Power, Participation and Privilege - Methodological Lessons from Using Visual Methods in Research with Young People

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Abstract

The practice of using participatory visual methods in research with young people is one that has come under scrutiny in recent years. Many scholars have examined these practices in order to question the singular and simple notions of voice that are often represented in these accounts. Taking up the challenges laid down by these scholars, this paper attempts to critically disturb some of the claims that have been made about this supposedly inherently collaborative and empowering practice. Drawing on research with a group of privileged young people the paper will argue that there is a real need for researchers to examine the ways in which different subjectivities are performatively produced in the participatory research process - to explore the ways in which the methods themselves may work to constitute difference and to position young people as powerful or powerless in this process. A call is also made for researchers to inspect their own practice and use of visual methods, in order to recognise the particular knowledges, subjectivities and truths that are constituted as a result.

Keywords: *Participation, Power, Young People, Privilege, Social Class, Qualitative Research, Visual Methods*

Introduction

Researcher: So can I ask you why you chose to create these particular photographs for this research project?

Hetty: Well...um...to be honest I'd rather not talk about that right now... Let me tell you about something I am more interested in...

1.1 In line with a small, but growing, body of critical literature this paper seeks to question some of the grand claims that have previously been made about the collaborative and empowering nature of participatory visual research. Unlike much of the work that has been reported on before however, this paper draws on a research project that was undertaken with a privileged^[1] group of young people. The experience of using visual methods in a collaborative project with this group will be reflexively examined in the paper. A number of research moments will be drawn upon in order to explore how these young people were positioned and were able to position themselves as participants in the process. In doing so the paper seeks to examine the various positions of power that these young people were able to take up.

1.2 As the quotation presented at the beginning of this paper demonstrates, the experience of working with this privileged group of young people led me (the researcher) to ask some unique questions about power and participation. It also presented the opportunity to undertake a rather different exploration of participatory research practice. This was an exploration which brought other subjectivity categories to the foreground, demonstrating that class as well as age matters in the way in which people are able to take up visual methods and use them in research practice. It was also an exploration which focused on the methods and the researcher's subjectivities as well as those that the young people inhabited.

1.3 The paper begins with a review of the critical visual methodology literature – a body of work which has sought to question the simple and celebratory claims that some researchers have made about conducting participatory visual research with young people. Owing to the paper's focus on a research project which

involved privileged young people, this section will also briefly review the 'studying up' literature. This is a body of work that has traditionally attempted to account for the power relations and patterns of participation that exist in research projects which include members of elite groups.

1.4 The accounts that follow are reflexive explorations of several moments that occurred during the research project that the paper draws upon. These are all moments where the researcher felt relatively powerless and felt compelled to ask questions about the power that the young people's apparent privilege afforded them. Two different interpretations of these moments are given: the first a tale of powerful participation viewed through the lens of the studying up literature, the second an alternative interpretation which uses Bourdieu's (1990) insights on classed photographic practice and Skegg's (2004) understandings of 'the methods that make classed selves' as a way of seeing things differently and in order to recognise the importance of class difference in the participatory research process.

A critical review of the literature

2.1 In recent years there has been a growing interest in the use of visual methods in research with young people. In part this is due to the increasing affordability of technology and the ease with which this equipment can now be handled (Banks 2001; Guillemain and Drew 2010). But visual methods have also been taken up with some enthusiasm by researchers who are seeking to work in a collaborative fashion with young people (see for example, Thomson 2009).

2.2 This is especially true of photographic methods, where a number of researchers have taken up the photographic diary method or have sought to engage their participants in photographic feedback interviews (Mayer et al 2004; Luttrell 2010; Yates 2010; Allen 2008; Durrant et al 2011). Many of these researchers appear to have been heavily influenced by the 'photo voice' approach which was first introduced by Wang and Burris (1994, 1997) as a way of collaborating with their participants in a health care context. However, film methods have also become more commonly used (see for example, Robson 2011). Here the participatory video approach, first thought to have been introduced by Don Snowden in 1967 and further championed by authors like Lunch and Lunch (2006:1), has been heralded as an 'inclusive', 'empowering' and 'fun' method, allowing the voices of those who are not normally heard to be shared with a wider community.

2.3 The interest that has been expressed in these methods may be better understood in relation to the wider moves that have been made to increase the participation of young people in research. Although relatively old now, the 'new' sociology of childhood has often been pointed to as the source of inspiration for these more collaborative approaches. As both children and young people began to be seen as 'beings' in their own right, or as 'doing' childhood, so they also became seen as responsible and competent participants, capable of making decisions in the research projects that would impact their lives (Punch 2002; Prout 2003). It was around the turn of the 21st century that participatory visual methods, such as film, photography and drawing, were particularly favoured by youth researchers who felt that they were techniques which would draw young people into the research process, empower them and absolve some of the adult-child power relations that they had been struggling with for some time.

2.4 But just as these wider participatory practices have come under greater scrutiny in recent years (see for example, Pole *et al.* 1999; Sinclair 2004; Holland *et al.* 2010; Coppock 2011), so has the use of visual methods in collaborative research with young people. Researchers like Buckingham and de Block (2008) have been particularly vocal about the way in which voice has been theorised in these accounts. These authors acknowledge many of the arguments that have been made in favour of visual methods: that they may allow young people to direct the research interests, to acquire new skills and that they allow researchers access to the different contexts in which young people dwell. However, they also believe that these methods may be used as a more devious means for satisfying a researcher's 'will for truth':

'Ultimately it would be naive to assume that young people could simply use media as a means of 'self expression' or a way of 'making their voices heard'. The media are not neutral tools; and young people will approach media production with a repertoire and a history of past media experiences that inevitably lead them in certain directions. Furthermore, they have to learn how to use media, just as they have to learn how to write. The media do not simply present their experiences or viewpoints, they represent them using particular conventions, genres and forms of language that are by no means simply natural or spontaneous.' (Buckingham and de Block 2008:141).

2.5 Luttrell's (2010) recent journal edition focusing on participatory visual research with young people also critiqued voice in relation to visual research. Luttrell's own work in this edition adds to Buckingham and de Block's challenge, for she too questions whether there can ever be a singular, authentic voice that can be elicited using these methods. She prompts researchers to consider the 'inspecting gaze' that surrounds young people (i.e. those forms of social control which orient them in their photographic practice) and urges them to consider what we can actually see and know through these particular modes of inquiry. Luttrell's own suggestion is to use several different lenses of analysis: to explore the images produced by these young people in relation to their content, their viewing, their production and their use.

2.6 Frankham and Piper (2007) have also identified a number of problems with participatory visual methodologies: the fact that children are often seen as natural performers who are inherently interested in visual methods, that these techniques are seen to offer simple remedies for low self-esteem, and that they are often understood to easily lead to social transformation. Their main argument, however, relates to researchers' interpretations of the visual statements that young people produce in these projects. Owing to their 'mimetic quality' these authors suggest that photographs often act as 'traps', encouraging researchers to tell singular truths about them. Like Luttrell, Frankham and Piper end their article with a

challenge. These authors encourage visual researchers to move beyond naive and realist readings of images in order to interrogate the truths that are generated as a result of the mediums that were used to construct them.

2.7 Together these papers offer a critical insight into the complexity of participatory visual research; challenging the often taken-for-granted assumptions about how these images may act as pipelines to young people's interiors and offer them true empowerment. And yet, even this work has tended to solely focus on issues of age-based competency and adult/child power relations. Whilst some have briefly explored how class and gender work to position young people differently in this process (e.g. Buckingham and de Block 2008), very few have fully examined how these subjectivities are performatively constituted as part of the research process.

2.8 Given that the majority of participatory visual research has often been conducted with less privileged groups, this oversight may be understandable. Indeed, the aim of many of these visual projects has simply been to give more marginalised young people a voice - a chance to regale their experiences or express their opinions in the arenas that they normally would not have access to. Visual methodologies have been purposively selected for these projects in order to enable these young people to 'have their say' in a different way, because of the methods' lesser dependency on literacy and oracy skills. It is rarely the case that privileged young people are selected for this type of research, perhaps because they are already viewed as a very powerful group in possession of the relevant capital to make their own voices heard.

Research with elite groups

2.9 This is not to suggest that research with more privileged groups has not been undertaken or reported on. Indeed, the 'studying up' literature, as Nader (1974) somewhat famously refers to it, has carefully examined what it means to work with elite individuals in the research process (Delamont 1978; Walford 1994; Puwar 1997; Ball 1998; Smith 2006; Conti and O Neil 2007; Stephens 2007; Gaztambide-Fernandez 2009). This work has, arguably, redressed a large gap in the literature and has asked some important questions about power relations in the research process. A number of studies have, for example, demonstrated how individuals in elite groups may have more power to control the access that researchers have to them, how they may have the ability to avoid uncomfortable questions and also how they may be able to position themselves as more knowledgeable.

2.10 And yet, much of this research has a tendency to view power in a fixed and hierarchical manner, seeing it as emanating from one source and held only by one social actor (in this case the participant rather than the researcher). It is also the case that this work rarely seems to engage with wider debates about power. The positioning of these people as elite is rarely questioned or examined as a class issue, and few connections are made with other work that has been undertaken with less privileged groups on participation and empowerment (Conti and O'Neill 1997). Furthermore, this is a body of research that has largely focused upon adults. Young people have been neglected, possibly due to the fact that they are still seen as marginalised because of their positioning within the life course.

Drawing the threads together

2.11 This paper attempts to draw both of these bodies of work (both the critical visual and the studying up literature) together in order to ask some further questions about how power is negotiated in participatory research relationships. The paper will, however, begin from a different understanding of power than that which has been held by many of the previous researchers in this field. Drawing on the work of Foucault (1981), power will be understood here as a fluid, multiple and productive force. Bourdieu's (1990) theories of 'class making' and Skegg's (2004) work on the 'methods that make classed selves' will also be utilised within the paper, as useful lenses from which to make sense of these power relations. The paper will argue that class really does make a difference in research practice, but not in the sense that much of the 'studying up' literature suggests.

2.12 Rather than classed privilege being understood as a static individual possession, existing prior to research and remaining unchanged during the process, it will be argued here that these identities are actually constituted in and through the research process. For researchers working with any group of young people, this means that we cannot readily assume that certain power relations exist by virtue of class schema, nor that visual methods can be used to easily subvert them. Instead, this means that we need to closely examine the ways in which our relationships with our participants and our methods may lead to the production of particular knowledges, truths and subjectivities.

The Study

3.1 This paper draws on an ESRC study^[2] which was conducted with 23 young people from 2 private Sixth Form colleges (Allan 2011a). Although not the focus of this paper, the aim of the research was to examine these young people's educational experiences and to consider how this group and their parents used the private education system to manage and negotiate risk (See Allan 2011b). The students involved in the research were all 16 or 17 years of age and in their first year of post-compulsory education when the research began. The two colleges were both part of larger private and selective schools. One of these schools had remained single-sex (for young women) and the other had recently become co-educational. The sample was largely made up of young women (with 20 female and only 3 male participants) and was a purposively selected sample owing to the project's original focus on young femininity and risk.

3.2 The study had an ethnographic focus and utilised a number of methods, including: individual semi-structured interviews, group interviews, participant observation, photography and film-making. All of the participants were interviewed at least twice, including an introductory interview and a photographic narrative interview. Only eight of these participants went on to create their own films and to work collaboratively in a film-making process. This group met regularly over a 16 month period and followed a process which roughly mimicked the standard film production process, including: the development of photomatics^[3], storyboards, scripts and shooting plans, followed by a series of meetings with a professional film maker and some filming and editing.

3.3 The project was informed by feminist post-structural theory, meaning that knowledge was viewed as partial, situated and as something that is constituted through discourse (Weedon 1997). These epistemological understandings clearly informed the project methodology. The films and photographs created by the participants, for example, were viewed as 'productions' rather than as 'pristine reflections' of the young people's experiences (Buckingham and de Block 2008). The process surrounding the creation of these images was also taken very seriously. The images were explored in terms of how they were made, what was chosen to be pictured, who the images were shown to, where silences existed and how the pictures were interpreted (Radley 2010)^[4]. Even the photographic interviews were referred to as 'narrative interviews', in order to understand them as inter-subjective co-constructions, where a variety of contested and contrasting meanings were brought together and shaped into a coherent story and only ever in a partial, contingent and contextually based manner (Luttrell 2010).

3.4 Indeed, this paper should be viewed as an attempt to engage in further reflexive practice. In line with Skeggs' (2002) and Adkin's (2002) understanding of the term, reflexivity refers here to the practice of reflecting on the power relations and practices of research. Taking up the challenges laid down by the critical visual literature, in this paper I am seeking to take responsibility for my own positioning and partiality and to be answerable to what I claim to have seen and heard during the research. The interpretations (re)presented in this paper will, then, only ever be claimed as my own partial versions of reality, inevitably stemming from my own positioning in discourse.

Privileged participants and a powerless researcher?: Examining power relations in the participatory visual research process

4.1 Whilst I began my preparations for field research like many other youth researchers, with a real concern for enabling powerful forms of participation, this concern faded as I began to feel that I was working with an already privileged and powerful group of young people who needed little help to voice their opinions or experiences. Indeed, even the very first notes taken during my field research appeared to mirror the experiences reported in the 'studying up' literature.

4.2 For example, during my initial access and negotiation meetings with the young people I was presented with a barrage of questions:

Amelie: So when you say you are interested in our school experiences...what exactly do you mean? I mean are you going to be writing about how we do at school...If we do badly are you going to write about that? Are you interested in private education itself? Is it because you see it as a bad thing? Will you be criticising us for coming here? ...and when you say research...well my Dad is a researcher and he publishes articles. Where do you intend on sending your work? Will we be able to read them? How can I really guarantee that I will like what you write about me?

4.3 Of course, I was prepared to be questioned about the research and I was pleased that these young people felt able to do this, particularly given the fact that many researchers report a real lack of awareness amongst young people about what they have agreed to as research participants (Edwards and Alldred 1999). Yet I was taken aback by the level of questioning and the knowledge that these young people had of academic research, even down to asking the titles of the journals I would write for. These were certainly not experiences that I could find reflected elsewhere in the participatory research literature. The young people's insistence on bargaining for certain levels of control in the project was particularly fascinating, especially when this came to protecting their own academic and moral reputations.

4.4 But these negotiations were not just about what I (as the researcher) might take from the project, for they also appeared to be about what they could gain and the reasons why they might give up their precious time to participate. Whilst many participatory researchers have written about the 'flows of exchange' that occur within research projects, and which may work to compensate participants for their time (Pink 2007), few have reported this as a set of demands that were issued by the participants. Very few researchers have also written about the ways in which they might feel limited in making these exchanges. In my case this was partly due to a strong ethical feeling that I didn't want to privilege an already privileged group. But it was also due to the fact that many of the exchanges that I offered were rejected. For example, when offering the young people an opportunity to visit my institution on a 'behind the scenes' open day, the offer that I made was politely yet firmly refused. This, I was told, was because the school had 'already made similar arrangements' and 'these were with *Oxbridge* institutions'.

4.5 These feelings of powerlessness increased when working alongside the young people in the film and photography work. Even though I regularly admitted my lack of expertise in using such technologies and I emphasised my role as a researcher rather than a visual artist, I felt I was constantly reprimanded by the young people for not being able to engage in more fluent conversations about the process. As these field notes demonstrate:

Even though it is the half term holidays Hetty wanted to meet up with me today so that she could have access to the project camera and tripod. Her intention was to take it to London later in the week when she was due to participate in a media course hosted by a national television company. Hetty was keen to have the camera so that she could 'capture some footage' about her 'hopes and dreams' of living in London when she left school. Seeing as though Hetty had never used the camera or the tripod before, I attempted to leave her with some basic instructions about their use. As I did this the camera and tripod accidentally fell to the floor. This was met with a disdainful look and a dry remark from Hetty: 'Come on Alex...you don't really know how to use this equipment do you! It's probably best if you leave it to us experts!'

4.6 Similar feelings were also experienced in the photographic interviews. In previous projects I had found it relatively hard to get the participants to discuss their images with me in any detail (Allan 2004). In one previous interview the only information that I was offered about the numerous photographs that a participant had taken of her pet dog was that: 'it shows my dog, stupid!' In light of such responses I had vowed to prepare myself thoroughly with a range of different questions to ask in interviews in the future.

4.7 But as the field note at the beginning of the paper demonstrates, my experience of interviewing with images in this project was entirely different. It was an experience where I was often left feeling that the discussions had been 'hijacked' by the young people and used to fulfil their own agendas. Indeed, some of the participants came armed with pages of notes about what they wanted to discuss. One interview lasted for nearly three hours, with very few questions asked by me, but with a whole ream of narrative generated around the aesthetic nature and construction of each image and the techniques that had been used to produce particular effects:

Charlotte: Here you can see a close-up image of something which is basically my grandmother's hand. But it's not the hand that's important to me in this image...it's more about what it represents and how I have framed it in the photograph. Look at the way I have tried to play with the light in this image and look at where the shadows fall. This is a technique that I have recently been trying to develop in my photographic work. I really wanted to draw attention to the lines that you can see on the hand. This is symbolic in some ways I suppose. The deep, dark lines that resist the light and capture the shadows stand for the passing of time and...well I guess the wisdom that they have accumulated over time. But also look at how I have captured the hand reaching out. This might be a sign of frailty and vulnerability but it might also be a sign of strength as she reaches out to me to share her knowledge with the next generation.

4.8 The field notes that I took after one of these interviews also reflect some of the disillusionment that I experienced during this process:

Today I am left feeling incredibly anxious about the progress that I am making in this project. Having travelled a number of miles to get to the school, I turned up to find that two of my participants were not going to attend their interviews and that one had not prepared any materials to discuss with me at all. Instead what she seemed to want to do was show me her previously produced footage on Vimeo. This seemed to be her way of 'stringing out the time' until lunchtime ended. One of the clips that I was shown was from a short film that she had named 'the lost boys'. These clips had been produced on a day trip to a village, a few miles from where she lived. The film was black and white and moved between different shots of the village; one that had been abandoned in recent years due to a decline in local industry. The footage pictured an empty school with exam papers flying around the hall, back gardens where washing hung on the lines and devastated swimming pools emptied of water but coated in graffiti. An eerie tune accompanied the lifeless images, almost as if it were a ghost film. Initially I was quite excited about the content of the images and I asked a torrent of questions about the choices that had been made in relation to the production of the film. But I was left with an unreservedly lukewarm response – that the footage wasn't created for the project, that it was only really a bit of fun and a way of making use of new camera equipment. Indeed it seemed that the conversations were purely dominated by the student's concerns to tell me about the techniques that she used to create the film. Though these were interesting, I was left with the distinct impression that these narratives solely centred round her aim to present herself as a talented film maker.

4.9 Of course, it wasn't only negativity and disappointment that I experienced when reflecting on such incidents. When reviewing the field notes at a later point in the project, I must admit to feeling a sense of pride when considering the possibility that it could have been the 'empowering methodology' which I employed that allowed these young people to inhabit such powerful positions in the project. But whether viewing it as something that was negative or positive, it seemed that I was clearly interpreting the young people's behaviour as a form of subversion which resulted from their privileged classed positions. I believed that these young people had the correct capital at their disposal in order to distance me, to control the research agenda and to ensure that only their interpretations of events and images were those that were taken seriously in the research representations.

Viewing things differently: Exploring alternative interpretations of power and privilege in the research process

5.1 A number of useful conclusions may be drawn from these research moments in order to inform future participatory practice. One is that such moments enable us to examine the research process for positions of agency and resistance (Allen 2008, Holland 2010). In turn, this may help us to understand the delusion

that researchers sometimes uphold when attempting to make the research process a more democratic process. As Back (2007:18) suggests: 'sometimes there is real value in the researcher being made to feel a fool', for it helps them to come to terms with the fact that 'real dialogue' means also being open to the possibility that those involved may refuse to enter into dialogue and may subvert the rules of the game itself.

5.2 Another conclusion could be that class matters in the research process and that it has a powerful effect on the way in which young people may engage as participants. Age is often the uppermost concern for most youth researchers and little attention is paid to other subjective categories (see Chalfen 1981; Buckingham and de Block 2008 for notable exceptions). Yet the analysis presented here seems to suggest that privileged young people are able to negotiate their positioning as participants in research differently; that they are more able to guard themselves from critical inspection and to remain in 'carefully guarded communities that are highly protective of their public image'(Gaztambide-Fernandez 2009). This is helped by the fact that these pupils attend private schools which are only answerable to their own constituents, meaning that these schools (and those that inhabit them) also have the power to control the knowledge that is produced about them.

5.3 This conclusion, that class matters, is one which chimes with Bourdieu's (1990) reading of photographic practice amongst middle-class groups. Of course, we do need to be careful about the age of such work and its applicability in current times, especially given the new and expanding forms of photographic technology available to young people (Lister 1995; Van House 2011). But perhaps Bourdieu's insights could be utilised here to argue that these privileged young people's photographic practices were not simply the product of random 'individual imagination' but part of a wider class practice:

'...so that even the most trivial photo expresses, apart from the explicit intentions of the photographer, the system of schemes of perception, thought and appreciation common to a whole group' (p6).

5.4 And yet we have to be careful about the ways in which we draw such conclusions in relation to class and power. For as Bourdieu suggests classed photographic practice is not simply a matter of economic difference - of elite groups having the financial capital to invest in photographic equipment and therefore being more practiced in using it. Indeed, photographic culture is so predisposed to diffusion and so many young people have access to a camera that Bourdieu believes this could never be the case. According to Bourdieu, we must also resist the urge to view class as if it only ever really exists in rigid and fixed schemas. Class exists, he suggests, in a theoretical sense - not as an actual class (e.g. a group mobilised for struggle) but as:

'...sets of agents who occupy similar positions and who, being placed in similar conditions and subjected to similar conditionings, have every likelihood of having similar dispositions and interests and therefore of producing similar practices and adopting similar stances' (1985:195)

5.5 In this vein, power should not be viewed, as it has been in the initial conclusions that were drawn from the research moments, as the intrinsic property of an individual or as fixed according to their class positioning. Rather it should be understood as something which flows through complex relations between individuals. In the same vein, then, photographic practice should be understood as relational and as a form of 'class making'; as constituting classed subjectivities rather than resulting from them.

5.6 Indeed, using Bourdieu's work as a lens on which to look back at these research moments I might argue that my initial readings of them led to a rather simple account of power in participatory research. It appears that I was simply attributing these experiences to innate class differences - as a case of a powerful group of young people subverting the research process because they had the capital to do so. Whilst such conclusions may provide useful insights and may fit with those provided by the 'studying up' literature, Bourdieu's work demonstrates how they do little to shift our understandings of power. Such conclusions could in fact work to further romanticise participatory research practice as a form of complete freedom and empowerment. As Conti and O'Neill (2007) suggest, such analyses also work to reify social categories like class. This is not only because they involve the simple ranking of individuals on scales, but also because they work to further the false assumption that we can identify degrees of power as a stable function of such ranking.

5.7 Like Bourdieu I have come to recognise that this story of 'powerful participation' does not do justice to the complex workings of power, agency or subjectivities of those involved in the research process. Indeed, it was certainly not the case that every young person reacted in exactly the same way in my research. There were some young people who did not seem to exert themselves in these powerful ways, some who found it hard to discuss the images that they had created and some who seemed unable or unwilling to refer to them in aesthetic terms. These young people preferred to explain their images in realist terms - as containing a self-evident and singular message about who they were and how these images related to their lives:

Researcher: So tell me about the photomatic that you have created. Justin: Well it just tells you about me. It is the story of my life. This is me as a baby...then me as a toddler. Here I am at Disneyland when I was ten. These are my high school photos...just hanging out with my friends having fun, and my prom pictures with my date. Researcher: So why did you decide to put the images together in this way? What story do they tell? Justin: Well I didn't choose to...not really...there is no story. These photographs are just my life in different stages.

5.8 It could also be argued that even those young people who appeared to take up a privileged position in the project were not entirely powerful in their actions and did not completely subvert the process. Drawing on a Foucauldian conceptualisation of power (as a multiple and productive force, (Foucault 1981) we can begin to understand that such incidents needn't simply be read as a reversal of power (e.g. of young research participants wielding power over more vulnerable researchers), but rather that they may involve a simultaneous state of subverting and submitting to discursive forms of power (Allen 2008).

5.9 Indeed, the very fact that these young people turned up to participate in the research, and continued to try and engage me in discussions about the films that they had produced, could be read as particular performances of 'good girl/pupil' subjectivity. Of course, these young people may not have directly performed the tasks that I had requested of them. This in itself provokes further questioning about how participation was negotiated in the project - whether it became more of an imposition than a choice for these participants (MacIntyre 2008). But the fact still remains that many of these young people willingly turned up and attempted to engage in the research conversations. The comments that many of them made after the interviews certainly seem to suggest that they were constituting themselves as 'good girls' or 'good pupils': 'I hope that I have been able to help you in your research', 'Have my interviews been helpful?' Indeed, these do not appear to be the remarks of those who are just attempting to be awkward or incompliant.

5.10 Maybe these young people did have their own agendas to fulfil and they did want to present themselves as busy, enterprising and successful individuals. But perhaps this was also something that was not entirely of their own choosing. It could, instead, be understood as a result of them drawing upon neo-liberal discourses of the enterprising self. As Davies and Bansel (2007: 251) explain:

'A particular feature of neoliberal subjects is that their desires, hopes, ideals and fears have been shaped in such a way that they desire to be morally worthy, responsibilised individuals who, as successful entrepreneurs, can produce the best for themselves and their families'.

5.11 This 'value-adding' discourse would certainly have been familiar to these young people in this competitive and 'high stakes' school context (O'Flynn and Petersen 2007). In this sense, it would not be at all surprising to find the young people continuing to draw upon these discourses during the research, or using the research as a space in which to present themselves as a competent and desirable subjects - quite literally as a way of boosting their own CVs and as a chance for success in the future.

5.12 Returning for a moment to the incident where the young woman chose to share the 'lost boys' footage with me, we could also ask whether her refusal to engage with the research themes can simply be interpreted as a point blank refusal to participate in the project. One of my own interpretations of the 'lost boys' film was that it was an incredibly classed production. I saw it as footage which made use of black and white images worked to fix 'working-class others' in this downtrodden and derelict place, whilst simultaneously working to constitute the film maker as a mobile and cosmopolitan subject (Skeggs 2004, Hollingworth et al 2009, Nayak 2006). The disillusionment that I felt during and after the interview with this young woman may well have been due to the fact that she refused to interpret these images in exactly the same way. I was certainly left questioning how she was able to dismiss the film light-heartedly and explain it away as 'a bit of fun'.

5.13 But rather than seeing this as a deliberate refusal to engage in these discussions, perhaps it could be viewed as a result of the young woman's inability to name class in the way in which I was asking her to. Indeed, many scholars have argued that we live in a time when speaking of class is not acceptable and that we live in a society where class awareness and language are retreating at the very same time that the gap between the rich and the poor appears to be widening (Howard 2008, Skeggs 2004). This is thought to be particularly true in educational settings (hooks 1994) and for those who are able to inhabit privileged class positions. For not only is it suggested that these privileged others do not have to experience class as a problem, but it is also argued that they may also actively avoid using classed language in order to project a politically correct image (Howard 2008).

5.14 Even if we were to privilege my interpretation of this young woman's film footage, we could use Skeggs's work on the 'methods that make classed selves' as a lens through which to view this research moment differently. Instead of arguing that the film was a mere reflection or representation of this young woman's privileged classed positioning, we could, in fact, understand it as part of the process which led to the constitution of such an identity. An alternative reading might be that this young woman's privileged and reflexive classed identity (as it was understood and interpreted by me in this footage) did not precede the research but rather that it was negotiated and brought into existence as a result of the process, relationships and methods used. Indeed, Skeggs (2004) suggests^[5] that it is the methods that we use to tell stories about ourselves and others which bring our subjectivity into existence in the first place. Historically, she suggests, it has always been the middle-classes who have used autobiographical methods to constitute themselves as clever, moral and respectable citizens. In modern times, Skeggs believes that this has changed somewhat, but largely in the sense that the privileged are now expected to constitute themselves as reflexive, disciplined and responsible individuals.

5.15 Of course, it cannot be denied that the young people who participated in this research came to it possessing a familiarity with certain forms of media language and with particular understandings of what constitutes valuable photographic practice, which in turn informed how they collaborated in the project. Yet, this classed habitus is only part of the story. As Yates (2010) suggests, it is imperative that researchers also account for their own part in this process, in order to understand the unwitting cues that they may have used to encourage the young people to participate in these ways. In this sense, researchers need to account for the different relationships that are enacted and negotiated in research,

and to understand the different ways in which power may flow through them. In this project, this could involve recognising the ways in which I may have further encouraged some of the young people's more symbolic forms of filmic representation, by positioning them as 'artists' and viewing their work with awe and admiration.

5.16 But researchers also need to examine the ways in which the methods themselves have been utilised in this process in order to produce certain truths, knowledges and subjectivities and to limit others. In my research this means accounting for the way in which the photographic diary method and the narrative interview may have worked as confessional and autobiographical devices. It is particularly interesting to note my privileging of the spoken narratives in this project, even despite the intentional use of visual methodology. Perhaps it should have come as no surprise to me that my participants 'chose' to represent themselves as reflexive and artistic individuals. As Buckingham and Bragg (2009) suggest, such results needn't be viewed as the natural result of a more empowering participatory process. Instead, these authors argue, that these reflexive art forms may be understood as being constituted in and through a wider governmental process (Foucault 1991) - as part of a process which may have worked to discipline the young people into the requirements of contemporary neo-liberal citizenship and to offer them the resources and positions with which to constitute themselves as powerful, responsible and incredibly reflexive individuals.

Conclusions

6.1 A small but growing body of critical work has developed in response to the current trend to engage young people in participatory visual research. Taken as a whole, the work of scholars like Frankham and Piper (2007), Buckingham and de Block (2008), Thomson (2009) and Luttrell (2010), provides critical insight into the working of these methods. As Frankham and Piper write, these are scholars who have sought to take the 'eye' as seriously as others have 'voice'. They have worked to move beyond a simple celebration story, in order to challenge researchers to consider how they interpret and analyse the visual statements that young people produce in research.

6.2 And just as these scholars have shown that visual methods do not give researchers easy access to the 'inner selves' or 'authentic voices' of young people, so this paper works to demonstrate that visual methods do not naturally enable a more democratic process. Rather than trying to be transparent about this process, by explicitly outlining the techniques used in analysis, this paper used empirical examples to examine the different ways in which the young people participated in the project and to explore the various ways in which truths were constructed about their lives.

6.3 The research moments that were outlined in the paper were first represented as a tale of 'powerful participation'. This was a story which closely aligned itself with the 'studying up' literature and which demonstrated how privileged research participants may be able to powerfully subvert the research process and to control the knowledge that is created about their lives. In later sections an alternative story was also offered up for critical inspection. This alternative interpretation attempted to combine insights from both the critical visual methods literature and the studying up literature in order to explore the various opportunities that were available for agency in this process. This was a reading which led to the conclusion that the research process involved moments of power and powerlessness, as well as moments of subversion and subjection for both the researchers and the participants.

6.4 Both of these accounts drew particular attention to the other forms of subjectivity which were performatively produced during the participatory visual research process and leant to the conclusion that class really does matter. Of course, some scholars working in the field of critical visual methodology have previously attempted to highlight the complex identity work that is undertaken in such projects (see Chalfen 1981; Luttrell 2010; Buckingham and de Block 2007). Some have also attempted to account for the differences that these other subjective categories (e.g. race, class or gender) may make in relation to the power that these young people channel and the ways in which they are able to participate in research. However, it remains the case that the majority of these accounts largely focus on exploring participation in relation to age-based competency and adult/child power relations. It is also the case that these accounts have tended to explain class differences in participatory practice in terms of classed habitus - by emphasising the importance of young people's previous experiences as members of certain classed groups and by referring to the capital and resources that they had access to.

6.5 Whilst this paper does not attempt to downplay the resources that this privileged group of young people had at their disposal, it also seeks to ask questions about the subjectivities that were constituted in this speaking process. The paper demonstrates a need to ask further questions about who is able to 'present themselves as reflexive, as having a self worth knowing and a voice worth hearing' (Skeggs 2004:133). As Skeggs suggests, in an age of compulsory individuality there will always be reflexivity winners and reflexivity losers and young people will be variously positioned in relation to how they are able to take up these discourses.

6.6 What the paper has argued is that this is not a simple matter of power and privilege emanating from a pre-ordained static class position. Just as Luttrell (2010) notes how some of the working-class young people in her research were able to resist the researcher's questions and find their own purpose for the research, so it has also been established here that not all of the young people participating in the project used the research as a form of 'authorial exhibitionism' in order to produce themselves as reflexive and respectable subjects (Skeggs 2004).

6.7 Whilst some did appear to be doing this, even they appeared to do so in a way that hid the conditions of its production (e.g. by avoiding directly naming class). In line with McNay (1999) then, it has been suggested that reflexivity, and thus also these forms of classed self-making, are irregular

manifestations dependant on particular configurations of power. Some of these may be challenging and disruptive whilst others reinforcing and repeating existing relations of power (Skeggs 2004).

6.8 One further conclusion that is drawn here, and which does not appear to be highlighted in the previous critical visual methods literature, is that class difference is something that is performatively produced as part of the research process. These forms of power and privilege did not precede the research. Instead they flowed through the research relationships and were constituted by the different methods employed. The argument presented here is that visual researchers should not simply consider who is speaking or who is being spoken for in participatory visual research. Researchers also need to examine the conditions and relations of production that surround this speaking and they need to be able to examine how their own methodological practices work to create certain knowledges, subjectivities and truths and to explore the positions that they offer young people as participants (Skeggs 2004). Visual methods are not, after all, keys to the truth but the tools that create them (Back 2007).

6.9 The multiple interpretations that have been represented in this paper must also be treated with some caution, for they are inevitably partial and subject to the 'iconoclastic baggage' and knowledges that I have brought to the project (Frankham and Piper 2007). It could be argued that even as I have attempted to interpret these accounts in different ways and to open them to examination I have begun to lay my own 'expert' accounts over the stories that my participants wanted to tell (Yates 2010). The stories that are told in this paper must, therefore, be regarded as 'faithful' rather than 'truthful'. And yet it is only in the bringing together of these accounts and the different research literatures that we can begin to work out how they speak to one another. This may help us to understand how we can forge new ways ahead, in a manner that is not quite so mired in class practice (Van Galen 2004), that breaks through the 'banality' and mundane realism (Maclure *et al.* 2010) and which enables us to open up spaces in the process of participatory research to challenge dominant discursive representations.

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Notes

¹ In line with Howard (2008), the term privilege is understood in this paper as an identity and a lens through which people may understand themselves and their relations to others, and not simply in terms of the advantages that some people have over others.

²ESRC grant number: RES-000-22-2944

³Photomatics are a series of still photos edited together and presented on screen in a sequence. Voice-overs, soundtracks, sound effects and music may be used to accompany the images. Photomatics are often used by filmmakers to generate a better idea of how a film might be put together and shot.

⁴The images were analysed using a form of Foucauldian discourse analysis (Graham 2005). Language and images were always analysed in conjunction with one another and, in line with Rose's (2009) advice, certain questions were asked of the images: How are they given specific meanings? How do they work together with the participant's narratives to produce effects of truth? What is not said or pictured? In what contexts were they produced, and for which audiences?

⁵ It is recognised that Skeggs is not always directly discussing research methods when she mentions the 'methods that make classed selves'. However, her work has been adapted here to make sense of these particular methodological dilemmas.

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