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### *Capturing neighbourhood images through photography*

**Abstract**

*This paper seeks to present and discuss a specific methodological approach based on photography, which draws on a method that combines auto-photography during photo-walks with photo-elicitation interviews. The method was used in the framework of a study that explored how families, living in the city of Geneva, Switzerland, make sense of their everyday practiced space, and how this informs us on knowledge about neighbourhood images in the context of lived space. The paper discusses the roles, benefits and challenges of the combined use of words and pictures, as well as the practice of taking pictures as a research tool and practice.*

**Keywords**

Visual methods, Auto-photography, Photo-elicitation, Photo-walk, Neighbourhood images

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is a PhD student in Human Geography at the Department of Geosciences of the University of Fribourg, Switzerland. Her research investigates place images, in a context of mundane practiced and lived urban space, in order to understand how they emerge in specific situations and how they take part in citizens' everyday lives. In line with a theoretical framework inspired by Deleuze and Guattari, in particular through the ideas of assemblage and of diagrammatic thinking, she developed a research design based on the use of multiple methods. This includes specifically the use of visual methodologies as well as qualitative GIS..

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## **Photography as a research tool and practice to explore sense making of everyday lived space**

The aim of this paper is to present and discuss a methodological approach based on photography (Blinn & Harrist 1991; Pink 2001, 2011, 2013; Crang 2003; Rose 2010, 2011), and to discuss the roles, benefits and challenges of photography as a research tool and practice. Through my research, I developed a method, which combines auto-photography and photo-walks with photo-elicitation interviews (Aitken & Wingate 1993, Harper 2002; Latham 2003; Mogensen 2012; Lombard 2013). Whereas auto-photography is photography carried out by the participants themselves (Aitken & Wingate 1993; Dodman 2003; Warren 2005; Noland 2006; Johnsen, May & Cloke 2008; Mogensen 2012), photo-elicitation is a method characterised by the introduction of photographs in the interview situation (Collier 1967; Harper 2002; Loeffler 2005; Duteil-Ogata 2007; Van Auken, Frisvoll & Stewart 2010; Rose 2011; Bigando 2013). The approach I elaborated was used to generate a better understanding of how families, living in different neighbourhoods of the city of Geneva, Switzerland, make sense of everyday practiced and lived space (Harrison 2000; Holloway & Hubbard 2000; Kottak 2012; Bigando 2013). The exploration of sense-making processes is a way to explore more broadly the notion of place images at a neighbourhood scale (Tani 2001; Van Ham & Feijten 2008; Permentier 2009; Schoepfer, Zweifel & Paisiou 2011; Van Ham, Manley, Bailey, Simpson & Maclennan 2011). In particular, I investigated the emergence of residents' *neighbourhood images*, as well as the role of these images in their choices concerning housing (Oldrup & Carstensen 2012; Pinkster 2012; Van Eijk 2012).

Drawing on empirical research, this paper demonstrates how photography provides a valuable means of investigation, in particular during the data production stage of the research process. Notably, both the practices of taking pictures and of looking at them (Sturken & Cartwright 2001; Rose 2011), as well as the pictures themselves as visual items enhance reflexion, communication and reflexivity for the participants to the research. Photographs' visual dimension and their aptitude of capturing the qualitative dimension of urban space allowed an in depth expression and exchange of ideas concerning space (Bigando 2013; Lombard 2013: 24). Playing a role of thinking tools, pictures appeared to be particularly beneficial for opening up spaces of negotiations in situations involving a group of persons – as for example family members<sup>1</sup>. Photography worked as a way to encourage interview talk, playing a role of visual catalysts (Rose 2011: 239), in particular by triggering emotions and memories (Loeffler 2005; Rose 2011: 240; Sampson & Gifford 2010; Oh 2012). These dimensions appeared to be particularly relevant in the context of an investigation of “ordinary” peoples' sense making of everyday space (Lefebvre 1980; Certeau, Giard & Mayol 1990; Holloway & Hubbard 2000; Thrift 2008; Rose 2011; Bigando 2013) and more broadly of the emergence and negotiation of their neighbourhood images.

In what follows I first clarify my approach towards the concept of neighbourhood image and expound on the implications of this definition on the methodological approach. Through this, I outline photography's potential for research on families' neighbourhood images, perceptions and practices of their daily-lived environment. Then, I provide details of the case study with nine families living in different neighbourhoods in Geneva and present

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<sup>1</sup> For a discussion about research with groups: Hopkins 2007, Kaufmann 2010.

the three-stage method composed of a preliminary interview, a photo-walk combined with auto-photography, and a photo-elicitation interview. Linking back to previous research using pictures, I further show how photography, as a research tool and practice, can be incorporated into the methodological approach to explore neighbourhood images. Drawing on the results of my empirical research, the benefits and limits of photography in the methodological approach are discussed. Finally, the paper concludes by highlighting some broader contributions of this research to the debate in the field of visual methodology.

### **The elusiveness of neighbourhood images of families living in Geneva**

This research investigates the question of how families<sup>2</sup>, living in the city of Geneva, Switzerland, characterise their daily-lived neighbourhood. How do their *neighbourhood images* emerge in everyday life and mundane practices, and how do they impact on opinions and choices concerning housing (Oldrup & Carstensen 2012; Pinkster 2012; Van Eijk 2012)?

Place images are complex settings composed of multiple elements that are associated to a particular place, such as the built and natural environments, atmospheres, profile of inhabitants, as well as the activities and events that take place there. These elements can be related to the perception and sensation of place, to the stories about the place, to its history, to hearsay conveyed by media or acquaintances, or to so-called “common knowledge”. Even if there are some constants and fixed aspects of images of certain neighbourhoods, there is never just one image of a place, but rather a mix of overlapping, fractured, changing, or even contradictory images. Thus, place images can be considered as dynamic processes, where a multiplicity of components – such as discourses, knowledge, beliefs, materials and feelings – are (consciously or subconsciously) connected in residents’ minds and practices. Working with families, understood as a specific group composed of several persons, makes it possible to look at the emergence of neighbourhood images “in vivo”. In other words, negotiations of different ways of making sense of space within a group, as well as different ways of communicating the results of the negotiations to the researcher could be observed.

I conceptualise neighbourhood images (Tani 2001; Permentier, Van Ham & Bolt 2007, 2008; Permentier 2009) in an assemblage perspective (Deleuze & Guattari 2004; DeLanda 2006). Doing that implies to consider them as multiple, elusive and performative (Schoepfer, Zweifel & Paisiou 2011; Schoepfer & Paisiou 2014, Crot 2014). Neighbourhood images emerge in the mind of city inhabitants through their actions and practices. Nevertheless they are also inputs, which, in turn, influence these actions and practices. The images residents have, regarding the various neighbourhoods in their city, help to inform their everyday activities (Lynch 1960; Gould & White 1974; Kitchin & Blades 2002) in particular aspirations and decisions concerning the question of housing (Wacquant 1997; Permentier, Van Ham & Bolt 2007, 2008). The presence of a non grown-up in the household has specific implications on lifestyle, on the assessment of residential neighbourhoods, as well as on choices related to housing (Bonvalet & Lelièvre 2012). In fact, it triggers specific needs and wishes concerning

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<sup>2</sup> Among a far more complex debate of the notion of family, I use here a simple definition of households, characterised by kinship between the members and the presence of at least one person aged from 0 to 16 (for a review of the debate concerning the definition see e.i. Moloney, Weston, Qu and Hayes 2012).

the household's residential choice, in particular concerning the immediate environment. For example, the presence of green spaces, quietness, good neighbourly relations, as well as to those aspects favouring the children's interests, such as proximity of the school, secure public parks and spaces, and public transport (Rérat, Pigué, Besson & Söderström 2008; Pattaroni, Thomas, Kaufmann & Ortelli 2009). Investigating the emergence of families' neighbourhood images, by identifying and understanding the aspects that matter to them and to which they pay attention, provides useful knowledge about how to produce high quality urban spaces for this type of household.

In the sixties, place images from a residents' perspective used to be investigated mainly through mental maps as a methodological tool, because they were understood merely as a product of the subjective perception of an individual observer (Lynch 1971; Gould & White 1974; Downs & Stea 2011; Kitchin & Blades 2002; Weichhart 2006). In the eighties, various critics to this approach (Golledge 2008) led a shift towards the idea of place images as socially produced representations of space, with a strong collective dimension of 'reputation' of that place. This also involved a shift on the methodological level, favouring the use of surveys and semi-structured interviews (Tani 2001; Permentier 2009). More recent works on place images go beyond the distinction between the subjective and the collectively produced in the constitution of the representation of a place. Highlighting that some characteristics of place image are sometimes as much linked to the place itself as to the psycho-social characteristics of the person or group who evaluate it, these studies favour the analysis of the material world and residents' practices in order to improve the understanding of the phenomenon. This increasing awareness of the importance of material and everyday life (Brekhus 2000) paves the way for a more ethnographic-oriented approach, which valorises the material, the visual, and the sensitive (Thomas 1983; Crang 2003; Lorimer 2010; Rose 2011; Garrett 2013). Therefore, on a methodological level there is a claim for an "...urgent need to supplement humanist methods that rely on generating talk and text, with experimental practices that amplify other sensory, bodily and affective registers and extend the company and modality of what constitutes a research subject" (Whatmore 2006: 606–607).

The use of photography appears to be particularly suiting for this kind of approaches (Alfonso, Kurti & Pink 2004), allowing the conjunct exploration of individual and collective aspects of place images, through the idea of an image being an assemblage of multiple and diverse features such as materials, discourses and semiotics. As evoked before, place images are elusive and changing, and thus hard to grasp. Hence, one major methodological difficulty is that, by asking participants only direct questions about their neighbourhood images (such as: "what is the image of neighbourhood xyz?"), there is a risk of obtaining mainly images in terms of clichés. In order to overcome this obstacle, and to get a more nuanced and personal view on neighbourhood images, an ethnography-inspired method based on photography, was set up for this research. Among the multiple ways of using photography in social sciences<sup>3</sup>, this specific research setting relied on auto-photography during photo-walks as well as on photo-elicitation interviews. The different steps of the method, as I show in details in the next part, gave the participants a voice to express their view that was simultaneously visual and verbal, and that also allowed experimentation with a more sensitive dimension of

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<sup>3</sup> For an overview, see: Rose 2011; Margolis & Pauwels 2011.

experimenting daily-lived space. In a way, this method represents a kind of laboratory set-up to observe how the participants' neighbourhood images emerged and are negotiated, out of their pictures and dialogues.

### **A three-step “neighbourhood images observation lab” based on auto-photo-walks and photo-elicitation interviews**

In the frame of the earlier mentioned reflections, and drawing in particular on Lynn Blinn and Amanda Harrist (1991), I set up a three-steps method to work specifically in participation with families living in different central neighbourhoods of the city of Geneva, in order to learn about their neighbourhood images. Nine families have been selected as participants in order to present a diversity of cases, according to various features. These comprise the household composition, the age and number of children, the socio-professional profile of the parents, and the profile of their residential neighbourhoods in regard to income levels<sup>4</sup>. Therefore, the selection included families with single parents or couples having different professions and income levels, with one to three children, and with at least one child aged corresponding to different school stages (pre-primary school, primary school, secondary school). The method included a preliminary qualitative interview, an auto-photography walk in the residential neighbourhood, and a photo-elicitation interview.

#### **Step one. A first encounter of the researcher and the family: discussion of the basics**

During the first interview that took place at the participants' home, a substantial amount of time was used to explain and discuss the purpose of the research as well as their upcoming tasks in regard to the next steps of our collaboration. This stage of explaining how we were going to work together was particularly important with households that included children who were already able to participate (from about three years old). I explained the research to them in simpler terms and answered any questions they wanted to ask. Equally important was my own integration, as a complete stranger at the beginning of the study, into a group composed of united members<sup>5</sup>. Generating an atmosphere of confidence and trustworthiness enabled them to feel at ease to share their personal opinions, feelings, everyday experiences, and stories. During this first encounter, we went over some questions related to their residential life, in particular in regard to places where they used to live before and to how they looked for and ultimately chose their current home. Moreover, we discussed questions relating to their daily life, such as their specific ways of considering their neighbourhood, the aspects they liked or disliked about their living space, as well as their residential preferences in relation to the other residential areas within the city. This first discussion worked thus at the same time as a semi-structured interview aiming at exploring

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<sup>4</sup>The statistics office from the canton of Geneva defined profiles in regard to households and incomes in the document “Un portrait des communes du canton et des quartiers de la ville de Genève” (OCSTAT 2008).

<sup>5</sup>Burgess, Limb and Harrison (1988) make a difference between “once-only groups” and “in-depth small groups”, the later referring to groups, which often meet on numerous occasions and thus already have connection.

the topic of neighbourhood images and residential life, as well as an important initial step of our collaboration. In particular, discussing families' everyday life and practices of the neighbourhood aimed at preparing the photo-walk, by raising their awareness about mundane issues. This first exchange could thus feed into what Eva Bigando (2013) names the "pre-photographic thinking", referring to the stage prior to the taking of pictures. The question "which pictures do we want to take?", which is underlying the intention of taking picture, encourages participants to adopt a reflexive position. This state of mind helps participants to think about their ordinary – sometimes a priori trivial – stories and topics, which are actually central in the understanding of place images.

### **Step two. The family's mission: a reflexive walk through their neighbourhood with a camera**

During the week following the first interview, the families completed a photo-walk combined with auto-photography. Their mission was to go all together for a walk with a camera, in order to take between four and six pictures, which they felt best characterised their neighbourhood. They went by themselves, according to an itinerary that they were free to choose both in terms of distances and time. The idea behind the procedure was thereby to convey their "neighbourhood images" to the researcher.

Previous studies based on walk-along (Latham 2003; Rose, Degen & Basdas 2010; Degen & Rose 2012), sometimes alternatively named go-along (Kusenbach 2003; Carpiano 2009), revealed advantages of using a method that combines walks and the taking of pictures that appeared to be likewise beneficial for a study concerning place images (Carpiano 2009). In particular, walking has been described as a sensitive and bodily experience of space (Degen & Rose 2012). The participants' perception and practice of space is therefore influenced by what they see, smell, hear, touch and feel. Through their specific task of taking pictures during their walk, in the frame of a reflection about their everyday lived neighbourhood, the participants were encouraged to pay attention to their senses, especially of their visual sense (Piette 1992; Lelli 2003). Hence, walking encourages participants to talk about otherwise unnoticed and mundane dimensions and patterns of personal and social life (Leon De & Cohen 2005), as well as spontaneous encounters. The generated data has been described as profoundly informed by the (built) environment and the landscapes in which the walks take place (Evans & Jones 2011). Discussing the idea of a sensitive approach of space, Paul Harrison (2000) shows further how thought emerges out of the unthought, through ephemeral moments of feeling as sense.

Unlike in the previously mentioned studies (Kusenbach 2003; Latham 2003; Carpiano 2009; Rose, Degen & Basdas 2010; Degen & Rose 2012), the walks in this case were not based on a recorded walking interview in participation with the researcher. Even if this way of proceeding has valuable advantages such as the possibility for the researcher to ask questions directly and to observe the participants during the walk (Degen & Rose 2012), I chose to not accompany them for the walk. The reason is that I wanted the participants to create their own story, without the researcher as a guide or an observer of their discussions and negotiations. Along these lines, with the idea of leaving participants as free as possible, I gave them little instructions about the way of proceeding, except for the directive to take a defined, small

amount of pictures. This criterion aimed, besides the time issues, at creating a starting point for negotiations. As a result, the family members were forced to decide together on an agreed selection of self-taken pictures, or on their “shared neighbourhood image”, which they wanted to communicate. This negotiation involved obviously also disagreements about the selection of certain pictures, which could further be discussed during the elicitation interview. Undeniably, having a small number of pictures allowed for a more in-depth discussion of each picture as well as more time for a discussion about all the pictures together.

Consequently, in this process of taking pictures and combining them, the families used photographs as visual supports to show and further tell their story of how they viewed or described their neighbourhood. In previous research, auto-photography – or “autodriving photography” (Clark 1999) and “reflexive photography” (Harrington & Lindy 1999) – has shown to offer rich potential to explore participants’ perceptual observations of place (Wang & Burris 1997; Loopmans, Cowell & Oosterlynck 2012). Beside the advantages of giving the participants a sensitive experience of place when they go on site to take the pictures, auto-photography is also a way of expressing and communicating thoughts and opinions through the visual qualities of the picture. This alternative description method allows thus, compared to more conventional verbal communication, for visual expression. Participants can thereby represent their community, through a specific photographic technique. Along these lines, auto-photography has been described as “a powerful heuristic tool that can enhance understanding in new and nuanced ways” (Johnsen, May & Cloke 2008: 205). In this case, voice is given to a group of residents, opening a space for exchange and negotiation, and promoting critical dialogues. Irrefutably, some limits of the method have also been highlighted, such as the unequal ability of using the techniques of photography (such as the framing of the content, the position of the photographer in space to take the picture) among different participants groups (Lombard 2013). However, combining auto-photography with subsequent interviews, as it was the case here, allows participants to express the eventual difficulties they might have faced.

The families also wrote a short vignette about each picture they took: giving them a title, an explanation of the choice, and a description of the place where the picture was taken. Moreover, they were encouraged to write down any further thoughts and ideas they had in this particular moment. This reflective stage is crucial for a method based on auto-photography as it guarantees a successful elicitation in the next step (Blinn & Harrist 1991: 189). The vignettes also give the participants time to think about their answers, to sum up the different thoughts and opinions of the family members, and to structure them in a specific way. In this process, the image the family wants to communicate of their neighbourhood can gain consistency (Guattari 1979). Although some researchers decide not to look at the collected material before the photo-elicitation interview, in order to let themselves being surprised and react spontaneously to it (e.i. Bigando 2013), I asked the participants to send it to me. As a result, the discussion could be based on printed material, and I was able to formulate interview-specific questions to guide the subsequent stage.

### **Step three. A second encounter of the researcher and the family: re-opening the negotiations through photographs**

The second interview began with the families sharing their story of the photo-walk. They explained the reasons for choosing their particular itinerary, the used procedure for taking the pictures, as well as the negotiation process for selecting the pictures for their “portfolio”. Then, they were asked to successively consider their photographs in the frame of a photo-elicitation interview. Thus, the participants explained the main idea, in relation to their neighbourhood image, they wanted to highlight through each photograph. Thereby, they referred to both the practice of photography during the walk (how and where they took the pictures) as well as to the visual content of the photographs themselves. Basically, similar questions as the ones from the vignette were posed, but the discussion enabled the investigation to go much deeper, by way of follow-up questions, narratives and stories. Simultaneously, these elicitation interviews give the participants the opportunity to explain and discuss their own choices. This way, their voice is untainted by the researcher’s subjective interpretations of their pictures. In this sense, photographs can have an empowering effect (Harper 1987; Hurworth 2003; Van Auken, Frisvoll & Stewart 2010; Tolia-Kelly 2011) because the participants retain authorship over the photographs they took and their interpretation. Consequently, the leadership role during the interview, which too often tends to be taken over by the researcher, is reassigned.

During elicitation interviews, photographs usually play the role of a visual catalyst in encouraging the interviewee to talk (Rose 2011: 239). Given their ability to activate (spatial) memory (Loeffler 2005; Rose 2011: 240), pictures have been recognized to help to improve interviewees’ capacity to think about space and verbalise their own experiences and perspectives (Van Auken, Frisvoll, Stewart 2010). Photographs also provide visual resources for the researcher and can be used to prompt for narratives of more emotional reflections (Buckingham 2009; Sampson & Gifford 2010: 118). In this sense, the dialogue and the pictures are working together in this type of interview. Photography is therefore not only used to illustrate some parts of the research visually, but is actively employed in the production of data. Building on John Berger’s idea (1972: 9) that we never just look at something without also considering its relation to other things and to ourselves, Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright (2001) address the question of the practice of looking at pictures (Sturken & Cartwright 2001; Tolia-Kelly 2011; Rose & Tolia-Kelly 2012). They state that pictures embody ways of seeing. Consequently, it is important to consider the question of what emerges from these relations and actions of looking. This means that, when using pictures, the researcher should consider the context in which participants look at them, and should take into account their social and cultural background, lifestyle and identity. As a result, when intervening in an interview, photographs have their own agency (Pinney 2004) and can represent multiple things at the same time. Beyond the visual or material qualities they can show, they can also be used as a way to remember an experience or social relationships (Stedman, Beckley & Ambard 2005). Photographs thus are material objects that are produced in a specific context, which mediates the world. They work as agents in action, rather than only as representations of the world (Cragg 2003, Thrift 2008; Crouch 2010; Rose 2011). Gillian Rose (2011: 13) sums this up by advising to consider three sites in which the meanings of images are made: the site (or context) of production of the image, the site of the



image itself, and the site where it is seen by different audiences.

While discussing the pictures sequentially, the participants arranged them on the table and it could be observed that they automatically made some connections between them. These links were sometimes made spontaneously and sometimes relying on ideas they already had during the photo-walk and their previous discussions. The photo-elicitation hence gave the participants another chance to re-discuss and re-negotiate ideas and points of views that had been tackled during the auto-photography. Re-addressing a discussion that already took place previously opens up new channels to further challenge participants' assumptions, and to revisit and reconsider the neighbourhood image they wanted to communicate. The pictures, as Douglas Harper (2002: 23) has described before, constitutes a platform where the interlocutors tend to find common ground. When all the pictures have been placed on the table, the participants were explicitly asked to comment and reflect upon this collection as a whole. In particular, they were asked to explain which pictures they would eventually add or change after having discussed the issue of neighbourhood image during the whole collaboration process. Thereby, the participants had the opportunity to rethink critically their own selection of images. Moreover, these moments of explicit reassessment encouraged each individual to take a step back from the family's "collective image", and to share personal, sometimes divergent opinions. Thus, even if I wanted the discussion to generally follow a "natural" flow, I still wanted that all family members had a chance to raise their voice, and these moments were a support for balancing speaking turns.

Finally, at the end of the interview, the families were asked to give feedback about our collaboration. In particular, we talked about the role of photography in the collaboration process; that is, the benefits and limitations when thinking about everyday space in a more conscious manner than one is accustomed to. This reflexive discussion was designed to get their feedbacks on their experience, as a concluding way to look back on our collaboration.

### **How and why did photography contribute in developing an efficient method for grasping neighbourhood images?**

After a detailed description of the method I used in the research, I focus in this part on the question of how and why photography contributed in making valuable a method designed specifically for grasping neighbourhood images. The research highlighted three main points: first, working with photography allowed the participants to "think visually" by inviting them to pay attention to the materiality of the world. Second, photography favoured communication among the group, by representing a platform of interaction. And third, photography enabled the participants to engage with the research process in a reflexive way. Thereby, the broad notion of photography refers, depending on the circumstances, to either the practice of taking pictures, to the objects themselves, or to the practice of looking at them (Sturken & Cartwright 2001). In these different definitions, which involve considering the three sites of the image as described by Gillian Rose (2011: 13), two fundamental qualities of photography, namely its visual and performative qualities, were mobilised in different ways. By means of illustrations from the fieldwork, I aim to discuss the benefits and limitations of photography in the data production stage of the research process.

### **“Thinking visually”: working with photography to look at the materiality of the world**

Photography possesses two kinds of visual qualities. On the one hand, there is the visual information that the picture itself carries. On the other, the research process connected to it encourages participants to pay attention to the physical environment and the materiality of the world that occurs when taking a picture (Rose 2011). Families were thus able to capture the qualitative dimension of urban space (Lombard 2013: 24), in particular what Alan Latham (2003) calls “texture”. This notion refers to the elusive qualities that define the sense of place, and that are difficult to convey by using words only. Through their pictures, participants could invite the researcher to imagine the places they wanted to talk about. They could show the agency or the arrangement of a vast range of elements – including the built and the natural environment, the sceneries, the spatial settings such as streets, parks and squares, and their architecture, colours and appearance, or the objects such as cars, bodies, street furniture and signs. Taking pictures with the intention of presenting them to an interlocutor allowed participants to elucidate the relations between the materiality of the places they wanted to demonstrate and the meaning that they attach to them.



*Figure 1: Terrasse chez Marie (family A)*

“There are many terraces in the neighbourhood, but \*\*\*’s terrace is particularly enjoyable. The arrival of her and her café brought people together. She has done a lot for the neighbourhood. It is a place that brings positivity and life to the neighbourhood. It is a meeting point where people take time to talk. There is a reflection about life that I like among people; It concerns our lifestyle, how we live, what we do, how

we like to live, about ecology, and quality of life. When we talk with people we ask ourselves questions about how to raise our children; maybe about not working 100% of the time but rather spending time with them instead. Thus, now there is a really great neighbourhood life in Les Grottes. With this atmosphere, people run their neighbourhood, there is cohesion between them, they feel part of the organisation, and they are heard”.

As an example, in figure 1, family A wanted to illustrate the atmosphere of the street in which they live. Particularly relevant to this was the terrace of the café they like, which they decided to capture in one of their pictures. They were able to show how it is framed, decorated and how it occupies the street, creating a shared space between pedestrians and motorized vehicle users. They explained further that when this café opened some years ago, it brought a new vitality to the neighbourhood by favouring contacts and communication among the neighbours, as well as between the local residents and other guests of the café. For the family, the owner and the way she got involved in the neighbourhood initiated this dynamism and dialogue. The issue of reaching a compromised situation in the use of public space was particularly important for them, and this conciliatory attitude represented for them the typical attitude of residents in this specific neighbourhood.



*Figure 2: Jacuzzi (family B)*

“Recently, in the neighbourhood there is a trend to extend existing buildings by the construction of an additional floor. There are some very ordinary buildings, which suddenly become luxurious due to something being placed on the roof. In the picture you can see a splendid extension with two floors, a whirlpool and a sculpture. It’s funny to see such luxury in a working-class neighbourhood, because the

people who live in these new sections are on a different social level than those who occupy the rest of the neighbourhood. It is quite an odd phenomena happening in the neighbourhood. Thus, the children of the families living in the wealthy extensions go to school with my daughter. The cohabitation of two lifestyle types exist in *Les Paquis* and it is beneficial for everyone”.

Figure 2 is another example of the use of a picture to show visual and material aspects of the neighbourhood that opens up a discussion about urban space. Family B wanted to illustrate a recent trend that characterizes their neighbourhood, namely the extension of some existing buildings by the construction of an additional floor. They wanted to show how the newly built floors are blending into the surroundings, in the sense that even though they are barely visible, they still make a contrast with the existing built space (on figure 2, the white arrow and rectangle indicate the constructions they were discussing). During the elicitation interview, the family members explained that this phenomenon came with a change in the population composition of their working-class neighbourhood, by the arrival of wealthier people moving into these newly built parts of the building. This socio-demographic change was also linked to a change of atmosphere in the neighbourhood, influencing how they feel about the place. Therefore, a physical change of the neighbourhood, which refers to a material dimension of neighbourhood image, was tightly linked to a socio-spatial change.

These two examples show how a picture can encourage participants to engage in a particular way of thinking, using the visual-material dimension of the neighbourhood as an entry point to reflect upon further dimensions. These reflections help in understanding the way they make sense of a particular place. Thus, photography makes people do / say something and possesses therefore performative qualities. Both during the photo-walk and the elicitation, pictures involve performative functions in the sense of fostering interaction and triggering thinking processes through the respective practices of taking and looking at them (Sturken & Cartwright 2001; Tolia-Kelly 2011; Rose & Tolia-Kelly 2012).

During the photo-walk, the families were guided by the idea and the practice of taking pictures, which helped them in framing their reflection about their daily-lived space. Holding the camera in hand made them feel as if they were “on a mission”, and forced them to think about how they wanted to position themselves within a particular space, in order to convey a specific view. Thus, taking pictures during the photo-walk enabled participants to capture things and ideas visually, by producing a “visual memos” of the moment. In fact, the walk consisted of a sensitive experience of space that enables the interviewees to pay attention to their different senses: smell, sound, touch and a sense of feeling of the atmosphere. Therefore, they tried to capture these impressions through pictures, to remember the momentum and to report it during the second interview. Participants had already in mind part of the places they wanted to take a picture of before going for the walk, but they also took some pictures spontaneously, or as some termed it, “intuitively”. Hence, photography also enabled the participants to grasp unexpected encounters, events happening in the place, behaviours of people, or their own unexpected feelings that emerged during the walk.



*Figure 3: voiture sur trottoir (family C)*

“In the photograph you can see an expensive car parked on a sidewalk. On the one hand, it shows that people who live here are wealthy and on the other that they do not really care about others. It is impossible to walk along the sidewalk and you are forced onto the road. It is an attitude of wealthy people who have little respect for each other”.



*Figure 4: les chantiers (family C)*

“At the moment when my husband said he wanted to take a picture of some construction work I told him to hurry up as I would like to include the man holding hands with two children who were walking on the street instead of the sidewalk in the picture. I find that it shows the shambles and consequences of the construction work and how it forces a family to walk somewhere other than the sidewalk”.

For example family C took a picture of a car that was parked on a sidewalk (figure 3) in order to illustrate how this material object (the car), its appearance (an expensive brand) and the spatial arrangement (it was parked on the sidewalk), characterises the particular neighbourhood, because it revealed the type of behaviour from the people living there. Family C took also another picture of this type, namely, as figure 4 shows, of a man holding the hands of two children who are walking on the street instead of the sidewalk because of some construction work. Starting from this fact, the family explained different elements about the recent transformations in the neighbourhood. The mother of the family explained that in this particular case she had asked her husband, who was holding the camera, to hurry up to take the picture of the very precise moment when the man and the two children had to step on the road because of the obstructed sidewalk.

The participants explained that the intention of taking pictures helped them to pay attention to these mundane events that would otherwise remain unnoticed if they were not gathered by the mean of a visual support that can be looked at with “distance” subsequently.

This reveals that the practice of taking pictures worked as a thinking tool. However, the pictures themselves (as visual items) also had a performative effect during the elicitation interviews, by generating talk and spontaneous reactions. In particular, participants became aware of elements in the pictures that they had not seen before and could comment on these ideas directly in our dialog.



*Figure 5: Rue de XX, notre entrée (family B)*

Interviewer: “Oh, we can see a reflection of a building in the picture”.

Respondent: “Oh I just noticed it now you know! It is a student residential house, and it is nice to have it in the neighbourhood because student life means young people from different nationalities, who are quite calm because they are serious students. It is nice to have them here because they are aware of what happens in their neighbourhood, they are involved, they participate in the life of the neighbourhood and bring life to the place”.

For example, family D took a picture (figure 5) of the entrance of their house in order to emphasise the importance of their home. While looking at the photograph during the interview, they suddenly noticed that there was a reflection (mirror image) of the neighbouring house on the pictured glass door, which they had not seen at the moment they took the picture. Drawing on this surprising element that clearly fostered enthusiasm, the family started to explain that the mirrored building was a student residential house. For them, this place was essential in the neighbourhood, not because of the building as such, but

because of its residents, namely students. They explained that this type of population brings some life, action, and critical thinking into their neighbourhood, as well as a valuable mix of population to this neighbourhood generally defined as a working-class. By looking at the pictures, comparing and commenting on them, interviewees thus thought about elements that they would not have thought of otherwise and also discussed what lays outside of the frame or stays absent in the pictures.

**Negotiating neighbourhood images: photography as a way to stimulate interactivity and communication**

The method, with several moments of decision-making, negotiations, re-questioning and reflexive stages among the group, was framed to actively involve the participants in the research through an interactive, collaborative and in-depth process of thinking about place images. Therefore, the participants went through alternate phases of first trying to find an agreement about a (fairly) coherent neighbourhood image to communicate, and second of (re)questioning it, creating a movement of “closing down” and “opening up”. As a result, this encouraged the participants to go through an in-depth process of thinking. For example, when presenting the pictures as a whole, most of the families tried to show a coherent neighbourhood image, built up through different logics. Some families tried to create a portfolio, which presented the most diverse dimensions of the neighbourhood. Others, as family E in figure 6, decided to use a verb to describe a mundane action represented in each picture such as living, working, socialising, playing, going for a walk and resting. Others used the pictures to tell a specific story. This could for example be about them living as a family in their neighbourhood, or of the particular day when they made the photo-walk.



Figure 6: Portfolio of family E



At several moments of collaboration with the families, photography encouraged the dialogue between the different interlocutors in that they presented a common ground for discussion, or a reference point (Schwartz 1989) that the different interlocutors could look at and discuss together. This means that it triggered first the communication between the interviewees and the researcher, since the collaboration fell into the perspective of an exchange based on photographs. The pictures played therefore a guiding role in getting the participants involved. Second, photography also fostered the interactivity among the participants themselves, in particular during the photo-walk when they worked without the researcher. The families had to choose pictures together, negotiate which ones they wanted to select, and what they wanted to tell about their neighbourhood. For example, there was a disagreement about the selection of one particular picture between a mother and a daughter. Whereas the mother found the place represented on the picture awful and not important for her neighbourhood life, for the daughter it was an important socialising place in daily life. This showed that dialogue, divergent opinions, personal experience and meaning attached to places can be different, but cumulated in order to describe a fuller image of a place. Thus, neighbourhood images appeared as complex constellations of overlapping, often contradictory, but still compatible, facets.

Photographs structured the dialogue during the photo-elicitation interview, by the way of discussing one after the other, and finally all together. Every time a new picture was introduced into the discussion, a new aspect of neighbourhood images emerged alongside of it. It sometimes reinforced an image, and sometimes contradicted it. Looking, seeing and pointing out details on the picture, comparing, moving and arranging them, triggered dialogue. The pictures invited to ask for further explanations concerning specific elements shown within as well as outside the frame of the picture (e.g. “and what is situated behind this building?”). Having the items on the table also invited participants to move them around, positioning them differently to tell a story, or different stories according to the group members. In particular, they favoured the dialogue about temporality and emotions, two important dimensions of the daily life in a neighbourhood.

The discussion and confrontations of different viewpoints and opinions allowed the participants to realise differences between the images they have of their neighbourhoods and practices. In addition they enable them to re-question things that they were not used to reassess.

### **Reflexivity: working with photography to grasp personal images and to involve participants actively**

Finally, the method encourages reflexivity (Holliday 2004; Rose 1997) and favours alternative ways of thinking about everyday life. The use of photography offered the families the opportunity to engage in the research in a collaborative way. The participants commented that reflecting on their everyday space and practices was not an easy exercise. In particular, they sometimes felt insecure about how to talk about their daily life. In other words, they were wondering how to find the interesting stories to tell and which elements to start with. Participants mainly evoked these doubts during the first interview because they considered the stories about their daily life as being uninteresting and ordinary. Using photographs this

way reveals the mundane, and helps to elucidate what people either take for granted or what seems unquestionable to them (Bogdan & Biklen 2007). For example, one family, composed of a mother, father and a three year old child, explained in the first interview that the image of their neighbourhood corresponds to a “trendy hipster neighbourhood with a lot of bars, boutiques and high [sic] educated young urban professionals without kids”. However, during the second interview, they wanted to show a completely different image of the neighbourhood with a main focus on playgrounds for children and parks, as well as schools, trying to give it some coherence. Therefore, the stage of choosing pictures highlighted another facet of this very same place.

Photographs therefore presented participants with a way to think differently and to have a new look on their everyday space, and the families acknowledged the richness of the method. Photography was described as being an accessible, familiar, and attractive tool, especially for groups that include children. In particular, the limited number of pictures they had to take helped them to structure their thoughts and to have a general reflection. This came up as a surprising element since at the first interview some participants seemed frustrated about the amount of pictures they were supposed to take, as they considered it as being too small. During the second interview however they realised how much one can say about even such a small number. In the end, all the interviewed families said something positive about the learning process and the knowledge gained from this experience. “Our participation in your research made us realise once again that the neighbourhood is still so important for us, and that we really like it. We rediscovered that, and we would not want to change it for anything in the world” (interview with family F).

The used method reveals two practices of inhabitants: the practice of their neighbourhood and the social practice of photography (Crang 1997). The later point allows considering photography as merely a practice forming part of the world, than as a representation that reflects it. By doing the photo-walk, interviewees created a new memory among the group (family), which turned out to be a reflexive and shared experience of their daily-lived space, reflecting everyday practices. During the photo-elicitation, the photographs played a role of catalyst and gave access to various spaces of the past and the possible. This refers to memories coming from the walk, to the everyday life, to what can be called the deep past, or from virtual possible. The photographs enabled to capture visual aspects of the neighbourhood image, to bring to light a collective way of seeing, experimenting, and perceiving the neighbourhood.

## **Conclusion**

This paper presents and discusses the use of a specific methodological approach based on photography. The proposed method consists of three steps: a preliminary qualitative interview, an auto-photography walk in the residential neighbourhood, and a photo-elicitation, which was elaborated in order to generate a better understanding of families’ neighbourhood images. The use of photography answers to a call for new methods developed to investigate people’s sense making of everyday space (Thomas 1983; Crang 2003; Whatmore 2006; Rose 2011; Lorimer 2010; Garrett 2013) in the context of increasing valorisation of material and everyday life within social sciences (Brekhus 2000).

The presented method, and the way photography was used in this context, does entail some biases, which require careful consideration. In particular, from pictures taken by families a strong tendency to describe positive aspects of the neighbourhood could be observed, while negative ones were excluded. This bias was verbalised by one participant who made a similar reflection on their own pictures, saying that it would have been difficult to take pictures of something they really disliked – as for example trash on the floor – even if this would have been relevant in the context of talking about what characterises their neighbourhood. Hence in order to avoid this bias, it is crucial to advise participants prior to the photo-walk to equally pay attention to what they appreciate less. Alternatively, these effects can be balanced by asking them the question during the elicitation interview. The mentioned difficulty of representing negative sides is directly related to another issue, which concerns the self-image. Presenting self-taken pictures to communicate, dovetails with the question of how a person wants to present her/himself; and is another bias to be aware of when using the proposed method. Finally, there is also a material bias, meaning that thinking about places through pictures makes participants focus on materiality or “frogs’ eyes view”, i.e., a horizontal view of the city. The proposed method is a fair, however not the only approach, to the study of place images that can be contrasted or combined with an orthogonal “birds’ eyes view” of the city shown by maps (Schoepfer & Rogers 2014).

The benefits of the method, with regards to my aim of understanding neighbourhood images of families living in the city of Geneva, can be summed up as follows. First, I could observe that (the act of) “showing” is important when participants explain how they feel about their everyday space. Pictures enable to illustrate physical – built or natural – environment, objects, settings, or disposition. Visuality appeared to be a valuable entry point to reveal further dimensions of place images, such as social, historical, functional, or factual aspects. Furthermore, being physical objects, photographs drive the interview by allowing interviewees to grab, arrange and structure them in different ways. The method allows highlighting the importance of these aspects concerning images residents have of their daily space. During the photo-walk, the practice of taking pictures encouraged the participants to have a sensitive experience of space. This means that they could use photographs to capture and fix moments, events, or happenings, which characterize their neighbourhood for them. The photos were additionally used in order to illustrate the participants’ descriptions during the interviews. As mentioned earlier, pictures stimulate memory and enable to navigate through different temporalities. Acting as visual catalysts or thinking tools, they favoured reflexion, communication and reflexivity among family members. In particular, the material dimension of place images could be addressed through the visuality of photographs while thinking through photographs during a walk encouraged participants to pay attention to the sensitive dimension. Photographs proved to have potential for revealing the sensitivity a local resident shows towards his everyday neighbourhood. Thus, they helped to understand relationships between places and inhabitants’ emotions and memories. Many families took pictures in order to show very specific and personal aspects of their lives, such as the place where their parents fell in love, or the place where the first child was born. Pictures worked as support for storytelling, through a double – visual and verbal – elicitation. Moreover, the theory used to conceptualise neighbourhood images lines up with the presented method, shedding light on dimensions of neighbourhood images that are elusive and emotional.

Finally, the main strength of the presented method is probably the way it was set up. Combining the different qualities of photography in a particular way made it possible to observe how images emerge from certain moments of the procedure and how they are negotiated among research participants.

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