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Visual Methods in Entrepreneurial Identity Research: Reflections from an Enterprise Educator Perspective

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CHAPTER 6

VISUAL METHODS IN ENTREPRENEURIAL IDENTITY RESEARCH; REFLECTIONS FROM AN ENTERPRISE EDUCATOR PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

Entrepreneurial identity is a complex concept. It has been recognised as a subjective and dynamic socio-cognitive factor which is not stable over time and is part of an iterative formation process. This chapter explores the journey of adopting, implementing and reviewing visual methods from the researchers' perspectives. A critical standpoint is offered which explores both the benefits and challenges that presented themselves in the search for rich data.

Keywords: Visual methods; Entrepreneurial identity; Enterprise; Drawings; Images; Reflective diaries

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter will report on a methodology, visual methods, that has not been widely used in entrepreneurial identity research. The method presented the research team with dilemmas both at an epistemological and ontological level but also in terms of maintaining the integrity of the research frame. The research team, Sarah and Peter, are active educators and researchers in the field of enterprise and entrepreneurship education (EE) regularly supporting Higher Education (HE) students both in and outside of the curriculum in the development of their entrepreneurial knowledge, skill and experience. They started their collaborative relationship based on a conversation a year prior to the study's commencement about creativity, expression and identity within EE. Both were interested in the use of visual methods, and Pete with a background in the visual arts and trained in textual analysis, they designed a research project that would enable experimentation with visual methods in the EE context. Both Sarah and Pete held questions regarding how educators can support students to better understand and communicate their identities and whether students are in fact equipped to navigate and negotiate identity work. Considering the importance that identity has as a pre-cursor for entrepreneurial behaviours (Alsos et al., 2016; Cardon et al., 2009; Farmer et al., 2011), this research offers value in the enhanced understanding it provides of how students convey their entrepreneurial identity using visual methods and what opportunities and challenges this may present for both participants and research teams.

This chapter will detail the story behind the research, how and why visual methods were utilised and the opportunities and challenges that were involved. It will demonstrate that some of our collective understanding and grand narratives around research design are disrupted by the visual methods approach which requires a particular kind of researcher performance that is engaged, reflective and flexible. Importantly, the chapter openly discusses the challenges faced by the research team and what might be done differently in the future. From here on, first-person pronouns will be used to aid expression as a reflection piece.

THE STORY BEHIND THE RESEARCH

When reviewing existing assumptions regarding entrepreneurial identity, it might appear that it is as simple as (a) understand how an individual self-identifies and (b) observe the corresponding entrepreneurial behaviours. As EE educators ourselves, we do not feel it is that simple and there is a myriad of potential influences on, and obstacles to, the development of an entrepreneurial identity. We see first-hand how the internalities of our students, their hopes, fears, insecurities, may interplay with the external environment such as their communities, families and broader elements of society. Some elements of the literature refer to this, citing influences on identity formation to include access to social networks (Gimeno et al., 1997), opportunity structures afforded (or not afforded) due to protected characteristics and cultural acceptability (Hytti et al., 2017; Kacar & Essers, 2019) and individual levels of entrepreneurial passion (Cardon et al., 2009; Murnieks et al., 2014). Researching the entrepreneurial identity also comes with challenges around the construct 'entrepreneur' and whether it 'fits' the individual in terms of their social and ideological positioning. There are entrepreneurs who despite their clearly entrepreneurial actions do not self-identify as entrepreneurs (Bridgstock, 2013; Dobson & McLuskie, 2020) as for some people, the construct of the entrepreneur is not discursively aligned with their social identity (Jones, 2012).

Adopting an interpretivist position to the study of entrepreneurial identity, we included multiple options for participant self-expression intended to open, rather than shut down, areas for exploration. As a research team, we were cognisant of the fact we had varying experiences of visual methods and varying perceptions of their utility as a method. We went into the project clearly that the content of the images was of primary interest but mindful that our own backgrounds and beliefs could impact interpretation (Rose, 2016). Data were collected over the course of one academic year with 18 first-year undergraduate students completing fortnightly diary entries that included both a written account and visual account of their reflections on identity in that two-week period.

Participants were all studying enterprise modules at the time and were sampled across two UK universities. The aim of our study was to understand how students may develop their entrepreneurial identity across the academic year. At the start of each fortnightly diary entry, participants were asked to visually represent how they perceived their entrepreneurial identity and had options of; produce a drawing (either freehand or electronically), upload an existing image and reproduce it with appropriate credit, or upload a photograph they had produced themselves – the 'photo voice' method (Rose, 2016). We also provided a 'stick man' template which functioned as a visual prompt that students could modify and adapt to help express their status at a given time in their journey. Such flexibility in how participants expressed themselves came from a desire to reduce constraints on participants and reach somehow a more 'authentic' account of their identity representation. The idea to encourage participants to utilise visual means to express their entrepreneurial identity, rather than just the written word, has precedence in the work of Clarke and Holt (2019), albeit with established entrepreneurs, who examine how visual metaphor can reveal the tacit assumptions entrepreneurs use to make sense of their lives. Based on methodological discussions in the existing literature, we felt that identity was going to be a complex and difficult concept to examine.

VISUAL METHODS

Visual data refer to the use of 'meaningful graphic representations' produced from primary data sources (Meyer, 1991, p. 218). Image use has a rich history in the domains of human geography (i.e., Maps and diagrams) and anthropology (i.e., photography and film) but there has been growing interest in the use of visual materials across a variety of social science discipline areas in recent years (Boxenbaum et al., 2018; Meyer et al., 2013; Rose, 2016). The use of images as a research tool first emerged in the social sciences in the discipline area of visual anthropology, in the late 19th century, where photographs were used to document diverse cultures (Literati, 2013; Rose, 2016). The fields of psychology and psychotherapy further popularised the use of visual methods in the early 20th century with image-based tests such as the Rorschach or 'Draw-a-person' test that have been utilised globally to ascertain emotional health and cognitive function. These types of visual methods were seen as particularly useful with participants who may lack the cognitive ability or language skills to fully express themselves verbally, for example, a child (Lyon, 2020). Use of visual data became so widely accepted in the psychological field that 'Art Therapy' emerged in the 1940s as a form of psychological intervention that uses media as the primary means for therapeutic expression (Meyer, 1991). Up until this point, images were either selected by the researcher for participants to comment on or parameters for participant generated visuals were heavily prescribed. From the 1970s, various projects began to pass agency to research participants to generate the visuals themselves (with varying degrees of prescription), so-called 'participatory visual methods' (Rose, 2016).

Visual data collection methods can be split crudely into two main 'types'; collating participant commentary on and/or engagement with pre-existing visuals (these could be drawings, sculptures, films, photos, etc. that are shown to participants) or collating participant generated imagery (again across various visual mediums). A project may use one or a combination of these types and the visual element may or may not be the primary method of that project.

While there has been somewhat of a 'visual turn' in the social sciences (Boxenbaum et al., 2018; Meyer et al., 2013), visual methods remain a lesser utilised methodological approach in entrepreneurship research (Clarke & Holt, 2019). This is for a myriad of reasons. On a practical level, visual methods can be challenging to set up as they often need specific and non-standard, resources – think canvas and paint, cameras, Lego and so forth (Meyer, 1991). While analytical frameworks are available, they face continuing questions regarding validity (Rose, 2016). Visual data can lack clear standards for measurement, be complex and multifaceted and requires researchers to be careful in acknowledging their own biases (Rose, 2016). The level of participant involvement required by some visual methods, such as participant generated drawings, is also deemed impractical for use with large groups thereby restricting sample size. Researcher reflections on the use of such visual methods in EE research are even rarer still, signifying a gap not only in visual method used within the field but also in our understanding of how and why it may be used. In the remainder of this section, we will discuss our methodological choice to use visual methods and what assumptions underpinned that choice.

Why Visual Methods?

There are a limited number of studies that utilise visual methods to explore elements of the entrepreneurial inner world but of those that do they advocate their future use (Forbes-Simpson, 2018). Engagement with visual methods has been found to help participants foster abstract and critical thinking, essential elements of identity formation but also conducive to reflexive action (Mars, 2019). One element the research team were unanimous on during the research design phase was that we saw visual methods as inherently 'useful', we had a shared belief that through the use of such methods we would be getting to the heart of what our participants perceived to be their entrepreneurial identity. After all, the historical popularity of visual methods in the psychology domain is rooted in a belief that visual strategies can enable participants to uncover subconscious or unrealised feelings (Weber & Mitchell, 1995) which may not be possible to realise within the constructs of the written or verbal. With emotions and feelings seen as important aspects of identity construction and formation (Cardon et al., 2009), allowing participants to draw their identity seemed logically aligned with the aim of the research to expand understanding of how students construct their entrepreneurial identities.

Our research design was therefore heavily influenced by the literature's stance on visual methods that they can hold an advantage in overcoming some of the limitations of the spoken or written word and instead encourage the use of imagination and associative thinking (Marshall, 2014). Words, both written and oral, are restricted by sequencing – a word uttered or written alone rarely makes sense until ordered with other words to articulate a sentiment (Meyer et al., 2013). The way we process visual versus verbal information differs, with the verbal requiring use of hierarchical categories which, can be argued, are reductionist (Meyer, 1991). Images are often not bound to sequencing and hierarchies in the same manner and can offer a more holistic representation of a chosen topic (Clarke & Holt, 2019; Kress, 2004).

The adage that 'a picture is worth a thousand words' neatly summarises this line of thinking. Such methods allow participants alternative expression that is not bound by the discourses of language (Rose, 2016), and in a way that engages the individual in awareness of their own thought processes (Marshall, 2014). We were intrigued that the literature on visual methods suggests that a deeper more 'authentic' set of data may be more achievable using visual methods (Meyer et al., 2013; Rose, 2016).

Research Design

There are several authors that categorise approaches to the collection and analysis of visual data. The work of Meyer et al. (2013), whose discussion of the potential of visuals to express identities and foster credibility and capability in operating as an entrepreneur, closely resonated with the research team. Meyer et al. (2013) present five different 'approaches' to utilising visuals in research design categorised by elements such as research focus, producer of the visual, interpreter of the visual, nature of the data and the relevance of the visuals.

Of Meyer et al.'s (2013) five approaches, our research design relates most neatly to the 'dialogical' approach whereby visuals that are produced by participants, and are subsequently interpreted by both participants and researchers, can act as 'triggers' to elicit rich information. The intention of this study was for participants' visual representations of identity, placed at the start of each diary entry, to encourage a deeper consideration of identity in the subsequent narrative aspect of their entry. According to Meyer et al. (2013, p. 503) the dialogical approach can appeal to 'deeper elements of human consciousness' leading to richer data but also more 'egalitarian forms of communication' between researcher and participant. The mixture of data types we allowed participants to produce (drawing, photo, etc.) is also unusual in a visual methods project, as often only one 'type' is encouraged, for example, participant-created photographs (Shortt & Warren, 2017; Slutskaya et al., 2012), despite recognition of the benefits that integration of multiple approaches may bring (Meyer et al., 2013; Shortt & Warren, 2017). Although we offered this choice, most of our participants chose to represent their identity through drawings, either freehand or electronic, rather than produce a photograph or upload an existing image.

Why Include Drawings?

Drawing can come in various formats (manual and digital) but a neat summary that we used for our research purposes was 'intentional mark-making on a receptive surface' (Lyon, 2020, p. 298). Clarke and Holt's (2019) study using drawings was deemed to provide participants with a creative outlet that allowed them the space to reflect not just on their experiences but also their meaning. Berger's seminal work describes drawing as almost primitive that it gets to the root of what makes us human and that it has a universality transcending demographic divisions (Berger, 1972; Rose, 2016).

Our priority as a research team was to elicit rich understanding of the dynamic and complex nature of the identity construction process. By including the option to draw we felt we could provide our participants a flexibility in how they expressed themselves that was not possible with language, or indeed other types of visual method, and this might allow us to tap into their lived experience (Guillemin & Drew, 2010). Kearney and Hyle (2004) claim that participant produced drawings 'appear to create a path toward participant feelings and emotions, making them viable tools for researchers who seek access to this type of data' (p. 376).

Participant-led drawing is also argued to be a visual research method particularly advantageous when working with young people across a variety of cultural contexts (Literati, 2013; Rose, 2016). This is due to its playful nature which can make research fun(!) and holds participant attention due its novelty but also its abstract nature can act as a 'communicative bridge for conceptualising and articulating aspects of their personal circumstances that [participants] may not previously have considered in any depth' (Rose, 2016, p. 178). Such methods often do not rely on someone being proficient in the chosen language of the research team, in our case English. With a growing number of UK HE students hailing from non-English speaking countries this research method offers a level of inclusivity that may not be afforded by the verbal and written methods of data collection that are usually utilised with the HE population.

We were mindful that it is important to consider not only the drawings themselves as key data but also the process and conditions for drawing (Lyon, 2020). Our participants knew that the images they produced were not for their eyes only but would be viewed by the research team. In this sense, the images also served a social function for the participants as it was a means to show who they are and how they may want to be seen (Rose, 2016). The drawings produced by our participants were therefore what can be termed 'subjective drawings' (Lyon, 2020), the drawings are expressive and represent inner conversations the drawer may be having with themselves and how they wish to communicate that to us. Therefore, the drawings become objects in themselves through which our participants can be seen.

However, incorporation of participant generated drawings in a research project does come with some health warnings. The main being that drawings can be highly interpretative and without some explanation from the author then such meaning can be misunderstood (Gauntlett & Holzwarth, 2006; Kearney & Hyle, 2004). This struck the research team as a design issue, not something epistemologically or ontologically irreconcilable with the wider aims of the project.

Visual methods where participants generate their own images provides the opportunity for participants to be active in the research process as opposed to responsive (Guillemin & Drew, 2010; Meyer, 1991; Pain, 2012). Literati (2013) also argue that drawing can be 'empowering' for participants due to the enhanced freedom of expression, 'placing the agency literally in their own hands' (p. 85) and that the research method can feel more personally relevant and even in some instances therapeutic (Guillemin & Drew, 2010). With this knowledge in mind, we made some specific research design decisions:

- Rather than ask participants to produce their images using our materials or within our settings, we let them use whatever resources they were comfortable with and in whichever setting – our only caveat was that each drawing must be uploaded by the fortnightly deadline.
- Drawings are seen as particularly useful in research as a starting point to spark off participant discussions (Gauntlett & Holzwarth, 2006). Kearney and Hyle (2004) noted in their study that even when the participants' primary emotions were not evident in their drawings, it was an engagement in the drawing process itself that paved the way for participants to be able to share their emotions in a written or verbal form afterwards. Therefore, we placed the visual method section at the start of each diary entry, prior to the written reflection section, to create conditions where drawings could be analysed in themselves but also act as a primer for the written reflection.
- Participants were encouraged to annotate their images; however, we did not make this mandatory – while good intentioned this did challenge us later when it came to analysis.

THE DILEMMAS OF VISUAL METHODS

In this section, we explore the challenges and interpretative dilemmas faced by us as academics and by the students when engaging in visual research and analysis.

Firstly, in the wider scheme of the research and the data collected, the visual evidence was quite limited. The fact is, very few students produced images every fortnight and for those that did this was not as consistent as the written data that they produced. The reasons for this are varied. Many of the students spoke about feelings of unease and confusion when it came to the images: why am I doing this? Am I being judged? Do my images make sense? What do the images reveal about myself and how much do I want to reveal? There were also comments about not being good at drawing and not being creative – something we had anticipated and responded to by allowing and encouraging students to use any media and providing a stickperson figure as a template option (which set the bar low in terms of artistic skill and expectations). The inclusion of the template of a stickperson, what (Meyer, 1991) would term ‘partial structuring’, provided electronically within the diaries, in hindsight may have encouraged our participants to feel their identity should be represented using human body parts rather than something more conceptual or abstract.

In terms of reluctance to draw, we might also consider cultural conditioning. The focus on drawing, in the Western education system in particular, usually tapers off as children get older and must fit into the dominant communicative mode of text-based literacy (Scott, 2018). As individuals become more adept at the verbal and written, and drawing skill is curtailed, then drawing confidence and ability can decline (Lyon, 2020; Scott, 2018). Adults often hold pre-conceptions of what drawing should or could involve and where it sits in the hierarchy of communication (Janscary et al., 2016; Scott, 2018) which can mean some adults are more willing than others to engage in drawing (Lyon, 2020) and this can also impact on researcher willingness to engage adults in drawings. It was clearly stated at recruitment stage that participants did not need to have any particular experience level or proficiency in drawing skills and again reiterated in catch ups with participants. The distance the research team had from the participants while they drew (i.e., were not standing over them, were not offering comments on the drawing that could be seen as a judgement) we feel helped maintain researcher neutrality in regard to the drawings during the data collection phase but possibly lacked the scaffolding that some of the participants may have needed particularly in the initial stages of data collection.

From this perspective we might ask, did the students feel awkward due to their perceived positioning as children? Did they feel infantilised by the request to draw? After all, it might be significant that the visual research technique is typically conducted with young people and the vulnerable. Would we as researchers be equally happy asking adults to draw their identity?

This raises a set of concerns for us as researchers. The creation of visual data was expected to offer more direct, perhaps unmediated access to the students’ thoughts and feelings. Image making can function as direct, unfiltered data, uncontaminated by the noise of surrounding discourses, driven by emotion and impulse, which cannot be faked or plagiarised. Yet, the very fact that students were expressing confusion and unease meant that they were policing themselves, they were self-conscious and perhaps guarded in their expression. In order to allay fears and concerns, we encouraged students to not worry about artistic integrity and briefed them about how the image making was another tool for gathering data. However, the question here is how much explaining and coaching should we provide and at what point does it undermine the purity and ‘authenticity’ of the expression and to what extent does it shape the outcome of the image making? For example, by providing the stickperson figure as a prompt, were we framing and perhaps prescribing their responses? There were indeed a good deal of stickperson responses and only a few dared to move away from this template.

As mentioned previously, we had very little control over the participants' drawings, they chose their own settings and resources and had a fortnight to complete each one. When comparing this to other forms of data collection such as a face-to-face interview when it would be unusual for a participant not to start responding to your question within seconds, this gives a participant potentially two weeks to 'craft' a drawing according to the ideals of what they see to be 'good', 'artistic' or 'impressive'. With verbal data, it is also possible to witness hesitancy, such as pauses or retractions, whereas 'unmanned' drawings leave the research team unaware of how many times our participants may have paused/deleted/amended their data. This removed the spontaneity and 'unprocessed' or raw elements of the drawing and image making which instead could have gone through several iterations before the 'correct' version was presented.

It is important to note that what a participant perceives, or is told, their image will be used for, and by whom, 'the site of circulation' (Rose, 2016) may influence the construction of the image. In our study, our participants were HE students and all the research team are HE staff. Although we did not teach these students personally, there is a clear power dynamic here or at least a perception of one where us, the research team, may be viewed as the 'more knowledgeable other' (Vygotsky, 1978) and the student therefore may construct an image intended to impress or at least not to offend. Was it possible then, that the tool that was supposed to offer deeper, more authentic insights was potentially being policed by the students and framed by the researchers?

A further consideration is: what should we make of those students that did choose to create images? Are they categorically different from those that did not? Will there be a bias in the data collection and analysis towards those that feel confident in visual image making? We have noted above that perhaps because of their rarity, the images were given more attention than words. And maybe due to their lack of concrete and transparent meaning they were treated to more interpretation and analysis than the words. Indeed, this leads onto another dilemma for the researchers which might be described as the seduction of the visual. Images can be compelling (Meyer, 1991), engaging and emotionally interesting (Hill, 2004). As researchers, we were first alerted to this when we presented to colleagues at conferences: audiences responded very warmly and positively to the images and found them compelling and seemed to give more significance to them than words. Were we as researchers equally guilty of overemphasising their significance? Of being charmed and seduced by them? This indeed is one of the grand narratives where we are warned against idolatry and the seduction of the image over words, where we are cautioned not to trust images as they are emotive and allusive (Stephens, 1998). However, images are not only charming and seductive, but, because they are potentially revealing, they can generate greater empathy and connection between the researcher and their subject. On the one hand, this can help generate greater insight for the researcher, yet, on the other hand, it may affect researcher objectivity and judgement. Indeed, perhaps due to the intimacy of the image we did find ourselves bonding with subjects, an effect that was magnified by the regular catchups we had with our participants. The point here is that the normal researcher-subject distance and objectivity is potentially breached by the intimacy of image creation and image analysis.

While we might contend that images are direct and unmediated, pure and authentic, nevertheless, like words, images are not 'discourse-free' and can contain some of the same engrained discourses that exist within language. Meyer et al. (2013) describe this as 'sedimented social knowledge' where the aesthetic used, and the composition of the image can reflect social conventions of that time. After all, if they were discourse-free, how could we interpret them? Many of the images produced by students reflected quite familiar discourses. For example, there was a common image of a see-saw or images suggesting balance and tension. These were symbolic representations of competing identities and 'inbetweeness', discourses which, to some extent, were already provided by the researchers and our agenda around developing entrepreneurial identities. Balance is also a familiar trope in discourses around work/life balance and informed much of the students' image making. It is a familiar way to represent a state of mind and internal conflict. As researchers we are often concerned that respondents are second guessing our agenda, interpreting our questions, telling us what we want to hear. Image making implies greater agency and autonomy. However, many of the images, such as the see-saw felt generic and drew upon familiar iconography.

One of the greatest challenges with visual data is in the form of interpretation, analysis and, as discussed above, the need for critical distance. There are several suggested approaches in the analysis of images. Hall (1997) emphasises that there is no truth or single correct answer regarding what an image means. It is interpretative with multiple meanings that are possible simultaneously. The focus instead should be on how one might justify the interpretation attributed to an image or set of images. One issue regarding interpretations is to do with comparability. While some images carried clear symbolic meanings (think of the see-saw) others were quite visceral and functioned on an emotional level – see Fig. 6.1. Giving students the choice of media helped avoid some of the framing and prescription discussed above, but it also made comparison less easy as students chose to approach it in many ways. Meyer (1991, p. 232) warns of the challenges of giving such power to your participants as the result can be 'ambiguous and idiosyncratic displays' which creates issues for comparability and can increase researcher bias. Fig. 6.1 exemplifies this as although we had a short narrative where the participant chose words such as 'creativity' and 'imagination' to supplement their drawing, the written explanation was limited.

As well as the issue of comparability, there are challenges around the interpretative nature of participant generated visual data (Silverman, 2001). 'Readings' of the images can be subjective and elusive and there was a pressure felt more keenly by the research team regarding our subjectivity in interpreting an image than when interpreting the written/spoken word. We questioned where this pressure was originating from, was it our pre-conceptions that images were in some way less reliable? Yes, they might be more authentic but at the same time they

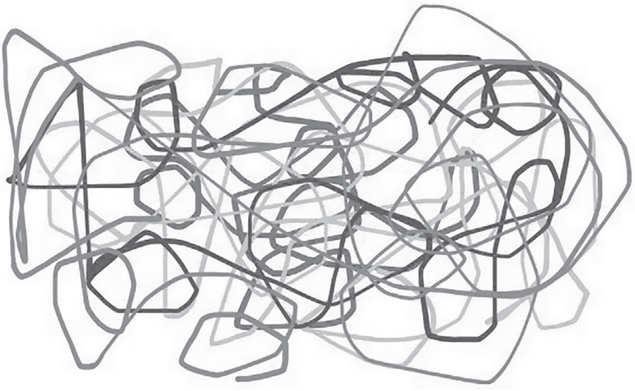

Fig. 6.1. An Abstract Participant Representation of Their Entrepreneurial Identity.

seemed more chaotic and unpredictable. Or, were we placing images in a hierarchy below that of words, in the same manner children move from picture books to words to indicate a growing sophistication in their understanding?

Arguably visual representations are a product of a participant's cultural background and in turn the researcher may interpret visuals a particular way due to their own cultural background (Literati, 2013). Indeed, there were noticeably clear cultural and social variations between researchers and participants and within the research team. There are also 'levels' of reading, the explicit and obvious meaning of an image but also the hidden meaning or 'truth' to be discovered and interpreted. And there is an issue in knowing whether such hidden meaning was consciously or subconsciously alluded to by the participant. Again, explicit and hidden meanings are also found in the written word, so why did we feel more keenly a need to uncover these during the analysis of images? Drawing and image making are often represented as key to knowledge and insight as a form of 'revelation'. This is familiar to us in popular culture – think of the drawing as revelation in the Netflix series 'Stranger Things', where several of the characters are compelled to draw which is then interpreted by the group and provides a key to the problem they are facing. This popular discourse also affects academics who we might assume to be more balanced and objective, but we find echoes in the literature. For example, consider this statement from Clarke and Holt (2017):

> In terms of practical implications entrepreneurs themselves or those who work in supporting entrepreneurs can use the drawing technique described in this paper as a means to help entrepreneurs consciously and deeply reflect on their experience of entrepreneurship. This can allow them to surface and 'stay with' the tensions inherent in the entrepreneurial process while at the same time making better sense of their realities, clarifying their thoughts, and guiding their future actions. (p. 447)

Here, for the authors, drawing is a key to making sense of reality. It is perhaps this notion of revelation, moving from the unknown to the known, which informs our understanding of the visual and leads to this belief that we might find some greater truth.

So, images are chaotic, allusive, bearers of truth but also shaped by the context and the frame that researchers create. As Rose (2016) suggests, there is a need to be critical, to adopt critical distance, even when the method itself disrupts that objectivity. It was therefore important to set up protocols and methodologies which could help manage and mitigate some of these interpretative and analytical variations and challenges. One way to tackle validity issues is to triangulate the data through combining visual methods with other methods like interviews, surveys, etc. (Literati, 2013; Meyer et al., 2013; Zilber, 2017), an approach which we incorporated to some extent drawing together visual data with written reflections.

Another way to ease interpretation and ensure validity would be to encourage students to provide a detailed written or verbal explanation of each image (Literati, 2013, Meyer et al., 2013; Wall et al., 2013). This can combat mis- or over-interpretation from the researcher and gives further power to the participant over how their data are represented. Although participants were encouraged to annotate their images where appropriate we found that many did not or their annotations were brief. Without the opportunity to discuss their images, this left elements of the images subject to our sole interpretations and also deprived our participants of the chance to explain their choices. Indeed Meyer et al. (2013) discuss how visual analysis is strengthened when accompanied by qualitative analysis of participants' narrative explaining what the image means. However, other studies caution against verbal and written descriptions, referred to as 'verbal overshadowing', where the explanatory words from the participant come to fix and anchor the meaning of the image prematurely and cut short further interpretations (Chin & Schooler, 2008).

There are several suggested approaches in the analysis of images. Forbes-Simpson's (2018) work explored how we might analyse visual methods data expounding the use of narrative analysis in the exploration of student identity construction. This working paper builds upon prior work by Riessman (2008), Rose (2016) and Shortt and Warren (2017) advocating the use of narrative analysis beyond the spoken and written word to also include visual imagery.

However, we adapted a methodology to analyse and frame our thinking around the images and we drew from several sources providing guidance and theoretical positions on semiotics and visual analysis (Arnheim, 1969; Clarke & Holt, 2017; Kress, 2004; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). In order to generate data and insight, we approached the images in two stages. The first stage was thinking about representational meaning. What did the image refer to – this was typically a representation of themselves – but it might also be objects and subjects that are relevant to them such as a laptop. The second stage was to move from the denotative, what is being represented, to the connotative, what does the image mean beyond the simple representational form. Here, images were read also in terms of their compositional features, thinking about what part of the image is most prominent and what kind of media is being used – both of which inform our reading and understanding of the image as text. This compositional interpretation method is suggested by Rose (2016) as most appropriate when the researchers' concern is regarding the image itself (as opposed to preoccupation with its circulation). Various aspects of an image can be examined such as content, colour, use of light, spatial organisation and expressive content.

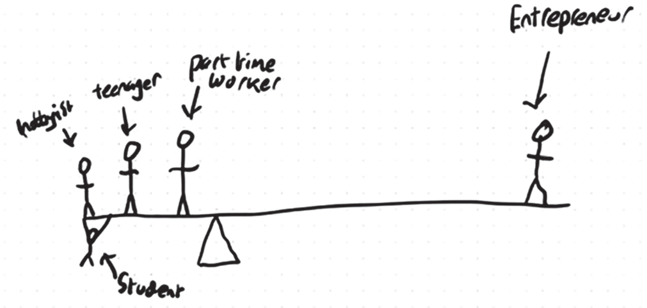

Fig. 6.2. Participant Representation of Their Entrepreneurial Identity – the See-Saw Motif.

Given that the students were being asked to reflect on their development, many of the images were symbolic and abstract rather than simply representative. Fig. 6.2 can help demonstrate our approach.

The image represents and denotes five figures, their identities made explicit by the text which explain who they are. The image also includes a see-saw which is balancing the characters at either end. However, we can see that the image is not realistic (in the sense of being naturalistically proportioned). The right-hand side is artificially extended and suggests that while there is a balance between the two sets of characters, nevertheless, the entrepreneur figure is a long way from where the others are. The formal arrangements tell us that this identity is remote, distant, perhaps even unreachable. Furthermore, if we continue to read from the connotative level, we can be sure that the see-saw, along with the arrangement of the figures, is not supposed to be read literally, but as a metaphor to suggest uncertainty, precarity, helplessness and perhaps danger and risk. However, as suggested earlier, in order to make this reading, there has to be some shared understanding of the context and the cultural coding that is attached to the see-saw and indeed the wider agenda around the notion of work/life balance. Therefore, visual analysis, as well as being subjected to individual bias, is further filtered through the cultural lens of the author and reader.

The final point to consider in this discussion regarding the dilemmas and challenges of visual analysis and research relates to the impact that this has on the participant. To some extent, the images were designed to not only represent thoughts and feelings but also to provoke them and to bring them to the surface in a form of reflective practice. Image making functioned not only as data to be collected and interpreted but as a reflective tool to encourage subjects to think about and identify changes in themselves. We found in the reflections that the act of drawing and producing images was a learning experience for our participants. Literati (2013) argues that participatory drawing is a useful pedagogical tool because of its 'inherent potential to foster creative expression and learning' (p. 85). Data collection can be in of itself a potentially transformative experience where in the case of visual methods images, shown or created, can provoke action in the participants (Mitchell, 2011).

In this way, the images were not the output; rather they were the input which help generate the insights to be communicated to the researchers. However, a by-product of this reflective process is change: by reflecting on their identity and their actions they were also examining themselves and identifying areas for change and improvement. Indeed, for some researchers and practitioners, a key function of visual methods is to effect change in the subject (Glegg, 2019). In this way, we as researchers, far from being objective, distant observers, were involved in facilitating change in the subjects that we were studying.

CONCLUSION

This chapter explores a research method that remains under-utilised within the enterprise and entrepreneurship discipline yet has much to offer in enhancing our understanding of the [nascent/latent] entrepreneurs identity formation processes. Our experience was positive in providing rich data to provide new insights and to support and complement data from other sources such as the written word. The images have given the research team food for thought and, arguably, kept us in the reflective/critical space longer than studies of the verbal or written word, where the meaning is on the surface and self-evident. We believe, as a result, that our understanding of, or at least our sense of knowing, our subjects, was enhanced and the subsequent data and discussions were enriched. The experience has also meant more reflective research practitioners, prepared to acknowledge and interrogate our position within the research frame and to recognise (and accept) our 'affect' – that is, our role in producing as well as collecting the data. The experience has also drawn attention to a factor which is typically suppressed in other forms of research where the construct of the objective, third person, 'researcher' is a disinterested, observer of the facts, which still holds major currency within the publishing world.

However, there are perhaps good reasons why it remains an unexplored methodology in the field of enterprise studies. It does, after all, feel messy with no apparent 'stopping rule' – it feels as though interpretation could go on and on. And while visual methods appear to hold out the promise of deeper, more authentic data, it is nevertheless riddled with methodological issues which call out the promise of authenticity: is image making spontaneous (from the heart) or iterative (crafted for an 'audience')? Do images speak for themselves or do we need them to be informed by other data? What about those participants who do not draw or make images, how do we account for them and will they become less 'interesting' due to their non-participation? How do we maintain distance outside of the research frame and are we in danger of affecting the research environment?

There are, then, compelling reasons for and against the adoption of visual methods. Beyond the exploration of entrepreneurial identity among students, there are other areas of interest that might benefit from visual analysis, particularly those areas which are concerned with the more allusive life experiences and perspectives of entrepreneurs which cannot so easily be captured through traditional research methods.

We would recommend the adoption of visual methods for other researchers and would certainly consider it ourselves for future projects. However, we would also recommend and welcome more papers and perspectives exploring the methodology and providing guidelines and protocols which might make the process smoother and might reduce some of the post data collection and analysis anxieties around questions of authenticity and rigour. In other words, following on from Meyer et al. (2013), let's bring together a community of visual researchers to establish a body of knowledge so that researchers can build upon the work of others, so that theory can be advanced and a common language can evolve in relation to visual methods research and practice.

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