THE DYNAMICS OF VISUAL NARRATIVES IN EXPLORING GENDER POLARISATION

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ABSTRACT

Polarised gender identities are prevalent in Zimbabwe, and are intricately associated with asymmetrical gender relations. These gender polarised identities are expressible in various spheres including a dichotomy in the production and interpretation of visual images. This paper argues that visual research methodologies can contribute towards theorising gender and, by extension, towards our understanding of identity and the complexities and consequences of gender polarisation. We propose that visual images constitute a valid form of sociological knowledge, ethnography, and gender representation, and in this manner we wish to contribute more broadly towards a critique of visual research methodologies. The paper proposes that a visual narrative approach in research situated within a critical interpretivist paradigm provides valuable empirical additions to our understanding of gender identity, gender orientation and gender polarisation. This study utilised prompts which required participants to create and interpret visual images that reflect engraved gender ideologies which they held as participants. Therefore, by combining visuals and narratives, this study can be regarded as a collaborative effort between visuals and naratives, with the aim of exploring how polarised displays of gender ideologies are reflected in the production and interpretation of visual images. The study explores and critiques the usefulness of visual narratives as a data gathering method in establishing how gender polarisation influences visual interpretation. Through critical visual discourse analysis the visual content is deconstructed to discover the hidden ideological meanings and gender nuances which reflect the skewed gender polarisation of both the maker and the viewer. This study therefore aims to address the research gap of omitting and neglecting visual research methodologies in exploring social prejudices.

Keywords: Visual narratives; visual research; gender polarisation; gender identity; gender displays

INTRODUCTION

The use of visual narratives in this study was based on a synthesis of critical and interpretivist paradigms. According to Reeves and Hedberg (2003) the interpretive paradigm is concerned with understanding the world as it is from the subjective experiences of individuals. In the same vein Heidegger (in Rose, 2013) reiterates that the interpretation of a text (or, in this case, an image) reveals significant information about the social context, ideologies, beliefs and orientations in which it was formed. It also, more significantly, provides the reader with a means to share in and contemplate the gender experiences of the author as Kress (2010) indicates that texts and visual images are expressions of the author. Interpretivism as an approach suggests that people have already interpreted their world; consequently, studying their artefacts reflects the meanings they have already attached to their socio-cultural environment. Thus this qualitative study sets out to interrogate and establish the gendered decisions and motivations for interpreting visual images from participants' dichotomous and unequal gender cultural orientations using visual research narratives. The idea that gender

relations may be reinforced, re-negotiated or deeply embedded in visual artefacts directed this study to engage with visual images from a critical studies point of view. This study therefore purports that visual methodologies such as visual narratives offer promising alternatives to traditional social scientific research approaches, which have tended to over-rely on language as the means of accessing interpretations.

PHILOSOPHICAL ORIENTATIONS

In this phenomenological visual narrative inquiry, critical theory and an interpretive paradigm have been adopted as the main philosophical orientations guiding the study in order to solicit how visual artefacts represent cultural and societal beliefs in connotation with gender ideology.

Phenomenological Research Design

Visual narratives contribute towards phenomenological research method. Visual interpretations by makers and readers of artefacts represent their deep-seated perceptions about their world views, as well as their lived experiences and culture which have shaped their gender identities (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007, Pimenta & Poovaiah, 2010; Rose, 2013). The meaning of lived experiences and gender identity constitute the phenomena which were studied in relation to reflections of symbols in visual images. Visual artworks express their makers' social ideologies and values, and in another sense, the reader/viewer's interpretation of cultures and world view can also be gleaned from his or her interpretation of images (Rose, 2013).

The study therefore utilised the visual narrative as a visual research method which offers powerful insights into culture and lived experiences. According to Rose (2010), visual images are social commentaries which have a certain social significance, making them function in the world as indexical signs that connote the artists' and viewers' gender orientation, social status or any other ideologically valued quality. Therefore, understanding gender polarisation through visual interpretation can arguably be best achieved by critically analysing and interpreting discourse from visual narratives. We further argue that these narratives can however be better understood by means of complementing with interviews (Berg, 2001; De Vos *et al.*, 2011).

Interpretivist Paradigm

The ontological basis of the interpretivist paradigm which guides this study is that reality is constructed inter-subjectively through meanings and understandings that are developed socially and experientially (Reeves & Hedberg, 2003). Interpretivism refers to the view that cultures can be understood by studying what people think about, their ideas, and the meanings that are important to them (Myers, 2009) which can be reflected in the artefacts they produce and use in their daily lives. The basic tenet of interpretivism is that the study of social phenomena requires an understanding of the social worlds that people inhabit, which they have already interpreted by the meanings they produce and reproduce through artefacts as a necessary part of their everyday activities together.

In interpretivist research, knowledge is expected to be generated from value-laden socially constructed interpretations and researchers follow up in rather personal and flexible research structures such as interviews (De Vos, Strydom, Fouché, & Delport, 2011).

Interpretivism in this study was applied to enhance the understanding of the impact of gender role socialisation and gender identity on participants' way of establishing meaning from visual images (Berger, 2009). Specifically, the study explored the gender identity

constructions of teacher education students in Zimbabwe through the images they produced and verbal interviews.

However, the weakness of interpretivism lies in its limited goal of trying to only understand, explain and interpret human behaviour. Thus, the present study used a blended approach where interpretivism was supplemented with critical theory, therefore it is apt to analyse how visuals demonstrate the critical consciousness by the participants of the unequal gender balances in patriarchal cultures.

Critical Research Paradigm

The critical research paradigm promotes democracy by making changes in different social, political, cultural, economic, and ethical as well as other society oriented belief systems (Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Creswell, 2014). Freire (2000) suggests that critical theory negates the limits of a situation and open ways to a new future that embraces democracy. Myers (2009) likewise suggests that the aim of critical theory is to critique and emancipate. The critical research paradigm pays more attention to eliminating injustices in society and the critical researchers today also aim to transform society with a view to address inequalities, particularly in relation to ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, disability and other parts of society that are marginalized (Freire, 2000; Mackenzie & Knipe, 2006). From this, one can glean that critical research aims to bring about changes by challenging meanings as well as values that prevail in society. Similarly, De Vos *et al.* (2011) concur that critical research seeks to explain social inequalities through which individuals can take actions to change injustices. It promotes the notion of social justice in order to create a world that is fairer, more impartial and more harmonious. Likewise, according to McLaren (2003), critical theory is concerned with the power and justice of several issues in society such as economy, race, gender and education.

Therefore, we argue that visual images and artefacts produced in the society are embedded with gender nuances ideal as emancipatory tools which can promote the agenda of social change, once these images are critically interrogated and the implications considered and shared with participants. Furthermore, De Vos *et al. (*2011) assert that the critical research paradigm deals with oppression and inequalities in a society and attempts to emancipate its individuals as well as certain ethnic groups with a view to redress power imbalances that may assist towards liberation of oppressive gender polarised ideologies.

For purposes of the present study, we propound that gender polarised interpretations of images produced in society inevitably reflect the gender inequality and barriers existing in that society more vividly than other research narratives. Thus through critical theory, this study posits that visual images create a platform for critical awareness towards social change and gender equity by expanding learners' discourse in their understanding of their world. Freire (2000) suggests that education functions as a practice of freedom, the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their gender discrepancies. Gleaning from Freire, visual narratives expose participants to critically and creatively express their gender interpretations and to explore possible gender and power imbalances. Hence a visual narrative guided by critical theory in this research explores and unearths gender polarisation and asymmetrical power relations that exist in society. The *why*-question which guided this visual narrative inquiry sought to deconstruct the meaning of gendered social symbols in visual images and their relationships. For example, why is the colour red often associated with females, or why is the female gaze in visual images so frequently withdrawn from the viewers? In the present study, also, one could ask why there is distinction in body size and height between men and women in the visual images created by the participants. These are among the questions which the

study explored which determine gender polarisation in the interpretations obtained. We therefore adopted visual narrative inquiry as the main data gathering method in order to solicit how the societal beliefs and gender ideology at any time are embedded in gender polarised cultural representations, artefacts, texts and mass media (Lorber, 2010; Cary, 1998; Rose, 2010).

VISUAL NARRATIVES AS RESEARCH METHOD

Using visual narratives as a research method means that one uses a combination of visuals and narratives. We combined the visual research method (VRM) (Rose, 2013) and the narrative inquiry method (Clandinin &Connelly, 2000) to generate research information through responses in visual form and interpretations (verbal interviews) to answer the research questions. The method(s) was found suitable as this study that sets out to decipher from visual images the meanings participants have developed of lived and perceived gender orientations to visual symbols. The narrative inquirer privileges individual lived experience as a source of insights useful not only to the person himself or herself, but also to the wider field of scholarship in social science (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The underlying precepts which inform the artist's and viewer's making of meaning are guided by their engraved gender culture. Thus visual narratives were central in responding to two major research questions; To what extents do visual texts created by males and females reflect dichotomous gender ideologies? , and how does gender influence the visual interpretations made by males and females?

The researchers gave students three tasks at different times; each task was followed by individual interviews to elucidate the meaning they have. Ganesh (2011) suggests that projective prompts allow the participant to show their own affect, interest and feeling in the phenomenon. Participants reveal their private worlds and personality by reacting to stimuli (*ibid.)*. The prompts probe visually into participants' personal interpretations of and reactions to their gender culture. The students had to perform the following tasks:

i.   Create a visual artwork through painting by portraying a gendered theme,
ii. Select images and/or take photographs from existing artworks which informants view to reflect gender polarity,
iii. Create a visual artwork based on the theme '*The Family'*

We asked for the creation and selection of artworks in these three prompts because they conceptually covered significant areas of meaning production from visual images. The prompts (i) and (iii) solicit encoded meaning from an artefact with an open and closed theme respectively and prompt (ii) solicit decoded meaning in the reading of encountered visual images.

Standardising prompt (iii)*, '*The Family'* made it possible to hypothesise, study and propose a general pattern of participants' gendered interpretations visible in their painting as alluded to by Ganesh (2011). The title '*The Family'* was selected based on the literature findings about the family's role in gender socialisation and gender constructions. Kambarami (2006) suggests that the family is the first institution for gender socialisation.

The prompts were explicitly defined to focus on gendered themes to avoid ambiguity (Tufford & Newman, 2010). We did this to mitigate the potential negative effects of accumulating unrelated data and thereby we increased the rigour of the project. Delineating the focus of the visual narratives to gendered themes also enabled deeper levels of reflection on the phenomenon under study.

Merits and Demerits of Visual Images in Research

A visual narrative is an effective research tool which was chosen as beneficial and suitable for the study. The recording of events and thoughts in a visual narrative is a baseline for repeating inventories in the future because images record thoughts or scenes with more accuracy than taking notes and what the participants could have described (Samwanda, 2013). A Chinese proverb which says, *a picture is worth more than ten thousand words*, is true and relevant in research of this kind. Visual images can arguably give a more complete, reliable and comprehensive record of gender culture constructions than words (Reiger, 2011). Thus visual narratives can be regarded as credible and trustworthy sources of data, especially in this instance where the visual findings were corroborated by follow-up interviews. Collier and Collier (1987) reiterate that visual images facilitate interviewing as a data-gathering method in the photo-elicitation interview. Reiger (2011) similarly suggests that images encourage the flow of information from participants during individual interviews as they refer to images rather than memory. Rose (2013) reiterates that visual methodologies promote engagement necessary for a subject area which has often neglected women voices.

However, visual images as sources of research data present a number of challenges; hence they are best used in collaboration with other information sources like interviews. Visual images can, nonetheless, precede social change (Reiger, 2011). For instance, visual images of gender role reversals can be produced in a different society before another society is conscientised about the cultural dynamics of gender shifts. In this sense, the content of visual images may seem alien. Sometimes visual narratives may somehow show a relationship between the visual images and gender culture which might not be very obvious or clearly showing prominent visual manifestations. It follows that there is a need to triangulate (Berg, 2001). Furthermore, visual images might adversely contain some elements which cause visual noise or visual anomaly when certain elements indicate contradicting contents.

To overcome these weaknesses and to maintain credibility of the data gathered, visual narratives were used in conjunction with interviews, focus group interviews and observations.

ANALYSIS OF VISUAL DATA

Critical visual discourse analysis (CVDA) was used to analyse fifty-one (51) visual artefacts which the students had made and collected. These visual narratives reveal the discourse sources of power, dominance, inequality and bias and how these sources are initiated, maintained, reproduced and transformed within specific gender social contexts (Berger, 2009). The analysis of visual data was not linear but rather iterative, since narratives were done in three stages as stated in the data gathering procedure above.

Critical Visual Discourse Analysis (CVDA)

Critical discourse analysts generally agree that there are three levels of discourse context: macro, meso and micro (Fairclough, 2001). Christmann (2008) also concurs with Fairclough (2001) and exemplifies her methodical approach to visual discourse analysis by stating the assumption that these three levels in the analysis of images must be taken into consideration: (1) the composition of the image, with its content and design (discourse as text), (2) the context of production and publication, including the horizon of historic events (discourse-as-discursive-practice), and (3) the mode of reception, with respect to communicative processes (discourse-as-social-practice).

Visual data analysis was therefore approached iteratively by using a hybrid CVDA drawing inspiration from Fairclough (2001); Christmann (2008); Lai (2013); Panofsky (1955) and

Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) by holding a three-dimensional conception of image analysis at the meso, macro and micro-levels in a non-linear but holistic way.

The micro-level of discourse context was used to analyse the composition of the visual image, what was being said in the visual narratives and which visual linguistic features and devices are being used to depict an idea. Berger (2009) argues that a great deal can be inferred from the lexical and grammatical choices made by the author of a text (and its corollaries in a visual text). Analogous to texts, images are therefore considered to be coded messages which may be decoded by the syntax, semantics, and pragmatics of figurative symbols (Barthes; 1967, 1981). According to Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006), the visual linguistics or the visual grammar is not ideologically random. Therefore, the present study concurs with Kress and Van Leeuwen by arguing that the visual elements in images have purposefully (although perhaps at times unconsciously) been used to portray a particular gender ideological idea. In the analysis of the visual narratives the focus was on design elements like colour choice, size and proportions, gestures, gaze, texture and perspective. According to Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006), the compositional meaning of images is realised through three interrelated systems: information value (given or new, ideal or real, important or less), salience (achieved through size, colour, tone, focus, perspective, overlap, repetition), and framing with particular reference in the present study to how these relate to gender polarisation.

At the meso-level, the analysis focused on the context of production and publication of the text; such as where was the visual text made? Who created it? What perspective might this person want to promote? What kind of person might view this image? The gender category of the participant as the maker was considered as influential regarding the meaning that could be gleaned from the visual narratives. Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) refer to this kind of meaning as representational. Representational meaning is divided into two kinds of images in the light of the different characteristics of images' production. One is narrative images which involve four processes: action process, reaction process, speech and mental process and conversation process. Narrative images were particularly important in the analysis of images in the present study because they infer the personal attributes of the artist's interpretation of everyday scenes which includes his perceptual gendered precepts influencing the meaning that is encoded. The second kind of representational images according to Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) are conceptual images which include classification processes, analytical processes and symbolic processes. These were significant for the present study to generate conceptual categories of the gender constructions displayed by the participants in visual images such as a hierarchical relationship expressed through higher and lower sitting positions for male and female respectively and male aggression perpetrating displays showing males beating females. These visual expressions represented the classification processes which are, we argue, influenced by gender polarisation.

Gleaning from Lai (2013), a meta-interpretive strategy was incorporated as well since this stage of visual analysis helped me to assume a more critical reading position, challenging and interrogating the structures and components that the participants used to construct meanings in the production of visual images. For instance, one could ask why participants represented a male figure performing hard manual labour tasks while females were watching and not doing any laborious task (Figure 1 below) or, why would a female figure be placed as an object to be looked at or admired by male spectators in bright coloured cloths and directly gazing at the audience? Such interrogations produced critical reading positions which reflected gender polarisation.

Figure 1. Family Labour Division

(Source: *Photograph by researchers with permission of the participant*)

At the macro-level, the analysis of reception, with respect to communicative processes, assesses the relationship between the text and broader social processes and ideologies; for example, what social issues are of particular importance at the time the texts were created and read? The macro-level analyses the relationship between the text and broader social processes and ideologies which prevailed particularly at the time of production and reading. This relates to the third level of the iconological analysis by Panofsky (1955) which mainly focuses on the interpretation of ideological meanings of an image constructed in particular social, cultural political and historical contexts. Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) in their social semiotic theory of reading visuals, use a slightly different terminology with the same meaning when discussing the meaning of image in visual communication. They suggest interactive instead of interpersonal relationships. Kress and Van Leeuwen have suggested three ways to examine the interactive meaning of images from three points of view: contact (demand or offer), social distance (intimate, social, or impersonal), and attitude (involvement, detachment, viewer power, equality, representation power). We used these standpoints to analyse the relationship between the visual displays and the broad gender social ideologies. We realised codes such as *doing masculine roles* for images portraying males performing roles stereotyped as masculine roles in Zimbabwean culture such as cutting firewood or *female subservient roles* for images portraying females sitting in lower levels than males. These codes describe the gender attitude of involvement and representation of power expressed in the visual displays such as in figure 1 below (See appendices).

In the same vein Lai (2013) suggests a sociocultural strategy of analysing visual images. Lai (*ibid.*) extends his argument further by saying that pictures are not merely analogous to visual perception but are symbolic artefacts constructed from the conventions of a particular culture. Thus, in order to interpret the meaning of images in this study we took the social meaning system into consideration, that is, we did not only consider the relationships within the images but beyond the image itself to the current social, cultural, and gender background specifically guided by the research focus. Lai (2013) suggests that focusing on the social, cultural, historical and political contexts of the production and transmission of visual images in multimodal texts is an indispensable aspect of the interpretation process. How the images affect us as viewers hinges on the larger social, political and cultural contexts in which they are viewed. To explore the meaning of images is to recognise that they are produced within

the dynamics of social power and ideology. Images are an important means through which ideologies are produced and onto which ideologies are projected (Sturken & Cartwright, 2009). For example, visual symbols, showing a hierarchical sitting order, are constructed in sociocultural contexts and used by artists to convey meanings beyond the literal level. The research aims and questions which focus on establishing how gender constructions are reflected in visual images guided the focus of the visual data coding.

Analysis in this study was based on the following questions; what first catches your eye in the image, that is, what is foregrounded, and what is backgrounded? How about the size and scale of the image? Why are certain elements larger than the others? Does the larger element add to the meaning of the image? Are there any dominant colours and what do they mean to the readers? What frame or delimitations are portrayed in the image? Gleaning from Iser's (2000) perceptual strategy, the analysis focused on what the readers noticed or perceived, that is, the visual and design elements (e.g. pattern, line, shape, colour, typography, texture) presented in the visual texts. For instance gleaning from Figure 2 below descriptive narrations from participants like *blue colour is masculine* show that the visual grammar is ideologically chosen.

Figure 2. The Doll Family

(Source: *Photograph by researchers with permission of the participant*)

The comprehension of visual images always begins with the perception of the visuals that artists use to render a story and communicate to readers (Van Leeuwen, 2005; Serafini, 2012). It is for this reason that our individual interviews on visual narratives was structured starting with description. If readers do not notice these particular elements, they may not be able to extract meaning from them during their interpretive processes. Employing these three steps in CVDA, we were able to interrogate the representations through profoundly considering what these representations allow them to see, and simultaneously what they prevent them from seeing in respect of gender constructions and how they are reflected in the visual images.

Merits of using CVDA in Visual Narratives

Maree and Van der Westhuizen (2007) suggest that critical visual discourse analysis illuminates ways in which the dominant forces in society construct versions of gender polarity and uncover the ideological assumptions that are hidden in the visual forms in order to appreciate, resist and overcome various forms of power or gain an appreciation that we are exercising power, one unknown to us. Consciously or unconsciously, visual images are

bound by oppressive connotations which need to be deciphered in order for images to act as tools for emancipation.

Thus CVDA allows one to take an interest in social and cultural issues, and how these issues affect society as a whole, looking at how social injustice is portrayed, and how certain social groups may be misrepresented in visual discourse. The relationship between masculine and feminine genders in a patriarchal society is, for example, dichotomous and asymmetrical and can be identified and addressed by means of this method.

Another reason is that CVDA allows one to look at images that are of interest in greater depth not just academically, but relating to everyday life too. The meaning of images is therefore derived in relation to the contemporary socio-political environment. Hence CVDA was found suitable to analyse the influence of gender as a social construct on the interpretation of images. CVDA emphasises the importance of studying texts in their full social and historical context.

REFLECTIONS ON VISUAL DATA ANALYSIS

The analysis of visual data using CVDA was not linear. We kept moving back and forth according to the demands of the process as well as the demands of the research questions which necessitated the iterative movement in analysis. The data findings were finally grouped into two categories to respond to the two major research questions stated above which guided this study. The use of visual narratives elicited this data with ease through the CVD analysis procedure which analysed the discourse as discursive-practice, as-text and as socio-practice.

Criticism of the data-analysis method used relates to bias, subjectivity and relevance of the data that is selected for analysis and interpretation. According to Derrida (1982) meaning is not static. Therefore the interpretation of the researchers could be different from those intended by the participants because of personal socio-cultural differences. These concerns are not limited to CVDA but hold true for most qualitative research. Critical analysis and reflections on each stage in the research process prompted iterative movements back and forth, and this involved revisiting grey areas and modifying strategies in order to get the most out of the visual narratives.

CONCLUSION

Visual narratives are essential means of soliciting qualitative data. Deductions which have been reached from this study reflect the applicability, adaptability and effectiveness of visual narratives as a method of data collection in qualitative research.

Visual narratives are applicable in interpretivist phenomenological studies because they reflect interpretations which people have done about their lives and are framed within everyday life scenario. Meaning is encoded and decoded from the social environment in which people live every day to their experiences, preferences and inclinations. Thus, artefacts are produced as integral reflections of culture.

The familiar saying that a *'picture is worth much more than a thousand words'* summarises that visual narratives are effective records for words and texts which attempt to describe a society. Visual images capture events with spot-on accuracy unattainable with verbal narration and text. Visual images do however require a special ability to represent and read visual signs.

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