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## Engaging ‘Future Generations’ in Meaning Making through Visual Methods: An Alternative Approach to Defining City-Regions

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### Introduction

Global environmental campaigns such as *Fridays for Future* and *Extinction Rebellion* have been incited and led by young people. Carrying banners that said ‘if the climate was a bank, it would be saved by now’, ‘systems’ change, not climate change’ or ‘if you’d be doing your job, we’d be in school right now’, young people ‘took to the streets in an estimated 185 countries to demand action’ in 2019 (Laville & Watts, 2019).

These movements demonstrated that while young people might have become vote-apathetic (Agger, 2012; Collin, 2015) and disengaged from traditional politics, they are not apolitical. Instead, the youth has chosen alternative spheres of political action such as protests, advocacy, rallies and online campaigns (Agger, 2012; Chou et al., 2017; Collin,

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2015; Farthing, 2010). Through these actions, young people have been calling upon their representatives to act faster and adopt more ambitious strategies for climate justice.

Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the 2019 movements seem to have lost momentum and their legacy is uncertain. Furthermore, planning and governance systems have chronically failed to reflect and engage young and future generations. This is particularly true in the case of British city-regions, an intermediary administrative level that sits between the national and the local. Established all over the UK, city-regions represent collaborative projects between various local councils, often aiming to drive economic development. While claiming to devolve power from the central government, city-regions have been criticized for their elitist and opaque governance structures, which rarely involve the civil society or a wider public (Axinte et al., 2019; Beel et al., 2018; Flinders et al., 2015).

In Wales, two city-regions were established in March 2016. The research project detailed below looked at the possibilities of balancing the narrow economic rationale with broader social, cultural and environmental aims in developing city-regions. Focusing on Cardiff Capital Region (CCR), the study positioned the city-region within the *Wellbeing of Future Generations Act*—a legislative framework that requires Welsh public bodies to place sustainable development at the core of every future action.

Nolt (2017) debated whether current generations hold any responsibility for future, unpredictable events, and thus, for future generations. Finally, he concluded that our rapid ‘acquisition of knowledge and power’, which could lead to a mass extinction, is a strong enough argument for intergenerational ethics and accountability (Nolt, 2017, p. 11). To operationalize the concept of *future generations* and help simplify such debates, this research defined them as ‘the first humans and non-humans that will be affected by policies and decisions currently made, having to live the longest with their consequences’. Considering that Cardiff Capital Region is a 20-year long scheme, the first future generations affected by it are actually the young people living in South East Wales today. Therefore, doing research *with* future generations and not only *for* or *about* them became an important research aim.

Starting from these ideas, the research tried to engage young people in a discussion about the city-region area and their aspirations for its development. The fieldwork began soon after the CCR was created, leading to a major research challenge: most of the research participants had never heard of the city-region, or had little interest in it. Nonetheless, the city-regional plans were going to affect young people in spheres such as transport and mobility, jobs and education, and digital connectivity. The questions leading this investigation became: How could a research project stimulate a conversation with the *future generations* about the areas where they live, and how could it encourage meaningful reflections on previously unfamiliar concepts, such as city-regions?

It is worth mentioning that this research was developed within the SUSPLACE Marie Curie ITN, which explored pathways for sustainable place-shaping. Within SUSPLACE, the notion of *sense of place* played an important role. Often used in social sciences and increasingly within sustainability studies, it refers to the 'collection of meanings and emotions that people assign to a particular setting', as well as 'the way people experience, use, and understand place' (Grenni et al., 2019). In general, research has shown a positive correlation between sense of place and pro-environmental behaviour, because people might act more responsibly towards their immediate environment when they feel a certain attachment and can ascribe meaning to a place (for a detailed discussion, see Grenni et al., 2019; and/or Kudryavtsev et al., 2012).

Kevin Lynch was the first scholar who referred to *sense of a region*, suggesting that spatial planning and design must strive to harness human perception of the physical form of cities and regions in order to improve their qualities, and thus, people's and places' well-being (Lynch, 1976). The following pages explain the approach used to uncover young people's *sense of the city-region* in Cardiff Capital Region—a first step to understanding their perceptions of the city-region's physicality, as well as their lived realities. Initially, the research also aimed to create a forum for young people and city-regional leaders to interact directly, allowing youth to offer their input to the city-region's plans. Despite failing to accomplish this final step, this research offers useful lessons for anyone interested in using technology-enabled visual methods, working with

youth, or accessing alternative definitions of city-regions (as interpreted by young people who live in South East Wales).

## Visual Methods and Participatory Research

The methods chosen to conduct this research were web-mapping and Photovoice. Both are visual research methods, as they require participants to generate visual data (Lorenz & Kolb, 2009) in the form of maps and photographs. They were selected due to their strengths: (i) the potential to shift the power differential between researcher and participant, as the latter can be in control of their contribution, (ii) the capacity to stimulate reflections and conversations in a less intrusive manner than direct questioning and (iii) the use of technology that might be more appealing for the young participants. Popular among researchers working with youth (Driskell, 2002; Wang, 2006; Ward et al., 2015), these two less conventional, creative methods seemed most suitable in allowing participants to apprehend the concept of a city-region, elicit their own interpretations and provide insights into their lived experiences without being too prescriptive. In addition, the participants' input was facilitated by technology (Geographical Information System in the case of web-mapping and phones or digital cameras in Photovoice), an aspect that the participants seemed to appreciate.

Both (web-)mapping and Photovoice have been used in participatory research *with* young people (Driskell, 2002; Literat, 2013; Wang, 2006), which flourished in the beginning of the 90s, when the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (UNCRC) was first ratified. The Convention marked a paradigm change, as children and youth started being regarded as potential collaborators, with individual agency and valuable experiences (Adams et al., 2017; Tisdall, 2016). The researchers' task became to harness this knowledge, and efforts concentrated on creating more participative approaches that would allow young people to engage and affect decision-making. Many participatory research projects used visual techniques because they support gathering 'information concerning whether lives are meaningful and fulfilling', that might

otherwise remain invisible through conventional and non-participative approaches (Chawla, 2002).

Although visual techniques do not guarantee an increase in participation, scholars often cite their potential to place participants and researchers on an equal footing, as active co-creators of knowledge (Trell & van Hoven, 2010). Some also choose these methods for their emancipatory potential and capacity to affect change (Driskell, 2002; Wang, 2006). Although out of scope for a wider debate here, it is worth mentioning that engagement and participation were not conceived as intrinsically 'good' in this research project. Therefore, the wider investigation went beyond engaging young people, and aimed to also understand if city-regional leaders consider youth engagement possible and valuable at city-regional level, and why/why not. This series of 16 semi-structured interviews was inspired by Farthing (2012), who condemned the 'heroic claims made to justify participation', and highlighted the need to ask more critical questions, such as 'why do we engage young people?' In this way, normative judgements about 'what are good things for young people and what a good society looks like in the first place' (Farthing, 2012, pp. 91–92) can surface. Issues related to participation and the participatory qualities of the two methods applied in this research will be critically analysed in the reflection section.

Nonetheless, this study demonstrates how two visual methods can be combined to obtain rich depictions of young people's everyday lives, and to overcome initial engagement barriers, adding to the methodologies in youth studies literature. Thematically, this is one of the few research projects that have sought to engage young people—a section of the population generally deemed 'hard to engage' (Flinders et al., 2015)—in conversations about their city-regions. This research could easily be replicated in other contexts to understand people's lived experiences in relation to certain administrative boundaries, test these demarcations' legitimacy, as well as their effects.

The next section critically discusses the ways in which scholars have applied mapping and Photovoice, expanding on the characteristics that also made them suitable for this project. The chapter then presents an overview of the research project, as well as a detailed account of the

application of the two methods. The final section represents a reflective account of the entire research experience, the process and the results.

## Using Maps and Photos in Research—A Brief Literature Review

Although boundaries—such as the administrative ones of a city-region—are a constantly changing social construct, they have real effects for people and places, both within and outside those borders. A city-regional level established primarily using commuting patterns might seem rather arbitrary for some individuals—not only young people—as they might not identify with that particular demarcation. Therefore, to engage young people in a discussion about a previously unknown or little understood concept, this research combined two creative visual methods—web-mapping and Photovoice—and used them in a series of workshops.

Maps—whether hand drawn or digital—embody a wealth of information, well beyond their functional spatial indications, and often represent the ‘worldview and particular interests of dominant powers’ (Literat, 2013, p. 198; see also Humphris, this book, and Reitz, this book). Participant-created maps symbolize a specific understanding of a certain location, marking personally relevant facts for the place’s development. In addition to harnessing individuals’ knowledge, such approaches invite participants ‘to take an active stake in the visual representation of their spatial environment’ (Literat, 2013, p. 199).

To highlight the antithesis to formal maps and the deeply political character of the participatory ones, Lee Peluso (1995) coined the term *counter-mapping* in a study that showed the intricacies of maps as consolidators of state control over Indonesian forests. Simply put, counter-mapping allows any actor, especially disempowered ones, to use cartographic tools and maps for an alternative (spatial) representation, often contesting the official one. Headrick Taylor and Hall (2013) used counter-mapping to study young people’s personal mobility and to improve participants’ spatial literacy. They described the result of counter-mapping as a ‘thirdspace’ where personal interpretations

and experiences supplement or contradict existing, official knowledge. Although characterized by conflicts, this interaction holds potential for positive change, both within communities and for the participants' self-development. In fact, the pedagogical potential of mapping has been highlighted in other youth studies; this is because the production of maps supports critical thinking and reflection and can be an introduction to GIS and digital tools when maps are technology-enabled (Literat, 2013; see also Ramirez Aranda and Vezzoni, this book).

For many young people who were part of the research described in this chapter, participating became an occasion to use the map creation tool available in Google Maps for the first time. Since the research relied on online GIS, the method is referred to as *web-mapping*. It is inspired by Lynch's first experiments with cognitive/mental mapping (Lynch, 1977) and the aforementioned *counter-mapping*. The use of technology aimed to facilitate the participants' contributions, as they could access a digital map and produce their own layers (after a brief training session), irrespective of their geographical knowledge or spatial thinking capacities.

Studies using a variation of participatory mapping stress that, while important in itself, the resulting visual output becomes a means to elicit conversations and should only be interpreted after a (group or individual) discussion. In addition to dialogues, certain projects combined mapping with other research methods to enrich findings, including participant-led walks (Driskell, 2002) or bike rides (Headrick Taylor & Hall, 2013), as well as interviews and photos (Dennis et al., 2009).

To enhance findings and to bridge between the young participants and the wider public (including city-regional leaders), this project combined web-mapping with Photovoice. Photovoice is a method developed by Wang et al. (1996) to reveal lived experiences and empower people, particularly marginalized ones, to voice their needs and take part in shaping their environments. It draws from Paulo Freire's *critical pedagogy* and from participatory action research (PAR). The former is a philosophy that supports students to engage in critical thinking, reflect on and discuss their own life conditions, as opposed to traditional teaching methods that 'bestow knowledge upon students' (Derr & Simons, 2019, p. 361). PAR aims to develop practical knowledge through collective

reflection and action that can lead to positive individual and community change (Reason & Bradbury, 2008). As the following parts will show, this project did not necessarily lead to positive change, and its PAR characteristics remained rather limited.

Generally, Photovoice requires participants to capture and record specific issues through the means of photographs. The photos taken are then discussed during focus groups, allowing the development of narratives and themes. The results can be further communicated to the wider community and to decision-makers, so new perspectives can affect change. From its design, therefore, Photovoice had three main goals: (i) to enable people, particularly those coming from marginalized groups, to record and reflect on their community's strengths and concerns; (ii) to promote critical dialogue and knowledge about important issues through group discussion of photographs; and (iii) to reach policymakers (Wang et al., 1996, p. 1391). Its creators defined a complex nine-step strategy to help researchers apply Photovoice, as well as a series of questions to facilitate group discussions and identify themes within the photos taken (see Wang, 2006). Nonetheless, the method has been modified and adapted according to context and needs (for a pertinent critique, see Derr & Simons, 2019), and the research described in this chapter is also a variation.

Conceptualizing young people as 'competent citizens and active participants in the institutions and decisions that affect their lives' (Wang, 2006, p. 152), Photovoice projects have been used for a variety of purposes: to explore children's perceptions and representations of nature (Adams et al., 2017), to elicit youth's perspectives on issues within their neighbourhoods, to find ways to address them (Wang, 2006), to improve the built environment in cities based on children's lived experiences (Driskell, 2002) and to understand the impact of commuting on teenagers' well-being (Ward et al., 2015).

This method's strengths lie in its capacity to shift perspectives, as it allows the researcher to experience the world through the participant's view, reducing preconceptions about what might count as important (Chawla, 2002). Nonetheless, scholars have also raised awareness that 'real, structural barriers' can sometimes persist, reducing the participants' ability to act as co-collaborators in research (Packard, 2008). Indeed,



methods alone cannot reduce power differentials, and researchers should reflect critically on how knowledge was generated (see Franklin, this book).

Even so, photos can facilitate the expression of views and are also a prompt for group discussions. Furthermore, Photovoice encourages people to depict not only weaknesses and needs, but also assets and potential improvements (Wang & Burris, 1997). However, Photovoice also implies serious ethical considerations regarding privacy, representation and safety (Wang & Redwood-Jones, 2001), requiring initial training for participants. Another difficulty raised is the analysis and summary of photos, considering that images contain complex information. To avoid bias in this phase, Photovoice projects should end through a facilitated discussion that allows participants to offer a wider context for their images.

Although some scholars assert that Photovoice could be worthwhile in itself for participants, due to the opportunity to express views, practice critical thinking and be part of group discussions (Lorenz & Kolb, 2009), Derr and Simons (2019) criticized the lack of interaction with policy-makers. Half of the 32 studies they reviewed failed to bring information to decision-makers and bridge between groups, not achieving one of the original tenets of Photovoice: that of enacting positive change within communities by challenging power structures and the *status quo*. For this reason, the aforementioned scholars emphasize the need for more honesty and critical appraisal of using Photovoice to discuss the desired vs. the achieved outcomes, and to understand how well-intended projects can turn into tokenistic approaches.

Concurring with the need for more honesty within academic accounts, as well as the potential of learning from less successful projects, the following part offers a detailed account of how Photovoice and web-mapping were combined and applied to elicit the views and aspirations of young people living in the Cardiff Capital Region. Despite several unsuccessful attempts to reach city-regional leaders and policy-makers, the project offers valuable lessons for researchers interested in creative research methods.

## Exploring Cardiff Capital Region with Its Future Generations

Paradoxically, Wales might be both the place that ‘led the global transition to a carbon economy’ (Eames et al., 2014, p. 3) through the industrial revolution, and one of the first nations in the world that integrated sustainability principles in its constitutive act (Williams, 2006). The Welsh sustainability agenda progressed over the years and culminated with the *Wellbeing of Future Generations Act*—a legislative framework meant to safeguard the well-being of both current and succeeding inhabitants. Since its adoption in April 2016, the concept of ‘future generations’ became central, without necessarily becoming better defined.

A month before the Act’s ratification, Wales also established its first city-regions—a new administrative scale deemed suitable to make Welsh cities more economically competitive. The decision was aligned to a national and international trend of defining cities as ‘engines of economic growth, and catalysts for creativity and innovation’ (Welsh Government, 2012, p. 5).

Cardiff Capital Region (CCR) became a collaboration between ten local authorities in South East Wales, the Welsh and UK Governments. Its ultimate purpose is to achieve economic growth through physical and digital infrastructure improvements, as well as upskilling and enhanced employment opportunities. Interviews conducted for this research have shown that although many of the city-regional programmes are targeting youth, the leaders considered businesses as the main stakeholders. As a result, any other groups (volunteer groups, trades unions, charities, etc.) and individuals remained disenfranchised, without the opportunity of influencing the city-region’s development.

CCR is currently home to 50% of all young people aged 16–24 living in Wales. The city-region’s proportion of youth (12.4%) is, in fact, higher than the average of Wales and the UK (Welsh Government, 2016). This project aimed to establish a dialogue with young people, as the first generation to be affected by the decisions made on their behalf by the CCR, and the ones who would have to bear the consequences for the

longest. Because of its novelty, CCR was largely unknown and required a strategic methodological choice to encourage meaningful reflections.

## Participant Selection

The 16–24 band age was chosen to simplify the research process, since research with underage persons has specific administrative and ethical requirements that can prove lengthy and complicated. Finding young people and convincing them to participate has been a major hurdle, requiring numerous emails, phone calls and visits to youth groups, youth fora, clubs, organizations and some schools. While some of the adults contacted have been extremely helpful, others acted as gatekeepers. Nonetheless, in two cases—Caerphilly Youth Forum and Bridgend College—participants were recommended by their officer and teachers. In all other cases, recruitment relied on personal connections and snowballing. In total, 29 people were recruited; however, only 24 of them got involved in both methods.

## Web-Mapping Workshops

The fieldwork lasted for 10 months and the two research methods chosen were applied in a workshop format. The first session used web-mapping and elicited young people's perceptions of their (personal) city-regional span, and of the assets and liabilities within it. In simple terms, participants created online maps of their own city-regions, marking also the significant places within those boundaries. These workshops aimed to gather young participants' depiction of their personal geographies without being an obtrusive investigation. Each session allowed participants to explore their region's online map, reflect on their experiences within their city-region(s) and superimpose their personal layers and pointers.

All sessions used laptops or computers connected to the Internet and participants created an online map using the map creation feature in Google Maps. Their participation required no previous knowledge and only basic computer skills, which all attendants had. Each person

received a step-by-step written guide and continuous assistance, and every session started with defining and discussing the concept of city-regions. Participants were instructed to think of their city-region as the area that expands beyond their hometown, where they might travel occasionally (for leisure, shopping, education, medical services, etc.) and to which they felt connected in some way. They were also told that boundaries did not have to be very precise, that each map is a personal artefact, and no answer was wrong.

After inputting general information (name, age, place of residence), each participant had to complete three tasks: (i) mark the boundaries of their city-region based on the aforementioned discussion; (ii) mark places of personal significance that they appreciated, indicating in a comment why; (iii) mark places they disliked and would like to see change, explaining why and how (Fig. 13.1).

Workshops varied in length, depending on the number of attendees (between one and nine) and their familiarity with the topic and tool used. After finishing the mapping task, each individual presented their contribution and the groups briefly discussed the differences and similarities between results. As expected, web-mapping showed that individual

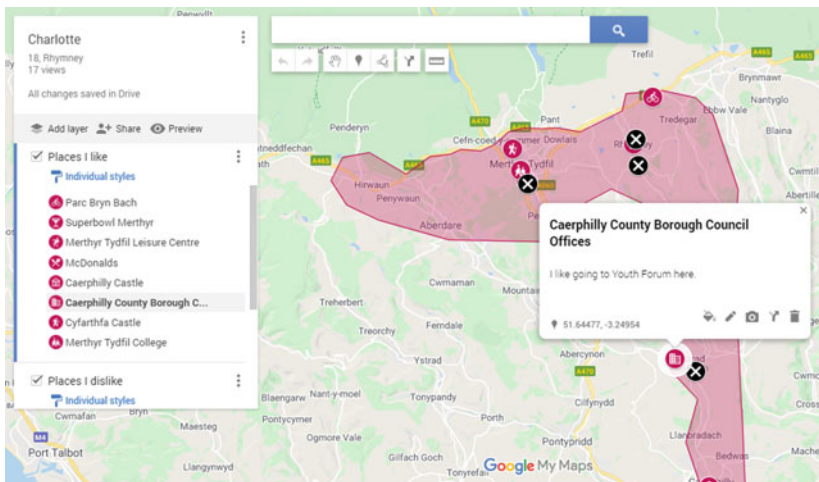
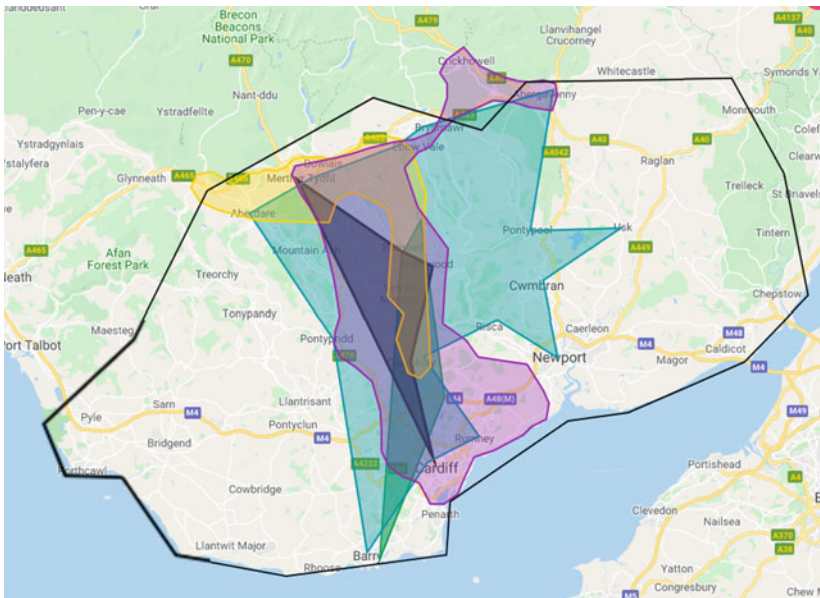


Fig. 13.1 Web-mapping using the Google Maps interface

city-regional boundaries take a myriad of forms. As Fig. 13.2 shows, they do not overlap with the official ones, challenging their relevance particularly in the context of extremely limited public engagement.

All the web-mapping workshops ended with short feedback sessions. These revealed that, in general, participants appreciated the web-mapping workshops for three reasons: (i) they had not heard about CCR and thought it was important to gain more awareness about future plans; (ii) they enjoyed expressing themselves geographically and considered this was an innovative way of eliciting their views; (iii) they were happy to have learned to make digital maps and the younger ones were actually hoping to use this skill in school projects. Therefore, the web-mapping technique enhanced young people's capacity to express spatial information, and to reflect on the suggested subject and the emerging themes. At the same time, it supported a shared language and understanding among all workshop participants, including the researcher. For instance, one of



**Fig. 13.2** Example of five city regional representations within CCR (marked with different colours) and the official boundaries (in black)

the participants marked a place from their community where they had come in conflict with local police officers, due to 'loitering'. This led to a thorough discussion about the lack of leisure spaces for young people, which proved to be a common theme across workshops.

On the other hand, apart from the one person who was familiar with CCR (as a student in Geography and Planning), nearly all participants had some difficulties at first in understanding what the city-region referred to. This was an alien concept for them, demonstrating the lack of information coming from CCR during its first years of existence. The narrower spatial representation (compared to the official boundaries) showed that the participants' sense of place is much more localized, and that when prompted to describe significant places, these would most often be situated in the proximity of their homes. In addition, the different representations demonstrate that city-regional identities are rather fragmented, and this could turn into significant impediments for future projects and policies. If CCR's inhabitants do not see the relevance of the investment, it is highly unlikely they will support such decisions.

Young people's counter-maps offer useful insights into personal boundaries, as well as everyday experiences, needs and expectations of a section of the population long considered 'difficult to engage' (Flinders et al., 2015). Therefore, web-mapping could be included in the wider toolbox of engaging techniques available for policy-makers and local authorities, even if the results might be more relevant at local, rather than city-regional level.

## **Photovoice Workshops**

Photovoice workshops were designed to build on the web-mapping workshop, and most participants attended both. The aim was to elicit youth's aspirations for their city-region; participants were therefore asked to photograph aspects that make life worth living in their city-region, aspects they would like to see change, and a travelling experience. Each question required two photos, yet people often took more. These instructions and ethics-related issues were discussed at the end of the web-mapping session, and each participant also received a briefing email.

Participants could choose to use their own gadgets or be provided with a digital camera they returned after use. After completing the task, each person wrote captions for their photos and returned everything by email. This allowed the researcher to become familiar with the visual outputs produced and to prepare ahead of the workshop, when the group met to present and discuss results. Nonetheless, these workshops did not have a predefined structure, therefore departing from Wang's method of identifying themes (see Wang, 2006). Still, as certain topics re-emerged either in the form of captions or during discussions, it has been possible to form key themes together with the participants.

These workshops also varied in length depending on the number of attendees. Although initially designed to follow precisely the Photovoice nine-step strategy (see Wang, 2006), the method was condensed to reduce the number of meetings, and therefore, the risk of tiring participants. As mentioned, briefing was done at the end of the web-mapping workshops, and then repeated through email. In addition, as none of the participants required training on camera use, this step was entirely skipped. The reality is that although recruitment was the most difficult part, commitment was also fluctuating and was sensitive to weather, exam periods, or personal events. Nonetheless, the compromise found yielded rich findings, without sacrificing the quality of the research process.

The guidelines received encouraged participants to reflect on both desirable and undesirable features of their city-region. Transport—a recurrent theme stimulated by the last aspect required to document—rarely elicited any positive feelings (Fig. 13.3) and shifted the balance from appreciative inquiry towards criticism. The participants who lived outside of Cardiff felt disadvantaged because of the unreliable public transport services in the South Wales Valleys and the impossibility of driving (determined by age or costs). Those from Cardiff declared they mostly walk or cycle, despite the lack of safe conditions for active travel. Given the car-centric nature of CCR, this is an important message for policy-makers who are trying to reduce transport emissions and encourage people to replace private vehicles with more sustainable alternatives. Without improved infrastructure and services, it will be impossible to achieve less carbon-intensive lifestyles.



Fig. 13.3 Broken train timetable board (C. Thomas)

Overall, photos and subsequent discussions unveiled different layers of inequality (in terms of access to leisure, employment and transport facilities), and most young people living in Cardiff felt strongly about the growing levels of homelessness in the capital. While trying to respect rough sleepers' privacy, various participants decided to document the homelessness crisis in Cardiff, as one of the most critical issues that required local authorities' immediate attention. In addition to the large number of homeless persons in the city centre, they mentioned a shelter located on the same street with a suite of corporate offices (where some of the participants actually worked). This juxtaposition demonstrated young people's astute observations of their surroundings, and a certain sense of social justice. While aware of the authorities' limited budgets, participants thought investment was often going to the wrong places. This argument also surfaced when mentioning new developments, and some participants decried the opening of a new shopping facility (Trago Mills in Merthyr Tydfil), instead of support for the smaller shops on the High Street.



Among the positive aspects, the most common were related, unequivocally, to CCR's environment, its diverse natural landscapes and the opportunities to spend time outdoors. Regardless of their place of residence, participants felt a strong connection to nature, in both urban and peri-urban areas. The natural environment was also used as a hook to talk about more delicate subjects, such as the stigma attached to certain areas of the CCR. Referring to the Welsh Valleys, various participants from two different groups cited the lack of place appreciation among individuals and communities who had come to internalize the deprecating narratives portrayed in the media.

Photovoice workshops offered a multi-layered understanding of young people's sense of place through the combination of photos, captions and group discussions. On the one hand, this would have been impossible to capture fully through more conventional research methods, or non-visual ones. As photos were analysed during workshops, they became prompts and supports for richer discussions. On the other hand, photos alone would have not been enough to grasp the participants' ideas, as 'coincidental things can be overrated' (Trell & van Hoven, 2010, p. 101) and misinterpreted. Furthermore, following Photovoice's emancipatory goal, this research project aimed to create a bridge between the young participants and city-regional leaders, through an open exhibition and/or a roundtable. Unfortunately, this event did not materialize, and the results did not reach policy-makers (detailed in the following section).

Despite this shortcoming, the combination of web-mapping and Photovoice formed a well-rounded strategy through which young people could share their lived experience in relation to an unfamiliar topic—the city-region. The wider study also included an initial quantitative analysis that was useful to understand general trends concerning youth; however, the majority of the data was obtained through these two creative methods. They provided a rich amount of information, which generally escapes surveys and statistical accounts. Workshops enabled participants to designate the city-regional span they identified with (via maps), show how positive and negative aspects looked in their communities (via photos) and clarify how these affected their lives (via discussions).

The following paragraphs reflect on the experience of using a combination of two creative visual methods, on the process and the results yielded.

## Reflecting on the Experience

This exploration validated Wang's (2006, p. 152) view, showing that young people can be 'competent citizens and active participants in the institutions and decisions that affect their lives', if given the chance, and that visual methods that allow a more creative form of expression can be useful engagement tools. Some of the most remarkable findings were young people's critical thinking skills and their strong connections to their communities. Participants invested time to reflect on the tasks and questions asked, and were able to contribute with both objective and subjective arguments, as experts of their local environment's conditions that support or inhibit their well-being (Chawla, 2002; Chou et al., 2017; Driskell, 2002; Wang, 2006).

However, this project also demonstrated that methodology alone cannot overcome other, more structural barriers in levelling the field between the researcher and the research participants (Packard, 2008), or in bridging between participants and policy-makers. In general, the workshops were successful in terms of attracting youth and in generating rich findings. However, like other Photovoice projects, this one also failed to reach policy-makers and to accomplish the method's emancipatory goal (Derr & Simons, 2019). Various blog posts, a photo essay (Axinte, 2018), a video (Axinte, 2019) and an invitation to an exhibition (Axinte et al., 2018) held in November 2018 in a popular arts centre in Cardiff were shared with various contacts from CCR. Despite all these efforts, there is no proof that city-regional leaders have taken notice of the project and its findings, although they were made aware of the ongoing research during interviews. Therefore, it became necessary to manage participants' expectations as many young people were enthusiastic that their voices could be heard and could make a difference. Participants were promised that their messages would be passed

on, yet they were informed that the capacity to influence the uptake was minimal.

In addition to this shortcoming, another caveat worth discussing is the 'participatory' nature of this research, which has been limited. In a fully participatory project, the participants would be involved throughout all stages, from choosing the topics, to selecting methods, analysing data, formulating conclusions and choosing the dissemination format (Driskell, 2002; Wang & Burris, 1997). Although this was the initial intention, it became unfeasible given the long time needed to recruit participants and to run the workshops, as well as the limited (human and financial) resources. The different dissemination activities mentioned above, and in particular the exhibition, might have had a bigger outreach had participants been directly involved instead of mere invitees. While every single session was flexibly moulded depending on the participants, the researcher chose the main topics, the data collection and the analysis methods, as well as the dissemination formats. Participants were, of course, in full control of their contributions and the conclusions formulated during each occasion, participating in knowledge creation via research (Driskell, 2002, p. 98).

A further thorny issue for this project, and for visual research in general, is the danger of misanalysing and misinterpreting data. Figure 13.4 offers an example of an image that can be misleading when examined in isolation. The research participant used it to express her admiration for the Valleys' natural capital, as well as her regret that these places (and their inhabitants) are victims of entrenched social stigma. These ideas cannot be 'read' by simply looking at the photograph, a conclusion also reached by Trelle and van Hoven (2010; see also Baimukmedhamedova, this book). Therefore, to avoid any misunderstandings, participants were always asked to comment on their outputs in writing, and to discuss them during focus groups.

Some other reflections arising from this research relate to the abilities, tasks and roles required to run creative methods workshops. Skills such as empathy, deep listening and facilitation are often taken for granted, yet the effort of applying them simultaneously during fieldwork should not be underestimated (see also Moriggi, this book). In addition, it can be particularly challenging to play two roles at the same time, as



**Fig. 13.4** Rhondda Valley—a place of great beauty, but also one with stigma and bad press (C. Howson)

a researcher and a facilitator. Although this topic is rarely discussed in the literature, facilitation skills are crucial for a successful participatory workshop. Employing a second person can reduce the burden of hosting sessions and collecting data at the same time; in this project it was not possible. To simplify the process, the researcher did a lot of preparation and planning, and tried to complete some tasks in advance. For instance, participants received all the information (including instructions and ethics-related issues) by email before the workshop. This allowed them to become acquainted with what was going to happen, and helped reduce the time spent on organizational matters at the workshop itself. Furthermore, every session was voice recorded, with the participants' approval. Listening to the recordings allowed the researcher to take notes, revisit preliminary findings and conduct the analysis. It also permitted the capture of any information that might have been missed during the workshop.

Despite certain challenges arising, the two creative research methods used have yielded a wealth of information regarding young people's lived experiences in CCR. Employed in a workshop format, the methods

complemented each other, eliciting spatial, visual and narrative information. In return, these workshops had a strong educational component, first by raising awareness regarding CCR's existence and future plans, and second, by allowing young people to gain new skills, such as basic web-mapping, and the capacity to express themselves geographically. Young people were encouraged to adopt a critical, analytical understanding of their environments. Their visual and textual outputs demonstrate their engagement and interest in contributing to a more complex depiction of CCR, beyond its formal socio-economic designation.

Furthermore, the two methods nurtured a more balanced researcher-participant relationship, allowing the latter to choose how they preferred to participate and what they wanted to prioritize. In return for their participation, young people could gain new skills and expand their understanding of the city-region, and of other people's insights. This less extractive researcher-participant relationship avoided the situation in which participants feel they have not gained enough in exchange for their time and contribution. As each workshop ended with a brief feedback session, some participants expressed content with the newly acquired web-mapping skills, and others appreciated the invitation to reflect on their surrounding environment. Although not included in this research due to limited time resources, a final feedback session with all participants could have been useful to compare experiences across groups.

## Conclusions

This chapter has discussed the application of two creative participatory research methods—web-mapping and Photovoice—in a research project that explored young people's lived experience within a newly created administrative layer—Cardiff Capital Region. Despite the participants' limited knowledge of CCR, the approach facilitated their understanding and their engagement with the topic.

The two methods successfully complemented each other. Through web-mapping, participants were invited to mark the larger territory to which they felt attached, as well as the places that seemed significant

for them. The findings suggest that the official city-regional boundaries have little relevance for young people, whose personal demarcations cover smaller territories, showing a much more localized *sense of the city-region*.

For the Photovoice session, the participants were asked to photograph some of the places they had pinpointed on their maps. They captured some of the aspects that made life worth living in the city-region, as well as those they would like to see change. Finally, they discussed differences and commonalities during focus groups, getting exposed to their peers' perspectives.

Youth's voices have been captured through GIS, visual and textual means, forming a rich body of data. Therefore, the project was successful in highlighting the young participants' ideas and concerns with their communities, and in promoting critical and analytical discussions during focus groups. In this sense, it maintained two of the original aims established by Photovoice's creators (Wang et al., 1996). However, as the project did not succeed in bridging between young people and city-regional leaders, the findings did not affect or 'infuse with young perspectives' (Wang, 2006, p. 159) the development of the city-region. As Derr and Simons (2019) showed, this is a common issue across various Photovoice projects: the method's adaption led to losing one of its original tenets—that of helping to emancipate participants' voices and needs. Moreover, although both (web-)mapping and Photovoice have been used elsewhere as participatory techniques, allowing children and young people to be fully engaged in all research stages (Driskell, 2002; Wang, 2006), this study has been rather limited. Therefore, it serves as a cautionary tale for anyone looking to design participatory research projects, confirming that 'democracy and engagement cost' time, effort and money (Flinders et al., 2015).

Nonetheless, this exploration offers relevant lessons for socio-environmental researchers because of (i) its capacity to attract research participants generally deemed harder to engage, (ii) the innovative use of two creative research methods, enabled by technology, (iii) the results that support previous claims that young people are experts of their local environments, with pertinent input for the place's future development, (iv) some honest reflections on the achievements and failures, as well as advantages and disadvantages of employing these methods. These

lessons will hopefully inform future researchers in their endeavours, and contribute to critical discussions on visual creative methods, as well as engagement issues within youth studies.

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