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Towards a visual social psychology of identity and representation: photographing the self, weaving the family in a multicultural British community

Book section

Towards a Visual Social Psychology of Identity and Representation: photographing the self, weaving the family in a multicultural British community

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Social Psychology has long recognised the role of the visual in the development of identity, representations of others and prejudice (Forrester, 2000). The images that others have of us impact on identity as we develop a sense *and a vision* of self. The images and so representations that others have of us sometimes affirm or jar with our own image of who we are (Howarth, 2002). Research within the Social Representations tradition (Moscovici, 1998), for example, demonstrates the ways in which representations produce, extend, threaten and sometimes transform different social identities (see Moloney and Walker, 2007, for a useful edited collection). Yet, methodologically, there are few empirical studies that practically explore the *actual* production of self-images or the contestation of stigmatising representations of particular communities. [1] As Forrester (2000) has commented "it is a little surprising that photography has rarely been used in psychology either as a basis for analysing cultural conceptions of the self-display, or as a methodological tool in research exploring the relationship between self-concept and presentation" (p. 168). In this chapter I examine one community-based arts project that does precisely this: it uses art (photography, painting and weaving) as a medium to examine the images that people hold of themselves and explore how far these correspond to and contest others' sometimes negative images of them.

Traditionally Social Psychology uses interviews, focus groups or surveys to capture people's sense of themselves and feelings about social stereotypes that relate to them. For example in my first study on identity (Howarth, 2000), I examined how young people

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[1] The main exceptions to this come from photo elicitation studies (see Stanczak, 2007, for a good collection from Sociology) and social psychological analyses of images of 'others' in a discursive or social representations tradition (e.g. Moloney, 2007). Such studies have been criticised as they "may be limited by the researcher's interests" and so miss what is meaningful to the participants (Clark-Ibáñez, 2007, p. 167). Rarely do studies look at the actual production of images themselves, as we do here, directed by the research participants and produced in collaboration with researchers.

living in Brixton (a suburb of London) felt about the different social stereotypes of Brixton (or social representations of Brixton). In the main, I used semi-structured interviews and focus groups to access how people related to Brixton, how far they developed a 'Brixtonite' identity or distanced themselves from the often racialised and negative representations of the area (Howarth, 2002). These standard methods served the study well and revealed important aspects of the participants' struggle for identity.

However, in this first study, I also analysed a television documentary series about people from Brixton and ran focus groups exploring the images produced in the series and how these could be interpreted by viewers in general. Following Gillespie (1995), I wanted to reveal the "mediated messages, through the eyes of her informants themselves" (p.1) and so I asked the focus group participants to consider both the encoding and the decoding of the programme (Hall, 1997). In many ways, the media programme and related focus groups went to the heart of the issue – the very *visual* significance of representations of Brixton, something taken-for-granted and simultaneous avoided as too sensitive or political to discuss. This was the racialisation of people from Brixton, the psychological politics of this and people's collaborative efforts to reconstrue negative representations of Brixton in more positive ways. Hence the visual methods led to an important finding*: identity is both restricted by and liberated by its very visibility*. (Ironically it was harder to publish this work as Psychology journals do not accept images.) This early study drew me to visual methods generally which developed into a commitment to explore the visual politics of identity and the value of using visual methods in psychological research.

Using visual methods to explore identity.
In this research project I collaborated with FUSION, a Black and mixed parentage family group. With funding from *The Arts Council*, FUSION set up workshops to provide a context for children and young people to explore mixed heritage, assert positive cultural identities and develop skills to protect themselves in racist encounters. Together we drew on both a) social psychology to facilitate a clear understanding of the connections between identity, representation and prejudice and b) art – as a means of bringing somewhat abstract concepts to life - such as the gaze, self-image, social representation, narrative and performativity. As other researchers have found (e.g., Banks, 2007; Clark-Ibáñez, 2007), we discovered that visual methods were an ideal methodology to engage

young people, to build rapport and disrupt the power dynamics of much social research. The workshops provided an ideal context to explore the value and limitations of visual methodologies as a means of examining the (co)production of identities, the diverse nature of identity (i.e. hybridity) and the ways in which identities are acted out or performed (i.e. performativity).

Following an ethnographic approach (Rose, 1982), I worked very much in the capacity of a participant-observer, recording as much data as possible while assisting the children and, where appropriate, participating myself. Each workshop ran over four days in two different groups: 7 to 10 year old children and 11 to 19 year old teenagers[2]. Experienced artists ran each workshop, with support from FUSION's art education officer and myself. The artists were highly skilled in using art as a means of subverting common stereotypes, encouraging rich narrative and promoting self-reflection. As a whole, the workshops aimed to promote the expression of secure cultural identities through creative and interactive activities that forged a collective sense of cultural heritage and history. We hoped to create a forum for 'community conversations' (Campbell, Nair, Maimane and Sibiya, 2007) on identity and a space to develop the social support to overcome prejudice and racism and experiences of exclusion, rejection and hostility.

The children and teenagers in the workshops were used to being seen as 'minorities', subjected to stereotypes of otherness and often treated as the object of reifying and racialising representations. As bell hooks has argued, to be an object of reifying representations is to the lose the power to represent one's self and so to lose the possibility for being recognised as one sees one's self. Creating a space to work with images of the self was important. In the photography workshop, the children and teenagers took photographs of themselves and painted over these – discussing the ways in which they saw themselves and understood others' images of them. In the weaving workshop, family groups told stories of connection, belonging and cultural identity while weaving together fabrics, wools and maps into individual, family and collective weaves. (These activities are discussed in greater detail below.) As other researchers have found "making and sharing photographs can be helpful in generating rapport" (Gold, 2007, p. 145). I found the experience very powerful and the resulting data

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[2] As the focus in the weaving workshop was on family heritage, one or two main carers participated alongside their children.

incredibly rich. The analysed data included the photos and the weaves, cultural artefacts brought in from home, group discussions within the workshops, recorded interviews participants made with one another and focus groups with participants (including children, teenagers and parents).

Interpreting images: connections between representation, identity and power

The best way of conveying the value of visual methods for this research is to give examples that illustrate the textured connections between representation, identity and power. I suggest that it is necessary to ground these connections in practice otherwise research questions and findings can literally get lost in words. However, without words, without some verbal qualitative data, the images collected in the project would only be interpreted though my eyes. The verbal data contains individual and collective interpretations of what the weaves, paintings and photos mean and how they can be read. Hence the combined analysis of verbal and visual data gives a much richer and more complex picture of the social encounters produced in the workshops and the connections between identity, representation and power. Here I give four examples, using both visual and verbal data, which illuminate four main aspects of the research project:

1. Representations as the building blocks of identity

2. The psychological violence of representation

3. The creative possibilities produced in 'doing' identity

4. The power of collaboration and collective identities

1. Representations as the building blocks of identity

Social psychology demonstrates that identity is always produced in relationship and is marked by the particular context in which it is performed (Condor, 2006; Tajfel, 1978). One of the mothers made this point[3]:

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[3] All names and some personal details (such as nationalities) have been changed in order to protect the identities of the participants.

Lucie: It (my identity) depends very much on the context – and how other people see me. I am aware of different parts of myself in different situations.

One of the main objectivities in designing the workshops was to produce a particular context that would facilitate a rich, multilayered discussion of identity – focussing cultural identities, cultural heritage, feelings of belonging, connection and disconnection. In both workshops this was done unobtrusively by placing artefacts, books and maps in the room – either simply as a backdrop or as tools. For example, one activity was to produce a family weave – a small weave with different colours and textures of wool to symbolise significant family members. This used a book as the frame on which to actually weave. The artist brought a diverse collection of books which appropriately reflected different cultures. These included well-known books (such as Maya Angelou's *The Caged Bird Sings,* Nelson Mandela's *Long Walk to Freedom* and Jung Chang's *Wild Swans)* and travel guides (for example to West Africa, India and Hong Kong). When discussing the weave and showing it to the others, participants discussed how they ended up choosing particular books that had some connection to their own cultural histories. Indeed, I found that this was what I had done myself in choosing a text that highlights my own connection to Africa:
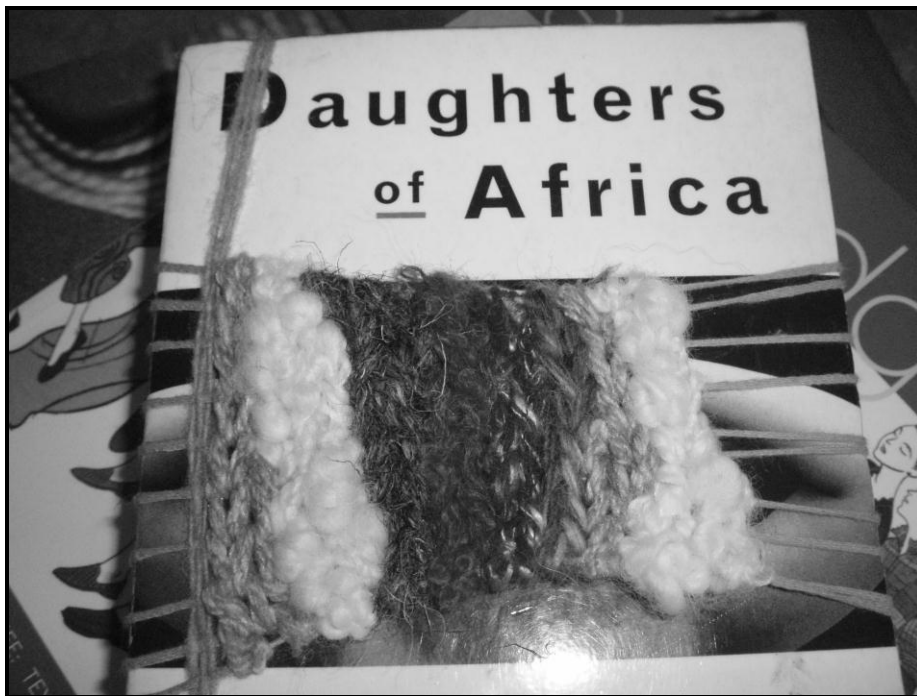

Image 1: Daughters of Africa weave

The workshops were managed in such a way that I could work very much as a *participant* observer (Rose, 1982) - joining in activities, sharing the stories developed through the art projects and being very open to questions about my own childhood in Kenya and the South Pacific. Some of the other participants had also grown up in Africa or had connections to the Pacific, and this created a considerable degree of connection and warmth. Assumptions about identity, which connections were prioritised and how other people construct 'different' cultural identities quickly and easily became topics of animated discussion.

The very practical, visual and creative nature of the activity brought the role of representations as the building blocks of identity to the fore. Just as Harper (2002) has found, this methodology can "mine deeper shafts into a different part of the human consciousness than do words-alone interviews" (p. 23). Participants chose colours and textures to identify with, physically wove these together, showed photos and weaves to others, created narratives about what they saw in their art and in work produced by others - perhaps seeing the emerging images through others' eyes or with new insight and emotion. While focus group discussions would have revealed some of these aspects of identity, I would suggest that the importance of visibility for identity in terms of how we are seen, how we 'capture' the other in our gaze and how we collaborate alternative visions of both self and culture would not have been so evident without the use of visual methods.

2. The psychological violence of representation

Evident in both workshops was the very political consequences of visual representations of identity. That is, people, cultures, communities but especially minoritised groups are literally *captured* in a particular way by the gaze – otherness is thereby marked onto their skin, their hair, their facial features and there are certain stereotypes that flow from this act of looking (Fanon, 1952; Hall, 1997; Howarth, 2006). As Foucault has forcefully demonstrated "visibility is a trap" (1977, p. 200). Many of the participants gave examples of how this 'trap' affects them, discussing their desire to relax (straighten) hair, have smaller noses and lips, be white – or to proudly assert afros, African features and other visual markers of difference. For example, this is an extract from a discussion with the mothers of the young participants:

Linda: Because Tracey - she never wears her hair down and I'm hoping that might change, you know, as her confidence grows and her own identity, you know, her perception of her own identity. … (When she was younger) Trace was coming home from the nursery in tears because another child wouldn't kiss her because she thought it might be catching, and this is at three years old. And kids weren't using the water fountain after my daughter used it. It is terrible, and some woman, "Oh, you've got hair just like my poodle."

Lucie: I was one of the only three black children in the school and immediately people's eyes were on me and it was just - being singled out. I was very shy and I just wanted to hide, and it was somewhere near that time I remembered thinking 'I wish I had straight hair', 'I wish I was white'."

Image 2: Red lips

In these extracts and image two it is possible to see the effects of the psychological violence contained in the politics of representation – as certain representations restrict the ways in which we are seen and so limit the possibilities of self (Howarth, 2002). In analysing image two, produced by Lucie's youngest child Jamelia, it would be an easy assumption that her daughter's identity is in fact damaged by the same negative

representations of blackness that equate beauty with 'white' features such as thin lips. Let me explain how this image was produced. In the workshop the artist asked participants to photograph a part of their face that they particularly liked *or* disliked. After these were developed as black and white A3-size pictures participants were invited to paint on the image and to explain the changes they made. One of the aims of this exercise was to explore how we are seen, how others see us and how we may change or challenge this. Most images were changed a great deal – participants enjoyed spending a lot of time adding various colours and patterns as we can see in image three (below). By contrast Jamelia made a few very simple changes to her photo – she painted her lips bright red but also, significantly, made her lips much narrower. In colour this image is quite shocking. The red stands out dramatically against the black and white, and the narrowing of the lips is less obvious, but when seen it jars with common hopes for and FUSION's ambitions of supporting positive and assertive cultural identities.

From the image alone it is impossible to know what this says about Jamelia's own identity: whether she is revealing a desire to hide her black features and therefore a certain degree of shame and a spoiled identity (Goffman, 1968), or whether she is demonstrating her knowledge of racialised stereotypes and that this in fact is a subversive attempt to challenge assumptions about beauty, femininity and 'race'[4]. From the verbal data as well as discussions with her mum, it seems just as likely that she is very conscious of racialised representations and is making quiet, determined attempts to unsettle easy assumptions about her identity and what she 'should' be like.

3. The creative possibilities produced in 'doing' identity

Interestingly the other photo that was also barely changed was of someone's hair. When I asked the teenager who took this photo why he hadn't painted it he simply said, "it's cool like that, no need to change. … Too many people mess with their hair. 'Don't mess with my hair!' (*in a mock angry voice*)". Hair can be a very political issue as it may assert or contest various representations about African and Caribbean identities (Haley, 1998).

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[4] 'Race' is problematised with speech marks in order disrupt its taken-for-granted and often naturalised status in both everyday and academic discourses. This emphasises the socially constructed nature of 'race'.

The photo itself hints to this significance and the political nature of the connections between how we are seen and how we re-assert identity. The act of taking a photo and then painting over it (or not) was very successful in highlighting the dynamic, creative and provocative aspects of 'doing' identity.
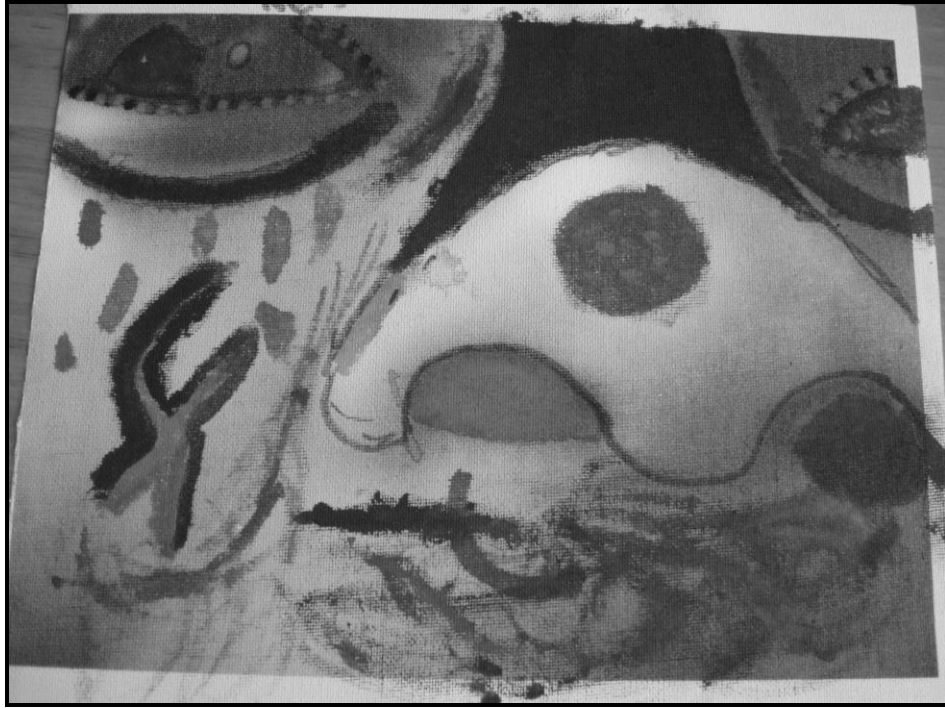

Image 3: My African face

Image three is another example from the photography and painting activity. Initially Akinyi was very resistant to keeping this photo at all; she said she "hated" the photo and would "put it in the bin". Gentle persuasion from the artist and FUSION's arts facilitator did not change her mind it seemed and she worked on another image. However, she later came back to the discarded image and spent a good deal of time painting onto it what she described as African colours and textures. At the end of the four day workshop, she admitted that she "really, really liked the picture", saying "you can really express yourself using pictures and art". She went on:

> Akinyi: This was an experience. (*laughs*) I hated this photo – my nose! It looked so ugly. Then I thought - this is my nose, it is an African nose (*laughs*). I shouldn't feel bad about it. So I painted it in a Africany way – the colours of Africa. The hills and valleys of Africa! (*Laughs*)… I like the multicolours too. I mean, it also symbolises I like multicultural – I like living in a multicultural community. I am proud to say that I live in a multicultural community.

Through the workshop as a whole, Akinyi's attitude seemed to change a great deal. She seems to change how she saw herself, how she dealt with others' representations and expectations of her and this increased her confidence and cultural pride. This parallels a shift from her positioning herself at the centre of her stories, to a focus on the community as a whole. She seems much more assertive and connected to the group by the end of the workshop. One of the other activities seemed to elicit these feelings of a new-found confidence to assert proud identities. This was a dressing-up task – where participants choose from a diverse range of clothes, wigs, hats and props that represented different cultures, generations and fashions. Hair again was a common topic – as children and teenagers choose to play with different types of wigs - making them feel "more African", "like a girl" and "happy". Olive was very enthusiastic about this task – choosing items that reflected what she "was like before", wearing an ankle-length skirt as she used to in Tanzania but in a style that she described as "Australian, hippy-ish and super-confident!". As she explained:

> Olive: This gives me a picture (looking in a full-length mirror) of who I can be. Hippy-ish, confident. I used to wear skirts like this. I think this is how Australians are. I will be like this one day. (*pause*) It makes me feel liberated! (*laughs*) Yeah! Liberated! (*Makes a power-to-the-people gesture with her fist*). Yeah, Liberated.

She said this on day one of the workshop. By day four she was even more assertive about her identity and the need to stand up to racism. She told us that she now realised that she has been very much a victim of racism and she had not had the confidence to stand up to racist bullying in the past. She says that the workshops enabled her "to express my feelings and stuff through pictures". She repeats a story that she told earlier of extreme racism on the school bus, racist chants and jokes told literally on a daily basis. She shares with us that she has realised she has never stood up to racists or asked anyone to help her deal with this. While she recognised this would be very daunting, she seemed to feel much less victimised by the situation, realising she has a choice in how to respond.

4. The power of collaboration and collective identities

What the analysis above fails to highlight is the very collaborated nature of the workshops, the art produced and the narratives told. Many of the participants

commented on the value of having "a space to stop and think about our cultures", as the mothers said, "a forum" where they could "see each others' stories", appreciate differences in cultural experiences and find commonalities in identity-work. Two of the participants talked about what they liked about the workshops:

> Karen: The workshops helped me think about myself, and where I am from. It made me want to learn more, about where I am from. It made me understand myself more – which helps. I liked thinking about what my culture is – the smell of mangoes, West Indian food, and the heat! It is hot. And also my English culture – like was grey skies really! (*laughs*) Because the more I understand myself, the easier it is when I have to deal with racism, the better I deal with it the more I know about myself. Because I feel strong, you know, about who I am.

> Susannah: I liked finding connections with other people. Like she said she thought of the smell of mangoes – so did I! So we both chose the same colours (*in the collective weave*).

All of the parents and older participants in the photography workshop commented on how much they learnt from each other, especially about experiences of racism. Some of the weaving embodied the collaborative and collective aspects of cultural identities very tangibly – in the production of large collective weaves such as image four (approximately three feet by five feet).

Image 4: A collective weave

Participants wove together colours and fabrics that held cultural significance for them while telling the story of these pieces to each other. In the making of these group weaves, therefore, there was a real sense of a collective narrative of identity emerging – as people found common memories of 'home', of food, music and smells, of parents and grandparents, of journeys to other places and connections to Britain. As well as telling these stories to each other, families were also sharing stories, as one of the mothers said:

> Lucie: "it reminded me of stories you hear about people who are working and making quilts or weaving in Africa. Not necessarily singing, but working and talking and telling stories and passing around stories from centuries ago. It's something about telling your story to your children that keeps it alive."

Everyone in the workshops was in some way 'mixed' – and so, for a change, people enjoyed "being part of the majority", as another mother said. Being in a minority was a more common experience for the children; one parent said that in her children's school of about 550 children there are only 6 non-white children. Like many of the other parents, she was passionate about the need for organisations like FUSION where they not only learnt about cultural identity and mixed heritage but they also learn how to deal with negative stereotypes and racism. As she said:

> Nancy: "They've got to be able to stand up (for themselves). That's what I want for them."

The very practical aspects of the methods invited the participants to work together, share difficult stories of prejudice and hostility and find ways of supporting each other. This made the workshops feel very empowering and invited both individual and collective forms of agency to develop, as other visual researchers have also found in their use of visual methods (e.g. Clark-Ibáñez, 2007; Banks, 2007).

Towards a Visual Social Psychology of Identity and Representation:

The contextual and relational dynamic of identity has been at the heart of Social Psychological theories on self and identity from Mead's influential lectures on the self and society, Goffman's conceptualisation of the performative self, Tajfel's early studies

of social identity and Turner's emphasis of the situation specific-nature of identity, and is also highlighted in powerful critiques of the field (e.g. Reicher, 2004; Wetherell and Potter, 1992) and explicit in recent, innovative work on identity and prejudice (e.g., Ahmed, 2000; Condor, 2006; Phoenix, 2006). Despite these weighty intellectual traditions, homogenising and reifying versions of identity and 'race' still penetrate the field (Howarth, 2008; Stevens, 2003). I hope that the research described here highlights the potential of visual methods for developing a Social Psychology of identity and representation that instead examines the creativity, collaboration and criticality involved in the telling and performing of cultural identities. This is what I hope I have addressed in this chapter: the importance of visibility for identity and the value of a methodology that brings to the fore the ways in which we see ourselves, are seen by others and the psychological politics that this provokes. Through a visual approach to the psychology of identity we can see how identity is both restricted and liberated by its very visibility.

People's sense of self, their fluid, dynamic and collaborated sense of connection and disconnection (to many different social groups and communities) and the negotiated limits to the production of identity is something that is often intensely visual. Being British, being white or Asian, being old, being female, having mixed heritage – these are all aspects of ourselves that are seen, displayed and created. The visual aspect of identity at once highlights the conditional politics of the gaze (we cannot often avoid being *seen* in very particular ways - as brown or white or 'mixed') and the psychological politics of resistance (there are so many ways of asserting / performing/ challenging what it is to be *seen* as brown or white or mixed). While this is undeniable in racialised contexts – as we impose 'race' in the very act of looking, I would argue that visual methods are relevant for looking at all aspects of identity – most importantly the relational and restricted aspects of identity (how identity is literally captured in a social relationships with others) and the creative aspects of identity (how we challenge, resist and re-create how others literally see us).

The workshops described here used the visual to great effect to bring out these tensions between representation and identity, highlight stigmatised assumptions and invite collaborative narratives of positive cultural identities. To summarise, we have seen how:

a) creative photography can capture the gaze of the other and the symbolic violence of racism as well as the possibilities for recasting the self in the eyes of others

b) weaving together different threads and fabrics that resonate with cultural associations and social memories can produce shared images and narratives of connection and disconnection, belonging and exclusion.

One of the participants described identity as "an unfinished project – a work in progress" and this was very evident in the workshops as a whole. Different activities explicitly and implicitly asked the participants to consider how others view them, expect them to be and so impact on their identities. Marcus Banks (2007) has argued that "the act of looking produces knowledge that in turn constitutes society" (p. 42). The activities worked with this principle – and found ways to encourage the participants to challenge the ways they were often looked at, to challenge the knowledge so produced and thereby to challenge the racialisation of society. For example, the act of taking a photo or producing a weave, consciously reflecting on it and debating this with others somehow seems to unsettle negative representations of identity and 'race'. Hence the visual methods used here portray how *identity is both restricted by and liberated by its very visibility*.

Acknowledgements

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