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# Visual methodologies, sand and psychoanalysis: employing creative participatory techniques to explore the educational experiences of mature students and children in care

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*Social science research has witnessed an increasing move towards visual methods of data production. However, some visual techniques remain pariah sites because of their association with psychoanalysis; and a reluctance to engage with psychoanalytically informed approaches outside of therapy-based settings. This paper introduces the method of 'sandboxing', which was developed from the psychoanalytical approach of the 'world technique'. 'Sandboxing' provides an opportunity for participants to create three-dimensional scenes in sand-trays, employing miniature figures and everyday objects. Data are presented from two studies conducted in Wales, UK. The first, exploring mature students' accounts of higher education, and the second, exploring the educational experiences of children and young people in public care. The paper argues that psychoanalytical work can be adapted to enable a distinctive, valuable and ethical tool of qualitative inquiry; and illustrates how 'sandboxing' engendered opportunities to fight familiarity, enabled participatory frameworks, and contributed to informed policy and practice.*

## INTRODUCTION

In qualitative research, there is often a need to understand individuals as 'simultaneously the products of their own unique psychic worlds and shared social worlds' (Gadd and Jefferson 2007, 4); and this understanding can be particularly important when working with marginalised communities. For example, mature students face a number of complex psychological and structural barriers to higher education and their journeys are often characterised by initial aspirations and later disappointments, when classed, gendered and relational positionings conflict with students' identities and contribute to their withdrawal from academia (Currie, Harris, and Thiele 2000; Edwards 1993; Garland 1994; James 1995; Reay, Crozier, and Clayton 2010; Walkerdine, Lucey, and Melody 2001).

Similarly, children and young people in public care experience dual psychological and structural barriers to educational achievement. They are subject to institutional disadvantages relating to their care experience; and many encounter unsupportive professional, or substitute carer, practices and experience stigma related to their 'looked-after' status (McLeod 2010). Additionally, many children and young people experience trauma relating to abuse or neglect, which precipitates their move away from their birth families, as well as a sense of loss of family, friends, home, and the familiar.

It is not enough to chart these difficulties; rather we need to seek opportunities to understand participant's subjective worlds. For mature students, this is necessary so that we do not simply widen access at the point of entry but ensure that they complete their studies. Regarding care experienced children and young people, subjective accounts of their educational experiences can potentially inform prevailing discourses, which are weighted towards the words and ideas of researchers, professionals and policy makers; rather than those of the children and young people themselves (Winter 2006; McLeod 2007). By relying on the accounts of adults who work with (or on) children and young people, it is unlikely that structural and organisational changes, which meaningfully benefit their lives, will be realised.

Consequently, it is important to engage with research methods that allow space for subjectivities, listening to individual accounts to offer the opportunity to develop more accurate, complex and differentiated understandings, which can contribute to making 'informed as opposed to ignorant policy decisions' (Reay 2004, 1020). The following sections will discuss the creative methodologies we adopted in studies with both mature students ( $n = 9$ ) and care experienced children and young people ( $n = 67$ ). However, before this, it is important to outline some debates in the use of

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psychoanalytically informed approaches within qualitative methodologies, and establish their potentialities.

## PSYCHOANALYTICALLY INFORMED RESEARCH AND THE VISUAL

For Hollway and Jefferson (2013), traditional interviews based on the question-answer method are thin, rationally driven accounts that omit more than they reveal of human subjects; suggesting that an understanding of lived subjectivities requires a move beyond this restrictive format. In their own psychoanalytically informed work, employing free association narrative interviews, they emphasise the importance of biography and the usefulness of open-ended questions; understood through participants' meaning frames, which are not predetermined by the researcher. This approach engenders 'a largely uninterrupted flow of talk with an attentive listener whose role it is to try and understand what is being said; opening up opportunities to gain a more nuanced understanding of participant's lived subjectivities' (Mannay 2016, 111).

Whether or not one is operating psychoanalytically, this central premise has similarities with visual research, where images are widely recognised as having the potential to evoke emphatic understandings of the ways in which other people experience their worlds (Belin 2005; Fink 2012; Mizen 2005; Pink 2004; Rose 2001). Arguably, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1990), including the right for children 'to express views in all decisions that affect them', has also acted as a precursor for the development of more participatory approaches (Payne 2009; James and Prout 1997). Children and young people have shifted from the position of data sources to one in which they have 'designed, enacted and interpreted inquiries and been honoured as an authentic critical voice' (Groundwater-Smith, Dockett, and Bottrell 2015, 2).

This has engendered a greater interest in visual data, often alongside more traditional ethnographic approaches (Holland et al. 2010; Ross et al. 2009; Abrahams and Ingram 2013); and creative methods are increasingly positioned as 'effective ways to address increasingly complex questions in social science' (Kara 2015, 3). Importantly the visual image, be it photograph or drawing, and the accompanying elicitation interview, are seen as ways to move beyond the question-answer technique. Visual methods also examine the way that seeing and being seen are both subjectively and socially constituted. The combination of the visual and narrative can provide new insights into participants' subjective

worlds; making what was thought familiar, strange and interesting again (Mannay 2010). Arguably, then, it can be useful to explore the potential for combining psychoanalytically informed and visual based approaches.

It is important to note that there have been strong objections to taking psychoanalysis outside of the clinical situation of the 'consulting room' (Frosh 2010; Frosh and Emerson 2005; Midgley 2006), where psychoanalysis is positioned as an undemocratic dialogue in which taking a psychoanalytical style of inquiry outside the clinic to the research setting imports power inequalities. Yet, psychoanalytically informed work can take a democratising and dialogical stance (Hoggett et al. 2010); and much visual research, acknowledging the limitations of this project of positionality (Lomax et al. 2011; Luttrell and Chalfen 2010; Mannay 2013a), has aspired to develop participatory relationships.

Nevertheless, in participatory visual frames with children and adults, there is often an attempt to make a clear distinction between therapeutic work and social research inquiry, and its techniques. This distinction is important and necessary; but attempts to write out or obscure any connections between the techniques applied and their psychoanalytical histories, arguably negates opportunities for reworking these valuable approaches in visual studies. For example, the work of Jacques Lacan (1977, 1978) can help visual researchers to appreciate that in seeing, we enter a culture of visibility, where our relation to things and others is established.

Similarly, W. J. T. Mitchell's dialectical concept of visual culture posits that 'it is not just that we see the way we do because we are social animals, but also that our social arrangements take the forms they do because we are seeing animals' (Mitchell 2002, 171). Indeed, the sensory act of seeing (and making something visual) is important in constructing and understanding the social. In terms of being seen, Lacan's notion of 'the gaze' encapsulates the subject's awareness of being able to be seen. We are subjects that see but also objects capable of being seen, and vulnerable to the gaze: 'I see only from one point, but in my existence I am looked at from all sides' (Lacan 1978, 72).

The 'spectacle of the world, in this sense, appears to us as all-seeing' (Lacan 1978, 75) as our entry as subjects into culture and language requires a development of self-consciousness through an understanding of our self as viewable object. The use of the 'sandboxing', discussed in this paper, appreciates this simultaneous sense of seeing/being seen. It allows

participants to represent themselves as both seer and seen by creating a sand-scene that is controlled by them and reflects their experience but is also knowingly immediately viewable by others. This method works with 'the gaze' to produce something that represents the tensions inherent in participants' subject/object status.

Further insights, can be drawn from the work of philosopher Luce Irigaray (1985) who argues that in having to acknowledge ourselves as object in order to become subject, we are always being looked at by what we look upon. While Irigaray's reformulation of Lacanian psychoanalysis has a specific focus on representing 'the feminine' in positive ways, which are not defined in terms of lack, her work is important because it opens up the idea that difference can be signified in its own right. Her attempts to dislodge 'our monosubjective culture' (Irigaray 2008, 2) can be applied beyond gender difference. This appreciation of multiple subjectivities, and the rejection of essentialism, is particularly important in the case of marginalised groups.

There is no space within this paper to explicate a highly theoretical debate between Lacanian and Irigarayan positions (see Staples 2012); however, our projects comprised participants who were marginalised and we sought to engender obscured discourses and respect alterity. In relation to Irigaray, arguably our use of 'sandboxing' offered an opportunity to address gaps, silences and intricacies in ways that traditional question and answer techniques may have been too rigid, too 'flat' to reflect. The 'world technique', as introduced in the following sections, is a practice technique developed in psychoanalysis. However, as with the theoretical perspectives discussed, we argue that methods derived and developed from psychoanalytical techniques can be usefully adapted and applied in qualitative research.

## METHODOLOGY

Both projects in this paper explored the potential for psychoanalytically informed visual research in relation to the innovative and reflexive process of 'sandboxing'. The term 'sandboxing' is used to distinguish our distinct development of this approach as a tool for qualitative research inquiry. Study one was interested in understanding the experience of mature students in higher education. Study two worked with care-experienced children and young people, to gain an understanding of their experiences of education and their aspirations for the future. Ethical approval for both studies was provided by Cardiff University.

Our 'sandboxing' approach was developed drawing on sandplay therapy wherein clients create three-dimensional scenes, pictures or abstract designs in a tray

filled with sand and a range of miniature, realistic and fantasy, figures and everyday objects (Weinrib 2004). However, rather than adopting a Jungian-informed approach that is popular in therapeutic work, we adapted the 'world technique' (Lowenfeld 1939) as this best aligned with the authors' approach to visual inquiry, which centralises the meaning making of participants.

The reading of images suggests that the meaning lies within the visual image and that analysis provides the opportunity for the image to speak. However, if research is interested in how people assign meanings to pictures, the study of images alone, as data whose meaning is intrinsic, is a mistaken method (Banks 2001; Mannay 2016). To gain an understanding of the internal narrative of the image, it is imperative to acknowledge the image-maker; and the notion that the most salient aspect in understanding a visual image is what the creator intended to show is often referred to as *auteur* theory (Rose 2001; Mannay 2010). Therefore, it was important to consider how 'sandboxing' could retain this participant focused understanding of visual data.

For Lowenfeld (1939), and the present authors, it is important to centralise the subjective perspective of the participants, rather than applying the researchers own interpretations and assumptions to their pictures. As Hutton (2004) maintains, Lowenfeld's work has often been overlooked, anonymously integrated and misrepresented in later applications. Lowenfeld was aware of this misrepresentation and in relation to its application to tests of traits, temperament and personality, she was anxious that the 'world technique' should not be 'misunderstood or distorted when part of the equipment is borrowed and adapted for a different purpose' (Lowenfeld 1950, 325). In adapting the 'world technique' as a method of visual data production, 'sandboxing', not as a psychoanalytical therapeutic intervention, distortion is unavoidable. However, what is critical in both applications is *auteur* theory, or the salience of participants' interpretations of their visual creations. Therefore, we would hope that Lowenfeld would approve of the current incorporation of her work.

Lowenfeld maintained that the worlds created by children, with figures in the sand-tray, are a projective tool allowing the expression of thoughts and feelings on a symbolic level. Lowenfeld respected the work of Jung and was influenced by Freudian theory. However, for Lowenfeld, the therapist should not attempt to interpret the symbolism of the world but rather wait for the meanings to be identified by the child, 'in recognition of the multiplicity of meanings the world may contain' (Hutton 2004, 607). In this manner, the figures in the sand-tray become a primary vehicle for intra-personal and interpersonal communication, where 'each figure holds

unique and personal meaning for individuals' (Sangganjanavanich and Magnuson 2011, 266).

Emphasising the importance of the individual's discovery of their own meaning 'resonates with the tenets of auteur theory and takes up a democratising and dialogical stance, which other psychoanalytically informed approaches have been accused of precluding' (Mannay 2016, 69). Accordingly, data were analysed using an inductive and deductive approach, creating overarching thematic categories and analytical themes arising from coding and categories across the data sets. The visual materials, which were photographed at the point of data production, acted as tools of elicitation, rather than objects of analysis per se, however, they were considered in the analysis to clarify, question and extend the associated interview transcripts.

Importantly, the activity of creatively constructing a 'world' can provide visual and verbal metaphors that enhance individuals' self-understanding, which resonates with the potential of the visual in relation to 'fighting familiarity' (Delamont and Atkinson 1995). The concept of defamiliarisation, introduced by the Russian formalist Shklovsky, argues that over time our perceptions of familiar, everyday situations become stale but that art can address this automatising by forcing us to slow down our perception, to linger and to notice (Gurevitch 1998). This potential for making the familiar strange, for both researcher and researched, has been taken up in previous visual based work (Kaomea 2003; Mannay 2010; Richardson 2015). The following sections explore how defamiliarisation and auteur theory can be engendered through 'sandboxing', to enable a more nuanced understanding of participants subjective experiences.

## STUDY ONE

The central aim of study one was to elicit the subjective views of mature students who had either completed the first year of their degree; or had come through a programme to access higher education and been accepted to university in the following academic year<sup>1</sup>. The project was developed in part to address the findings of earlier studies (Currie, Harris, and Thiele 2000; Edwards 1993; Garland 1994; Mannay and Morgan 2013) that highlighted the difficulties experienced by marginalised, working-class, mature mothers who had returned to higher education.

The study<sup>2</sup> was designed in relation to the premise of action research as a 'process of reflective problem solving at the school level', which allows practitioners to identify an issue of study to determine if and how changes can be implemented to improve processes, procedures and programmes (Howard and Eckhardt 2005, 32). In this case, it was envisaged that the

participants' accounts could form a reflective base, which could potentially inform and improve provision.

Nine mature students that had undertaken or enrolled on a social science degree programme at a university in Wales, UK took part in the study. The students constituted three groups, participants that had completed their undergraduate degree programme ( $n = 3$ ), participants that had completed their first year ( $n = 3$ ) and participants due to enrol in the following academic year ( $n = 3$ ). For the first two groups of participants, the scenes created represented the experience of their first year as an undergraduate. The third group focused on their expectations, hopes and fears around embarking a trajectory in higher education. The researchers had both undertaken their degrees as mature students. Therefore, it was important to guard against familiarity and the potentially deceptive assumption of shared understanding.

## STUDY TWO

The second study was part of a Welsh Government<sup>3</sup> commissioned research project, which explored the educational attainment, experiences, aspirations and opinions of care experienced children and young people in Wales ( $n = 67$ ) (see Mannay et al. 2015; 2017). 'Sandboxing' was offered as an option alongside other activities to participants aged 7–16 years old ( $n = 39$ ) who were currently 'in care' and had been for three months or more. Participants either created scenes representing what school was like, or focused on their future and what they wanted to do, be, or achieve.

As a commitment to children and young people's participation in research about them has become more mainstream, there has been a simultaneous increase in the variety of techniques used to attempt to foster that participation (O'Kane 2008; Kim 2015). Whilst they are not a guarantee of full and active participation, visual and material methods do have the potential for more collaborative and participant led data production (Mannay 2013a); and our approach attempted to enable participants to take part in the research in a meaningful way.

'Sandboxing' was also chosen to resist the recreation of the social work interview. The formal social care and legal processes involved in placing a child or young person into public care mean that all of the participants would have experienced some form of social work encounter, which may have informed fundamental decisions about their lives, including removal from their birth families. To enable the elicitation of subjective accounts, individual semi-structured interviews were

initially selected, in line with previous studies (Jackson and Höjer 2013). However, this partially mirrored social work practice and compounded the risk that participants would be inhibited from producing an account of their educational experience, lest what they say be used to determine a decision about their life.

Enabling participants to lead the research activity by creating a sand-scene stood in contrast to a social work interview, in which they would have had no choice about how or whether to participate. Whilst, no technique would guaranteed participant directed accounts, 'sandboxing' engenders a central importance upon the participant as ultimate creator of a miniature world. Therefore, they went some way towards facilitating care experienced children's and young peoples' engagement with researchers on their own terms, and provided a space in which they could articulate their experiences and imagine their futures.

## DATA PRODUCTION

Study one employed a wooden sand-tray, while study two used plastic, portable trays, which better suited the project. Lowenfeld (1950) suggests that the collection of objects should represent the ordinary themes found in particular cultures. She defines no strict formula but classifies themes, which should appear in any collection: namely people, houses, trees, fences, animals, transport, street signs and miscellaneous (such as sticks, stones, broken parts of objects). This patterning of themes is consistent in more recent applications (Hutton 2004; Sangganjanavanich and Magnuson 2011).

We applied the same broad themes and offered up to 200 separate objects, some in multiples of two or more. As illustrated in Figure 1, landscapes, traffic, people and



FIGURE 1. Selection of objects.



FIGURE 2. Child participant's sand-scene.

animals were mainly figures from play sets while the miscellaneous category included items such as conkers, shells, coins, keys, paperclips and jewellery.

Data production was facilitated on a one-to-one basis. Mature students were asked to create a sand-scene to reflect their perceptions of undergraduate study, and care experienced children and young people created their experience of education or their future ambitions. In the fieldwork, adult participants were left alone while the researcher left the room or the researcher moved to a different part of the room and read a book. The visual data with children and young people was produced in the presence of the researcher but the encounter was informal. Researchers engaged children in conversation about other things, got on with other tasks or completed a sand-scene themselves. Where sandboxes were created by both researchers and participants, children and young people were given the opportunity to 'interview' the researcher and ask them to explain their sand-scene to extend the participatory nature of the activity.

Participants' responses were complex, drawing across the thematic categories, as illustrated in Figure 2 (child participant). In both projects, the elicitation process was characterised by a conversational style with the researcher situated as an attentive listener whose role it was to try and understand what was being said, so that the psychoanalytical paradigm became relevant and practical in the context of qualitative educational research.

## WRITTEN IN THE SAND

The method proved useful in engaging participants at an affective level and the data production drew upon psychoanalytical sensibility; which was psychoanalytically informed rather than

psychoanalytical. All of the mature students ( $n = 9$ ) were open to the creative process of 'sandboxing', with the exception of one who expressed a preference to move to the interview format. The younger participants in study two ( $n = 39$ ) were given a choice about whether to create a sand-scene, which some undertook ( $n = 19$ ). Others selected a traditional interview ( $n = 14$ ) or the option to take part in an emotion sticker activity followed by an interview ( $n = 6$ ).

Reflections in study one prompted us to offer a choice of activities in study two, as researchers need to consider that some approaches will not necessarily be appropriate to use with some participants or may not suit their individual preferences (see Johnson, Pfister, and Vindrola-Padros 2012). However, arguably, the pre-interview activities were useful in shifting the interview dynamic because participants could lead the discussions around their visual productions and direct the interview. This participant directed model also acted to limit the propensity for the researchers' own knowledge and experiences to overshadow the participants' accounts; 'fighting familiarity' (Delamont and Atkinson 1995), as discussed in previous visual studies (Mannay 2010; Richardson 2015).

Images and narratives, may belong to a world of things that we know immensely and conventionally about but the connections between them can be clouded by our subjectivities and remain unrevealed by our reading. Imagery evokes memories, reflections and feelings but interpretation depends on our accumulated cultural knowledge and experience imposes a set of available frames for reference. There is a need to frame and fix our understandings as tropes, metaphors or analogies as 'no sooner is an image seen than it must resemble something: humanity seems doomed to analogy' (Barthes cited in Spencer 2011, 19).

As Steedman (1986, 137) contends, it is generally recognised in literary accounts of metaphor that 'the connective device on which metaphor turns, that is, on the perception of real similarities between entities in the real world, is often actually no more than the recognition of culturally highly specific contingent relations: we are used to comparing certain things with particular other things and metaphor often works through this connection, rather than perceived similarity'.

Reading literature and artwork from other cultures often serves to reveal the connections of our own metaphoric system. Where there is not the vision that permits the understanding of these new connections, then a story cannot be told (Steedman 1986, 138); or where a story is

constructed it may be one that has no relationship with the meaning making of the original creator. For Lacan (1978), what is seen exists before us and will exist after we have stopped seeing it; the visual is not purely socially constructed. Nevertheless, we contend that the audience, actively make their own meanings from an image regardless of whether one holds that we reflect or are reflected by the visual field. Therefore, it was important to discuss the meanings that participants attached to their sand-scenes, rather than simply ascribe meaning.

Consequently, data production was followed by elicitation interviews to acknowledge the polysemic nature of the sand-scenes. All the visual data were polysemic because of the ambiguous and multiple meanings that could be generated. As Reavey (2011) contends 'the interpretation of an image cannot always be fixed' and it was important that our own interpretations did not act to frame and fix the data in a way that silenced the meaning making of the participants. Accordingly, participants were enabled to explain the analogies and metaphors in their sand-scenes using their own subjectively contingent schemas. Therefore, the interviews were not so much about an understanding of the data produced, as an understanding with the data produced about the lives of the participants (Radley 2011).

Lowenfeld (1979, 329) discusses the way that the child gradually comes to 'find himself[sic] in the medium of the 'world technique'. In the 'sandboxing' with mature students there was a high level of reflection where participants also expressed how they were party to 'defamiliarisation' (Gurevitch 1998); in relation to their re-thinking of their educational experiences and interpersonal relationships. Resonating with Lowenfeld's (1959) experience, metaphors created in the sand-scene also enhanced participants' understandings of the self so that, as in previous visual work, there were new discoveries of the self (Mannay 2010; Thompson and Holland 2005). Crucially, rather than eliciting rational responses to successive questions inherent to traditional interviewing (Hollway and Jefferson 2013); 'sandboxing' engendered a reflexive engagement with the realm of emotion: in which isolation was a central theme for mature students as illustrated in Figure 3.

In Figure 3, the participant employed replica figures to represent the subjective sameness of traditional students, in contrast to her position as different, as demonstrated in the following quote;

*'and there'd be like two hundred of, two hundred of these very similar people sat there, and me . . . the dinosaur because I was much older and then all these very similar people. . . I was probably just invisible, I don't think they were all like glaring at*



FIGURE 3. You feel quite isolated.

*me thinking what's she doing here the odd one out, it was more about, they all were the same and were friends and I was just, just this sort of strange entity in the lecture theatre'*

Importantly, it is both the sand-scene and the elicitation interview that engenders an understanding of these metaphors. The student used the dinosaur, both as a visual metaphor and a metaphorical figure of speech, to

illustrate how she imagines her status as a student and her experiences of the lecture theatre. Metaphors often assume a transcendental-hermeneutic function (White 2015), and the dinosaur is a common allegory for old-age or being out-of-touch with the modern world. This theme of incongruity was also evident in another mature student's imagery and interview talk related to Figure 4;

*I'm on the first bit of a ladder here, the 'Do not enter' is there, obscuring the way, because I don't know the way. . . I feel like I'm kind of climbing the ladder a little bit blind. And, the menacing man is, that I always feel like somebody is going to find out that I shouldn't be here. And say, and kick me out. . . the men alongside represent the people that should actually be here, with the nice suits and the nice trousers.*

The mature student has employed objects to communicate her anxieties around access to, and membership of, the undergraduate academic world. The scene features the central element of a rope ladder and the participant explains that she is 'on the first bit of a ladder'. The centralisation of the ladder is interesting because the term is often used metaphorically in discourses of social mobility, where climbing the ladder equates with advancing ones position in society (Walkerline 1998). The initial rungs of the ladder signify the participants first year of undergraduate study; however, although she is positioned on the ladder there are significant barriers to progression placed immediately in front of the figure selected as her avatar.

The participant explains that the 'Do not enter' is there, obscuring the way' and this is clear from observing the sand-scene; however, the scene itself cannot communicate the participant's subjective understanding of the denial to enter. The interview allows the



FIGURE 4. No Entry.

participant to discuss how their lack of knowledge acts as a barrier so that they feel they are 'climbing the ladder a little bit blind'. The menacing man represents an internal fear about not belonging but also an external presence that could be an academic, administrator or another student.

The menacing man is used figuratively to communicate the student's concerns and she explains, '*I always feel like somebody is going to find out that I shouldn't be here*'. The temporal positioning of 'always' suggests that this feeling has persisted throughout the participant's learning journey and the positioning of the 'menacing man' creates a threatening impasse. The 'menacing man' is taller and broader than the avatar of the student, communicating a sense of dominance with his large biceps and height, as he leans over the participant's avatar. The combination of the participant's account and the metaphors communicated in the sand-scene attest to the salience of these psychological barriers.

The problematic nature of the student's education is compounded because it is not simply an individual, private journey; but one with an audience. Explaining the sand-scene, the participant says '*the men alongside represent the people that should actually be here*'. These figures are at the periphery of the scene but they are watching from the side-lines and their eyes are fixed on the participant's avatar. Furthermore, as with the identical cats in Figure 3, the audience are the same '*with the nice suits and the nice trousers*'; and this uniformity confirms their membership in this space. Accordingly, the participant becomes isolated by her lack of knowledge of higher education, her feelings of 'outsiderness', and the anxiety around those who appear to fit into the university milieu. Importantly, '*the people that should actually be here*', will be able to easily recognise her as out of place, resonating with the

premise that we are always being looked at by what we look upon (Irigaray 1985).

Feelings and emotions were also inherent in the sand-scenes and accompanying interviews in study two. For example, a desire to foster security and safety for themselves and others featured clearly in many of the participants' accounts, as illustrated in Figure 5.

'Sandboxing' allowed children and young people to create complex visual representations of their future aspirations like this battle scene using soldiers and wild animals. This scene represented the participant's desire to join the army '*because there's some little wars which are going on and people are trying to fight for their country to keep it... I want to help them and keep them going*'. There was an emphasis on the importance of doing a job where they could keep people safe. In the army they could '*help everyone... if there was an earthquake*', alternatively, if they joined the fire brigade they could '*save some people and actually be a hero*'.

The battle scene illustrated an understanding that safety and security were not necessarily automatically conferred, rather that they were things that involved some form of negotiation, struggle or fight. This theme transferred to the participant's discussion of his employment and how his wages would be related to family security; '*I wouldn't mind anything that I could make a lot of money, just in case I have a family so we're actually able to look after them and to keep them safe*'. These issues are often central in the experiences of care experienced children and young people, which are characterised by instability, family separations and placement moves. The creation of the sand-scene, and the mirroring activity in which the researcher made a representation of their aspirations to share, along with the ensuing conversation, enabled a discussion of these sensitive issues, which moved beyond the trope of the traditional social worker interview.

Importantly, 'sandboxing' also has the benefits of scenes being made-and-remade. Many visual methods lack this level of fluidity as they become fixed once collage pieces are glued, camera clicked or when ink comes into contact with paper. Arguably, Lego Serious Play offers opportunities to encourage experiential forms of expression and analysis that can help participants see familiar situations in a new way (Gauntlet and Holzwarth 2006, Hinthorne and Schneider 2012). However, although Lego bricks have the potential to be built and rebuilt, they do not necessarily have the flexibility of 'sandboxing'; and to some extent, unlike 'sandboxing', they are reliant on particular spatial and coordination skills, which could exclude some participants.



FIGURE 5. Battle Scene.

The figures themselves are not pliable or open to physical change, although metaphorically they can take on multiple and unrestricted meanings. However, even where the figure itself is not solely malleable with the imagination of the participant there can be a level of creativity. For example, in a workshop<sup>4</sup> conducted with the same equipment set a participant made a dress for one of the figures using a post-it-note. The figures also become placed and moved or removed and structures were built and destroyed both prior to and during the interviews. The sand-trays were often decorated by the imprints of other pieces that were inserted and later removed; and in one of the interviews with a mature student the participant played out a live battle scene with a dragon on an embankment, raised with the sand, and rock and fence features. Similar enactments featured in interviews with children and young people with one participant creating a complex dramatised play with the figures.

The sand itself opens up a range of creative opportunities for participants to construct an external representation of their interior experiences, hopes, fears and fantasies. As well as raising the sand, as in the dragon's embankment, the sand was also used to obscure, hide and partially bury items. Many sand-scenes featured keys, jewellery and other symbolic treasures that were sometimes barely visible; representing what was lost, out of reach or the goal to be attained. In Figure 6 the participant buried the figure that represents her mature student self and explained;



FIGURE 6. Quick sand.



FIGURE 7. Good future, bad future.

*'I partially buried her because she's like in quick sand, because there's too much for one person to do... she can't do it all, but she has to do it all so she has to keep her body out and she's like flailing her arms but you can't really, so you're sort of half, you're always half sunk but you're trying to carry on'*

The ability to bury objects is not easily negotiated with other visual techniques; and here the participants partial immersion of their avatar led to discussions around what it meant to be buried and their subjective experience of how this continual struggle against completely sinking was negotiated. Consequently, 'sandboxing' allowed an opportunity for feelings of helplessness and fear to be visualised and expressed. As well as building up and burying objects, the sand base was also useful in the creation of physical boundaries as illustrated in Figure 7.

The participant demarcated a good and bad future, using the sand to clearly stake out a division between their two possible futures. The importance of pets was notable in many of the care experienced children's and young people's accounts of their current experiences and their future lives. Pets are significant, as although they play an active role in fostering well-being (Briheim-Crookall 2016), they are often left behind in the process of separation from the family home and later in placement moves to different foster cares.

Here the participant has put snakes on the left hand side to represent the horrible pets she would have in a bad future *'There will just be like horrible, like, I don't like snakes so then that means bad... they are really mean pets, and I don't really like meanness'*. The participant also used the sand to partially bury a yellow snake,

emphasising their sneakiness. The ability to demarcate and bury objects provided understandings about how care experienced children and young people visualise their futures within conflicting narratives of the positive and the negative, which often reflects their everyday experiences.

### REFLECTION ON 'SANDBOXING'

'Sandboxing' offers opportunities for participants to creatively and imaginatively build worlds that have meaning and relevance for themselves; which can be communicated, metaphorically and through the elicitation process, to others. Accordingly, in trying to create a distance between qualitative research and all that is connected with the psychoanalytical and the therapeutic, we could be curtailing the range of visual-based methods available to researchers. Why then should we not be taking techniques from psychoanalysis outside of the clinical situation of the 'consulting room' (Frosh 2010)?

A key objection is in relation to importing unequal power relations. However, in adapting the 'world technique' to a method of data production, 'sandboxing', there is an argument for the participatory potential of the approach. Nonetheless, in relation to the associated therapeutic nature of this qualitative inquiry we can, and do, question the ethics in regard engaging participants at an affective level. Mature students discussed feelings associated with isolation and of being overwhelmed by university life; and some participants illustrated the emotion of recalling painful memories in their language, paralanguage and in some cases with their tears. The study then could be criticised for engaging with a psychoanalytically informed technique in the absence of a trained therapist.

Yet, as Rock (2007) contends, there is a 'need to remain open to the features that cannot be listed in advance of the study', and in previous work applying visual methods (Mannay 2013b), the openness of the tasks elicited an invasive element of trauma; and family troubles that were central to the participants' construction of their identities. The question of who we are, is always tied to the memory of who we have been, and the imagination of what we might become (Henriques et al. 1998); and similarly the future is often haunted by phantoms of the past, which impact upon the present (De Beauvoir 1949). For these reasons, all forms of open qualitative inquiry have the potential to surface painful memories and anxieties about future selves: and this was considered carefully at the outset of the research projects.

Interestingly, none of the children and young people who participated in the second study demonstrated observable distress when discussing their sand-scenes, even when describing what adults might perceive as traumatic events. Perhaps this is testament to the resilience of care experienced children and young people, or reflects a weary familiarity with sharing details about their personal lives with non-familiar adults. The potential for eliciting emotional responses through 'sandboxing' did provoke an instance of disclosure of a safeguarding issue. However, as long as researchers are properly trained, able and willing to deal with disclosures, the argument against engaging children and young people on an affective level in research for fear of this occurring, is unsatisfactory. Providing participants with the means to explore elements of affect in their experiences can provide an important opportunity for children and young people to have their feelings acknowledged and heard. Furthermore, disclosures should not be feared but conceived of as potentially contributing to an improvement in a child or young person's safety and well-being.

For Lowenfeld (1950), the action of making worlds can in itself begin the process of amelioration in the disturbances and discomforts of some children. Clearly, this was not a therapeutic process in either study, and in study one the work was with adults. With the mature students, participants expressed that 'sandboxing' was to some extent cathartic: and in the researchers they recognised elements of a shared journey that engendered some form of support. Similarly, children and young people spoke in positive terms about constructing their sand-scenes and being able to lead the discussion about their experiences with researchers. Lowenfeld (1950) argues that in both children and adults there exists an interior experience that persists throughout the life course and that it is of profound importance but has so far been insufficiently studied: and it is this aspect of the interior life that 'sandboxing' can elicit.

A further advantage of 'sandboxing' is that it does not have the ethical difficulties associated with the dissemination of photographs and other recognisable forms of data. Much mainstream engagement with the ethics of visual research focuses on issues of anonymity so that the focus is on who is taking the picture, who is in the picture; and what else can be known from the geography or materiality of the image. Thus, the 'moral maze of image ethics' (Prosser 2000) has been centrally concerned with informed consent and the tension between revealing and concealing the contents of visual images and with who has 'the right' to claim ownership of images to in turn edit their content and show them to

others (Allen 2015; Cox et al. 2014; Lomax et al. 2011; Renold et al. 2008; Wiles et al. 2008).

In response to these issues, researchers have been interested in finding new ways to communicate the findings of their research without visual images or textual references that could compromise their relationships with participants and risk anonymity. Whilst, at the same time retaining the impact of these accounts. The generic nature of 'sandboxing' figures and lack of attachment to individual participants beyond the situated and transient nature of the fieldwork, means that they can be used in ethical, yet impactful, strategies of dissemination.

### CONCLUDING REMARKS

This paper discussed the usefulness of 'sandboxing' as a tool of qualitative research as well as reflecting on the associated difficulties with the method; arguing that a reluctance to engage with psychoanalytically informed approaches outside of therapy based settings could preclude a more nuanced understanding of participants subjective lived experience. The visual can be viewed as 'a mode of inquiry and representation, and as a mode of dissemination and engagement' (Mitchell 2011, 5); and the paper has demonstrated the ways in which 'sandboxing' can be applied as a multimodal tool in qualitative research.

In terms of inquiry, the approach offered an open site in which the construction of worlds acted to limit the propensity for participants' accounts to be overshadowed by the enclosed, self-contained world of common understanding (Mannay 2010); fighting familiarity (Delamont and Atkinson 1995). The equipment employed offered a level of fluidity that is not possible with other visual techniques of data production. This relative freedom engendered forms of defamiliarisation, illustrated in the reflexive ways that participants represented their subjective worlds (Gurevitch 1998); and communicated them in the accompanying elicitation interviews.

Importantly, the themes that arose from the fieldwork discussed here were later explored in relation to how educational experiences could be improved. Accordingly, the research drew on the affective accounts of participants to influence policy and best practice; aiming to improve mature students' experiences, retention and success; or to remove educational barriers for care experienced children and young people. To date, these visual and narrative accounts have been employed to engage with institutional administration in different ways.

The findings from the study with mature students made the case for setting up a coffee club, to form a support framework and combat the troubling effects of isolation experienced by these students. The research with care experienced children and young people informed the Welsh Government strategy '*Raising the ambitions and educational attainment of children who are looked after in Wales*'. Additionally, visual outputs from study two, including four short films featuring individual 'sandboxing' figures<sup>5</sup>, have been used to communicate the findings to young people and practitioners. Demonstrating, the ways in which the visual can also be a useful tool in communicating findings to a wider public and increasing research impact (Mannay 2016).

It is also worth briefly noting the possibilities for using 'sandboxing' when teaching, which we have incorporated with undergraduate and post-graduate students, across academic disciplines. Engendering affect is a useful way to foster reflexivity for students who are faced with the new and particular expectations, concepts, languages and pedagogy of higher education. 'Sandboxing' provides an active and accessible way for students to begin to grasp the foundational notion of 'the sociological imagination' (Wright Mills 1959). By situating themselves as subjects and audiences, interpreting their experiences in the context of a visual world, students' 'capacity to range from the most impersonal and remote transformations to the most intimate features of the human self – and to see the relations between the two' (Wright Mills 1959, 7) may be developed. Accordingly, the relationship between identity, history, art and sociality may be mapped, fostering critical thinking.

Lowenfeld's work is frequently applied in play therapy, adult psychotherapy and family therapy (Hutton 2004), which is testament to the usefulness and innovativeness of her original ideas and insights. In reference to the 'world technique', Lowenfeld (1950, 325) writes, 'I am anxious that my whole research and therapeutic method, of which this equipment is part, should not be misunderstood or distorted when part of the equipment is borrowed and adapted for a different purpose'. In taking her technique outside of the clinic, we hope that Lowenfeld would see this development as respectful to her original psychoanalytical work and its potential as a tool of qualitative inquiry. This paper has been concerned with establishing 'sandboxing' as a respectful tool of qualitative inquiry; to extend the parameters of visual methods, to fight familiarity, to engage with the subjective worlds of participants, to expand the

participatory potential of qualitative research, to engage with ethical yet impactful dissemination; and ultimately to contribute to informed policy initiatives.

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## NOTES

- [1] The specific programme to access higher education was the completion of 60 credits at undergraduate level 4. Modules were studied part-time over the course of one academic year. The 60 credits were equivalent to 50 per cent of the undergraduate first year degree programme so students moving from this pathway to further degree studies only had to enrol for 60 credits rather than the standard 120 credits. This pathway was designed to widen participation and was in its first presentation at the time of the study.
- [2] The research project, *University Challenge: How can we foster successful learning journeys for non-traditional*

*students?* was funded by the Cardiff Undergraduate Research Opportunities Programme (CUROP).

- [3] The research project, *Understanding the educational experiences and opinions, attainment, achievement and aspirations of looked after children in Wales*, was commissioned by the Welsh Government, and the project was undertaken by the Children's Social Care Research and Development Centre (CASCADE) at Cardiff University.

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