

9

Photo-interviews: Listening to Talk about Photos

Listening to what people have to say about photos is an increasingly popular method in social and historical research, known widely as ‘photo-interviewing’ or ‘photo-elicitation’. But what is the purpose of using photos in interviews, what do they contribute? And how can researchers make sense of what people say about photos; how do photo-interviews work? These fundamental questions are the focus of this chapter. Though I tackle them separately, these two questions are interwoven; understanding how photo-elicitation works is pivotal to deciding whether and how to use photos in interviews.

To address these two questions the chapter is organised in two parts. In part one I focus on the purpose of using photos in interviews, starting with an overview of how researchers have used them. I then evaluate the two main benefits that are claimed for using photos in interviews: that they encourage dialogue and generate useful data. The first part concludes with an overview of practical questions that researchers need to consider before doing a photo-interview. In the second part of this chapter I concentrate on how photo-interviews work and the implications of this for what people do and don’t say as they look at photos. Understanding this process can help researchers make decisions about methods and inform the analysis and interpretation of photo-interview data. This discussion engages with how interviewees conceptualise photos, the temporalities of the visual–verbal relationship, and the relationship between photos, memories and stories. I conclude by drawing out key strategies for incorporating photos into interview analysis.

Part One: Key purposes of using photos in interviews

Before evaluating photo-elicitation it is useful to reflect on the main ways that researchers use photos in interviews. Increasingly, photo materials are a tool for social

and historical research and deliberately 'inserted' into interviews to prompt discussion, reflection and recollection (Harper 2002: 13), sometimes alongside other visual and textual materials (e.g. Bagnoli 2004). Some interviews use found photos, including interviewees' personal pictures (Chapter 4), but often the talk focuses on photos the researcher (Chapter 7) or research participants have generated for the research (Chapter 8), the latter is sometimes called 'autodriving' (Heisley and Levy 1991). Often, especially in historical research, photos are not deliberately inserted into an interview for a specific purpose, rather personal photo collections are studied in their own right, sometimes alongside other documents and objects, and interviews are used to make sense of these collections and what they might reveal about the past and the people that created and used them (e.g. Langford 2001, 2007; McLelland 1997; Thomson 2011a; Tinkler 2010, 2011; see also Chapter 5). Photos are also drawn into interviews on an ad hoc basis as and when they are volunteered by interviewees (see Pink 2007).

Researchers seem increasingly keen to discuss photos in interviews, but what are the attractions of doing this? Advocates of the practice identify two main reasons it is helpful to use photos in interviews: photos facilitate dialogue between the interviewer and interviewee, and they generate useful data. I now consider each of these benefits. Though people often relate differently to impersonal found photos, personal ones and those generated by the researcher or themselves (Pink 2007), as the following discussion demonstrates, there is no simple relationship between the type of photo and what happens in an interview.

Photos facilitate dialogue

Photos are widely praised for facilitating interview dialogue. An important aspect of this is that they encourage people to talk and can serve as an icebreaker. Sighted people are generally used to talking about photos, especially family ones, although people may approach this differently in non-Westernised cultures (Collier and Collier 1986). Photos can also foster a relaxed atmosphere because they lessen the pressure on an interviewee. One way they do this is by acting as a 'third party' in interviews (Collier and Collier 1986: 105) so that an interviewee no longer feels they are the centre of attention. As Dona Schwartz (1989) discovered, people often respond directly to the photographs and pay less heed to the interview context and the interviewer. In photo-interviews there is also less need for eye contact and the 'potential tension generated by face-to-face contact is lessened by mutual gazing at a photograph' (Prosser and Burke 2006: 9).

According to proponents of photo-elicitation, photos facilitate interviews by 'building bridges' between the interviewer and interviewee, this can occur with all types of photos (e.g. Collier and Collier 1986; Harper 2002; Pink 2007). As the interviewer and interviewee pore over photos together and discuss what they see and what this means, communication is encouraged and rapport and trust are built. While photos decentre the interviewee in terms of the interaction, they simultaneously create space for the interviewee's meanings and perspectives: when 'people discuss the meaning of photographs they try to figure out something together' (Harper 2002: 23),

leading sometimes to a ‘negotiated understanding’ (Heisley and Levy 1991). This is important because people often see things differently. For example, in conversations with children about the photos they had generated, Marjorie Orellana (1999) found that the children and researcher literally did not see the same things in the same physical spaces. Where the researcher generates the photos, photo-elicitation can help the photographer see their pictures from different perspectives: ‘the photographer, who knows his or her photograph as its maker ... suddenly confronts the realization that she or he knows little or nothing about the cultural information contained in the image’ (Harper 1998: 35). These features are reasons why photo-interviews are sometimes seen to shift the balance of power in interviews, empowering research participants and giving them more ‘authority’ (e.g. Clark 1999).

All these features make photo-interviews particularly useful when working with people who are not used to interviews or who may feel intimidated by them. This is why some scholars (e.g. Clark 1999; Clark-Ibáñez 2007; Prosser and Burke 2006) embrace photo-elicitation as a child-centred method: ‘words are the domain of adult researchers and therefore can be disempowering to the young. Images and their mode of production on the other hand are central to children’s culture from a very early age and therefore are empowering’ (Prosser and Burke 2006: 408).

Photos don’t always facilitate the talk researchers want

Researchers often find that photo-interviews elicit longer and more comprehensive responses than talk-alone interviews and are less taxing for respondents (e.g. Collier and Collier 1986). But this can have downsides as Katherine Davies and Jennifer Mason discovered (see Box 9.1). Photos can elicit an outpouring, and contrary to John Collier’s experience (Collier and Collier 1986) they do not always encourage focus and engagement. In interviews based on personal photos, interviewees may end up pursuing their own agendas rather than engaging with the interviewer’s questions.

BOX 9.1 THE CHALLENGES OF PHOTO-ELICITATION: AN INTERVIEW WITH KATHERINE DAVIES

Interviewee’s photographs were a valued resource in the project on family resemblances undertaken by Jennifer Mason and Katherine Davies. In combination with other methods, photo-elicitation was revealing, though not always in ways that were anticipated; it also posed challenges (Davies 2011; Mason and Davies 2009).

The social pressure to say the right thing was felt particularly keenly by Davies as she conducted the photo-elicitation. Interviewees often looked to her as an ‘expert’ on family likenesses and she felt considerable pressure to identify these correctly as she looked at interviewees’ photos. Visible likenesses often mattered

(Continued)

greatly to the interviewees, especially when these were perceived as evidence of a special relationship or a link with someone who had died. It also seemed rude not to 'see' what someone was pointing out in a picture and this linked to the practical consideration of helping the interview flow smoothly.

Photos could, however, be a distraction, especially when the interviewee had a clear image in their mind's eye of a likeness and went rummaging through stacks of pictures searching for a concrete instance of it. The sifting through loose photos that often accompanied these searches made it difficult, sometimes impossible, to keep track of the relationship between verbal comments and specific photos. But 'seeing their struggle to find a photo that sums up, often intangible, likenesses, was revealing about the nature of family resemblances' and the inadequacy of a two-dimensional image to convey what people conjure up in their minds. The 'inadequacies' of photographs were almost as revealing as the likenesses they seemingly depicted, but the experience of remaining engaged throughout this process and of trying to redirect the interviewee's attention was sometimes exhausting.

In the first interviews in which interviewees often volunteered their photos as a starting point, the photos had a tendency to dominate and to redefine the interview agenda. For these reasons, and because Mason and Davies were keen to avoid an over reliance on photos in case this led to a conflation of 'likeness' with the visual, they shifted to a talk-alone interview followed by an examination of photos.

Not all photos get people talking

While too much talk is sometimes an issue, the reverse can also occur. Photo-interviews do not always encourage relaxed and full responses from interviewees. Silence can be a productive part of an interview (though sometimes disconcerting for the interviewer) during which the interviewee reflects on photos before offering comment, and this space for reflection should be preserved. But sometimes interviewees seem to have little to say. This can be because they perceive that photos require no explanation, in which case it may be necessary to ask for elaboration (Harper 1987; van de Does et al. 1992). Sometimes the problem is more complex. There are two main issues: first, the relationships that interviewees have to the photos discussed in the interview, this is particularly pertinent when working with interviewees' personal photos; second, whether interviewees engage with the content of photos.

First, the photos that seem most likely to get people talking are those that are relevant to them or otherwise meaningful, including personal photos, but this is not always the case. It can be difficult to anticipate correctly how interviewees will relate to photos, even family ones, as Alexander Freund and Angela Thiessen (2011) describe. In an interdisciplinary project 'Local Culture and Diversity on the Canadian Prairies', historians and folklorists interviewed 600 men and women aged over 70 years who had lived in the prairie provinces before 1940. Three methods were used: a survey

questionnaire, a life story interview and a photo-interview. For the photo-interview interviewees were asked to select around ten photos from their personal collections and describe them to the interviewers. The researchers assumed that photos would encourage rapport, sharpen recall and elicit detailed and expansive responses:

[W]e assumed that people would be more used to telling stories about photos than to narrating their life story or responding to oral historians' questions. This hypothesis was reinforced by assumptions that interviewees' selection of photos gave them control over the structuring of the interview, and that chronology was less constraining than in a life story interview. (p. 29)

The researchers were disappointed. A typical interviewee response was a 'hesitant, cursory description of a few words or a sentence or two. Follow-up questions were successful only with some photographs' (p. 30).

There were three reasons why the photo-interviews about life on the Canadian Prairies did not flow smoothly, all of which concern the relationships that interviewees had to their photos. First, it was not usual for interviewees to talk about family photos with people who had no personal connection to them:

We began to understand that ... photographs' meanings were not fixed, but changed with the context. ... A photo-interview could not imitate the intimate sharing of memories among friends and family. This was a new context, and interviewees learned only during the interview which meanings the interviewers were interested in, and which meanings were safe and useful to inscribe in the photos in this particular context. (p. 30)

This should not be interpreted simply as interviewees telling researchers what they want to hear; rather, it is an acknowledgement that we all adjust what we say depending on the perceptions of our audience and the occasion of talking. The second point is that though several interviewees had inherited their photos they had only a weak connection to them, or they had not looked at them in such a long time that the photos were unfamiliar. Whereas the researchers assumed the interviewees would be familiar with their photographs and have stories to tell, the interviewees approached their pictures as outsiders would and tried to figure them out by, for example, using clothes and buildings to date them. Third, photos sometimes offered versions of the past that contradicted the interviewee's memories and hindered their storytelling. As other oral historians have also noted, photos can have a muting or silencing effect by generating difficult feelings or memories. I return to these points later.

The second reason why photo-interviews are not always successful is that some photos are better than others at promoting the interviewee's engagement. In a study of change in a farming community, Douglas Harper (2001) had mixed results with photo-interviews. Harper used archival photos of agricultural work produced in the 1940s with success: 'the historical photographs operated simultaneously on the empirical dimension (the farmers saw in the photographs details of work they had not specifically imagined for decades) and subjective dimension as the research subjects

saw themselves implicitly in images from earlier decades of their lives' (2002: 18). However, photos of the farmers that Harper had taken were less productive because they were too familiar and did not encourage the farmers to reflect on what was in the pictures. A similar problem was encountered initially in Harper's study of a car mechanic (2002: 21):

At first I ... was reproducing the perspective through which any person in the environment would gaze, and these photographs did not lead to any deep commentary from Willie, the shop owner. When I photographed from unusual angles, or from very close, it led Willie to see his activities from a new and interesting perspective.

For similar reasons, John Berger argues that black-and-white photos are better than colour in eliciting responses (1972, cited in Harper 2002). In these research contexts, I think the crux of the difference between photos that do and don't get people talking is the interviewee's assessment of how much work is required to explain a photo. When the interviewee thinks the photo is obvious, they are perhaps less likely to engage – to really look at the picture. In contrast, incomplete or unusual pictures are likely to be perceived as requiring interpretation; this explanation seems consistent with Harper's productive use of archival photos. Unusual photos are also likely to be more interesting to interviewees. Thinking back to Mason's account of research on children's understandings of kinship, it seems that the children's excitement at the pictures they had taken was a spur to looking and talking (Chapter 8). Seeing personal photos enlarged on a laptop offered a fresh perspective on the familiar for Alistair Thomson's (2011b, discussed later) interviewees in that this revealed previously unnoticed details and facilitated collaborative viewing. An unusual perspective can, however, also close down dialogue if the subject of the photo is unrecognisable (see 'Setting up projects' in Chapter 8).

This discussion of photos that do and don't get people talking has implications for designing research. Researchers need to consider what kinds of photos will be most useful at eliciting feedback and, if generated by the researcher or research participant, what guidelines should be followed in making pictures (see Chapters 7 and 8).

Generating useful data

Scholars agree that photos can have powerful effects in interviews, although they are less sure why, a point I shall return to. Where photos do foster discussion, and this is not guaranteed, photo-interviews can generate rich and complex data: photos stimulate people to talk about their thoughts, feelings, memories and experiences, to work things out and, sometimes, to discuss subjects that are difficult to broach in talk-alone interviews. Talk is also key to understanding people's photo collections.

Photos often stimulate people to talk about what they know, think, experience, feel and remember. Aside from factual information, photo-interviews bring out the personal significance and meaning of what is depicted in photos and, if the photos are personal, sometimes the meanings attached to photo-objects. Photos can also prompt

people to talk about their feelings, disrupting complacent viewing and inspiring emotionally charged responses (e.g. Emmison and Smith 2000; Mannik 2011). Memories are often stimulated by looking at photos (personal, generated, commercial etc.); this can include recollections about the events of the previous night as well as memories of years or even decades past. Discussing the mnemonic power of photographs, Annette Kuhn describes how 'the everydayness of photography... combined with the capacity of the still photographic image to "freeze" a moment in time, lends extraordinary impact to an apparently ordinary medium' (2007: 285). In my historical research, I found that personal photos provided specific, concrete and personally relevant prompts that often worked better than spoken generalities to stimulate recollection of detail, accounts and feelings. Photos portray particulars that the researcher would not otherwise know to ask about; they offer information that interviewees may have forgotten or would not think to mention.

The use of photos can also enable participants to introduce their priorities and perspectives into interviews. This is particularly likely where personal photos, or those the interviewee has generated, are discussed. Participant-generated photographs are widely valued for enabling participants to set the interview agenda and this is an attractive feature for those who research the experiences and perspectives of marginalised or disempowered people. Cindy Clark (1999: 44), for example, discovered that photo-interviews provide 'a viewfinder for the child's perspective' of chronic illness. However, as discussed in Chapter 8, you need to bear in mind that participants are not always the sole or principal creators of their photos. Personal and especially participant-generated photos can also be used by interviewees to broach topics that are difficult to mention. Rosaleen Croghan, Christine Griffin, Janine Hunter and Ann Phoenix (2008: 345) noted that their teenage participants used their photos 'to show rather than "tell" aspects of their identity that might have otherwise remained hidden', this included topics which sat uneasily with dominant notions of adolescence such as religion, or complex issues around race and culture.

Looking at photos and thinking with them can also enable people to process and articulate experiences that they may not have worked through before. This can be seen in Harper's (1987; also Chapter 7) study of the craft of Willie the motor mechanic. Reflecting on Harper's photos of his work, Willie is able to deconstruct, identify and explain the fine detail of highly skilled practices that he typically does almost without thinking. But Harper understands the limitations of this method: 'It is pushing words to expect that experience can be literally described, for the reality Willie experiences is taken for granted, a many-sided gestalt of theoretical, tactile, and auditory input. It is difficult to put into words a complicated but utterly ordinary reality' (p. 118). Photo-elicitation, using archival and researcher-generated photos, has also been used to expose and explore people's feelings and thoughts about change, as in David Byrne and Aidan Doyle's (2004) study of a County Durham community in the 1990s following the closure and destruction of local mines in the 1970s and 1980s. In order to bring to the surface people's feelings about change, the researchers used focus groups in which photos of the area taken before and after the closure of the mines were viewed and discussed.

Generating photographs and then talking about them can be particularly effective at enabling participants to work through their ideas and feelings about a topic (see also Chapter 8). The photo-interview also enables the researcher to explore how participants approached the task of photography: 'the planning, deliberating, and problems ... [were] often as enlightening as the actual images' (Frith and Harcourt 2007: 1346; see also Radley and Taylor 2003). The ability of photos to help people formulate views and responses was noted by the Sri Lankan novice monks interviewed by Jeffrey Samuels (2007). In this instance, research participants were given cameras and a list of eleven topics to photograph including 'an important temple activity' and 'what makes you happy as a monk'. As one monk explained:

The photographs are like a mirror for us. We can learn a lot of things by discussing the photographs. It is easier to speak while holding the pictures in our hand and while looking at the pictures. We can explain more when the pictures are close at hand. (pp. 216–17)

Samuels notes that:

knowing and thinking are not merely mental processes; feeling (holding the pictures) and seeing (looking at the pictures) are intimately connected to remembering, learning, and expressing. Indeed, taking photographs and later discussing them with me enabled many novices to recall, in greater depth, their own ideas; it also provided many novices with the occasion to construct meaning in a manner that was much more personally significant. (p. 217)

This is a good example of what Gillian Rose (2004) calls the 'materiality of seeing', in other words, that touching photos is often integral to the process of seeing what is in a photo and that looking produces embodied responses. Interestingly, the photo-interviews were less productive several years earlier when Samuels asked novices to photograph 'things that they like'.

Photos may also help generate data about concepts and topics that are difficult to explore in talk-only interviews. Gillian Bendelow (1993) used found photos and other images in a study of pain and how experiences of it are gendered. She noted that images provide concrete examples for interviewees to respond to and a means of talking about personal experiences in public. In a study in which children with chronic illness were invited to generate photos about their experiences of ill health, Clark (1999) similarly found that photos facilitated discussion of experiences that were otherwise difficult for the children to talk about. The success of photo-elicitation was partly because the children could use photos of themselves – for example, injecting insulin – to describe their experiences in the third person. But whereas Clark's participants discuss photos of their lives that they have taken or orchestrated, so the veracity of the images is not questionable, when using found photos it is possible that interviewees may engage less with the content of the images and more with their production (does the image convey genuine emotion or a performance for the camera?).

It is widely acknowledged that interviews are usually helpful to understand and explain the content of personal photos and what they mean to their owners (e.g. Chalfen 1987). On the basis of studying 40 family albums, Andrew Walker and Rosalind Moulton (1989: 165) argue that different types of album – family, travel etc. – have a common structure that facilitates a general interpretation of the meaning of an album, but it is difficult to pinpoint the meaning and significance for an album's owner of individual photos by looking only at an image, captions can give clues but you usually need to talk to people. Another reason why interviews are useful is because talk often accompanies the viewing of family photos. The role of photos in storytelling is well established, but recently Martha Langford has argued that a photo album's fundamental structure is not literary but oral, 'images selected and ordered *in anticipation* of storytelling preserved visual memory in a framework of oral consciousness' (2007: 227). Elizabeth Edwards (2006b) extends the analysis of the relationship between photos and orality to embrace the sounds, gestures and physical interactions that accompany the 'performance' of family photos.

Talking to people about their photo practices is not straightforward. There is a tendency to assume that people can explain what they do with photographs and why, but the details of photographic practices are often forgotten because they were not memorable at the time or since (Musello 1979). Photo practices can also be difficult to verbalise because people are typically unused to noting and talking about them (keen photographers are a possible exception). There are ways to help interviewees recall details about their photographic practices. In contemporary studies, practices can be explored by examining photos that have been taken recently and using these as a prompt for talk. In contemporary as well as historical research it is useful to work with photos in their original presentational formats; in contemporary research this can be images on a camera phone, in historical research this is more likely to be an album or framed photo. Handling cameras can also be helpful in historical research. This memory work involves looking, also touching and holding, because memories are elicited by doing as well as by seeing and thinking. Another reason talking about photo practices is not straightforward is people are usually interviewed days, weeks or even years after they have taken or done things with their photos and they therefore rely on memory to answer questions about their practices. As I discuss later, a range of factors consciously and unconsciously shape what people remember and say. For instance, when interviewing older women about their girlhood photo collections (Tinkler 2010, 2011; see also Freund with Thiessen 2011, discussed earlier) I found they often did not recall how they took or acquired their girlhood photos, instead they worked this out in the interview using fragments of memory, what they already knew about their youth, and the evidence of their collections; the women's adult interests and priorities, as well as the interview context, influenced this process. If you use interviews to explore photo practices you need to keep in mind the complexity of the accounts provided and, where possible, use other sources to confirm recollections.

So far I have reflected on the reasons why researchers use photos in interviews, now I consider the practice of doing photo-interviews.

Doing a photo-interview: practicalities

There are several practical questions that researchers need to consider before doing a photo-interview. These questions apply principally where photos are used as tools in interviews, although some points are relevant to other types of photo-interviews.

How many photo-interviews and when?

Do you have one or two interviews with each research participant or are a number of photo-interviews undertaken over the course of the research, perhaps as an ongoing check on your findings? Are photos featured in all interviews or are some talk-alone, and what is the relationship between these different interviews? At what point is it useful to discuss photos and what implications might this have for the rest of the interview (see later discussion of temporalities)?

What kinds of photos will be discussed?

This depends on your topic, the kinds of data you want to generate and feasibility. Bear in mind that some photos are better than others at stimulating talk and a pilot may be the only way to work this out.

Do you want interviewees to think about their photos in advance of the interview?

Particularly in projects involving photos generated by research participants, it can be useful to ask participants to provide captions or write about their photos in advance of the interview.

Which photos will be included in the interview?

Will the interview be organised around all the photos taken or collected, or focused on a selection of them? If a selection of photos is used, who decides what should be included? If the interviewee selects, do you need to know what has been excluded and the criteria for the selection? How many photos can reasonably be discussed?

Who decides how the photos should be looked at?

Will you or the interviewee decide which photos are looked at, in which order and when? Is there value in noting how research participants navigate selections and collections? In what media will you view the photos (hard copies, digitalised images) and with what implications for what interviewees see and how they, and you, can engage with the pictures (zooming in, holding etc.)?

Will you need strategies to stimulate or focus talk?

Photos are widely recognised as a useful stimulus to talk, but prompts may be needed when working with some social groups or when addressing particular topics. A pilot can help you decide this and what strategies are likely to be effective. For instance, when working with young children Clark (1999: 44) placed 'thought balloons' over an image of a child in a photo as a means to ask the child what s/he was thinking. Clark also suggests asking children to sort photos into categories in a game-like activity: 'tangible props in referring to situations or feelings'.

What types of data do you need to generate during the interview and how will you achieve this?

How will you keep track of the relationship between talk and photos during the interview? Do you need to examine the images discussed? Do you need copies of these photos and, if so, how will you get these? Are you interested in how people relate to photos as material objects during the interview (e.g. do they hold and touch them in particular ways)? How will you record this (notes, video)?

Part Two: How do photo-interviews work?

The distinctiveness of photo-interviews is that interviewees are encouraged to engage with photos. Though I have shown that photos are often good at generating data, the relationship between photos and talk needs further attention. As Croghan et al. (2008: 346) discovered, there 'is frequently an assumption that the visual will act as a trigger to an oral response or that the visual and verbal will somehow strengthen one another, without examining the ways in which they differ as modes of representation'. What people say as they peruse photos is often more complex than assumed. Understanding this can help researchers make decisions about methods, and inform the analysis and interpretation of interview data. What is the relationship between verbal and visual representations? How do people see and use photos to talk about themselves and their communities in the present and past? Do photos simply elicit descriptions and explanations and trigger memories? In the following I consider three factors that shape photo-interviews: how people conceptualise photos; the temporalities of the visual-verbal relationship in photo-interviews; and the relationship between photos, memories and the stories people tell. This is followed by a discussion of how to incorporate photos into interview analysis.

How people conceptualise photos

People see different things in photos, and how interviewees conceptualise images is an important aspect of this. According to Schwartz (1989), addressing this conceptualisation is essential to the interpretation of photo-interview data. Schwartz conducted interviews with three generations living in a rural community using photos she had taken of the town and everyday life in it. Schwartz discovered that rather than commenting on what she was trying to convey through the photos or evaluating the aesthetics of the images, interviewees approached the photos as capturing what was going on in their community and it was the detail of community life that they subsequently talked about. These findings are consistent with studies of how Euro-American families view domestic photos (e.g. Banks 2001) and probably explain why photos that are personally relevant, whether produced by amateur or professional photographers, tend to stimulate talk about the social reality of the interviewee rather than discussion about the construction of the images. But while interviewees often view personally relevant images in a realist manner, not all photos

are viewed in this way. For example, as Marcus Banks (2001: 95) explains, commercial photos typically prompt a different type of viewing and a detached response that can shift the focus of talk from 'the personal' to 'broader sociological topics'. Presumably the viewer looks at an advertising image as something that has been staged for the camera according to a set of objectives, it is these objectives that become the subject of talk. For example, an advertisement featuring a wedding may generate talk about societal conventions around weddings and wedding photography, whereas a personal photo of a friend's wedding would be more likely to prompt talk about what happened on the wedding day or the suitability of the groom as a spouse.

Temporalities in photo-interviews

The temporalities of photo-interviews are central to understanding the complexity of the verbal–visual relationship. Photos represent a split second, and to say anything about the content involves talking either side of this moment. Relatedly, the meaning of this moment is not transparent and so an account is required to create both context and meaning. Sometimes this context/meaning is suggested by captions or other sources such as letters, but usually much is left to the narrator's interpretation.

There is often a temporal disjuncture between taking a photo and occasions of viewing which provides an opportunity to explain and confer meaning on the occasion pictured, a point I shall return to. This temporal disjuncture is as significant in research on the 'present' as on the 'past'. Croghan et al. (2008: 351–2) used photo-elicitation interviews to explore consumption and young people's identities. Research participants were given cameras and asked to take photos of things that mattered to them with a view to talking about these pictures in an interview with a researcher. Drawing on Roland Barthes, the authors point to a 'discontinuity between the moment recorded and the moment of looking', and argue that 'photo-elicitation invites the viewer ... to bridge that moment of discontinuity in order to invent a story that explains the photograph'. Because of the illusion that a photograph captures 'authentic' identities, this bridging provided an opportunity for their respondents to engage in 'identity work'. The young people used photos to 'underline and verify verbal claims in ways that are not available through verbal means alone' and, through 'verbal editing', to 'clarify and repair any problems in the presentation of the self in the photographs'. I would argue that in some instances a bridging account collapses time and is present-focused in that the interviewee engages with the photo (of yesterday, last week or years ago) as a representation of the present ('what they/we are doing', 'how I am') as if the image represents a window on to the world, or a mirror. Sometimes, especially with distinctly old photos, the interviewee acknowledges that the photo depicts the past.

Another way that temporality shapes the verbal–visual relationship is the positioning of photo-elicitation in an interview, whether the interview revolves around the photo(s) or the photos come after or before a talk-alone interview. In their study of change in a Pennsylvania steel town, Judith Modell and Charlee Brodsky (1994) employed a two-stage interview to explore the relationship between photos, memories

and narratives. First, they encouraged people to talk about their community in the past and present. Second, they asked interviewees to comment on photos of the places and people in their community; these included archival photos of the town, photos taken by Modell for the purposes of the project and interviewees' personal photos. The two-stage process was explained to interviewees at the outset. Modell and Brodsky discovered that after narrating an account, people used photos to confirm and expand on what they had just said: 'people chose those aspects of a scene, a portrait, or a pictured event that affirmed an articulated memory' (p. 150). Although verbal narratives do not necessarily constrain engagement with photos as rigidly as in Modell and Brodsky's study, it is likely that people look at photos differently if following a verbal narrative compared to when the photo is a starting point for talk. Many researchers prefer to do talk-alone interviews before looking at photos to avoid an overemphasis on the photographic story or on visual phenomena (see Box 9.1). However, where photographic practices are the focus of research it makes sense to wrap the interview, or the early stages of it, around the photos. Sherna Gluck (1977: 9) suggests recording interviewees' reflections on their photos and then returning to them later within the context of the interview agenda because these moments of storytelling are different: 'the second version of the story might be quite different from that first rendition – which could become a lost gem were we not to record it when the memory spontaneously surfaced'.

Viewing photos also takes place in time – at different historical and biographical moments – and this temporally specific context shapes how viewers relate to photos. People engage with photos from the vantage point of their current personal needs, interests and perspectives, including as Modell and Brodsky demonstrate, to confirm verbal accounts they have just offered. For example, a holiday snap of the interviewee with a friend, taken on board a cruise ship several years ago, might elicit a slightly different account following news of a cruise ship sinking than before (historical event) and prompt different stories depending on whether the interviewee has recently fallen out with her old friend (biographical event). Even as an interview unfolds, the shifting juxtaposition of photos, talk and memories generates different contexts within which images become meaningful: 'photographs' meanings shift not only over historical time; multiple meanings are ... attached to photographs during the interview process' (Freund and Thomson 2011: 12).

Memory is another temporal dimension which I now examine more closely in the context of the relationship between photos and the stories people tell about them.

Photos, memories, stories

Modell and Brodsky's study raises important questions about how photos contribute to memory: are they only ever used to confirm recollections and narratives? How does memory work in a photo-interview? Is memory only relevant in historical research? In the following I begin with a brief introduction to memory before focusing on remembering with photos and the difference between using selections and collections of photos.

Memory

Even in contemporary research, memory is often drawn on to explain the content of a photo and detail the circumstances of its production. But in contemporary research the recourse to memory is often taken for granted and not discussed. In many instances researchers are interested in probing what was going on around the time the photo was taken; here, as with research that explicitly addresses 'the past', it is necessary to reflect on how people remember with photos.

There are two main approaches to memory. One treats memory as a sort of filing cabinet in which recollections are stored ready for retrieval. The language used in these types of account can be revealing. Photo-interviews are described as 'retrieving', 'releasing', 'unlocking' and 'jolting' the interviewee's mind and memory, in other words bringing out what is already formed. In contrast, cultural theorists and historians, treat memory as a construction and as dynamic (for overviews see Abrams 2011; Misztal 2003). These scholars argue that oral histories do not tell us simply about the past, memories are reworked over time in light of subsequent experiences and the meanings attached to these. These accounts are also shaped by the cultural context in which the interview takes place. The concept of 'composure' is often used to explain the process (for account see Summerfield 2004). It refers to how people try to construct an account of their memories that contributes to a version of themselves with which they feel comfortable. How do photos contribute to this process?

Remembering with photos

Scholars agree that photographs can be a powerful stimulus to memory, but even old photos do not always prompt an active engagement with the past. Barthes (2000: 91) suggests that photos can actually 'block' personal memory because photos provide easily-recalled visual versions of the past that substitute for memories of what happened; often it is photos that come to mind rather than experiences. Moreover, interviewees may describe photos rather than try to remember with them. In some instances, photos are cues to well-rehearsed stories; photos are noted and recognised, but they do not prompt an active engagement with memories of past experiences, views and feelings. But encouraged by the interviewer's questions, it is possible for interviewees to engage in a more dynamic process of remembering.

Drawing on my own research (Tinkler 2011), I suggest that when people remember with photos there are two aspects to the photographic encounter that are, in practice, interwoven: the memory response and the processing of recalled matter. The first aspect, the *memory response*, can take two forms – reaction and searching; some photographs elicit both. In some instances the memory experience is initially one of reaction to the photograph. This flash or welling up of often vivid recollections of sounds, sights, smells and touch, is often entangled with an emotional response; the experience is akin to Barthes' (2000: 27) 'punctum' (the part of an image that is 'poignant', that 'pricks' the viewer). More commonly, the memory response emerges gradually as the viewer studies the photo and searches for – winks out – what they can remember about people, places, events and experiences. This type of memory response has parallels with Barthes' 'studium' (an interested reading).

Stage two of the photographic encounter usually involves the *processing* of recalled matter (as discussed below, this is sometimes resisted); memory fragments, facts and meanings are interpreted, classified, synthesised and arranged into a coherent account which is articulated to self and others. This process is shaped, but not determined, by contemporary cultural resources, including language, dominant discourses and collective memories (shared popular accounts). It is also influenced by the perspectives and interests of the interviewee and the recall context, which includes the dynamics of the interview and the interviewee's perceptions of their audiences. The objectives, conscious or otherwise, of this process are to produce memories that make sense to self and others, and which present and position the self in ways that one can live with.

Photos sometimes bolster the process of memory composure in that their content seems consistent with the interviewee's recollections and can be used as visual evidence of them, or they support a particular version of the past that the interviewee is comfortable with. Sometimes photos that bear little obvious relation to the interviewee's account can also facilitate narrative. For instance, the photos that Mary Brockmeyer selected to talk about in the study of life on the Canadian Prairies were often of the men in her family and their work 'hunting, slaughtering and harvesting' (Figure 9.1), but these images 'carved a space for her' to tell stories of 'women's hard labor and men's abuse of their domestic power' (Freund with Thiessen 2011: 36). But the process of composing memories is not always successful and can result in 'discomposure' (Summerfield 2004). Memory responses that contradict the photo evidence can make it difficult or impossible for an interviewee to recount a story, as where photos of smiling people generate memories of hardship



Figure 9.1 'They had easy hunting'. Source: Brockmeyer collection

(Freund with Thiessen 2011; Mannik 2011; Thomson 2011b). Discomposure can also occur when a photo elicits a memory reaction, as the often intense emotional/sensory recollections can be difficult to interpret and organise into a coherent and comfortable account. The interviewee may also resist this processing. Discomposed by the photographic encounter, the interviewee may be rendered speechless or left struggling to find the right words to convey his or her recollections. As well as hindering storytelling, discomposure can also result in physical disengagement from photos, a refusal to look (Mannik 2011) or touch (Tinkler 2011).

Using selections and collections of photos

People remember with, and talk about, photos in complex ways, but talking about a photo collection is a different experience for an interviewee than reflecting on a few photos they have selected to speak about (Tinkler 2011). A selection is a choice dictated by concerns at the time of the interview rather than when the pictures were acquired; it represents a present-day agenda. Additionally, absences as well as presences are typically revealed by looking at and talking about photo collections, but absences are difficult to detect when working with only a selection of photos. A further difference is that talking about a collection involves the interviewee composing accounts about individual photos and about the collection as a whole:

Talk about a collection is more than a stringing together of discreet accounts about photos and is not reducible to these ... Interviewees introduce, explain and frame their collections by what they say and do. Albums also require navigation. Through what is talked about at length, merely commented on, or ignored, the subject navigates a visible path through their collection ... Preferred pathways are ... narrative threads that are not reducible to, or necessarily obvious from, the photo collection in and of itself. (p. 51)

The following example demonstrates how I traced the threads that are woven through an account of a photo collection. I interviewed Carol about the girlhood album she compiled over 40 years earlier when she was in her teens. The album is a magpie collection dominated by photos from when Carol was 16 and 17. In our interview I was able to trace Carol's girlhood agenda as she honed in on certain photos and spoke animatedly about friends (Figure 9.2), being a first-time aunt and gaining increased independence at home and at school – 'Life started for me at 16'. But two other narratives could also be discerned that related to what happened to Carol's life after the album was compiled. One of these, a narrative of loss relating to the father-daughter relationship as Carol left home and then married a controlling husband, emerged in part from how Carol framed my viewing of her album. Although there are no photographs of Carol's father affixed in her album, as Carol passed the album to me she extracted from the front cover a small, loose, black-and-white photograph of her parents that was sent to her when she left home for university. Although both parents are featured, Carol points out her father and recounts how

much he had missed Carol when she left home. Having introduced her father so poignantly, the father–daughter relationship is then woven through the narration of the collection. Carol tells stories about her father and their relationship that are not visible in the photos, including stories about photos that were taken but which never made it into her girlhood album.

Understanding the relationship between photos, memories and stories can help us make sense of what people say as they reflect on the past, but various strategies are needed to discern the processes at work.



Figure 9.2 Carol's friends (private collection)

Incorporating photos into interview analysis

Much has been written about analysing talk-alone interviews, but how do you take account of what happens when people talk about photos? Drawing insights from the discussion of how photo-interviews work, I suggest several strategies for analysing photo-interviews that can be used in addition to the usual techniques of interview analysis (on the latter see, for example, Mason 2002; Tonkiss 2004). Before I list these strategies I will first address analysing common features of photo stories that have only been touched on so far, namely multiple meanings, discontinuities and discrepancies.

Talking about photos creates the conditions for multiple meanings to emerge. I have already noted that there can be ‘layers’ of memories and meanings as people talk about old personal photos. The meanings of personal photos can also shift in the course of a single interview (Freund and Thomson 2011) or between separate interviews as in Wendy Luttrell’s participant-photography project which involved children talking about their photos in four ‘audiencings’ (see Box 8.3). Whenever interviewees are involved in the production of photos – personal (e.g. Thomson 2011; Tinkler 2010) or ones generated for the research (e.g. Radley and Taylor 2003) – the interview also creates space for exploring the meanings made both at the point of production and in the context of the photo-interview. Discussing participant-generated photos, Sarah Pink (2007: 91) advises that interviews should ‘seek to understand how the images have meanings on both of these two levels’.

Researchers can also explore the ‘fissures and gaps’ that emerge in interviewee’s accounts (Freund and Thomson 2011: 12). Sometimes disjunctures occur between the verbal and visual as people are speaking about photos (e.g. Freund with Thiessen 2011; Mannik 2011; Thomson 2011a, 2011b; Tinkler 2011). Discrepancies and discontinuities can also emerge between a photo-interview and a separate talk-alone interview as when Maris Thompson (2011; see also Winddance Twine 2006) interviewed German-Americans about settling in the United States pre-1940. The settlers’ photo albums adhered strictly to American conventions and spoke of upward mobility and cultural assimilation, themes the photo-interviews dwelt on. In contrast, the talk-alone interviews about Americanisation produced very different stories of language loss, identity issues and hostility from locals. Read together, however, the two types of account are revealing.

Juxtaposing photos and stories, also accounts of photos produced at different times, can be a fruitful analytic strategy as seen in Thomson’s study of migrant women (see Box 9.2).

BOX 9.2 MOVING STORIES

Productive juxtapositions are at the heart of Alistair Thomson’s (2011a) book, *Moving Stories*. In this study of four British women who migrated to Australia in the 1950s and 1960s, Thomson explores the creation and interpretation of the



Figure 9.3 Dorothy Wright with her baby. Reproduced courtesy of Dorothy Wright

stories that the women made about their lives. Thomson is a social and cultural historian; he is interested in understanding lives in the past, but also the cultural phenomena of story-telling and remembering, 'the dynamic relationships between self, story and society' (p. 15).

Although photo-interviews often focus on a set of pictures selected or made for the occasion, Thomson's research engages with a mixture of accounts that four women constructed, at the time and since, to show and record their experiences of migration – letters, audio-letters, photos, life writing and oral history accounts. Photos are considered in relation to their captions and other commentary on them in letters of the time: 'Photo stories combined image and text, and the text conjured the meaning for an image' (p. 246). The photo stories are also examined alongside autobiographical writing and the oral history interview transcripts.

The juxtaposition of sources is treated as a productive space, and Thomson hones in on discrepancies *within* photo stories between pictures and captions or commentaries, and *between* photo stories and what the women now say about them. He asks, 'what stories do the photo collections tell, what stories do they conceal, and what stories are lurking beneath the photographic surface to be prompted into life through new remembering?' (p. 14).

Thomson uses interviews to maximise what can be learnt from photos. Photos are mined for evidence of material culture, particularly of domestic acquisition

(Continued)

and consumption – the new car, the roomy and well-stocked refrigerator, evidence that letters and oral histories flesh out. Interviews are also used to explore how these pictorial accounts were made – the implications of available camera technologies and conventions about where and when to use cameras, cultural expectations about how photos should look, also details about the events and interpersonal relations surrounding the construction of pictorial accounts of life in Australia. These details are scrutinised for what they reveal about past subjectivities and aspirations:

From the ways in which photos are taken and used to create stories and make sense, and from the choices about which photos should be sent to family in England, we can explore how migrants felt about their life in Australia and explain the meanings of the new house and car or the latest domestic acquisition. (pp. 274–5)

Complex and changing narratives emerge around the photos in the course of the research.

Although in three of the four cases men were the main photographers in the women's home lives, Thomson stresses that the production of a photo involved other contributors, notably the 'stage managers', usually the women, and the 'actors': 'there were many contributors to the photographic image, and this unruly and even contested authorship makes for complex representations and meanings' (p. 256). Subsequent renditions, including the oral history interview, generate different interpretations of the photos: 'like all life stories, these accounts are ... constantly evolving and moving, they are living histories' (p. 15). For example, Thomson explores several photos that Dorothy Wright sent home shortly after her second child was born. One photo of Dorothy with her children, captioned 'End of a perfect birthday', suggests that all is well; an interpretation supported by upbeat commentary in Dorothy's letters. But in another photo of Dorothy holding her new baby, Dorothy averts her eyes from the camera, a pose that is repeated in other pictures of the young mother with her new-born baby (Figure 9.3). It is only in letters written to her mother several months later that Dorothy admitted that she was at 'screaming point' in the months after her baby's birth, but it was not until the 1980s, when Dorothy's now adult daughter was pregnant, that Dorothy realised that she had probably been suffering from postnatal depression. Dorothy brings this insight to her oral account of the 1960s' photo, but she also articulates newer interpretations relating to her sense that as a young mother she was stifled and frustrated by domesticity and thwarted ambition.

Thomson's analysis of the women's stories involved careful scrutiny of different sources about, and renditions of, the past; it also emerged from allowing interviewees time to reflect on and (re)assess their memories as they talked about

their lives. Thomson conducted the first interview without photos because they ‘tend to focus the discussion around what was photographed rather than what was recalled’ (personal correspondence). Following this, Thomson borrowed photo albums, perused and scanned them, and then returned to talk about them with his interviewees; in some cases the women sent him selected photos on their own volition or in response to a request from him. Trust and understanding between Thomson and the four research participants were key to the success of this study. Thomson was ‘guided by the aim of “sharing authority” in both the interview and its interpretation’ and this, as he stresses, cannot be hurried (2011a: 324).

Condensing insights from photo-elicitations and oral histories, I suggest that researchers use the following strategies to analyse what people say about photos: look, contextualise, listen, watch, juxtapose and trace the threads. These strategies complement established techniques of interview analysis.

- Look at the photographic images your interviewees are engaging with: what do they see? What do they talk about or ignore in the photo?
- Contextualise photos to understand their place in interviewees’ lives because these relationships may shape interviewees’ accounts; they might also provide opportunities to explore different moments of meaning making. Try to view personal photos in their original contexts with the captions or descriptions that accompanied them. Attend to other contemporary sources, such as personal letters or diaries, that help establish the meanings of the photos at the time they were produced or first engaged with by your interviewees. In participant-photography projects, this process includes noting entries in research diaries or logbooks that record how and why photos were taken (see Chapter 8).
- Listen to accounts and, utilising established interview techniques, attend to: what is said; the silences and hesitations that may result from what is forgotten or from topics too difficult to talk about; and how stories are delivered, including fluency, detail, velocity, rhythm and tone (Portelli 1998), which provide clues as to whether tales are well-rehearsed or composed in the interview and whether they result from an experience that made an impression. Listen for evidence of the ‘layering of memories’ (Tinkler 2010: 268). For example, in my interview with Carol about her girlhood collection compiled in the 1950s (discussed earlier), Carol discussed a photo of her best friend. This photo generated memories about the joys of teenage friendships, but also of Carol’s later experiences in an oppressive marriage during which her husband vandalised her girlhood album destroying some of her photos.
- Juxtapose accounts. When working with interviewees’ personal photos, set the original photo narratives alongside other contemporary accounts produced by interviewees, and with subsequent accounts of the photos, included those produced in the photo-interviews. If using participant-generated photos, attend to

the initial descriptions of photos presented in diaries, logbooks or captions and reflect on these alongside oral account(s) produced in subsequent discussions.

- Watch how interviewees physically engage with photos and collections as visual and material things, and how they react when touching, viewing and talking about them.
- Finally, when working with collections, trace the narrative threads that are woven through an account of a collection and that are not reducible to the sum of comments on individual photos.

As with all qualitative interviews, it is important in photo-interviews to reflect on inter-subjectivity – the interaction between the two subjectivities of interviewer and interviewee (see Abrams 2011: 58–63) – because this contributes to the account generated; this includes assumptions you and your interviewee make of each other and how you interact. Two interconnected aspects of photo-interviews are worth noting. First, the production of a photo's meanings is often a collaborative affair as you and the interviewee reflect together on the image. Second, in photo-interviews it is not only the interviewee who is compelled to engage with each picture, but also the researcher. In interviews with women about their personal photos, Judith Okely (1994: 50, cited in Pink 2007: 87) emphasises the need for researchers to reflect on how they experience their interviewees' photos as this will shape the interview dynamics; she describes 'watching, listening and resonating with the emotions and energy' of an interviewee 'living through the photographs'.

Summary

In this chapter I have argued that deciding whether and how to use photos in interviews involves reflecting on what photos can contribute and how photo-elicitation works. Researchers are increasingly keen to use photos in interviews because they are perceived to encourage dialogue and the generation of useful data. However, though photo-interviews are often very good at doing both, this is not guaranteed. Thinking about why photos do and don't get people talking has implications for designing research. Reflecting on how photos work is also a crucial consideration when designing research because what people say in interviews is often more complex than assumed. I suggest that it is helpful to reflect on three factors that shape photo-interviews: how interviewees conceptualise photos, the temporalities of the visual-verbal relationship, and the relationship between photos, memories and stories. By looking closely at what happens in photo-interviews, I draw out five strategies for analysing what happens when people talk about photos that can be used in addition to the usual techniques of interview analysis.

In the next chapter I consider the ethics and legalities of using photos in historical and social research, this includes issues relating to photo-elicitation and the presentation of interviewees' photos.