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**The Plastic Ceiling Project: Advantages of Using Arts-Based Research to
Explore the Pain of Mothers that Work and Study**

Introduction

Since the publication of the Dearing Report in 1997, the UK Government has consistently promoted social mobility and fairness as part of its rhetoric. Despite the drive for inclusivity in our Higher Education Institutions, those with mothering responsibility, particularly if they are also in employment, often need to overcome considerable challenges in order to complete course requirements (Brooks, 2012, Moreau and Kerner, 2012).

This project was developed from research undertaken over several years and initially aimed to investigate and understand perceived barriers for students who had additional responsibilities as both parents and employees. Over time, however, I became increasingly aware from that although many of the issues cited were similarly challenging for both mothers and fathers, female participants (mothers) consistently described “emotional” barriers. Why this is the case remains unclear and will require further investigation in future research.

As a researcher, participants’ emotional recounts of fighting to juggle study, employment and motherhood resonated strongly with my own circumstances as a mother of two working as a teacher trainer and struggling to complete a doctorate. I also had a keen, long-standing interest and belief in the power of the Arts in education and was interested in developing art-based

research that would facilitate opportunities for participants to discuss experiences and challenges through the building of networks and communities, in order to potentially facilitate support, protest and campaign. This paper aims to consider the successes of The Plastic Ceiling Project and the importance of using an arts-based methodology to achieve these aims.

Methodology

The project commenced with the gathering of a series of initial stories via an online blog. Participants were simply asked to recollect an instance when they perceived that the collision of their multiple roles as mother, student and employee could be said to have caused them emotional pain.

A constant theme that had become apparent through previous research was that although many individuals described very similar experiences, many of them also described themselves as being “the only one who felt like this”. Hence, it was deemed important that participants could see each other’s contributions through the blog as this supported a dialogue or exchange and co-creation of knowledge; which would enrich knowledge for mutual benefit, rather than a simple knowledge transfer.

By coding data revealed in the stories, I found that several emotions; those of guilt, shame, frustration, isolation, judgement, resentment and exhaustion were consistently cited and that these all appeared to be motivated by the fear of being a “bad” mother. Thus, I created seven images inspired by the collected stories and used these images as the basis of a virtual exhibition which I intentionally provocatively entitled The Seven Sins of Bad Mothers housed

within a purpose-built website for The Plastic Ceiling Project with a built-in blog that enabled participants to comment on each of the images.

Participants then viewed the images online over the course of the virtual exhibition and were able to comment both on the images and to respond to others' comments.

Use of Barbie

In this project I did not want to present the participants' stories using real characters. This was for several reasons. The first was practical; I would need to recruit actors that would be prepared to pose as the characters in the images. The second was that there would then be certain inherent endangerments for those actors in that these images would provide a permanent record of an experience that might be attributed specifically to the actor rather than the character, for example by their own children. Finally, I felt that it was important that the characters were generalised to represent any working mother rather than a particular working mother.

Using Barbies as the characters in my project gave me several advantages. Firstly, the characters were easy to procure and manipulate. Secondly, Barbie was able to represent the feminine and as such 'every woman'. Thirdly, I felt that subverting my overtly feminist research with an anti-feminist icon gave the project some humour and made it more appealing and enjoyable for the participants. This was important, I felt, as the subject matter of the project could have been regarded as overly intense and off-putting for participants.

In choosing Barbie as the character in the images I was very aware that there has been much concern about the use of media images of women in the construction of dominant feminine

stereotypes (see, for example, Owen, 2007, Thomas-Banks, 2003, Urla and Swedland, 1995) with the constructed stereotype presumed to be false in opposition to the more truthful 'real woman'. However, it can be robustly argued that the category 'real woman' does not refer to a homogenous social grouping either and is in effect simply a different "kind of mechanism by which the protagonists of fiction articulate with reality" (Hall and Nixon, 2013, p. 342). Rogers has argued that Barbie erases the category of woman by being hyper-feminine or emphatically feminine; she reveals nothing about real women existing as an "unbound signifier" (Rogers, 1999:112) with Tofoletti categorising Barbie as a "posthuman prototype...who embodies the potential for identity to be mutable and unfixed" (Tofoletti, 2007:59). In other words, she is literally and metaphorically plastic; she can be who you want her to be.

The Role of Photo Elicitation

Representing every-day, intimate dimensions of the social family or workplace was a challenge in itself; as it is often elusive; constantly shifting and dynamic and may be experienced differently by each individual or even by the same individual at different times. Building imagery into the research process was helpful in exploring every-day, taken-for-granted experiences and allowing participants to reflect on these by providing the space to consider, articulate and make explicit that which is normally implicit (Liebenberg, 2009; Mannay, 2013; Rose; 2012).

Photo elicitation is described by Harper (2002) as "the simple idea of inserting a photograph into a research interview" and involves using visual images to elicit comments. Advocates have found that the meanings and emotions elicited often differ from those obtained through traditional verbal methods. According to Banks (2001) one important characteristic is that

photo elicitation creates images as part of the research project. They are not then an image of something already described in the text but are used actively in the research process (Banks, 2001; Rose, 2012).

The Role of the Blog

Where the images presented allowed participants to share experiences, the blog allowed them to discuss them, giving them the chance to communicate with other participants and to establish communities of their own. Unlike many other social research approaches, one particular advantage of a blog is that it enables and encourages rich reflection because the contributors have to put their thoughts into writing which gives them time to reflect deeply on their experiences (Scott and Morrison, 2006; Buckingham, 2009). Once the blog went live images and comments were available to participants throughout the seven days of the online exhibition and, from the dates and times on the posts, it was evident that participants returned to posts over time. Unlike a focus group or interview, participants were free to comment at a time that was convenient to them which was particularly advantageous with participants who were likely to be so time poor.

Advantages of an Arts-Based Methodology

Advantages of Using Visual Images in the Methodology

Banks (2001) argues that the biggest advantage of photo elicitation in research is the value of the image as a starting point to stimulate discussion and that the most important part of the process, then, is what the participant interprets from the image. Photographic images have

been widely valued for their ability to carry a lot of information including the sensory element of an experience (Grady, 2004; Latham, 2004; Tinkler, 2013). Although Tinkler has debated whether this can be done more effectively with images than words, my experience throughout this project has been that asking participants to explain and elaborate on given images is an opportunity to gain different insights than those provided by other research methods. In commenting upon the image below for example, Susan wrote;

Barbie looks nice doesn't she? She's handing out sweets...to sugar the pill...she's not bending down to see the world from their point of view. House is clean too!



In this example, Susan is “reading” the picture, looking at its surrounding context to make meaning and has inferred significance that I, as the maker of the image, had not consciously intended. Banks (2001) discusses this. He argues that each image has its own “internal narrative” or story that is communicated and that this may not necessarily be the same story that the maker aimed to communicate.

Advantages of the Methodology as Enabling

Pink (2007) and Van Auken (2010) contend that visual methodologies are enabling because they can be used to invoke life as it is lived. Buckingham (2009) expands on this by contending that visual methods give participants a “different way in” and allow them to overcome the rational, logo-centric tendencies required by verbalisation in order to access regions in the brain that are evolutionarily and developmentally older, broadening the scope of data access and offering insights into authentic information that are less self-conscious and more complex and insightful. One participant gave the following emotional account;

More important to me than feelings of guilt was my sense of feeling jealous of the caregivers who got to spend time with our previous daughter!! She was the only one of the ten babies we conceived who survived to term. The others died in my womb. I just wanted to have the fun of watching her grow.

The participant here talks about her feelings as invoked by the image rather than the image itself.

Advantages of the Methodology as Empowering

Traditionally, researchers have held the dominant role in research, but in recent years there has been a growing emphasis on collaborative production and the participant’s role in the creation of images (Samuels, 2007). Photo elicitation has successfully been used in a range of studies which encourage the empowerment of participants, emphasising a clear and central role and allowing them to become the “expert” in the interview (Joanou, 2009; Rose 2012).

There is also a clear advantage in that all contributors can cultivate a sense of involvement within a developing community and comment on one another's posts to add meaning or provide support. In response to a conversation around the stress of multi-tasking inspired by one of the images for example, Anne responds humorously;

I think this applies to all people who care enough about what they are doing. We are our own worst enemy sometimes by setting our own high expectations because we don't want to fail at anything. I was told once by someone that they like to do one thing at a time but do it very well. This was, of course, a man!

Development of Empathy and Understanding

Fundamentally, blogs are designed to be interactive (Warlick, 2007) and give participants the opportunity to meet virtually and interact with one another; learning about other people and their experiences while being able to share their own thoughts, feelings and experiences and receive feedback. It was important to me to have a forum where participants were able to interact and possibly influence the feelings and behaviours of other contributors as I believe that a sharing of experiences could and should promote understanding and build empathy between communities of people. For example, one of the participants, who now has grown up children commented; "I'd forgotten how hard all this was!" after reading another's comments.

It was interesting to note that participants also began to communicate between themselves. Commenting on the image below for example, Val made a comment at 12.11pm arguing that non-members of the school run can also feel isolated by not having children. Maggie then responded at 12.38pm; "Well said Val. I agree that isolation comes from 'clubs' where you are either in or out and the baby club is the biggest!" with a further comment directed to Maggie

from Elaine at 3.24pm; “Living up to other people’s expectations re the number of children in the family is a difficult one Maggie. My favourite one is the open-mouthed incredulity on people’s faces when I tell them I have six children, work and study!”.



I noted that certain participants admitted that they had begun to see situations from different perspectives such as Viv on Thursday’s post “The Charity Cake Sale (judgement)”, who initially commented at 9.59am; “I love baking so this is the perfect justification of me allowing myself time to play and my children love helping out!” and then returned to the conversation the next day at 8.33am; “Just looking back over these comments, so many people seeing it as a competition. This did not enter my head at all!” Pink (2007, p.235) describes participants as “partners and collaborators in the negotiation of experiential meaning” stating that, “Capturing cultural experience with visual text therefore allows for a transformative potential.”

The Inclusivity of an Arts-Based Methodology

Because the images led the conversations, many people felt that they were “expert” enough to comment. One participant said that they had intended to “just read” the comments on the blog

but were pleasantly surprised as they had felt that they had something useful to say. Some expressed concerns that they may have felt intimidated by others in face to face situations and that the blog mitigated this. One participant noted “we may come from all walks of life but first and foremost we are mothers and love our children before anything else”.

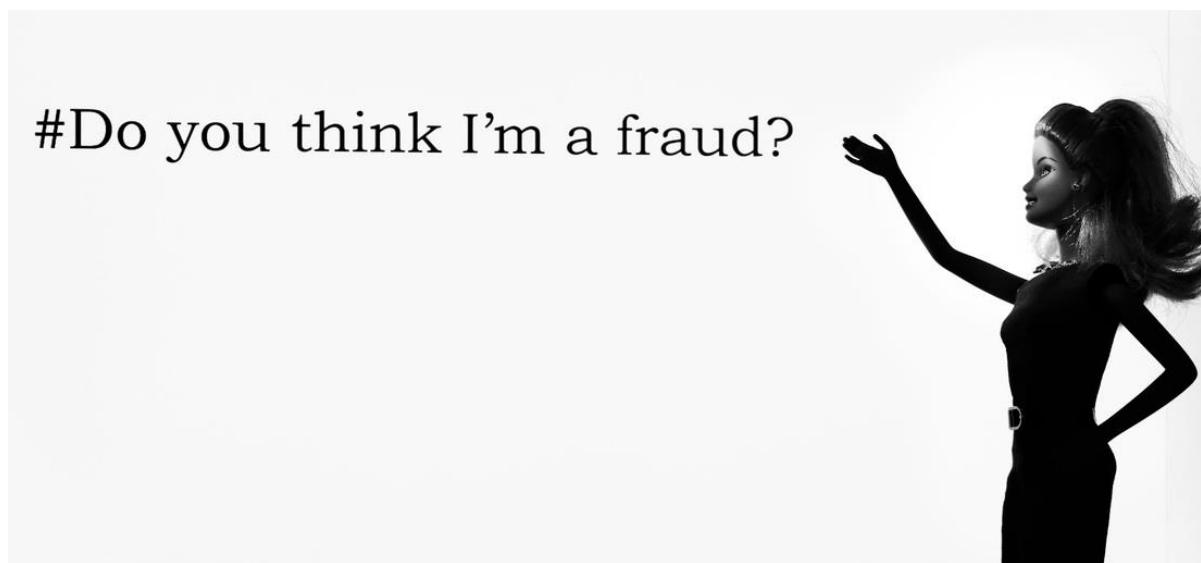
The Potential for Building Communities and Support Networks

For Philo (2014), selecting groups of people to become audiences reflects a commitment to the belief that meanings are socially and culturally produced, rejecting an idea of the audience being a collection of distinct, unique individuals and instead arguing that social interaction mediates a collective understanding of specific issues. During the project, I noticed that the first commentary each day often set the tone of successive posts. However, there were also many instances of participants disagreeing with others for example, commenting on the image below Sue writes; “Trust me to read this differently to everyone else! My resentment comes in the form that my ex never has the girls overnight!”



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Blogs can also inspire feelings of community among group members making it easier for participants to lose their inhibitions (Gumbrecht, 2004; Hookway, 2008). At the end of the project for example, Lynne commented; “Really enjoyed reading all the comments and I feel as if I joined a group of like-minded people for a week”. There were also many examples of participants providing support to one another. This can be seen where Sue commented on the following image:



Sue: This is a big one for me. I very often feel shame that I'm not doing a good enough job. Especially if I haven't handled something very well. My ex said I always over-complicate things. Probably because I'm always trying to think ahead and not just dealing with the thing at the time. I worry a lot!

Lynne: I suspect your ex might have under complicated things.

Conclusion

Creative approaches through art-based research offer possibilities that other methods do not and can yield highly applicable, rich data that energise and empower participants. Several

contributors in this project who came from non-academic backgrounds said that they were pleasantly surprised as they had felt that they had something useful to say, whilst a colleague from an academic background said that she could see a deep value in shared conversations around these images and had enjoyed the light-hearted nature of the images. The use of a blog has been an exciting way to stimulate debate, promote understanding of emotional barriers as perceived by many women, to capture data and to bring people together (albeit in a virtual environment) who would not normally be able to share a physical space. Thus, a key finding of this project has been that such methods create a bridge between the everyday lived experience and opportunities for activism, giving participants a chance to share, discuss and co-create knowledge.

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