



Who I was, Where I am, What I want to be

Methods in focus: Photographic research methods

Introduction

Photography and sociology are thought to have a lot in common and photographic methods are often thought to play an important role in social research.

Despite the fact that photographic methods have seen something of a revival in recent years, they are not new. We may well have witnessed what some refer to as a 'visual turn' in sociology (with photography becoming increasingly accepted as a valid tool for generating social research data), but some writers have pointed to the use of photography in research articles from as early as 1916 (Banks 2001)



Undoubtedly the use of photographic methods in research has changed over time, and Pink (2001) summarises this process as a move from an early scientific realist paradigm (which tried to use photographs as 'objective social facts'), through to a more recent critical and reflexive visual methodology where:

- Images are taken seriously in their own right
- The social conditions and effects of images are considered
- Researchers account for their own particular ways of looking at images (Rose 2004)

Of course, Pink is not suggesting that the decision about how to use photographic methods is this simple.. In reality it will often depend upon the paradigm in which they are working..

This resource sheet will explore some of the ways in which researchers have used photographic methods to research social life, before moving on to examine how such methods were utilised in the WWW research project.



Using Photographic methods in research

Banks (2001) has famously argued that photographic research practice takes three different forms:

- 1) A form of research where the researcher takes the photographs
- 2) A form of research where the researcher discusses ready-made images
- 3) A form of research where the participants are asked to create the images themselves.

Some of the most commonly used methods are:

Photographic diaries - These are used as a way of examining the visual nature of everyday life, of allowing researchers access to the private worlds of participants and examining how they wish to visually represent themselves. Participants are often given a camera and are told to create photographs which represent one aspect of their experience. These are then brought together to form a book of images.



Photographic interviews - Many researchers choose to talk to their participants about images that relate to their research project. These may be images that the researcher or the participants have taken, or even images that already existed and were created by someone else. Many refer to this method as a form of 'photographic elicitation', though following Harper (2002) many now prefer to call these 'photographic feedback' interviews.

Photos as evidence - Some researchers will take their own photographs as a way of evidencing what they have seen or heard as part of their research. This is a different way of using images because the photograph is used to 'speak for itself' and the process of creating it or viewing it is often not interrogated in any way.



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Participatory research practice

Photographic methods have commonly been taken up by researchers who are keen to work with people in a collaborative fashion. Many researchers have been influenced by Wang and Burris (1997) who first introduced the concept of 'photo voice' (a form of photographic action research) in research which took place in health care contexts. Participatory photographic methods have also been favoured by youth researchers who feel that these techniques draw young people into the research process, that they empower them and absolve some of the power relations. Photographic methods are also often used by researchers who want to offer young people the opportunity to develop this skills set.

But just as wider participatory research practice has come under scrutiny in research in recent years, so has the use of collaborative photographic methods. Piper and Frankham (2007), for example, urge researchers to examine the ways in which they interpret the images that are produced in collaborative photographic research. These authors also conclude that: children are not inherently drawn to photographic methods, that images don't necessarily allow simple or direct access to inner thoughts, and that images don't lend themselves easily to social transformation or the levelling of self-esteem (as is often suggested).

Some Considerations...

Ethics - Photographic research does not necessarily entail a whole new set of guidelines but there are some concerns that come to the fore: anonymity (how people might be recognised), permission to photograph (especially if the participants photograph others outside of the research) and ownership (do the images belong to the researcher or the participant and how does the researcher know when and how they can be used?). Some visual associations have developed their own principles to help in these decisions: www.britisoc.co.uk/equality/Statement+Ethical+Practice.html

Equipment - Is it image quality that you are concerned about or just generating images for discussion? What can you afford? Collaborative researchers are now often able to afford digital cameras to lend to their Participants. However, some participants prefer to use their own devices (including: ipods, phone cameras, web cams, etc).

Analysis and representation - How will the images be used in the final representations of the research? How might they be interpreted by others? Will the data be analysed alongside other forms of data? Will a computer package be used (e.g. AtlasTI or NVIVO)?

Suggested readings

- Pink, S. (2006) *Doing Visual Ethnography*. London: Sage.
- Banks, M. (2001) *Visual Methods in Social Research*. London: Sage.
- Rose, G. (2004) *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to the Interpretation of Visual Materials*. London: Sage.
- Wang, C. and Burris, M.A. (1997) 'Photovoice: concept, methodology, and use for participatory needs assessment', *Health Education and Behaviour*, 24, pp369-387
- Thomson, P. (2008) *Doing Visual Research with Children and Young People*. London: Routledge
- Harper, D. (2002) 'Talking about pictures: a case for photo-elicitation', *Visual Studies* 17 (1), 13-26.
- Frankham, J. And Piper, H. (2007) 'Seeing voices and hearing pictures: image as discourse and the framing of image-based research', *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* 28 (3), 373-387.
- Luttrell, W. (2010) 'A camera is a big responsibility: a lens for analysing children's visual voices', *Visual Studies*, 25 (3): 224-34





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Photographic methods and the WWW research project

Many of the participants in the WWW research project chose to use self-directed photographic methods as a way of participating in the research. All but two of the participants borrowed one of the digital cameras for a period of up to eight weeks in order to generate images that represented

themselves and their experiences as a privately educated pupil. To accompany the camera, each of the participants were given a notebook where they could jot down their thoughts about the images that they had created (e.g. When the images were taken, how they were constructed, if any were deleted). Participants also had the choice of having the images printed for them or storing and viewing them on a computer.

Image-based interviews

Once the participants felt that they'd had enough time to generate the images that they wanted they met with the researcher in an individual or group photo narrative interview. Here the participants decided on the ways in which they wanted to show the

researcher their images (often using the computer as a way of ordering, cropping, editing and moving through them) and the stories that they wanted to tell about them.

The researcher sometimes prompted discussion by asking questions about the images (e.g. About how they had been constructed, to clarify content, to ask about intended audiences, etc). Occasionally the discussions would also move away from the images, as the participants began to tell different stories about their lives and experiences.



Some of the participants who had been involved in the previous phase of research also took part in photographic memory interviews, where they returned to look at some of the images that they had taken seven years ago, to discuss them in light of their current thoughts and experiences.

Photo essays and photomatics

The participants who wished to progress from taking photographs to making a film also constructed a photo essay or a photomatic as a way of sharing their images and ideas with those who they would be creating the film with. Photo essays consist of a series of images that are intended to tell a story or address a certain issue. Photomatics are a series of still images that are edited together and presented on screen in a sequence (often accompanied by a voice over or a soundtrack).

These methods were chosen to encourage the young people to think about the stories that they wanted to tell with their images, to reflect on how they may be viewed by others and to begin to consider how they may be combined into a moving image (the film).

The photo essays were made by selecting a series of ten images and attaching them to an A3 board. The participants chose whether to use words and images or just images. They brought the photo boards to a group meeting in order to share their essays with the rest of the group.

The photomatics were made by selecting a series of ten images and placing them into a power point presentation . The images were ordered so that they would tell the story that the participant wanted to present using the images. Narrations and soundtracks were also used to accompany the images and to tell the stories.

Related Publications

- Allan, A. (2011) 'Doing Ethnography and Using Visual Methods', in Bradford, S. And Cullen, F. (eds) Research and Research Methods for Youth Practitioners. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Allan, A. (forthcoming) 'Power, Participation and Privilege: Methodological Lessons From Using Visual Methods in Research with Young People', *Sociological Research Online*.



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Why photographs?

The photographic methods were used to complement the data produced through other research methods and because they were felt to be particularly useful in 'getting to know' the girls and the ways in which they constituted their identities. Identity was understood as something that is fluid, multiple and always in the process of becoming. The

photographs were used to examine the different ways in which the young people were constructing their identities and the different discourses that they were drawing on to do so. The images were not viewed as a form of evidence of a reality that was there to be simply explored through the content contained in the images. Rather they were viewed as productions and co-constructions.



The importance of process

The process in which the images were produced during the project was seen to be as important as the photographs themselves. A great deal of effort was made to treat the processes that surrounded the creation of the images seriously. This included focusing on aspects like: group discussions where images were accepted or rejected, noting the reasons given for aesthetic appreciation of an image, observing occasions when images were edited or changed in some way,

examining the notes contained in the accompanying notebooks and photo essays or paying attention to the decisions that were made about the soundtracks used in the photomatic displays.

Comprehensive notes were taken during these

periods of observation. These notes focused on: how the images were made, who was pictured, what was not pictured, who the images were shown to and how they were interpreted.

Analysis

The narratives that surrounded the photographic images (generated during interviews and during group meetings) were central to the analysis of the photographic data.

Indeed, the images and the text were analysed in conjunction with one another. Both were stored and managed on the NVIVO computer package, with codes and memos

linking them.

Discourse analysis was also used to explore the language the young people used to construct narratives about the images that they had produced. In line with Rose's (2004) advice a number of questions were asked of the data.

E.g.:

- How are images given particular meanings?
- How do the narratives and images work together?
- What is not said or pictured?

Further Information:

To find out more about the WWW research project please go to the

project website:

www.wwwresearchproject.weebly.com



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