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Using photography in connection with social research

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This talk needs to be prefaced by a kind of health warning! I've been asked to tell you about the use I make of photography in relation to my research. And I'm going to talk about that, about my own work. But others may use it in many different ways. And in any case, photography is a very problematic matter. It's got both ethical and practical implications. And what's seemed useful and workable to me might very well not seem so in the kind of research you're doing, and the circumstances in which you're doing it. I'm going to come back to these problems at the end of my talk, and maybe we can compare notes in the discussion.

I'd be interested to know whether any of you have actually used photography in connection with research - could you just raise a hand if you have?

Right - well - photography apart, *qualitative research* is the field of interest I hope I might share with many of you. But my own work has almost always been a specific subset of qualitative research - '*action research*'. You probably know books and articles that define and describe various rather different action research methodologies. I'm not going to load this talk with references. But I've made a short bibliography here for any of you who might be particularly interested.

Most authors see action research as meaning you get engaged with people in a material context - lets say with, or as, teachers in schools, or nurses in hospitals - and the research you do may be to instigate or to test practical developments in practice.

My own version of action research is a bit different from this, in the sense that since 1995 I've actually been studying *a field of activism*, movements against militarism and war, peace movements. Furthermore, I'm active myself in the London branches of two international networks that are components of such a movement, Women in Black against War (WiB) and the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF). In approaching my research informants, I've always made sure they were aware of our shared, though never identical, engagement in the peace movement. And that they accepted and welcomed my interest in them because we have common goals.

Another thing I need to say in introduction to this theme is that for two decades or so, between 1979 and 1995 I was carrying out a string of gender

studies of labour processes and technological change. For all that time I was getting funding from governmental sources, such as the Economic and Social Research Council and the Equal Opportunities Commission, and I was doing it through a university (City University London where I had an honorary but not a paid position).

In that year 1995 I turned my attention to gender studies of peace and war. At that point the university ceased to be the channel through which I obtained and was paid research funding. I began getting funding from charitable organizations, ngo's, who paid me directly, and whose objectives aren't academic but humanitarian, social, or even political.

To give you an example...One time when I visited the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust office to discuss the possibility of their funding a new project, their research officer Nick Perks asked me what outcomes I foresaw. 'We know you'll *write* something', he said. 'There'll be a nice book for sure. But what will *change* as a result of this research you want us to fund?' In other words, like me, JRCT don't see the researcher as the proverbial 'fly on the wall' of positivist science, the observer who sees without being seen, without having an effect.

A funder like that, for me, is ideal! And it's in this spirit, I've always tried to contribute, albeit in a small way, to the work of the groups I've investigated. And although I've probably always gained more than they have from the engagement, a lot of them have told me it's not all been one way. It can be helpful to activists when a researcher engages with them and asks them to recount, reflect on and analyse their practice. It may sometimes clarify their thinking and renewing their sense of direction - even though it's demanding on their time.

As a quick introduction, these are some of the things I've published on women's antiwar movements in the last fifteen years. Here you can see I'm using photographs to show photographs!

[Powerpoint: Birkbeck1Books : 2 mins]

And let me say in passing that it's much easier to persuade a book publisher than an academic journal to carry photographs. I've written dozens of such peer-reviewed articles over this same span of time and only one of those has been illustrated with photographs, and that was online. And of course universities value these as measures of research achievement more than they do books.

Now I thought I'd go into a bit more depth about the first of those studies - the one that was published as *The Space Between Us: Negotiating Gender and National Identities in Conflict*. It occupied me fulltime in the years 1995-98. I'll tell you about the original project and show some of the photographs involved in it, and then I'll go on to tell you about a revisiting of that project I carried out in early 2012, some sixteen or seventeen years later - in which photography also played a significant part.

This research project involved my immersion for quite some time in three women's organizations, each in a war zone: Bosnia, Israel Palestine and Northern Ireland. The organizations had something in common: they were partnerships of women from opposing sides in the conflict.

Yugoslavia, as you well remember, was destroyed by nationalist aggressions in the 1990s. The Bosnian phase of the war started in 1992 and ended with the Dayton peace agreement, signed in Paris on December 14 1995. Eleven days later I sat down to Christmas dinner in Medica Women's Therapy Centre in Zenica. A Christmas dinner? you might well ask. In Muslim central Bosnia? Yes, because the staff of this extraordinary women's organization were, against all the odds, an ethnically-mixed team. Medica was a medical, psychiatric and social resource for women raped and traumatized in the war. In a Muslim stronghold, its clientele was mainly Bosniak, as Bosnian Muslims were now called, and so was the majority of the staff. But a minority of the Medica staff during the war were women of other 'names' - Bosnian Serb or Orthodox, and Bosnian Croat or Catholic - or of mixed birth, or in mixed marriages. These were women who'd stayed put in their homes in Zenica, adhering to the old Yugoslav ideal, refusing to be intimidated into uprooting and moving to territory secured by Serbs or Croats in their ethnic name. The Christmas dinner wasn't exactly an Orthodox or Catholic celebration. It was more an excuse, in a time of scarcity, to cook up something special and give presents all round.

I had the privilege of living among the doctors and therapists and patients of Medica for a while. I tried to be useful in various ways. But my research purpose was to study and understand the thinking, the processes and practices that enabled them to set aside the issues the war raised between them - huge scope for mutual blame - and to work together as a feminist collective for the care of war survivors.

By the time I was writing up, although not when I started, Italian feminists, and later Nira Yuval-Davis, were using the term 'transversal politics' to describe this kind of process - relating to others across difficult borders marking difference. My research project showed how transversal politics was being achieved in practice - and the difficulties it encounters.

(Powerpoint: Birkbeck2BiH : 2 mins)

The second organization I was working with was in Israel Palestine. There, the 1993 Oslo Accords were gradually being implemented in the occupied West Bank, and giving a hope of statehood - not justice exactly, but at least statehood - for Palestinians. That same year, up in the north of the region, in the Galilee, the Jezreel Valley and the Wadi Ara, a group of Jewish and Palestinian Israeli women had started meeting. They demonstrated together in roadside vigils, 'Women in Black' style vigils, against the Occupation. But, more than most 'peace groups', they weren't just focused on the Occupation. They called for full equality and democratic rights for the Palestinian minority within the state of Israel. They took the name Bat Shalom of the North (Bat Shalom means Daughter of Peace). The Jewish members of this 'Bat Shalom

of the North' lived on the agricultural *kibbutzim* that spread across those fertile plains. The Palestinian women came from Arab towns and villages perched on the dry rocky hills – places like Nazareth and Iksal and Ara. Although they were neighbours, these two kinds of Israeli very rarely had contact. They were set apart physically by land ownership law, and emotionally - on the one hand by Jewish fear and racism, and on the other by Palestinians' deep bitterness about the theft of their land and the expulsion of most of their community when the Israeli state was founded 1948. As with Medica in Bosnia, my main research interest in Bat Shalom of the North was just how women so divided managed to share a political feminist project of action. What kind of transversal politics were they evolving?

(Powerpoint: Birkbeck31-P : 2 mins)

The third case study was in Northern Ireland. When I started in 1996, ceasefires had been on and off and on again. A peace process was gradually gearing up. It would culminate in the Peace Agreement signed on Good Friday 1998. That agreement was hardly going to put right the wrongs of centuries of British colonial oppression in Ireland, but it did close 30 years of armed conflict in the north. The Belfast city map was – it still is - a patchwork of Catholic and Protestant housing areas, deeply divided by Republican and Loyalist affinities. From the late 1970s, some women in some neighbourhoods had been opening drop-in centres, a resource for local women. And something odd happened in 1990. The Unionist-controlled Belfast City Council refused to renew its grant funding to the women's centre in the Catholic Falls Road, claiming they were 'IRA supporters'. The women in the Shankill women's centre, a strongly Protestant district, whose grant was renewed, were really upset by that injustice and called a press conference to support these 'enemy' women. The media were totally surprised by this. After that the two centres set up a cross-community unit they called the Women's Support Network, and some other centres joined it. They found common ground in the poverty, violence and political neglect besetting all their neighbourhoods. It became a really bold and articulate feminist voice of working class women in Belfast. Of course working across sectarian lines was risky. The armed groups controlling their streets hated to see it and punished them as traitors. I stayed close to the Network for some months, to observe and learn from the way they dealt with differences between them – the centuries of injustice and violence, but also the inequalities and discrimination still going on.

(I'm not going to show you photos of Belfast and the Women's Support Network at this point in my narrative, as I did with the other two organizations - because there'll be an occasion for you to see them in a minute.)

It was understood from the start of my research that I'm involved in the peace movement in my non-working life, and that I supported their aims and wanted to understand their circumstances, difficulties they faced, and what they were achieving. I hoped that my work could be a contribution to the movement. It was accepted that I'd be among them for several weeks on several occasions, participating in some of their activities, as appropriate, while observing and

carrying out in-depth interviews. It was also understood from the start that I'd be using a camera as well a tape recorder to illustrate their location and their work. But first I sat down with the coordinators of the organization in each case, and other interested participants, to discuss the implications and the uses of photography. The way I saw it, and tried to explain it to them, was that the photography could be an aid to reflexivity, a seeing of themselves through my eyes, and a seeing of me through the way I was seeing them. But we also explored more practical ways in which we could use my photographs in support of their work. For instance, in Bosnia I worked closely with Medica's Information Department - it was called Infoteka - and among other things I produced a publicity poster for them in English and Bosnian language to assist in fundraising. And I showed you earlier a photographically illustrated book in Bosnian language Infoteka printed, after further research we did together.

I also went on working closely with the three organizations a while longer - because they asked me to set up exchange visits between the countries, and I made videos of these further exercises in transversal politics.

Now, I want to move on to tell you about my 'revisiting' of these three organizations in 2012 - exactly two years ago. It was more than a decade and a half after the original study. I got in touch with and interviewed as many of the original activists as I could find (thirty-eight in total). In each country I arranged a meeting of the 'old-timers' for group discussion. I asked them 'What's become of violence?', and 'What are relations like today between people identified by those conflictual nationalist names?' 'Have gender relations changed in this period - what's become of women?' Hardest of all, I asked them 'What progress has been made here towards justice and democracy?'ⁱ

I haven't got time in this talk to tell you the substantive outcomes of this revisiting study. What I want to discuss with you instead is the use I made of photography in it.

My problem in going back was : how was I going to span *time* - this gap of fifteen years, more or less, between the two research moments? What's involved in the intellectual and emotional enterprise of looking back through time, and redirecting the light of the past onto the present moment? The women I hoped to find, in the cities of Belfast and Zenica and in the wide reaches of northern Israel, would be fifteen years older than when I last met them. Their lives today would be shaped by new realities - children and grandchildren born, health and wellbeing gained or (more likely) lost, changed economic circumstances and new political structures. How could I re-establish simultaneity with each of them, in a moment we had shared in the past? How could we together travel through time, connecting the past with the present, and the interval between?

'Memory work' is a distinctive category of qualitative inquiry and in recent years there's been quite a lot written about it. For those of you who are interested, I've listed some references here.

It's common ground among memory researchers that a given memory shouldn't be taken as "truth" but rather as evidence, to be interrogated, mined for its meanings and its possibilities. A memory should be seen as something to be critically interpreted in terms of both form and content. Both individual and collective memories of given events and moments change with the passage of time. Memory studies aren't just concerned with the past. The crucial thing is they're about the *relationship between past and the present*.

So after doing all this reading I could see that my own approach to a shared memory of 1996 was going to have to be cautious, and open-minded, and provisional. I might be able to generate a remembering of that period (my own recall, as of this moment). But I couldn't assume that is how things actually were. Even less could I suppose that other women would remember those times in the manner I remembered them myself.

Annette Kuhn has written about the conscious and purposeful (quote) 'staging' of memory. And I thought that was a useful concept. How was I going to 'stage' my attempt at a memory of 1996? The materials I had to hand were of two kinds, visual images and the printed word. I had an archive of a couple of hundred photos, painstakingly printed in my dark room back in the days of silver print, and now stored in boxes. I've shown you some of these. And I had lots of words - I'd written full research reports that I had been confident of back then because my research participants had read, checked, amended them at the time. And I had the women's own words, quotes from interviews, affirmed by them, and eventually reported by me in my writings from the period.

So I devised a plan to 'stage' that moment in the past by a collage of these two elements, photographs and words. It had to be more than a scrap album. It had to be a presentation that could hold its form across a lot of viewings in a lot of locations, because I wanted in my re-interviews and group discussions to present each woman from any given organization with an *identical* stimulus to memory. I decided to produce a medial framework in two forms: a set of printed posters; and PowerPoint. They would draw on the same matter, the same photographs and words. They'd be portable. They could be viewed individually or by a group of women. Together, they'd be a kick-start to memory.

I've brought with me a couple of the posters I made for this purpose. There were two for each country, one portraying the place and time, the other the women and their activities at that moment in the past. Four languages were involved - I had to produce them in English, Bosnian in both latin and cyrillic scripts, Hebrew and Arabic. On the wall you see just to examples - one in Bosnian and one in Arabic examples. In a minute I'll show you the Powerpoint of the Irish material.

But we have to remember that these verbal-visual statements can't rightly be said to be 'about' 1996. They only have reference to 1996 in my own *selective* remembering. The words had been selected by me in the first

reporting, and now selected once more for this medial memory framework of posters and Powerpoints. Their significance was the significance with which *I myself* endowed them, then and now.

And as to the photographs... They may seem like representations of historical events and moments that may be understood at a glance - but photos are tricky things. They're not transparent in this way.

The late Susan Sontag used the phrase the 'shady commerce between art and truth' - and that occurred to me now when I was thinking about my choice of images. A photograph is contradictory because on the one hand it has a secure indexicality, it can be traced back to an actual time and place. But perversely, it's meaning actually changes as time passes. Patrick Sjöberg says memory 'collaborates' with a photograph in complicated ways. So here I had to see myself, not as showing the past exactly, but kind of performing it, trying it on.

Let me show you the Powerpoint version of the materials I took to my revisiting of the women in Belfast, Northern Ireland.

(Powerpoint: Birkbeck4:Belfast : 3 mins)

So in launching discussions of the posters and videos I took care to stress: 'This is how, listening to you, I saw you in 1996'. And then I'd ask: '*Is this how you remember it, or differently, otherwise?*' That invitation to alternative interpretations of the past became for me a totally mandatory preface to any discussion of the present.

OK, to wind up, I think we should come back to some of the practical and ethical problems of photography in relation to qualitative social research.

Practically, it can seem quite difficult - it can seem abrupt, even abusive, to break off from the intimate, listening mode of interview or observation and pick up a camera, stand back and 'objectify' the subjects you've been so sensitively relating to. That's the main practical problem I think.

As to ethics - today there are a whole raft of 'research ethics' principles and procedures that govern academic research. These were pretty undeveloped in the 1990s. And anyway, as I've explained, I wasn't myself doing this research in and through a university. Today you have to get written agreement from participants before interviewing. And (I checked this out with Warwick University which I have an association with) the same applies for anyone you photograph.

But back in 1995/96 I was making my own ethical decisions. And while I've no doubt at all about the legitimacy of my photographing the place, the buildings and the activist women themselves, I do now have some hesitation about the photographs that involve their clients. It was implicit in my close working with the activist women that they would tell me if it were inappropriate

to photograph certain women from among their clients. But I didn't myself seek the agreement of those individuals for their images to appear in print. Is that enough - I now wonder.

I want to end now - and just as material to feed into our discussion I'm going to flash up four images from my recent revisiting studies. They were all published in a recent article in *Soundings Journal*. I didn't have the agreement of the subjects to their use. I'd really like your feelings as to how legitimate or illegitimate that use may be.

(Powerpoint: Birkbeck5FourImages : 2 mins)

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