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Doing visual archaeology: archive images and participatory film-making

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Visual sociology often relies for its content on researcher-created or participant-created images. In this article we discuss our use of existing local history archive images in a participatory film-making project with ten people living in residential dementia care in the Northern UK. We draw on the concept of archaeology in two ways: first, as used by Foucault (1972), who contends that archaeology is a metaphor for exploring traces left by the past in order to understand the present. Secondly, in a more obvious sense—many of the most salient cultural references for our participants related to public buildings and local landmarks that had been demolished, repurposed, or dramatically changed in appearance since their youth.



King Alfred's Castle. See Hope's story below (used with permission, Leodis).

We explore below several images from local history archives, in order to highlight specific situations and contexts in which they may be particularly useful in data creation, analysis, or dissemination; for example:

- When personal photographs are not available
- To elicit memories of people, things, or places that no longer exist, or whose appearance has changed significantly
- To enhance researcher understanding of intersectionalities between social and national history

The research study

Our study (funded by the UK National Institute for Health Research – School for Social Care Research) used the principles of participatory video in a format adapted for use with older people with dementia living in a long-term care environment (Capstick 2012). The two men and ten women who took part each made a short film about what was most important to them. This was done using still images in slideshow format with the participants' spoken (and sometimes singing) voices forming the soundtrack. We found this to be an inclusive format that everyone could participate in; exercising choice over content, and indicating approval or disapproval of the emerging images and storyline. The finished films vary in length from around 3 to 11 minutes.

The process of building the films was iterative. It involved a considerable amount of research between visits to identify potential images for inclusion. Some participants had family photographs, which provided a starting point. Such images tend, however, to be conventional in format, taken in a period when photography was used by the majority of people only to memorialise family events such as weddings, baptisms, or departures on military service. It was much less common for participants to have photographs of the areas in which they grew up, their former schools, workplaces, or local facilities such as shops, cinemas, and dance halls. As we will outline in the following sections, however, many of their most pressing memories were connected with such locations.

Rita's film: Down where all our roads end...

Rita had an album of photographs of her 1950s wedding. She told us that she made her own wedding dress, and this led on to a discussion about dress-making more generally. Generic images of paper dress-making patterns and sewing equipment from the time were only moderately interesting to Rita, but she told us that from the age of 14 she worked in a clothing factory operating an industrial sewing machine. We found present day images of the building where Rita had worked; no longer a factory, it was now empty and awaiting conversion into residential apartments. Rita recognised the building, but didn't seem particularly interested in it. When we found an archive image of the building in its heyday as a clothing factory with the name of the company on large sign outside, however, Rita became much more animated. This image triggered a lot of memories that she hadn't recounted before. She pointed to windows on the upper floor of the building, and told us how she and her friends used to wave out of them to lorry drivers during the lunch hour. She also talked about how she used to go dancing with her friends at a dance hall in the nearby arcade. We then found images of the dance hall, and so the story progressed.



Rita's former workplace. Image credit?

Nora's film: Heaven to me...

Nora's film is about the small seaside town on the North East coast of England where she grew up from the age of around 5 or 6 years, and which she described as "Heaven to me." The town was a sharp contrast to the industrial area where she had been born, and which is now best known for having been one of the main centres of protest during the "hungry 30s." It was from here that, in 1936, unemployed miners and shipyard workers marched to London to argue their case in Parliament. Nora's reaction to the image below—always prefaced with the words "Eeeh, those poor men..."—offers an important insight into the ways that personal narratives intersect with events in national and social history. This is something we can easily overlook as researchers working with older people. It is well-established, for example, that people with dementia often retain intact memories of emotionally-charged, remote events, but current analytical frameworks often fail to locate such memories within a real-world, socio-historical context, or to politicize them.



Hunger marchers, 1936. (used with permission, History Matters)

Hope's film: I'm Meanwood...

Hope identified so strongly with the area where she had grown up and lived all her life that, like a lot of local people, the phrases 'I am' and 'I come from...' had become synonymous. She particularly liked looking at maps of the area, but we found that several local landmarks and sites had changed or disappeared over time. One of these was known locally as King Alfred's Castle (pictured at the top of this article), a folly built in the 19th century by a local landowner, and demolished due to safety concerns in 1946. This was one of the places where Hope and her brother and sister played as children. Although dedicated to King Alfred the Great, the ruin had no actual connection with the 9th century British monarch. We have found that such references to local folklore are often dismissed as figments of imagination by those working with people who have dementia. Searching local history archives for photographic traces of these lost sites can therefore be an important way of validating memories and experiences.



Standing stone near present day housing. (used with permission, Leodis)

In other cases, although the landmarks themselves remain, their history and meaning have faded from popular knowledge. A memorial stone commemorating soldiers who fell in the English Civil War, erected in 1812, stands in the same area as King Alfred's Castle. The nearby street is known as Stainbeck Lane because, as Rose, another of our participants told us, "the water ran red with blood." The inscription on the stone tells us a great deal about the long-term archaeology of knowledge. Translated from the Latin, it reads "Neither do the lands know themselves in the turning of the years."

Conclusion

Our study was carried out with older people living with dementia, but we suggest that there are many other groups for whom this form of visual archaeology may be valuable, such as refugees, asylum seekers, prisoners, or displaced persons who may have lost many of their family possessions, including family photographs. Archival images of places and spaces familiar to these groups can help recover lost memories and stories. Older people living in a second homeland may remember places and events now unknown to younger generations,

even within their own cultural tradition. Historical archives have potential for increasing intergenerational understanding and for enhancing our awareness of pasts that have often been associated more with the arena of visual folklore than with “official” history. Part of Foucault’s aim in his *Archaeology of Knowledge* (1972) was to replace the concept of history as unidirectional, linear progress with a model in which the past is layered and multi-faceted, often echoing, repeating, or interpenetrating with the present; this is also what we found when working with our participants.

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