Using Visual Methods in Social Science Research
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Introduction
Before we take our first steps, speak our first words or have our first conversation, visual communication is one of our primary ways of engaging with the world around us. As we grow it becomes one of the most prolific forms of communication. This is particularly the case in the contemporary world in which we are increasingly ‘hyper-visual’ beings (Knowles & Sweetman 2004: 1–2). Visual imagery is at the centre of consumer culture: billboards, styling magazines and a plethora of advertising, to name a few, inform us of new fashions and trends. Social networking sites such as Facebook, on which over 300 million images uploaded each day, have begun to render our relationships with people increasingly visual (Uimonen 2013: 122). Our online selves take on fluid postmodern forms that grow and change as we add and subtract new imagery. An online self that is centred around imagery. How we come to connect to the modern world and express ourselves within it is continually crafted and unmade through unending visual sensibilities.

Likewise, the visual image has become central to many of the contemporary social and political movements throughout the world and to how we understand them. Climate change is one such case. Images of the earth from outer space, floating like a small blue ball against a backdrop of endless darkness, polar bears on melting Arctic ice shelves, forests engulfed in flame, coastlines devastated by tsunamis and coal power plants spewing out oceans of smog all help to inform how we conceive the world. Such imagery has played a large role in transforming our understanding of nature and the world. Where once we saw hostility and wildness, the modern use of imagery has come to unveil a certain fragility and human neglect.

Visual research involves the use of visual capturing technologies (such as cameras) and already existing visual data to elicit meanings of the social world. While visual methods often utilise several media, such as moving images, film, photographs, art, drawings and paintings, in seeking to understand the social world, this chapter focuses on the use of photography and the use of the still image – the photograph – in social research.
Visual methods in the social sciences

Historically, visual data within the field of social science research has, at best, maintained a dubious position. Until recently visual methods were commonly seen as a form of art and aesthetics, rather than a legitimate research method (Harper 1998: 28–9). That the visual can construct a personhood seemingly out of our imaginations, such as those on Facebook, that it can transform our perception of the planet, and become a tool of social and political activism, largely as a result of its emotional, artistic and aesthetic characteristic, leaves it open to all kinds of critiques and concerns of non-objectivity. As a result, the social sciences have typically seen photography and other visual methods as non-scientific, subjective, relative and emotive. This is not to say that photography has not been used in social research; rather, it is to suggest that it is only recently that visual research has been used for purposes other than simple illustration. More recently, social sciences have come to embrace visual methods as a valid strategy of social enquiry and as a way that has the potential to illuminate parts of the social world that other methods may be less equipped to explain.

Human culture, social forces and society as objects of study are not often so easily measured as the general matter of geography, physics and chemistry that follow more static laws. Social scientists, being concerned with explaining the social, also need to be aware of forces that are, at times, inherently artistic, creative, imaginative, subjective, socially constructed, changeable and less explicitly empirical. Social flows that compose, motivate and organise human behaviour often do not necessarily follow the laws of anything. When it comes to humans and human culture, it is often the inner, the emotive and the subjective that motivate social change and human behaviour, areas that the visual has a greater capacity to access. There is another key value of visual methods, one that is focused on the outside rather than the inside.

Where methods such as interviews, observations and experimentation tend to break things down, focusing on smaller and smaller parts of the social, visual methods tend to hold many of these social forces together (not all, as you will see later). To use a metaphor: if society is represented as a painting, researchers would, classically, ignore its totality and focus instead on the colours, hues, saturations, shapes and densities to explain the meaning of that painting. While this works well for atoms, the rules of physics and for neurons, when it comes to society there is a danger of losing the meaning of that painting (society) as a whole. When it comes to dealing with
social forces, the object of research is not always the sum of its parts. When it comes to societies it is just as important to understand the makeup of that society as a whole as it is the individual parts that make up its constitution. In which case we can muster two concerns about empiricism or, better said, two key supports for visual methods. First, visual methods have the capacity to access the inner, the emotive, the creative and the subjective. Second, the visual has the ability to hold things together and give wider meanings to social flows as a whole.

Social scientists need an approach to research that engages with the complexity of human actors, social forces and cultural dynamics while simultaneously maintaining the requirements of legitimate scientific and academic research. Visual data produce a unique avenue to gain access to inner feelings, memories and forms of information that are often less accessible via other methods (Harper 2002: 13). It is for such reasons that they are increasingly seen as a stand-alone approach that offers valuable data (Harper 1994). In an environment that has been dominated by words and text, visual methods offer a way to uncover new visual meanings.

**A few cases for the usefulness of visual methods**

When entangled in field research social forces often come at us so quickly and heterogeneously that we are unable to maintain our hold on to them all at any one time. In recent research I photographed human movement in public space. This was particularly useful around traffic lights where it allowed me to identify the quick glances and looks of annoyance towards J-walkers. By using photography I was able to understand more fully micro behaviours, judgements, annoyances and social responses that may have otherwise gone unnoticed. In this way, the still image pacifies the complexity of social life, gives us an opportunity to re-analyse social behaviours and to delve deeper, with more reflection and analysis, into those moments.

**Box 1: The unique adequacy of the still image**

Among the most important uses of the still image or photograph is the ability to capture a piece of time, freezing still the complex social forces that the camera is pointed at. As a result, the photo offers myriad social science research applications. A single photo can record social behaviour, be a reference to past events, inspire lost memories or record past events. The still image enables us to capture social life in
ways that words cannot. Whereas an author must assemble any words that exist, imagery is already embedded with meanings, emotionality and a degree of self-explanation. In this way it has a uniquely inherent equality, universality and accessibility to it as an explanatory tool of social life. The still image enables us to connect to social phenomena in ways that transcend verbal and textual accounts. There is a great scope for the still image to come to reconceptualise and add visual layers to the academic world. Our understandings of globalisation, climate change, gender, consumerism, poverty, whiteness and class are all possible concepts that may be opened up in new ways to visual representations and explanations. The still image has a unique adequacy that words and texts often struggle to provide.

While the still image helps translate complex micro social actions within one timeframe, so too does it effectively express social change across time. Photography works well to track bodily change, changes of identity, ageing, environmental developments and disaster studies. The power of the still image to freeze time enables important reflections, memories and tracking of social change. In a project in Mississippi after Hurricane Katrina in 2005, Burton, Mitchell and Cuttler (2011) used photography to capture 131 sites and repeat photographed those same sites every six months for three years. After that time, when they compared those photographs, they were able to track the rate of community recovery, rebuilding and social change.

In another project, in which the still image was used to track the change of time, Pillar and Schwartz (1996) used photographs to convey the changes in the life of a man who was experiencing the final months of dying. Seventy-seven year old Professor Emeritus Morrie Schwartz, after being diagnosed with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, was photographed throughout those final months of his life. After only one page of text the article masterly conveys the power of acceptance, community spirit and living while dying through nineteen that are accompanied by short excerpts to contextualise those images. Each of these studies uses the still image to capture social, environmental and life changes in ways that texts would struggle to convey, or would come to convey in less inherently explicit ways. In this manner the still image is a powerful tool of explanation, analysis and social storytelling that gives visual descriptions to social phenomena.
Another important use of visual methods is to access worlds that have previously been closed off or, at best, have been very difficult to enter through interviews, observations and text alone. Bolton, Pole and Mizen (2001) gave child workers between the ages of 11 to 16 disposable cameras to photograph their everyday life at work. By placing a camera in the hands of children, rather than using them themselves, not only did the researchers obtain a visual record of their everyday lives—an area of social enquiry that is typically very difficult to access—but they also gained insights into what those children perceived as most significant. In this way, the visual method was used to uncover closed off social worlds, in this case that of child labour, and to gain valuable insights into what participants subjectively attribute value to within those worlds.

Analysing the particular presence of certain visual data within society is also another valuable application of visual research. Butler (2013) analysed public imagery of children in the Australian floods of 2010–11. She revealed certain social sentiments within the public sphere around climate change anxiety, natural disaster insecurity, environmental uncertainty and the prevalence of wide-scale social risk phobia. Her research demonstrates how visual methods do not necessarily require the researcher to enter the field and collect their own photographs. Rather, by using imagery from the public and private spheres, researchers can identify social trends, perceptions and practices.

There are many other ways visual methods have been utilised in social research. Whether expressing the world in new ways, opening up closed off worlds, accessing the subjective views of individuals, exploring historical comparisons, public perceptions or any of the multiplicity of applications of visual methods, they are most certainly an approach to social research that offers a unique and valuable contribution. Through their use in social research, visual methods can come to reconstruct—or what Harper (2002: 20–1) has referred to as ‘break frames’—our understandings of previously text-centric concepts. The possibility of visualising concepts such as class, identity, gender, globalisation, risk, whiteness, indignity, material cultures, housing and disaster studies promise exciting new ways to reframe and expand these concepts.
How to use visual methods in social research

It is not as simple as taking a camera into the field or an image into an interview and hoping they will uncover valuable information. When it comes to practising social research, the old cliché of a picture is worth a thousand words may not always be the case. Without correct management you may find yourself with endless piles of pictures and no certainty of what value they add to your research. As visual methods is relatively new in social research many of the research projects undertaken using this approach do not commonly stick to a formalised how to approach. Rather, personal styles and methods are more common (Grady 1996: 18). An important part of making the visual method more accessible and dispersed is to outline some key ways this approach may be used. The following section offers several possible strategies for using the camera and still image in fieldwork and interviews, and discusses their strengths and weaknesses.

The camera in the field

Focused capturing

One of the most common methods for use of the camera in the field is focused capturing. This method involves the researcher focusing their camera on key informants, sites, events and social behaviours. Once the researcher has deduced the social forces they are interested in, this method will become particularly useful. It is important when using this method to address concerns of bias and validity. By controlling the camera’s frame of attention, the researcher may come to chose what to photograph and what not to, according to their biases, biography and subjective perceptions. They may come to miss important data in other places they were not aware of or saw as unimportant. Nonetheless, this method is valuable in many instances. Take for instance the photographs of Professor Emeritus Morrie Schwartz. Schwartz became the focus of the project. Key events, such as meditation, doctors’ meetings, family, friends and community meetings, and the change in physical vitality all become important focused sites of capturing in understanding living while dying.

Random capturing

Random capturing involves randomly taking photographs of the general areas you are interested in studying. This method is useful for tracking complex social forces, such
as public spaces, social events or places with more actors than the researcher is able to pay adequate attention to. You may be interested in rave subculture, for instance, but not certain of how the event will unfold, or of the exact processes that are performed throughout the event. This is often the case in early stages of grounded research in which you seek to uncover something you do not already know. When going over your images you may identify behaviours or important social processes that, when in the field, you did not notice. If your research involves multiple field trips, you can use random photography again on those identified areas when you return to the field, which will further narrow your focus. By repeating this process multiple times, random photography could evolve into a focused approach. This narrowing down will also help develop your key themes and codes for analysis.

**Structured capturing**

Structured capturing involves setting up a framework of capturing for collecting visual data. Perhaps you are interested in understanding social dynamics in public spaces. You might begin by using structured capturing to take a single photo every hour of the day over a one-week period. This would be your framework. By using this framework you will come to identify use of public space across different times of the day, age difference, difference of public space use during the week and over the weekend, differences of use during the day and night. The method works well for more quantitative use and measurement purposes.

This method also has qualitative applications. You may be interested in working-class conditions in factories. You might decide to photograph at key sites such as workers on the factory floor, in the lunchroom, in dormitories. You might decide to shoot these sites at certain times of the day and on certain days of the week, which would make up your structure. Once you are at those places you can begin using random capturing or focused capturing of key interests within that structure.

**Repeat photography**

This technique involves taking repeated photographs of the same subject. Repeat photography is particularly valuable for tracking the evolution of events. Burton, Mitchell and Cuttler (2011) used this method when they took repeated shots of the same houses in Mississippi after Hurricane Katrina to understand community
reconstruction. This method works over hours, days, weeks, even years. While it is similar to structured photography in that you have a framework of sites to take photographs, the main difference is that repeat photography captures images of the same sites every time and does not change them. This method can be used not only at sites but also in to capture human behaviour. You might take a photograph of the same person once a week over a year because you want to understand growing up, identity transformation or ageing.

**Participant-led visual method**

The participant-led method involves placing the camera into the hands of your subjects. Using cheap disposable cameras is a good option for making this method more financially viable. When giving your participants cameras you might ask them to capture key events and themes (a more structured approach) or to simply photograph what they find important to their lives. As mentioned earlier, this approach has several advantages. It removes the attention paid to the researcher and enables the participant access to areas that are often difficult to access, which is particularly valuable for research into sensitive areas where the presence of a researcher may transform the normative behaviours of those observed, whereas the presence of a camera in the hands of a member of that community is far less likely to distort normal practices than would be so for an outsider. The retention of normal behaviours before the camera is more likely to occur because camera technologies have become increasingly commonplace. If your research is in areas such as slums, work places, private spheres, studies where the researcher is of a different race, sexuality, age or nationality, then this method may be particularly applicable. Second, the participant-led method may uncover new insights into the lifestyle and subjective perspectives of subjects. Where researchers might photograph areas that are thought to be of importance to themselves, they could, by placing the camera in the hands of their subjects, come to realise different forms of data that they previously thought of as unimportant.

While each approach offers interesting research potential as a stand-alone method, using multiple methods can often lead to a far more comprehensive collection of data. While you might use random capturing to discover some key themes, from there you might narrow down to a particular area and use structured capturing to flesh out more

detail. Once key themes have been discovered maybe you will employ focused capturing to obtain further detail of those key themes. Finally, you might give participants cameras to gain an insight into the subjective and identify any themes you missed.

**Images in interviews**
Visual methods, what is commonly referred to as ‘photographic elicitation’, are increasingly commonplace and recognised as an important method of interviewing. First used by researcher John Collier in the 1950s, its purpose is to elicit information during interviews and gather meaning about social phenomena through visual stimulation. Using visual data in interviews can involve not only photographs but also any other form of visual data, including drawings, paintings and film, which you might source these from earlier fieldwork or research gathering. They may come from archives, family albums, libraries, news reports and television to name just a few sources.

One main purpose of using photographs in interviews is to give an insight into feelings, memories, emotions and reflections of those depictions. If you have used photos from field research the interviewee may offer explanations of key events and social process or inspire more vivid memories. Those events may come to take on different meanings as the subject points out their interpretations and understandings. You can also employ a participant-led approach to visual data in interviews, which involves asking interviewees to bring images they find valuable in relation to your research concerns. In these ways, images play an important role in helping to guide interviews, access emotional responses, past reflections and participant values.

**Weaknesses and final considerations**
Visual methods, which offer many ways to access new kinds of knowledge, are becoming critical tools in the world of social research. Still, there are several significant criticisms and challenges to be mindful of when using a visual methods approach.

First, a picture does not necessarily convey what it takes a thousand words to say. Simply entering the field and snapping wildly does not mean you will come out with meaningful data. It is important to make sure your selected methods are clearly thought through and that you have considered the kinds of data each method can
uncover before employing them. Make sure you consider what kinds of themes your images convey and how they are useful to your research enquiry. Coupling your imagery with a theoretical focus will help to filter those images and to uncover those themes (Harper 1998: 29). This will enable the researcher to narrow down key social forces rather than expect to accidently capture a picture that tells the whole story. By using a theoretical framework you will be able to make sense of your data, which will help inform further gathering, rather than have you wandering aimlessly with a camera.

Second, visual methods can place too much emphasis on the material that is presented in imagery when it may have less value as a social force than it appears (Wagner 2011: 78). While the freezing of a social scene through the still image may be a key strength of visual methods, it is also one of its key weaknesses. Because a still image cannot capture moving social forces this can lead to issues of misattribution or misinterpretation. One solution to this potential problem is to combine your visual methods with other methods, such as interviews and keeping a field journal. Both of these methods will help to supply you with more information and support your interpretations. Keeping a field journal, for instance, could be useful to fill in the social movements and contextualise the before and after of what the image shows. Words in combination with photos bring together the ability of images to freeze time with the ability of words to explain the dynamics of movement.

Third, while visual methods are good for accessing the visible, they can undermine invisible forces. Most obvious of these are feelings, emotions and inner reflections. While it is true that emotions can be identified through facial expressions, there are times when what a face conveys and what a person feels are two separate matters. This is also the case for other invisible forces, such as structural influences that are often conceived of as invisible. Depending on your methodology you may argue that such forces can be visually captured; however, this will require careful consideration of how these forces can be visually expressed. Will you convey these forces through a series of images, such as was done with Pillar and Schwartz (1996) when they were expressing living and dying, or through a single image? It is important to consider how your images express these forces and what type and number of images can most clearly express those forces.
Key points

- We increasingly live in a hypervisual world in which visual communication and engagement with the world are deeply rooted in our psychology and social practices.
- Visual methods is a research method that utilises visual capturing technologies and imagery throughout the research process to elicit meanings about the social world.
- Visual methods are valuable in their capacity to access inner feelings, motivations and emotions. Similarly, they offer a way to hold social flows together as a whole.
- The still image is unique in the way it stabilises complex social actions, re-analyses social phenomena, visualises concepts and elicits complex emotional data.
- The still image has a unique adequacy in explaining social events because the image is already embedded with meanings.
- Visual methods are useful for breaking frames or reframing textual accounts of social reality.
- Using visual methods in the field should involve careful consideration and selection of data collection strategies, which include, focused capturing, random capturing, structured capturing, repeat photography and the participant-led approaches.
- Photo elicitation is a useful method for using visual imagery in interviews to guide interviews and elicit data. This method is particularly valuable for revealing emotions, past reflections and participant-led reinterpretation of events.

- It is important to be mindful of the limitation of visual methods, namely, that still images do not always uncover information, they fail to capture moving social forces and what the image displays may not accurately reflect the inner feelings or motivations of the people and other invisible forces photographed.

Conclusion

Visual methods offers myriad unique and valuable contributions to the social sciences. It gives social researchers a way to visualise the social world in a textually dominant environment. It provides an array of alternatives to accessing data in areas
that are otherwise difficult to gain entry to, and is important for accessing the emotional and the subjective, and in taming complex social forces. From studies of the postmodern visual identity, to disaster research and slum enquiries, visual methods have many promising applications. When adopting visual methods it is important to carefully consider what kinds of data you are interested in uncovering, what visual strategies will be most helpful in revealing that data and what the limitation of each method is.

References