

Doing Visual Research

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Doing Visual Research

I dedicate *Doing Visual Research* to my dear partner, Ann Smith. Thank you for your inspiration and your imagination. I hope that you will find many pleasant surprises in this book.

Preface

Doing Visual Research offers researchers in the social sciences an innovative orientation to the ways in which visual tools such as photography, video, drawing and objects can be used as modes of inquiry, modes of representation and modes of dissemination in research related to social change. Funding agencies, community groups, educators, health care professionals, the general public and researchers themselves would like to see more academic research tackle pressing social concerns related to everyday life, and there are growing calls for 'research that matters', that makes a difference and that points more directly to policy implications. This book attempts to answer that call and as such is meant to be a resource for researchers investigating a wide range of critical issues related to poverty, gender, human rights, violence, education and health, across a variety of disciplinary areas, using such visual participatory tools as photography, video and drawing. Clearly, the field of visual studies is a dynamic one, particularly in the context of new technologies. Taken as a whole, the book addresses methodological, interpretive and ethical concerns that arise in the study of social issues, offering creative, practical ways to re-frame or explore them further. The book highlights visual participatory methodologies (sometimes referred to as VPM and sometimes termed participatory visual methodologies, PVM). This area, while a relatively new one within visual research and as part of qualitative studies, is a burgeoning one. It is an area that has led to new questions related to ethical considerations and to alternative tools for interpretation and representation.

Increasingly, social science departments and faculties are offering a more diverse range of qualitative research methods courses, with work related to the visual being a particularly rich area. Often, however, visual research is covered in only one or two chapters and must be supplemented by other authors and readings. The overall purpose of this book, then, is to provide both conceptual and practical 'takes' on working with visual tools and methods that are meant to be highly participatory in engaging communities themselves in research. Research designs that use the visual raise many new questions, including those that look at the blurring of boundaries related to research and intervention, for example. Is the work research or is it art, and how do we take account of the new technologies and challenges related to representation? The emergence of visual and arts-based research as a viable approach puts pressure on the traditional structures and expectations of the academy. Space, time and equipment requirements, for example, often

make it difficult for researchers to present their work in the conventional venues and formats of research conferences. But there are other questions that interrogate even further the relationship between the researched and the researcher. Do we as researchers conduct ourselves differently when the participants of our studies are 'right there' – either in relation to the photos or videos they have produced? How can visual interventions be used to educate community groups and point to ways to empower and reform institutional practices? What ethical issues come to the fore in these action-oriented studies? How do we work with such concepts as 'confidentiality' and 'anonymity' within this kind of work?

While the study of visual cultures is a growing one, and while community-based research itself is seen to be significant, the 'doing' of this work, it seems, is often more implicit than explicit. Too often, the work is approached in a way that is unproblematized and in which images carry some extra truth value – particularly if they are produced by communities – or that they simply speak for themselves. They can, but they might offer even more when studied and interrogated with participants.

In writing this book – which comes out of many different collaborative projects, the bulk of them involving other colleagues in Canada and Southern Africa, with a variety of different communities, many of them in sub-Saharan Africa, where I have been working since the mid 1990s – I often struggled with coming to terms with the idea that no visual participatory project ever seems to end. Visual participatory studies that I had carried out five or six years ago or perhaps even longer, suddenly, as I was writing, compelled me to re-examine and re-interpret the work in the light of new understandings – either about the visual itself or about the phenomenon under study. Thus, I found myself writing about old data in new ways. One could regard this as one of the challenges of any kind of qualitative research, but perhaps exacerbated by the fact that the visual is forever in one's face. It is so easy to look again at a video, a drawing or a photograph and think something else. I prefer to think of this as one of the strengths of the 'doing' of visual research and why, as researchers working in the area of the visual, and particularly with communities, we need to be prepared for the iterative nature of doing visual research.

What I hope this book conveys is a sense of the richness of visual data, the democratic possibilities for engaging communities and the fact that the work is never completed (although contained by the need to finish a thesis or submit a manuscript). Perhaps the fact that this book is written in one voice (as opposed to an edited or co-authored book) may also contribute to a sense of this. Three books that greatly influenced me – Marcus Banks' *Visual Methods in Social Research*, Gillian Rose's *Visual Methodologies* and Sarah Pink's *Doing Visual Ethnography* – are each examples of 'one voice' books. Sarah Pink's extensive references to her own visual work with bull fighters in Spain, although far from my own interests, deepens an understanding of the full context of the work because of the 'one voice', and I have tried to give a similar sense of this in relation to visual participatory work with communities.

Finally, I hope that this book gives a sense of the creative possibilities in doing visual research – and overall, a sense of the ‘why’ of the visual. Some of my research colleagues and students laugh at me when I say ‘make it up’ when engaging in the interpretive process. By ‘making it up’, however, I don’t mean pulling something out of thin air and without any back-up documentation on the questions under study. Rather, what I mean is that work with the visual creates a generative space for looking, and then looking anew (and with communities themselves). For researchers and research students new to the area of visual methodologies, this can be a liberating experience. And for colleagues who have been working in the area of visual research for much longer than I have, this book can be a reminder, I hope, of why we do what we do.

Acknowledgements

Doing Visual Research owes its existence to the contributions of many people, starting with all the youth, teachers, health-care workers, agricultural workers, parents and other community members in various parts of the world who have participated in the projects and studies I write about here.

I am grateful to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) for its support of the study 'Seeing for Ourselves' and later the study 'What Difference Does This Make?' I would also like to acknowledge the National Research Foundation's support of our research team (led by Naydene de Lange) in two projects: 'Learning Together' and 'Every Voice Counts'.

This book comes out of collaborations with many colleagues and students, especially those at McGill University in Montreal, Canada, and the University of KwaZulu-Natal in Durban, South Africa. Collaboration, by its very nature, lends itself to a blurring of boundaries in knowledge production. This makes it extremely difficult, if not impossible, to acknowledge adequately the origins and various destinations of conference presentations and publications. I have attempted to deal with the difficulties through referencing, and also in the actual writing of each of the chapters, in which I try to contextualize the work as much as possible. Many of the ideas presented in the book first saw the light of day at several International Visual Studies Association (IVSA) conferences; at such conferences as the Education Association of South Africa (EASA) conference held in Durban in 2009, the First International Visual Methodologies Conference held at the University of Leeds in 2009, the Material and Visual Cultures of Childhood conference held at Goldsmith's College in 2006, the Consuming Childhood conference in Trondheim in 2007; and, of course, at the various symposia of the Centre for Visual Methodologies for Social Change. My thanks to the organizers of these events for giving me the opportunity to explore my ideas.

I am grateful to all the co-researchers who have worked on (and inspired) the various projects described in *Doing Visual Research* and who have made this work so exciting. What has given much of this work shape is my involvement with the Centre for Visual Methodologies for Social Change at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, and I am particularly indebted to my two colleagues, Naydene de Lange and Jean Stuart, co-directors of the Centre. With the 'up-for-it-ness' of Naydene de Lange, now the HIV and AIDS Education Research Chair at Nelson Mandela Metropolitan

University, it has been possible to carry out community-based work in South Africa, as well as in Rwanda and Ethiopia. Even at the risk of leaving anyone out, let me list (alphabetically) all the colleagues who have been part of the studies that led to the writing of this book: Thabisile Buthelezi, Naydene de Lange, Sarah Flicker, Myriam Gervais, June Larkin, Fikele Mazibuko, Relebohile Moletsane, Eun Park, Jacqueline Reid-Walsh, Jean Stuart, Myra Taylor, Linda Theron and Sandra Weber.

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PART I

Introduction

ONE

Introduction: Getting the picture

A few years ago Ardra Cole and Maura McIntyre, researchers at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education in Canada, embarked upon a long-term study of adult caregivers caring for their elderly parents suffering from Alzheimer's disease. *Living and Dying with Dignity: The Alzheimer's Project* (Cole and McIntyre, 2006) focuses specifically on the fact that relatively little is known about the experiences of caregivers, particularly taking on the role of 'parent', and, critically, what kind of support they need to sustain themselves in their care of their parents – a care that cuts across legal issues, health care, emotional care and public education. In their work, Cole and McIntyre conducted many single face-to-face interviews with the caregivers, along with interviews of support groups, social workers and physicians. They translated their findings into an exhibition first shown in the foyer of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation Headquarters in Toronto. This exhibition was comprised of a number of installations, one of which was titled *Life Lines* (2008) and was made up of a gigantic clothesline spread from one wall to another with undergarments and adult-sized diapers hanging from it. The website of the Centre for Arts Informed Research describes *Life Lines* as follows:

Description: A free standing clothesline about 20 feet in length is held up by ropes and secured by concrete blocks at each end. Astro turf carpeting represents the grass below; a chair invites the viewer to sit and relax. The clothes on the line are blowing in the breeze. The undergarments are ordered from left to right according to the time in the life cycle at which they are worn. (*Life Lines*, 2008)

Another installation, *Still Life 1*, included a series of refrigerator doors, each with a different arrangement of fridge magnets holding a variety of artefacts: a school photo of a child (a grandchild), reminder notes about medication, and so on. In another of their exhibitions set up in Halifax there was a voice-activated tape recorder where viewers could sit and tell their own 'caring for' stories. Yet another installation, *Alzheimer's Still Life 2*, contained a series of visual images taken from family photograph albums of the two artist-researchers, both of whom themselves are adult caregivers who looked after their mothers suffering from Alzheimer's. As

their curatorial statement expressed, the particular photos ‘were chosen because they so clearly signify the mother–daughter connection over a life span and poignantly elucidate the role reversal that inevitably occurs when Alzheimer’s interrupts, confuses, and redefines a relationship’ (*Alzheimer’s Still Life 1*, 2008).

Their work demonstrates some of the complexities related to what is actually meant by visual methodologies, showing, for example, the multiple forms of visual data: domestic photos taken from family albums and items taken from material culture (adult-sized diapers, fridge magnets). Their work also shows the multiple ways of working with the visual. Working with the visual is about both representation (transforming the interviews into visual representations through the use of material culture) and dissemination (creating a visual exhibition that drew the attention of the public as well as health care researchers and health care policy makers), but is also, as we see in the second level of interviews with the participants, a mode of inquiry (a type of data elicitation). But there are two other aspects of the visual that are also critical. One relates to epistemology and how it is that we come to know what we know (and how to account for subjectivity). Cole and McIntyre are inside their own experience as caregivers as much as they are studying the experiences of the hundreds of other caregivers who they have interviewed and met through their exhibitions. The other aspect relates to broader issues of engaging in social science inquiry in the first place and the question, ‘What difference does this make anyway?’ For Cole and McIntyre (2008), and for an increasing number of researchers engaged in social research, the idea of how data collection can in and of itself serve as an intervention and be potentially transformative is key. Given the impact of these installations, people with a personal connection to the topic are ‘provoked’ to tell their own stories (Knowles and Cole, 2008). And if visual data can mobilize individuals or communities to act, it may be possible to think of the idea of visual research and social action.

Participatory Visual Approaches

‘Draw a scientist’; ‘Take photographs of where you feel safe and not so safe’; ‘Produce a video documentary on an issue “in your life”’; ‘Find and work with seven or eight pictures from your family photographs that you can construct into a narrative about gender and identity’. Each of these prompts speaks to the range of tools that might be used to engage participants (children, teachers, out-of-school youth, women farmers, community health care workers) in visual research (drawings, simple point-and-shoot cameras, video cameras, family photographs) and suggests some of the types of emerging data: drawings, the photographic images and captions produced in the photovoice project, the video texts produced in a community video project, and the newly created album or visual text produced by the participants in an album project. In each case, there is the immediate visual text (or primary text as John Fiske, 1991, terms it) – the drawing, photo