Picturing commuting: photovoice and seeking well-being in everyday travel

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Abstract
We used participant-produced photography to investigate everyday commuting practices in Cambridge, UK. Photovoice served as an observational method for producing ethnographically rich data. A total of 19 participants produced over 500 photos about their journeys to and from work and took part in photo-elicitation interviews. Three themes emerged. First, many images depicted ‘well-being’ in commuting, for example, beautiful landscapes. Second, during elicitation interviews, participants described positive images that they intended but failed to capture in photos. Third, those participants who did not depict well-being described a lack of choice in their commuting, while those who acknowledged well-being seemed to do so in order to make practices of commuting meaningful and habitable. While our interpretations of photos of well-being could be subject to a methodological fallacy relating to a preference for positive over negative images in lay photography, we nonetheless suggest that the rich visual and oral narratives indicate a ‘real’ experience, albeit elicited through the photovoice.

Keywords
active travel, commuting, credibility, ethnography, photovoice, well-being

Introduction
Qualitative researchers, in particular ethnographers in sociology, social geography and social anthropology, have recently begun to explore travel as a research topic in more detail, often within a framework of mobility and its impact on society (Freudendal-Pedersen,
While quantitative research has focused on quantifying associations between travel behaviour and such explanatory factors as supportive environments (Panter and Jones, 2010; Saelens and Handy, 2008) or habit strength (De Bruijn et al., 2009; Verplanken et al., 1997), qualitative research explores the experience of travel and transport and the meaning people give to it (Guell et al., 2012; Pooley et al., 2011). In their ethnography of walking as ‘culture from the ground’, Ingold and Vergunst (2006) suggest that walking with (and talking to) informants is often part of the everyday participant observational practice of anthropologists. A variety of ethnographies have investigated walking in different settings (urban Tokyo or Aberdeen, a forest in Malaysia), following varied intentions (walking as a tourist, a pilgrim, a schoolchild) and experiences (walking as a social or sensual experience; Ingold and Vergunst, 2008). Other ethnographies have considered how leisure cyclists negotiate transport infrastructure and engage in a practice of sociability (Aldred and Jungnickel, 2012) and how travel is a social practice influenced by family and social expectations (Pooley et al., 2011). Sociality in travel has also been investigated in train travel (Bissell, 2009; Watts, 2008), while an ethnography on bus travel has explored how expectations of public conduct can challenge and foster intercultural relations (Wilson, 2011). Qualitative studies have also investigated the notion of ‘culture’ or ‘identity’ in car driving (Edensor, 2004; Sheller, 2004) and cycling (Aldred, 2010).

With this new qualitative research interest comes the methodological challenge of capturing mobility with our available research tools (Büscher et al., 2011). In interviews, participants are asked to recall routine and mundane journeys but might focus on out-of-the-ordinary experiences. Participant observation of commutes, the key method for exploring taken-for-granted activities, might not be acceptable on stressful and time-constrained journeys, or even feasible, for example, while cycling along narrow cycleways. This conundrum of capturing mobility ethnographically can be addressed with ‘walk-along interviews’ (Pooley et al., 2011), or ‘cycle-alongs’ (Fincham et al., 2009). Alternatively, ‘virtual’ participant observation can be conducted using film or photography (Fincham, 2006; Pink, 2006). Using participant-produced photography as a non-participatory observational method, for example, might enable researchers to extend ‘ethnographic borders [ … ] through the generation of “artful” emic perspectives that illuminate the complexities of how, why, and under what conditions cultural norms might be followed, redefined, and/or explicitly rejected’ (Oliffe and Bottorff, 2007: 856). These new avenues of qualitative exploration certainly invite both an interrogation of the use of alternative methods and a theoretical reflection on their analytical product.

This study forms part of a larger research project, the Commuting and Health in Cambridge study, that combined the quantitative assessment of travel behaviour and physical activity using questionnaires, household travel diaries, physical activity monitors and Global Positioning System (GPS) receivers with qualitative examination of attitudes, perceptions and context regarding the commuting patterns of adults travelling to work in Cambridge, United Kingdom (Ogilvie et al., 2010). The aim of the photo-voice sub-study was to explore commuting ethnographically, and to go beyond a standard interview-based methodology. In order to observe busy mobile lives, we chose to use participant-produced photos, often called photo-elicitation or photovoice, as a ‘quasi’-participant-observatory method. ‘Photo-elicitation’ refers to the use of photos as an interview guide. We frame this study in its use of ‘photovoice’ that emphasizes that
photos are produced by the participants and provide data in their own right. Both are increasingly popular methods in health research (Cannuscio et al., 2009; Harper, 2002), often to address sensitive issues such as experiences with life-threatening illness, and to help document and thus verbalise severe bodily experiences (Frith and Harcourt, 2007; Radley and Taylor, 2003). Photography is also often used in research with children or adolescents to establish rapport and enable interaction in a more creative or less authoritative setting than is typical in one-on-one interviews (Allen, 2011; Darbyshire et al., 2005; Wang and Pies, 2004). Previous publications reporting the use of this relatively new qualitative data collection tool include discussion about some of the methodological procedures and pitfalls, to which we aim to add an analytical dimension. Qualitative researchers agree that interview data are analysed differently to focus group or observational data (Kidd and Parshall, 2000). The use of photographic data requires similar analytical scrutiny, which might also contribute to a critique of more established methods.

In this article, we address the following questions: can photovoice produce ethno-graphically rich data, and if so, how should these data be treated analytically? The latter question particularly arose as participants produced different narratives using photovoice from those elicited in their initial interviews, the former involving much more positive accounts of ‘well-being’ in commuting (e.g. enjoying scenery or relaxation). Can the participants’ visual narratives produce a kind of participant observation of commuting experiences, or do the participant-produced photos simply represent easy photo opportunities? Their depiction of commuting experiences serves as an analytical lens through which we explore the representation of the method of photovoice as ethnography. In other words, we ask about the validity – or (to use a more social constructivist term) ‘credibility’ – of the data: whether participants’ stories and images document actual experiences – or at least aspirations – of Cambridge commuters, or merely reflect a public discourse of aspiring to content lives despite everyday adversities.

**Methods**

*Research design*

We used a range of qualitative social research methods in this study in order to arrive analytically at an ethnographically ‘thick description’ of individual everyday commuting experiences (Geertz, 1973). Initially, 50 semi-structured interviews were conducted with members of the larger Commuting and Health in Cambridge study cohort between June 2009 and September 2010 (Guell et al., 2012). They were asked about their typical commute to work, routes, modes of transport and time and other factors shaping their commutes. At the end of the semi-structured interview, all interview participants were asked whether they would be interested in taking photos about their commutes. A total of 19 participants (with three of their children) chose to take part in this photo project, and we conducted their subsequent photo-elicitation interviews between May and September 2010. We chose participant-produced photography for several reasons. In its use as photo-elicitation, it would allow us to meet the busy participants for a follow-up interview that could be more participant driven and unstructured. Changes in the participants’
lives could thus be captured, and participants would have the opportunity to place emphasis on special aspects of their experience and raise issues that were not anticipated by the researcher. Most importantly, we chose it in its function as photovoice, using the photos as data in their own right. Both the photos and the follow-up interviews provide a more nuanced and richer data set and allow for an ethnographic analysis beyond content analysis of singular interview transcripts. All interviews in this study lasted between 20 and 60 minutes and were conducted at a place of the participants’ choice, at their homes or workplaces or at the research centre. They were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim, and the transcripts were double-checked by the researchers.

Interviews and photo-elicitation interviews were complemented by detailed ethnographic field notes written by the researchers during and immediately after each interview. Ethnographic data collection also included general observation of travel practices in the local area and local public discourses around travelling, in order to further contextualize participants’ representations of travel behaviour (Atkinson et al., 2008).

Setting and participants

The setting of this study is Cambridge and its hinterland in the east of England. Central Cambridge is marked by its unusual prevalence of cycling by UK standards (Aldred, 2010), with students, academics and the general population alike manoeuvring the narrow medieval cobbled streets on their bicycles. However, high housing costs in the city (which is within commuting distance of London) and the limited rural public transport options render the commuting catchment area of Cambridge a car-dependent environment. Cambridge commuters can make use of the five park-and-ride facilities – large car parks with a bus service to link to the city centre – which surround the city but often cannot escape the congestion that is present on the main roads approaching Cambridge.

Participants in the semi-structured interviews were purposefully selected to form a diverse sample according to gender, age and area of residence. Reflecting the largely middle class, White English population of Cambridge, most had academic degrees. The photovoice sample comprised all interview participants who agreed to take part in this further photo study but formed a similarly diverse sample of 9 men and 10 women (plus 1 boy and 2 girls) between the ages of 5 and 61, some single and others with partners, 4 participants with children below 5 years and 4 with children between 5 and 15 years, and some caring for older people. We also gave all participants the option to undertake their photo project with others who influenced their travel decisions: one couple took separate sets of photos but chose to be interviewed together, and two mothers chose to take their photos and undertake their subsequent interviews together with their children. The photovoice sample contained a high proportion of cyclists (eight), those using a combination of driving with some walking, cycling or public transport use (eight) and car drivers (three).

Photovoice procedure

We asked the participants to take photos of one or several commuting journeys. Participants were given minimal direction, being asked simply to take some time on their
way to or from work to pause on their routine journeys and reflect consciously on activities that were often taken for granted and undertaken habitually. They could document their actual commuting journeys and aspects or experiences of the journeys that were significant to them, or an ‘ideal’ (desired) commute. Some were provided with disposable cameras, others chose to use their own digital cameras or mobile phone cameras. The follow-up elicitation interview was purely driven by the discussion of the photos. The participants sorted their photos in a particular order, usually to correspond with the stages of their usual journey; many had prepared the narrative, or purpose, of their photo story before the interview. At the end of the interview, participants drew their journey on a map; some pointed out where photos were taken on the journey. While the participants varied in their interest and inclination regarding photography, most participants were very articulate, both orally and visually. The participants produced over 500 photos. All photos were digitized, and the participants reviewed and selected the photos to be discussed and were given copies of these.

**Ethics**

We provided the participants with written and oral instructions, including an explanation of the responsibilities of taking photographs in public places. The participants retained copyright of their photos and gave separate consent for the photo component of the qualitative study and within that for the use of their photos for academic dissemination. The study was approved by the Hertfordshire Research Ethics Committee (reference numbers 08/H0311/208 and 09/H0311/116).

**Data analysis**

We conducted ethnographic analysis throughout the data collection process and drew from the multiple datasets of interview transcripts, transcripts of the photo-elicitation interviews, the photos themselves and accompanying field notes. Some participants provided written ‘memos’ with their photos, which were also analysed. Our analysis was theory driven, framing interpretations within anthropological approaches to well-being (Mathews and Izquierdo, 2009), visual anthropology (Chalfen, 1998) and social practice theories (De Certeau, 1984), and increasingly funnelling analytical findings towards three themes (Silverman, 2006). The analysis was led by C.G. as the main researcher, who, for the large part, collected and collated the variety of data. Theoretical assumptions and analytical steps were discussed and further developed with D.O. Management of the variety of data was aided by the use of NVivo 8.

**Findings**

Three issues emerged from and guided the ethnographic analysis. First, although all participants decided to depict part or all of their actual everyday commute rather than creating photovoice of ideal commutes, the most prominent narrative of the participants’ photovoice was – unexpectedly – that of ‘well-being’. All but four participants took images of beautiful landscape and tranquil nature scenes; follow-up interviews
contained stories of relaxation and ‘me-time’ in commuting. Second, many participants highlighted that their photos could not capture all of their experiences, so they added narrated images to their photovoice during these photo-elicitation interviews. Third, participants whose photos did not depict well-being seemed to lack a sense of choice in their commuting, and those who presented narratives of commuting as well-being described tactics of making their commutes habitable by acknowledging positive travel experiences.

**Visual narratives of well-being**

*Picturing well-being.* Rebecca (all names are pseudonyms) was going through the photos that she had taken about her commute. The first featured a screaming little boy on the back of her bike. The young woman laughed and explained that this was her son who did not share her enthusiasm for the daily cycle commute. She quickly flicked through the next few photos that showed some urban scenes of junctions, cycle lanes and her son’s nursery until she stopped at a set of photos of the tranquil river Cam and the green meadows she crossed on her route through Cambridge to get to her work place on the other side of town. She commented that she had tried to capture the ‘… pretty scenery because … I really enjoy my cycle to work, because after travelling about 100 metres from [my sons]’s nursery, across the river, that’s a picture from the bridge crossing the river, it’s absolutely glorious’.

This vocal exclamation of a positive side to commuting was a surprising finding. Many of the semi-structured interviews with the research participants contained commuting narratives that focused on the practicalities of time, distance, route, mode of transport and local transport facilities and infrastructure. Many raised issues concerning lack of safety for vulnerable road users, congestion for car drivers or poor public transport provision. Many joined a common current public discourse in the United Kingdom that calls on the government to provide for safe and conducive environments to support environmentally friendly activities.

In contrast, all but four of the participants’ photovocêdes and follow-up interviews added an unexpected positive perspective. Some participants pictured their enjoyment of moving through nature; others appreciated the interesting landscape or architecture, or focused on commuting as a relaxing or transitional time between home and work life. We summarized all these positive experiences under the theme of ‘well-being’. Well-being was experienced not only by those walking or cycling but also by car drivers. Maggie, who had spent her life cycling in Cambridge, going to school and university and later taking her children on the back of her bike, was now a happy car driver:

*I would say I’m much calmer now I drive and I don’t cycle. As I mentioned I was getting very stressed ... because of the behaviour of others on the road. Yeah, I think it’s important to have some sort of me-time and I actually find that works very well now I’m in the car for, well, I suppose on average an hour a day.*

This echoes some studies in transport and travel research that challenge the traditional supposition that commuting decisions are made on the grounds of finding the shortest,
quickest way from A to B. Many commuters would not want to reduce their commute to zero miles even if that were possible but prefer some transition time between home and work (Metz, 2008). Moreover, while commuting time might be conceptualized as ‘wasted time’, commuters make use of the time, getting work done or enjoying reading or listening to music in otherwise busy lives (Jain and Lyons, 2008). While these issues have often been explored using standardized survey approaches, the present study can provide an insight into how enjoyment (or stress) in commuting is experienced, or at least how it is depicted.

Rebecca’s photos (Figure 1), taken to document her cycling commute, also contained pictures of heavy urban traffic, but in the follow-up interview, she explained these images as a positive experience. She grew up in Cambridge, had always cycled and was not easily stressed or frightened when cycling:

I don’t mind it really … In a way it’s sort of, after, it’s quite nice to actually hit a bit of civilization before I get to work (laughs), wakes me up a bit and makes me pay attention.

Rebecca’s upbeat account of her commuting experience mirrors other accounts beginning to emerge in public discourse. For example, some recent mass media campaigns to promote active commuting in London have used similar imagery of happiness, such as a young, smiling woman riding her city bike with blue skies and trees in the background (Transport for London, n.d.). The imagery contrasts starkly with that of the more common (and realistic) Lycra-clad group of London bike commuters who brave the busy traffic.

**Discovering well-being.** It seems an important analytical question to ask how the task of taking photos produces such accounts of enjoyment. How valid or credible are our data? We take photos of weddings but not funerals; lay or family photography seems to be focused on pleasant, positive motifs. The visual anthropologist Chalfen (1998) suggests that amateur photographers prefer ‘smiling and awake participants … over dour, sad, crying or sleeping ones’ (p. 223). Did the participants simply find it easier to photograph beautiful landscapes rather than road hazards? The subsequent interviews might then have inevitably elicited equally positive narratives. While qualitative research is typically less concerned with ‘validity’ than quantitative research, the issue is often reframed in terms of the ‘credibility’ of qualitative methods and the data these yield (James and Busher, 2006). While triangulation of methods is often suggested as a means of ensuring valid data (Silverman, 2006), the two methods of semi-structured interviews and photo-voice used in this study clearly did not produce neatly matching data.

Some participants clearly discovered enjoyment in their commute only through the task of documenting their journeys with photos. Walter, a middle-aged man, used a park-and-ride facility to drive and then cycle to work. He did not speak about well-being at all in his first meeting with the researcher. In the initial semi-structured interview, he described the practicalities of his commute, the journey, the timing, that he liked the park-and-ride facilities and getting a bit of exercise and that he would cycle twice a week all the way, but the long journey would be too strenuous on his knees. He also complained that facilities and infrastructure still needed to improve but
conceded that there were ‘natural’ barriers to converting Cambridge and its medieval street layout into a more cycle-friendly city.

Walter’s photos and follow-up interview had a very different focus and provided the opportunity to address a more phenomenological perspective on commuting. The photos were not so much about why he cycled, but the experience of his everyday commute. He started his photovoice account with his car and the radio in his car, explaining about his daily routine of listening to a specific programme: ‘I’m a convert, it’s something that I have to listen to, but I won’t listen to it if I’m at home … , yeah, it’s nice to

Figure 1. Rebecca depicting positive environments in two different ways: ‘pretty scenery’ and ‘a bit of civilization’.
have that'. The majority of photos were about his cycling route, showing quiet roads through leafy university property, and cycle paths through lush parkland. He described the photos:

All along my route is … it’s all green, there are huge houses with nice gardens and I’ve started to choose the route now for its pleasantness at the start of the morning … There’s a rabbit, and there was, I couldn’t get it on both of them, a pigeon sitting up here at the same time.

These very different, more emotional, narrations of commuting might have been triggered by the assignment of a commuting photo project, and the conversation introducing this part of the study to him. The photography – from preparing for the task to executing it and finally reflecting on it – privileged a new perspective on his commuting experience. He started the photo-interview by saying: ‘At the end of our last conversation, I realized how much being and seeing nature and doing that sort of thing [is part of my commute]’. Indeed, when introduced to photovoice, he had mentioned that he thought that in the 3 years of cycling to work, he had become more ‘connected to the environment’ – aware of his surroundings and the nature he cycles through.

However, while the photos might have prompted a focus on nature and the aesthetics of his journey, his depiction of his enjoyment listening to the radio during the car journey seems equally important within his narrative. We suggest that the two different interviews demonstrate that the photos enabled him to address an element of the everyday experience of commuting that was not captured in the initial discussion of route and mode choice, timing and safety. This also suggests that Walter’s photography represents more than an amateur photographer’s preference for a ‘pretty picture’. The vivid and varied accounts presented by the participants suggest that photovoice provided the opportunity to reflect on more pleasant experiences in mundane daily practices and, therefore, to ‘discover’ positive experiences on their daily commutes. The interview and subsequent photos and photo-interview gave two partial accounts of Walter’s experience. Triangulation in ethnography does not expect to arrive at consistent narratives (Cho and Trent, 2006), but credibility in ethnographic research stems from its recognition that accounts of social phenomena are always multiple and our methods can only grasp ‘partial connections’ (Strathern, 2004).

Picturing varied perspectives. In cases where both interviews featured positive aspects of commuting, the photos brought out a new perspective. Julia, a middle-aged commuter, used the initial interview to talk about her choice to take the bus to work. She talked about the annoyances of driving, the dangerous road, busy traffic and the costs of parking and petrol. In contrast, on the bus, she enjoyed winding down after work, reading a book or chatting with people.

The second photo-interview focused on a different kind of enjoyment. Although there were some photos about the bus route and of a page of the novel she was reading on the bus, many photos were about the landscape, and she explained about the beauty of the changing seasons, colours and nature. With the camera, Julia seemed to have adjusted her perspective on her commute from an inward (me-time, reading, socializing) to an outward gaze (nature, the aesthetics of her journey). She explained her photos:
I’m sitting upstairs on the bus here and it’s another picture of more fields … and actually one of the ladies on the bus she pointed out … [an] absolutely beautiful field of poppies.

Although the narratives in the two interviews differed, they remained consistent in that they highlighted the relaxation aspect of her bus journey. In fact, the quote above shows that it is part of the sociality on this shared bus experience – ‘one of the ladies pointed out’ – to discuss and enjoy the passing landscape together.

**Oral narratives of absent images**

*Absent motifs.* Many participants highlighted the limitations of documenting everyday experience and practice with photos. As an observational method, it produces snapshots of social lives, capturing movement and life in static images, taken at a brief moment in time (Bowker and Leigh Star, 2000). Walter described his struggle with these shortcomings. He tried to represent the wildlife he frequently witnessed on his cycle journey to work, but on the day he decided to take the photos, this wildlife was absent. A pigeon on a lamppost – a very urban scene – had to stand in: ‘[T]here were so many pigeons … that was it for the day. I assure you there are green and white woodpeckers and loads of other hawks and roe deer, pheasants, depending on the time of the year around …’ (Figure 2).

Returning to our analytical question of credibility – as to whether these visual narratives of commuting experiences can be reduced to a methodological fallacy, the heightened attention for ‘Kodak moments’ – how do these non-images fit into this? Many participants mentioned images that they could not capture in the photos, for example, seasonal changes. Maggie brought along a set of old photos that she had stored on her computer and discovered when processing her commuting photovoice: ‘And I had some

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**Figure 2.** Walter depicting ‘wildlife’.
on the computer that were snow so I thought okay, … [t]he fact that the pavements are never cleared is a big problem as well’.

Julia also talked about the unpicted seasons that add to the variation in her journey: ‘What you can’t see on that photograph is that what grows on the field changes so every year they grow something different’. As briefly discussed in the Methods section, it was anticipated that the photos and subsequent interviews could help to follow participants over a greater length of time instead of meeting them only once for a single interview. Indeed, the two interviews and the images produced in between could often highlight the fluent and changeable nature of everyday lives in which daily practices are shaped by the seasons, or by when people move house or change job or children grow and change school. The photos acted as prompts of memories of space and place, and acted as a representation of something else. However, the photo itself could only produce a static reminder that these lives are in constant flux, and the participants had to fill these visual gaps with their explanations.

Failing technology. Some participants also struggled with the rather basic technology of a disposable camera without a zoom, or to capture fast moving objects that the bus passed too quickly (another problem of ‘capturing mobility’). Deborah, a car driver close to retirement age, was challenged by capturing the haphazard moments that made her commute interesting. Deborah mainly took photos of traffic signs and other nuisances on her route to work. However, she also derived pleasure from her daily routines and encounters on the road but struggled to capture these:

I was stuck in a wonderful traffic jam, it was the dusties [refuse collectors] one morning and oh, it was wonderful, they take hours for the wheelie bins considering it’s automated … and … I thought, oh this would make a wonderful photograph, why haven’t I got the camera?

Moreover, she emphasized that even when travelling by car, she enjoyed the environment around her, often because of, rather than despite, the traffic. She quite enjoyed the nice flowers planted on the roundabouts dotting the route on the way to work. She also explained she could hear bird song, and at night, she could see foxes and sometimes deer (from field notes). Indeed, despite the photos of traffic signs and road diversions, she was keen to say that her journey did not just involve negative experiences but that on a car journey, moments of enjoyment could not be captured in photos. And what perhaps could not be documented was that such experiences were often not only about seeing but also about hearing or tasting:

It’s quite funny when you’re in traffic jams in the summer because they have wonderful traffic jams … and everybody has their car windows open and everybody’s playing different music … I quite like that, that’s quite nice, yes.

Claudia, a newly converted everyday cyclist, brought only a few pictures to her elicitation interview. Her disposable camera had malfunctioned, but she was nonetheless happy to fill in the blanks. She explained about a self-portrait that (had it not been for a faulty flash) would have pictured her at home in her cycling gear, she
showed pictures of her route, and then filled in the missing pictures with more explanations:

Yeah, what I have taken pictures of, which obviously the ones that didn’t come out, is I had a picture of the shower room here to show that … if they didn’t have a shower here I wouldn’t be able to do it because I need to have a shower when I get in after cycling! (laughs)

Memories produced ‘would-be’ photos during the follow-up interviews and were visualized during conversations, despite not being captured by the technology itself. De Certeau (1984) argues that places are not limited to those in the tangible physical environment but can also be ‘opened up by a memory or a story’ (p. 106). It was important in this study not to treat the photos as standalone documents of experience. Rather what is pictured can have many meanings, and the subsequent photo-interviews created room to open up these spaces ‘to something else’ (De Certeau, 1984: 106). One of Walter’s photos was another picture of a large green space, tall trees and a tranquil setting. Talking about the photo, he pointed out the traffic jam in the background, ‘that’s the other people, yeah, the people queuing in their cars, most of whom I can do the same … who have the same journey time as me’. Although the lack of a zoom lens had left the traffic jam in a marginal position in the photo, its presence in the image was nonetheless important to the photographer.

**Tactics of habitable commutes**

**Absent well-being.** Most photovoices depicted either consistently positive or (in the case of four participants) only negative commuting experiences. The positive photovoices often left large parts of the route on busy roads undocumented, and only a map-drawing exercise at the end of these photo-interviews revealed the discrepancy. As explained earlier, the photos pictured partial journeys and therefore represent partial accounts of the multiplicity of people’s experiences of commuting as an everyday practice.

To understand why some participants chose to focus on this well-being aspect of their commute, the flipside of well-being – narratives of stress and distress – should be interrogated more closely (‘deviant-case analysis’ for validity, see Silverman, 2006: 297). Not experiencing well-being is demonstrated in visual and oral narratives of traffic, stress, danger and boredom, which were mentioned with reference to the same overarching constructs of health and well-being. Deborah explained, ‘No, I mean I think commuting is bad for your health because it is quite stressful and it takes up a long, a large part of your day and it’s sort of wasted time’. Frank depicted only scenes of traffic dangers he encountered as a daily cyclist:

I don’t know if you noticed this road but about 90% of the cars are breaking the speedlimit … [T]his is showing the twenty miles an hour sign lit up, it works quite nicely, so I stopped to take this.

Catherine used to drive to work to park on site using her parking permit for parents of young children. Once her child was too old for her to qualify, she started to use the park-and-ride site and cycle the last part of the journey. Her interviews and photos contained
hardly any positive aspects of her commute. The photos showed many images of the road to work (her husband had driven while she took the photos) and close-ups of the poor quality of the cycle path. Although there was a pretty photo of the path and another with a very scenic view, Catherine did not seem impressed, commenting only matter-of-factly on the rape fields and describing the journey as quite ‘countrified’ and ‘with a bit of a view’.

**Well-being as tactics.** However, even participants who chose a negative depiction of their commute as unpleasant, stressful, or even risky sometimes mentioned more positive experiences in the subsequent interview or in passing conversations. Catherine later talked about enjoying cycling her son to the local school on her days off: ‘My eldest son’s just started high school so he now cycles daily, so he’s now more of a competent confident cycler … we like to cycle’. Catherine experienced the school run and the commute to work in very different ways: perhaps the biggest difference was that the school run offered her the choice to drive, walk or cycle with her son. Conversely, she described her commute as presented to her without alternatives: the bus journey would take hours, and her parking permit had expired.

The context of experiences of well-being was described very differently by different participants. Those who did not perceive themselves to have any choice experienced their commute as much more of a drag, something that had to be done so many days a week, while those who described enjoyment in their everyday travel reported having made a conscious choice. A common narrative in cycling-prevalent Cambridge is that of ‘going back to cycling’ on some days of the week as a conscious choice, for some extra exercise or variation. De Certeau (1984) conceptualized such everyday practices of defiance as tactics: the ordinary person walking through urban spaces, transforming space and place through their way of choosing routes, ascribing meaning through memory and bodily practices of ‘walking, wandering, or “window shopping”’. While space and place might have formal, ‘official’ meanings and strategies, ordinary people use tactics to make these habitable. Equally, Cambridge commuters described positive experiences of tranquil, aesthetic or sociable journeys in spite of daily adversities of time pressures, traffic, stress, safety or boredom. We suggest that their tactics of cherishing the unusual, relaxing or happy moments made the daily routine of commuting more habitable.

Not everyone seemed to engage in their commutes in this way. Well-being seemed to require choice, or at least the perception of having choice. People using all modes of transport to get to work expressed well-being in varied ways, but they had made conscious decisions about their commute.

Greg, a daily cyclist in his 60s, explained,

> I’ve been cycling now for well over 35 years … , to me it’s the only way to travel around Cambridge it’s so easy. So that’s, it’s a choice for me and I choose to do it because I used to do a lot of sports years ago and as you get older you can’t do those sort of things … so cycling now is my main exercise if you like.

Walter talked about his conscious decision of taking things more slowly in the morning and doing pleasant things:
It’s just building nicer stuff like this into the morning part, so it isn’t just a run from A to B, and there are lots of times you screech into the work car park, slam the door, run into. … It’s about finding the best start to the day really.

Discussion and conclusion

Adding photography as a qualitative research method yielded different insights into participants’ commuting experiences from those of semi-structured interviewing. Interviews focused on the practicalities and politics of commuting, how people made decisions to fit their social lives and structural barriers that prevented them from making their preferred choices (Guell et al., 2012). We asked our participants to reflect on their journeys and produce a commuting photovoice that was not shaped by our interview questions. Most participants provided us with visual and oral narratives of positive experiences that we summarized as capturing ‘well-being’. Well-being in commuting was experienced in complex and varied, if partial, ways. Ideal commuting could be a solitary enterprise, ‘me-time’, or sociable, having made ‘bus friends’. It was about enjoying pleasant landscape, nature and wildlife; the spirituality or relaxation of commuting in these spaces and finding a buffer between home and work life. For others, it was about dodging the traffic skilfully, or enjoying urban scenes (including music emanating through car windows). Some enjoyed the exercise, flexibility and relaxation of cycling or walking, others considered the car to be the safer, less stressful or more entertaining mode of transport.

In analysing the data, we reflected on their credibility. Did participants find it easier to capture scenic views than potholes and traffic signs? Was it more convenient to capture a nature scene and, in the subsequent interview, create a narrative around this? How much can this be considered a limitation of this study? We propose that the answer is more complex. Considering the combination of two methods as a form of triangulation, the varied accounts did not discredit each other’s findings. While our analysis did not aim to question the ‘authenticity’ of our participants’ experiences, the partiality of their narratives depending on each method was a significant finding. The unexpected themes elicited in the photovoice accounts might be regarded as posing a challenge to the credibility of that method, but we would argue from an ethnographic perspective that its credibility is gained from its potential for ‘thick description’ (Cho and Trent, 2006). Not only did the participants produce the photos, but many added rich narratives of their well-being experiences during the photo-elicitation interviews, which suggests that their photovoice reflected more than simple ‘Kodak moments’. Moreover, many failed to capture all of their experiences with their cameras but narrated these instead as ‘would-be’ pictures. Perhaps more subtly, participants were picturing a socio-culturally shared discourse around seeking well-being in everyday life. We suggest that their experiences of well-being reflect an important aspect in their commuting practices. Appreciating these joyful, positive aspects can serve as a tactic to make everyday travel routines habitable; however, it seems that a sense of choice is important in experiencing if not healthy commutes, then happy commutes.

An emerging ‘anthropology of well-being’ pleads for a refocusing of social research on enjoyment and happiness (Thin, 2009). While examinations of well-being in public
health, psychology and economics increasingly aim to depart from narrow and standardizing frameworks of quality of life or mental health measures to measure positive well-being (Bech et al., 2003; Stewart-Brown et al., 2011), qualitative ethnographic research could interrogate everyday experiences of what well-being means in complex social life worlds. Mathews and Izquierdo (2009) highlight the dialectic of well-being as combining the subjective and objective. While they argue that well-being thus means both how happiness is felt and ‘what it actually is’ (p. 3), we would instead suggest that well-being should be conceptualized as both a private (subjective) experience and a public (shared) aspiration towards well-being, thus mirroring our methodological considerations around ‘picturing practice’.

We conclude that photography can produce rich observational data in addition to traditional methods of interviewing and focus groups and thereby help document and understand a more complete and complex picture of health-related experiences (Cannuscio et al., 2009; Fleury et al., 2009; Oliffe and Bottorff, 2007). As Law (2004) suggests, standard methods ‘are badly adapted to the study of the ephemeral, the indefinite and the irregular’ (p. 4). The photo component as a participatory and exploratory method of our study provided insights into commuting experiences that the interviews failed to capture (Harper, 2002) by aiding our participants to reflect on mundane and everyday experiences (Bibeau et al., 2012; Mannay, 2010). By exploring images of well-being, we aim to have contributed to this growing field of qualitative inquiry by interrogating the analytical consequences of this method – not only what is chosen to be pictured but also what is chosen to be narrated – and also by provoking some critical interrogation of our tried and tested methods, which are often taken for granted.

Acknowledgements

We thank the study participants for their cooperation and the staff of the MRC Epidemiology Unit Functional Group Team, in particular for study coordination and data collection (led by Cheryl Chapman) and data management. The views and opinions expressed herein are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the NIHR PHR programme or the Department of Health.

Funding

This study was developed and initially funded under the auspices of the Centre for Diet and Activity Research (CEDAR), a UKCRC Public Health Research Centre of Excellence. Funding from the British Heart Foundation, Economic and Social Research Council, Medical Research Council, National Institute of Health Research and the Wellcome Trust, under the auspices of the UK Clinical Research Collaboration, is gratefully acknowledged. The study is now funded by the National Institute for Health Research Public Health Research programme (project number 09/3001/06: see www.phr.nihr.ac.uk/funded_projects).

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