

Objects, Memory, and Narrative

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There is a large and growing field of narrative scholarship studying social life with visual materials. A strong component of this field is to use visual materials as cues to understanding individual and family identity stories. Study of visual narratives inevitably raises familiar questions of “truth” and “representation.” Anthropologist Daniel Miller (2010: 4) provides a framework for expanding the range of visual materials with his argument that “the best way to understand, convey, and appreciate our humanity is through attention to our fundamental materiality.” ‘Stuff’ does not merely reflect who we are, but in many respects it “actually creates us in the first place.”

Like Miller, I argue in favor of taking “stuff” seriously and for using it in biographical research. Doing biographical research with stuff – including photographs – enlarges our tool kit for connecting individual and family biographies with public issues of the social structure. The study of material culture – of stuff – involves immersion “in the sensuality of touch, colour, and flow” and the invocation of the “tactile, emotional intimate world of feelings” (Miller, 2010: 40). Incorporating stuff in our biographical work helps us to see and feel how cultural discourses are reflected in, reproduced by and resisted by who we are.

Susan E. Bell, "Photo images: Jo Spence's narratives of living with illness." health, 6(1): 5-30, 2002;

Susan E. Bell, DES Daughters: Embodied Knowledge and the Transformation of Women's Health Politics Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2009;

Susan E. Bell, "Visual methods for collecting and analysing data." Pp. 513-535 in Ivy Lynn Bourgeault, Raymond DeVries, and Robert Dingwall, eds., The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Methods in Health Research. Sage Publications, 2010;

Mary Ellen Bell and Susan E. Bell, "What to do with all this stuff?: Memory, family, and material objects." Storytelling, Self, Society, 8(2): 63-84, 2012;

Susan E. Bell, "Seeing Narratives." Pp. 142-158 in Molly Andrews, Corrine Squire and Maria Tamboukou, eds., Doing Narrative Research, second edition. London: Sage Publications, Ltd., 2013.

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Some of these materials have appeared in previously published articles and book chapters. See the notes below and the sources listed at the end of this slide show.

Today briefly introduce you to a research strategy. First, I will set it in the context of narrative work and show you an example from my research, and then we will do it together. This particular research is collaborative; in it, my younger sister and I employ a range of visual materials to explore memory, family and autobiography. We culled these materials from the mountain of stuff collected by our parents' families over the past century. In the early 1980s I interviewed women about their experiences of living with risk and medical problems that resulted from an anti-miscarriage medication their mothers had taken during pregnancy (Bell 2009). One of the women, who had had a hysterectomy when she was a teenager, told me early on in the interview that her surgeon had taken pictures "of the whole procedure." At several points during the interview she reintroduced the pictures as a topic. Each time she did so I let the topic of pictures drop.

- At the time it did not occur to me that a photograph was necessary to understanding her experience, or to appreciate how fuzzy the line is between image and word, and between verbal and visual narrative, or indeed that attempts to distinguish them clearly are utopian modern projects (Tagg, 1988; Bell 2002, 2004).
- Not until years later did I come to understand the importance of pictures in making sense of illness, and to wonder what I had missed in this woman's story by attending only to what she said and how she said it (the tones, hesitations, gaps, repetitions, and nonlexical utterances, as well as the gestures she used).



My father's leather photo case 1940s

What would I have learned had I looked at the pictures with her? What might she have told me about her experience if she had held a picture while she talked with me? How might our talk with pictures have shaped the narrative of her experiences? I have learned to incorporate visual materials into my work, and thus to deepen my understanding of the connection between biography and society, of the intimate connection between the lives of individuals and larger social structures, and of narrative ways of knowing. At first I studied images in order to study lives and more recently I have been studying lives with visual materials, including objects.



Scenes
in
Scarsdale



We have a Scout. They
will come for dinner
night

My niece is, Katherine Hubbard
NY
Dreads ave:
Mr. & Mrs. Burritt S. Hubbard
330 East 42nd Street
Ashtabula, Ohio
Telephone -- 2723.
I am going to visit my aunt:
Mrs. Harold J. Lange
6 Wallbrook Circle
Scarsdale, New York

April 7, 1938
On envelope in
letter from Aunt
Ann

The [unclear] card
= [unclear]

My mother's scrapbook (1936 – 1938)

To explore how stuff “creates us in the first place” and indeed continues to shape who we are, my sister and I selected objects for our visual narrative analysis that, first, represents our parents’ childhoods and their marriage, e.g., this highly stylized portrait of our mother.



Portrait of my mother 1941

Second, we selected objects for our visual analysis that represented our childhood experiences and travels, such as family snapshots like this one, of our family pet, taken before we left our home in Pennsylvania, USA, to live in Uganda for two years (1963-1965). We took this photo with us in its leather carrying case.



King (1963)

This typewritten account was written by our father during the two years he worked for the Rockefeller Foundation in East Africa. Ndegwa was a student of our fathers at Makerere University who later rose to a high position in the Kenya government.

Philip V. Hall

THE OLD AND THE NEW IN AFRICA:
A Personal Story Reflecting on Social Change among the Kikuyu

On November 10th (Sunday) Philip Ndegwa and I motored over to Nairobi together and then on up to his home in Ngari, where to spend an evening and the following morning prior to a meeting of the University Social Science (Research) Council at the Royal College. Philip and an attractive young British girl here, Allison Stewart, both twenty-eight years old, want to marry in December. It appeared that it might be useful if I went with him when he talked with his mother about it. I thought that if the wedding is held, and his mother comes over, she would know ahead of time at least one person here. Philip wanted me to come for other reasons as well - reasons which were not entirely clear to me but which involved helping his mother to understand that a Kikuyu and a "European" could have a close friendship, that heads could be reached across cultures even as apart as these. This is a report of that trip into the heart of Kikuyu land - a very personal report, but one which I would like to set down on paper and share with a few people who might be interested.

We motored through Jinja, on past the great plantation areas of the Mahdavi empire - neat rows of coffee, tea, and sugar carefully laid out over hillside as far as one could see, nurtured by the most extensive modern, mechanized equipment to be found anywhere in East Africa. Tororo, at the very eastern end of Southern Uganda, is a center for cement and fertilizer production. From there to Lesera, some seventy miles into Kenya, the country is populated but the land is quite barren, the road is not paved, and poverty seems even more pronounced than in other portions of East Africa.

As soon as we entered Kenya, we began to be greeted either by a raised hand with all five fingers extended, or by a raised hand with only the index finger pointing skyward. Both of the greetings were casual - really a loose wave - but there seemed to be a distinct difference, and I asked Philip about it. "KADU and KASU," he said. Of course - many regions versus a single, unified country.

Between Turbo and Lesera everything changed. We were entering the White Highlands portion of the great Rift Valley - the area which cuts a swath across Kenya from a little below Mount Elgon in the west to a little below Mount Kenya in the east, and runs generally north of Nairobi. The land here, limited by law to Europeans until 1960, was the primary source of contention in the "Mau Mau terrorism" or "disturbance" if you are a European, the "civil war" if you are Philip Ndegwa. It is beautiful country - fertile soil, great farms stretching across hundreds of acres, well cultivated.

My father's Personal Story about Philip Ndegwa (November 12, 1963)

Third, we chose objects for our visual analysis that represented the historical and social structural context in which our family is/was situated. This watch and fob were given to our grandfather by his mother when he turned 21. At the time he was a student at Princeton University.



My grandfather's gold pocket watch and fob (1913)

Another object that represents the historical and social structural context in which our family was/is situated is this snapshot, taken of our father home on leave from military service during WWII – wearing the uniform – standing with his parents and older brother in front of their house on the Upper East Side of New York City.



Snapshot of my father home on leave (1943)

Fourth, we selected an object that represented the sorting process itself, an inventory made by my husband of some of the stuff. This helped my sister and I to organized the stuff and it points to the continuous process of accumulating and discarding objects and memories in our stories.

- ① STAMP COLLECTION, PUZZLES, GAMES, MUSIC (CROSSWORD CARDS)
- ② COOKBOOKS NO
- ③ BOOKS & MAGAZINES NO
- ④ OLD BOOKS - ~~SEE MOSTLY CHILDRENS BOOKS (CONCENTRATED TO CENT)~~
- ⑤ MISC PAPERS - SANTA CRUZ ERA NO
- ⑥ ~~BOOKS~~
- ⑦ MISC. LETTERS FROM 70's - *KHB BABY PICTURE? NO
- ⑧ DESK EQUIPMENT 70's NO
- ⑨ SLIDE PROJECTOR & SLIDES *? NO
- ⑩ ~~BOOKS - HUBBARD FAMILY - LATE 19TH, EARLY 20th CENTURY~~
- ⑪ TRAVEL - PAPERS, FILES Peace Camps, Malaysia
- ⑫ OLD BOOKS LIKE #11, 4
- ⑬ KHB PAPERS & MEMORABILIA SPANS THE AGES NO
- ⑭ BOOKS - MOSTLY CHILDRENS VARIOUS ERAS NO
- ⑮ KHB PAPERS 40's - 60's NO
- ⑯ FILES - SANTA CRUZ - VT. NO
- ⑰ 1961 SCRAPBOOK (SEE?)
- ⑱ PUZZLES, FRAMED PICTURES
- ⑲ SHEET MUSIC, PICTURE ALBUMS 60's & 70's 60's STUFF
- * 20 FRAMED PHOTOS, SONG BOOKS → PULLED OUT BOOKS? DO WE NEED IT? SAVE FOR PHOTOS
- 21 PAPERS, FINANCIAL RECORDS - BU YEARS → VT. Financial Planning
- 22 FILES, LETTERS VT. YEARS NO
- 23 LETTERS & PAPERS NAIROBI 1974 KEEP
- 24 BOARD GAMES NO
- 25 DESK/FILING SUPPLIES NO
- 26 KHB TAX RECORDS - 90's NO
- 27 OLD LINENS - BOX MARKED "LINENS" KHB MOTHER? TAXES 1990s
- * 28 FAMILY PHOTOS
- * 29 MATERIAL, WHOLE, SCRAPS - LOTS OF AFRICAN FABRIC
- 30

Inventory (2009)

My sister and I used a modification of photo-elicitation, which Jon Prosser and Andrew Loxley describe as 'a complex and multi-layered process' that is shaped by 'the context of viewing, the importance of a meaningful link between the image content and respondents, the degree of preferred reading or level of abstraction determined by the researchers, the influence of triggered memories, the range of emergent discussion and the insightfulness of informant's understanding' (Prosser and Loxley, 2008: 21)

We combined “object-elicitation” with a written dialogue similar to the exchange of letters. We reflected on each of the objects separately and then together. We used this format – of a written dialogue about each of the objects – to make sense of our family in the past and to consider how objects make family memories. Our process was iterative. First one of us wrote a description of and response to an object using pen and paper, and then the other responded in writing to the object and the other’s written text. We followed each of the written dialogues by talking together face-to-face about the dialogues and the objects.

Our methodology in this project is similar to one employed by scholars interested in a grounded approach to cultural memory or “memory work” that “carefully builds up explanations from clues and traces extracted from readings of objects of study” (Kuhn, 2007: 283).

Writing to each other with objects

My family story with objects began when we moved our mother from a house into a one-bedroom apartment. There was no room for most of her things in the apartment, so we rented a self-storage space to temporarily store furniture, rugs, household items, sports equipment, toys, clothing, photographs, photograph albums, letters, scrapbooks, linens, and books. Our turn to self-storage was a personal necessity, but it reflects and is part of a dramatic turn since the 1960s in how Americans deal with stuff. Today, millions of Americans are likely to rent storage spaces to accommodate their overflow of stuff, not as a temporary solution to life events, but as a more permanent strategy for storing the stuff that won't fit into their homes.



Self-storage space

2.3 billion square feet of storage space in the United States

One out of every ten American households rents a unit

Vanderbilt 2005

Over the course of six months, we used the storage space as a place to separate out the trash and identify objects that could be donated, sold, or given to family members.

We put some objects into a box we labeled “Treasures.” We wanted to spend time with these objects, but we didn’t want to get sidetracked. Work we (and then I) have done with one of the “treasures” is a multi-layered and complicated process.

Treasures
to Save
+ Share

In celebration of Uhuru
and on the occasion of the visit of
His Royal Highness the Duke of Edinburgh
His Excellency the Governor and Mr. MacDonald
request the pleasure of the company of
Prof. Philip W. Bell
at a Garden Party at Government House
on Wednesday, 11th December, 1963, at 4 p.m.
Government House Nairobi



General Sessions (to be held on 11th Dec 1963)
New York
1945. Miriam Wilks
the parents of said Katia
personally appeared before me and gave me
their said sons with witnesses to
which, consent duly attached by two witnesses to
WITNESSES my signature
this 22nd day of Dec 1963

Treasure box

When we finished sorting we took the Treasure box and went on a two-day retreat together to reflect on the meaning of these treasures in our family biography.



Farmhouse on the Maine coast



Baby carriage in a box (circa 1950)

I focus on one example of this multilayered process with the object we named “Baby carriage in a box.” This is a mystery object – even to our mother. The box, which is about the size of a small jewelry box, invites us to bring our own experiences to it in an effort to make sense of it. My sister and I read it through our experiences of making families and as daughters, sisters, and mothers. The box cover and contents celebrate family, fertility, and lineage during the baby boom when our parents were trying to make a family. It sends us from the present into the past of the 1940s and 1950s, as we reflect on our mother’s reproductive experience, and what we learned tacitly about pregnancy, childbirth, adoption, and becoming mothers when we grew up. (In the family we grew up in, the two older children are adopted and the two younger children are not. I now have an adopted son and a not-adopted daughter.)

Here's a heavily edited example of our dialogue. In this case I wrote first and my sister read and responded to me. (See Bell and Bell 2012 for the longer version)

Susan: Our father's name was Philip W. Bell. There is no Philip W. Bell, Jr. Dad wasn't a junior. The box is old, well it makes me think 1940s or 1950s, surely after Mom and Dad were married (in 1946) and before my younger brother was adopted in 1954. Was this how Mom 'told' Dad she was pregnant? I know Mom had one miscarriage, and I think it might have been around the time my younger brother was adopted. This box carries with it for me the story of how we became a family – through adoption and birth – as well as the hopefulness and heartache of pregnancy loss that Mom suffered. It also carries the warning of how little we can ever know about family stories.

Writing to each other with objects

After I wrote this, I handed it to Mary Ellen along with the box, and she took both of them and wrote a response.

Mary Ellen: This is, indeed, an object of mystery that we found nestled in a larger box—a small, mysterious, miniature box, within a big jumbled storage box. Our family is, as Susan says, a family of adoption and birth. This is a pattern that continues into our generation. I realize that I have never talked much to Mom about her pregnancies and adoptions. I remember most clearly the ways that ‘adoption’ was explained to us as children in a joking light hearted way. ‘Your older brother and sister were chosen, you and your younger brother just arrived!’

Writing to each other with objects

Mary Ellen's response:

....My childhood vision was of Mom and Dad going to 'pick out' Susan and my older brother. The room where you 'picked' babies was like the fruit and vegetable section of the supermarket, only that rather than lettuce, carrots and broccoli displayed, there were rows of little babies wrapped in blankets, ready to be picked out.

In our first layer of memory work, Mary Ellen and I unpacked the taken-for-grantedness of this object (see Bell and Bell 2012).



Baby carriage in a box

We used a sociological imagination and – drawing from C. Wright Mills - we argued that what might appear to be “just personal” troubles in our lives are indications of “public issues of social structure.” We explored how Baby Carriage in a Box could become a potential source of meaningfulness about gender and family in our parents’ generation – the generation that grew up during the Great Depression, lived through World War II, and formed families during the 1950s. We left unexplored other sources of meaningfulness in/with this object.

Individual lives are shaped by “larger historical and structural
circumstances”

C. Wright Mills, “The Promise,” 1959

A few years after tapping into this one layer of memory, I returned to our dialogue with “Baby Carriage in a Box,” and reconsidered it in the context cultural discourses of adoption in mid 20th century US. I returned to our stories and carefully built up another layer of explanation from clues and traces in them by focusing on the concepts of “choice” and “matching” (“telling” is another concept freighted with cultural meanings).

Layers of Explanation

In my review of literature about adoption in the mid-twentieth century United States I discovered a classic book provided by adoption experts to parents who adopted children in the U.S. *The Chosen Baby* was first published in 1939, revised in 1950 and substantially transformed for a 1977 edition. “Choice” and “matching” were key elements of adoption discourse during our childhood.

Valentina P. Wasson, *The Chosen Baby* (NY: Lippincott, 1939)

Once upon a time in a large city lived a Man and his Wife. They were happily married for many years. Their one trouble was that they had no babies of their own.

One day they said to each other: "Let us adopt a baby and bring him up as our own." So the next day they called up a Home which helps people to adopt babies, and babies to adopt parents, and said: "We wish so much to find a baby who would like to have a mother and father and who could be our own. Will you help us find one?"

The Lady at the Home said: "This will be difficult because so many people wish to adopt babies and are waiting for them, but come and see me anyhow."

Source: quoted in The Adoption History Project, created and maintained by Ellen Herman
<http://pages.uoregon.edu/adoption/index.html>

The second passage from *The Chosen Baby* sets my sister's story of adoption in a larger context and beautifully illustrates how a "personal" story in our family indicates a "public issue in the social structure" about the meaning of family and kinship in the mid-20th century. Neither of us saw this public issue the first time we did our memory work.

Wasson, *The Chosen Baby*

Then suddenly one day the Lady at the Home called up and said: “We have three fine babies for you to choose from. Will you both come and see them?”

....

The first baby was a little boy with blue eyes and curly blond hair. He laughed and played with a rattle. The Man and his Wife watched the baby, then they shook their heads and said: “This is a beautiful child, but we know it is not our baby.” And they were taken to see the next.

And there asleep in the crib lay a lovely, rosy, fat baby boy. He opened [h]is big brown eyes and smiled. The Wife picked him up and sat him on her lap. The baby gurgled, and the Man and his Wife said: “This is our Chosen Baby. We don’t have to look any further...”

A key component of the discourse of adoption in the United States is choice. Judith Modell (1994: 129) writes that “Since the 1940s, the chosen-child story, emphasizing the parents’ desire for a child and the child’s special qualities, has been the standard way of explaining adoption to a child” in the U.S. My sister’s version of the story exposes the capitalist roots of “choice” as a cultural value, by locating the “choice” in a supermarket and turning adoption explicitly into comparison shopping. This formulation of the story does a number of things: it hints at matching; it locates adoption institutionally; it rehearses an ethos of choice that is so persistent in U.S.-based cultural discourses; it excludes reference to the birth mother – effacing her from our family biography in much the same way that dominant cultural discourses did at the time.

Adoption Discourse

Matching was another key component of the discourse of adoption from the 1920s to the 1970s in the United States. Our family story and our construction of it with Baby Carriage in a Box are infused with adoption discourse. Written on the cover of the box is “Philip W. Bell junior.” A goal of matching was to make a family through adoption that looked just as real as one made through conception. That is, to adopt a boy who could look like a “junior” by matching on the basis of physical similarity (eye color, hair color and texture), religious likeness, and racial sameness (Herman, 2008: 121). Matching made families with effort-filled social operations – using a specialized agency “The Home” and expert social workers and other professionals “The Lady” – to simulate the appearance, stability, and authenticity of a family that others assumed to be an “effortless product of nature” (Herman, 2008: 121).

The Discourse of Matching

Keeping in mind concerns about representation, truth, and doing narrative research with stuff, we now turn to the second part of this workshop, in which we will “do” object-elicitation narrative research together. This is not the same as the approach my sister and I used. It is modified to be useful in settings where one of the participants is familiar with an object and the other participant is unfamiliar. Most often, unlike the situation in which my sister and I worked, our biographical or narrative research begins with people we don’t know and with whom we do not share personal memories.

The sensuality of this box, our immersion “in the sensuality of touch, colour, and flow,” and the invocation of the “tactile, emotional intimate world of feelings,” provide layers of meaning for those of us interested in memory and narrative. By attending to “stuff” we can carefully construct “truths” that are open, shifting, multiple, and emergent.

Summarizing this example of object elicitation

Object elicitation exercise Part I

Writing with objects (20 minutes)

1. What is this? (describe it in as much detail as you can)
2. What do you feel when you hold it and look carefully at it?
3. Where did it come from? (was it a gift? Did you purchase it?)
4. Why did you bring it to this Workshop?

Use the object you brought with you to elicit answers to these questions. The questions are designed to help you engage with the object, to make it “strange” and to immerse yourself in the sensuality of touch.

If you have trouble getting started on the writing part of the object-elicitation exercise this is a helpful strategy.

“Take some genuinely good picture ... Using a watch with a second hand, look at the photograph intently for two minutes. Don’t stare and thus stop looking; look actively ... you’ll find it useful to take up the time by naming everything in the picture to yourself. Once you have done this for two minutes, build it up to five, following the naming of things with a period of fantasy, telling yourself a story about the people and things in the picture. The story needn’t be true, it’s just a device for externalizing and making clear to yourself the emotion and mood the picture has evoked, both part of its statement”

Howard Becker, *Photography and Sociology*, 1986

Object elicitation exercise part 2

Interview exercise with objects (allow 20 minutes each member of a pair to interview the other)

1. What is this?
2. Where did it come from?
3. Is it something you currently use? If so, how do you use it? If not, why did you save it?
4. What family memories do you connect with it?

Interviewer – write brief notes, focus attention on the person and object

Divide the group into pairs. One person interviews the other for 20 minutes and then they exchange roles.

Reporting from pairs to the group (allow 10 minutes for each pair to report = 5 minutes each person/object)

1. What is the object (show and tell)?
2. What did you learn about yourself in writing and telling about your object? (were there any surprises?)
3. What did you learn about your partner with/through the object?
4. What questions, wonderings, or puzzles do you have now about yourself/your object, your partner/his or her object?

Group discussion

1. What surprised you?
2. What challenged you?
3. What did you learn about objects and memory?
4. What/how does this add to your narrative toolkit?

Evaluation

1. What did you like best about this exercise (writing and interviewing with objects)?
2. What did you like least?
3. What did you find most challenging?
4. What can you take away from this Workshop?

Thank you

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See Bell and Bell (2012), “What to do with all this ‘stuff’,”

Storytelling Self Society: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Storytelling Studies 8(2): 63-84. Available online on my faculty webpage:

<http://www.bowdoin.edu/socanthro/faculty/index.shtml>

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