Using Visual Data in Qualitative Research

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1 Introduction

Chapter objectives

After reading this chapter, you should

- see why the use and study of images in social research as one among various methodologies employed is justified;
- see the distinction between image creation and image study;
- understand the place of visual methodologies in the research process;
- know some key terms and concepts; and
- have an overview of the book.

Case study: Visual methods and hypothesis testing

For visual anthropologists, as well as many other visual studies scholars, Sol Worth and John Adair's 'Through Navajo eyes' project of the late 1960s is one of the landmarks in visual research. Although there have been criticisms of the project, it stands out as an example of well-designed empirical research, with clear objectives and methodologies. Worth (a communications scholar and anthropologist) and Adair (an anthropologist and linguist) set out to see if people who had little or no exposure to cinema and moving images would make films that reflected the way they saw the world in general. In particular, would the

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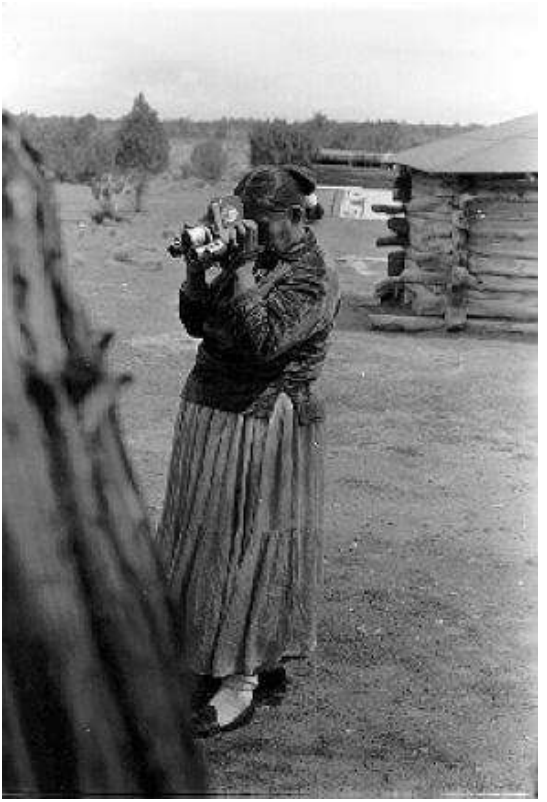

FIGURE 1.1 Alta Kahn shooting *Navajo Weaver II*, Pine Springs, Arizona, July 1966 (photograph by Richard Chalfen)

Navajo be able to 'bypass' language in communicating their world-view. The premise for the investigation rests on what is known as the Whorf–Sapir hypothesis – the idea that the structure of the language one speaks conditions how one sees and understands the world around one. Speakers of very different and unrelated languages, English and Navajo for example, will, in Whorf's words, 'cut nature up, organize it into concepts, and ascribe significances' in very different ways (Whorf, 1956, p. 214). While there have been various attempts to test the hypothesis, up to this point these mostly relied on language itself to conduct and assess the investigation in a rather circular fashion. Worth and Adair's breakthrough was to identify and use another channel of communication.

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Worth, Adair and Worth's student Dick Chalfen gave 16 mm film cameras to seven Navajo people, living in a relatively traditional community in Arizona, where many older people spoke only Navajo, although the filmmakers were all bilingual. The seven had all seen some films but only one of them (an artist) had seen many. On the other hand, none of them was what Worth and Adair call 'professional Navajo' (1972, pp. 72–3), in the sense that they were self-consciously aware of Navajo traditions and customs and used to representing them to others. After they had been given basic instruction in shooting and editing, the Navajo were free to film whatever they wanted. Their final films consisted of short, silent, documentaries on topics such as silversmithing, weaving and Navajo curing ceremonies.

The results broadly confirm a 'weak' version of the hypothesis: 'language is a guide to social reality' (Sapir), not determinative of it. In assessing the way in which the Navajo filmmakers edited sequences of action, Worth and Adair noted on the one hand that the filmmakers did not discover and adopt the principle of continuity cutting common to Western film traditions (i.e. they saw 'jump cuts' as unproblematic), while on the other hand, certain sequences of apparently over-long or pointless action (such as a weaver winding up an entire skein of wool into a ball) could be linked to particular Navajo ideas about 'action' that are themselves linguistically distinctive in the Navajo language. Although the findings of the 'Navajo eyes' project are not wholly conclusive (some films, for example, could not be 'read' by some Navajo viewers, although tellingly one informant said she could not understand one film because it was 'in English'; in fact the films were all silent), it is nonetheless a pioneering early use of visual methods to address a particular research question. The original 1972 monograph describing the project was revised twenty-five years later by Dick Chalfen, who summarizes much of the subsequent debate (Worth and Adair, 1997).

Why (not) pictures?

Why should a social researcher[1] wish to incorporate the analysis of images – paintings, photographs, film, videotape, drawings, diagrams and a host of other images – into their research? There are two good reasons, though the first is easier to prove than the second, and there is also one caveat.

The first good reason is that images are ubiquitous in society, and because of this some consideration of visual representation can potentially be included in all studies of society. No matter how tightly or narrowly focused a research project

is, at some level all social research says something about society in general, and given the ubiquity of images, their consideration must at some level form part of the analysis. Of course, the same could be said of music, or clothing, or many other aspects of human social experience. Yet while many valuable studies of these phenomena exist, none seems to have assumed the sensory prominence within social research that images have, sound (in the form of language) perhaps excepted. Some suggestions as to how this has come about are presented in the next chapter.

The second good reason why the social researcher might wish to incorporate the analysis of images is that a study of images or one that incorporates images in the creation or collection of data might be able to reveal some sociological insight that is not accessible by any other means. While this is self-evidently true of research projects that focus on visual media, such as a study of the effects of television viewing on children, it is less self-evidently true – and much harder to prove – in other projects. It is relatively easy to triumph the findings of some piece of visual research (some examples are given in later chapters), but less easy to prove that the same insights could not have been generated by an alternative research methodology. One would have to set up a series of research investigations into the same topic, with the same research subjects, each identical but for the research method employed, and each using researchers who were unaware of the findings of the other teams. While this might be possible in a laboratory context for a set of psychological experiments, say, the number of variables would spin out of control when attempted in a field setting. I return to this issue in the book's conclusion, but until then I confine myself to describing the distinctiveness of visual research processes and their findings rather than making claims as to their uniqueness.

The difficulty of setting up the experimental conditions to test one research methodology against another leads me to the caveat. Regardless of the existence of books and manuals such as this, devoted to a single social research methodology, in practice social researchers employ a number of different methodologies in their investigations, ranging from the highly formalized (certain types of image content analysis, closed interviewing schedules containing internal consistency checks) to the highly informal (chatting to people, observing daily activity). To restrict oneself to a single methodology or area of investigation is as sociologically limiting as wilfully ignoring a methodology or area. This book is an attempt to make the case that visual research methodologies are distinctive, are valuable, and should be considered by the social researcher whatever their project. It is not an attempt to claim that these methodologies supplant all others. Visual research should be seen as only one methodological technique among many to be employed by social researchers, more appropriate in some contexts, less so in others.

Being visual

Case study: Seeing through the eyes of children

Many sociologists and anthropologists have experimented with giving cameras (still or moving) to research subjects in order to 'see' the world as their research subjects see it. Although there are problems with this method, usually involving the interpretation of the resulting images, it can be particularly useful when conducting research with people who might find it difficult to express themselves verbally in the context of a formal interview – those with learning difficulties, for example, or children who might otherwise become bored.

Sharples et al. (2003) set out to explore not so much what children 'see' as how children understand photography in the first place. Disposable cameras were given to 180 children in five countries across Europe, drawn from three age groups (7, 11 and 15). The children were given a weekend to photograph whatever they liked and were then interviewed about their pictures. Some of the findings might have been expected; for example, the youngest children tended to photograph toys and other possessions, while the oldest children showed a preference for groups of friends. Equally, younger children enjoyed their photographs largely for their content alone, while older children had a growing appreciation of style and composition. But the researchers also conclude that the children's photographs are not merely their 'view of the world' but an indication of their perceived place in the world, particularly with regard to kinship and friendship relations. One finding was that children were generally 'scathing' of adult photography, and saw their parents' use of photography as indicative of their adult power.

In another study, Mizen (2005) gave 50 children cheap cameras and asked them to compile a 'photo-diary' of their work experience. This formed one element of an investigation into children's employment in England and Wales (between the ages of 13 and 16 children may legally be employed in what is known as 'light work', which does not affect their schooling or health). The cameras were introduced roughly halfway through a year-long period of qualitative research, during which the children had already been keeping written diaries, having interviews with research staff, and so on. One of the aims of the project, and one that particularly justified the use of cameras, was to find out 'what the children had to tell us about their work (rather) than the usual preoccupation of researchers with what the work has to tell us about the children' (Mizen, 2005, p. 125). Unsurprisingly, given that the children were themselves the photographers, there were few images of children actually working, and indeed very few pictures of people at all (including employers and co-workers). What the images did show was the character of the children's work, through documentation of their workplaces.

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Mizen points out that there are no studies that have directly observed children at work in the 'affluent economies of the North' and so the photographs allow him and his co-researchers direct access to the structure, form and content of the work, but more particularly to the children's engagement with it. In particular, Mizen claims that although only around 5 per cent of the photographs showed employers, they were an invisible presence (in several instances they had asked the children to cease taking photographs) and relations with employers became a research theme that was subsequently developed with the children in interviews. Thus although both Sharples et al. and Mizen had quite different research agendas and employed quite different forms of subsequent analysis (Sharples et al. used two kinds of quite formalist analysis: see Chapter 3), the use of the same visual methodology produced rather similar findings concerning power relationships between children and adults.

What precisely are visual methodologies? While this question is addressed in detail in the rest of this book, particularly in Chapter 4, which considers methods in a fieldwork context, some basic points need to be established early on. Broadly speaking, there are two main strands to visual research in the social sciences. The first revolves around the creation of images by the social researcher (typically photographs, film and videotape, but also drawings and diagrams) to document or subsequently analyze aspects of social life and social interaction. In a field-based or even a laboratory context, the social researcher will undoubtedly be taking notes on the spot, perhaps muttering into a tape recorder, but she may also be taking photographs, making quick pencil sketches, and so forth. Back in the office, the social researcher may be turning lists of numbers into graphs, drawing up flow diagrams to show how one social event leads to another, analyzing sequences of videotape for repeated hand gestures, and so forth.

All these methods involve the creation of images by the social researcher, independently of whether the research subjects know about, understand, or even care about these images. The aim of such a project may not be specifically visual. For example, an investigation into the role of formal schooling in the creation and maintenance of gender stereotypes might involve the creation of many hours of videotape, numerous still photographs, and perhaps a number of visually based psychological tests, but few if any of these might be presented in the final research report or even referred to in detail. Even if the research was intended to be visual, or the findings revealed a visual outcome – for example, the hypothetical research above revealed that gender stereotypes are communicated visually as much as verbally in the classroom – then the researcher may still face

constraints preventing her from publishing this. The power of the word is such that few journals would be prepared to print more than a few photographs, and no print-based ones would be able to present video. Similarly, it is rare that an image (as opposed to text about an image) is cited in the work of others, again leading to a disincentive to publish images. (Some possible solutions to this problem are presented in Chapter 5, in the section on presenting visual research.)

The second strand of visual research revolves around the collection and study of images produced or consumed by the subjects of the research. Here the focus of the research project is more obviously visual and the research subjects more obviously have a social and personal connection with the images. In the field, the researcher will be spending time with subjects watching television, or flicking through magazines, observing them as they videotape wedding ceremonies, or take photographs at children's birthday parties. Back in the office she will be transcribing interview notes about the television programmes watched, or studying copies of the photographs they took. These methods stem directly from the visual media themselves and from the research subjects' engagement with these media. Regardless of the difficulties, it is probably more necessary for the researcher to publish and disseminate her visual findings in this strand of research.

Briefly stated, these two strands can be contrasted as, on the one hand, the use of images to study society and, on the other, the sociological study of images. Methodologies for both sets are covered in Chapter 4, though the emphasis in that chapter is more on image creation in the study of society, while in Chapter 3 a number of analytical strategies towards the study of images of society are considered.

The two strands are not mutually exclusive, nor are they exhaustive of all visual research within the social sciences. In either approach, depending on the project, the social researcher will still be conducting surveys, interviewing subjects, collecting life histories, and so on. The former strand – the creation of images as an aid to studying society – is perhaps the older. Photography has been used to document and diagrams used to represent knowledge about society since the beginnings of modern sociology and anthropology in the nineteenth century. The latter strand – the sociological study of images – has grown in strength in the second half of the twentieth century, with the rise of film studies, media and communication studies, and a more sociologically informed art history. But in recent years a third strand has developed, one that encompasses the other two. This is the creation and study of the collaborative image and it is deployed in projects where social researcher and the subjects of study work together, both with pre-existing images and in the creation of new images. This development is informed by fundamental changes in social science epistemology, sometimes referred to as 'the postmodern turn'. The historical development of these strands and the corresponding theoretical insights that inform them are described in more detail in the next two chapters.