

# Vernacular narratives of well-being and the practice of photo-a-day

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## Abstract

The impact of social media on psychological well-being is usually investigated through survey-based studies of the mass effects of its use. This paper offers an alternative perspective, by exploring individuals' narratives of their own well-being, arising from interviews about one seemingly simple, mundane digital practice: photo-a-day. These stories showed how people saw that they could shape their own well-being gradually through the way that sharing a photo each day reconfigured routines, brought them to notice new things and connected to others in new ways. The effect was complex and largely unintended. This reflected their sophisticated understanding of well-being as an elusive, complex practical accomplishment. The paper reflects on how well-being can be understood as accomplished within social practices by the spreading of meaning.

Keywords: digital photography, photo sharing, photo-a-day, well-being, practice theory

## Introduction

The impact of social media on well-being and mental health has become an important topic in public debate, and as a result in research. The issue is usually framed as the overall effect on psychological well-being of using Social Networking Site (SNS) platforms such as Facebook and is often focussed particularly on the experiences of young people (for recent systematic reviews of this literature see Baker and Algorta; Keles et al.). It explores the 'see-saw' (Weinstein) between the benefits of SNS for social connection with the negative effects of social comparison, addiction and other types of problematic uses. Most of this literature adopts a quantitative approach to seek to measure

associations between variables such as personality, SNS use and well-being, on a mass scale. The perspective is often based on psychological constructs such as addiction.

This is an important locus for the debate, but there are many specific digital practices (or practices with online elements) that play an important part in individuals' lives and so presumably their experiences of well-being. Through fine-grained attention to such specific practices we may gain a different type of insight into the links between well-being and social media. This would be to conceptualise well-being as the practical accomplishment of good experience and psychological functioning. Indeed, it could also tell us much about people's own conceptualisations of well-being and how they seek to shape it for themselves. Qualitative inquiry taking a socio-culturally-oriented approach to the analysis of personal narratives would be a natural method to adopt for such research, because it captures the full richness of vernacular accounts of experience and places them in a socio-cultural context (Squire).

Such an approach finds warrant in the work of the sociologist, Mark Cieslik ('Not Smiling', *Happiness*). Cieslik reviews a number of psychological and psychoanalytic perspectives on well-being but finds room for a biographical method reflecting a 'complex appreciation of the diverse ways that happiness is experienced in everyday life.' (Cieslik, *Happiness*, 8). Such studies can explore the agency of individuals in shaping their well-being through action and reflection, as well as potentially encompassing the impact of social structures, such as social class or gender expectations on these experiences.

One important and distinctive aspect of social media use is the sharing of photos. Photo sharing takes a multitude of forms, but one of particular interest for this paper is photo-a-day: the apparently simple practice of sharing a photo every day online. Such photos and the text written to accompany them are a rich narrative resource. Our previous work on photo-a-day has suggested complex potential connections to well-being (Cox and Brewster; Brewster and Cox). Thus, the aim of the paper is to examine narratives around photo-a-day and what this tells us about everyday experiences of well-being. To support this we adopt a practice theory based approach, that examines the detail of day to day activities and the meanings attached to them (Schatzki). The research questions that guided this study were:

- How is photo-a-day experienced to shape the well-being of those who practise it?
- What does this tell us about how people themselves conceive of well-being and their ability to shape it?
- How would we conceptualise well-being within practice theory?

## Literature review

An important feature of social media use is the sharing of photos (Malik et al.). A small but growing body of literature explores the role of photo sharing as an aspect of SNS and its connection to well-being, usually through a focus on what is currently the most popular platform, Instagram (Pittman and Reich; Yang; Frison & Eggermont; Kircaburun & Griffiths). Fairly typical of this emerging literature is Mackson et al.'s study which concludes that Instagram use has a positive impact on levels of depression, anxiety and loneliness, and on self-esteem. Yet this is a general finding correlating use and well-being and takes no account of the multiplicity of specific photo sharing practices developed on Instagram and how they might impact well-being in specific types of way. For the purposes of the paper, just use and time of use of Instagram are measured. Implicitly the use of the platform is assumed to be a uniform practice. The data used are survey responses, which ask simply about facts such as frequency of use and do not even seek to explore how Instagram is used, experienced and managed reflexively by participants. Acknowledging such limitations, the authors rightly call for studies examining more deeply the relation between different behaviours on Instagram and well-being (Mackson, et al.). Without denying the potential for a general effect of using a photo sharing platform, if we consider the relation between well-being and particular practices of photo sharing and the meanings individuals attach to them, the picture of how well-being and the digital relate is likely to be greatly enriched.

The authors' own previous work contains some suggestions of what this approach might look like (Cox and Brewster; Brewster and Cox). These studies have explored the links people themselves made between well-being and one mundane photographic practice, photo-a-day (also often referred to as 365 projects): the sharing of a single photo taken on a particular day on that day every day for a year (Cox and Brewster; Brewster and Cox). This practice is found on many platforms, for example, openly on Instagram (the hashtag #365project has two million posts as at March 2020) or Flickr and also on closed Facebook groups. There are also dedicated platforms for the practice such as Blipfoto (<https://www.blipfoto.com/>) and 365project.org (365project.org/). It could be seen as a form of photoblogging with strong roots, like any blog, to much older traditions of keeping a diary, but also creative practices such as journaling. Although often seen as a means to improve the hobbyist photographer's skills, their appeal seems to extend well beyond the hobbyist.

Our previous work has shown how this use of photography became a highly valued part of people's everyday lives (Cox and Brewster; Brewster and Cox). The positivity of sharing photos was partly because the conventions of photography are to focus on the visually appealing and happy events. But photography was also a support to other valued activities, such as hobbies, documenting and

sharing these pleasurable experiences. The practice of sharing a photo-a-day gave people a strong sense of learning and creativity (a point also observed by Barton). Another important effect was the impact people experienced of noticing things around them more, taking them out of their routine paths, in search of different photos. Taking and sharing the photo for their photo-a-day project could be elaborated in different ways through their life and was an interest across the whole day e.g. people enjoyed looking at the day's photo and choosing the one to share. Digital cameras make it easy to take many photos in one session. The discipline of sharing a photo only one photo but sharing one everyday lends the practice a very particular reflexive power, as Piper Wright (2013) observes. The practice of sharing and trying to keep going every day, was the basis for strong communities, that offered surprising levels of care, even where participants had never met face to face. Critically the way that expressions of online identity were constructed through looking outwards, avoided the more "narcissistic" focus on self-presentation common on SNS. Rather than self-consciously created profiles people created expressions of identity by sharing what they saw, through their photos. Photo-a-day seemed to produce a rich, less constraining, more reflective articulation of identity, that emerged over time for the participant as much as for others.

Part of the explanation of the power of photo-a-day is that although apparently simple it is actually rich in narrative resources. Each photo is potentially able to tell a story, sometimes purely visually, sometimes with the help of a caption and explanatory text, and potentially supplemented by the comments of others. Sometimes the text is the focus and the photo incidental. Photos can be connected by themes to previous photos or the photos of others. The collection as a whole tells a story, further reflected on by commentary, by the self and others.

The narrative richness of this seemingly simple practice is suggestive of the value of taking a different perspective on well-being than that adopted by authors such as Mackson et al.. Rather than examining broad correlations between well-being and the use of photo sharing web sites there seems to be value in developing a rich picture of the link between well-being and specific practices within which photo sharing happens recognising the complex interweaving of the digital and the embodied and material; the routine and the creative.

In thinking about the relation between photography and well-being, there are a number of perspectives that could be drawn upon. The emerging literature on Instagram tends to deploy psychological constructs such as social comparison theory. Cook has explored the link between the hobby of photography and well-being, using rather similar models of psychological maturity, rooted in cognitive psychology. But there are other potential frameworks available. Within another very different tradition, psychoanalysis has long exploited the potential of photography to explore

unconscious processes. Weiser, for example, has explained the value of phototherapy as a set of techniques based on discussing photos from family albums in a therapeutic context. Suler (2008; 2009) recognises the value of understanding online photosharing in the same way. Other authors such as Craig have argued for the value of photography as a tool for self-reflection and self-development, outside a therapeutic context. Doing something like sharing a photo every day is akin to one of the many simple prescriptions for behaviours that improve well-being promoted by positive psychology, so could be considered from this perspective (Layous & Lyubomirsky).

These perspectives may all be important within their own terms of reference, however, there seems to be value in an approach that recognises the importance of listening to people's own narratives of their well-being. Warrant for this approach is elaborated by Cieslik ('Not smiling'; *Happiness*). He invites us to take seriously individual narratives of how ordinary people manage well-being through their life course: What people actually do and think about their own well-being.

*Wellbeing is the everyday effort we make to flourish and as such is a practical accomplishment. ('Not smiling' 10).*

This approach has the potential to give us a nuanced sense of how people make sense of their own well-being and the strategies used to seek to shape it.

*Happiness for ordinary people is an evaluative process whereby individuals weigh up courses of action, informed by their values and interests and think through what is best for them. Furthermore, this ethical conduct – of choosing between possible courses of action (good/bad, ways to flourish) – happens as we make decisions, but then over time we also monitor, reflect and modify these choices. ('Not smiling' 8).*

Cieslik wishes to resist the picture painted by Furedi and other social critics, of people being made dupes of simplistic scripts of what brings happiness, such as through a selfish search for material possessions. For Cieslik, personal accounts of well-being are "rooted in social, caring relationships and traditional virtues of compassion, altruism and duty" ('Not smiling' 9). The purpose of this paper is to consider how photo-a-day could be understood as an everyday example of a practice through which it appears people practically accomplish well-being.

In exploring specific practices of photo sharing we are also influenced by practice-based theorising (Nicolini; Shove et al.; Hui et al.). This work seeks to resolve the dichotomy between structuralist and individualist theories of action, through focussing on the reproduction and evolution of social practices. Practices are seen as a 'temporally evolving, open-ended set of doings and sayings linked

by practical understandings, rules, teleo-affective structure and general understandings' (Schatzki, 87). Thus, they involve patterns of people doing things, both physical actions and speech as action. Practical understandings are the skills to perform the practice appropriately and rules are explicit guidelines on how to carry it out. Teleo-affective structure refers to the way that a range of small activities, tasks or more complex projects are organised around an imagined end, which has a mood or feelings accompanying it. General understandings are social beliefs and values that have expression through many practices.

The activities that make up the performance of a practice are played out in time and space: Process is a central concern of the practice approach (Geiger). Practices often involve a temporal rhythm of activities of bodies and use of objects in particular spaces. Photo-a-day, for example, involves chains of activities such as looking at things and taking photos, transferring them to a computer, viewing and editing them, then uploading them, writing text and later responding to comments. It involves bodily movements and multiple material objects such as cameras, lenses and computers. Certain knowledge and skills are required to achieve competencies as socially defined. It also involves configurations of social connections. Taking of photos itself is particularly interesting as a sort of meta-activity that can be used to report on other practices. Within this study a practice-based approach was adopted which implied a close concern with the detail of the process of how people carried through photo-a-day, in more or less routinised ways and the social meanings attached to these activities.

## Materials and methods

Suitable data for such a narrative, practice-based approach was selected from material collected in two consecutive studies of photo-a-day (Cox and Brewster; Brewster and Cox). The first, conducted in 2015, was based on 16 semi-structured interviews and the second (2016-17) combined interviews of a further eight participants with observations of their photoblog for two months. Interviews explored how photo-a-day was carried through as a day-to-day, material and digital routine, the meanings they associated with it and how participants thought that it impacted their well-being. Observation was based on a close reading of photo entries, examining such aspects as social interaction through commenting. Participants were recruited through open invitations that explained our interest in the potential relation between photo-a-day and well-being. This was disseminated via Facebook, Twitter and on the Friends of Blipfoto group on Facebook, and asked

interested participants to respond via email. Some participants were recruited by snowballing from the initial respondents.

For the analysis of the data the current paper adopts what Riessman (*Narrative methods*) calls thematic narrative analysis and Squire refers to as a socioculturally-oriented approach to narrative. In this approach what is of primary interest is the content of narratives, set in the context of wider social discourses, rather than the structural or linguistic aspects of how they are constructed. It is based on an understanding of narrative as a key means of human sense making, especially in the context of ruptures of normality and personal transformation. Participants tend to be seen as enacting a preferred identity, rather than enacting an essential self (Riessman, 'Analysis'). Narratives are understood to involve more than a passive representation of experience (Squire) and can be used to create social connections. Narrative sources for such analyses are varied; they can be rather long semi-structured interviews, historical texts and other sources, including ethnographic data. The approach differs from thematic analysis or grounded theory in endeavouring to treat individuals' accounts as a whole, rather than fragmenting them through coding. There are many examples of research that adopt this broad approach: It is the method adopted by Williams, for example, in analysing illness narratives. It is also the method used by Plummer in setting the "coming out" story in historical context. However, there is considerable variation in position among researchers who adopt this form of analysis (Squire). There is also no simple methodological formula for conducting them (Riessman *Narrative methods*). The boundaries of what the narrative is may not be themselves easy to define (Riessman 'Analysis').

For the purposes of this paper extended analysis is offered of extracts of two interviews, one from each of the studies, informed by the understanding derived from the wider analyses of these and the other interviews and data. Both were males working in professional roles, the first in his fifties the second in his thirties. Each is referred to by a pseudonym.

### Capturing 'the birds'

The first interviewee, who we shall refer to by the pseudonym, Clive, framed the wider narrative of his use of photo-a-day, indeed the whole interview, by explaining that he had been diagnosed with terminal cancer. Part of his motivation for using the photo-a-day dedicated web site, blipfoto, was to build a record of himself for his family in the future, he said. He was particularly keen 'to talk about the birds', as he put it. The topic is something seemingly trivial, namely learning to take slightly better photos of birds that come to his garden. Yet it seems that he was trying through the idea of

'spreading of interest' to explain how photo-a-day projects create a richness of meaning in daily life, and in turn how they enhance well-being.

*So I began to see these fantastic coloured birds and [...] bird photos] always got good reports. I ought to try and get some birds. Well I would stand at a tree and the bird was there and by the time I got it focussed the bird was gone, so actually I put a couple of photos of empty trees on, with a story about you know and people entered into it saying "oh yes I think that's a pigeon" [...] and then I thought let's get into this a bit, and I researched it a bit and I bought a bird feeder for the back garden. And I got quite excited about this, and I put all the bird feeder stuff out and I placed it so that I could see it from my downstairs toilet which became my hide and I made a thing about this as well. And I would go in there, open up the little window and I would stand there for ages and gradually the birds came. [...] at first I took these birds I didn't know what they were, so I would put the bird on and my friends, my followers would say to me "that is a blue tit", "oh no that is a great tit", "that is a little dunnock" and they would argue. Somebody would say it was one thing, someone would say it was another, "oh no it isn't, you can tell by the little..". And now I suppose I have had about 12 to 15 maybe more different species through the garden and each time I get a new one I get really excited [...] I got a starling last week and I had never got a starling before. I mean I think I might have seen one before but I had never got a decent photo of it, and I didn't know what it was I just... that was incredibly beautiful. So I reckon in a year, I have become not exactly a twitcher but I have become interested in birds. [...] People talk about "you have really come on in your garden birds, you know". And yesterday I got a greenfinch which I had only had one in the garden that I had seen before in the past year, and it came on this new bird table and I was just so pleased with myself. So I think in miniature that is a good example of the kind of, erm... spreading of interest and spreading of kind of erm... your way you conduct yourself and think about things just simply through doing the photography and wanting to, well firstly capturing and then thinking "bloody hell these are nice you know!"*

The story begins by his 'starting to see': to notice beautiful birds, partly because he has realised that bird photos are popular on the web site. As in most blogging there is a strong drive simply to gain followers and likes. His first efforts to 'capture' the birds end in ludicrous failure. He takes the photo,

but the bird has already flown away. A joke develops, involving his followers on the web site, around trying to identify the bird that is not in the picture. Perhaps because of the attention this gets, he is prompted to explore taking of bird photos further. He researches how to attract birds to the garden and buys a feeder. Excitement builds. He sets up his downstairs toilet as a kind of hide. This has a perhaps unconsciously absurd aspect to it, but it reflects his difficulties of mobility due to illness. Gradually the birds start to come. Online contacts identify the birds he takes photos of, which he has not the knowledge to identify. He notices for the first time how beautiful the starling is. He starts to notice how beautiful the birds are (and by his extension his photos of them). So gradually, his knowledge of birds increases, and people start to recognise his bird photos as good. While he does not become a good bird photographer or a ‘twitcher’ or birdwatcher, he develops an interest in something about which he knew nothing before.

The ‘spreading of interest’ is not planned. He is first driven by what is couched as an extrinsic motive to gain followers and likes, but then moves to an intrinsic recognition of the beauty of birds. It emerges through how his efforts to take photos of birds develop and through interacting with an audience. The narrative reflects the unplanned process through which meaning is constructed. The blipfoto account is able to capture this process of emerging meaning. This expression of identity is emergent in contrast to a self-consciously constructed profile more typical of social media platforms.

Central also to the process is the building of ‘community’ which he narrates as arising from the helpfulness of others in appreciating his photos and also in identifying the birds. This points to the way that mundane interactions and small acts of offering attention and help accumulate meaning to build narratives for participants. Thus, one of the most common interactions on the web site is to like a photo or make a comment of appreciation on a photo. These seemingly trivial communications cumulatively build a sense of trust and offer a precious sense of attention. In this particular case another conventional activity in the community of helping to name items in a photo is also crucial. Perhaps he could look up what the bird is in a book, but he offers the chance to others to do this work. Identifying the birds can be seen as an act of generosity by others, but also on his behalf through opening up a role for others to participate in co-constructing his web presence. Equally, their contributions construct him as social, popular. In his story he is explaining how such small often highly conventionalised interactions contribute a foundation for more complex, personally significant narratives.

At a deeper level a key aspect of the narrative is gradually starting to notice everyday things and recognise how interesting and beautiful they are. This happens through seeing other people’s photographs, and then wishing to learn to see the same things himself: to learn to see through the

eyes of others. Interview participants often mentioned this trope as a particularly valuable form of empathy promoted through photo-a-day. Thus, the narrative is about learning to notice and appreciate things, through others. The account is rich in how it enacts the gradual process of noticing more, appreciating beautiful things, the shared enjoyment and effort along the way, the growing satisfaction and knowledge. It is linked to the ‘way you conduct yourself’ (as Clive puts it) and a morally laden sense of giving attention to others and being willing to depend on others for help (such as to identify birds). At another point he talks about taking pictures of black swans in New Zealand for one of his contacts who is building a collection of pictures of swans. Thus, taking a photo is a gift for an online friend. This small act of generosity fits into a pattern of caring for others which for interviewees reaches its epitome in people expressing support for those who are ill. Like many of the interviewees he is struck by how much people seem to care for each other on this web site.

There is also a strong emphasis in the narrative on learning, particularly on informal, social learning. Learning is about photography but also many other things. This is apparent for example in the sense he expresses that in some way he has lost out in his education in not learning to identify birds; in his researching a bird feeder; and his wanting to learn more about taking photos of birds in flight. In this way learning as an end in itself seems to provide meaning to life, even when what is learned actually has no specific utility. He is at pains to distinguish the learning he has experienced from developing real expertise, either in bird watching or photography. In this claim he is drawing on a strong cultural discourse about learning being a social good, especially in the context of social learning and the ‘creativity’ of photography. Central to the experience is the beauty of birds and then of the photos of them. Something aesthetically pleasing is an outcome of the process.

In the context of Clive’s cancer diagnosis, the valuing of simple daily things, treating others in a caring, generous way, and learning gains an added dimension of importance. Such daily practices have their own life and by being shared, live on beyond an individual. Consequently, the output of his whole website project can constitute a memorial of himself for loved ones. He was delighted to know that the British Library planned to archive the photo-a-day dedicated web site he was using, blipfoto, as a kind of memorial of ordinary lives. The sense of a wider contribution to society pleased him. Yet it also creates immediate meaning in life for himself. Small acts of taking a photo and sharing it and corresponding interactions create a powerful web of meaning that motivates further action. Particularly in the context of an immediate sense of death, finding meaning in continuing life seems hard. The narrative portrays a kind of bootstrapping of meaning that is central to how small routines create meaning in lives, and so contribute powerfully to well-being. It addresses a central post-belief existential dilemma, of nothing having inherent meaning, but things having the possibility

of gaining meaning from links to other things. Thus, similarly each photo is not very important but gains importance from its relation to other photos and other acts of sharing and of learning.

This narrative reveals some key ways that the mundane practice of photo-a-day accumulates meaning and contributes to well-being. One aspect is the way that meaning emerges as interest 'spreads'. This is not intended or planned. An effect on meaning and well-being emerges. The process is social; through the way that other actors contribute to co-constructing the wider narrative, often in very small ways, such as liking a photo or naming a bird. As a social practice it implies ethical treatment of others. There is creativity in observing and capturing something beautiful. Something is learned about photography, about birds, but also about the self. Something is also documented and preserved.

### 'A picture but it was just of darkness and blank'

The second narrative was much more introspective and the photos more enigmatic.

*I have certain things I love to take pictures of as well and they've emerged.*

*Because I have albums elsewhere on [a SNS] which are things like lights. I love to take pictures of lights, electric candles, whatever, how they throw and shape other light and shadows in a room I always find endlessly fascinating. So there's a number of pictures of things like candles or open fires or different things. I find things sticking up in the sky quite amusing, cranes radio masts, those sort of things. I find those interesting. So, my regular trends have been there but I think there have also been other things which have, you know, leapt out at me and are different. And I'm just scanning through the list now and, you know, I can see one in the last couple of months was about going to a tip and getting rid of some things , which is what you want to know is... well, you'll probably see what you might perceive to be a gap in the things around late November but that was because I was very close to making an attempt on my own life and had to be taken to hospital. And I took a picture in the waiting room of A and E [Accident and Emergency] and then the next day I did actually take a picture but it was just of darkness and blank. But I did actually take a picture in a dark room, it was just what I felt I was. So, I look back over the period of time and I guess I can see changes for me throughout the time. But then my standard favourites of, you know, how flowers are, you know, spider's web, the intricacies of those things as well.*

*Interviewer: That's interesting because obviously I don't know you very well at all but following the project I felt like I kind of got a bit of a sense of the kind of things that you liked. I have to admit, I was a bit worried when you posted the black photograph. So it's interesting to hear you talk about it in that way.*

*Well, yeah. And, I mean, the picture before is A and E. It's a quiet room. I was far from home. Luckily a friend was nearby. [...] Yeah, it was a terribly stressful time. A relationship literally broke up on that day. I'd not been feeling well anyway. And I look back at it and, in all honesty, if it hadn't have been that my friend was there I wouldn't have been prepared to hand my car keys over. I think I would have just gone off and done it, and certainly earlier in the day that's where I was at. I used to work for [Transport organisation] so I know where I'm going to do it. I know how to make it all fit together. I don't really need to plan it, as it were. [...] But, yeah, the picture the next day after, if you recall is a dog with his head on, well her head actually, the sofa. That is I'm recovering at my friend's house. That's her dog. So, yeah, it kind of tells the story I guess. [...]*

*My health has been quite poor over the year. I've been in and out of psychiatrists. I've been changing medications, as we know, towards the end of it. I was very close to taking my own life. There's something about the rigour of blogging. There's been the rigour of doing this which has been good. There's a meme that goes round the internet that I quite like where it kind of says along the lines of, you know, every time I'm having a bad day I remind myself that so far I've got 100 per cent record of getting through bad days. Some days that's the only thing I can get. That's all I can talk about in the day is that I've done another one. So I guess as I reflect on this it was probably an opportunity to perhaps add some colour to some of those days which were dark or to show that those days, many of them had good things in them. However bad I felt at the time they had something. Every day has got something. It's like there the three good things that you would have heard about. It's self-care, journaling, gratitude, that sort of stuff. I think it's something like that to a degree. It's to find the good thing in the day for me.*

The second participant, who we shall call Jimmy, begins by talking about the kind of photos he likes to take. This has emerged over time and implies a related activity of reviewing one's photos and beginning to see patterns and stories for oneself. There is again something of the sense of

documentation and collection. As for Clive, documenting experience creates an archive of material. And just as for Clive the character of what emerges in the photo collection is unplanned. Unlike the typical self-consciously constructed social media profile the self-definition through photos taken is emergent.

Interrupting the narrative about what types of photos he likes to take, is recollection of a very difficult personal experience. This narrative reveals the potential of photos to capture memories of distressing events, but in visual terms. While the interviewer clearly sensed from the photos that something troubling was going on, the narrative meaning of the four photos taken at this time of extreme personal crisis are enigmatic to the audience: a hospital room, a picture of A&E, a photo of darkness and a picture of a dog with its head on a sofa. Yet for the author the photos do vividly capture the experience. Photos are able to record difficult memories, but the author can withhold the full narrative meaning to a wider audience. This is partly because the associations with a photo can be quite different from anything in the image itself. Indeed, all of Jimmy's work is more enigmatic, for example, he self-consciously chose not to label his photos with words. But another interviewee also talked about a photo of a road sign, which for him recorded a key personal life event. It recorded an important memory, but in a rather discreet way. Photos can operate both as strong narrative links to a past memory yet be enigmatic for the audience. Controlling access to the memory in this way allows the author to capture memories but control how exposed they feel.

Another affordance of the practice is the requirement to keep going: what Jimmy refers to as its rigour. It is interesting the way he links this to discourses of self-care. It is the particular rhythm and reliability of sharing a photograph daily that lends it some power for well-being. It provides a sense of narrative continuity that is powerful in the context of uncertainty. In the context of well-being, there is a sense that consistently repeated routines hold life together.

## Discussion

Although all the interviewees in the study responded to an invitation to talk about photo-a-day in relation to well-being, nearly all said that its benefits to this was not part of their original intention in starting the practice. People understand that something as complex as well-being cannot be easily manipulated intentionally, in the manner of a positive psychology intervention. It was an unintended effect, of a practice often taken up quite lightly.

Equally, although the practice was intensely personal and valued interviewees did not use a psychotherapeutic or psychoanalytic interpretation of their experience, in most cases. In this sense Clive's account is more representative. Quite possibly the story of the elusive birds could be read

psychoanalytically, but this was not apparent in Clive's narrative. Rather it seems to be rooted in hobbyist and leisure discourses, rather than in that around personal relationships.

Taking a photo every day and sharing it, the essence of photo-a-day, does not in itself necessarily impact well-being at all. Nor does it do so outside the context of a somewhat complex social practice that develops around this simple act. The birds story illustrates the rich elaboration of this simple process of going out and taking photos, selecting one to share, uploading it and responding to comments. It is the rich ways taking and sharing photos is used to generate narrative meaning, through the 'spreading of interest' and the accumulation of resonances and reflections that seems to give it its power.

On the surface sharing a photo each day is relatively simple, yet photo-a-day offers a rich set of resources that can be used in many ways narratively. The photoblogs created can have both visual and textual elements. As narratives they also directly include the likes, comments and work of others. The two examples explored here used the available resources in very different ways. Clive had produced a very rich collection of images (e.g. a collection of images of birds) and textual narrative. This was further connected to the endeavours of others (e.g. by being linked to and enhancing other people's bird photo collections and through comments and likes). Jimmy's presentation was much more enigmatic, merely sharing photos, without text.

Such practices are deeply social. The comments of others were a big part of Clive's photoblog narrative, in particular. At a more profound level seeing through the eyes of others was a commonly repeated trope among interviewees implying a strong sense of sharing. The caring character of the community was often remarked upon too. Thus, engaging with others in a "community" seemed to be central to the experience and its impact. It is far from an individualistic experience. At the same time meaning can be somewhat withheld. Jimmy captures, records and shares photos as important moments for future memory, but in a way that does not leave him emotionally exposed.

Value accumulates through the spread of meaning as more and more connections are made. The corpus of material also documents and in some way preserves the experience. The resulting photoblog narratives are complex documents resonating with each other and evidently reflected on closely by participants. Confronting the choice of only a single photo each day forces participants to think carefully about what to keep. This avoids an excess of material on the photoblog and also prompts more reflection on what is being shared and why (Piper Wright). People looked back at their past material and, importantly, its meaning emerges to them as much as to any audience.

Jimmy emphasises the power of the routine of needing to find one photo every day. The sense of continuity and regular accumulation is satisfying and reassuring, an anchor.

Photo-a-day is also social in drawing its meaning from prevalent social discourses. Participants often used a discourse of learning as central to characterising the practice: Learning both about photography and the objects photographed, about others and what they see, and about oneself. We would suggest this reflects the strong cultural value attached to narratives of learning. It also ties into important cultural values about creativity. Taking photos was often seen as inherently valuable because it was ‘creative’.

This analysis points to one way that well-being might be conceptualised within practice theory, though the way that practices generate meaning. Taking up a practice involves many small reconfigurations of daily activity: such as new forms of movement in space (e.g. creating the hide in the toilet), acquiring new material objects (e.g. a bird feeder), having new forms of embodied experience (e.g. aesthetic responses to beautiful birds) and the acquisition of new knowledge (e.g. of birds’ names) and skills (e.g. how to photograph birds). As in the narratives above it may also generate many forms of small and significant social interactions with fellow practitioners. Collectively all these doings and sayings derive meaning from the practice. There is intention to participate in the practice, but many of the outcomes are not intended as such. These derive value from being repeated and offer stability through the routine element of a practice, while allowing some significant variation. Over time these activities accumulate more meaning relationally to memories of practice and to other interlinked practices, in a thickening nexus. Thus, practices contribute to well-being through enriching the meaningfulness of activity. They also provide material for self narratives which talk about individual agency and seek to place the meaningful practice in wider contexts of positive discourses (e.g. around sociality, learning and creativity).

Cieslik conceives happiness as ‘a social, processual and biographical phenomena’ (‘Not smiling’ 6) where ordinary people ‘creatively manage their lives as they navigate constraints and conflicts in an effort to flourish’ (12). For the individuals practising photo-a-day, the practice was a small, mundane but important part of this. Cieslik’s work mostly focuses on major relationships and significant life events. Our work suggests that the accomplishment of wellbeing can also take place partly within mundane leisure and learning practices, where important life dilemmas can also be worked through.

Cieslik (‘Not Smiling’, *Happiness*) does ask questions about how these narratives are shaped by social structures. This was not a central issue posed in our research. However, it is clear to us that photo-a-day is not available to everyone. Photo-a-day is a highly literate practice. Photos are interpreted in a

social context, so it is a community arguably based on particular socially marked forms of visual taste (Bourdieu). It has the hallmarks of a middle-class activity, premised on a certain kind of education and certain tacit forms of taste. Thus, our purpose is not to overly idealise photo-a-day, rather to point to a form of examination that can reveal the way that many mundane practices (increasingly with a digital element) that might contribute to well-being.

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