

Picturing the Wheatbelt: Exploring and Expressing Place Identity Through Photography

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Abstract Community arts and cultural development is a process that builds on and responds to the aspirations and needs of communities through creative means. It is participatory and inclusive, and uses multiple modes of representation to produce local knowledge. ‘Voices’ used photography and photo elicitation as the medium for exploring and expressing sense of place among Aboriginal and non-Indigenous children, young people and adults in four rural towns. An analysis of data generated by the project shows the diverse images that people chose to capture and the different meanings they afforded to their pictures. These meanings reflected individual and collective constructions of place, based on positive experiences and emotions tied to the natural environment and features of the built environment. We discuss community arts and cultural development practice with reference to creative visual methodologies and suggest that it is an approach that can contribute to community psychology’s empowerment agenda.

Keywords Photography · Photo elicitation · Place identity · Arts · Community cultural development · Praxis

Scholars have argued for the potential of arts-based initiatives in contributing to community development (Adams and Goldbard 2005; Kasat 2013) and for arts-based methods in research and evaluation (e.g., Foster-Fishman et al.

2005; Gergen and Gergen 2011; Reavey 2011). In this article we describe a community arts and cultural development project, Voices of the Wheatbelt, which employed photography and photo elicitation as the medium for exploring and expressing sense of place among Aboriginal and non-Indigenous children, young people and adults, in rural towns in the Eastern Wheatbelt region of Western Australia. We show how photography and photo elicitation we can be used to engage people in the construction of meaning about place. As part of a broader community arts and cultural development strategy, we emphasize that this project laid the groundwork for future projects, which would focus more explicitly on the Aboriginal¹ community, in response to continued experiences of social exclusion.

Community Arts and Cultural Development

Community arts and cultural development is a collaborative process between artists and/or art workers and different stakeholders, where diverse modalities of arts are used as a platform for communities to work together, express identity and for social change purposes (Kasat 2013; Madyaningrum and Sonn 2011). As noted by Adams and Goldbard (2005), in community arts and cultural development work, “community artists, singly or in teams, use their artistic and organizing skills to serve the emancipation

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¹ We use Aboriginal or Noongar throughout this article to refer to the Indigenous people of the Wheat belt area described. Noongar refers to Indigenous people who live in the south west corner of Western Australia. CAN WA staff have found that the people with whom they work generally express a preference to be described as Aboriginal over Indigenous, but would identify themselves first and foremost as Noongar.

and development of a community, whether defined by geography (e.g., a neighborhood), a common interest (e.g., members of a union) or identity (e.g., members of an indigenous group)” (p. 8). The artistic media used are diverse, and encompass a wide range of creative expressions including visual, verbal, written and performed (Mills and Brown 2004). It is widely claimed that community arts and cultural development is an empowering process that enables people and groups to voice their own stories, learn new skills, express identity and diversity, establish relationships and communicate their concerns and aspirations for the future, thus building community capacity and wellbeing (Kasat 2013; Mills and Brown 2004; Sonn et al. 2002). This methodology shares the goals of empowerment that have been articulated within community psychology, and expressed in Participatory Action Research (PAR).

Participatory Research and Empowerment

In community psychology there have been numerous calls for research and action methodologies that can support the empowerment agenda (Rappaport 2000). This is exemplified by calls for a narrative approach to theory and method (Rappaport 1995, 2000), a decolonizing standpoint (Reyes Cruz and Sonn 2011), collaborative and participatory action research (Foster-Fishman et al. 2005; Johnson and Martínez Guzmán 2013; Lykes 2010; Montero 2009), and the participatory practices of liberation psychologies (Lykes et al. 2003; Martín-Baró 1994; Watkins and Shulman 2008). Central to these approaches is the view that the critical capacity of people to name and construct meanings in their social world is essential in challenging oppressive social realities and promoting liberation (Freire 1970). These approaches challenge dominant modes of inquiry and seek to reduce the power asymmetries between different actors in research and evaluation. They also try to build on community strengths and resources, and construct knowledge in context that is meaningful and relevant to the people involved. One of the ways in which researchers and community practitioners have sought to expand possibilities for people to participate and express their views in research and community based practice is through arts-based approaches including visual methodologies.

Visual Methodologies

Arts-based practices have been central to community cultural development as well as participatory and empowerment focussed research and evaluation. While there are a variety of creative methods that use arts, we focus our review on participatory visual methodologies such as photovoice, photo-novellas, and photo elicitation (e.g.,

Foster-Fishman et al. 2005; Griebing et al. 2013; Reavey 2011; van House 2011).

Photography is a means of self-expression; it is a way for people to represent their individual and collective experiences and actively engage in making memories that connect the personal with places and people (Pink 2011; Purcell 2007; Reavey 2011). Harper (2002) has advocated for the use of photo elicitation, which was first named by Collier in the 1950s in visual anthropology, as a tool to develop deeper and different knowledge to that which can be gained from standard interviews. This technique invites participants to engage in deeper reflection and in new ways with the images that they themselves have produced. Radley (2010) used the term photo-production to highlight the active role of people in the process of ‘picturing’ the social world. Hodgetts et al. (2007) have similarly emphasized the significance of exploring “what people choose to picture, using which devices, what they choose to hide, to whom and how the pictures are shown ...” (p. 269). Photography then is more than a methodological tool; it is a practice through which people actively engage in constructing meanings about identities, community, and belonging to place (Hodgetts et al. 2011).

Different authors have demonstrated how photo-based approaches can be used as both methodology to explore and engage with participants in meaning making and as a modality to foster social participation (e.g., Loopmans et al. 2012; van House 2011). For example, Foster-Fishman et al. (2005) showed how photovoice can be used to empower participants as experts on their lives, foster reflexivity, and offer a safe space for reflecting diverse perspectives. Nowell et al. (2006) demonstrated how photographs can serve as a mnemonic device for recollection and remembering, for understanding the meanings of places in neighbourhoods, and open possibilities for personal and community aspirations to be explored and expressed.

Loopmans et al., have discussed photography as a form of pedagogy. As pedagogy, photographic depictions of places and place-based communities not only create awareness of place and community but also contribute to their construction. This reflects a critical, non-individualistic and action oriented conception of place identity and place making (Dixon and Durrheim 2000). As articulated by Dixon and Durrheim, place identity is “a collective construction, produced and modified through human dialogue, that allows people to make sense of their locatedness” (Dixon and Durrheim, p. 40). The ongoing process of place making involves private conceptions of local identity and community being debated and translated into collective imaginations (Loopmans et al. 2012). Identities are therefore understood as “being formed in a social and political process in which the exchange of meaning takes a prominent place (Martin 2003a)” (Loopmans et al., p. 700).

Place identities at an individual and collective level, are therefore viewed as always in the making.

In their PAR, which employed photography and was informed by a post-structuralist lens, Johnson and Martínez Guzmán (2013) demonstrated how Lesbian Gay Bisexual and Transgender people were able to create new stories and images, and in turn, “new representations, new relationships and ultimately new possible worlds” (p. 415). The authors argue that PAR projects do not merely bring something to light. Instead, the achievements associated with PAR projects (e.g., exhibitions), were understood as co-produced artefacts, co-owned by community members and researchers. Rather than viewing these co-produced artefacts as representations of fixed individuals from particular communities, they emphasize that they continue to change, “creating new forms of meaning and action as they are utilized for different purposes by communities and researchers” (Johnson and Martínez Guzmán 2013, p. 414).

As this brief review has highlighted, using creative approaches such as photography and photo elicitation in research and community cultural development practice can provide opportunities for people to share and reflect upon personal meanings and to translate those into collective understandings. Art-based approaches provide opportunities for social participation in activity settings (O'Donnell and Tharp 2012), and through that process, people from diverse walks of life can meet, share ideas and experiences, and gain new skills and knowledge about their communities. Drawing on both the community arts and cultural development framework and the ideas about participatory visual methods, this article showcases the Voices of the Wheatbelt project that was conducted as part of a longer-term, ongoing program of activity being undertaken by the Community Arts Network Western Australia (CAN WA). We describe the project to show how it fostered social participation and then we use the data that was produced through photography and photo elicitation to explore meanings of place.

Community Arts Network Western Australia

CAN WA is a community arts and cultural development organization which was incorporated in 1985. CAN WA's role is to inspire and mobilize communities to explore, express and grow their unique and local culture; facilitate and promote participation and engagement in community arts and cultural development; and actively engage in partnership development to facilitate and support community determined arts and culture activities and promote the value of cultural diversity and creativity (CAN WA 2009). CAN WA has demonstrated a commitment to working with

socially and economically disadvantaged people including Aboriginal and culturally and linguistically diverse communities and young people. CAN WA's capacity to develop long-term partnerships with communities and key stakeholders, its effective advocacy and alignment with strategic government community development agendas, and the quality of its processes and artistic outcomes, have contributed to the organization being recognized as one of Australia's best practice community arts and cultural development agencies (Kasat 2013).

The first and second authors have been collaborating with CAN WA in different roles. The first author has been involved with the agency since the late 1990s serving initially as a board member for 3 years, a researcher and evaluator, and then subsequently maintaining a role that includes providing support, advising on research and evaluation, and participating in critical discussions about the dynamics of power and privilege in community arts practice. The second author is currently involved in research into how storytelling projects foster new forms of place making and belonging for Aboriginal people in rural towns in WA. The third author is the Managing Director of CAN WA who has been central to the agency-university relationship and translating the agency perspective from the ground into academic discourse and vice versa. Her roles include providing leadership, mentoring and support to staff, as well as developing the direction of the organization and securing its resources.

The Eastern Wheatbelt

Authors have highlighted issues of rural decline, including the erosion of sense of community and pointed to the role of the arts in rural revitalization (e.g., Dunphy 2009; McHenry 2009). The Voices project was undertaken in the rural Wheatbelt region of Western Australia, which covers 154,862 square kilometres extending southeast from Perth. It comprises 44 shires and a widely dispersed population of over 74,000, making it the third most populous region in the state. The region produces cereal crops, canola, lupins, olives, vegetables, wine grapes and livestock and is often referred to as the ‘food bowl’ of Western Australia. The first phase of Voices took place in the four Eastern Wheatbelt towns of Merredin, Kellerberrin, Quairading and Tammin. While, Voices was a whole of community project, CAN WA has expressed a particular commitment to working with and for Aboriginal communities given the well-established social inequities that exist between Aboriginal and non-Indigenous Australia (Australian Human Rights Commission [AHRC] 2011; Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [AIHW] 2011).

The Voices project came about following the establishment of an Aboriginal arts and culture hub by CAN

WA in the town of Kellerberrin² in 2006. A key aim of this hub was to assist self-determined cultural arts development in the town, and surrounding towns. Since its establishment, CAN WA has delivered a number of arts-based projects, which were chosen by and developed in consultation with different community groups. Those initial arts-based activities included silk-screening workshops with a women's group and a photography workshop with a group of young women in the town (Green and Sonn 2008), which provided the impetus for CAN WA to seek funding support for Voices.³

At the time of the project,⁴ there were approximately 391 persons usually residing in Tammin (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS] 2006a), 1,020 in Quairading (ABS 2006b), 1,181 in Kellerberrin (ABS 2006c), and 3,245 in Merredin (ABS 2006d). As with many rural areas, the data reflected a trend towards out migration of young people to Perth and large urban centers for employment, education and social opportunities. For example, while the percentage of people aged 15–24 years nationally, was 13.6; the percentage was lower in Tammin (6.14 %), Quairading (7.25 %), and Kellerberrin (7.79 %). Moreover, while 13.3 % of the Australian population was 65 years of age and above, the percentage of people in this age bracket was higher in Quairading (18.33 %) and Kellerberrin (19.22 %). The percentage of people identifying as Indigenous was higher in the four participating towns. Whereas, 2.3 % of the Australian population, and 3.1 % of the Western Australian population identified as Indigenous; there were 53 people who identified as Aboriginal in Tammin (13.55 %); 132 in Quairading (12.94 %); 119 in Kellerberrin (10.08 %) and 158 people in Merredin (4.87 %) identified as Indigenous. All-Indigenous persons identified as Aboriginal in these towns, besides three people in Merredin who indicated that they were of both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander descent.

It is important to note that the historical and political context within which Aboriginal and non-Indigenous people live and relate to one another has, and continues to be characterized by colonization, dispossession and racism (Dudgeon et al. 2014). As noted by Clark (2000),

government policies effecting Aboriginal people can be divided into the four broad areas and timeframes of protection (1840–1950s), assimilation (1950–1970s), integration (1967–1970s) and self-determination and self-management (1970s+). While the official policies and rhetoric have changed and some positive steps have been taken, the relationship between Aboriginal Australia and the broader Australian community and Government, continues to be characterized by highly asymmetrical power relations, and Aboriginal disadvantage remains entrenched (AHRC 2011). Moreover, this history and its continuities, has created a lot of mistrust of 'white' people and 'white' society for Aboriginal people and this has been evident within this region (Quayle and Sonn 2013).

The higher fertility and mortality rates of Aboriginal communities (AIHW 2011), was evident in the four towns. For example, the Aboriginal population had a younger age structure than the non-Indigenous population. Of those identifying as Aboriginal, the percentage of people 24 years of age and under was much higher (Merredin: 56.96 %; Tammin: 55.56 %; Quairading: 51.15 %; Kellerberrin: 44.07 %) than the number of people in this age bracket, nationally (33.4 %). Additionally, there were only 14 Aboriginal people 65 years and over in the four towns in total; there were no Aboriginal people in Merredin who were 65 years or over. Employment inequity was also evident in the four towns. For example, while the percentage of people unemployed in the towns was relatively low (Merredin, 3.43 %; Tammin, 4.57 %; Kellerberrin: 5.27 %; Quairading, 6.07 %, of the total labour force, 15–64 years), the percentage of unemployed Aboriginal persons was much higher (Kellerberrin, 9.38 %; Merredin: 22 %; Quairading: 40.63 %; Tammin: 47.06 %).

Since CAN WA first began involvement in the region, lateral violence stemming from historical or intergenerational trauma (AHRC 2011; Dudgeon et al. 2014), including the issue of family feuding has been an ongoing challenge. Consequently, there has been a focus not only on strengthening relationships between Noongar people and the broader non-Indigenous community and across generations, but also on improving relationships between and within Noongar families. The hard daily realities that have become a normalized aspect of Aboriginal people's lives, reflected for example in the tragic loss of young lives through suicide, the high number of funerals, as well as issues of lateral violence, has been an additional challenge for agency staff, and provided valuable learning experiences that have informed their praxis. Indeed, at the time of the project, there were some difficult issues occurring for the Noongar community in one of the participating towns, and the sudden death of a well-respected Noongar man meant that grieving issues prevented elders from attending one of the workshops (CAN WA 2008).

² The establishment of this hub was funded by the state government through Australian Council, Arts WA (Department of Culture and the Arts), Department of Communication, Information Technology and the Arts (DoCITA) and the Department of Indigenous Affairs (DoIA).

³ The project was funded under the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy of the Australian Government.

⁴ The 2006 census data was used rather than the more recent 2011 census data, as the project was conducted in 2008. Statistical Local Area data is used. It is recognized that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are more likely to be under-enumerated in census data.

Voices of the Wheatbelt

Evolving from a youth arts and skills development program conducted with Aboriginal women in 2007, the *Voices of the Wheatbelt* project has now been running for over 5 years. In this original project, photography “sparked the interest and imagination of the young women and gave CAN WA the opportunity to develop a broader 12-month initiative where local people and school students could come together and explore their community while learning some new skills” (Kasat 2013, p. 74). The project has been delivered in different phases across a number of Wheatbelt towns, and is the largest community arts and cultural development project CAN WA has embarked upon (Kasat 2013). The overall aim of the different phases of Voices has been to bring people together and literally give voice to the individual and collective perspectives that inform local identity. As expressed by Kasat: “It is about uncovering and rediscovering the unique aspects of Wheatbelt life and applying the medium of photography to capture and celebrate the heart of these communities” (CAN WA 2009, p. 9).

In the first phase of Voices (*Voices of the Wheatbelt: The Eastern Wheatbelt*), young people and adults from Merredin, Kellerberrin, Quairading and Tammin were taught how to express their sense of place and belonging through music and the camera’s lens. In phase two (*Our place, our stories*), photography and filmmaking workshops were offered to towns in the Southern Wheatbelt, again inviting people of all ages to learn camera skills as a way to tell the story of their lives within their communities. The third phase (*Wheat Beats*), focused on young people in Eastern and Southern Wheatbelt towns. It involved hip-hop music and dance, traditional Aboriginal dance, filmmaking and photography. The broader project has been iterative and generative, most recently evolving into *Healing songs*, which more explicitly engages with Aboriginal people in storytelling about the history of colonization, dispossession and racism as part of the healing process (<http://www.canwa.com.au/productions/current/healing-songs/>). In this article, we describe the first phase (*Voices of the Wheatbelt: The Eastern Wheatbelt*) which has been reported elsewhere (Sonn 2009). We focus on the photographs and captions that were written to explore: (1) what images people captured about their place, (2) what meanings they produced through the caption writing process, and (3) how these reflect, individually and collectively, a sense of place identity. In our view, these photographs and the diverse meanings produced by participants is a key aspect of the voicing, or place making, and came to represent the Voices of the Wheatbelt.

Voices: Project Components and Participants

The project was conducted in schools and local community settings in Tammin, Quairading, Merredin and Kellerberrin where CAN WA already had strong community connections. The project primarily involved photography but also incorporated a music and song-writing component in the schools. The assumption behind the project was that by providing opportunities and resources for people to come together, to learn photography skills, people could explore and express a sense of place and represent themselves and their communities to a broader audience. In bring people together across generational and cultural divides, community members could learn about each other, about place and about the history of their town, which in turn could foster relationships within and between communities.

Aboriginal and non-Indigenous school aged children, young people and adults, artists, photographers, and musicians participated in the project (see Table 1). While everyone within the different towns, were welcome to become involved in the project, there was a particular focus on encouraging Noongar participation. Key advocates such as elders, Community Development Officers and schools-based Aboriginal Liaison Officers facilitated Noongar participation. Most of the participants in the different towns became involved in the project because it was set up at the school or through one of the community groups. Some adults became involved after reading about the project in the local newspaper, some saw it advertised in the newsletter, and others heard about it through other community networks. Overall, there were close to 200 people who participated in the project across the different workshop settings.

Photography and Song-Writing Workshops in Schools

In the five participating schools, photography excursions and song-writing workshops were delivered over three terms of the 2008 school year, with approximately 95 students participating, 45 of whom identified as Aboriginal. Over 16 weeks, professional artists including two male non-Indigenous photographers and two female Aboriginal musicians travelled together with CAN WA staff to each of the schools conducting photography and music workshops (Kasat 2013). The music and song writing workshops provided participants with the opportunity to write and record songs about their place. The photography workshops sought to introduce participants to the basics of digital photography and photo-composition, and challenge them, using tasks and problem solving activities to initiate the development of individual voice or photo-aesthetic (Berlyn 2009).

Table 1 Project activities and participants

Action components	Participants
Photography and song writing workshops at schools (N = 95)	Tammin Primary School 20 year 5, 6, 7 students (4 Aboriginal) South Merredin Primary School 10 students (5 Aboriginal)(Aboriginal students each chose a non-Indigenous student to work with) Kellerberrin District High School 15 Aboriginal students Quairading District High School (2 groups) 20 year 8 students (5 Aboriginal) 20 year 9 students (6 Aboriginal) Merredin District High School 10 Aboriginal students
Photography skill development workshops in the community (N = 52)	Kellerberrin (N = 9) 5 Aboriginal and 4 non-Indigenous adults (18- 60+ years) Quairading (N = 8) 8 non-Indigenous adults (40+ years) Tammin (N = 15) 15 non-Indigenous adults Merredin (N = 20) 12 Aboriginal adults, 3 non-Indigenous adults 5 Aboriginal young people under 18 (plus artists and staff members)
Photo elicitation workshops (N = 83)	Kellerberrin (N = 21)(39 Labels without captions;18 with label and caption) 3 Aboriginal adults, 6 non-Aboriginal adults 8 Aboriginal students, 5 non-Indigenous students Quairading (N = 23)(39 Labels without captions) 6 non-Indigenous adults 5 Aboriginal students, 12 non-Indigenous students Merredin (N = 9)(1 Label without caption;13 with label and caption) 4 Aboriginal students, 5 non-Indigenous students Tammin (N = 30)(5 Labels without captions; 91 with label and caption) 14 non-Indigenous adults 4 Aboriginal students, 12 non-Indigenous students

In each photography workshop, participants had access to a Canon Coolpix L10 or L11 digital camera. Following hands-on training, students were asked to photograph as many subjects around the school premises that they wished. At other times, they could go out and explore their towns. However before coming back into class they were required to delete all but two of their shots; “self-editing being an important step toward developing a clear personal aesthetic” (Berlyn, p. 3). At the end of the program, the five classes of students had taken over 16,000 pictures.

Photography and Skill-Development Workshops

In addition to the workshops in the schools, CAN WA facilitated photography workshops with young people and adults in the four towns (Kasat 2013). These were

advertised widely, and a total of 52 people, of a variety of ages, Aboriginal and non-Indigenous, participated (see Table 1). The workshops involved first learning about photography and then going out to explore and take photographs of their town—photographs that capture their everyday lives in the Wheatbelt.

Photo Elicitation Workshops

Follow-up workshops, in which the first author was a participant observer, were conducted in each of the towns to provide an opportunity for those involved in the project to share the stories behind the photographs and explore what the images said about their communities. This process, guided by photo elicitation (Harper 2002), generated many titles and captions, which was not only a hugely

beneficial aspect of the community arts and cultural development process, but also provided data about the everyday knowledge about place people use to give meaning to their pictures.

These workshops were attended by a total of 83 participants including children, young people and adults. It was considered important for people across cultural and generational divides, to see what each other had produced and everyone enjoyed receiving feedback on their photographs. There was a strong sense that understanding was being developed across the generations because a space was created where people could come together and discuss their towns, their communities. As noted by CAN WA staff, this was particularly notable between Aboriginal young people and non-Indigenous adults and was one of the highlights of the project (CAN WA 2008).

Everyone was welcome to attend these follow-up workshops, which required much co-ordination and time investment from project staff including, shifting through the 26,000 images that were taken throughout the whole project. Given the large number of photos, limited time and the cost of printing, project staff selected 10 images from each participant's photos, which were printed on A4 size photo paper. Participants were asked to select a few that they would like to speak about. They were then asked to share what the pictures captured for them, what they liked about the pictures, to label their pictures, and write a short caption. This process produced 122 images with titles and captions as well as 84 images with titles, but no captions (see <http://voices.canwa.com.au/>). Unfortunately there were no captions produced at the Quairading sharing workshop, only photo labels (Table 2).

Exhibitions

The project culminated with the production of a 180 page full-colour, hardcover, professionally designed and printed book of photography, in which every participant's photography is represented (http://www.canwa.com.au/resources/VOICES_wheatbelt_Part1.pdf). A series of exhibitions were also held in school and community settings. The main exhibition and launch of the publication was hosted at Kidogo Arthouse in Fremantle. As noted by Kasat (2013), this exhibition:

gave participants the opportunity to see their work exhibited at an urban gallery and also provided an important and rare platform for Noongar people to represent themselves and their place through their own eyes in a showcase in a capital city (p. 75).

As reported by Sonn (2009), some of those who attended the exhibition commented on the quality of the photos and inquired about the ages of the young people who participated. Some recognized the scenery, landscapes and other

images of the Wheatbelt—it reminded them of where they grew up. This exhibition represented the culmination of the project, but also the beginning of other Voices journeys in different towns. A website of the images produced has also been developed (voices.canwa.com.au/).

Data Analysis and Interpretation

This research was guided by a naturalistic approach, which is an open approach to exploring what emerges in the context of the real world (Patton 2002). As noted previously, we were specifically interested in exploring the photos and the outputs from the elicitation, that is, the textual data, and its role in representing voice and constructing place identity. While over 80 people attended the sharing workshops, the total number of people who provided captions and labels for their photographs across the four towns was approximately 74 (Table 1). The photos were about everyday life, as expressed by one participant: “about everyday life, like winning an award at school, about our community, about our people”. As noted by Kasat (2013), “The discussion that emerged from these workshops was broad ranging, encompassing issues of representation of regional people, their sense of place and engagement with their communities” (p. 75). The titles and captions were creative and imaginative. They were also diverse and range from a focus on technical aspects about colours, angles, and lines to poetic interpretations of people, places and scenery captured in the photographs. Some excerpts were up to 30 words in length while others were single words used to label a photograph.

Our analysis of the photographs and captions involved three steps. Step one involved scanning the photos to get a sense of what was captured. This step resulted in the authors constructing four broad groups: scenery, buildings and artefacts, family and friends, and photo aesthetics. Step two involved the first two authors assigning the different captions to one of these broad groups and recording the captions with labels in an excel spreadsheet. In some cases we had labels only; we decided not to include these because they were often just a name or a word, which was difficult to interpret without follow up discussion. Step three was a standard content analysis, similar to the process outlined by Cassidy and Maule (2011) and Miles and Huberman (1994), which involved coding titles and captions for words and phrases that people used to give meaning to their images. Given that we were interested in place identity, Dixon and Durrheim's (2000) conception of place and personal identity as interconnected and mediated by social and cultural resources, guided our analysis.

This process resulted in the relabelling of the original broad labels to now be: ‘technical aspects, photo-aesthetic

Table 2 Selected captions

The natural environment: the country life	The built environment: livelihoods
It shows the flowers blooming and how pretty they are. Beauty and colours. Happiness. It says that Tammin is a beautiful town (<i>The bird paradise</i>)	The grain storage. It tells that it is turning to summer. It brings mysterious feelings with the darkness and clouds. The bins are opening soon (<i>The bins</i>)
This shows some of the landscape around Kellerberrin and what makes it unique (<i>A view from Kellerberrin Hill</i>)	It is harvest time and hard work. Watching the grain flow into the header and hope for a great harvest. Concentration and long hours from in the header. It's a dry and hot time of year (<i>Work in progress</i>)
Brightness of Kellerberrin sky and Wildflowers (<i>Brightness</i>)	I like this picture because it is on an angle and it is in black and white, which makes it stand out. I took this picture of the Tammin silos because I think that the silos make up 1/11 of our town. This picture tells a story of the silo in Tammin and how it is so high up because you can see a light shade of clouds (<i>The leaning tower of Tammin</i>)
Keller is surrounded by these vistas (<i>Paddock by Mitchell Street</i>)	White stands out; a storm coming, a staircase. The weather in Tammin is very weird. The silos represent Tammin also. It's going to rain (<i>Stormy days</i>)
Typical Keller (<i>Front Verandah</i>)	This photo means loading grain from place to place. Loading grain in the country. Interesting and mysterious. That grain is used every day (<i>Grain train</i>)
This is a Verticordia known as the Cauliflower Bush because of its appearance. It flowers in late spring and really stands out in the nature reserves. Pleasure to see so much regeneration after a lot was illegally picked. This photo shows the strong feeling of landcare in the community (<i>Cauliflower Bush</i>)	This old wagon has obviously seen better days. I like the photo because it is very clear. Not very much emotion. The photo shows that I live in the country surrounded by old wrecks (<i>Wagon Wheels</i>)
Beauty of our country. Crop in the foreground is ready for harvest. Enjoyment and peaceful. I love the countryside (<i>Mt. Caroline</i>)	When I see this picture I wonder who would have a collection of old, rusty drums and who would keep all these drums, how they got there and why you would keep them in a straight line. This story tells what I just said. These ancient drums tells how old Tammin is or close to it (<i>Old rusty drums</i>)
The contrast of golden flowers with spikey leaves on a shadowy background is pleasing. Wildflowers continues to bloom no matter what the season is like. A feeling of joy and tranquillity to see the flowers. Conservation and learning about species of shrubs helps keep our community preserve the natural vegetation we have (<i>Blooming gold</i>)	It means to me that Tammin has eerie weather and tall silos. It tells that there are tall things in small towns. It brings up when Tammin was first built and how the silos were built. It shows that Tammin is old (<i>Right to the top</i>)
It shows the blooming of flowers in spring. The way the flowers grow. It brings up happiness and joy. For the community it is growing and happy (<i>Spring time</i>)	Remembering what times were like. What life was like years ago and it is just great to have this old truck still able to been seen and has been saved from the scrap heap. Thank goodness it was saved. How life was in the country (<i>The way it was</i>)
We should take the time to stop and appreciate nature. Stop and look at the world around us. Happy. Relaxing (<i>The Outback bus</i>)	It looked really interesting. The changes in our ways. It's kind of sad because it's been rejected. It shows that Tammin is a dry old town (<i>Spirals</i>)
I like pictures of chooks geese and ducks. This shows that my chooks like being the centre of attention. Pride in my chooks: it says I like my chooks. It says I live on a farm (<i>Chooks with attitudes</i>)	Shows the conditions of days gone by. It tells you the old methods of construction. Makes me sad to see it being neglected. It shows that pioneers were very innovative (<i>Old time cottage</i>)

and having fun'; 'natural environment: the country life', and 'built environment: livelihoods'. Sometimes, captions and labels could be placed in more than one of the categories; however decisions were made regarding which theme the caption most strongly reflected. The themes 'natural environment: the country life' (N = 27), and 'built environment: livelihoods' (N = 33; see Table 2), portray a shared understanding of living in the Wheatbelt. The captions within the first theme (N = 62) were more descriptive of the process of learning about photography, the skills acquired and how this made them feel, and thus highlighted other valued aspects of participation in the project (see

Sonn 2009). Captions and labels about family and friends was subsumed under this category, because often when participants were taking photos of family and friends, they were playing around with the skills they had been learning and having fun. Most captions belonged to this theme, which is perhaps reflective of the fact that many of the caption writers were students. While the captions did not necessarily relate to sense of place, the labels given often were related to the natural and built environment. We describe this theme using participant's photo captions and labels. We then discuss the final two themes, which were more specifically about place, and are presented in Table 2.

Technical Aspects, the Photo-Aesthetic and Having Fun

Showing their new knowledge and skills, the captions of the students often focused on the technical aspects of taking a photograph, and describing what was aesthetically pleasing or not about their photographs. For example, one student focused on the effect achieved in their photo.

This photo of mine was taken down the top of an old glass bottle. I don't know how the orange effect happened, I guess the colours you put the bottle on the different effects there are. It looks like a flower in the centre (*Timewarp*).

Another students caption focuses on what he likes about his photo aesthetically.

I like how electricity pole reflects off the water. The different coloured clouds in the background; how on one side it's dark and light on the other. There's a raincloud on one side and a normal cloud on the other. The power lines look like they're going downwards. It shows that it has been raining (*Reflection*).

Students also commented on what they didn't like about their photo and how they would improve it, which is illustrative of the skills that they were learning in the workshops: "This photo is boring. I don't like this photo, there is too much space" (*Climb the chain*); "I don't like this photo because it is in too close" (*Side view*).

Also captured in the images and the meanings attributed to the images, was that the kids had fun with the photography and used it as a form of self-expression. That is, to say something about themselves and their interests. In Kellerberrin for example, the young people took the opportunity to dress up and take pictures of themselves and their friends posing in different clothing. Often the young people took self-portraits, and commented on aspects about themselves that they liked. In a photo where a student is sitting on a tunnel that is painted with the word Achievement on it, the caption read:

I like the way I am sitting on the tunnel. I like the way the writing is on the tunnel. I like the colours on the tunnel and what I am wearing. I like the way I am smiling and I am happy. I like the background and all the trees and leaves (*Achievement*).

In exploring their communities and camera techniques, the participants often commented on the happiness of the kids in the images, as exemplified by the following captions: "Happy young girl. Free Spirit. Easy Going. Joyful" (*Happy and low*). "It's in black and white. I like the background because it has the pattern of the fence and

trees. I like how the kids are all looking different. It shows that Tammin is full of lovely kids" (*Happy Kids*).

Through the captions students often expressed the sense of achievement associated with their participation in the project, for example, by having their photographs recognized and displayed in the school. For example, one student's caption read:

I like this photo of mine because of the beauty in the photo. This photo is in my school South Merredin Primary School. You can't tell it's me; it looks like an alien with a camera. This photo was hung up in the library of South Merredin Primary School. I like this photo because it's in my school. I like the shade of this picture. It looks like this photo has been taken many years ago in the olden days. I was actually standing far away, I zoomed in. I love living in Merredin! (*Mirror Vision*).

Also captured here, and common across the student's captions, are comments about living in their town ('I love living in Merredin') or going to school ('school is not a bad place').

Some took pictures of their friends performing activities, making funny faces, and joking. In many ways this was about friendships and relationships captured and expressed through the cameras lens. In the workshops, students commented on the photos they took about their friends and what they liked about their friends.

I like this photo because I like the colours and because it's of my friend Tyler. This is almost the perfect photo since it's my photo. It's not blurry and there's no red eyes. Tyler's funny, and loves sport. I think his personality shows through this photo. He has friends, like apples and is curious. I like the shadings with the black, grey and white.

Photo Subject: Tyler

It made me feel pretty good. It makes me look special and the colours of this photo makes it look old. I like this photo because it's of me. I was caught unaware eating my apple at fruit break in front of my room (*Deep thought*).

Natural Environment: The Country Life

A large number of captions focused on elements of the natural environment. These included descriptions of the rich colours of the landscapes and the beauty of taken for granted aspects of the natural environment, flora, seasons and the weather (a selection of captions are displayed in Table 2).

These similar references to aspects of the natural environment were very important in constructing a place identity that people felt proud about. These descriptions often also included references to the town and the pride that people felt about their town. This is evident in the captions for ‘The bird paradise’, ‘A view from Kellerberrin hill’, ‘brightness’, ‘paddock by Mitchell Street’ and ‘front veranda’.

While these captions show how the valued aspects of natural environment becomes a strong part of people’s place identity, which has also been noted in previous research (e.g., Nowell et al. 2006), other captions pointed to deeper values about the importance of the land, and to strong feelings of land-care in the community, and respect for the natural environment. These values are important for protecting the environment, which is central to livelihoods, but that has suffered because of practices of land clearing and deforestation. For example, the captions for Cauliflower bush and Blooming gold:

This is a Verticordia known as the Cauliflower Bush because of its appearance. It flowers in late spring and really stands out in the nature reserves. Pleasure to see so much regeneration after a lot was illegally picked. This photo shows the strong feeling of land care in the community (*Cauliflower Bush*).

The contrast of golden flowers with spikey leaves on a shadowy background is pleasing. Wildflowers continue to bloom no matter what the season is like. A feeling of joy and tranquillity to see the flowers. Conservation and learning about species of shrubs helps keep our community preserve the natural vegetation we have (*Blooming gold*).

In addition to valuing the natural environment and naming its beauty, which were both aspects central to the meaning of place and place being positively valued, it was also clear that these notions were central to constructing a positive country lifestyle, one characterized by the use of words such as ‘enjoyment and peaceful’; ‘peace and quiet’; and ‘love of the bush’ as shown in Table 2. Often the captions emphasized the peace and quiet of the countryside and the simple life, often in opposition to the city: “Love of the bush. Animals. Calm. Crickets + Bird Noises. No traffic” (*Bush Walk*). This is also reflected in the captions for ‘Mt. Caroline’, ‘Spring time’ and ‘the outback bus’. Through the images and caption writing, participants expressed pride in their town and their way of life, and were constructing a collective identity—one about living in the ‘country’. This is exemplified in the caption for, ‘Chooks with attitude’. The photos also stimulated telling stories about the community. For example, in one town a story was told about how Aboriginal people used to gather salt from the pink

and blue lakes. This was then sold to farmers. But, the lakes are also evidence of the effects of land clearing, deforestation and soil degradation.

The Built Environment: Livelihoods

In the previous theme there was an emphasis on how people’s feelings and sentiments about the natural environment functions in the meaning of place and place identification. In the final theme, ‘the built environment: livelihoods’, many captions referred to buildings and artefacts such as farming equipment, ‘old wrecks’, water tanks, and typical farm sheds in towns. The captions highlighted modes of production, work, and how people made a living in the country, which was constructed as hardy, hot, salty and dry. These are mostly wheat producing towns where wheat silos and other farming equipment are part and parcel of the landscape. For example, drawing on both aspects of the natural and the built environment, some, captions referred to the cycles throughout the year relating to the harvest, the seasons and cycles of work—“the bins are opening soon”, the “eerie weather”, and the need for water tanks in Tammin. The themes point to another aspect of the ‘country life’—farming, as illustrated in the captions: ‘the bins,’ work in progress’, and ‘the leaning tower of Tammin’.

The grain storage. It tells that it is turning to summer. It brings mysterious feelings with the darkness and clouds. The bins are opening soon (*The bins*).

It is harvest time and hard work. Watching the grain flow into the header and hope for a great harvest. Concentration and long hours from in the header. It’s a dry and hot time of year (*Work in progress*).

I like this picture because it is on an angle and it is in black and white, which makes it stand out. I took this picture of the Tammin silos because I think that the silos make up 1/11 of our town. This picture tells a story of the silo in Tammin and how it is so high up because you can see a light shade of clouds (*The leaning tower of Tammin*)

Some authors have argued that photography can serve as a cue or mnemonic for recall (e.g., Nowell et al. 2006; Pink 2011). In our analysis several captions of artefacts captured in photos served a mnemonic for remembering a different time. For example, one caption read:

Remembering what times were like. What life was like years ago and it is just great to have this old truck still able to been seen and has been saved from the scrap heap. Thank goodness it was saved. How life was in the country (*The way it was*).

This sense of nostalgia is also reflected in the captions for ‘Spirals’ and ‘Old time cottage’. In this case we suggest that the photo elicitation invoked an idealized remembering of a time gone by, a simpler way of living (Foster-Fishman et al. 2005). But as researchers have noted (see Boym 2001), nostalgia often also involves a sort of forgetting or not remembering of difficult and challenging times.

Importantly, as with nostalgic remembering, it is also important not to romanticize the images and captions. For some, particularly young people in the towns, the experience of boredom was expressed through captioning. For example, the caption provided for the photograph titled ‘Boring’ was: “It means that I find no joy at what I’m looking at. It tells that our town has a lot of trains going through”. Similarly many of the titles given to photos in one of the schools had a strong theme of being trapped: ‘No freedom-trapped/scared and terrified; Fenced in/let me out/get me out of here’; ‘I did not do it/buzz off/not today/give me a break’.

Discussion

In this article we discussed community arts and cultural development methodology, which shares with community psychology a commitment to the empowerment of individuals and communities through participatory and inclusive practices that recognize and promote the strengths and resources already existing within communities. Within this broader framework, we described Voices of the Wheatbelt, with its strong focus on participation, and presented a study using the captions and labels that emerged from the photo elicitation component of the project as our primary data. We explored how photography and photo elicitation can provide a means for people to represent and give meaning to their community and sense of place. Specifically, we showed that the images people captured, and the meanings they attached to those can provide insight into place identity.

The community arts and cultural development activities associated with this project included photography and song-writing workshops in schools, photography and photo elicitation workshops in the community, as well as exhibitions. Each of these project components can be viewed as the construction of activity settings (O’Donnell and Tharp 2012) within which people from diverse walks of life can come together to share ideas and experiences, engage in learning skills and develop new ideas about their community (Sonn 2009). The photos people took, and the accompanying captions, captured different elements of Wheatbelt life and invited producers and the audience to explore the community and the landscape through the eyes of those who live, play and work there (CAN WA 2009). These were personal yet collective representations of the

Wheatbelt, and became a means for people to share what makes them unique as well as discover what they have in common.

As some researchers have shown (e.g., Foster-Fishman et al. 2005; Nowell et al. 2006; Pink 2011), photography and photo elicitation provide creative means for people to represent their life-worlds. It is a tool that enables people to capture and examine aspects of their everyday life that is important to them at a particular moment. The process of caption writing invites them to reflect on their images and to interpret them using tacit knowledge they hold about living in this place and being part of this community. In line with the arguments developed by Dixon and Durrheim (2000), place-identity is conceived “as something that people create together through talk: a social construction that allows them to make sense of their connectivity to place” (p. 32). Through the simple task of writing captions and labels for their images, people shared their own personal meanings about place. In this case, participants communicated through their images and captions a sense of place that was based on positive experiences and emotions tied to the natural environment as well as the links between nature and the features of the built environment that come to signify livelihoods.

Photography and caption writing offered multiple benefits in terms of representation and for engaging people in reflection on issues related to their lives in communities (see Sonn 2009). By coming together to share personal understandings with other members of the different towns, collective representations of their place and the people within it were developed (Foster-Fishman et al. 2005; Loopmans et al. 2012). These representations were ultimately captured in a book, several public exhibitions and a website, which has served an educative and awareness raising function about the towns and everyday life. Similar to Johnson and Martínez Guzmán’s (2013) suggestion, these products are utilized in different ways by community members, the agency and researchers, thereby creating new opportunities for meaning and action. In this case, the products have become resources for welcoming newcomers and presenting the participating towns in positive ways. These resources are a source of pride for those who participated, reminding people of their belonging and connection to place and people. The agency has used the resources to show people in other towns what can be done, as well as promoting the value of community cultural development and place making practices. Importantly, the collective representations of towns does not mean uniformity, rather these shared representations of place celebrate the multiple meanings and experiences that make up the Voices of Wheatbelt.

This project did not have an explicit research focus, but a focus on community arts and cultural development,

which itself is open to research. Guided by a naturalistic approach, an open approach to exploring what emerges in the context of the real world (Patton 2002), we described the process and explored the project products, that is, the images captured by people and the captions they wrote about them. While we acknowledge there are limitations to this type of data, we emphasize that the images and the text were produced by participants, thus representing their voices. However, the efforts of representation are always taking place within the context of power relations. For example, even though efforts were made to ensure that participants controlled and selected images, this was not always possible. Given time constraints for running photo elicitation workshops, arts workers had to select images from a database for use in workshops. While participants took these images, the range selected still involved decisions about which images, representing what, and for what purpose. Attempts were made to balance this with the photo elicitation process. Nevertheless, these seemingly micro considerations involve power dynamics in terms of representation and voice that we need to be aware of and negotiate on an ongoing basis, otherwise we run the risk of undermining the processes of fostering opportunities for voice and who gets heard (see Lykes et al. 2003).

While we have focussed here on visual methods, it is important to understand these within the broader community arts and cultural development methodology used by CAN WA. Also premised on the ideas of participation, collaboration and drawing on local resources to foster community building (e.g., Johnson and Martínez Guzmán 2013), this methodology resonates with PAR. As part of a longer-term strategy to contribute to empowerment of Wheatbelt communities, the project was foundational and helped the agency to establish trusting relationships with community members and in developing important links in the different towns. It also brought to the foreground the needs and aspirations of Aboriginal people in these towns including the ongoing dynamics of inclusion and exclusion (Quayle and Sonn 2013). This has informed the direction the agency has since taken. This has been characterized by a focus on cultural renewal and reclaiming, which is understood as central to the development of positive individual and collective identities, and the process of healing. As community psychology researchers, we can support this on the ground action by documenting those practices that foster supportive relationships and intergroup solidarity, as well as the ways power can be reinscribed in these spaces despite their liberatory intent. While the arts is not a panacea, creative methodologies provide an important means through which people can share, contest, and construct resources that are important to their personal and collective identities.

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