

Article

**Picturing Students' Habitus:
The Advantages and Limitations of Photo-Elicitation Interviewing
in a Qualitative Study in the City of Buenos Aires**

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Abstract

In this paper the author examines some advantages and limitations of the use of photo-elicitation interviews in a study on class habitus, identities, and schooling in two secondary schools in the city of Buenos Aires (Argentina). First, she describes her research questions, methodological strategy, and application of photo elicitation technique, which refers to the use of a single or set of photographs as stimulus during a research interview. Second, she assesses the benefits and problems of its application by making comparisons between both different photo-interviews and interviews with and without photographs. This exercise allows the author to identify the benefits of photo-elicitation, such as the opening up of unforeseen dimensions for analysis and the facilitation of a rapport with respondents; and some disadvantages, for example, the possibility of the “closing communication” effect between researcher and participant.

Keywords: qualitative methods, photo-elicitation, visual methods, habitus, identities

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Introduction

Photo-elicitation refers to the use of a single or sets of photographs as stimulus during a research interview. It aims to trigger responses and memories and unveil participants' attitudes, views, beliefs, and meanings or to investigate group dynamics (Harper, 2002; Hurworth, 2003; Prosser, 1998). This technique has gained followers among sociologists and anthropologists and has been used across a range of academic subfields such as sociology of childhood, youth studies, and education (Kaplan, Lewis, & Mumba, 2007; Noland, 2006; Rasmussen, 2004; Thomson & Gunter, 2007, 2008). For example, sociological analysts have used this technique to examine different topics such as the evaluation of changes to a town (Hareven & Langenbach, 1978), attitudes toward modernization (Gates, 1976), the working lives of children (Bolton, Pole, & Mizen, 2001), and street children (Campos Monteiro, & Dollinger, 1998; Young & Barret, 2001). Another example is sociology of education, where photo-elicitation interviews have been carried out to examine topics such as pupils' evaluation of school climate (Schratz & Steiner-Löffler, 1998), the spatial manifestations of apartheid discourse in schools (Karlsson, 2001), spatial and power relationships in the classroom (McGregor, 2004), and professional identity in teacher education (Mitchell & Weber, 1998).

According to many researchers, photo-elicitation interviewing has various advantages. For instance, within education, sociology of childhood, and youth studies, the use of visual material with children and young people promotes rapport and enables researchers to grasp young people's viewpoints and social worlds (Capello, 2005; Clark, 1999; Epstein Stevens, McKeever, & Baruchel, 2006; Fischman, 2001). The majority of researchers have also recognized the power of images, over oral interviews, to trigger richer conversations about the community, memories, and reflections (Clarke-Ibanez, 2004; Hazel, 1995; Holliday, 2000). Moreover, researchers have also asserted that the inclusion of photographs could operate as a bridge between the distant social and cultural worlds of the researcher and research subjects (Epstein et al., 2006; Harper, 2000; Wagner, 2002) and could contribute to the denaturalization of the interviewees' social worlds and their critical reassessment (Prosser, 1998). Finally, researchers have also positively valued the inclusion of photographs because of the open and indexical nature of images. In this sense, photographs favor richer interpretations of social actors' perspectives by researchers and readers, and can potentially challenge researchers' analyses (Becker, 2002; Schwartz, 1989). Images help to engage participants in conversation and to respond to them without vacillation because of the familiarity of taking and talking about photos.

In this article I critically unfold the use of photo-elicitation interviews in one ethnographic study about social class inequalities and secondary schooling in two schools in the city of Buenos Aires (Argentina). I identify some of its advantages and disadvantages as a means of producing qualitative data. To begin, I examine my research design, research questions, and methodological strategy to locate the inclusion of photo-elicitation interviewing. Second, I compare and contrast the structure and data produced by photo-elicitation interviews and by traditional interviews also carried out in the research. This comparison enables me to grasp some central advantages and disadvantages of both kinds of interviews when they are used with different groups of research subjects. Finally, I compare different photographic interviews (PEIs) to assess the variability of the application of photo interviewing with different interviewees.

Research questions, methodological strategy, and the use of photo-elicitation technique

In my study I have examined the relationships between class habitus, identities, and schooling in the context of a post-neoliberal political landscape, recently altered socioeconomic structure, and inclusive educational policies in the city of Buenos Aires, Argentina (Altimir & Beccaria, 2000; Braslavsky, 2001; Filmus, 2001). I have addressed three research questions: (a) how schools produce, resist to and/or challenge the configuration of circuits of schooling; (b) how middle class, working class, and marginal students deal with the social and educational demands of their teachers and schools; and (c) how students produce their class and gender identities through schooling.

I have adopted in this study an ethnographic approach and have critically drawn on Bourdieu's theory of social praxis and on sociological theories of identity making (Bourdieu, 1998; Jenkins, 2000; Skeggs, 1997). Following Bourdieu and Wacquant (2002), there is no method without a theory and every theory presupposes a methodology. I argue that ethnography is a particularly productive method for studying social practice from a Bourdieusian perspective, with its focus on concepts such as social space, social games or fields, social class, habitus, capital, and individuals' sense of the game (Bourdieu, 1985, 1986, 1988, 1990). Ethnography allows the recognition of structural constraints on actions as well as individuals' agency and abilities to be reflective and to challenge the circumstances they are in. Unlike other forms of qualitative data collection, ethnography encompasses the collection and/or production of a broad range of data on different dimensions and layers of the phenomenon under study. My daily participation in particular aspects of the schools' lives provided fertile ground from which to gather/produce data on (a) the wider field of state secondary education in Argentina; (b) the ways in which schools played within it; (c) students' educational and social engagement; and, finally, (d) the ways in which the latter participated in schooling from their specific class positions and with their habitus, resources and abilities to (within certain limits) be strategic, rational, and reflexive. Being there and interacting with teachers and students allowed the identification of similarities and differences between the "games"¹ of schooling, students' abilities to deal with the educational and social demands, and their class and gender identities.

As part of my ethnographic approach I used different techniques for producing data: participant observation, self-completion questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, group interviews, diaries, and photo-elicitation interviews. The use of multimethods has been part and parcel of the ethnographic gaze (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995). My use of photo-elicitation within ethnography has numerous antecedents both within sociology and anthropology (Banks, 2001; Collier & Collier, 1990; Edwards, 2002; Pink, 2001; Wang, Burris, & Ping, 1996; Worth & Adair, 1972).

The inclusion of photo interviewing in the study was justified by a number of factors. First, it appeared as an adequate method to help answering two research questions. Photo-elicitation interviews would contribute to explore students' gender and class identities. This material would be valuable to interpret their gender performance and class habitus at the school. On the other hand, photo-elicitation interviews let me explore students and families' class positioning and their capital. This kind of interviews also seemed useful to examine how students dealt with schools' demands outside schooling and how their families viewed and related to secondary schooling. Following Bourdieu (1998), the analyst maps people's access to resources or capital, opportunities, and disadvantages to understand their strategies, power, and authority within specific social fields. Capital is able to confer "strength, power and consequently profit" (Skeggs,

1997, p. 8) in social fields, enabling an analysis of the micropolitics of power. Moreover, the researcher has to unfold individuals' class habitus when examining their relationships with particular social fields (such as education). In Bourdieu's (1996) words, habitus is a

generative schemata of classifications and classifiable practices that function in practice without acceding to explicit representations and that are the product of the embodiment, in the form of dispositions, of a differential position in the social space defined . . . by the reciprocal externality of positions. (p. 2)

Habitus is, then, a productive and embodied matrix of dispositions, categories of perception, and classification of practices that allows social actors to participate in different arenas of social life (such as the arts, religion, secondary education, and the labor market) in such a manner that their practices tend to reproduce the objective structures or principles that regulate that particular confine of activity. The habitus is unconsciously acquired through socialization in the family from early childhood (Bourdieu, 1977; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 2002). Talking about students' photos was a useful way to unpack their ways of classifying others and themselves, and their class and gendered practices in different fields such as family, education, labor market, and leisure.

Second, photo-elicitation offered an opportunity to expand the participation of students beyond the role of traditional interviewees and research subjects (Bolton et al., 2001; Campos Monteiro & Dollinger, 1998). In line with other qualitative researchers, I expected that inviting students to take photographs of their lives, through conscious and unconscious processes of selection, seemed an appropriate tool to enhance their active role in the research project.

Third, photo-elicitation would contribute to enhancing rapport and facilitate communication between me and the students. Like other researchers, I hoped that photo-elicitation would smooth the process of interaction. The majority of students were used to looking at and talking about photos with friends and relatives.

Finally, photo-elicitation would open up students' agendas and ways of seeing their own social worlds (Willis, 1980). Their images could lead me where I did not expect and, in this way, configure a fertile ground for further explorations and inquiries.

I carried out fieldwork in two state secondary schools in Buenos Aires. I was at the schools from March to November 2004. High Mountain² offers nursery, primary, secondary, and tertiary education.³ At the secondary level, the school is quasi-selective.⁴ It has good reputation and low levels of educational failure.⁵ The school Low Hill offered only secondary school, and its access is open.⁶ Unlike the former, it has the reputation of being a "sink" school and has a much higher rate of educational failure. The schools occupied the same block and shared some wings of one building, some offices, halls, corridors, stairs, toilets, and classrooms. Each school also had exclusive access to certain spaces such as their administrative secretary's office, chemistry and computer laboratories, and libraries. High Mountain had a mainly middle-class intake, and Low Hill had students from poor and socially excluded families as well as those from a middle-class background.

I selected 9 girls and 11 boys between 15 and 17 years old to participate in the photo-elicitation interviews. To select the sample of photographers, I used data from a survey I carried out with third-year students in both schools. To identify students from different social classes, I used as proxy indicators the occupation and the educational level of the head of the household. The final sample included 10 students from the middle class, 7 from the working class, and 3 from marginal families. Within each social group I selected students with and without experiences of

repeating a school year. These proportions reflected the differential weight that educational failure had in the third school year in each educational institution, according to the schools' statistics (around 10% in High Mountain and around 40% in Low Hill).

I had at least one previous traditional interview (whether individual or collective) with all the students who participated in the photo-interview. All the invited students enthusiastically agreed to participate. They received disposable cameras and one film of 24 photos. In the next subsection, I discuss how I dealt with issues of consent, confidentiality, and anonymity in this research.

Ethical considerations were paramount throughout the fieldwork. According to the general guidance of professional associations in the United Kingdom, relationships with adults and young people were always enmeshed in ethical considerations (British Educational Research Association, 2004; British Sociological Association, 2002). I reflexively looked for different ways to ask for explicit consent from teachers, students, and pastoral assistants to participate in the research (British Sociological Association, 2002).

I paid special attention to the differences and similarities of doing research with adults and young people. A growing body of literature points at the necessity of carefully considering the implication of working with young people and children (Christensen & Prout, 2002; Lewis, Kellet, Robinson, & Fraser, 2004; Morrow & Richards, 1996; Punch, 2002). A variety of perspectives exists, such as treating young people like adults or considering them as completely different from them and in need of special handling.⁷ In my study, following Christensen and Prout, I considered that there is an ethical symmetry between adults and young people. Like adults, children and young people are social actors and participants in social life, with their particular voices and views. Ethical symmetry implies that the researcher assumes the same ethical considerations and responsibilities when doing research with adults or children. However, when differences between them arise, researchers should address them. Ethical symmetry, however, does not imply a presumption of equality between researchers and young people. Like when working with adults, power relationships between me and the young people were always present (Mayall, 2000; Robinson & Kellett, 2004).

Interviews with young people were carried out in cafés and restaurants nearby the school. The location of the interviews with students and the fact that I always invited them to have a soft drink contributed to their feeling of being taken seriously (as adults). Despite this apparent symmetry, however, I was aware that my position of authority could have forced them to answer or to continue the interview when they did not want it. To address this, I repeated several times during each encounter that they could leave the interview at any time and that they had to answer only the questions that they wanted to or felt comfortable with. In general, students shared with me much more than I expected. A few of them surprised me with intimate confessions of current or past personal problems and traumas.⁸ When the problems were contemporary, I assessed if they were receiving any professional advice and, when they did not, I found out where they could go (whether in or outside the school) and encouraged them to ask for help and advice.

When doing traditional and photo-elicitation interviews with students, I followed specific procedures to address issues of consent and anonymity. In both types of interviews, after inviting students to participate, I reminded them my commitment to guarantee confidentiality and anonymity as well as their right to withdraw at any time. After they agreed to participate, I explained them that I also needed to have their parents' authorization. Students took the letter to

their homes, and all parents signed it.⁹ In this letter I specified what we would do, the locations of our meeting,¹⁰ and my personal contact numbers in case they needed more information. I also explained the ethical principles that guided my research.

In the case of the photo-elicitation interviews, ethical considerations had to be well thought out. When images are used only for elicitation purposes, the issue of consent is relatively straightforward (Wiles et al., 2008). However, in my research, I also wanted to include students' photos in dissemination of the research. This demanded attention to copyright issues and, more important, to students' knowledge of the purposes to which the photograph may be put (Wiles et al., 2008). Furthermore, the publication of visual material makes the anonymization of people, institutions, and locations "problematic if not impossible" (Clark, 2006). Despite this, social researchers tend to favor the presentation of visual material produced by informants or themselves in its "entirety, with consent, and not to attempt to anonymize individuals" (Wiles et al., 2008).

To address issues of consent and anonymity, I developed a multistage strategy. First, in the letter sent to parents, I made it clear that I was going to ask students' authorization to use their images. After receiving parents' authorization, I had two meetings with individual students. In the first meeting, I explained what I wanted them to do: to show me their lives through photographs.¹¹ During this meeting and the photo interview, I used an agreement form (see appendix). We agreed when they would start taking photographs and when we were going to meet up to talk about their images. I explicitly asked them to not take photographs in school time. With this warning I tried to avoid any potential problems that photographing at school could bring to them and/or to my fieldwork (interruptions in lesson time, conflicts between groups of students, etc.).¹² However, as analyzed later, the majority decided to include photos at their school.¹³ In this meeting, I also stated that students would be the owners of their photos. Then students filled the first section of the consent form (appendix, Section 1). The photo-interview took place in the second meeting. At the end of this encounter, students completed the second section of the form (appendix, Section 2). In this form I asked students which images they authorized me to use, which ones they wanted to be anonymized, and where they authorized me to publish them. With this consent form, I tried to empower students to represent themselves (Pink, 2006). Despite the complexity of the form, there was a wide range of responses evidencing its usefulness to empower students and to take control over their own photos (see next section for more details).

However, as Pink (2007) has argued, signed consents do not imply that researchers have the right to use images in unlimited ways. In this study, I decided to not publicly use some photographs that I considered potentially damaging for participants (whether photographers, friends, classmates, adults from the schools, and family members). For instance, Rodrigo (a male student from Low Hill) showed a series of photographs of himself posing in front of a mirror, wearing makeup and posing with seductive body and facial gestures. These images could be considered erotically charged. In this case, despite having the student's authorization, I decided to not include them in any publication. Moreover, I decided to use images of students at their schools as far as they did not reveal key architectural features or locations of their buildings.

Virtues and pitfalls of photo-elicitation interviewing

To assess the advantages and disadvantages of my application of photo-elicitation within my wider methodological strategy, I will tackle some pertinent questions. In so doing, first, I compare photo-elicitation interviews with traditional interviews. These two types of interviews have been applied to different groups of students within the same study. I look at how these two types of

interviews differ in terms of their structure and organization as well as what kind of data I was able to gather about certain topics in both situations.¹⁴ Second, I compare different photo-interviews to examine how the same device worked with different interviewees.

Interviews with and without photographs

This comparison is an assessment of the ways in which the process of interviewing was altered as well as the advantages and disadvantages of the inclusion of photo-elicitation. My first set of evaluative questions is: In which ways these two types of interviews differ? Has the use of photo-elicitation enhanced the interview process, data production and analysis? Did it carry particular challenges?

Formally, the structure and organization of the PEI assumed particular features before, during, and after its implementation. Before the interview, I had to distribute cameras, solve technical problems that came up, develop the photographs, and individually identify them. During the interview, I had to remember to record the numbering of the photographs to be able later to recognize students' comments about them. Moreover, I had to be attentive to their images and try to ask questions relevant both to their content and my own interests and wider concerns. After the interview, I asked interviewees to sign a "contract" wherein they explicitly authorized me, or not, to use their images in different types of international and national academic and nonacademic publications (such as my doctoral thesis, conference papers, websites, and newspapers) (see previous section for details). Furthermore, not only did I have to transcribe the interviews, but also record photographs of students in a format that would be possible to handle in future analysis.

In both interview situations I gathered similar information about topics such as housing, occupations of students' family members, family relations, neighborhood, friendship groups, young people's subcultures, schooling, and gender relations. From my initial comparison of both types of interviews, I argue that photo-interviews were richer than traditional interviews. I identify seven major advantages of photo-interviews over traditional oral interviews: (a) they elicited longer and more enjoyable interviews; (b) they enhanced the participation and control of interviewees; (c) the gathering of richer data about similar topics; (d) they reinforced what was already stated in the traditional interview; (e) they offered a closer look at what and whom participants considered important; (f) they allowed the emergence of unexpected topics; and (g) they enabled making sense of some data, which otherwise would have been difficult to interpret. Of course, not all the PEIs had all these advantages in full.

Like Collier's (1967) classic assessment of photo-interviews, my research demonstrates that "pictures elicited longer and more comprehensive interviews but at the same time helped subjects overcome the fatigue and repetition of conventional interviews" (p. 858).¹⁵ Photo-interviews lasted an average of 2 hours, whereas traditional oral interviews lasted an average of one hour. I asked questions to students about the images, participants, and situations. The familiarity of this act favored comments from the interviewees, jokes, laughter, authorized me to ask details questions about different topics and areas (some of which could have been difficult to integrate smoothly into a "traditional" interview, such as the living conditions of the poorest students), and enhanced rapport between interviewees and me.

The photo production and ownership of their images enhanced interviewees' participation and their control of what they wanted to share with me and wider audiences. I would argue that in PEI students had more control over their images than they usually have over their words in interviews. In fact, different students used this power to say no in the case of the images and did not authorize

specific photographs to be used in certain types of publications. For instance, 14 out of 20 students authorized me to publish their images in all types of publications. Within this first group, one female student asked me to anonymize people in all the photos. Two other students did not authorize me to publish a few images. Four of the 19 students authorized me to publish their photos only in certain types of publications. They preferred academic publications, whether national or international. Among them, one girl authorized me to use only a minority of her images.

Photographs triggered rich data about family relations, housing conditions, students' everyday lives outside schooling, and their relationships. Images showed how students lived, where they did so, with whom they lived, their friends, and the social and material spaces where they spent their out of school time. The majority of photographs also showed snapshots of their school buildings, classrooms, their friendship groups, and sometimes their teachers and pastoral assistants. Some images showed the nature of what was described by the students with an intensity that only images could convey. For instance, in the case of the interviews of María, Sara, and Valeria, one a traditional and the other two PEI interviews, it is possible to find differences in the kind of information that I was able to gather in each interview situation about similar topics. María and Sara were from lower middle-class families and entered Low Hill during the 2003 school year. Valeria was from a middle-class family and entered High Mountain in 2002. They lived in the city, and the heads of their households had completed at least the secondary level of education. In the case of María, I asked her where she lived.

María: in Palermo (Note of translator (NT): it is a middle class neighbourhood), in Paraguay street, 18 blocks from the school . . . and Dani lives three blocks from my house, I live in Paraguay and Salguero and he lives in Santa Fe and Salguero. We walk everyday from the school to there. (Interview, December 3, 2004)

The geographical references situated María's house in an apartment block in a middle-class neighborhood in Buenos Aires. Later in the interview, she referred to the fact that during the week she lived with her father and during weekends she stayed over at her mother's house.

In my PEI with Sara, she took several photographs of her house (the majority of them her bedroom), mother, father, and siblings. Sara commented on her house and bedroom and was explicit about the meanings associated with them. For instance, she showed me her bedroom as a central part of her life.

AM¹⁶: why did you take this photograph? Did you have any particular reasons? (see Figure 1).

Sara: because I had all my stuff there. If you open that little box, paper will jump . . . this candle is a gift from Marina, my make up, here I have only a few, I don't have all of them there, boxes, this is a clock, I have lots of jewellery and that kind of stuff, I have boxes with rings . . . well, stuff. It is also part of who I am. Whenever I can I spend time there, I sit down and read something, for instance, down there, there are boxes where I keep all the letters from my friends.

AM: how are you as woman? How do you see yourself? . . .

Sara: my boyfriend says that I am egocentric and very vain because I am all day long with the mirror, you see? Every time I can I look myself at the mirror. (Photo interview, November 19, 2004)

Figure 1. Sara's corner in her shared room (a female student from Low Hill)



In her bedroom (see Figure 1), she is immersed in expressive activities (writing poems, reading friends' letters) and in staging herself for her gender performances (the use of makeup and jewelry, and her comments about the centrality of the mirror to her self-definition). Sara's image offered some clues of how she produces her gender identity. Her emphasis on physical attractiveness and her reference to her boyfriend locate her, at least provisionally, within the confines of traditional heterosexual femininity. Later in the interview, Sara showed me more photographs of her room, and from them and her descriptions I knew that she had to share her bedroom with two sisters and that their parents had to sleep in the living room. In her descriptions, she did not only name people, objects, and places, but she also offered a vivid account of what they meant to her. Although it was not the norm, this was more common in PEI than in the traditional interviews. In the latter, my questions tended to lead students' reflections.

The photo-interview with Valeria (female student from High Mountain) also triggered richer data. She took all her photographs but one at her home. The photos showed empty rooms but also her siblings and herself posing. Some of these images and Valeria's comments illustrate how bodies and physical appearance are crucial to perform traditional female gender identities (see Figures 2 and 3). In this case, playfulness and frustration were part and parcel of a complex and painful process of identity work. References to these ongoing and subtle practices were almost non-existent in traditional interviews when talking about their homes, families and everyday life.

AM: Did you specially dress up for this photograph?

Valeria: Yes. With my sister we always try clothes. We dress up; we try different clothes for fun. . . .

AM: Do you like the way you look?

Valeria: No, I don't

AM: Why? . . .

Valeria: well, my dream is to be blonde and to have light blue eyes. When I was a child, I was blonde.

AM: why is that? Do you think that blonde girls are more beautiful?

Valeria: I don't know. It's something that I always think . . . My brother is darker

than me. When I was younger, I always told my brother that he was adopted. I told him “you are a shitty black” (*negro de mierda*). I always say that to my siblings, not to the youngest one though. . . . I think that blonde girls are more beautiful than girls with dark hair. I don’t know why. (Photo-interview, November 2, 2004)

Photo-elicitation interviews sometimes restate with visual imagery what was already identified in traditional interviews. The great majority of the interviewees underlined the centrality of their friendship groups in the school. They commented about breaks, meetings, and everyday activities

Figure 2. Valeria¹⁷ at her home (a female student from High Mountain)



Figure 3. Valeria at her home (a female student from High Mountain)



that they shared with school friends. The intensity of these ties varied but it was apparent that students' social networks made their school time more bearable and enjoyable. For instance, Rodrigo (male student from High Mountain) and Sara (female student from Low Hill) illustrate the centrality of friendship groups to "have a laugh".

Rodrigo took pictures of 4 of his male friends while they were at a friend's house. In one photo,¹⁸ Esteban and Ignacio were sitting on a sofa, their legs resting on the seat of the sofa-. Ignacio was drinking a soft drink from a plastic bottle, and Diego was sitting on the floor, waving to the camera. Javier was sitting on the floor with his back on a wall. They seemed relaxed, and with the exception of Esteban, they were looking at Rodrigo. Looking at one of the photos, Rodrigo said:

Rodrigo: these are my friends; they are the first friends I met in this school. We are a team. We are five. . . . We always meet at Esteban's house. His house is like a safe haven (*aguantadero*). We'll go to watch a football match, to talk about us, we are always there. We are very close.

Rodrigo: . . . my friends were the only reason why I wanted to come to school. There was no other motivation . . . I have a laugh with them, endure the day, and come back home. (Photo-interview December 13, 2004)

Sara photographed 2 female and 2 male friends at her classroom (Figure 5). The girls are in the back and the boys are in the front. They are very close to each other. The girls are sitting with their backs resting on a wall (where the classroom window is). Sabrina (a female student) is hugging Tobias. He is resting his back on Sabrina's chest. Daniel is also very close to Samantha and is resting his head and part of his back on a desk (which is in between the two pairs of students). They are smiling and looking at the camera. Sarah showed me this photograph and asserted:

Sara: These are my friends. We are playing around all the time. We are always like this . . .

AM: OK

Sara: when we chat, we are always like this. We sit on David's or Maxi's lap. Or on each other's lap (referring to a girl friend).

AM: Do you do that in breaks or during lesson time?

Sara: well, this photo is in lesson time. (Photo-interview, November 19, 2004)

Close networks, which ranged from endurable to volatile, operated as a locus of emotional support and mutual recognition and acceptance. These friendship groups in school were seen as important mediators between the adult worlds of the school and students' views and perspectives. Friendship groups were, in many cases, a key reason why they wanted to be at the school. The images show the intensity of their interactions and its affectionate nature. In numerous photographs, students took snapshots of their everyday lives with their school friends both within and outside the school site.

Another example is one photograph of Juan, a male student of Low Hill. In the image, there are 4 young people (two in the front and two in the back) in one classroom. Juan and Cecilia are sitting on chairs in the back of the room, close to each other. Juan is putting his arm over Cecilia's shoulder. They are both smiling. Closer to the camera, another good girl friend of Juan is also

sitting on a chair. A male classmate is sitting on a chair besides hers, while he is placing his back on her chest. They are looking at the camera. The students are in one corner of the classroom, made up by one blue wall full of graffiti and a half acrylic and half green wall, also full of graffiti. In the photo, the four students looked relaxed. The girls wore black sweaters and trousers, Juan a red sweater, and their classmate sport clothes. A friend of Juan took this snapshot. Another example of the affectionate nature of friendship groups are the photos taken by Maka (a female student from High School). Maka's image shows four female friends by the entrance door of the school (where they used to spend time chatting and, sometimes, singing after the end of the school day). Maka took this photo. They are smiling and looking at the camera. They are standing very close to each other. Three are in the back, and Karina is in the front. Mariana is hugging Stella; Stella had one of her hands on Karina's shoulder (who is in the front) and with the other is hugging Sabrina.

In photo-elicitation interviews, I was able to look closely at what the students identified as being important in their lives. In the majority of cases, family, friends, and partners were paramount. All of them took shots of the places where they lived (apartments, houses, or hotels), their rooms, friends, and activities that were meaningful to them. Although traditional interviews were guided by my research interests, photo-elicitation transformed the power dynamics of the interview so that the students were able to ask themselves about their lives in their own terms. A few identified other interests and activities outside the school and they were related with youth cultures (such as being part of a band, loving music, or being a skater). Several spent quite a lot of shots and talked about their dogs and cats and how they played with them and had to assume domestic responsibilities regarding their care.

Although the majority of the photographers did take photographs of the school, the process of learning and teaching (inside or outside school) was not the target of their shots. Fourteen out of 20 students took photographs at their schools. In this group, three took only one shot, three captured two images, and five youth took between three and five photos. Only three students took more than eight shots at their schools. Only two students included adults in their pictures.¹⁹ In the majority of the photos, the school operated as a stage for interactions among peers. The fact that I asked students to take photographs outside the school limits the interpretation of these images. From the absence of images about the learning and teaching processes, it is not possible to infer that they were marginal for students. On the other hand, the breaking of the guidelines for the photo-experience supports the interpretation of friendship groups and "having a laugh" as central aspects of students' lives.

PEI also helped to make sense of certain data that would have been difficult to interpret without them. For example, in the oral interviews, several working class and marginal students did not provide details about their families' living conditions and they tended to overlook everyday hardship. Photo-interviewing enabled me to interpret this "silence" as a strategy to produce valued class identities. Historically in Argentina, the identity of "poor"/ "low class"/ "working class" has been discursively and materially produced by the state's social policies and the media as having negative symbolic value. They have been associated with dependency, powerlessness, and lack of initiative (Duschatzky, 2000; Skeggs, 1997; Vasilachis de Gialdino, 2003). Photographs of students' living conditions and our conversations about places and people were crucial to make sense of this silence and reluctance to talk in oral interviews about their needs and economic limitations. Isabel illustrates this point. Isabel lived in a villa miseria (slum) with her parents, seven siblings, and two nieces. Isabel's father was a construction worker and over the past decade had gone through long periods of unemployment interrupted by unstable and short-term unskilled manual jobs. Her family lived mainly on social benefits. Neither parents had completed secondary school, and Isabel's older siblings had also dropped out of secondary

schooling. In the oral interview, Isabel did not want to give specific details of where she lived. When asked, she mentioned only the name of a neighborhood in downtown and highlighted that it was a *barrio* (neighborhood).

AM: who do you live with?

Isabel: my mum, my siblings and my dad.

AM: where do you live?

Isabel: in Sacramento

AM: where do you live?

Isabel: It's a *barrio*. (Interview, April 14, 2004)

The photo-interview allowed me to interpret the use of the word *barrio* and Isabel's emphatic tone in saying it. She took six photographs of her house, and all of them were close shots that focused solely on people. The photographs did not show much of the rooms, corridors, and furniture of the house. She focused her attention in what was more important to her: family members' relationships and the affection they felt for each other. However, her shots also offered glances of the poor state of the walls, the use of curtains instead of doors, and the small size of the rooms, which were indicators of her family's deprived living conditions.

Sometimes, the photos motivated Isabel to talk more about her family's living conditions and the nature of family and gender relations. On other occasions, the photographs enabled me to ask more questions about the use of different spaces and the people with whom Isabel lived. While viewing a close-up photograph of her three nieces (who were sitting on a single bed located in the corner of what it seems to be a very small room with unfinished brick walls), for example, Isabel and I had the following conversation:

AM: who are they?

Isabel: they are my nieces. They see my mum as their mum. If my mum doesn't give them a good bye kiss, they cannot go to sleep . . . when my mum goes out, they have to go with her. Otherwise, they cry . . . We all sleep in this room. We have a three level bed (*cama cucheta*) where I sleep with three of the girls. My sister sleeps in the lowest bed, I sleep in the middle bed and my sister in the one at the top. My other sister sleeps in the double bed of the room. She sleeps with her two kids. (Photo-interview, July 20, 2004)

Isabel's descriptions, her initial silence about her living conditions, and her identification with the middle class enabled me to make sense of her insistence in calling her neighborhood a *barrio*. In different ways, Isabel was trying to produce a positive social identity. In doing so, she distanced herself from those who are seen as marginal, powerlessness, and struggling for their lives. Locating herself in a *barrio* was a way of rejecting the negative identity of *villera* (in Spanish this word refers to a woman living in a slum), which is attributed to those who, like her, lived in *villas miseria* (slums) (Crovara, 2004; Giménez & Ginóbili, 2003). In other words, photographs, texts, and silences were crucial to forward the analysis of class identity making (Kolb, 2008).

Finally, of course, the use of PEI also carried several disadvantages as compared to traditional interviews. Some were epistemological, and others were practical. As a method of exploring students' views and perceptions, sometimes PEI made it difficult for students to express themselves. Few perceived photographs as stand-alone devices that did not need to be explained or elaborated upon. Despite my questioning, a few students did not say much about their images. I would argue that images could be perceived as "speaking by themselves" by research participants, which could obstruct or, at least, not facilitate their narratives. In this sense, images

in my research, sometimes, despite broad agreement among those who have used this technique that they always prompt stories, did hamper communication (Bolton et al., 2001; Collier & Collier, 1990; Harper, 2002).

In practical terms, conducting PEI interviews were more expensive and time consuming than traditional ones. They were also more challenging and demanding. To carry out PEI, I had to buy disposable cameras (which were relatively cheap) and paid for the development of the films (which was quite expensive). PEI demanded more time before, during, and after the interviews. Beforehand I needed time to prepare a consent form to use students' images and to number their photos for future reference. Furthermore, I met students once before the PEI. Then I gave them the cameras and guidelines for the task.

During the interviews, trying to follow students' stories and photographs to be open to their views without becoming stranded on certain topic areas was a continuing source of tension. Students' pictures led my questions and interests. On the other hand, there were aspects of their lives that I wanted to explore (whether they photographed them or not). Asking questions about their images but also about aspects that mattered to me was a difficult juggling act. Moreover, during the interviews, I had to remember to say aloud the number of the photographs. This was crucial to later identify to which images students were referring.

After the interviews, it was more difficult to transcribe PEIs than traditional interviews. This was the case when I forgot to record the number of a photograph. On few of these occasions, I could not identify the image a student was referring to. Archiving this material was more complex than archiving interview transcripts. First, I had to scan photographs and to store them. Second, I had to identify and learn how to use software that allowed me to analyze both textual and visual material. Finally, the fact that this was the first experience that I had of applying photo-elicitation, without previous training, did not help. My training in the United Kingdom and back in my country did not include how to deal with cameras or digital photographs or how to analyze photographic material. This has been an ongoing challenge.

Variations within photo-elicitation interviews

My second set of evaluative questions is, How did the inclusion of photographs affect different interview situations? What were the similarities and differences between PEI, considering their structure, richness of data, and level of difficulty to be conducted? How did photographs operate in relation to the enhancement of the rapport with different interviewees? Did photographs lead me to unexpected areas of inquiry and reflection?

Formally, the structure of the PEI differed according to the interviewee, my previous encounters with her or him, and the immediate context of the interview. For instance, some PEIs at Low Hill were opened by me with a discussion about a fight between two girls from the same form group. The fight took place just before the interview at the school. My interviewees were close friends of one of the girls involved, and they seemed distressed by the situation. I decided to ask them about their views of the fight and the role that teachers and authorities assumed to deal with the conflict. In these interviews, after talking about what happened and how the interviewees participated in the event, first, I quickly showed students all the photographs. Only then did we look in detail at each photo. In these encounters, the unexpected occurrence of an event made me reassess the opening of the interview. In the rest of the interviews, I talked about and "around" the photographs and asked follow-up questions from previous encounters.

At the interviews, I asked students about the meaning of the experience, how they organized it, and if they felt that their images reflected what they had wanted to show. Students asserted that they enjoyed the experience because they could show me the people and, to a lesser extent, activities that they cared about most. In the majority of the PEIs, previous rapport was reinforced during the photo interview. The organization of the taking of the photographs ranged from being reflexive and staged to spontaneous and unplanned. Sometimes, there were combinations of both strategies within the same PEI.

During many of the interviews students talked freely and enthusiastically about their photographs; in others I encouraged them to engage with the pictures by asking questions about the images and their content. In general, those students who were talkative in traditional interviews were also expressive and articulate during the photo experience. However, this was not always the case. Sometimes, the familiarity of showing photographs relaxed them but did not contribute immensely to their commentaries. These interviews were more difficult to manage. In these cases, students gave the impression that they believed that images could speak by themselves. Nevertheless, images did always offer me opportunities to ask more about people, spaces, activities, and issues that were more or less directly related to them.

At this stage, I could say that the majority of the PEIs offered a different richness of data in terms of students' reflexivity about the photographic experience. This varied according to my previous knowledge of them, my ability to conduct the interview and students' engagement in their task. For instance, in the case of Santiago, I had two previous in depth interviews with him before the photo experience. His photographs operated as illustrations, but at the same time suggested that taking the photos had been a reflexive exercise for him.

Santiago: I've thought about your research and if you have to include photographs I could have included photos of the building XX, which is great, it's a beautiful building . . . but you can't be, I thought, you can't be superficial and take it because it will be look nice in your project because that photo is not mine, it doesn't mean anything to me. (Photo-interview, November 18, 2004)

The majority of students in both schools, however, were not as reflexive as Santiago and were happy with just showing me their immediate social worlds without reflecting on the nature of the photo project, and their involvement.

In terms of the richness of the photographic material produced in PEIs, it is possible to assess it by looking at the quantity of images taken and the variety of topics covered. In average, students took 21 shots. Thirteen students took more than 20 shots, three between 10 and 15, and only one 19 photographs. However, the number of shots per topic area varied among students. A few took numerous shots of the same person in the same place (for instance, Nora took seven photos of her boyfriend at her home). The majority opted to take photographs of different people in various scenarios. In this sense, it seems that some photographers wanted to share more than others, and they assumed different degrees of compliance with the task, evidenced by, for instance, the time invested and the strategies developed to meet people to photograph them. Regarding the contents of the photographs, some photographers surprised me with their high personal investment in activities outside school such as music, skating, and participating in institutions that were central to their self-definition. Other photographers surprised me with images about their desired gendered and sexual identities. For instance, two female students, one from each school (Manu and Anto), took numerous pictures of her older boyfriends and spent long time talking about them

and their dreams for the future. Another example is the photographs of Santiago, who took pictures of objects (such as his football trainers, uniform, and football) that he identified as relevant aspects of his life and gender identity.

To also assess the richness of the data offered by PEIs, I have to consider what was included in the photographs and what was absent (Jewitt, 1997). In general, they included people (family and friends, whether in or out school, and, for a few girls, their partners) and places (where they lived, the cyberspace where they went, friends' houses, streets, parks, school). People portrayed were usually smiling and in affectionate poses (such as hugging each other and kissing). In the majority of the cases, places were used as stages for interactions rather than objects as such.²⁰ People posed for the photograph, and activities were in general not depicted.]

Few students photographed objects as representations of different aspects in their lives (such as Sara and her photographs about meaningful places that referred to tastes, relationships, and gender performances). In the case of the schools, they appeared as places where they shared time with friends. Images showed what was apparent to those who attended this school: the bad state of the furniture; the lack of maintenance of the building; the visual dominance of graffiti in the classrooms and toilets (which showed drawings, insults and personal signatures); the lack of traditional arrangements of desks and chairs; students' feeling of comfort within the school; and the uneven enforcement of the school's rule of wearing the school uniform, the white smock. In relation to people, images only showed students' networks and did not portray the sociocultural diversity of the student population. They focused on those who were "like them." This particular absence could be related to the difficult coexistence of different groups of students. Regarding what is missing from these photographs, the list is extensive. The great majority of images of the schools did not show classroom situations, playgrounds, libraries, laboratories, terraces, staffrooms, staff, corridors, stairs, bars within the school, or other floors of the buildings of Low Hill and High Mountain. This initial depiction of the collection of images taken offers analytic potential and a bridge between students' cultures and my potential readers in a way that my textual descriptions alone would struggle to achieve.

Conclusion

In this paper I have presented the ways in which I have made use of PEIs as part of a wider methodological strategy to unpack students' class habitus and identities. I have shown that visual images can help to create more maps for the traveler/ethnographer (Kvale 1996). They can open up images, spaces, and meanings in specific and productive ways to enhance our understanding of people's social worlds and meanings. I have presented my research questions, methodological strategy, and the ways in which I have used PEI within my research. Here, I located my study in two state secondary schools of the City of Buenos Aires, and I have unveiled the rationale behind the use of PEI and how it operated in my wider research strategy. Finally, I have focused my attention on the advantages and disadvantages of photo interviews. To do this, first, I compared them with oral interviews in my own research. Second, I began to compare different PEIs to assess variations and degrees of effectiveness across interviewees.

The experimental nature of its use has been difficult and demanding throughout the fieldwork, resulting in advantages and disadvantages. The PEIs promoted access to areas of inquiry that I would not expect before, but they also became time consuming exercises without clear format. PEIs were exhausting and enjoyable (for both students and me). They bridged students' social worlds with me and my readers in rich ways. Images of their schools, the spaces in which they studied, and what the students left out or marginalized in their photographs offered potential

analytical richness that can be interrogated vis-à-vis other data. Rather than advocating for PEIs in general, I would argue for the need to carefully assess why, at what stage, and how such techniques would be incorporated.

Researchers need to carefully assess if this technique would help them to deeper exploration of the phenomenon under study. Moreover, they need to evaluate if they would have enough time to deal with the preparations and practicalities involved in carrying out PEIs. As seen above, they are more time consuming, expensive, and demanding than traditional interviews. Researchers need to be ready to deal with the different types of ethical, methodological and practical challenges that would emerge before, during and after the PEIs. However, drawing on my positive experiences, I would argue for the potential of visual methods to enhance students' voices and participation in research about themselves and their views and images of their social worlds.

Notes

1. According to Bourdieu, social fields constitute "games" that work according to their own particular rules or logic. Fields configure social spaces where there is competition and conflict around specific stakes (whether social, economic, or cultural capital), only acknowledgeable for those who participate in them. In this article, the concept of a game of schooling is used to refer to students' everyday experiences, which are influenced by school's academic and social organization, and by the wider social field of state secondary schooling, with its institutional actors (such as the national and local government, and schools) and their capital, their relationship; implicit and explicit codes, and regularities.
2. All the names of institutions and people are pseudonym.
3. In Argentina, compulsory schooling starts at 5 years old. Children would benefit from a total of 13 years at school (1 year in kindergarten, 7 years at primary school, and 5 at secondary school). In Buenos Aires, secondary schooling is compulsory since 2000. At the national level, the school leaving age was raised by the new Educational Law (*Ley de Educación*) in 2006.
4. The school set a language entrance examination for those students who did not complete the primary school there.
5. In Argentina, school failure refers to repetition and dropping out.
6. There were no entrance requirements.
7. See Christensen and Prout (2002) and Punch (2002) as illustrations of contrasting perspectives.
8. Only a minority of students (all from Low Hill) shared these kinds of situations. The most dramatic ones were pregnancy, and the rape and sexual abuse of two boys.
9. The letter required that only one parent or legal guardian signed the form.
10. The majority of semi-structured and photo interviews carried out with students were located in nearby cafés. The school did not have available spaces to perform them.

11. In the consent form, I included one sentence that guided students' participation: "I would like that you tell me about you and your life through photographs. Please take the photographs before or after school time" (see appendix).
12. I informed head teachers, many teachers, and pastoral assistants that a group of students would take part in the photo-experience. They all made positive comments about the experience.
13. Five students did not take photographs at their schools. The rest took pictures of people in different places such as terraces, corridors, classrooms, and toilets. Only one student from Low Hill reported problems with one teacher when taking a picture.
14. Those students who participated in photo-interviews also took part in traditional interviews.
15. Unlike other researchers, I cannot argue that photo-interviews increased rapport compared to traditional interviews. Having interviewed all students before PEIs limits direct comparison of this particular aspect. In this research I had already established rapport with students when they decided to participate in the photo-experience. In this sense, the experience reported here could be very different from a study using only photo-interviews.
16. AM refers to the researcher.
17. Valeria asked me to anonymize all her photos.
18. Unfortunately, it is not possible to publish these photographs. Although I did get permission from photographers to publish these photos, I did not have the permission of all the people who has been photographed.
19. One female student at Low Hill took a photograph with a pastoral assistant and one boy from High Mountain one shot with his History teacher and male friends at their classroom.
20. Three boys and two girls took mainly photographs of objects and/or empty places.

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Appendix: Photo-elicitation guidelines and consent form

"I would like that you tell me about you and your life through photographs"
Please take the photographs before or after school time.

Section 1

1. Please take photographs during the next seven days from the and return the film on so I could send it for developing
2. On (date)..... I will give you the developed film and we will meet up to chat about your photos.

Agreement between Analía Meo and for the taking of photographs and the reproduction of the images taken

1. (name of the student) agrees to take the photographs of a 24 photo film (bought by Analía) during the seven consecutive days from the dayand to meet up at least once to talk about the photographs.
2. Analía Meo recognises the ownership of (name of the student) for the photographs taken in the context of this research.

Section 2

3. In the following, (name of the student) expresses if he/she authorizes Analía to use their images in different publications and situations:

Use of the images	Type of Authorization			
	<i>I authorize Analía to use any of my photos</i>	<i>I authorize Analía to use all the photos. However, people's faces should be anonymised</i>	<i>I authorize Analía to use only the following photographs</i>	<i>I don't authorize Analía to use any of my photos</i>
In Analía's PhD thesis				
In papers presented in national conferences or scientific meetings				
In papers presented in international conferences or scientific meetings				
In articles in national specialist journals				
In articles in international specialist journals				
In articles in national magazines or newspapers				
In books dedicated to sociology of education or education				
In websites of academic content				

4. Analía commits herself to communicate the results of her work to and to ask for permission if she plans to publish images in means that are not explicitly included in this agreement.
5. The work of Analía Meo is strictly confidential and anonymous

Name of the student:

Analía Meo

Signature:.....

Signature:.....

Buenos Aires, October 2004.