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The use of visual methods with children in a mixed methods study of family food practices

Rebecca O'Connell*

Thomas Coram Research Unit, Institute of Education, University of London, 27/28 Woburn Square, WC1H 0AA, London, UK

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In their capacity to evoke the sensory, non-rational and material aspects of life, visual research methods offer potential for the study of food and eating. The flexible and interactive nature of some visual approaches also means that such methods may be particularly appropriate for research with children. Drawing on an ongoing study of food and eating in employed families, this paper explores the usefulness of using visual methods, including drawing and photoelicitation, to study children's food practices. It examines what these methods 'add' in this mixed methods study and how they work in combination with other methods and reflects upon some of the challenges faced by researchers adopting such approaches.

Keywords: children; food practices; visual methods; mixed qualitative methods

Introduction

Researchers have noted that because food practices are embodied and embedded in social relations and social processes, they are not necessarily easily accessible to reflection or amenable to textual representation. In their capacity to evoke the sensory, non-rational and material aspects of life, visual research methods therefore offer potential for the study of food and eating (Power, 2000). The flexible and interactive[1] nature of some visual approaches also means that such methods may be particularly appropriate for research with children. Drawing on an ongoing study of food and eating in working families,[2] this paper explores the usefulness of using visual methods, including drawing and photoelicitation, to study children's food practices. It examines what these methods 'add' in this mixed methods study and how they work in combination with other methods and reflects upon some of the challenges faced by researchers adopting such approaches.

The first part of the paper describes the potential for, and gives some examples of, the application of visual methods to the study of food practices, including with children. A current mixed methods study of food and eating in working families is then drawn upon to examine what these methods contribute and how they work out in practice. Having outlined the research aims, methodology and methods, the paper explores the ways in which data generated through visual methods corroborates, elaborates and contradicts data generated through interview methods. The paper

*Email: r.oconnell@ioe.ac.uk

concludes by suggesting that the employment of visual methods not only generates important insights about children's and family food practices in this study but also notes and discusses important challenges faced by researchers adopting these methods.

Food, habitus and everyday life

The taken for granted or habitual nature of everyday realities mean they are often carried out without reflection or fuss by people who are operating according to a 'practical logic', an embodied 'feel for the game' rather than an explicit plan or strategy (Bourdieu, 1977). Researchers have noted that this can sometimes make these aspects of life less accessible to researchers using traditional interview methods (Sweetman, 2009). When they have asked participants to reflect upon their food practices, some researchers have reported responses to be halting and hesitant, reflecting a struggle either to put meanings into words or to choose what to say (DeVault, 1990, 1991; Power, 2000). Food is part of the materiality whilst eating has discursive and 'pre-discursive' qualities. However, social convention and social desirability effects encourage normative discourses about behaviour; it is well known that people under-report 'bad' behaviours and over-report 'good' ones. These social desirability effects occur in food studies because food and eating are infused with shame, status, morality, guilt and so forth.

For these reasons, ethnographic methods have been popular in this substantive field. Observation may avoid some of the pitfalls associated with reliance upon reported behaviour and the defamiliarization, which is the hallmark of social anthropological approaches may bring to light fundamental assumptions and practices that normally remain opaque to 'insiders' (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983, p. 8; Schütz, 1964). But the contingencies and improvisations that characterize everyday life may be illuminated not only through observational approaches but also by and with other methods. In particular, researchers have proposed that visual methods may be especially appropriate to the study of everyday life (e.g. Sweetman, 2009), suggesting that these may 'break the frame' (Harper, 2002) of taken for granted routines and ways of seeing. This may be particularly appropriate for studies of food practices, not only because the latter are often carried out unreflectively but also because the visual and sensory nature of food may be better captured through visual approaches (Power, 2000).

Visual methods in research with children, young people and families

Recent interest in visual methods has been particularly apparent in research involving children and young people (Buckingham, 2009, p. 634). By avoiding reliance on linguistic competence, researchers have suggested that visual approaches may enable participation of (and dissemination to) individuals who are less enfranchised in relation to the academic and research communities (Clark, 1999; Oakley, 2000; Wang & Burris, 1997). Visual methods may reflect the interests of particular social groups, such as teenagers and children, who may be more comfortable in the visual mode of representation (Clark, 1999; cf. Croghan, Griffin, Hunter, & Phoenix, 2008). In this way, it has been proposed that they can enable active participation of children and young people in research and keep them focused on the task at hand (e.g. Mauthner, 1997).

Due partly to the influence of therapeutic approaches on health research, and particularly in the context of recent policy concerns with children's health and diets, visual research methods have been employed in a number of studies to examine the food practices of children and families. Drawing methods have been employed as a way of eliciting visual and spoken narratives about children's perspectives of food (e.g. Carahar, Baker, & Burns, 2004; Dryden, Metcalfe, Owen, & Shipton, 2009). Methods such as visual 'timelines' have been viewed as useful for facilitating recall (e.g. Mauthner, Mayall, & Turner, 1993), and 'food mapping' (Albon, 2007) has been used as a way of visualizing and highlighting how food practices are embedded in daily routines and social relations. The purported benefits of such approaches include enabling reflection by parents, children and practitioners upon everyday food practices and, in some cases, facilitating health interventions.

However, it also acknowledged that the employment of visual methods is not without challenges or pitfalls. A key area of concern is that of ethics, with issues including those related to privacy, surveillance and anonymisation (Moss, 2001; Prosser & Loxley, 2008). Of equal concern to some visual researchers, notably Pink (2005), is the problem of 'realism' and the tendency to treat photographs in particular as neutral reflections of reality (cf. Clifford & Marcus, 1986). A further issue relates to the distinction between visual and non-visual methods, which tends to break down when one considers the trend, in some academic outputs at least, for pictures to be translated into the words of the author. A charge levied at all so-called child-centred methods more generally is that research with children is not inherently different from adults (Punch, 2002) and, related to this, that there is no reason to assume that visual methods may interest children. Some go so far as to suggest that methods such as drawing may be reminiscent of school-based assignments and that, rather than engage children, serve to put them off the task at hand (Gauntlett, 2004; Kitzinger, 1990, p. 324). Neither do elicitation approaches sit well with claims that visual methods avoid reliance on linguistic competence. Some researchers further argue that there is nothing inherently participatory about visual methods and that, in any case, the researcher always does (and should) retain control of the research process (Pauwels, 2004). Moreover, some researchers have raised concerns about tokenism (e.g. Buckingham, 2009), fetishisation (e.g. Sweetman, 2009), and the question of what, if anything, visual methods add 'beyond the standard interview' (Bagnoli, 2009; cf. Darbyshire, MacDougall, & Schiller, 2005).

Questions about what these methods 'add' relate, on the one hand, to the issue of whether they generate new information about, or a different lens on, the phenomenon under study. But they also relate to debates in mixed methods research about whether and how it is possible to integrate data from different methods. The metaphor of triangulation (drawn from navigation) is popularly used to explain the integration of data derived from different methods.[3] But beyond the triangulation metaphor, researchers have suggested a number of ways in which data from different methods may be usefully integrated, without subordinating one view of the world to another (Mason, 2006, p. 19).

Brannen (2005) suggests that corroboration (in the sense of triangulation) is only one of at least four possibilities (Bryman, 2001; Hammersley, 1996; Rossman & Wilson, 1994). Developing Green, Caracelli, and Graham's (1989) conceptual framework for mixed method evaluation designs, Brannen suggests that, in addition to corroboration, ways of combining the results from different analyses include complementarity, elaboration and expansion; for example, qualitative data analysis may exemplify

how patterns based on quantitative data analysis apply in particular cases – and contradiction – where findings conflict. Initiation may also occur, wherein data from one method raise new questions to put to the data (Brannen, 2005, p. 12).

In what follows, a recent study of food and eating in working families is drawn upon to explore the benefits and challenges of integrating data from a number of visual methods with children and families as well as semi-structured interviews. The rationale for adopting a range of qualitative research tools is explained, and the nature of the insights generated by the methods illustrated through the example of one family case study. In discussing the application and integration of these methods, the paper critically reflects upon the challenges faced by researchers adopting such approaches.

Food practices and employed families with younger children

This recently completed mixed methods study aimed to map and understand the effects of the rise of maternal/dual parental employment in the UK upon the quality of children's diets. The study interrogated the 2009 National Diet and Nutrition Survey (NDNS), the Health Survey for England and the Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children to examine in relation to diet the associations found in other studies between childhood overweight and parental employment. Secondary analysis was followed by an intensive study of 48 higher- and lower-income working families purposively sampled from the NDNS. This part of the study sought to provide explanations for statistical associations found (or not found) in the survey data and to provide a fuller picture. The key research questions asked in the study were as follows: How does *parental employment* influence and shape family food practices, in particular the diets of children aged 1.5–10 years? How do parents' experiences of negotiating the demands of 'work' and 'home' affect domestic food provisioning in families? What foods do children of working parents eat in different contexts (home, childcare and school) and how do children negotiate food practices? It employed qualitative methods, including interviews and visual research techniques, to understand the social processes that influence healthier and unhealthier diets of children both within and outside the home.

Employing visual methods in a study on food practices with young children: design, practice and analysis

The research questions, potential of visual approaches for studying children's food practices and Principal Investigators interest in visual methods suggested the importance of including them within the study design. However, the constraints of the research meant that visual methods could only be employed in a relatively limited way. Time, the distribution of the sample and the fact we wanted to involve a range of families demanded semi-structured rather than 'ethnographic' research tools. We developed a semi-structured interview for use with parents and a topic guide for our interviews with children. A range of visual methods were designed to address the topics included in the guide.

The sample from which we drew our 48 families was such that we had to include a relatively wide age range of children (2–10 years). Methods that appealed across this age range were therefore needed. We also wanted to give children some freedom to select methods. A flexible range of methods were developed to

encourage children to draw, write, photograph and talk about their food practices at home, school and childcare, including timelines; photographic vignettes; participant generated photoelicitation; a shopping trolley activity; a paper plate exercise; and a puppet. Since children were given the opportunity to use the different methods or just to talk, not all of the methods were used with all of the children. Some children did not complete any of the activities or talk to us. Reasons included that they were considered too young, considered themselves too 'old', or did not attend the interview. Forty-one out of 48 children completed at least one activity. Table 1 shows the use of methods across the sample of children.

The paper plates and puppet were designed primarily to be used with younger children. We asked children to draw foods they liked and foods they did not like and talk to us about their pictures. The puppet usefully elicited talk in some circumstances and was a helpful 'prop' in others. However, not all researchers were entirely comfortable with using the puppet, and it was only employed in a minority of cases.

Timelines may facilitate recall and so provide an opportunity for researchers to discuss eating events in the contexts of children's everyday lives. Two timelines, one for a weekday and one for a weekend day, with a sun at the start, a clock representing midday in the centre, and a moon at the end, were printed in colour on A3 paper. Children were asked to describe the last weekday and last weekend day. They marked (using words or drawings) when and what they had eaten and talked to us about it. Because we were interested in exploring children's agency in relation to food and eating, some children used 'traffic lights' stickers (Mauthner et al., 1993) to mark how much 'say' they had about what they ate on each occasion, using green to indicate 'a lot', red 'none' and amber, 'some'. We asked the children to define what they meant by this, asking what made them use the colour in each case.

Because the timelines were more suitable for use with older children, we were also concerned to explore children's agency and negotiations with parents through other methods. In our pilot study, we found that younger children engaged with photographic images and decided to use visual vignettes as prompts for talk about particular issues pertinent to the study: shopping and negotiations over mealtimes. These were offered to all the children as the topics may not have been covered in the timelines and also because we were concerned to generate some data using the same methods across the age range to enable comparison. Two photographs were used: one of a man and boy fighting over a large packet of crisps in a supermarket and another of a girl refusing food being offered to her on a fork. We asked the

Table 1.

Activity	Paper plates	Trolley	Vignettes	Photoelicitation exercise	Puppet
No. target children ($n = 48$)	26	26	23	9*	4

*Total of 12 children in nine families in total took part in photoelicitation (PEI) exercise as some siblings also completed the activity

children what they thought was happening in each picture, why and whether this had ever happened to them.

Because food purchasing is an arena in which children are understood to exert some control, we also designed a 'shopping' activity, which was designed to prompt discussion about children's preferences, their experiences of food shopping and any strategies or experiences relating to influencing food purchasing. The empty trolley was printed on A4 paper, with the caption, 'Shopping! What food and drink would you like to buy?' written in a text box underneath. Children were provided with coloured pens to add items to the trolley in words or pictures or both. We noted the order in which children added items.

Finally, a subsample of children ($n = 15$) took part in a photoelicitation exercise.[4] Participant photography gave children an observer research role in contexts not accessible to the researchers and encouraged them to describe taken for granted aspects of their everyday realities. We gave children a disposable camera and checklist of photographs to take (e.g. take pictures of two places in your home where food is kept) in order to keep them 'on task', but we also left space for them to choose other places to photograph. We were interested in children's food and eating in school and childcare, but only encouraged them to take pictures of food and eating in these places if they felt comfortable doing so. Where they did, we provided information about the study and a letter targeted to the relevant authority (usually head teacher) to facilitate this. Children were encouraged to use the left over film to photograph whatever they liked. The camera and completed checklist were posted back to us once the task was completed. We then processed the film and arranged another meeting in which we talked about the developed photographs with the child, using the pictures as prompts to guide the interview. We asked children to describe what was in the photograph; one purpose was to enable us to identify in the transcript which picture they were talking about; another was to encourage them to make their perspectives explicit. Children were given a £10 voucher to thank them for their time as well as a set of photographs to keep.

As suggested above, there are a number of ways in which data from different methods may be integrated in analysis. The first stage of our analysis was to construct family case studies. This means that the team 'wove together' (Mason, 2006), the data generated via these different methods into case studies of each household. Researchers noted where the material from different methods agreed and where there was dissonance, for example between the accounts of children's food practices by parents and the pictures or accounts of the children themselves. In the following section, material from one case study household is used to exemplify some of the ways in which the visual methods generated particular insights about family food practices and what they added in combination with other methods.

Combining data from visual methods in the analysis

This section of the paper describes some insights generated through the application of visual methods and how they worked in combination to *confirm, complement, elaborate* and *contradict* data generated through other methods. In order to focus the discussion, the data are drawn from one case study of a girl, Zoe, who completed all of the activities. Zoe is a White British seven-year-old girl who lives with her older brother, aged 10, and two parents, who both work full time, in a low-income household in the south of England.

Confirmatory and complementary data

Among our key research questions was the issue of what foods children ate and preferred to eat and how they negotiated food practices. In the parent interviews, we asked parents what they thought influenced the food and drink that children liked. In response to this question, Zoe's mother said she thought that television advertising was important but that financial resources meant that she was not always able to meet the children's requests for particular items. She suggested that her children were aware of this limitation:

> Well they've always said, if they see something on the telly, 'oh mum, mum can we buy those?' 'No'. 'Oh whyyy'. 'Why do you think? Too expensive' or 'they're not . . . a yoghurt's a yoghurt you don't need it in the shape of a strawberry and pay double the price' to, and that's my reason, *and they know that* [. . .] And, I don't think that would hurt them at all. I can't go out and buy them top of the range of stuff just because it's on the telly or their friends have got it. So [. . .] sometimes something comes out and if it is on offer, or its half the price, or it's something silly like a £1, well 'yeah you can have it. But once they go back to normal price you're not having them again'. (emphasis added)

In completing the shopping trolley and vignette activities, Zoe's account presented a similar picture of the constraints set by her mother. Compared to other children in our sample, Zoe selected a very modest list of items to place in her shopping trolley (Figure 1): apple juice, cookies, 'a bowl of fruit' (oranges, then apples) chocolate biscuits and chicken.

In response to questions about the trolley, Zoe said that she did not usually ask for things in the supermarket, although her brother sometimes did. When she talked about the vignette of the boy and man in the supermarket, Zoe confirmed this and also demonstrated her appreciation of the household's financial constraints:

Figure 1. Zoe's shopping trolley.

I What do you think is happening in this picture?
Z He [the boy] wants the crisps and he's having a look at them but he's [the man's] trying to snatch them off him.
I Who's that? Is it his dad do you think? [Zoe nods]. Why would his dad being taking the crisps away from him in the supermarket?
Z Because I might be too much.
I Yeah? What too much?
Z Too much pennies.
I So he says he can't have them?
Z Yeah so he's trying to snatch them off him and put them in the trolley.
I Right okay. Do you ever have fights over food in supermarkets?
Z No.
I What about your brother?
Z Errr, well when we went to, supermarket like that [. . .] he wanted chocolate rolls and daddy let him have.
I He let him have them. Why do you think he let him have them?
Z They were already less pennies.
I Right, I see.

Research suggests that children mobilize a range of discourses in accounting for their food choices (Dryden et al., 2009). In the current study, children gave a range of explanations of what might be happening in the two vignettes. For the supermarket picture, these included that the boy 'has been naughty' (James), that the crisps 'might not be nice' (Rishab) and that the child 'might be stealing it' (Amelia). However, the largest number of children gave nutritional reasons, suggesting that the crisps were 'unhealthy' (Alisha; Martha) 'full of rubbish' (Jade) or contained too much fat (Gemma; Hayley; Nicola) or salt (Dylan; Logan). In contrast to those children who cited 'too much' fat or salt, however, Zoe suggested the crisps might be 'too much pennies', thus foregrounding the issue of cost. In doing so, she demonstrated an awareness of resource limitations that is common to children in lower-income families (O'Brien, 1995; Walkerdine & Lucey, 1989). The supermarket vignette in this case generated data, which confirmed Zoe's mother's assertion that her children were aware of the family's financial constraints.

Another focus of interest in the study was family meals. Zoe's photographs of everyday eating practices also fitted with her mother's verbal description of mealtimes. When asked about whether the family usually ate together, Zoe's mother said that:

> I quite often don't eat with the children, cos I get them out the way, washed, bathed, homework done, food and by the time I sit down and I go to college on Tuesday nights; 9 o'clock before I get in. From half seven day at school, so it's quite varied. But Martin [dad] will quite often sit with them and eat. But usually my dining table is covered with washing, clothes, [laughing], so there's nowhere *for* them to sit . . .

Zoe provided two photographs which confirmed this description. One shows the kitchen table, pushed up against a wall and with clothes hangers visible in the corner (Figure 2(a)), and another shows her in her school uniform eating MacDonald's on the sitting room floor (Figure 2(b)).

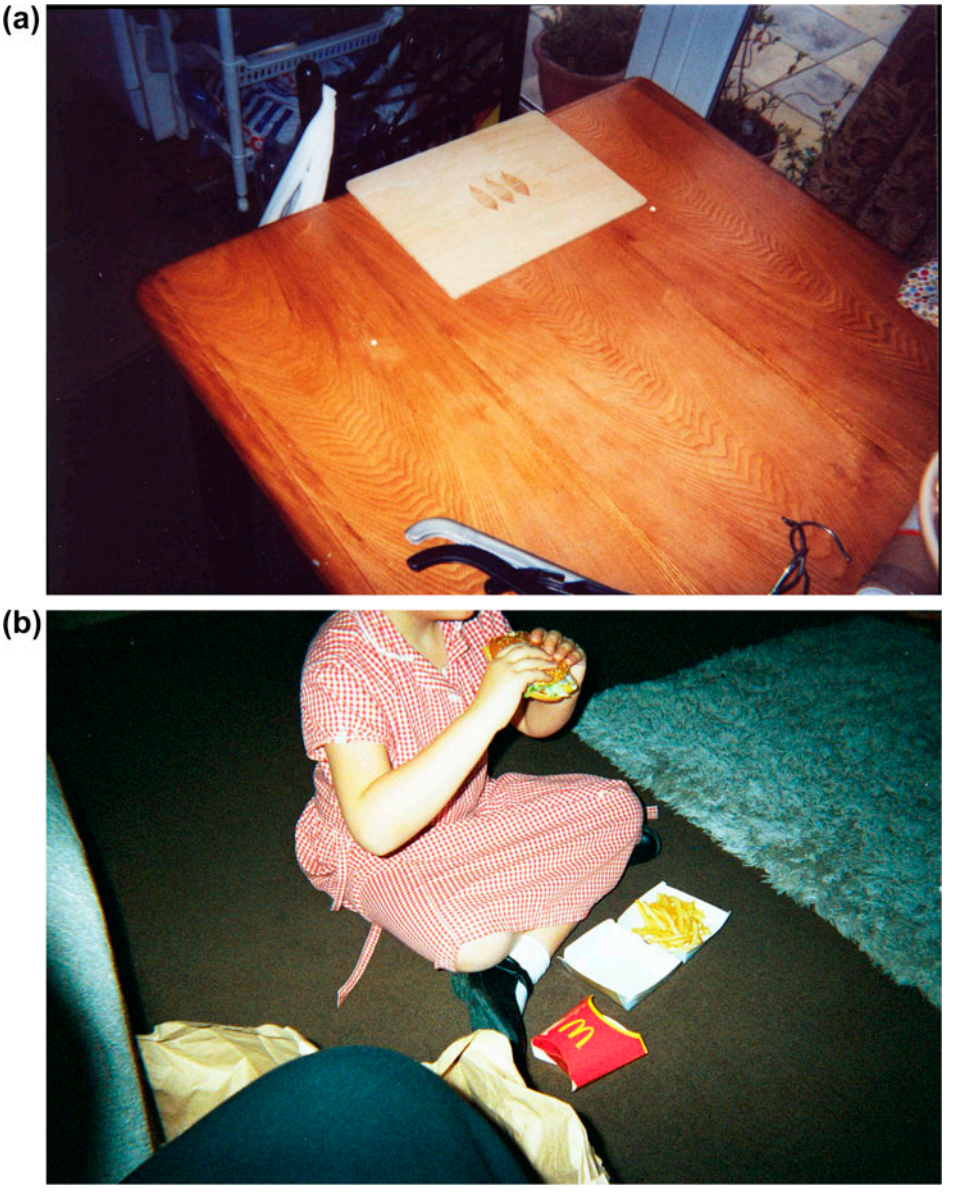

Figure 2. (a) The 'dining' table and (b) Zoe eating dinner on the sitting room floor.

In illustrating her mother's description of family meals, Zoe's photographs confirmed the account and also added to it, providing an additional 'layer' or dimension. In this sense, the visual data did more than corroborate; it complemented the interview data, providing a fuller picture.

Elaboration

The data generated in visual methods used with Zoe also *elaborated* on the interview material. For example, Zoe's talk about her photograph of 'breakfast club'

Figures 3. Zoe's breakfast club (Zoe).

(Figure 3) provided more information than her initial account of her everyday food practices.

In her first interview, Zoe told us that she attended breakfast club and listed the sorts of things she ate there. She drew these (apple juice, cereal and toast) on the timeline. But it was not until she showed us the photograph that she told us what made her experience of eating there different from eating at home. When asked to describe the photograph of the breakfast club and tell us about it, Zoe said a breakfast club was:

> 'Somewhere that people go . . . And they can buy their breakfast and eat it at tables'.

She went onto say that she preferred to eat at tables because it was 'cleaner' than eating on the floor. This finding fed into our analysis of children's food practices across settings. In Zoe's case, the breakfast club 'made up for' what were, from Zoe's perspective at least, less than optimal food practices at home. Zoe's description also emphasizes the importance, from her perspective, of the social and physical aspects of eating; this was common in the accounts of other children in our study. For example, Jade, an 11-year-old girl who had recently started secondary school had begun eating school meals because the canteen was 'more chilled' and a number of mothers reported that their children preferred packed lunches because they did not enjoy queuing for hot meals.

Contradiction

Finally, sometimes the data generated by different methods *contradicted* each other. In Zoe's case, a photograph of a meal at home prompted a discussion that complicated the description of family mealtimes presented by her mother. Zoe's mother suggested that she did not cook separate meals for the family and that the children 'got what they were given':

> They have the same. I can't be doing with four different meals; it's literally have what's there and tough.

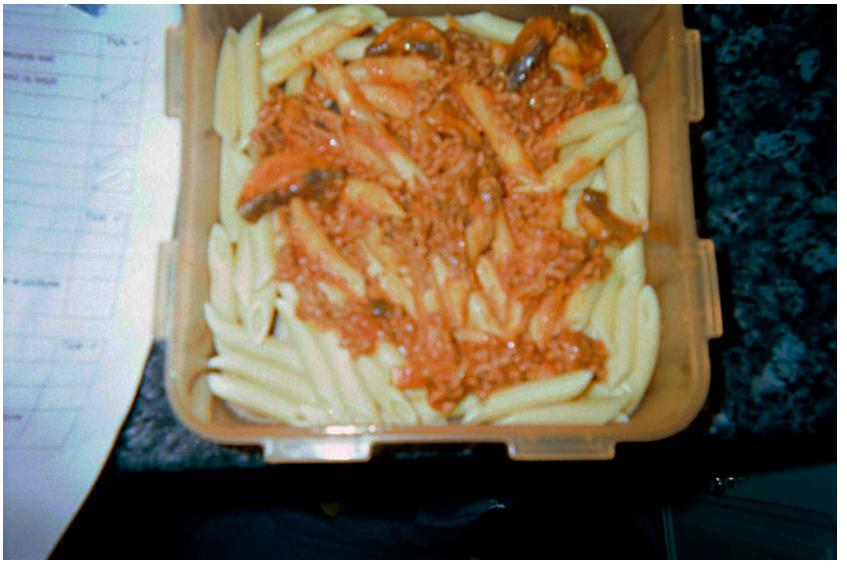

Figure 4. 'Spaghetti bolognaise' (Zoe).

However, Zoe's description of the photograph (see Figure 4) complicates her mother's narrative. When she described the photograph, Zoe said that it was a picture of 'spaghetti bolognaise' and listed the ingredients. When asked about whether she ate all of the meal, she suggested that her mother did in fact adapt the meal to suit her individual tastes:

Z Yeah it's got tomatoes and it's got mushrooms in.
I Do you like mushrooms?
Z No. Mummy picks them out.

Such modifications of otherwise shared meals were common to a number of families in which the mothers claimed to enforce commensality. For example, Nicola would only eat lamb chops if they had melted cheese added on top, and in Malkeet's family, his mother added chillies to curries at the end of cooking so that the dishes were not too spicy for the children. These micro-adaptations evidence a tension between a symbolic and practical commitment to shared meals and the need or desire to recognize individual preferences and thereby identities (O'Connell, 2010; Valentine, 1999). Uncovering these practices informed our findings about synchronizing tastes in the negotiation of family meals (Brannen, O'Connell, & Mooney, forthcoming).

Discussion

In seeking to examine the food practices of children and employed parents, we were concerned to explore how power, agency and resources are negotiated in everyday food and eating routines. We anticipated that using visual methods would enable the participation of children and help them to convey their experiences to researchers. Zoe's case illustrates how in corroborating, elaborating and contradicting data

from other methods, visual approaches generate additional insights over and 'beyond the standard interview' (Bagnoli, 2009).

Photographs and drawings also re-present the world in a way that makes it more accessible to the beholder than words alone. They add another dimension to the data so that the reader learns more, one hopes, about Zoe and her family from the preceding combination of words and pictures than would have been gained from text alone.

In terms of the research process, we also found that the visual data made children and their families more familiar to those team members who had no direct contact with the participants. Photographs that the children took helped us 'see' families we had not met and 'get to know them' better. It helped with problems of recall and made them 'real' so that they were no longer serial numbers.[5] A further advantage in using multiple methods with children, whether or not they are visual, is that it enables the researcher to note interactions (or not) with parents about conducting the activities and therefore to gain further insights into family dynamics. The different methods were also practical 'props'. For example, the puppet and the plates were useful for keeping children occupied, whilst researchers interviewed parents. And they enabled children to communicate with researchers, even if sometimes this meant expressing their non-consent to participate. In one case, for example, the plate was used by a boy (age 3) to indicate that he did *not* want to take part: when the researcher asked him a question, he held the plate over his face.

In presenting the research, we have also found that the visual data lend themselves well to communicating with audiences beyond academia and thus contributing to research impact. Feedback from engagement activities suggests that the photographs and drawings with which we illustrate case studies and findings bring the research 'alive' for policy makers and practitioners. We have also used the images to illustrate research updates for the study's participants.

Nevertheless, as researchers employing these methods, we have faced a number of challenges. Given the spread of the sample geographically, it was difficult to find time in the schedule and costly to make return visits to discuss the photographs with children. We therefore had to limit the number who took part in the photoelicitation exercise. Further, in many photoelicitation studies, the rationale for its use lies in giving greater control to participants. In these cases, photographs may be understood and interpreted as 'identity projects' in which participants represent (particular versions of) themselves to the researcher (e.g. Croghan et al., 2008; Sharma & Chapman, 2011). However, in our study, children's capacity for constructing stories about themselves was limited by the frameworks we provided; we were directive in telling children where to take pictures. Therefore, we cannot claim that this is how children chose to represent food and eating in their worlds. Whilst in providing 'options' for children we hoped to give children some degree of choice about what they chose to photograph, it is important to acknowledge, for the purposes of interpretation of the data, that children were to some extent directed in this as they were also in other methods.

In terms of implementing the methods, conducting the range and type of methods in people's homes raises a number of issues to do with the availability of space. Since not all families have a table to sit at, or that they use, it can sometimes be difficult finding suitable space to 'spread out' the necessary materials. This also raises physical challenges, since getting down on the children's level, especially if using the floor, can sometimes be uncomfortable. Linked to this is the issue of pri-

vacy and the need or desire of parents to 'help' children with their interviews (cf. Harden, Backett-Milburn, Hill, & MacLean, 2010), although as we note above, the interactions may be revealing. Additionally, the employment of such methods demands a good deal of time (for example, to allow for children to spell words, choose pen colours, and so on); an issue exacerbated in the current study by the time limitations of the employed families participating in our study. The use of a range of methods also demands the employment of experienced, competent and confident researchers (Darbyshire et al., 2005), and this in turn requires that sufficient funds are costed into the research budget.

The challenges of analysis include issues related to data management, in particular the time and organization required for the storage, retrieval and sharing of images. Limitations of time also mean we are unlikely to do justice to the data from all the methods for all the cases within the study's lifespan. An issue pertinent to researchers employing a range of methods, not only visual ones, is also that of consistency: because the research focused on children within a wide age range and because children were able to select activities are not easily able to extrapolate across the findings from each method (Backett-Milburn, Cunningham-Burley, & Davis, 2003). However, some methods, for example the vignettes, were employed with almost all the children (see Table 1) and hence provide extensive data for the whole sample.

Children's engagement with the trolley activity also raised some interesting issues in relation to our interpretations of their drawings and how data are created in the research relationship. Two children suggested that they filled their trolley in the order they would encounter the various items within the supermarket, suggesting that one would not want to infer too much from the fact that many children began by 'buying' fruit. Related to this, it was clear that some younger children were selecting their favourite colour pen and then deciding what they could draw with it; Alex, aged 4, for example, picked up a red pen and wondered what foods were red, before drawing strawberries and cherries. These points draw attention to the interview as a process (Mayall, 2000), challenge idealist assumptions, and suggest the materialist tendencies of (some) younger children. One cannot assume, that is, that children are searching for the tools to express themselves, as some of the literature suggests. Rather one might surmise from these cases that some are searching for what to say with the tools they are given.

Lastly, a challenge in any analysis that seeks to elicit multiple perspectives is that of how to weave together the different – and as illustrated, sometimes contradictory – accounts of family members. The approach taken by the research team was pragmatic. Similar to that adopted by Harden et al. (2010), it involved developing a view of the family as a whole whilst retaining a sense of the different perspectives from which the bigger picture was formed. Through integrating the data generated without subordinating one view of the world to another (Mason, 2006), a sense of the complexity of family life may be preserved.

Conclusion

It has been proposed that, in their capacity to evoke the sensory, non-rational and material aspects of life, visual research methods offer potential for the study of food and eating (Power, 2000). The flexible and interactive nature of some visual approaches also means that such methods may be particularly appropriate for

research with children. However, visual or 'creative' methods cannot in themselves be seen as providing more accurate or authentic representations of individual 'beliefs' or 'attitudes' and their utilization demands a degree of reflexivity about methodological approaches and methods (Buckingham, 2009, p. 648).

This paper has sought to reflect upon the methods employed in a current study of family food practices and explore how they add to the insights generated through more conventional interview approaches. Our early analyses lead us to claim that the use of multiple methods adds to our understanding of the social processes involved in the negotiation of food practices within working families. As the case study material demonstrates, in generating data which complements, confirms, elaborates and contradicts that gathered through interviews with parents or collected via other methods with children, visual methods add depth to our findings and enable conclusions to be drawn, which reflect the multidimensionality of food practices in employed families with younger children. At the same time, such methods present challenges for researchers in relation to research design, implementation of methods and analysis of data.

Notes

1. The term 'interactive methods/approaches' is used in preference to often misleadingly employed term 'participatory' methods. Whilst interactive methods entail a greater degree of participation than standard interview approaches, they are not necessarily participatory in the sense of addressing power asymmetries in research relations.
2. The study that is the focus of this paper was funded as a collaborative grant between the Economic and Social Research Council and Food Standards Agency (FSA) in 2009 (RES-190–25-0010). On 1 October 2010, responsibility for nutrition policy transferred from FSA to the Department of Health (DH). As a result, the research project also transferred to DH. The author would like to acknowledge the children and families who generously gave their valuable time to participate in the study, her co-researchers (Professor Julia Brannen, Ann Mooney, Abigail Knight, Charlie Owen and Antonia Simon) and Dr Wendy Wills, who co-presented the seminar at which this paper was first presented. Thanks also to colleagues at HNR and NatCen for their help in drawing the qualitative sample, and to three anonymous referees for helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.
3. Triangulation is a technique that emerged as a response to criticism of qualitative approaches from positivist researchers, particularly the charge that such approaches lack appropriate validity (Blaikie, 2000). The concept draws on the metaphor from surveying and navigating, where a single unknown location is found at the point where the trajectories from three known locations meet (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983).
4. Resource limitations (time, travel costs) as well as the wide age range meant that not all children were asked to participate in the photoelicitation study.
5. Pseudonyms were, of course, given later, and all names of participants have been changed to protect their anonymity.

Notes on contributor

Rebecca O'Connell is a research officer in the Thomas Coram Research Unit, Institute of Education, University of London, UK. She is a social anthropologist whose research interests focus on the intersection of care and work, particularly foodwork and childcare. She is co-convenor of the British Sociological Association Food Study Group.

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