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## **Photographs as a Research Tool in Child Studies: Some Analytical Metaphors and Choices**

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Date of publication: June 28<sup>th</sup>, 2018

Edition period: June 2018 – October 2018

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To cite this article: Poveda, D., Matsumoto, M., Morgade, M., & Alonso, E. (2018). Photographs as a research tool in child studies: some analytical metaphors and choices. *Qualitative Research in Education*, 7(2), 170-196. doi:10.17583/qre.2018.3350

**To link this article:** <http://dx.doi.org/10.17583/qre.2018.3350>

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# Photographs as a Research Tool in Child Studies: Some Analytical Metaphors and Choices

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*(Received: 06 March 2018; Accepted: 24 June 2018; Published: 28 June 2018)*

## Abstract

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This methodological paper discusses how photographs can be used in multi-layered data projects with children and families. We present photographs as a versatile low-fi digital artifact that can be used under a variety of research circumstances and critically discuss this particular visual tool in the context of the growing body of visual and multimodal research with children and families. The critical discussion draws on a series of research projects in which we have employed photographs (topics of the projects include family diversity or children's routines). The comparisons between projects highlights some of the procedural and analytical choices that are opened up when using photographs. In particular, we focus on two issues: (a) differences that emerge when materials are created by participants or are elicited by researchers, and; (b) the metaphors that are applied to interpret and work with photographs.

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**Keywords:** photographs, family diversity, children's routines, qualitative research, narrative methods



# **Las Fotografías como Herramienta de Investigación en los Estudios de la Infancia: Algunas Metáforas y Opciones Analíticas**

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*(Recibido: 06 de marzo de 2018; Aceptado: 24 de junio de 2018; Publicado: 28 de junio de 2018)*

## **Resumen**

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En este artículo metodológico analizamos cómo las fotografías pueden ser utilizadas en proyectos de investigación con infancia y familias que usan diferentes clases de datos. Planteamos las fotografías como un artefacto digital de "baja fidelidad" ("low-fi") versátil que puede utilizarse bajo una variedad de condiciones de investigación y discutimos críticamente esta herramienta visual, particularmente en el contexto de la creciente investigación visual y multimodal con infancia y familias. La discusión crítica se basa en una serie de proyectos de investigación en los que hemos empleado fotografías (los temas de los proyectos incluyen diversidad familiar o rutinas de la infancia). La comparación entre los proyectos sirve para resaltar algunas de las opciones analíticas y procedimentales que se abren cuando se usan fotografías. Específicamente, nos centramos en dos cuestiones: (a) las diferencias que surgen cuando los materiales fotográficos son creados por los participantes o son provocados por la investigación y; (b) las metáforas que se aplican para interpretar y trabajar con fotografías.

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**Palabras clave:** fotografías, diversidad familiar, rutinas infantiles, investigación cualitativa, métodos narrativos

The use of photography in social science research has over a century of history, originating in early anthropology at the beginning of the 20th century (Harper, 1998; Pink, 2013). In this early history, photography was considered as ‘objective materials’ (Mead, 1995, p. 9-10. Cited in Pink 2013, p. 19) and used ‘as a simple... truth-revealing mechanism,’ providing visual information to categorise human races (Edwards, 1992, p. 4.). While photography had declined in importance by the middle of the 20th century (Harper, 1998), there has been an ‘explosion’ (Barker & Smith, 2012, p.91) in recent decades, and presently, photography is used in various disciplines, such as sociology, geography, media, technology studies, psychology as well as anthropology (e.g. Banks & Morphy, 1997; Ortiz, Prats, & Baylina, 2012; Thomson, 2008). In addition, there are a variety of paradigms, theoretical approaches, and analytic procedures to work with photography (e.g. Bohnsack, 2008; Rose, 2001; van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2001). More fundamentally, while a realist approach may continue to consider photographs as an objective record, a constructivist approach to photographs has come to be widely acknowledged: photographs reflect the photographer’s point of view, biases, and knowledge, or lack of knowledge, and the meaning of a photograph is something constructed by the maker and the viewer which can change across different contexts and through time (Edwards, 1992; Harper, 1998; Kolb, 2008; Pink, 2013; Thomson, 2008).

Images, in general, “allow us to make statements that cannot be made by words” (Harper, 1998, p.38). Photographs, in particular, have the strength of capturing an image in an instant (unlike drawings) including a sense of the context and texture, such as of the places, or ambience or the mood of a particular moment, which are difficult to capture exclusively through written text (Harper, 1998). Furthermore, photography is increasingly becoming an accessible and user-friendly technology. People are immersed in photos in their daily lives, through mass media and taking and sharing photos in social media. Children are not exception in this trend; photographs have become part of children’s daily experiences and cultural practices, especially in industrialised countries in a digitally mediated world. With these technological changes, furthermore, children have moved from being the ‘objects’ of photographs taken by others to become also photographers of their experiences (Capello, 2005). Under these circumstances, photographs gain a central role in different research

processes. On one hand, photographs emerge as a documentation tool that is easy to use with participants from diverse social and age groups, including less literate children and adults. On the other hand, photographs can be a tool that facilitates “participant driven / collaborative / participatory” forms of data collection and research (Barker & Smith, 2012; Clark, 2010; Kolb, 2008; Mitchell, 2011).

There are also claims in relation to the particular advantages of photographs in research with children. There is a growing awareness that children can be active agents in research rather than objects of research (e.g. Cappello, 2005; James, Jenks, & Prout, 1998; Mauthner, 1997; Mayall, 2000). This requires, however, adjustments of research designs and tools to become more ‘child-centred’ (Mauthner, 1997, p.17) or ‘child-friendly’ (Parkinson, 2001, p. 138; Yamada-Rice, 2017) and ‘in tune with children’s ways of seeing and relating to their world’ (Thomas & O’Kane, 1998, p.337). Traditional methods, especially those that rely on verbal interviews, can be problematic with children for a number of reasons. First, they rely on linguistic ability, which is still limited for children, especially if they are younger or still pre-readers (e.g. Clark, 1999; Clark & Moss, 2011; Crivello, Campfield, & Woodhead, 2009). Second, it may be difficult to explore abstract concepts with children when only relying on interview techniques (e.g. Cook & Hess, 2007). Finally, in a context in which children are not used to sharing information in question-and-answer sessions with strangers, an interview format may accentuate the authority of adult or turn the research relationship into a test-like school activity (e.g. Clark, 1999; Epstein, Stevens, McKeever, & Baruche, 2006).

In contrast, visual methods (drawings, photos, videos), are presented as ‘child-friendly’ tools to overcome some of these difficulties and help children, even young pre-reading children, to participate actively in research processes (see for example Baker & Smith, 2012; Clark & Moss, 2011; Young & Barrett, 2001). In particular, photographs are pointed out as having the following advantages in research with children:

- They are easy to generate, allowing for the relatively fast production of multiple and tangible visual data (e.g. Cook & Hess, 2007)
- Taking photographs, increasingly, can be done without needing special technical skills either on the part of researchers or child-participants - in contrast, for example, to drawing, which relies on

children's competence in drawing painting and potential insecurities children may have about their drawing capacity (particularly in school settings) (e.g. Cook & Hess, 2007; Johnson, Pfister, & Vindrola-Padros, 2012)

- The tangible nature of (taking) photos helps focus attention and discussion on relatively abstract concepts and topics (e.g. Capello, 2005; Cook & Hess, 2007).
- Children generally do not associate photography with school exercises, which allows researchers to step outside established authority roles (i.e. the teacher) - while drawing is in some contexts associated with school activities (e.g. Capello, 2005; Johnson et al., 2012).
- It helps establish rapport with children, making the research process fun, and allowing children to take control and actively participate in research (especially with photovoice method) (e.g. Baker & Smith, 2012; Clark, 1999; Cook & Hess, 2007; Johnson et al., 2012)
- It offers flexibility and autonomy, allowing the children to take the research to other spaces and moments that are difficult to observe directly (Baker & Smith, 2012; Crivello et al., 2009; Young & Barrett, 2001)
- Photographs taken by children can act as a tangible representation of children's interests and provide insights into children's perspectives (e.g. Cappello, 2005; Cook & Hess, 2007).
- Photographs enable the researcher to ground discussion in children's experiences and social environments, thereby making the process of interpretation and analysis more collaborative and situated (Crivello et al., 2009).
- In case of the case of photovoice approaches, children are involved not only in data generation but in analysis simultaneously, as they at the very least interpret the research prompt from their own perspective (e.g. Clark, 1999; Johnson et al., 2012).

Photographs are a flexible material and tool, offering different ways in which they can be used in research with children. They can be part of the research methodology and/or a tool to elicit responses from informants (e.g. Capello, 2005; Clark, 1999; Collier, 1957; Kolb, 2008; Latham, 2004; Torre & Murphy, 2015). Photographic data generated in a study can be a data source on its own to be analysed or can be combined with other types

of data sources (e.g. Eskelinen, 2012; Harper, 1988; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; Rose, 2001). For instance, Harper (1988) suggests four modes in which photographic data could function: scientific or empirical (as a record of information), phenomenological (where photography ‘communicates sociological insights in an artistically stimulating manner’ (p.66), reflexive (where data is built from the participant’s point of view) and a narrative mode (as visual narratives, using photographic sequences). In terms of the origins of photographs, research can utilise photos that already exist in the life of participating children (their family album, for instance) (e.g. Bourdieu, 1990; Brown, Reavy, & Brookfield, 2014; Mraz, 1999), photos taken by the researcher (e.g. Capello, 2005; Epstein et al., 2006) or photos taken by the children themselves during the research project (e.g. Clark & Moss, 2011; Cook & Hess, 2007; Delgado, 2015; Johnson, 2011; Latham, 2004; Rasmussen, 2004).

In short, photographs, as produced and consumed in the majority of contexts in which contemporary children and youth participate, are presented as a versatile data-source, a technically accessible and affordable (low-fi) visual technology and a research tool that has been successfully used with children under a variety of circumstances. Yet, current discussions about the use of photography (and perhaps other visual techniques/methods) in child and youth research seems to take a celebratory stance on the use of photographs and it is less often that we find more critical and reflexive discussions of photographic/visual research with children that, in addition, to highlighting the affordances and possibilities of photographs also discusses some of the interpretive and methodological challenges related to using photographs (e.g. Baker & Smith, 2012; Heydon, McKee, & Phillips, 2016). In this paper we draw from our own research experience to uncover some of the complexities and tensions that emerge in research and data analysis processes when using photographs. As part of this discussion, we propose a framework that might help unpack the intersection between two central elements in the use of photographs as research tools. First, the issue of who generates/creates the photographic materials: if they are elicited by researchers, drawn from participants lives, generated by participants for the study, etc. Second, what explicit and implicit metaphors guide the use of photographs; particularly we focus on how a "narrative" or "structural" logic (cf. Bruner, 1986) can be seen as central metaphors for the analysis of photographic material. Before we turn

to this discussion we briefly present the four research projects we draw from to develop this discussion. It should be noted that, since this is a methodological article, in this paper we do not delve into substantive findings from each project and, rather, focus on procedural and analytical issues related to the use of visual materials - empirical reports and discussions of findings can be found in the references we provide to our projects.

### **The Projects**

Table 1 below summarises four projects in which photographs were part of the methodological tool-kit. The first two projects are related to family diversity. The 'Adoptive families' project focused on understanding the adoption processes and construction of adoptive families from the perspective of each family member (see [Alonso, 2012](#); [Poveda et al, 2014](#)). The study took a comparative perspective and documented the experiences of families in the Chicago (USA) metropolitan area and in the region of Madrid (Spain). The sample of families included different family structures and included transracial and transnational adoptions. In the project we asked the parents and children to choose separately 10 photos from their family albums prior to semi-structured interviews with them. The general instruction was to choose photographs 'you like because they reflect who is your family'. Previous research and professional experiences indicated that the family album is an important family visual artefact for families and, in particular, for adoptive families ([Brown et al., 2014](#)). In the case of the American families, they could choose from all the family photos (printed or digital) they thought relevant, and in the case of Spanish families, they were asked to choose photos from the album of photos at the beginning of the transnational adoption trip (in this case to Nepal). In the interviews, participants were asked about the process of adoption, the family composition, the most important milestones in family settings (marked by the selection of photographs) and, particularly in the case of adults, the most important challenges in their adoptive experience.

The 'Single-parenthood by choice' project involved children and mothers from single parents by choice families in Madrid, Catalonia and Valencia. The broader project is a multi-year and multi-sited ethnographic study of single-parent families formed through adoption, foster care or assisted

reproductive technologies (Jociles & Medina, 2013). The larger projects includes well over 100 interviews with parents, professionals and children, multiple observations in physical and on-line settings and extensive analysis of current legislation and documentation in Spain. The specific sub-study discussed in this paper focused on children's understanding of their family model and experience. Families were asked to choose at least 10 photos from the photos that the family already had (or take new ones) and then, create a poster/mural about their family that was later explained and discussed in an semi-structured interview. In addition, some of these families created the poster during a workshop event organized in a single-mother-by-choice association.

Table 1  
*Four projects in which we employed photographs*

	<b>Project short name</b>	<b>Participants with whom photos were used in the project</b>	<b>Uses of photos in the project</b>
<b>1</b>	<i>Adoptive families</i> (Alonso, 2012; Poveda et al, 2014; Poveda, Jociles, Alonso, & Morgade, 2015)	4 adoptive families from Chicago (2 transracial and 1 transnational adoptive families) and 4 adoptive families from Madrid (all transnational adoptions). Total: 7 parents and 7 children	<b>Family photos as data source and as an elicitation technique</b> Semi-structured interviews, asking parents and children separately to choose 10 photos from their family albums, prior to the interview.

(continues)

Table 1

*Four projects in which we employed photographs (continuation)*

	<b>Project short name</b>	<b>Participants with whom photos were used in the project</b>	<b>Uses of photos in the project</b>
2	<i>Single-parenthood by choice</i> (Jociles, Poveda, & Rivas, 2013; Poveda, Jociles, & Rivas, 2011)	13 children aged between 3 and 19 of single parents by choice in Madrid, Catalonia and Valencia.	<b>Family photos as data source and as an elicitation technique</b> Children were asked to choose at least 10 photos from the family album (or by taking new photos), and then create a poster/mural about their family.  The poster/mural was analysed as an information source itself as well as used to develop an interview with the children or the children and mothers.
3	<i>Retiro children</i> (Poveda et al, 2007; Poveda, Morgade, & González-Patiño, 2012)	32 children aged between 1 and 9 in a middle-class residential district of Madrid	<b>Photovoice and photo elicitation</b> Families were asked to take photographs of their daily lives during a week (most participants took between 20-30 photographs).  Follow-up interviews using the photographs to explore their daily experiences and the scenes captured in photographs.
4	<i>Chamartín/Salamanca preadolescents</i> (González-Patiño, 2011; Morgade, González-Patiño, & Poveda, 2014)	4 preadolescents aged between 9 and 13 in affluent areas of Madrid	<b>Photovoice and photo elicitation</b> Children were asked to take a minimum of five pictures a day (in total over 35 photographs in all cases) regarding their daily lives.  Later asked to take a second series of photographs focusing on their use of technologies during a week.  Interviewed twice over a course of several months.

The last two projects were about children's daily routines. In both cases, photovoice and photo elicitation methods were employed. The combination of the methods allows children to document their day to day lives and organize their narration without starting from our questions, and it is the children who, from the material they deliver, elicit our questions. The approach allows children to take pictures applying their own logic, discover daily routines from children's point of view and allows children to participate actively in the research process. The 'Retiro children' project focused on the daily routines of young children in the context of a wider study on children's literature socialization and participation in out-of-school literary events. Children and their families were asked to take photographs of their daily lives. Instructions were open ended in terms of format and number and most participants took between 20-30 photographs. In the case of smaller children (five years and below) parents took most of the photos, while older ones took them themselves. Later, based on these photographs, children were interviewed about their daily experiences and activity preferences.

The 'Chamartín/Salamanca Preadolescents' project followed a similar methodology and was focused on the daily routines of middle/upper-class children and their engagement with digital technologies. Preadolescents (between 9 and 13 years of age) in two affluent areas of Madrid (Chamartin and Salamanca) participated and were asked to take a minimum of five pictures a day regarding their daily lives (in total over 35 photographs in all cases) and then were interviewed using the photos they took by themselves. In addition, this project involved two iterations of the photo-elicited interviews: one focused on daily routines and a second cycle focused on engagement with digital technologies.

### **Complexities and Tensions when Photo Materials Are Created by Participants vs. When They Are Elicited by Researchers**

The first tension we want to discuss gravitates around the dynamics that emerge in the use of photographs as analytical materials and or "prompts" to generate conversations with children. In our experience, there are distinct dynamics and issues depending on whether these materials are drawn from children's own photographic archives (e.g. their family albums, collections, etc.) or are generated by participants following some type of instruction

from researchers. In short, there are two basic paths, both of which have been followed in different research projects:

(a) When images are drawn from children's archives what is foregrounded is the ecological validity or emic relevance of these visual materials for the children: the photographs were generated, kept, commented and shared by children and their families before they were ever reappropriated as research materials. Under these circumstances, often the goal of the research process is primarily to uncover some of these constructed meanings for children. However, this advantage also mean that researchers have very little "control" over the nature of the materials (regarding aspects such as quantity, type, content, etc.). More importantly, as we discuss here, the interpretation of the materials will have to navigate through the potentially multiple meanings attached by different participants (e.g. parents, children, friends, etc.) to these images. In addition, meanings may change over time, which involves additional complexities but also makes family photographs a particularly powerful visual tool to understand family histories (in contrast, for example, to other visual techniques used to study families).

(b) In a photographic corpus generated as a response to researcher prompts, often the goal is to gain some control over the nature of the photographs and establish some constraints that tie the generated photographs to the research questions of the project. However, given that usually these photographs are generated within qualitative and open-ended research projects, instructions to participants have to be relatively open and variability across participants becomes an important consideration in the analysis.

Our research projects with diverse families, and especially with adoptive families, illustrate some of the potentials and complexities of using visual materials that are offered by participants (parents and children). On the one hand, family photographs are a very rich source of information and meaning for families as shown in our own research as well as other studies that highlight the importance of photographs and photo-albums in the construction of the adoptive family projects (e.g. [Alonso, 2012](#); [Poveda et al., 2015](#); [Brown et al., 2014](#)). On the other hand, using visual materials with adoptive children helps handling and working through some of the "silences" that surround adoptive families: the topics, experiences and feelings that are not easily talked about or do not emerge often in

conversations in adoptive families (Frekko, Leinaweaver, & Marre, 2015). Yet, given these conditions, the same photographs can have very different meanings for each family member, encapsulate very different emotions and serve different social functions for each family member.

This multiplicity of meanings is something researchers have to calibrate carefully when they work with and interpret visual materials and is well illustrated in our work with adoptive families. The photograph in Figure 1<sup>1</sup> comes from the materials generated with an adoptive family in the United States (Study 1 above). In this family, mother and daughter selected photographs that captured their family experiences and the daughter included the photograph below which includes her and two of her biological siblings. In the image, she is placed in the middle between her older biological siblings - with whom she has a relationship, as she is part of an open adoption. During the interview with Aisha (pseudonym), the importance of these siblings in her life became apparent and she selected and discussed this photograph to emphasise this aspect of her family experience. However, during the interview with the mother it transpired that, from the mother's perspective, the relationship with the biological mother and family (not necessarily these two siblings but other siblings and family members) was at times problematic and a cause of tension for the mother. Yet, the photograph is part of the family photo album and allows Aisha to make present this aspect of her family experience. In short, without going into the details of the family socialization strategies that these adoptive families put into motion (see Poveda et al, 2014), how this photograph is situated in the family album and the research process illustrates well some of the key points we have made regarding photographs as participant's artifacts. First, the photograph plays a role in the construction of family experience - specifically here in relation to the complexities tied to sustaining relationships between adoptive family members and the biological family in the context of open adoptions in the USA. Second, as a device that is brought by participants to the research process, it allows to draw into the research conversation/interview relationships and dynamics that might be quite removed from the time and place of the interview (for example, Aisha is several years younger in this photograph than when she was interviewed). Third, as the photograph can be discussed and introduced in the research conversation in different ways by each family member, researchers are provided with a privileged

opportunity to explore and compare divergent/convergent meanings associated to the particular images. Perhaps it would be possible to explore these aspects of family experience through other (non-visual) research techniques -such as semi-structured interviews, written diaries, etc.- but our argument is that using photographs has facilitated greatly the process or, potentially, uncovered elements that would have remained invisible through other research approaches.

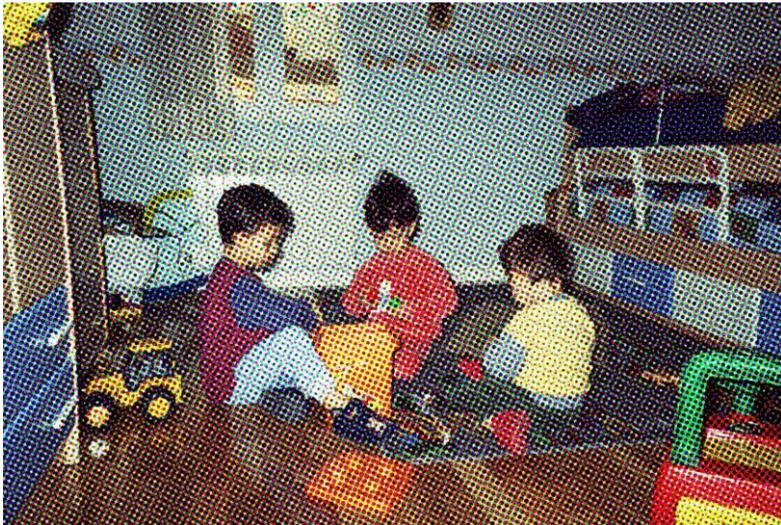


*Figure 1.* My brother and sister - from an adopted child's photo-album

Our research on children's routines illustrates well some of the complexities involved in comparing and handling visual data sets generated by participants during the research project which, nonetheless, might be very different in terms of how they were produced. To start, while in one of the studies we claim that most families produced between 20-30 photographs of their weekly lives (Poveda et al, 2007), the actual range was very large and went from 11 to 119 family photographs generated over a week. More importantly, as this was a task that was transferred to families, in some families' children had most responsibility over the process while in others most photographs were taken by parents. This obviously introduces important differences in the perspective of photographs, as parents will

primarily capture their children (focal participants) engaged in activities, while in photographs taken by children the focal child does not appear in the image (in 2007 "selfies" had not emerged as an iconic visualization). More importantly, these contrasts reveal important and often subtle differences in what children consider significant aspects of their daily lives and how they should be captured for researchers. These aspects are not necessarily easily revealed from the photograph itself but require going beyond the picture, exploring the relationships that surface around the photograph and the dialogue that emerges through the photograph during the research process - as we discuss later in the paper.

For example, the two images below apparently depict similar scenes: children playing in their rooms. Yet, the first one (Figure 2) was taken by the parents and depicts the three siblings playing together and, from our perspective, could be seen as primarily a parental perspective (and ideal) of what "quality evening time" at home should look like. In contrast, the second image (Figure 3) was taken by the older sister (and key participant of the study) and primarily, again from our perspective, can be seen as a way to capture her fraternal relationship and the importance of her brother in her daily life.



*Figure 2.* Three siblings playing (taken by parents)



Figure 3. My brother in his room (taken by sister)

### **Complexities and Tensions When Analysis Follows a Narrative Logic vs. a Structural Compositional Logic**

The second point we want to discuss deals with the analytical logic applied to photographs and visual materials. From our perspective, following alternative analytical paths, which often broadly fit within the two options discussed here, is something simultaneously tied to: (a) the research questions and goals of the project; (b) the implicit metaphors behind how the use of visual materials were presented to participants; (c) the specific analytical tools that are brought to the interpretive work around the photographs. Broadly speaking, we have analyzed photographs and visual materials within two guiding modes that, for the goals of this paper, fit relatively well with Bruner's (1986) distinction between "narrative" and "paradigmatic" reasoning and thinking.

From a *narrative perspective*, photographs "contain/tell stories"; that is, they primarily situate and organize events and participants in particular times and places within unfolding action. These stories are not self-evident

in the visual artifact and must be uncovered through conversation and work with/around the photographs with participants. Further, following classic distinctions in narrative analysis (Bauman, 1986; Wortham & Reyes, 2015), narrative conversations around photographs reflect the divisions between the *narrated event*, the original event and episode captured in the photograph(s), and the *narrative event*, how this event is retold and reinterpreted in subsequent conversations and encounters around the photograph.

In social research it is often more important to locate the analytical work on the narrative event around photographs, as this is what allows contemplating how the meaning and personal relevance of the same materials might change over time for individuals (and a research project usually documents these meanings at one particular point in time of participant's life-course). Examining how photographs are reconstrued and reinterpreted also helps uncover differences across the participants depicted or connected to the photograph - for example, members of the same family as in Figure 1 above. In addition, adopting a narrative perspective around photographs and the "stories they tell" may, in fact, involve adopting different perspectives on what constitutes a story and what is mobilized from participants in terms of the dramatic elements that constitute a narrative (cf. Burke, 1945) as well as how photographs interrelate to each other in the analysis. The different projects discussed in the paper capture some of the alternatives.

In our studies of children's routines, we have tried to focus on habitual and mundane aspects of children's lives (that is, materials that might be relevant for research purposes but do not usually form the basis for "good stories") (Bruner, 2003; Labov, 1972). Here the focus has been on examining collectively sets of photographs that, taken together, document children's daily and weekly routines and pursue research questions that both focus on the meaning and importance of these routines for children as well as more "objective" aspects of these routines - such as where, with whom, with what materials, when, etc. children engage in different activities.

In contrast, in our studies with adoptive families we have facilitated that participants single out photographs that condense important relationships and emotions in their lives. These photographs are often selected because they capture "extraordinary" moments in participants' biographies and are brought to the narrative event for this reason - that is, are a source of "good

stories" (Bruner, 2003; Labov, 1972). Methodologically, this means that photographs are brought to the the research interview layered with multiple interpretations and past conversations among family members. Consequently, more meaning can be extracted from individual photographs rather than necessarily from the global portrait provided by the full set of photographs (although this collective analysis can also be conducted). Figure 4 illustrates some of these qualities. It was selected by an adopted adolescent and portrays her and her cousin sleeping in strollers during a walk in a family reunion trip. The photograph was taken when they were toddlers, so most probably the stories around the photograph are not drawn from her "individual" memories and recollections of the event. Rather, as transpired during the conversation around this photograph, what provides meaning and personal relevance to this photograph are the stories told by her parents and other family members from/around the image, the relationship that has developed since then with her cousin or the accumulated meanings of successive "family reunions" -i.e. narrative events and experiences that unfold beyond the place and time depicted in the photograph.



*Figure 4. Me and my cousin - selected by participant as an adolescent*

Photographs can also be examined from a *paradigmatic* perspective, as containing or enabling structural relations, which are extractable from the compositional organization of the elements in the visual materials (e.g. Bohnsack, 2008; Rose, 2001). While this approach to visual materials might seem "colder" and detached from why and how families and participants usually relate to visual materials there are, at least, a couple of analytical advantages that should not be disregarded. First, there are well developed structural analytical procedures that have been specifically developed for/from visual materials (e.g. Bohnsack, 2008; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). Among other advantages, this avoids the problems associated with adapting and "stretching" concepts and procedures developed in other fields to work with photographs - such as linguistic narrative analysis as in the case above. Second, from this perspective it might be easier to bring into the analysis concepts and issues developed in different areas in social theory (e.g. structural theories of ethnic/class/gender relations, definitions of kinship and family, etc.) that are also organized as "paradigmatic theories".

We used this structural approach with the family posters created by children and mothers in the study around single-motherhood-by-choice. This study developed an approach that blends some of the issues and potentialities discussed above and an analytical approach stemming from contemporary social theories. First, we asked families (mothers and children collectively) to select photographs from their photo-album (or take new ones) that reflected their family and family life. Second, we organized an activity in which we asked the families to create a poster with these photographs (and add any text, drawings, decorations, etc. they wanted) that represented the child's family - that is, families created an additional visual artifact elicited by the researchers. Third, we analyzed these photographs through the tools and lenses of two specific analytic grids: (a) the "documentary method", a type of compositional visual analysis developed by Bohnsack (2008); (b) the definition of family and kin relations developed by Trost (1988, 1999). The procedure allowed us to identify how children built their own individual system of family relations, including a selection of relatives and other significant people and the subsystems these members form - and, as a result, we have used it with some success to study single-parent families and two-parent families formed in different ways: adoption, biological reproduction, re-marriage, etc. (Poveda et al., 2011;

Jociles et al., 2013). Figure 5 illustrates the resulting visual artifact as well as the analysis that we layered over it to identify relationships and sub-systems:

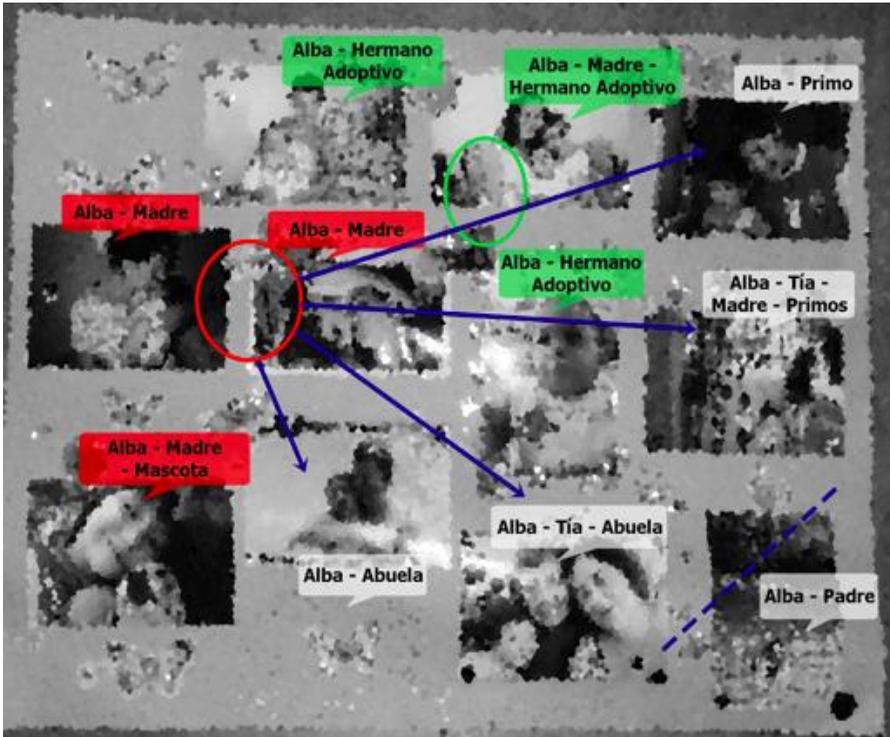


Figure 5. Alba's (pseudonym) family poster

## Conclusions

In this paper we have reviewed some of the reasons why photographs have been used in research with children and young people. We have then illustrated how we have used photographs and visual materials in our own research, discussing some of the dilemmas, alternatives and analytical decisions that emerge when working with photographs. From our

accumulated experiences, there are a few general conclusions we would like to highlight.

(a) Photographs have the advantage of being a very flexible and adaptable material and data source in research. As we have shown, photographs can be collected under very different conditions, can be recovered from children and family photographic archives (and, more recently, from social media profiles -a key area of current research we have not discussed in this presentation) or can be elicited from participants with technologies and devices that are relatively cheap and easy to use. Analysis can draw on relative large sets of photographs (e.g. 100 photographs of a single child) or gather rich information from a single family photograph. In short, there are no general and specific guidelines in terms of the characteristics and quantity of images that have to be gathered to conduct valid social research. Rather how photographs are used is something closely tied to each specific research project and questions and the practical and ethical conditions under which the project is undertaken. In addition, from our perspective, we would argue that using photographs does not require a strong commitment to any particular research or theoretical paradigm. As can be seen from our overview of the different projects, we have drawn from different disciplinary traditions -ranging from Children's Geographies, to Human Development to Kinship Theory- and have analyzed photographs and visual materials using, adapting, exploring and combining available analytical approaches. In other words, we would claim that work with photographs is an area in which a 'non-fundamentalist' theoretical attitude brings about productive results or, even better, visual research might be an area that facilitates generating new ideas and tools - such as the family poster procedure and analytical grid we developed for the single-parenthood-by-choice project.

(b) A recurrent theme in the discussion of the different projects was that analysis of the photographs often needs to move "beyond" the photograph and use interviews and/or other sources of data to understand the meaning, relationships and dynamics that surround the photographs, children's daily lives and family experiences (topics of the projects we have discussed). Indeed, we think this is generally the "way to go" with photographs in ethnographic/qualitative oriented studies of children and youth: photographs combine well with other research techniques and flourish in projects in which different data sources are triangulated. Nonetheless, the

role of photographs as a source of more "objective" information should not be disregarded. In other words, photographs need to be interpreted from a broadly constructivist perspective and cannot be seen as neutral, objective and truth-revealing artifacts. However, they also provide, within well-calibrated analytical frameworks, information about the materialities and conditions of social life that can be critically examined beyond the discourses and particular interpretations of the participants-protagonists in the photographs. Even in qualitative research projects as the ones discussed in this paper what photographs depict is difficult to disregard: it would be complicated to ignore or minimize the importance of themes and aspects that recurrently appear in photographs and it would be difficult to put at the center of children's lives themes that (unless we have strong reasons to do so) are never captured in their photographs.

(c) Lastly, we want to close the paper by pointing out what we see as a distinct place for photographs within the growing body of visual and multimodal research with children and youth (Thomson, 2008; Stirling & Yamada-Rice, 2016). Within this literature, research photographs and digital cameras can be seen as the 'low-fi' choice within the set of visual/media tools that are currently available and used in child research. Photo cameras can be relatively simple and relatively cheap to use (by increasingly younger children), do not require sophisticated digital or visual skills on the part of participants to be generated successfully, nor does working with photographs require excessively complicated research infrastructures. No doubt, there is very interesting and valuable research currently drawing on video, video-edition, multimodal creative projects with children and youth or work that tracks contemporary children's and adolescent's multifaceted and complex visual-digital-social media activity we do not want to disregard. However, photographs might be a good place to start experimenting in research projects that want to to "keep it simple".

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Each of the projects discussed in this paper was funded through different agencies and involved different institutions. Thus, the ethical requirements and oversight of each project was different and cannot be discussed in detail in this paper. In any case, all participants gave their written consent to participate in the study and specified if masked/anonymized photographs could be used in academic publications and presentations. Across different publications the photographs have been masked and filtered in various ways depending on

the analysis and discussion we developed around them. In this article, given our focus in the overall composition of the photograph and the setting/scene depicted in the image, we have applied filters that obscure the identities of participants but still provide an overall sense of the scene and participant's facial expressions and emotions (an aspect that is difficult to maintain when parts of the face are masked with solid colors).

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