

Photography, Politics and Childhood: Exploring children's multimodal relations with the public sphere

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**Photography, Politics and Childhood:
Exploring children's multimodal relations with the public sphere.**

Abstract

In qualitative research with children visually oriented and multimodal approaches are identified in the literature as more appropriate for approaching children's meanings and feelings often deemed to lie beyond the realm of language. In our own research, a comparative ethnography which enquired into the relationships between childhood and public life, with six-to-eight year olds in three cities (Athens, Hyderabad and London), we have reflexively experimented with the employment and remixing of methodologies which would allow us to explore such relationships. In the process of our research, incorporating different visual and ethnographic methods, we have developed a data collection and production process, an adaptation of the *photo-story*, which allows for a multimodal, processual and reflective enquiry into children's relationships of concern and politics of care. We review the central visual methods in research with children, we then proceed to provide a documentation of the method, its development and its rationale. Consequently, we provide some examples of the photo-story method's implementation in the Connectors Study together with a discussion of the production processes of the photo-stories themselves and our readings of them. We conclude with a section with reflections on the method, which, we argue provides a departure point from which we may rethink the political in childhood, as well as the ways in which photography is employed as a research method in the social sciences.

Keywords: Childhood, Public Life, Methodology, Photo-story, Multimodal Ethnography

1. Introduction

In qualitative research with children, especially with younger children, tools beyond the standard interview, considered limiting in capturing children's views, are often sought in order to enable the researcher to access and approach children's opinions, views, experiences, meanings and feelings (Clark 1999; Johnson 2011; Johnson et al 2012; Wagner 1999). Within alternative and creative approaches to research with children visual methods have taken on a key role. It is assumed that, as Wagner puts it, the employment of the visual as a central practice in research with children, 'increases opportunities for getting a clearer sense of what kids think' (1999:4). Beyond research with children parallel discussions have taken place in visual anthropology and cognate disciplines regarding the limitations of language, feeding into an ongoing discourse about the different kinds of knowledge which exist beyond the linguistic and thus may demand different means of approach (Edwards 1997, 2011; Kalantzis 2014; MacDougall 1988, 2006; Morphy and Banks 1997; Nolas et al 2018; Varvantakis 2016; Varvantakis and Nolas 2019, under review; Pinney 2004). According to MacDougall the project of visual anthropology may enable 'rethinking certain categories of anthropological knowledge in light of understandings that may be accessible only by

nonverbal means' (MacDougall, 1997:292) – which, in his understanding, may lead to novel enquiries into human culture and 'new pathways to anthropological knowledge' (1997:292). Additionally, multimodal methods have been noted in recent literature as enhancing ethnographic research (for a review see: Varvantakis and Nolas, 2019; see also Nolas and Varvantakis 2018.)

In this paper, we document our engagement with the above debates in the context of a comparative longitudinal and multi-sited ethnography with children, the ERC-funded Connectors Study, in which we explored the relationship between childhood and public life (Nolas, 2015; Nolas et al 2016, 2017a, 2018; Nolas and Varvantakis, 2019; Varvantakis 2018; Varvantakis and Nolas 2019; Varvantakis et al, 2018). The study followed a sample of 45 children, aged around six years old in the beginning of the study, living in different neighbourhoods across three cities (Athens, Hyderabad, London). Children were recruited to the study through a range of approaches including snow-balling, public advertising, word of mouth, and through some schools. All care was taken to construct a heterogeneous sample. We used an intensive research design and multimodal ethnographic methods including participant observation, photography, walking, mapping, interview and workshop methods (Varvantakis and Nolas, 2019). The *relationship* between childhood and public life is conceptualised in broadly phenomenological terms and we draw on ethnography and social theory rooted in this philosophical tradition to think about experiences of human agency, relating, belonging and everyday life in childhood. Such approaches raise questions about interlocutors', and researchers' relationships of care and concern to the world (Sayer, 2010), as well as what *moves* and *matters* (Lutz, 2017) to children as they engage with the world beyond themselves. The intensive research design has resulted in 45 ethnographic biographies which are being analysed along 'lines of desire' (cf. Nolas and Varvantakis, 2019 for more details about the study epistemology and design).

In this paper, we focus on the visual component of the study design. As we describe elsewhere (Nolas and Varvantakis, 2019; Varvantakis and Nolas, 2019) we experimented with different data collection methods in response to our interactions with children and our own intuitions about which methods were more likely to yield desired insights into the relationship between childhood and public life. Within this process, we developed the photo-story method – which we describe in detail in the following section.

The term photo-story has been used before in a different context, by Keremane and McKay (2011), as an adaptation of the Photovoice approach (Wang 1997), and has been employed mostly in the applied contexts of community development, social work, international development and action-oriented research aiming at changing policy making (see Skrzypiec et al. 2015, Skrzypiec et al. 2013). In the use of the method by Keremane and McKay (2011), the authors expand the techniques employed in photovoice in that research participants were recording stories alongside the pictures they were making. In our own employment of the term, and of such techniques, we have used the photographic medium (and at a later stage stories too) with a longitudinal, contextual and reflective stance aimed at involving our interlocutors in data collection and analysis, in reflective practice regarding the collected material and regarding

sharing and gradually making this material public. Through the photo-story method we aimed to access, assess and discuss children's views and experiences of what mattered to them over time and in a reflexive manner.

The photo-story method, as used on the Connectors Study, asked six to eight year old children, over an 18-month period to make pictures of things that mattered to them. The focus on 'what matters' was in line with the study's epistemological orientation mentioned above. We subsequently asked children to choose ten pictures of things that mattered the most, to discuss their selections with us and eventually with each other at a workshop we organized bringing children from each city together. At the workshop each child was asked to choose one picture (or a combination of pictures) which they felt spoke to something they valued highly and to write a story about it. The photo-stories were exhibited for parents to see on the day of the workshop, were later published in an exhibition catalogue (Nolas et al. 2017b)¹, and later exhibited to the general public in each country². In the next section we describe the method in detail.

2. Making what matters visible and relatable

The study employed visual methods, and photography in particular, because it afforded opportunities for children to express themselves, their feelings and meanings using non-verbal languages. Photography is often employed in qualitative research with children as a prompt (either child- or researcher-led) in order to generate dialogue in the research encounter (cf. Harper's (1984) *Photo-elicitation* technique). As John Collier, an anthropologist who pioneered the use of photography in ethnographic film, put it nearly 60 years ago, photography relieves the strain of being questioned (1957). '[P]hoto-elicitation generates extensive verbal commentary' (Schwartz, 1989) and it is upon this basis, that the technique is usually employed (cf. Clark 1999; Johnson et al. 2012; Rose 2001; Pink 2003; Schwartz 1989; for a review of visual based methodologies see: Tornabene et al. 2018).

Photography has also been combined with group work approaches intended to simulate and stimulate collective action. Wang and Burris (1997) for example, developed the *Photovoice* technique (Wang and Burris 1997, Wang 1999) which was inspired by Freirean pedagogies of liberation (Freire, 1970), feminist critiques of patriarchal forms of knowledge and oppressive representations of especially marginalised groups, and documentary photography (Wang and Burris 1997, Wang 1999). Designed as an action-oriented and participatory tool, Photovoice was initially implemented in public health action research but has rapidly spread into other applied

¹ The entire catalogue can be openly accessed at:

<https://childhoodpublics.org/communications/writing/exhibition-catalogues/>

² The 'In Common' exhibitions took place in London, Hyderabad and Athens between late 2017 and early 2019. You can read more and find visual documentation of the exhibitions at: <https://childhoodpublics.org/events/in-common-childrens-photo-stories-of-public-life/>

contexts such as environmental education (Chanse et al, 2017), youth and social work (Aldana, Richards-Schuster and Checkoway, 2016), and health and social care (Skovdal and Evans, 2017). With photovoice, cameras are given to participants with the aim of empowering communities to create their own records of experience, to enable dialogue amongst community members on often taboo and silenced topics and to reach policy-makers whereby the possibility of dialogue for change is seen to lie. Beyond policy-oriented projects, the technique has been widely employed in research with children (action oriented or not), in which researchers usually ask children to photograph particular aspects of their lives (Johnson et al 2012; Orellana 1999; Luttrell 2010; Malone 2015; Marquez-Zenkov 2007).

There have been many appropriations, derivatives and remixes of the two techniques – of photo-elicitation and Photovoice, to meet researchers' needs and the needs of their interlocutors according to the study questions or community needs. Characteristic examples include self-driven photo elicitation (Heisley and Levy 1991; cf Clark 1999), Participatory Photo interviews (Jorgenson and Sullivan 2010), and Photo-narratives (Böök and Mykkänen 2014). PhotoStory, mentioned in the introduction, is also a further method developed by Keremane and McKay (2011).

While our own approach to the photo-stories employs elements from both techniques (photo-elicitation and photovoice), it also differs from traditional applications of the method in the following ways. In line with the ethnographic design of the study, the photo-story method maintained an open thematic orientation by focusing on children's lived experiences and everyday lives and asking children to take photographs of what mattered to them without narrowing the subject matter to a specific domain (e.g. health, or school). Following learning from previous research (cf Nolas, 2011), we were less interested in the visual as a conduit of children's empowerment, a paradigm that makes problematic assumptions about individual and group membership and experiences before the researcher's arrival into people's lives, and which also often fails to document dynamics of both inclusion and exclusion in the research process. Instead, we positioned the method within an arts and humanities tradition of visual images as publics generating and publics sustaining practices (Warner, 2002). Here images vie for our attention, circulate in search of an audience, and act as potential connection in a distinctly modern form of relating, that between strangers. In this paper, we focus on the process of creating those images with the children and on the possibilities and limitations of that process as a methodology for raising issues.

As such, the photo-story method was process driven. We worked reflectively with children over an 18-month period, emphasizing the processes of the picture production, (re)view, interpretation, and publication. In effect, we came to interact with the children in the study through practices of photography and these processes of expression and communication were ethnographically grounded in an ongoing dialogue with our interlocutors. Visually oriented methodologies have produced a significant body of knowledge and an important insight from such research is the realization that via the employment of visual techniques informants can be involved *both* in the data collection *and* analysis (Johnson et al 2012). According to Pink (2003), visual methods require participatory approaches, and according to Liebenberg, visual methods can, not

only provide the material through which participants will reflect upon their lives, but also a space for reflection on the very relation between the researcher and the researched (Liebenberg 2009). Mitchell has advocated the approach to children's visual productions "as social rather than individual creations, and as sites of cultural production, rather than as mere reproduction" (Mitchell 2005: 61).

Indeed, the sociability of photography is noted in several cases and taken into account – both in the production of the picture, as well as in the context in which it acquires (and changes) meaning. Schwartz for instance highlights photography as social interaction, whereas not only picture making but also "viewing photographic imagery is a patterned social activity shaped by social context, cultural conventions, and group norms" (1989:120). In this context, meaning is socially, culturally and interactively shaped and varies across different contexts. Thus, for instance, for Schwartz what matters in photography in social research are ethnographically situated analyses, as "the use of photographic methods must be grounded in the interactive context in which photographs acquire meaning" (1989:120). For Liedenberg (2009), pictures "take up meaning from the contexts in which they are inscribed or which we inscribe to them" (2009:445; cf. Banks 2001, Orellana 1999). For example, an ethnographic analysis of a participatory video intervention with socially excluded young people showed young people interpreting the researchers' intent and methods as part of a larger cultural landscape of reality television and celebrity culture, and not as an evaluative and reflective process (Nolas, 2011). In a nutshell, in the Connectors Study, the longitudinal, reflective and contextualised processes of the images' production and circulation were valued over the end result as our object of enquiry, and it is from these processes that knowledge has been derived.

Furthermore, as referenced in the introduction, we drew on debates in visual anthropology about how the visual might communicate a different kind of knowledge and tell different kinds of histories. With regards to the production of pictures we consider particularly significant that cultural influences are not just apparent in the substantive subjects depicted in the pictures, but may also correspond with culturally informed representational styles and points of view, as well as perceptions of time and space; as famously reflected by Worth and Adair (1972) who were initially puzzled over the fact that participants in their Navajo indigenous filmmaking project turned in long shots of their walks in the desert (Worth & Adair 1972; see also Seremetakis 1987; in particular for work with children see Stockrocki 1994). An analysis drawing on this more 'haptic' approach to visual image analysis in the study has been explored elsewhere (Varvantakis and Nolas, under review).

3. The photo-story method as applied in the Connectors Study

We now turn to the application of the method itself. Each child interlocutor in the research was given a simple, inexpensive digital camera in the first phase of the research. We explained to the children that we were using the camera as a research tool, in order to see their worlds through their eyes and to give us (child and researcher) an opportunity to discuss things they cared about. Where necessary, we provided children

with some basic explanations about how the camera worked and how to take photographs. We had discussions about taking pictures for the research and taking personal photographs (this distinction was increasingly blurred as the 18 months progressed). All children were aware from the outset that they would need to make a selection of photographs, of things that mattered to them the most. Children also knew that they could keep the camera after the end of the study. We also had very extended discussions about privacy, anonymity and seeking consent for taking photographs of others in the pictures that they were making.

In discussions with the children about *things that matter* to them, we deliberately employed the word ‘things’ (and its equivalent in Greek and Telugu) and used the term vaguely, in order to allow each child to inscribe their real and imagined cares and concerns onto the term, taking relevant photographs where possible. When prompted by the children, we said that it can be anything – places, people, objects, or events. Our insistence in framing the photographic brief with an open category is in-line with critiques of research with children which focuses strictly on specific research questions, which often communicate more about researchers’ and policy-makers’ preoccupations than they do of children’s lived experiences (Aitken 2001); an issue pertinent to visual methodologies as well (Mitchell 2005).

Following the gifting of the camera, we had allowed some time to lapse (approximately three to six months³), before engaging children in discussions about their photography. These discussions took place in the context of preparing for children’s creative workshop with children in each city and children were also asked to select a sub-sample of 10 images to bring with them to that workshop. We sat with the child, often as they were making their selection (in different stages of the selection process), and through fieldnotes and recordings documented their commentary on their photographs, as well as their thoughts and rationale for shortlisting various images. We discussed children’s final selections extensively. On many occasions, children couldn’t settle on a selection of ten pictures and wanted to turn in a few more, which we accepted. It took some children a couple of discussions and rounds of selection with the researcher to make a final decision about which photographs to bring to the workshop. The final 10 photographs could be of different things or of the same thing (children often took photographs of the same ‘subject’ at different times, or different angles).

As part of the workshop children were given the opportunity to make their selections ‘public’ to other children in the study and to discuss these selections. At the workshop children were asked to select a single image from their shortlist of 10, of what mattered to them the most, with which to make a photo-story. For the workshop⁴,

³ In the meanwhile we have been meeting with our interlocutors, carrying out other research activities.

⁴ The workshop in Athens took place on 7 April 2016, at the building of the Association of Greek Archaeologists; in London the workshop took place at The Photographers Gallery on the 14 May 2016 ; the workshop in Hyderabad held at Centre for Economic and Social Studies (CESS) on the 24 April 2016. Each workshop was a day workshop, with a duration of approximately 5-6 hours.

we printed two copies of each of the children's selection, alongside with A3 sized white card paper to use as a canvas and further arts and crafts materials (glue, glitter, stickers, colouring pens, coloured tissue paper etc) for children to alter/adapt/enhance their selected photograph in any way they thought appropriate such as drawing over or around it, create collages with more pictures etc. Additionally, we had an instant camera at each location, which children could use if they happened to change their mind about the pictures that they had in the workshop.

Four facilitators supported the researcher and children in each city. A professional photographer was also present with whom the children could discuss their photographs and ideas. Initially, and after introductions and warm up games and chatting, the children sat in separate tables, in three groups (four groups in London). Consideration was given to group composition to maintain a heterogeneous mix of children at each table as that related to gender and other demographic considerations. Each child presented her pictures to the other children at the table. Children took turns discussing their photographs, as well as having general conversations sparked by the photographs. Facilitators encouraged children to share their readings of the images and the experiences depicted, and to think about what images and stories resonated with them (something which happened considerably with the many cat photographs).

Following a period of discussion, the children went into a process of jointly deciding which picture or pictures they would choose for their individual photo-story. Some of the children made this decision swiftly while others took longer to decide, discussing their thoughts with other children, the researcher, the facilitators or the photographer. Children were advised that the story that would accompany their image should tell the viewer what they (the child) saw or experienced in this picture and why it mattered to them (the child-creator). Some of the children tried out their stories verbally as well as in writing and in dialogue with other participants, before committing anything to paper. Some of the children did not want to write the story themselves, preferring instead to dictate it to a facilitator or to the researcher (especially younger children who did not feel confident with writing).

Once all the children had completed their stories and decorated or altered their pictures, we covered all the stories leaving only the pictures visible on each table. At this point the groups rotated around each of the tables, each group now encountering pictures of which they did not know the story. During these encounters, each child picked up a photograph and then tried to image the accompanying story and why what was depicted might be important. The photo-stories were consequently revealed to the children following these discussions.

At the end of the day all the photo-stories were placed on the wall, in a display that was co-curated by the children, the photographer, the researcher and co-facilitators. The pictures mounted on the walls, parents arrived to collect their children and to view the exhibition of the photo-stories. The 'mock' exhibition for the parents, acted as a third step in making *things that matter* public (after the initial sharing with the researcher and showing the pictures to the other children on the day of the workshop). Consequently, all the photo-stories from the three cities were included in the Study's

internal circulation newsletter (with translations of the stories), and thus children saw the pictures of their peers in the other cities. The photo-stories have also been included in a printed book which has been given to the children, and where also exhibited to the general public in all three cities⁵⁶.

4. Children's other visual histories: Three case studies

From the 45 photo-stories created by the children 13 made reference to animals and nature, 12 to places, seven to popular culture and another seven to relationships (e.g. family and friends). Three photo-stories were about toys (of which 2 were stuffed animals), one photo-story related to technology and two photo-stories were about religion.

It ought to be noted that children knew from the outset who the initial audiences of their photo-stories would be, researchers and parents, and were also told about the final exhibitions and a public audience. As such, the photo-stories can be read as the cares and concerns that children were comfortable with making public and wanted to communicate. There are many overlaps between data collected through other ethnographic methods used on the study, and the photo-story method. There are also differences in emphasis that point towards the limitations of using photography with children that is intended for public consumption, but also communicate the context specificity of producing data. For example, children put more emphasis on their close relationships in more 'private' conversation with researchers; these relationships were less often depicted for public consumption (although there were exceptions which were negotiated with children and their parents) because we asked children to refrain from portraiture photography on grounds of protecting their and their family's anonymity. Nevertheless, as Anna's photo-story below demonstrates, some children in the study found other ways to communicate their private lives in public'.

Having outlined the photo-story process in the previous section, and addressed some of its specificities above, we now present close readings of three photo-stories, two from the most resonant themes (public places and animals) and one from an exceptional theme (religion). Our interpretation of the photo-stories is also embedded in the three years of fieldwork we carried out with the children. We share these readings here as a way of demonstrating the ethnographic value of the process, as a way of generating knowledge with children, as well as a way for children to raise issues.

4.1 Athens – Vasiliki: 'The Playground!!'

⁵ Some of the children didn't manage to come to the workshop (ie some were sick on that day). In these occasions, we repeated the process individually with each of the children at a later day, and their photo-stories were included in all future activities (newsletter, book, exhibition).

⁶ Details of the exhibitions can be found here: <https://connectorsstudy.com/events/in-common/> (London) and here <https://connectorsstudy.com/events/athens-in-common/> (Athens)

Vasiliki, a girl of 8 at the time of the workshop, lives in Exarchia a neighbourhood in central Athens. She has a sister – the five-year-old. Both her parents work as educators - both are not in permanent employment and work delivering private tutoring. The neighbourhood they live in, Exarchia, is a neighbourhood with a high population density, little and contested public space, as well as, significantly, a very strong anarchist and left-wing political character (Varvantakis 2015; Vradis 2014). A counter-cultural refuge, it is often also the site of violent clashes between protesters and the police and is often maligned by the mainstream media and establishment voices (see for instance Katsounaki 2015; Theodoropoulos 2016).

Vasiliki likes her neighbourhood a lot, and she's both aware of the special character of her neighbourhood, as well as the darker images an outsider might harbour of it. Both her parents identify with the neighbourhood's colourful character and political life and consciously chose to live there; they are open to discussing the outside world with their children, including talking politics. They are also engaged in various local politics and social actions.

From the outset, one thing that arose as an issue of concern for Vasiliki was her local playground. One of the sole two playgrounds in the entire area, it is a small space located very close to Vasiliki's home. It is important to her for a number of reasons. She has many memories of playing there from when she was younger, it is the only public space around her home, so they used to go there a lot. But also, even as she grew, she has many memories of being there with her younger brother—first as a baby then later playing with her and teaching her how to use the few play structures available. At the beginning of the research, she told Christos, many stories about the playground, but she had a particular interest in the fact that recently, somebody had cut the brunch of a tree, in which children used to climb. The brunch was presumably deemed dangerous, as it was pretty high and reached over the playground wall. Children had to secretly climb the errand branch careful not to draw adult attention to themselves, and she described several strategies, trickery and techniques which children employed in their transgressive play – for example, how children would distract adults, or knowing which of the parents are less observant, looking at their mobile phones etc.

As such, during a walking tour with Christos, Vasiliki made a picture of the cut brunch, and included it in her selection of the things that mattered to her. From this point on, Vasiliki also started reflecting on the event. She came up with questions about who actually cut the brunch? And furthermore, who made the decision, who was consulted about this (certainly not her or her peers!), who does the playground belong to at the end of the day? These were questions which essentially related to public space usage, urban design and civic control. Vasiliki posed these questions to Christos and to her parents, as well as to her friends at school. When the photo-story was introduced, she already knew that her photo-story would be about the playground. This was a place that mattered to her a lot, and also a great place to show to other children, and one that had many interesting *things* attached to it.



[PLEASE INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE.]

Meanwhile, the playground shut, and there were works taking place in it as renovations were underway. Vasiliki had mixed feelings about it: she was eager to see

what would replace it, but she also liked it as it was. She returned to her original questions regarding who decides such things? She raised these questions with the workers, telling them that she was researching the playground (they, at first, were defensive and told her that she couldn't enter and make photos of the works, but later spoke to her). She found out that the old play structures have become dangerous, and they had to replace them. She also enquired about the works and the schedule for completion. She asked her peers at school about how they felt – both about the fact that the old playground will no longer be there, as well as about the fact that a new one will replace it. And she documented the works at various stages using her camera and a notepad. Her original idea for the photo-story was to show the change process. When the playground was done, Vasiliki, as well as her friends, really liked the new one. However, there was a bureaucratic delay in opening the playground for the public, as there had to be some expert security checks. Vasiliki discovered this fact by asking her mother and her teacher, the former of whom called the municipality on her behalf to find out. The delays in the playground's opening led to protest from the children, directed towards their parents until, eventually, one mother volunteered to take responsibility for opening and closing the playground, something which parents then took turns doing.

When Vasiliki was finally allowed to enter she really liked the new playground and made pictures of it. Although she had originally thought to create a before-and-after photo-story, she finally opted for a presentation of how the playground is now. She thought that she could tell the story, now that she knows it. Both of why it happened, but also of how, despite bureaucratic delays, the playground opened, how the children managed to make it open. She also thought that it will be nice to show to the rest of the children, who come from different places and they may not know that such beautiful places exist in *her* neighborhood –for this reason she wanted to use the pictures of the new playground, instead of the decaying old one, because, as she told me, sometimes people think of Exarchia as a dirty and dangerous place.

Hyderabad - Saif: 'Kaaba'

Saif, an eight-year old boy at the time of workshop, lives in Tadbund – a dense Muslim neighbourhood in old city in Hyderabad. His father is a lorry driver, so is often on the road and only visits the family occasionally. His mother works from home as a casual labourer doing sari embroidery work. The family have a modest economic existence, something which is evident in their living conditions. Saif's father has attended middle school and his mother has attended high school but neither parent has completed those respective levels of education. Saif has four siblings – two brothers and two sisters, and he attends a local government school where the medium of instruction is Urdu. The Old City, where Saif lives, has a history of hostility and violence between local Muslims and Hindus, and is often experienced by residents as a volatile place. This is manifest in everyday social interactions, which are documented in the literature, including the emergence of child/youth vigilante groups, whose members were once victims of previous communal clashes or everyday abuses (Sen, 2011).

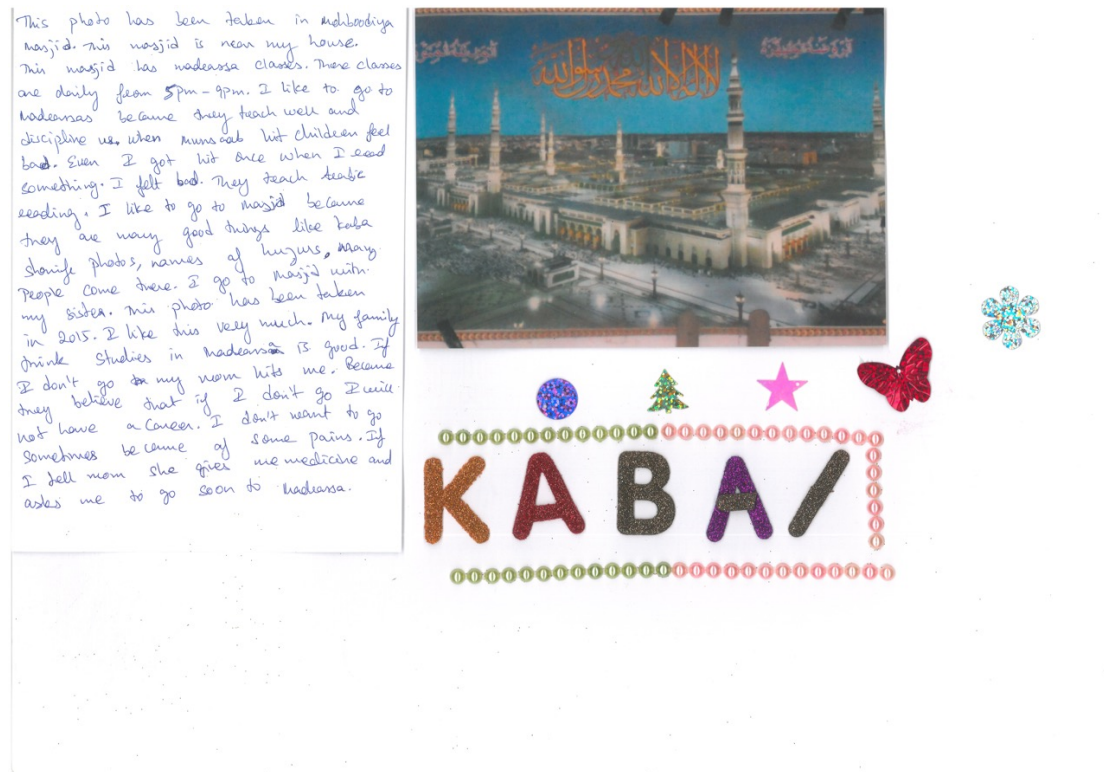
The cultural history of the Old City is unique. The city remained as a princely state of the ‘Nizams of Hyderabad’⁷ when the British ruled the majority of the country, which partly explains the existence of Muslim neighbourhoods in Old City. The place is still considered a ‘safe pocket’ for Muslims; thus, Muslims from other neighbouring districts migrate there. At the same time, there is considerable outward migration amongst Muslim youth in the area to countries of the Middle East. There is sustained political interest and communal politics on inter-country and intra-country religious matters as exemplified by occasional street protest. In the rest of Hyderabad, the Old City has a reputation of violence possibly because of its boundedness and lack of communication with the rest of the city, although the critical reading of the place and its people, and the reality would suggest otherwise (Sen, 2011). There is no park or public places meant for children in the Old City. Saif comes across as being indifferent to his neighbourhood– he neither likes nor dislikes the places he visits.

Religion plays a key role in the everyday life of the Old City. As such, it is perhaps unsurprising that Saif should choose to focus his photo-story on religion. On a number of occasions, Saif shared with Vinnarasan and, our research assistant Madhavi Latha, about the ways in which religion was deeply embedded in his life – in celebrations, rituals, education, food habits, family practices, learning Arabic, choice of dress (kurta), friendship making and so on. When we asked to document ‘what matters to him’ through photographs, he mainly took photos of his home, as his mother was initially apprehensive of allowing him to carry an expensive (for the family) camera to public spaces alone. But, he slowly developed confidence in himself, as did his mother, in his ability to handle the camera, so, eventually, he captured more than two hundred images on various things that mattered to him, both inside and outside the home.

In the process of shortlisting, he reflected on many things that matter to him in his everyday life. For example, his relationship with his siblings were really important to him, especially, the strong bond he shared with his elder brother, four years his senior. However, his brother’s admission to the local Madrasa changed Saif’s position in the family. He started recounting his pain of being separated from his brother and the subsequent changes it created in his everyday family life. Now, as a responsible male member of the family he had to attend errands and his role in the family was redefined in the absence of his father and elder brother. He used one of his photographs to reflect on his newly acquired role in contributing to the family finances which involved helping his mother for nearly half-an-hour every day in her Sari embroidery work. He did not like the work completely though and there was some negotiation around his contribution of labour, with his mother promising pocket money in exchange for a week’s work. At the same time, he felt happy to assist his mother. Another photo taken by Saif bring out the effects that of poverty has on his life. Looking at a photograph of a cup of milk, Vinnarasan saw his eyes well up with tears. He doesn’t drink milk often, as it is luxury for the family, so when his mother offered him a bowl of milk when he was sick he took a photo of it.

⁷ The ‘Nizam’ was the title of Muslim dynasty rulers of Hyderabad State in the 18th and first half of 19th century.

Saif wasn't sure which photograph he would pick for his photo story but he was consistently evaluating and reflecting on his interest and sharing stories of things that matter to him while we visited him. After much consideration, finally, he decided to create a photo-story on a Kaaba – a photo he captured of a photo frame in his Arabic class in the mosque. One of the facilitators at the workshop wrote down the story that Saif dictated.



[PLEASE INSERT FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE.]

Saif wasn't sure about the name of the mosque and where it exists but he knew that it was a photo of a mosque and he was certain that this is what his photo-story would be about, because the Kaaba related so much to his life. On a number of occasions during the fieldwork, he insisted on the importance of religion in his life. He has been attending Arabic classes every day since the age of four. He has a sense of induction and orientation towards religious life by learning Arabic in the Madrasa and through that to public life. He spoke to the researchers about the differences between his school life and his Arabic class, especially as that related to corporal punishment⁸. He told them

⁸ Although Saif felt bad when he was hit once by the master in Madrasa, he self-reported that he still likes to go to Masjid/Madrasa because there are so many good things that he enjoys over there. And given a choice he would prefer to go to Madrasa than his regular school, he confessed once in Vinnarasan's and Madhavi's

that he preferred his Arabic class, as the teachers there are better than in his school. His Arabic class was also important to him in making and sustaining friendships as well as for playing and joking about with friends/sibling(s) on the way there and back. When he used to go with his elder brother, his brother introduced him to a tree where they could pluck custard apple and he still loves doing that.

4.3 London – Anna: ‘A figure of pure majesty’

Anna, an eight year old girl at the time of the workshop, lives with her mother in an affluent and mixed-use North London suburb. Her mother, Lysette is a freelancer with her own media arts practice and her father is a teacher. Anna’s parents are separated and she lives with her mother during the week, and with her father, who lives nearby, on alternating weekends. Family is very important to both Lysette and Anna. One of the first things Lysette says about herself is that she comes from a large family, compared to the smaller family of origin of her former partner. Anna talks about her grandmother, aunts and cousins. The biggest unfairness in her life to-date has been her parents’ separation which she feels she was not consulted about and should have been. When describing her week, days were described as ‘mummy’ and ‘daddy’ days. Nevertheless, with the exception of one or two occasions during the fieldwork when Anna takes the opportunity to vent to Melissa about her parents’ separation, the topic does not come across as an overriding or overwhelming concern. What matters more and most to Anna are animals, and cats in particular.

Early on in the fieldwork Anna describes herself as “fanatic about animals” and tells Melissa that when she grows up she wants to be a scientist of nature and animals. There are two cats already that live with the family when we meet them, and one of the cats is expecting kittens. One of the first conversations Melissa has with Anna is about the kittens. Anna explains that she has been running a competition at school asking her classmates to guess the kittens’ coats. Over the course of the next 18 months, the fieldwork is punctuated with the birth of the kittens, their early months and weaning in the front room of the flat, the process of selecting which of the six kittens Anna and Lysette will keep, and the search for loving homes for the rest of the kittens. The arrival of the kittens is a big event in the house, Anna names all of the kittens and guests are asked to thoroughly wash and disinfect their hands before being allowed to caress and cuddle any of the new arrivals which often slip behind the sofa in search of the radiator pipes for warmth.

Many of Anna’s other interests also implicate animals, from swap card collections to her love of mythical creatures and T.S. Elliot’s *Old Possum’s Book of*

visits. Similarly, being a firm believer of Islam, his mother once told Vinnarasan and Madhavi that religious life is paramount to everything, so learning Arabic and Quran is a must for peaceful life and future career. Therefore, even if Saif is not feeling well, she gives him medicine and sends him to Arabic class regularly. For Saif, the mosque is not only a place for learning, but it also provides a space for social life, especially friendship. Overall, he has a positive feeling about his experiences in his Arabic class.

Practical Cats. The photographs that Anna returns on the project camera and which we review together, are predominantly of the kittens, a dog that is known to the family, a few photographs of family members, and a photograph of her favourite stuffed animal and a mythical creatures. During the photo selection process for the workshop eight of the 10 photographs that Anna selects to bring with her for the workshop are either individual or group portraits of the kittens. During the workshop Anna's photographs generated much interest from the children at her table drawing them into her life and her perspective. Finally, at the workshop Anna chooses one of the eight cat photographs to compose her photo-story.



[PLEASE INSERT FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE.]

While Anna's passion for animals, and her cats in particular, could well be read as a moment in time, an ephemeral matter of care and concern sparked by the arrival of the kittens, a closer look at her evaluations of her photographs and the justifications she gives for making her selection of images for the workshop, suggest that her 'fanaticism' about cats is both real and idiomatic (Nolas, 2015; Nolas, Varvantakis & Aruldoss, 2019), emblematic of other cares and concerns related to her lived experience that are harder to articulate.

Discussing one of the cat photographs, of the mother cat pictured under a chair, Anna tells Melissa during the photo-selection, and then also shares with the workshop group, that the photograph represents 'safety' which 'is really important because

otherwise everyone would die, we would get nowhere without safety’ (Melissa fieldnotes, 14 March 2016). The meaning of the picture of Hurricane, one of the kittens that ended up in the photo-story, is more ambiguous. During one visit and discussion of her photographs Anna describes the close up of the cat’s eye as representing ‘laughter’. Asked why laughter might be important to her she tells Melissa ‘it’s important we have laughter because if everything was stern there would be some things we could do but it wouldn’t be much fun’. A month later, the same photograph is read as ‘fear’ by Anna which in turn is understood in a protective sense: ‘it’s important to have fear because otherwise we wouldn’t be scarred and in some circumstances it’s important to run’ (Melissa fieldnotes 9 April 2016). The photo-story itself talks about beauty, and the figurative language used (majesty, most beautiful), conveys an intensity of feeling about the photograph’s subject, as well as the many other human experiences that Anna has come to read in and through Hurricane’s eye.

The meaning of ‘what matters’ to Anna, as she tells Melissa during the photo-selection meeting, are her deep held ‘needs’, her ‘fundamentals to myself’ and ‘what you can’t live without’. She is the only child in London to define what matters in such existential terms. In this sense, while animals and cats may well be a passion of Anna’s, they also allow her to communicate more existential experiences of safety and security, laughter and fear, which are otherwise difficult to articulate in words alone. Her idiomatic use of animals, as a way through which to express fundamentals of the human condition, are echoed in other children’s narratives of animals. For example, asked ‘if your cat were a human who would they be’, Jean, a 7-year-old boy participating in the study, tells Melissa that his cat would be his mum or dad if they were a human. Relationships were a key ‘matter of care and concern’ in children’s private and public narratives and Anna’s photo-story is emblematic of the many ways in which such concerns might be expressed. Anna’s photo-story is also a reminder that needs, interdependency, and care are both political and gendered (Eichenbaum and Orbach, 1993). Echoing Nancy Fraser’s observation about domesticity and motherhood in the nineteenth century, as both private practices and idioms through which women connected to the public sphere (Fraser, 1990), Anna’s emphasis on life’s vulnerabilities and joys, so often experienced in private, can be read as the personal in the political, especially at a time of austerity where many children and women’s needs, and the public services to support them, have come under severe threat, if not complete extinction (Sanders-McDonough et al. 2016; Jupp, 2016, 2017).

5. Discussion

In research with children, visual methods are often employed in order to overcome linguistic skills or perceived age-related restrictions to linguistic expression. In this paper, we have argued that photography can be an especially helpful tool for social science enquiry, particularly if photography is employed as grounded to social life and time. We have experimented with the medium of the photo-story, beyond the status-quo linguistic methods as well as beyond ‘transactional’ (Nolas, 2011) uses of photography in research, as a medium that is embedded in social relationships to raise issues that provide researchers with a complex understanding of what matters to

children that is also elaborated and made more profound of time. The particular medium has allowed us to look at the ambiguities and nuances of children's views about the phenomena depicted, providing us with valuable insights on how issues of care and concern in childhood relate to wider public issues. Thus, in the three examples discussed in the previous section, we have respectively explored three children's multimodal elaborations of issues relating to access to public space, religion and animals. The complex views that children expressed through the medium of the photo-story, in a critical dialogue with other expressive forms and data collection methods, on these issues are revelatory of how children's views are far from simplistic and in fact embedded in wider public discourses. As such, the issues raised by the children are politically relevant in their complexity and social grounding and photography offers a medium for creating and sustaining childhood publics (Nolas, 2015; Nolas and Varvantakis, 2019).

However, this should not be seen as implying that the visual might be a *form of expression which is* closer to the child; such assumptions, namely that visual methods are closer to the child, essentialise both child and visual methods processes (Mitchell 2005: 70; Christiansen and James 2000). In the case of the [Name of the study], our rationale in using visual methodologies in our research has been focused not just in filling the gaps of children's developmental skills, but also in looking at the different knowledge that the visual production of children may bring to the forth; to enable explorations of 'hidden transcripts of power' (Luttrell 2010, cf. Scott 1990), at *other* urban geographies (Orellana 1999), at materialities (Mitchel 2005), at *other* sensual landscapes (Varvantakis & Nolas, under review), in the study of children's relationships of care and concern to the world. For example, Vasiliki's engagement with photography and the visual representation of her local park led to her role in documenting local social change. Saif was able to celebrate his religious identity that occupies a minority and historically contested position in the Indian public sphere. Anna's photography explores the fundamentals of the human condition through a 'third object', her cats. This way of approaching the visual knowledge, is in line with the project set forth by MacDougall, who calls for "rethinking certain categories of anthropological knowledge in light of understandings that may be accessible only by nonverbal means' (MacDougall, 1997:292) – which, in his understanding, can lead to novel questions about human culture – "new pathways to anthropological knowledge" (1997:292. See also Pinney 2004, Kalantzis 2014).

The method of the photo-story which we have experimented with in our research and described in this article has proven fruitful in the enquiry of politics as relations of concern, in the context of what moves and matters to people, and as ways of relating to the world in ways which are often embodied and more often than not, unseen. Multimodal ethnographic experiments, such as the one presented in this paper, may enhance our understandings of children's encounters, experiences and engagement in public life (Varvantakis and Nolas, 2019; Nolas et al al. 2018) and the political aspects of everyday life in childhood (Kallio & Häkli, 2011, 2013; Milstein 2010; Nolas et al 2017a, 2107b), which are often ignored or glossed-over. In turn, such multimodal experiments hold the potential for enriching our theoretical understandings of public life.

Definitions of the political, as that relates to people across the life course, continues to draw on a narrow definition of institutional politics. Asking the question of what matters expands and enhances our political imagination. Political processes may often be ‘invisible’ and issues/things that matter may and do vary considerably. We employed photography in order to address these issues – to explore the things that matter to children and to do so through their own views and in dialogue with them, also beyond the domain of the purely linguistic. Our methodology has valued the longitudinal approach to photography as a process that is socially grounded in various stages and moments of dialogue, from its production to its circulation. Foregrounding the process of inquiry over its outcome, paradoxically (?) resulted in a rich and multifaceted end product. Pugh (2013) has argued that the theoretical stakes in ignoring childhood are high. With this research approach we have shown that children’s matters of care and concern are infinitely recognisable and relatable to those of adults. Methodological learnings from research with children, can and should be in dialogue with the wider social sciences and would fit well within the wider agenda of decolonising our theoretical frameworks and understandings (de Sousa Santos 2014), to include instance of alternative epistemologies from *places*, such as childhood, that have been historically ignored.

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