

# SEVENTEEN

## Visual Research: Issues and Developments

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### About this chapter

This chapter has two principal tasks. In the first place it conducts a stock-taking exercise of the ways in which visual research has traditionally been conducted. I focus in particular on more recent participant-centred studies and offer some reasons why they have become so dominant. A common feature of virtually all existing modes of visual enquiry is that they focus in some way upon analysis of photographic and other forms of images. The chapter's second goal is to suggest that this is unduly restrictive and that visual enquiry needs to consider a range of other sources of data besides the two-dimensional photographic image. I outline an alternative approach that focuses instead on a much broader conception of the visible aspects of culture and social life, and the contexts in which these are observed or encountered.

### Keywords

visual, image, photography, photo-elicitation, photo-interview, observation, space, place

Interest in ‘researching the visual’ – understood either as a substantive domain of enquiry or as a distinctive set of methodological techniques – shows no signs of abating. The visual realm has become not only a focus of concern in its traditional homelands of anthropology and sociology, but also something which has engaged the interests of scholars in many disciplines which had previously shown little or no interest in this topic. The complaint, once regularly voiced by visual sociologists, that their speciality was marginalized and ignored by mainstream social scientists can clearly no longer be justified. The plethora of theoretical and methodological discussions, handbooks and edited collections, not to mention original research articles, which have appeared over the last decade or so (e.g. Banks, 2018; Pauwels, 2015; Pauwels and Mannay, 2019; Rose, 2016) testifies to the legitimacy of this field within the broader domain of qualitative research practice.

Viewed historically, however, there has not always been agreement as to what visual enquiry entails or how it should be conducted. Simply put, there has been a diversity of ways of doing visual research, and newcomers have been presented with the necessity of making strategic choices as to how best to proceed given their research interests and questions. Perhaps the most basic is the decision about whether they should become photographers to generate the data they seek to analyse or alternatively confine their attention to images or representations that are already in existence. The profusion of images readily available on social media and photo-sharing platforms (Facebook, Instagram, Pinterest, Snapchat, Imgur, etc.) seems increasingly likely to see the demise of the former social documentary approach. But more recently it has been argued that the field has moved beyond these contrasting foundational approaches, and in the view of one influential commentator (Rose, 2014, 2016) a consensus has emerged. Rose suggests that we should now speak of ‘visual research methods’ (VRM), a term which signifies that a broader range of techniques is essential to successful visual enquiry, most importantly, as we shall see, methods which involve the visual researcher *talking* with her research subjects. However, before turning to examine this in more detail it is perhaps helpful to begin with an overview of the various modalities through which visual enquiry has been, and in part continues to be, conducted. My discussion focuses primarily on visual research within the social sciences. Visual enquiry is also undertaken in a range of disciplines that are more culturally focused, such as film, television or audience studies, but these fields are generally not informed by social science theories. Although this is not an exhaustive typology, I argue that the vast bulk of visual social research falls into one of four principal modes or approaches. Some of these have existed almost from the inception of visual enquiry as a recognizable field; others are of more recent provenance. In summary form, these approaches are as follows:

1. *The use of researcher-produced visual materials - the researcher as photographer.* The generation of photographic images, and to some extent film, was the traditional mode of conducting visual research. Photography has been principally associated with ethnographers in the fields of social anthropology and sociology and has been variously understood as an additional means of documenting social and cultural settings and processes. Historically, still photography played a prominent part in the development of visual enquiry (Becker, 1974; Wagner, 1979) and there are some studies

(e.g. Bateson and Mead, 1942) that are widely respected as exemplars of the craft. However, it has frequently faced charges that it fails to meet the rigour required by the standards of social science research and cannot be readily distinguished from the illustrative use of images associated with photojournalism. Today this form of ethnographic still photographic work is much less popular, and its prospects seem relatively stagnant. It appears to have been largely replaced by work conducted in other modes, particularly participant-centred approaches.

2. *The analysis of existing materials - decoding or coding and counting.* Alternatively, visual research can be undertaken on the numerous existing images. The ubiquity of visual imagery has been seen as one of the defining features of our postmodern societies, and the rise of internet-based visual digital culture has witnessed a dramatic increase in the sheer volume of images and representations that are available, as well as facilitating their ease of access to these materials. A variety of methods are on offer for the investigation of existing or 'found' visual data as it is sometimes referred to. A great deal of research has traditionally been conducted on print media content, such as advertising images, primarily by cultural studies scholars who are interested in decoding their hidden ideological and cultural messages. Much of this work has been carried out on single case studies or small samples from which wider generalizations may often be difficult to make. However, the extensive records which are generally available, for example in the form of newspaper and magazines archives, mean that such material can be subject to more rigorous investigation via traditional methods of content analysis. Although attention has more recently shifted to the investigation of internet-based visual imagery and the voluminous images posted on social media and photo-sharing websites, it has not fundamentally altered the ways in which researchers seek to analyse this content.
3. *The use of video technology - seeing social interaction in detail.* Approaches to visual enquiry that rely on the use of video recording provide a third distinctive mode in which visual research is currently being undertaken. Despite the increasing use of video as a private or domestic media technology, the systematic use of video for research purposes poses particular challenges. As noted above, ethnographic film making did play a part in the early development of disciplines such as social anthropology, but for a variety of reasons it fell out of favour. Isolated instances of film being used in other social science disciplines to study aspects of human movement and work activities can be found throughout the twentieth century, but it is only comparatively recently, with the availability of affordable digital recording equipment, that the potential video offers for social researchers has been recognized. However, the use of video technology appears to be marked by a fundamental analytical division. One branch (e.g. Pink, 2007) has sought to disassociate itself from the earlier scientific-realist appropriation of the moving image and instead advocates its use largely as a tool for conducting reflexive or experimental ethnographic research with the video recording typically viewed as a collaborative undertaking between researcher and researched. In contrast, a second group of researchers, those working within the ethnomethodological tradition, see video's potential as lying precisely in its ability to capture the embodied details of social life - the 'elusive phenomena' (Heath et al., 2010: 5; see also Heath, this volume) comprising everyday interactional conduct. In this tradition the use of video has been equated with the role that the microscope has played in the biological sciences.
4. *Participant-centred approaches - recruiting the respondent in the analysis of visual materials.* The defining feature of work in this modality is that it involves the research subjects actively participating at some point in the research process rather than remaining as passive objects for the researcher's camera as in the earlier social documentary tradition. The extent of this involvement is variable, ranging from being invited to comment on visual material in an interview, through to more extensive engagement as image producers, photographing sub-cultural worlds that are largely inaccessible to the researcher. These different approaches have been given a variety of labels such as 'photo-elicitation', 'auto-photography', 'photovoice' or 'visual storytelling'. Involving research participants in producing

and commenting on their own visual material was first undertaken in pioneering anthropological research but in recent years participatory visual approaches have become popular in sociology in fields such as adolescence and youth studies, health and illness, race and ethnicity, and gender relations. More generally they have been identified as a possible means for achieving an emancipatory style of qualitative research among scholars investigating marginalized or subordinate groups (Packard, 2008).

Space does not permit a detailed discussion of each of these modalities. The pioneering social documentary tradition in visual sociology appears to be of limited relevance today as it has been largely eclipsed by the participant-centred approaches. Becker's classical discussions of the relationship between photography and sociology (e.g. Becker, 1974, 2002) can still be profitably read today but they retain most relevance for the historian of the discipline. The analysis of existing images has received extensive coverage in the literature and there are useful discussions and illustrations of the two principal methodological approaches (semiotics and content analysis) that have been adopted for the investigation of this material readily available elsewhere (e.g. Ali, 2004; Lutz and Collins, 1993). The use of video technology to capture interactional conduct is a highly specialized field and as it is the subject of a separate chapter (Heath, in this volume) I shall not provide further comment on this.

Instead I propose to consider the developments that have assumed an unexpected prominence on the visual research agenda over the last decade or so. At the heart of this new agenda is the active participation of the research subjects. Although images might still be taken (by researcher or by participant), less is made of the visual material *per se* and rather more on what the research subjects are motivated to say about these images. This is a change of profound importance and one that I suspect would sit uneasily with the social documentary pioneers. Rather than their photographic work enjoying central place in the research process – and carrying the analytic burden – the new agenda places the research subjects and their interpretations of the images at the heart of the investigation. Indeed Rose (2014: 28) has gone as far as claiming that now 'Almost all VRM [visual research methods] involve talk between the researcher and the researched'. This is not an exaggeration. The focus on talk has become so prevalent now that it can often be difficult to assess whether a particular publication can be construed as a contribution to visual enquiry. Whereas once a visual sociological article could virtually always be identified by the inclusion of photographic images these are now often seen as optional extras clearly subordinate to whatever comments they have generated. It is talk about the images or talk about issues touched off by the images that is now seen as essential. This epistemological shift in the form of knowledge that can be generated through visual enquiry has come about at a staggering pace. As recently as 2002 Harper offered a useful overview of participatory approaches, largely covering photo-elicitation methods. A measure of the growth of this style of visual research practice can be seen in the fact that he was able to individually comment on all of the then published studies. Such a feat would be inconceivable today.

So, what lies behind the exponential growth of these participatory visual studies? At least part of the answer no doubt lies in the fashionable currents – reflexivity, postcolonialism, empowerment – informing the wider social science agenda, the challenges these pose for established research protocols and the undermining of the authority of the researcher as the sole repository of knowledge. But I would suggest that there are more mundane matters at play in the shift towards the participatory visual agenda. Put simply, eliciting talk from your research subjects can be a reassuring and generally productive analytical gambit for a visual researcher who may be uncertain as to how to proceed with a purely visual study. By scaffolding their enquiries on the tried and tested techniques of the interview method, participatory visual researchers are provided with a means by which they can generate material (talk) that is recognizable as data and perhaps more to the point, readily analysable. But does this come at a cost for the integrity of such studies as ‘visual’? Before we consider this matter, let us look first at the practical details of doing participatory visual enquiry for this also gives us some clues as to their popularity.

## PARTICIPATORY APPROACHES: CORE THEMES AND TECHNIQUES

In recent years qualitative visual researchers have embraced participatory methodologies in ever increasing numbers. Studies drawing on photo-elicitation, photovoice, photo-interviewing, auto-photography and so on have been conducted on homeless people (Johnsen et al., 2008), socially excluded black youth (Wright et al., 2010), coping strategies among urban youth (Rose et al., 2018), chronic disease self-management in adolescents (Drew et al., 2010), women’s experience of their postnatal body shape (Nash, 2014), participatory health research with children (Abma and Schrijver, 2019), prostate cancer survivors (Olliffe and Bottorff, 2007), personal space in organizations (Vince and Warren, 2012) and identity construction in mature-age body builders (Phoenix, 2010). These studies, and many others like them, follow a very similar format. Most exponents agree that there is a basic format for much of this research involving six steps or ingredients, and although not all of these are included in every participatory visual study, for ease of exposition I outline each of these steps with illustrations from some of the studies referred to above.

*Step 1* is the recruitment of, and an initial interview with, the research participants. The purpose of the interview is to explain the aims of the research and why the respondents have been approached. Typically, at this stage there is no, or only minimal, discussion of the role photography will play in the research; instead the focus is on the broader questions to which the eventual photographs will play a part in answering.

*Step 2* involves providing the research participants with a camera as well as some instruction in its use if this is required. Traditionally most researchers have preferred to use some form of single-use or disposable camera. The assumption here seems to be to minimize the

degree of researcher control of the images and to maximize the 'spontaneity' or unedited character of the visual material which is generated. For example, in their auto-photographic study of socially excluded black youth in the UK, Wright et al. (2010) gave disposable cameras to their research participants and simply asked them to take pictures of 'family, friends and anyone else who has been a source of support and people they enjoyed being with'. In other cases where the research question is more specific, the researcher may exercise more control over this stage. For example, in their Toronto-based study of children's experience of their geographic locales, Fusco et al. (2012) recruited two groups: the first who were 'active' (those who cycled or walked) in their journey to school and a second group who were 'non-active (driven by parents). Each child was asked to take a series of photographs that they felt illustrated key features of their journey to and from school. In summary, Fusco et al. found that the photographs of the active children exhibited a finer sense of both the built environment (curbs, the contours of sidewalks, signage) and nature (trees, gardens, flowers). This led them to suggest that the non-active school journey might be an instance of a wider contemporary phenomenon – 'the extinction of experience' – an estrangement from nature in a fast-moving world.

*Step 3* is for the photographs to be developed and, in some cases, for the research subjects to write brief comments about them prior to meeting with the researcher for a second time. Several researchers note that this can be a very time-consuming process, particularly if the research involves marginalized groups. In their study of homeless people in two sites in the UK, Johnsen et al. (2008) comment that the need of some of their participants to find somewhere safe to eat and/or feed a 'habit' inevitably outweighed their desire to complete the research exercises. A number of their participants failed to return their cameras, some reported that they were lost or stolen (and they add that it is not unrealistic to assume that some may have been sold). However, assuming that the cameras are successfully returned and the film developed, a crucial phase in participatory visual design then needs to be confronted concerning the issue of respondent anonymity and/or ownership of the images. Drew et al. (2010) took particular care to ensure that their research participants were able to make decisions about whether the photographs they had taken could be incorporated into the project data. A written information sheet stressed that the adolescent would be the first to view the developed images and that they would have an opportunity at the start of the interview to remove any images they did not want the researcher to see. In contrast, Johnsen et al. (2008) approached the issue of image inclusion in a different way. Their research participants were provided with a disposable camera and asked to carry this with them for a week and to take pictures of the places that they utilized in everyday life and/or that were in some way important to them. However, upon return of the cameras two sets of photographs were developed – one for the research participants to keep and one for the research team's records.

*Step 4* involves the researcher carrying out a second interview with the participants during which the photographs they have taken are discussed in detail. All researchers comment on the importance of this step and how the presence of the visual material serves

to facilitate the interview process and elicit verbal material that may not otherwise have surfaced. In their study of prostate cancer survivors, Oliffe and Bottorff (2007) note the general reluctance of men to admit to, let alone talk about, illness and discuss a number of ways in which the photographs helped to overcome this. A number of their respondents dwelt on the objects or possessions depicted in the photos and this helped generate a sense of shared 'men's talk' within the overall formality of the interview. At other times when the topic of the interview turned to more sensitive matters, such as the specific details of their recovery or their feelings of mortality, the men 'found respite and refuge in the photographs' and, by speaking in the third person about others they had encountered during hospitalization, were able to distance themselves from the overall cancer experience.

*Step 5* is the actual analysis of both the photographs and the interview materials in accordance with some established social scientific technique or procedure, or with the aim of exploring a particular theoretical concept or issue. There is considerable variability to be found here and the decision as to how to proceed is largely determined by the initial research question(s). The techniques chosen can be either quantitative or qualitative or perhaps some combination. One auto-photographic study, which employed a systematic quantitative research design, was a large-scale comparative investigation of children's photographic practices (Sharples et al., 2003). In this study a total of 180 children from three different age levels (7, 11 and 15) recruited from five European countries were provided with single-use cameras. The resulting photographs could be understood in terms of two axes – one which differentiated between photographs taken indoors as opposed to outdoors, and a second dimension which distinguished between photographs of people and those of objects or scenes – and where the photographs were located on these axes was significantly shaped by the age and gender of the children. For example, the photographs of the older girls were most likely to feature their friends. Sharples et al. argued that their research had challenged the view that children were immature or untutored users of cameras. Children's photographs should not be seen simply as their 'view of the world' but as an important means for them to articulate their sense of identity in relation to both parents and friends.

Quantitative participatory visual studies are, however, the exception and it is more common to find qualitative or interpretive approaches used in the analysis. In her auto-photographic study of mature age body builders, Phoenix (2010) arrives at the concept of the 'body-self' after reviewing the photographs her respondents had taken and their commentaries on these. Three different 'body-self' identities were revealed: a 'healthy body-self', a 'performing body-self' and a 'relational body-self'. The diverse identities that her mature-age body builders exhibited appeared to challenge 'stereotypical assumptions' that such people were obsessed with their weight training and generally lead anti-social lives. In their study of marginalized black youth, Wright et al. turned to Goffman's well-known distinction between 'front stage' and 'back stage' regions (Goffman, 1959) in their analysis of the images and the comments made by their respondents during the interviews. Front stage regions comprised 'public spaces, schools, parks, streets, city centre' and so on.

Back stage regions, in contrast, are those spaces such as family homes, bedrooms, living rooms and relationships with friends. Wright et al. suggest that the limited number of photographs taken of front regions might be one way in which the young people tried to account for their exclusion. In contrast the more numerous photos of their back regions typically depicted relationships with friends that were a source of support in managing their perceived exclusion.

*Step 6*, the final step, concerns the way that the completed research is presented to a wider audience and this involves decisions about the balance between a focus on ‘the talk’, the interview discussions about the photographs, and a focus of the images. As I have observed, it is the former that is given priority with the visual material used as illustrations of key conceptual points. In some cases, the visual material may not even be included. The absence of images may be the result of cost constraints; publishers of social science journals (and books) are often reluctant to include high-quality illustrations and colour images are generally out of the question. A further factor is that because the images have not been professionally taken, they may not be of a suitable standard for publication. Finally, of course, given that empowerment is seen as a major dimension to this research, if the research subjects are reluctant to have their images viewed by a wider community then authors are unlikely to challenge this. However, for a contrasting view that empowerment is not so readily achieved in these studies, see Switzer (2018).

There seems little doubt that this style of visual enquiry is likely to attract more adherents into the future. As digital technologies become commonplace the various steps outlined above may become streamlined or eliminated. For example, in her study of young Indian women in Queensland, Volpe (2019) found that her respondents readily volunteered photos that were already on their mobile phones and referred to these in discussing their experiences as members of a diasporic community. As noted earlier, for commentators such as Rose, a consensus has emerged that these participatory visual research methods are now the default way of proceeding. For the reasons I have outlined – its appeal to qualitative researchers from many disciplines, its natural affinities with established qualitative methods such as the in-depth interview or focus group – it is not an exaggeration to suggest that eventually it may come to be seen as the sole way in which researchers who wish to employ photography as a research method must proceed. To the extent that the proliferation of participatory visual research has succeeded in having visual methodological concerns brought to the attention of the wider social scientific community then it can be welcomed. But has it also come at a cost? Glancing through the participant-centred studies reviewed earlier, it seems clear that they are preoccupied with finding answers for a vast array of disciplinary-specific research questions but the answers are primarily found in respondent talk. However, the extent to which they are also seeking to contribute to a cumulative advance in our theoretical and methodological understanding of ‘the visual’ as a particular modality is not at all apparent. It seems ironic to say the least that only a few decades since the pioneers of visual sociology urged us to consider new methods of generating data by canvassing the explanatory potential of photography and image making,



visual methods appear to have attenuated to the point that they are in danger of becoming almost indistinguishable from the established research techniques.

## VISUAL RESEARCH BEYOND THE PHOTOGRAPHIC IMAGE

Whether they are generating their own images, analysing existing visual material or eliciting respondent talk about their self-generated photographs, visual researchers are united in the belief that the image is central to their field. In the remainder of the chapter I want to consider what an agenda for visual research that goes beyond the photograph might entail. The principal message I want to convey is the need to think of visual enquiry as embracing *more* than the study of images. Elsewhere with colleagues (Emmison and Smith, 2000; Emmison et al., 2012) I offer book-length explorations of this issue and so the following observations must of necessity be schematic. Since we first presented these ideas over a decade ago, signs have emerged that our message has begun to be taken note of by the wider visual research community. For example, in his proposal for an 'integrated framework' for visual social research, Luc Pauwels argues that the field is founded on 'the idea that valid scientific insight in society can be acquired by observing, analysing and theorizing its visual manifestations: behaviour of people and material products of culture' (2010: 546). What is intriguing about this statement is that it contains no reference to visual enquiry being predicated on the camera or the photograph. Formulations such as this would have been inconceivable 30 years or so ago when visual sociology re-emerged as a speciality after a lengthy period of quiescence. Moreover, throughout her overview of visual methodologies Gillian Rose (2007) uses the phrase 'visual object' interchangeably with the term 'image'. Although Rose doesn't offer a precise explanation of what a 'visual object' is, the point that she wishes to make seems clear enough: visual researchers need to embrace data which go beyond the typical photograph or two-dimensional image with which they have been traditionally preoccupied. Rose confesses that her book will deal with a 'narrow selection of things visual' and suggests that the methods she outlines could equally well apply to 'buildings, built landscape and sculpture' (2007: xv). Pauwels, in the article to which I have already referred, ventures into similar territory though even more explicitly. He points out that the phenomenon of material culture, which constitutes one of the core empirical referents of visual enquiry:

includes artefacts and objects (boardrooms, home settings, art objects) and larger visible structures (e.g. urban areas, cemeteries) that may provide useful information about both the material and the immaterial traits (in as much as they embody values and norms) of a given society. (Pauwels, 2010: 553)

Both Pauwels and Rose allude in these statements to a visual research practice that extends far beyond the photographic image. However, neither of them looks systematically

at what this requires. In our earlier, more detailed, consideration of these issues we advance this agenda through a number of key propositions. The first, and less contentious, is to think of images not simply as a realm of representation but also as containing information which can be brought to bear on the investigation of social and cultural processes. It is this theme – that the visual is a realm of data, not simply a domain amenable to cultural or interpretive modes of enquiry – which is at the heart of this alternative programme. In part, thinking of the visual as data may require going beyond the reliance on the photograph and to consider the possibilities inherent in other forms of visual material of the kind we refer to as ‘two-dimensional’. For example, newspaper cartoons offer unexpected insights into the wider political and economic systems in which they are located (Emmison et al., 2012: 81–91). Other forms of two-dimensional visual data such as directional signs, maps and instructional diagrams can be used to explicate the claims of ethnomethodologists about the significance of common-sense reasoning. Here the focus is not so much on the discovery of cultural meanings by the academic analyst but rather the ways in which ordinary actors use or make sense of such visual information and incorporate it into their everyday practical routines (see also Prior, in this volume).

However, the equating of ‘the visual’ only with such two-dimensional images is also curiously short-sighted and unduly restrictive. Social life is visual in diverse and counter-intuitive ways. Consequently, there are many more forms of visual data than the photograph, the advertisement or the cartoon. Accordingly, we proposed that visual research should also recognize the existence of three-dimensional data. We have in mind here the elements of material culture that operate as purposive or accidental signifiers in social life. These range from the items of everyday life in the home which carry personal meanings to those in public spaces, such as statues or monuments, which represent official public discourses. Our argument is that such objects provide a rich vein of visual information that can be read for clues about selves and societies. While they can be analysed in traditional semiotic terms, they are also implicated in human actions. Object-centred visual enquiry has obvious methodological affinities with an older – and these days somewhat neglected and unfashionable – branch of social research, the use of unobtrusive or non-reactive measures (e.g. Webb et al., 1999). The sheer visibility of many kinds of objects means that it is possible to explore social life covertly. Because respondents are not required for many kinds of object-based research we can circumvent the usual problem of normative responding – providing the researcher a socially acceptable answer. This may be particularly useful in researching fields such as crime and deviance or urban disorder.

Pushing further down this analytical path we also argue that the physical spaces and places in which humans conduct their social lives – suburban homes and gardens, educational institutions, shopping malls, boardrooms, as well as larger geographical spaces – parks, city centres and the like – are also amenable to visual enquiry. Such settings constitute

'lived visual data' where both actions and sign systems can be read to unpack their cultural significance. A dual focus is possible looking at both the place or setting itself and on the ways in which action is patterned in response to the physical locale – for example, 'successful' public spaces are generally those that encourage or enable interaction (Whyte, 1980). Finally, of course, these spaces and places are generally populated by humans in interaction and this in turn provides us with a further analytic category of data. People are 'living visual data' and interaction in contemporary urban environments is significantly regulated by norms about display, dress, eye contact. Clothing, gesture and body language are signs that we use to establish identity and negotiate public situations. To research these one does not necessarily require the fine-grained power of the video recording. Simple observation, provided it is theoretically informed, can offer a way to answer diverse questions about the ordering of human conduct.

In all of these areas there are rich supplies of material for the visual researcher. In giving up the idea that visual research is only the study of photographs or advertisements then, a far broader range of data becomes available for investigation. From this vantage point visual enquiry is no longer just the study of the image, but rather the study of the seen and observable. Photographs may be helpful sometimes in recording the seen dimensions of social life. Usually they are not necessary. Our insistence on the need to think beyond 'the photograph' in broadening the agenda for visual enquiry was one which caused considerable consternation within the established visual research community (e.g. Wagner, 2002; Prosser, 2008), but it is one that is essential if visual research is to genuinely connect with the broader themes in social and cultural enquiry.

In moving towards an agenda for a revitalized visual enquiry which is respectful of the spirit (if not the letter) of the pioneers of the field I have argued that too much of what is offered up as visual research relies upon a largely unreflexive use of the photographic image. A failure to distinguish between the disparate kinds of information that photographs inevitably contain and the use of photographs as the means by which this information can be disseminated has led to a confusion about the status of visual enquiry and a failure to appreciate its divergent theoretical possibilities. If we move away from the common-sense equation of visual research as a purely image-based activity and embrace the claims I have advanced here, then it is possible to regard many aspects of twentieth-century social science, and many of the major figures (e.g. Simmel, the Chicago School, Goffman, Foucault) in these disciplines, as contributing to the development of visual research. Thinking of visual research more as the study of the seen and the observable, rather than as something which can only be conducted through recording technology, can facilitate important conceptual connections to be made between 'the visual' as a domain of enquiry and the work of many classical and contemporary theorists alike who might not otherwise be regarded as contributing to this field. In addition, this may well open up visual enquiry to students whose substantive research interests might otherwise lead them to overlook the possibility of visual methodologies.

## CHAPTER SUMMARY

- Visual research traditionally involved the taking of photographs or alternatively working with existing images and representations.
- More recently the subjects of the research have become participants in the process, often taking their own images that are then the subject of discussion.
- These participant-centred studies are now the principal way visual research methods are undertaken.
- However, the increasing reliance on generating respondent talk has meant that such studies are often indistinguishable from mainstream interview techniques.
- Visual enquiry, however, can extend beyond the use of the two-dimensional image and embrace objects, places and settings.
- The sheer number of images available on digital platforms are a rich resource for visual researchers but their analysis is likely to require quantitative skills.

## FUTURE PROSPECTS

The use of visual data and visual methods are here to stay but future developments are not easy to predict and are likely to be uneven. A major growth area is almost certainly to be in the use of video given the affordability of new digital technologies and their widespread adoption outside the academy. But the gulf between the experimental ethnographic use of video and the multi-modal analysis of interaction by ethnomethodologists and conversation analysts is one that seems likely to remain. The possibilities for conducting research on the world of digital imagery are immense, but paradoxically some of the most animated discussions are to be found among quantitative researchers where it has been subsumed under the concept of 'big data' and the challenges that this profusion of online social and transactional data poses for the viability of established empirical sociology (Burrows and Savage, 2014; Mills, 2018). Consequently, visual research that utilizes social media and photo-sharing websites (e.g. Murthy et al., 2016) is likely to be developed in the first instance by quantitative social scientists who possess the necessary analytic skills. Qualitative researchers could be involved but this may be as members of interdisciplinary or multimethod teams. Finally, the principal growth in qualitative visual enquiry is likely to be in the use of participatory methods but with the danger that such approaches will increasingly come to resemble mainstream interview techniques and that the distinctive character of the visual mode for conducting research will accordingly be lost.

## Study questions

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1. What are some of the problems with basing visual research solely on the use of photographs?
2. Do you think participant-centred visual studies are advancing the methodology of visual research?

3. In what ways are the participants in participant-centred studies likely to be 'empowered'?
4. Identify an example of two-dimensional visual data other than a photograph and suggest how it could be analysed.

## Recommended reading

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Banks, M. (2018) *Using Visual Data in Qualitative Research* (2nd edn). London: Sage.

Provides an overview of the ways in which visual data, primarily in the form of images, can be utilized in qualitative research. Suitable for both advanced undergraduate and postgraduate students.

Brighenti, A.M. (2010) *Visibility in Social Theory and Social Research*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

A challenging book which explores notions of the visual, visuality and visibility and argues for their centrality in understanding contemporary social life.

Emmison, M., Smith, P. and Mayall, M. (2012) *Researching the Visual* (2nd edn). London: Sage.

Offers an innovative way of conducting visual research that extends the field beyond the use of photographic images and shows how visual enquiry can connect with many of the core theoretical traditions in the social sciences.

Margolis, E. and Pauwels, L. (eds) (2011) *The SAGE Handbook of Visual Research Methods*. London: Sage.

A comprehensive edited handbook that addresses a range of visual research methods and debates, with contributions from many of the leading figures in the field.

Pauwels, L. (2015) *Reframing Visual Social Science: Towards a More Visual Sociology and Anthropology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

A well-balanced account of the practices of contemporary visual research that covers the social sciences, the humanities and the behavioural sciences and the need to integrate knowledge of the visual in these fields.

Rose, G. (2016) *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to Researching with Visual Materials* (4th edn). London: Sage.

Provides a systematic overview of the various methodological approaches that can be utilized for conducting research into visual culture. Covers both qualitative and some quantitative techniques.

## Recommended online resources

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The Visual Sociology Group of the British Sociological Association:

[www.visualsociology.org.uk](http://www.visualsociology.org.uk)

International Visual Sociology Organization (IVSA):

[www.visualsociology.org](http://www.visualsociology.org)

Mass Observation Project:  
www.massobs.org.uk

Photovoice website:  
www.photovoice.org

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