

Narrative Storywork: A Visual and Material Approach to Ethnographic Portraiture with Children in Care

Christopher Chapman, MA (University of Oxford)
christopher.chapman@sant.ox.ac.uk

Introduction

Child welfare is a space where children do not generally choose to be. Some may not know why they are in care, while others may not leave until they age out. Some have experienced abuse, illness, and/or disability. Consequently, how should ethnographers listen to and portray their stories, if even at all? In this paper, I explore the methodological question of how to do ethnographic research with children in care. I suggest a combination of visual/material tools, demonstrated by an approach I call narrative storywork. I begin by outlining how I conducted this approach. I then explore an ethnographic encounter which illustrates the ways in which people shared stories about their everyday lives. My aim is to encourage experimentality with ethnographic portraiture; this paper is a resource for ethnographers to build on.

Methods: Multimodal Approaches to Care

Narrative storywork seeks to evoke everyday life narratives through a variety of modular, collaborative methods. I derive the name from a social work tool called Life Story Work, in which a facilitator helps a child understand their life trajectory through the collaborative creation of representations of their life before entering care (see Goldfarb Forthcoming, 107-111).¹ By labeling my approach similarly, I extend an olive branch to practice-based researchers who may find insight in anthropological scholarship. I designed narrative storywork in response to my encounters with children in care, which I then used across twelve months of research on everyday caregiving in the child welfare system in Japan. Jean Hunleth (2017) and Julie Spray's (2020) work are notable influences because of their portrayal and celebration of children's voices through methods like drawing and collaborative storytelling. Small groups of elementary school-aged children at a foster home and children/teenagers at a residential care institution participated in narrative storywork over approximately four months.² Outside of the workshops I interacted with people through my daily trips to the institution and regular visits to the foster home. Several caregivers participated as well.

We interacted through a series of weekly/twice-weekly workshops where we discussed short, everyday life stories facilitated through intermediary objects. The discussions were not fixed to a particular place, and I participated too.³ Importantly, people maintained creative control over what they chose to share. I did not tell participants what to do but encouraged them to think about objects that had *meaning* and objects that they often *used*. Discussions involved everyone asking questions and offering comments. Later, I asked participants to think about portraying *emotions* through their stories. My interlocutors' stories were unplanned, emergent, and sometimes subversive; I found reassurance in Armstrong and Agulnik's (2020, 29-32)

encouraging use of “happenstance” to understand the links between structure and agency. Yet, my aim leverages Allison James’ (2007) position that working with children is not solely about giving them a voice—they already have one—it is the ways in which researchers include, listen to, and retell these stories that matter.

I offered a variety of means to promote inclusive participation, such as digital cameras, drawing supplies, walking tours, show-and-tell, and one-on-one or group discussion; modularity was vital as an accessible way to resituate the researcher-interlocutor relationship and co-creation of ethnographic data (Campos and Anderson 2021).⁴ Cameras were popular and I found photography to be a poignant counter to reductive interests among clinical professionals in the developmental processes of children in care (see also Vaughan and Khaw 2021, 754-8). My purpose with narrative storywork, however, was not to collect people’s things and curate them as data. While people gave me permission to use their work, I do not have a large repository of visual/material data. Instead, I listened to and kept notes on people’s stories.⁵ Lastly, I want to stress that I did not evaluate people’s stories in terms of quality—it was the doing that mattered.

A Story of Laughter



A String of 1000 Origami Cranes. Picture courtesy of Kenji

Narrative storywork provided interactive spaces that, aside from the content of the workshops, demonstrated how children and their caregivers got along. On a late summer afternoon, I sat around a small wooden table with three young foster children, Nanako, Kenji, Emi, and their

foster mother, Misae. The children were eager to share their pictures with Misae, who pretended to act appalled when they tried to show her sneak-peeks of their photos, “Ahh! Don’t show me yet! Wait your turn... This is special.” Kenji went first. “This is a picture of my string of origami cranes,” he said confidently.⁶ “Since I couldn’t go outside due to the state of emergency, I made this hoping COVID would go away.” I noted that the state of emergency, Japan’s lockdown-like measure, was recently lifted. “It must have worked,” I said. “What?” said Emi, who was not paying attention, “The emergency is gone? Everything is normal now?” Misae looked at Emi and said, “Yes, because of Kenji, the state of emergency was lifted. You can see your friends again.” Emi perked up and replied, “Wow that is great! All of Japan? America too?” “No, just Japan,” Misae chuckled. She quickly added, “But you should thank Kenji—it was because of him.” “Really?” Emi asked suspiciously. Misae smirked slyly and said, “Yes, it was *specifically* because of him, so you owe him thanks.” Emi, not convinced, asked “But I didn’t see anything on the news this morning!” Misae, being melodramatic, frowned with regret and replied, “Aw, but I saw the news on my phone this morning.” Emi, thinking she found an answer, said, “Well then give me your phone.” Misae, keeping up the joke, said “Oh no... it is too late, I already closed the app—it’s gone.” Unable to contain himself, Kenji let out a chuckle, as did Nanako. Misae and I joined in. Emi, looking unconvinced, exclaimed, “I knew it!”

Our workshops were spaces where my interlocutors could share their stories, yet our engagements often transcended or subverted a simple focus on things and places. This story of laughter, brought forth through a picture, exemplifies the everyday life of the Hasegawa home and how people crafted close relationships. The narratives invoked in this vignette—as an icon of others in my research—situate narrative vis-à-vis social (inter)action and the senses. This aligns with Cheryl Mattingly’s (2010, 41-45) narrative phenomenology, a framework that is less about narrative as a textual production but more about everyday life as dramaturgical performativity (see also Howes and Classen 2014, 4-13). Drawing this point further, I realized how narrative storywork could facilitate new ethnographic encounters: I travelled with youths into the city in search of collectibles, witnessed children reliving old memories, and learned people’s stances on what constitutes quality care. Multimodal approaches in marginalized spaces take multiple forms. To deconstruct assumptions about the practice of ethnography, I encourage proactivity and creativity in offering people opportunities to choose *how* they engage.

Conclusion

Being open to novel methods of interaction offers an engaging way to invite people in care into ethnography. The story in this paper leaned towards photography; other possibilities include but are not limited to film, video diaries, music, digital spaces, poetry, and games. These avenues can be solitary or collaborative endeavors, and the resulting creations do not need to be made into consumable media for others. The point is to connect with people in an equitable, inclusive, and responsible manner that helps them articulate their stories; multimodal

approaches like narrative storywork offer worthwhile means of deconstructing barriers in age, ability, health, and identity.

Notes

¹ For clarification, I am not using narrative storywork as a therapeutic intervention, and it should not be interpreted as such. The inspiration from LSW extends insofar as using material intermediaries to engage people. My research design is also motivated by training in Youth-led Participatory Action Research (YPAR).

² Due to the short form style of this paper, I center my methods overview on practical information and takeaways for researchers. Please see Chapman Forthcoming for more details on the multi-sited focus of the research project this paper draws on.

³ See Chapman 2023 for a discussion of positionality, an important topic that deserves its own space for discussion.

⁴ For more information about the variety multimodal research approaches in anthropology, see Westmoreland 2022.

⁵ This point coincides with a broader question of my research: who defines, or who should get to define, the circulation and consumption of people's stories? My position here is that visual and material content should not be un-critically construed or classified as presentable and digestible data for an audience.

⁶ In Japanese this is called *senbazuru*. They are made by hand to celebrate a special event or wish someone good health.

References

- Armstrong, Neil, and Peter Agulnik. 2020. "‘I Was at the Right Place at the Right Time’ The Neglected Role of Happenstance in the Lives of People and Institutions." *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 10 (3): 890–905. <https://doi.org/10.1086/711880>
- Campos, Fabio C., and Gary L. Anderson. 2021. "Paulo Freire's Influence on Participatory Action Research." In *The SAGE Handbook of Participatory Research and Inquiry*, Vol. 2, edited by Danny Burns, Jo Howard & Sonia M. Ospina, 41-54. London: SAGE Publications. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781529769432>
- Chapman, Christopher. 2023. "Affinity through Vulnerability: The Politics of Positionality in Child Welfare." *Medicine Anthropology Theory* 10 (2): 1-9. <https://doi.org/10.17157/mat.10.1.6892>

Chapman, Christopher. Forthcoming. "Dissonances in Care: Childhood, Well-being, and the Politics of Welfare in Japan." PhD Thesis, University of Oxford.

Goldfarb, Kathryn. Forthcoming. *Fragile Kinships: Child Welfare and Well-Being in Japan*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Howes, David, and Constance Classen. 2014. *Ways of Sensing: Understanding the Senses in Society*. London: Routledge.

Hunleth, Jean. 2017. *Children as Caregivers: The Global Fight against Tuberculosis and HIV in Zambia*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

James, Allison. 2007. "Giving Voice to Children's Voices: Practices and Problems, Pitfalls and Potentials." *American Anthropologist* 109: 261-272.
<https://doi.org/10.1525/aa.2007.109.2.261>

Mattingly, Cheryl. 2010. *The Paradox of Hope Journeys through a Clinical Borderland*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Spray, Julie. 2020. *The Children in Child Health: Negotiating Young Lives and Health in New Zealand*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

Vaughan, Cathy, and Sarah Khaw. 2021. "Photovoice." In *The SAGE Handbook of Participatory Research and Inquiry*, Vol. 2, edited by Danny Burns, Jo Howard & Sonia M. Ospina, 754-770. London: SAGE Publications.
<https://doi.org/10.4135/9781529769432>

Westmoreland, Mark R. 2022. "Multimodality: Reshaping Anthropology." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 51 (1): 173-194. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-anthro-121319-071409>

Author Biography

Christopher Chapman is a doctoral candidate in anthropology at the University of Oxford. He is a cultural and medical anthropologist interested in caregiving, health, and personhood. His doctoral research examines the multi-sited politics of child welfare in Japan in search of new ways of thinking about care and inequity.

Author contact: Christopher Chapman, MA (University of Oxford),
christopher.chapman@sant.ox.ac.uk

To cite this article: Chapman, Christopher. 2023. "Narrative Storywork: A Visual and Material Approach to Ethnographic Portraiture with Children in Care." *NEOS* 15 (2).

To link this article: <https://acyig.americananthro.org/neosvol15iss2fall23/Chapman>