SPECIAL ISSUE: WORKING WITH VISUAL DATA: PRACTICES OF VISUALIZATION AND REPRESENTATION

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Editors' Introduction

Mike Ball and Greg Smith

Abstract Please add an abstract of up to 150 words.

In the contemporary world visual data are found in a range of forms and formats and in a variety of practical empirical contexts. Our Introduction considers the growth of visual studies in recent decades and its increasing focus upon practices of visualization and representation. Contributions to this special issue are introduced to highlight the diversity of approaches and topics used by researchers employing visual methods. The articles presented here range from developments out of Garfinkel's ethnomethodology to studies concerned to promote a focus on aspects of human dignity and community.

More than two decades ago we wrote *Analyzing Visual Data* (Ball & Smith, 1992), a book in Sage's Qualitative Research Methods series that aimed to provide a compact review of approaches and issues in the use of still images by sociologists and anthropologists. Since then there has been a tremendous explosion of interest in visual approaches and visual data. A once slightly quaint specialism now has become a staple item of qualitative methods training programs and textbooks. Sociological and anthropological concerns with the visual aspects of social life have spilled out across a range of social science and humanities disciplines.

The recognition that visual sociology now encompasses a range of visual research methods and approaches, open to multidisciplinary influences, was signalled in the 2002 decision to change the name of the flagship journal in the field, *Visual Sociology*, to *Visual Studies*. As visual methods grew in salience, a crop of books appeared in the new millennium that extended the scope of the area and expanded its horizons. Some of these books provided student-facing guides to the practice of visual sociology and visual cultural studies (Emmison & Smith, 2000; Emmison, Smith, & Mayall, 2013; Rose, 2001, 2016). Others delineated key approaches (Banks, 2001, 2007; van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2001) and linked them to neighbouring and emerging areas, notably Sarah Pink's (2009) inventive 'sensory ethnography'. There are signs, too, of the consolidation and institutionalization of the field. The massive *Sage Handbook of Visual Research Methods* (Margolis & Pauwels, 2011), running out at 754 pages across 37 chapters, amply testifies to the breadth and depth of the field. One of the founding figures of visual sociology, Douglas Harper, published a wide-ranging guide to the use of images to understand society, drawing upon four decades–worth of research activity exploring the sociological potential of still photography (Harper, 2012). Harper's book repeatedly reminds us of the power

of photographic images to reinvigorate social scientific investigations that are still overwhelmingly expressed in words and numbers and communicated via graphs and tables.

One major contributing influence on the 'visual turn', as it has come to be known, was the development of digital technologies that have made it easier than ever for researchers and research participants to make and share still and moving images. Never before in human history have people produced more photographic images on a daily basis than they do now. Mobile devices have revolutionized image production while new ways of sharing images via the Internet have emerged. Currently popular applications such as Facebook, Twitter, Flickr, and Snapchat have accelerated the circulation of images. The omnipresence of the visual dimension of social life – often regarded as a leading feature of postmodern or late-modern societies – is evident in the diverse range of topics addressed by articles in this special issue: how optometric work practices are socially organized (vom Lehn, et al.Webb, Heath, & Gibson); the classroom production of images designed to encourage student engagement with a Shakespearean text (Sharrock & Greiffenhagen); the transformation of numbers into mnemonic eidetic devices (Ball); the apprehension of community landscapes (Clark); and the view of the city of displaced people (O'Neill, Mansaray, & Haaken).

The condition of postmodernity and postmodern theory also has been a key component of the 'cultural turn', a movement in ideas that has encouraged a greater awareness of the importance of the complex notion of 'reflexivity'. Visual research methods have proved readily amenable to methodologies aimed at taking a participatory and collaborative approach to research investigations (see the studies by Clark and O'Neill et al. in this issue). Contemporary visual researchers have grappled creatively with the need to treat the human 'subjects' of

research in ethically sensitive ways that keep faith with the postpositivist sociological imagination.

Of course photography, in both analogue and digital forms, has long been notorious for generating ethical dilemmas for its practitioners (Sontag, 1979). These dilemmas traditionally concerned photography's potential to present and powerfully depict the moment-by-moment looks of human existence in the material world with a vividness, particularity, and detail unmatched by other graphic forms. The immediacy of photographic representation and the social situation in which photographs are produced generates difficult issues for documentary photographers. When working in troubled sites around the world, documentary photographers find that easy distinctions between detachment and involvement, and observation and advocacy, become blurred. Visual social scientists, and those from the humanities who work in more mundane settings, are nonetheless likely to encounter different, perhaps less intense, moral dilemmas – problems that prove real enough and in need of delicate handling in these times when all research projects involving human research 'subjects' are closely scrutinized by research ethics panels and institutional review boards. One study of innovative methods (Nind, Wiles, Bengry-Howell, & Crow, 2012) identified a creative tension between the development of new techniques and the constraints of ethical guidelines. The more successful resolutions of these tensions involved researchers openly acknowledging the reflexive dimensions of their investigations in order to demonstrate that although risk could not be eliminated entirely, it could be managed..

The resolution of many ethical questions within visual sociological studies thus centres upon a reconsideration of the relationship of researcher and researched. Shifts in this relationship have spurred the development of more innovative and participatory methodologies such as those

taken in the articles by Clark and O'Neill et al. in this issue. These developments have also been aided by the way the new information and communication technologies have accelerated the democratization of the photographic process. Digital applications are ever more ubiquitous and embedded in the everyday life of people around the world. The cell phone's transformation into a mobile device with sophisticated still image and video capture capabilities is perhaps the latest, but surely not the last, manifestation of a process that began towards the end of the 19th century with the marketing of the first Kodak camera. By putting cameras in the hands of the nonspecialist public, the Kodak marked the first dent in the mantle of technical expertise surrounding the professional photographer. That process of democratization has been accelerated by technical advances that automated many of the skilled aspects of picture making. Photographic expertise, once restricted to the technical elite, has become diffused widely among camera users throughout society. Yet while increasingly automated image production technologies have simplified the making of competent photographs, there remains a significant craft element in the making of the kind of arresting images that continue to populate the documentary and art photographic traditions.

While developments in contemporary visual culture have helped shape the recent paths taken by visual research methods (Rose, 2014), changes in digital technologies have been pivotal in fuelling visual applications and innovations by researchers. Much attention has been directed to the increasing ease of picture production for users, yet these technologies also offer many innovative possibilities for the *presentation* of academic research. In a notable reexamination of *Balinese Character*, the 1942 classic by Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead, Dianne Hagaman (1995) demonstrated the potential of digital technologies to transform many of the editing and presentational problems the authors confronted. Computer resources now regarded as standard

could simplify the difficulties Bateson and Mead faced in sizing and setting out a large collection of images. Hypertext linking now affords opportunities for readers to take different routes through big collections of photographs, and video could be linked easily to stills. Clearly, digital technologies offer presentational and analytic opportunities unimaginable to previous generations. Some of these possibilities are presented in the articles presented here.

Thus, this special issue of *IRQR* follows an efflorescence of social scientific interest in 'the visual' and takes its place alongside other collections that seek to showcase current work at the forefront of visual studies (Knowles & Sweetman, 2004; Pink, 2012; Stanczak, 2007). While the articles included here are diverse in terms of content and approach, they each reflect the impact of the 'practice turn' (Schatzki, Knorr Cetina, & von Savigny, 2001) in contemporary sociological and cultural studies. Each of the articles in this issue shows a strong concern with analysing the organization of ordinary practices and a corresponding suspicion of premature theoretical accounting. Although there are clear differences in the approaches of the articles in this special issue, they share a sympathy towards working in a way consistent with Karl Marx's (1845) famed eighth thesis on Feuerbach: 'All social life is essentially practical. All mysteries which lead theory to mysticism find their rational solution in human practice and in the comprehension of this practice'.

Through the seriousness with which it addresses ordinary practices, each article seeks to comprehend the character of those practices. Each article offers a different kind of dissection and reflection upon visually mediated practices. Therein lies the basis of their emancipatory potential, should that be sought. If it is, then as one advocate of 'visual activism' put it, echoing the Marxian sentiment, 'once we have learned how to see the world, we have taken only one of the required steps. The point is to change it' (Mirzoeff, 2015, p. 298).

This collection offers a sample of the diversity of the perspectives and traditions by those working with visual data in and around ethnographic sociology. The collection presents empirical studies of visual arrangements that examine practices of visualization and representation as features of everyday image work in a range of practical contexts. These studies can be grouped around the research methods, methodologies, and theoretical orientations they use to investigate, in Sturken and Cartwright's (2001) inspiring phrase, 'practices of looking'. The first three papers emanate from a tradition of critical qualitative research methodology that developed out of Garfinkel's corpus. The last two papers share a concern with the study and promotion of aspects of human dignity and community. Each paper fashions a different take on the place of images and ethics of image-making within the analysis of social, cultural, and cognitive processes.

The two papers by vom Lehn et al. and Sharrock and Greiffenhagen each offer different kinds of ethnomethodological analysis of video data. The vom Lehn et al. study explores aspects of 'professional vision' (Goodwin, 1994) evident in optometry work. According to Goodwin (1994), professional vision concerns the 'socially organized ways of seeing and understanding events that are answerable to the distinctive interests of a particular social group' (p. 606).

Vom Lehn et al. consider how the process of 'subjective refraction' works in optometric consultations through a careful analysis of video materials. Their study concentrates on the interactional dimensions of that phase where clients are asked to compare the visual experiences offered by two different lenses. The study shows how visual research methods can uncover the social organization of optometric testing as it unfolds moment by moment. The methods employed in this study reaffirm practitioners' claims that no two consultations are exactly alike.

The authors show how determining the client's visual difficulty is an iterative process dependent upon the contingent features of actual instances.

Drawing upon a kindred analytic orientation and methodological approach, Sharrock and Greiffenhagen's article develops a study of the production of images that are designed to illustrate, for secondary school students, the text of Shakespeare's 'Scottish play'. Students were asked to work on computers in pairs to demonstrate their understanding of the continuity and flow of Shakespeare's narrative by displaying their own version of it on storyboards. The article explores an episode in a school classroom in which pupils work through puzzles generated in using a computer program to comprehend the contours of a Shakespearean text. Sharrock and Greiffenhagen show how attention to the details of actual instances can shed light on the question of how 'emergence' actually occurs in social life.

Theoretically and methodologically, the papers by vom Lehn et al. and Sharrock and Greiffenhagen share much in common. Both have their roots within ethnomethodology's general framework that is often considered a rationale for conversation analytic research. Both are studies of what has come to be known as institutional interaction (Drew & Heritage, 1992; ten Have, 2007) where interactants' talk and conduct is shaped by an institutional setting, in these cases an optometric consultation and a school lesson. Each study uses data that have been video video-recorded. The opportunity for repeated scrutiny of interactional fragments facilitates the systematic analysis of what is accomplished through processes of social interaction. The method of data analysis puts the reader in the same position as the analyst by furnishing for inspection and potential challenge exactly the same empirical materials that the analyst has worked on.

Mike Ball's paper also explores a pedagogic theme, the transformation of numbers into mnemonic eidetic devices designed for the work of meditation. This paper also has its analytic

roots within ethnomethodology. Its analytic attitude follows what Francis and Hester (2004) characterized as the method of 'self-reflection' in ethnomethodology. Ball's own experiences and actions while meditating become objects for analysis (breathing, counting, etc.). The paper's approach displays kinship with the tradition of autoethnography in that Ball uses his knowledge as a member of a social group that practices meditation. The meditation practice involves forms of visualization. Seeing things through closed eyes are examined as practices of eidetic image-making. Ball explores how commonplace numerical systems can be employed in more abstract mental work. Meditative visualization is set in the context of a broader literature on visualization practices.

The papers by Maggie O'Neill et al. and by Andrew Clark employ participatory methodologies that seek to move beyond traditional conceptions of the relationship between researcher and research 'subject'. These authors, especially Clark, emphasize the interconnections between the visual and the other senses. Clark cautions against optimistic justifications of visual methods as offering accounts of social life that are somehow 'more real' than traditional methods and stresses the constitutive role of visual research methods in constructing the realities that researchers often think they are merely uncovering. The interrelations these two papers trace among knowledge, practice, and experience – among research participants as well as those who research them – are increasingly salient within contemporary social sciences.

Employing arts-based biographical methods of study, O'Neill et al. explore women's lives and well-being in a refugee community.. This paper reports on findings from research conducted into a refugee support organization in the North East of England. Using an arts-based biographical research approach that includes a 'story walk', the researchers show how the

participants establish a shared conception of safe community and a hopeful future by negotiating the meanings they associate with their housing, their neighbourhood, police stations, solicitors' offices, the local university, and the like. They produce a collective story in the course of photographing and videoing the places they walk through, a story that secures the bonds amongst them and offers hope for their future lives.

Andrew Clark also addresses the theme of community using the methods of participatory network maps and walking interviews. These visually mediated methods serve to disclose the meanings associated with space and place in a community. In both studies the attempt is made to break down conventional divisions between the researcher and those researched by using methods that encourage the collaborative production of knowledge. In addition, Clark's article emphasizes the performative role of the use of visual methods (Rose, 2014). Adopting such methods does not afford a 'better', more 'realistic' depiction of social life but rather one that is framed by and constituted through the use of participative visual techniques. There is an inescapable need for continuous reflexive critique of the research process to set its products in context.

The articles presented in this special issue offer examples of work done at the leading edges of visual studies. Visual approaches now occupy an established place in the research methods of a range of social sciences and humanities disciplines. Visual methods, often standing as methods augmenting and particularizing the traditional interview, observational, and survey methods of the social sciences, have served as a catalyst for the development of 'innovative methods' more broadly. By highlighting the significance of one human sense, the visual, they have drawn attention to the role of other senses in social life, encouraging the encashment of Simmel's (1908/2009) sociology of 'sensory impression'. In this way visual methods have paved

the way to such promising forms of investigation of contemporary sociality as 'sensory ethnography' (Pink, 2009) and 'live sociology' (Back, 2012). The creative potential of visual approaches to illuminate aspects of human interaction and experience remains far from exhausted.

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