between people and photos have received most attention in studies of family/domestic photographs (Challen 1987, 1991; Spence 1986; Spence & Holland 1991; Walkerdine...
1991; Kuhn 1995/2002, 2007; Hirsch 1997, 1999; Willis 1994; Thomson 2011; Tinkler 2011), and of photo objects and remembrance (Batchen 2004). Family snaps and portraits are widely seen as custodians of personal memory and much has been written about this and their consequent potential for autobiographical and historical enquiry (see above). Understanding of relationships with documentary photos is far less developed: their key characteristics have not been the focus of enquiry. People’s relationships to documentary photos are, nevertheless, implicit in critical studies of their authority and ‘illusory neutrality’ (Sekula 1986, 156) in social institutional contexts. This underpins the pioneering, and now ‘classic’, studies by Sekula (1986) and Tagg (1988) which exposed and interrogated the role of photos in archives and in government and professional discourses. Sekula’s exploration of the politics of the photographic archive flagged the mnemonic implications of the historical exclusion of working-class subjectivities from them. Documentary photographs and archives have since been explored as sites of mnemonic contestation, and memory has been mobilised to critically theorise these (for example, Kuhn and McCallister 2006; Cross et al. 2010). Their contribution to collective memory has also been the focus of a small but important body of scholarship (Blaikie 2006; Hagiopan 2006; Kuhn 1995/2002) that traces the ‘social biographies’ (Edwards 2002, 68) of photographic images, tracking their use and circulation, and the meanings ascribed to them in different contexts. How people relate to documentary photography and its potential for personal memory are, nevertheless, still not widely appreciated or understood, although there is evidence of their significance: the ways in which some marginalised communities have repurposed historical photos of ancestors, often produced in the context of colonial administration, to serve community and family remembrance (see for example: Lydon 2010; Payne 2011); how people with a public profile narrate their lives drawing on documentary images of themselves, or created by themselves (Schiebel and Robel 2011; Ryan 2011; Mauud 2011). The mnemonic potential of documentary photos is also acknowledged by researchers who use them to stimulate recollection about social change (eg Schwartz 1989; Modell and Brodsky 1994; Harper 2001; Byrne and Doyle 2004) and several factors are seen to influence this process (Tinkler 2013), including: personal relevance; how photographic images are conceptualised; how, if at all, photos feature in people’s lives. This is useful, but a more refined understanding of processes is required to explain and exploit the mnemonic potential of documentary photos.

Focusing on Shirley Baker’s work, this article explores relationships between people and the photos that purportedly represent the communities of their childhoods. It addresses neglected questions about how documentary photos contribute to the construction of personal memory, and how personal memory might animate documentary photos. Baker’s photography collection is one of several, typically underused photographic sources in local archives, representing everyday life in post-war Britain. These photos feature ‘ordinary’ and sometimes marginalised people – the poor, minority groups, women – and the quotidian and often overlooked details of everyday life. Understanding how people relate to documentary photos that purportedly represent their lives, and the implications for memory and life-history, enables more effective use of them as sources in academic and community history contexts.

I propose that it is useful to describe relationships between people and photos using terminology that characterises connections between people. Intimate relationships are the focus of this paper; these occur when people have a personal connection, and feel close, to a photo. Other types of relationship did not figure prominently in this research but include: acquaintance – a photo ‘one knows slightly’ but which one is not close to; ‘stranger’ - a photo previously unknown or which remains distant; ‘enemy’ – a photo perceived as hostile. An advantage of this terminology is its familiarity and, following from this, its conceptual accessibility. These labels are, however, intended only as shorthand; they are not straightjackets. The invitation to conceptualise relationships with photos encourages scrutiny of these associations, displacing assumptions about different types of photograph – personal and public (eg commercial/advertising, documentary, photo-journalism etc) – and about implicit or explicit hierarchies regarding their significance for remembering.

It is widely assumed that people have an intimate relationship with their personal photos and that, following from this, these pictures are evocative memory materials. The term ‘resonance’ is often used in this context, although not theorised. The Collins Dictionary explains that when something has ‘resonance’ for someone, it has ‘a special meaning or is particularly important to them’. ‘Resonance’ is also defined as ‘continues to sound’, and in the context of
memory this is pertinent in that a photo has affects/sounds that continue over time and beyond the contexts in which it was initially made, viewed and used. In many instances, people have close bonds with their personal photos and they are resonant, but this is not always the case (Freund, A. with Thiessen, A 2011). Moreover, resonance is not always dependent on a personal connection; it can sometimes result from engaging with other people’s family photos. Artist and academic, Lorie Novak (1999, see also Tinkler 2013, 70–1), created an interactive website – Collected Visions – where she invited visitors to contribute personal stories about family photos, their own ones and those belonging to other people posted on the site. Most of the contributors to the online archive chose to write about photos that were not their own. Novak notes that participants recalled photos they could no longer find, or which were never taken, and that some people felt more liberated writing about other people’s photos than their own ones because the former were free from ‘personal baggage’. The success of Novak’s venture demonstrates that other people’s family photos can stand in for personal ones and resonate, although the qualities of these surrogate relationships and their resonance are not explored in depth by the participants or by Novak. Like other people’s family snaps, street photography is commonly associated with realism and the documentation of the ordinary. The apparent connection to everyday life raises the question of whether photos, such as Shirley Baker’s, might resonate and ‘stand in’ for missing, or never taken, personal snaps.

I argue that intimate relationships were forged with Baker’s photos, in part because of their mnemonic power. In the following, I introduce the project, Shirley Baker’s photos and how interviewees responded to them. I then look closely at how the forging of intimate relationships with photos was bound up with their mnemonic potency: a potency heightened by the project’s link to a high-profile exhibition in a prestigious gallery. I look first at how remembering was facilitated by ‘recognition’ and belief in the authenticity of Baker’s photos, and second at how Baker’s photos were embraced because they contributed to the construction of personal histories of childhood in place, that is, meaningful space (Cresswell 1996).

Shirley Baker’s Photos and the People We Interviewed

The hosting of the exhibition at Manchester Art Gallery enabled the research team to engineer an encounter between Baker’s photos and people from the communities she photographed in the 1960s and 1970s (see Figure 1). Following an open day at the gallery at which over a hundred visitors looked at, and talked about, a preview of the 130 images, we invited those who had a direct connection to the areas featured in Baker’s photos to be interviewed about the photos that they particularly liked. We interviewed twenty four participants, fourteen women and ten men; one participant was West Indian, the remainder were white. The eldest was born in 1937, six were born in the 1940s, eleven in the 1950s, six in the 1960s. Using photoelicitation, we sought: personal memories of life in the districts photographed; historical context for the images; insight into how people related to the photos.

The encounters with Baker’s photos were lively; the photos stimulated interest, memory, talk, and interaction. People were noticeably affected and these affects extended beyond the first workshop. Everyone found it easy to identify photos they liked and thought important. Photos were sometimes selected because they were aesthetically pleasing, but most often because they documented the landscapes of their youth and had personal relevance. Everyone saw Baker’s photos as testimony to a way of life that no longer existed; this was widely perceived as a ‘forgotten’ past. The photographic encounter was repeatedly described as enabling the rediscovery of memories that had not been recalled, reflected on, or recounted for many years, except in a piecemeal or fleeting manner. Christine Potter struggled to explain this process:

CP: … it’s something you’ve really forgotten about until you see these photos …

LF: So, is there anything in that photograph that you had forgotten about?

CP: I wouldn’t say forgotten, it’s always there in your memory but just when you see a photograph, it brings it all back, Just one photograph can take you right back to your childhood really.

Christine differentiated between well-established memories that she could easily draw to mind, and those she had been unaware of having until the project stimulated their recall.

Forgetting was exacerbated by a lack of reminders. Everyday life constantly changes and participants forgot how people, places and ways of living used to be; Baker’s photos brought to mind past incarnations. Alongside incremental changes there were also radical transformations caused by the erasure of the landscapes interviewees grew up in: the bulldozing of streets, crofts and buildings and their replacement with motorways,
high rise flats and commercial and retail centres. Although most interviewees continued to live in and around Manchester and Salford, the terrain of their youth had been invisible for over forty years and there were few physical reminders of it.

The invisibility of the landscapes of childhood was compounded by a lack of personal and cultural representation. Participants typically had few, if any, personal photos from their youth and it was rare for these to place people in everyday contexts. There were photos taken by itinerant photographers during Whit Walks, and posed individual and group portraits often gifted by friends and family. The few who owned cameras used these sparingly because of the cost of film and processing. Popular representations of the 1960s and 1970s offer two very different views of the period, neither of which resonated with our participants. On the one hand, colourful images of swinging city life and youth culture. On the other, images of working-class life in Coronation Street, Weatherby – a fictional, inner-city area, ostensibly in Salford, that has been featured on television since 1960. None of our participants described ‘Coronation Street’ as having visual parallels with the cityscapes of their youth. There are several likely reasons for this. Despite the opening panoramic shot of brick-built terraced houses that has been a feature of the series since its inception, ‘Coronation Street’ has focused on domestic interiors – houses, the corner shop, the local pub – rather than street life. Moreover, unlike the areas that Baker photographed in the 1960s and 1970s, Coronation Street was not designated a slum and demolished; it lacked the decay and debris that constituted the make-shift playgrounds that our participants recalled so vividly. Relatedly, ‘Coronation Street’ has always focused on the everyday worlds and places of adults; the lives and landscapes of children are invisible.

Shirley Baker’s photos provide a rare visual representation of areas of Salford and Manchester that were ‘cleared’ in the 1960s and 1970s, one that foregrounds the places of childhood. Until recently, these photos were relegated principally to the archive; they circulated only in the cultural margins and received very little scholarly attention.\(^5\) Baker’s first solo exhibition of these photos was in 1989, accompanied by

FIGURE 1. Talking about Shirley Baker’s photographs. © Anna Douglas. Courtesy of Anna Douglas.
a book, *Street Photographs* (Baker 1989). In 2001 the Lowry Art Gallery invited Baker to re-photograph the areas featured in her first exhibition; the two sets of photos were subsequently exhibited side-by-side and published in *Streets & Spaces*. Following this, several of Baker’s photos were used commercially.⁶

It is instructive to reflect on the similarities and differences between the cultural positioning of Baker’s photos of children, mostly in black and white,² and Bert Hardy’s black and white photo ‘Gorbals boys’. Hardy’s photo portrays two small boys, arms linked, about to cross a road in a deprived inner city area (Gorbals) of Glasgow; it was produced in 1948 for the monthly magazine *Picture Post*, though never used. Like Baker’s photos, ‘Gorbals boys’ provides a compassionate representation of working-class children in northern ‘slums’ that were subsequently demolished. But whereas Baker’s photos have remained on the margins of popular culture, ‘Gorbals boys’ has become iconic; the image has been reproduced on the covers of autobiographies of celebrity Glaswegians, made into a poster, and ‘quoted’ by other professional photographers. Blaikie (2006) argues that the contexts in which the ‘Gorbals boys’ image recurs and circulates are key to understanding why it has ‘resonance within popular culture’ (p.61). For Glaswegians from working-class backgrounds, the photo fits in to collective memory of tenement life: it feeds nostalgia for a lost community and lost childhoods that are often associated with a myth of tenement life. The significance of the photo is heightened because the tenements were replaced in the 1950s with housing estates that were widely criticised by locals.

Commenting on Glaswegians who grew up and left the area, Blaikie notes that these ‘exiles have eulogised their roots, amongst them famous men, who given some fine tinkering with ages and neighbourhoods, might have been the Gorbals boys’ (p.61). Amongst these Glaswegians (all Blaikie’s examples are male), there is identification with Hardy’s image and a willingness to be represented by it. While there is an established collective identity around growing up in the Gorbals area of Glasgow in the mid-C20th, there is no equivalent for people who grew up in Manchester and Salford in the 1960s and 1970s. As our interviewees frequently commented, their childhoods were ‘forgotten’ as were the ‘slums’ they lived in, though the high-profile exhibition of Baker’s photos may change this and stimulate the formation of a collective memory incorporating her images.⁸

Interviewing people about Baker’s photos generated a different perspective to that offered by Blaikie.

Although Blaikie noted the continued ‘currency’ of ‘Gorbals boys’ as it circulated in various texts, his reliance on textual sources limited exploration of the particular ways that the authors and users of these texts engaged with the image. Interviews revealed intimate relationships with Baker’s photos and allowed us to scrutinise these. These intimate relationships were bound up with their mnemonic potential. Many of Baker’s photos were experienced as deeply resonant and participants were keen to adopt them.⁹ A few interviewees were familiar with Baker’s photos and, typically, self-declared fans; these included the participants who featured in the photos and those with interests in art and local history. Stephen Williamson proudly announced that Baker’s photo of him and his brothers appeared on a CD cover for the rock band, *The Jazz Devils*, in 1990. ‘The Murray sisters’ prized a copy of the photo in which they featured, signed by Baker. The relationships that the Murray sisters and Williamson brothers already had with particular photos were deepened by involvement in the Shirley Baker project as they encountered, and engaged with, public interest and new or forgotten details relating to the photos and their lives in the 1960s and 1970s. For those interviewees who were new to Baker’s photos, the photographic encounter was intense: pleasure, often amounting to joy; surprise, and sometimes shock. The sudden exposure to a visual representation of their past may partly explain the intensity of the resonance and recollection that followed. While it is understandable that intimate relationships may be forged with photos that portray people that viewers know personally, including themselves, interviewees also adopted photos featuring unknown people and streets. I now look more closely at intimate relationships with Baker’s photos and the implications for personal memory.

**Intimate Relationships: Recognition, Authenticity and Memory**

Recognition was at the heart of the intimate relationships that were forged with particular photos. There was literal recognition of a particular place or person in the photos,¹⁰ but more commonly, recognition of a likeness. ‘This could have been … ’ was a frequently cited reason why a photo was resonant with interviewees. This recognition embraced houses, streets, neighbours, family members and the self. In these instances, the likeness was perceived as so close that the difference between the original and the likeness was experienced as inconsequential.

‘This could be my dad, okay, … going to the bookies. And he would, the phrase was, put a bet
‘They could have been any street corner … where we lived there would have been more houses, … but any of these could have been our street more or less … we didn’t have as many steps on our street. But the one next door had … next street up had steps and front garden.’ (Sue Shefield)

‘And that could be any of your family, looking at that really.’ (Christine Potter)

Interviewees’ comments sometimes blurred the line between likeness and literal recognition, eliding their difference and temporarily creating the misleading impression that they knew the particular people portrayed in the photos. Kate Withington, for example, began by talking about a photo that reminded her of elderly neighbours, but then switched to talking about the women in the photos as if they were her neighbours.

KW: [pointing to Figure 2] Yes they were good friends, those two. So, I mean, obviously, I remember Granny Crane.

PT: Oh, these are the actual ladies? …

KW: No, but they remind me so much of them.

Norma Barratt commented that this same photo, ‘reminds me very much that these two women were in every street basically and in my street they were called Flo and Annie … Yes, so that’s Flo and Annie’.

Recognition of likeness – ‘could have been’ – was highly valued and often given as much status as literal recognition. Despite this, authenticity was fundamental to a photo’s mnemonic power. Authenticity depended on a realist understanding of the image, in other words, that Baker’s photos documented what was in front of the camera when she pressed the button. It also rested on participants’ trust that Baker was sincere and that she did not seek to create misleading impressions of people and place. While a fixed relationship between the subject and the image was key to this particular understanding of authenticity, in the context of remembering, the image could be unfixed from its subject and transferred to someone or someplace else. Memories were valid even though they were stimulated by likeness rather than a literal representation. The likeness could stand in – be a proxy – for the actual person or place and elicit memory responses in a similar way to representations of the particular people and places being discussed. This transference was only possible because the image was regarded simultaneously as authentic and a good likeness. Feeling assured of authenticity, people opened themselves up to remembering; it was as if they needed this assurance in order to make personal connections. The context of the interviews – linked to a public exhibition in a prestigious gallery – enhanced these, often intense, engagements by culturally sanctioning Baker’s ‘authentic’ images and conferring legitimacy on interviewees’ recollections.

Baker’s photos were perceived as providing a window on to the past. Through ‘recognition’ of places and
local people, facilitated partly by belief in the authenticity of the images, participants felt encouraged to remember in vivid detail. A sense of familiarity empowered interviewees to explain what they saw in the photos, to animate the subjects of the photos and hypothesise about their actions, motivations, thoughts; it was as if the interviewees knew them. This identification and the narratives that followed exposed deeply embedded autobiographical and historical knowledge, as illustrated by Geoff Knight’s account.

all the women looked the same. They all had the cardigan on, they all wore a pinafore. The hair was usually either waved or in curls with a headscarf on perhaps in preparation for going out in the evening with the husband, to the local public house. A lot of them wore slippers, just like this lady here.

… I think that’s just a daytime shot of perhaps, a woman that’s come out of the back door of a house, I think, oh no she hasn’t got a, I thought she might have a purse in her hand there, possibly heading to the local corner shop. It was only round the corner. There was no need to dress up for it. So she’s got her house slippers on. She’s got her pinnie on, and her pinafore dress and a cardigan, she’s just off to the local shop for something.

Remembered personal experience was also deployed by Geoff to explain children’s play, leading to a graphic instance of identification as he shifted from talking about children in general to what he would have done as a boy (see Figure 3).

… coming across something like that [a canal bridge], as a young child, it would be seen as a challenge, and you’ve got to climb it … If you see a lamppost you’ve got to climb it, if you see a bridge you’ve got to climb it. If you see a wall, you’ve got to climb it. And it was an inbuilt instinct to do this sort of thing. And that’s just the sort of thing I’d have done. If I’d have seen that bridge, I would have been up on the parapet, and I’d have been swinging from the arches.
‘Place memories’ are renowned for their ‘immediacy and potency’ (Pascoe 2011: 19; Chawla 1992); in this instance, they were evoked powerfully through engagement with photos and literal recognition or recognition of likeness. Participants recalled the ‘tours’ (De Certeau 1984) and ‘rituals’ (Fortier 1999) that made the streets and their residents meaningful. This mnemonic potency facilitated re-enactments of belonging/identification to place. Leach (2005) argues that identification with place is based on the repetitive performance of modes of perception, what he calls ‘mirroring’ between the subject and environment over time: a fusing of self and other through processes of projection and introjection. Drawing on Christian Metz and Walter Benjamin, Leach describes projection as where ‘the environment is a screen on to which we project our own meanings, and into which we read ourselves’ (p.305), while introjection is where, ‘over a period of time the sensory impulses [our visual and tactile experiences of an environment] leave their mark, traces of their reception’ (p. 306). The outcome of these processes is that, ‘In moments of identification we effectively see ourselves in objects with which we have become familiar. At the same time we have introjected them into ourselves’ (p. 306). I suggest that mirroring was enacted, and identification with place rediscovered, via the memory response that occurred when participants engaged with Baker’s photos. Sue Sheffield spoke for many when she pointed to details of people and place in a selection of photos and explained how they made her feel, ‘I feel like I could be sat on there [doorstep]. I could be the one taking the picture of them [teenagers]. I would be that little girl playing there or this one sat on the … It’s how we grew up’. Whether literal or likeness, participants described being transported into the spaces depicted and feeling they belonged: they quickly colonised them (projection), making them meaningful places; they also claimed and absorbed them (introjection). As Sue expressed it, ‘it’s like I’m part of that. That’s part of us’.

It is a truism that personal photos are made principally to aid remembering: their mnemonic potential is often key to their personal value and the relationships forged with them. The Shirley Baker project revealed that the mnemonic power of documentary photography could also foster intimate relationships: likeness photos were often accepted as surrogates for personal ones. When Lesley Hampson identified her dad’s likeness in a photo, the interviewer asked her whether it mattered that this was not a personal photo. Lesley was adamant that it did not: ‘No, not at all, definitely. It evokes lots of memories. It doesn’t matter one bit, no’. As memory material, Baker’s photo worked for Lesley in the same way as a personal one. Whether or not Lesley already had a photo of her dad, she grasped an opportunity for a new connection and conduit for remembering him. Lesley did not ‘recognise’ all features of Baker’s portrait, but this did not prevent her from embracing it: ‘I don’t ever remember my dad sitting on a chair, in the street, at all. But I remember him walking around with a fag, definitely’.

Geoff Knight had some photos of his childhood, but these were not accorded greater status than Baker’s photos: they were equally evocative. The quality of the photos may be a contributing factor. Baker’s professional photos were aesthetically appealing and freshly printed in high definition on quality glossy paper. They contrasted starkly with Geoff’s faded personal pictures that lacked clarity and animation. Recognisable and authentic content was another reason Baker’s photos rated highly for Geoff. Referring to old family photos, Geoff commented, ‘That’s me on Thompson Street, with my aunt, that’s my mum’s sister’.

LF: So, how is it different looking at these, than looking at Shirley Baker’s photographs, do you think?

GK: No different.

LF: No different, really?

GK: No different …

LF: Emotionally, is it the same for you?

GK: Yeah. I can remember that street like it was yesterday. I mean, there’s a distance of 50 odd years there, in time, but I can remember it just like yesterday. If you drop me back in that street, in a time machine, I could take you anywhere from there.

For Geoff, places were more meaningful and evocative than people in both his personal photos and Shirley Baker’s. This prioritisation may be because people change so much over a life time that representations of their appearance at any one point may be less evocative than the relatively static places (at least prior to their demolition) that were the context, focus and material of their daily lives. Indeed, Geoff talked animatedly about the play and adventure that characterised his experience of place. It is also likely that Baker’s photos facilitated a hitherto rare opportunity to re-enact belonging to place.

Baker’s photos, by virtue of recognition (literal and likeness) and trust in the authenticity of the image, prompted memory. The memory potency led to the forging of strong attachments to Baker’s photos, which
was why they could 'stand in for', and 'stand alongside', personal snaps. Their utility as memory materials was not simply that they prompted remembering, including re-enactment of belonging in place, but that they did important work for participants by facilitating the composition of narratives about the self, past and present.

**Composing Accounts of the Past**

Shirley Baker’s photos were perceived as representing life as it was (‘that’s how we lived’ – a realist reading) and as recalled by the interviewee (‘it brings it all back’). Interviewees were deeply invested in approaching images and memories in a realist manner as they did important work; these were the raw materials for constructing autobiography, crafting identities and articulating belonging. To understand how this ‘work’ was achieved, we need to examine how people remember with photos.

Explaining how photos contribute to memory, it is helpful to distinguish between a ‘memory response’ to looking at an image – one that produces memory fragments, facts, meanings, often including vivid recollections of sights, sounds, smells and touch – and the ‘processing’ of recalled matter (Tinkler 2011). Processing is what oral historians describe as ‘composure’ (Dawson 1994), and it has two dimensions. First, the composition of an account, as recalled matter is assessed in terms of relevance and importance, interpreted and then arranged. Various factors shape composition, including current personal and social contexts, the interview context (which here includes looking at photos), audience and the cultural resources and frameworks available to understand experiences. Second, people strive for ‘composure’, or ‘psychic comfort’, when they articulate memories to themselves and others. Both senses of composure rely on memories making sense. Looking at photos sometimes bolster the process of memory composure in that their content seems consistent with the interviewee’s recollections and can be used as visual evidence of them, or they support a particular version of the past that they are comfortable with; it can also disrupt it when the memories elicited are inconsistent with the content of the image (Tinkler 2013, 187).

Additionally, where public photos are already established and enmeshed within discourse, they can provide a culturally recognisable way of knowing/ framing the past. Cultural frameworks are important in the process of crafting narratives that are conceivable and convincing to self and others. As Abrams (2010: 66, 90) explains, ‘A comfortable telling is often one where the story told coheres with larger cultural understandings’; ‘Like a landscape painting, we place ourselves as a speck on a much larger canvass’, creating a ‘mingling of public and personal memory’. Describing the difficulty of composing and recounting memories when these lack cultural frames and sanction, Summerfield (2004) coined the term ‘discomposure’.

In our project, the gallery/exhibition context aided composure because it signalled public acknowledgement of interviewees’ memories and enhanced the status of Baker’s photos as cultural frameworks and resources for remembering. While Baker’s photos bolstered composure – important work in itself – the kinds of stories that were composed were also significant. The themes of childhood and place are not the focus of this discussion, but they are relevant to understanding the mnemonic importance of Baker’s photos and relationships forged with them. Childhood is typically important in the construction of autobiography and identity. Engagement with Baker’s photos helped interviewees represent and mobilise their childhood experiences autobiographically. Place is also fundamental to our sense of self (Leach 2005, 141) and Baker’s photos played an important role in this regard too. As already noted, memories of place (memory responses) facilitated re-enactments of belonging; Baker’s photos also facilitated the processing of this recalled matter. I now look at three interrelated ways that Baker’s photos bolstered composure: authentication, intelligibility, insight.

**Authentication**

Baker’s photos bolstered composure by supporting participants’ recollections. Accounts of play and place were particularly rich. The seemingly neat fit between participants’ memories and Baker’s images could suggest that the images colonised memory (ie were overly suggestive), but a reductionist reading is unfounded. Baker’s photos undoubtedly influenced what was most readily recalled and discussed, but the priority given to street life in the interviews is indicative of its status in urban working-class communities of this period, particularly for children (Roberts 1995, Dudgeon, P. with Cox, J. 200611; Cowman 2017). Moreover, street life was relatively comfortable and uncomplicated memory terrain; several participants suggested that life ‘behind doors’ could generate ambivalent or unpleasant memories, for example of domestic abuse, overcrowding and extreme deprivation. The focus on street life was also entangled with current debates about ‘a loss of community’ and
about children’s pastimes as passive and risk-averse (Read 2011); these drew attention to particular aspects of Baker’s photos and prompted engagement with these.

Relief surfaced in John Bell’s account when he discovered that his memories were validated by Baker’s photos. John’s mother had some personal photos of the street he grew up in, but John felt that he lacked evidence of its context – the broader neighbourhood and its community – until he recognised his street in two of Shirley’s photos, both featuring Glen playing with children outside the corner shop that he owned. John could name all the children in these two photos, and identify himself and his brother as small figures in the background of one. John seamlessly connected his personal photos with Baker’s.

If we go to my mum’s and look at photographs, and it’s all from down our end of the street and outside our house, so you don’t get an idea of how big the street is and what it looked like, so all of that when I was a kid growing up was forgotten. I had memories of it and all that, and then when I saw Shirley Baker’s photograph there, it just … I wasn’t lying to myself. You know like sometimes your memories, you make it up in your mind how it looked, and then that just confirmed it. The picture was there. And I played at this end of the street, and now there’s a photograph showing that end of the street, and Glen’s shop.’

For John, Baker’s photos were more trustworthy than his memory; they authenticated his recollections. Baker’s photos now stand alongside Bell’s personal ones as surrogates for family snaps that were never taken.

Baker’s photos also contributed to the construction of memory and personal histories indirectly by legitimating participants’ own photos (these were, however, scarce). Personal photos were enhanced and given greater status by virtue of their likeness to Baker’s photos; the latter became a benchmark for authentic representation. Norma Barratt introduced her personal photos as if they could have been taken by Baker. This was not an aesthetic comparison: ‘I don’t by any stretch of the imagination think that any of my photos are anything like Shirley Baker’s; the likeness was in the subject matter.

So my other photos which I have to show you are not Shirley Baker’s, but they certainly could be. I’ve got women with their arms folded with their carpet slippers on watching the children …

I know it’s very faded but they just look like people that Shirley Baker would photograph, don’t they, with their arms folded and the dog on the picture and the children.

These are all my dad and his friends going out, so they’re great photos not to have lost, aren’t they, and to have kept. They’re like Shirley Baker shots, aren’t they?

Pointing to one photo, Norma commented – ‘I actually look like a Shirley Baker kid’. But what did this mean? Norma is a long-time fan of Baker’s work, having encountered it in 2001 when working at the Lowry. For Norma, Baker’s work is both an authentic representation of the social and physical terrain of her childhood, and an artistic one on par with the work of Lowry.

Baker’s photos bestowed authority on personal representation and established Norma’s childhood portrait as authentic in a way that was culturally recognisable. To ‘look like a Shirley Baker kid’ was to achieve recognition historically and culturally; to be part of an aesthetically appealing, and potentially radical, visual history of Salford and of an emerging cultural framework that validated Norma’s photos, memories and her composition of self. On a personal level, Norma seems to have been flattered that she had been the kind of little girl that Baker, an artist and documentary photographer, would have chosen as a photographic subject. It is significant that personal photos were unable to validate in the same way as Baker’s images. Norma’s response points to the widespread tendency to see amateur photos as banal and as culturally unimportant (Spence and Holland 1991). It is only recently that scholars have begun to take amateur photographs seriously and it is unsurprising that Norma’s valuation of her own photos is fragile. Arising from their newly-acquired status in Norma’s estimation, her personal photos now have greater value for her as autobiographical resources.

Intelligibility

Baker’s photos also helped participants make their memories intelligible to others. Photos can be important resources for the visualisation of experiences that are difficult to convey in words. In light of dramatic changes since 1980 in the localities participants grew up in, Baker’s photos were often perceived as valued illustration, particularly of ways of life that are alien to many people, especially younger generations. The personal value of Baker’s photos – whether they afforded literal or likeness recognition – was amplified by their evidential status and the lack of
cultural frameworks for talking about childhood in disadvantaged, northern, inner-city communities in Britain in the 1960s and 1970s. Many participants mentioned that it was difficult to recount stories about their childhood because these lacked cultural recognition and there were few personal photos that seemingly evidenced their experiences; they eagerly embraced Baker’s photos as evidence and explanation.

Poverty can be hard to describe to those who have not experienced it, especially when the speaker is wary of seeming to exaggerate. As Malcolm Metcalf explained, Baker’s photos captured a ‘disappearing world’ and a level of quotidian poverty in Manchester and Salford, and Britain more widely, that is now rare to see:

one of the great difficulties I’ve had, in my life, is almost describing this old Hanky Park to people. And for example, just recently, me ex-wife, who I’m great friends with, she knew that I grew up in some poverty, but I showed her one of my books, I’ve got all of Shirley Baker’s books, and I said, look at these, and she was looking at them. And I said, that’s where I grew up. And she was amazed. She said, I didn’t know it was this kind of poverty.

‘This kind of poverty’ was written on the body through dirt and clothing, and in housing and the everyday environment. Photos are, however, polysemic and their evidential status is determined partly by how their meanings are already constituted in dominant discourse or by other types of contextual framing. When participants mobilised Baker’s images in their recollections, they implied or explicitly offered interpretations of them. Images of grubby children wandering the streets could be interpreted as evidence of poverty; participants embraced this interpretation, but also insisted that dirt was a sign of adventure and fun. The photos could also be read as evidence of parental neglect when viewed through the lens of contemporary discourses around good parenting (Kehily 2010). Participants countered this, stressing the pleasurable freedom they experienced as children, though typically watched over by local women, and the valued qualities it fostered (independence, self-reliance). They insisted on us noting the poverty they grew up in, but not being blinkered by it.

For those who did not have personal photos of their youth, recognition of likeness sometimes facilitated composure by providing an avatar that could stand in for them, making their child-self intelligible and more credible. Psychoanalytic theory is relevant here. As Leach (2005, 303) explains, identification is ‘always speculative, ‘always a question of recognising – or misrecognising – the self in the other’. John Kerwin recognised his likeness in several of Baker’s photos and these images became props in his account of childhood. Describing a photo of boys playing on a bridge (see Figure 3), John noted:

when I first saw this photograph I thought the kid that was kind of reaching out across the spa at the top, I thought that was me. He’s about the right age, and the little gang of lads that are with him look very reminiscent of the little gang I played around with.

Later, John talked about football and again found his likeness in Baker’s photos. This aided composure of a narrative about childhood, but was also mobilised to convey that his currently ageing body was once lithe and agile; being ‘stick thin’ was a recurring theme in John’s account of his boyhood. Typical of many interviewees, John began by identifying with the likeness, before adopting the figure to describe himself, almost as if he were in the picture.

... when I was out with my mates playing football or riding a bike or running I used to play on bits of waste ground or patches of ground like these kids here. In fact, the guy in the dark hair and the pullover could be me. It looks like me. It looks exactly like I was at the time. It’s not, but it looks very much like me. I was throwing myself around, I was stick thin, I could jump around and leap around.

Insight

Looking at Baker’s photos afforded new ways to make sense of – compose – recollections. Studying Baker’s photos Christine Potter was struck by the realisation of how hard life was for her mother and other women.

You’re looking at these, and you realise how much they must have struggled. Some of the ladies in these photographs, they probably weren’t that old, but it must be the way they lived their life. Just working very, very hard, you know. And that’s one of the very abiding memories of my mum.

Place was fundamental to narratives of childhood experience and while Baker’s photos stimulated memories, they also contributed to their interpretation. The context in which composure took place – the project – facilitated affirming interpretations of, and feelings about, this experience. For example, Sue Sheffield re-enacted belonging in the past, but through the sociality of the project she discovered, and felt part
of a diasporic community. This pleasant and affirming experience contributed to a positive re-enactment of belonging to place and reflection on this. Participants had not forgotten that life could be harrowing, particularly ‘behind doors’, and they commented on the injustice of their poverty and how they were regarded and treated by the council or school teachers, but Baker’s photos and the community (re)constituted through the project, maintained attention principally on an aspect of life in which children typically had good experiences – playing in the streets.

Interviewees gained new insights into themselves past and present. They often described being surprised by the extent of the poverty they endured; this was perceived as creating greater knowledge about themselves as children and who they are now. Being reminded of the fun and freedom of childhood prompted some to recalibrate personal histories, restoring memories hitherto sidelined by experience of considerable hardship and/or by a reluctance to revisit the past because of these; this enabled fresh perspectives on both child and adult selves. In an evaluation of the project, Malcolm Metcalfe explained that, ‘It helped me come to terms with, and perhaps be more honest about, a “strange” upbringing (I lost my mother when I was six),’ while Jane Duffy concluded that the project helped her to ‘understand a missing chunk of my past with some good memories’.

For some, recognition of a likeness led to intimate insights into the younger self and facilitated talk about this, as when Norma Barratt looked at a photo of a two or three year old girl, standing alone in the street, her back to the camera (see Figure 4). Earlier in the interview Norma recounted that her mum died when she was three and that she was expected to be relatively independent. The photo was important for Norma because it embodied how she remembered feeling and helped her communicate this to the interviewer. The photo also enabled Norma to view herself from a distance, both physically and biographically.

![Figure 4. Little girl. © Estate of Shirley Baker/Mary Evans Picture Library.](image-url)
I chose that [photo] purely because it’s a little girl and she’s wearing a blue dress and a pair of sandals. She’s standing with her feet astride, dress a little bit pulled up at the back, no idea what she’s looking at, nobody else on the photo but that just kind of speaks to me because it looks like, oh, that could be me standing there. ‘Right, I’m out. I’m here. What’s happening? Who’s around?’ And very much because, looking back on it, I felt like I was on my own looking after myself. I would be that big or not much bigger. So, yes, that’s just what that said to me, really.

Insight could also come from studying literal representations of the self. Kate Withington, one of the Murray sisters, recalled being very affected by what she learned when, in 1989, she first encountered Baker’s photo of her and her sisters. What stood out for her was the sisters’ closeness and this encouraged her to revisit her recollections: Kate was a quiet child and may have felt on the edge of sisterly sociality. Mobilising what Walter Benjamin (1931/1980) coined, ‘unconscious optics’ (what a family photo can render visible to an insider about family members and relationships), Kate examined how the sisters responded to the photographic event and what this revealed about them. She attributed her avoidance of the camera’s gaze to shyness, a result of having a lisp. In contrast, she interpreted the engagement of her sisters with the photographic gaze as evidence of their more confident and outgoing personalities.

PT: Do you remember the occasion?

KW: I don’t, really. But I remember, you see, they’re all facing into the camera in this. But I think I, because, when I first saw this, you know, I became quite reflective. And I was very, very shy, I had a terrible lisp at that age.

KW: So, you know, like my sisters, they were quite gregarious, but I always remember being very shy, a bit timid, really. So I think that’s the reason why. I probably knew it was being taken, but I didn’t want to look at the camera.

New insights about childhood tended to enrich composure, although they had the potential to disrupt it. Kate was composed in the interview. She had gleaned personally-valuable insights from looking at, and thinking about, Baker’s photos of the sisters, but her account suggests she was discomposed when she first encountered them.

**CONCLUSION**

Relationships are at the heart of this discussion of documentary photography and memory. This approach foregrounds what is often skated over, assumed or ignored in academic and lay contexts: People can have intimate relationships with documentary photos; they can be intensely meaningful and ‘stand in’ for personal photos.

Baker’s photos portrayed people and places that participants believed in and could enter and animate. As Norma Barratt explained, ‘I loved Shirley Baker’s work because it’s like our lives’; this is why she – who looked like ‘a Shirley Baker kid’ – could find her place in these pictures. Akin to the mirroring process described by Leach (2005), participants claimed ownership of the images and absorbed them into an understanding of the self; as Sue Sheffield put it, ‘I’m part of that. That’s part of us’. In light of these reactions, it is unsurprising that Baker’s photos were adopted by participants. These intimate relationships relied on the mnemonic potency of Baker’s photos. Through recognition – literal and likeness – and belief in the authenticity of the images, Baker’s photos stimulated memory responses. They also facilitated the composure of recalled matter into accounts that were credible and intelligible, and which sometimes enabled fresh insights into the past and present. Participants could mobilise their memories to construct autobiographical accounts, identity and belonging. The importance of this mnemonic work was heightened for participants because, given the paucity of graphic reminders of the terrain of their youth, Baker’s images provided a now rare opportunity to identify with a childhood self and to re-enact belonging to the places of childhood.

Arising from the intensity of the mnemonic experience, participants were deeply moved and empowered by Baker’s photos. There was potential to discompose participants and obstruct the forging of intimate relationships with Baker’s photos, but this did not materialise. The mnemonic experience was universally welcomed, even if poignant. The contexts of remembering were very important; participants discovered a diasporic community that worked with Baker’s photos to affirm their past. Norma Barratt and John Kerwin expressed affection for the image-children that ‘stood in’ for them, and most participants expressed deep gratitude to Baker: ‘we’re very grateful for what she [Baker] did, you know: that she caught it, in many ways’ (Malcolm Metcalf). They also valued the project for facilitating memory work and affording
them an opportunity to make Baker’s photos intelligible to others. The personal memories that emerged from the encounter with Shirley Baker’s photos were inflected, and given colour, by the images. In turn, the images are now infused, especially for the participants, with the multitude of memories and explanations they elicited. As Penny Summerfield (2004) explains with reference to oral history, a cultural circuit operates whereby public discourses inform private understandings, and personal experiences inform and reshape public discourses. In the process of mobilising Baker’s images, participants contributed their memories and meanings to them. These narrations were incorporated into an audio-guide accompanying the exhibition and they now inform public discourse on Baker’s photos and, more generally, on poverty and childhood in post-war Salford and Manchester.

NOTES

[1] Definitions of ‘documentary’ photography are contested, see Price (2000).
[2] Baker did not romanticise the areas she photographed (Streets & Spaces: 4–5). She saw adults as ‘miserable’ with their living conditions, but noted that ‘to the children it was a giant adventure playground’. These perspectives are conveyed in her photos.
[3] The work of other, mainly male photographers of London street life, notably Roger Mayne and Nigel Henderson, has been more prominent, see Moran (2012), Brooke (2014).
[4] The Shirley Baker oral history project was funded by a University of Manchester ESRC Impact Acceleration Award, 2016–17. Interviewers were: curator, Anna Douglas; University of Manchester sociologists, Laura Fenton and Penny Tinkler. Anna Douglas was subsequently awarded funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund to create an audio guide relating to the exhibition and to develop further public engagement activities.
[5] Initially archived in the Greater Manchester Country Records Office, now in Manchester’s Central Library.
[6] The Jazz Devils, ‘What In the World’, CD cover, 1990; His Latest Fame, ‘Londonderry Road’, 7 inch vinyl, indie rock, 1989; Greater Manchester Punk 1977–87, punk rock, vinyl cover, 2015. Source: Discogs.com.
[7] Black and white photography was Baker’s preferred medium; she was disappointed with her brief experiment with colour photography in 1965. The exhibition featured black and white photos and hitherto unseen colour prints.
[8] Manchester Art Gallery recorded 217, 000 visitors while the Baker exhibition was on, including a ‘new demographic’ from local communities that do not typically visit public galleries; most people saw the Baker exhibition. Over 17,000 people listened to the accompanying audio guide. The exhibition at the Photographer’s Gallery, London, attracted 48,000 visitors.
[9] We acknowledge that this is partly because our interviewees are self-selected fans of Baker’s photos, with an interest in their childhood experiences. People who did not want to be reminded of this time in their lives probably avoided the exhibition.
[10] Nine participants recognised themselves.
[11] This biography of romantic novelist, Josephine Cox, features Shirley Baker’s photos on the front cover and inside.
[12] The film, Kes, and Lowry’s paintings were other examples referred to by a couple of interviewees. Participants did not see their childhood in terms of other, also earlier, documentary photos of children.
[13] On other, and contested, meanings of children’s street play, see Highmore (2013), Read (2011).
[14] Conveyed in interviews and evaluation feedback.

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