

from

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Using Visual Data
in Qualitative Research

Sage

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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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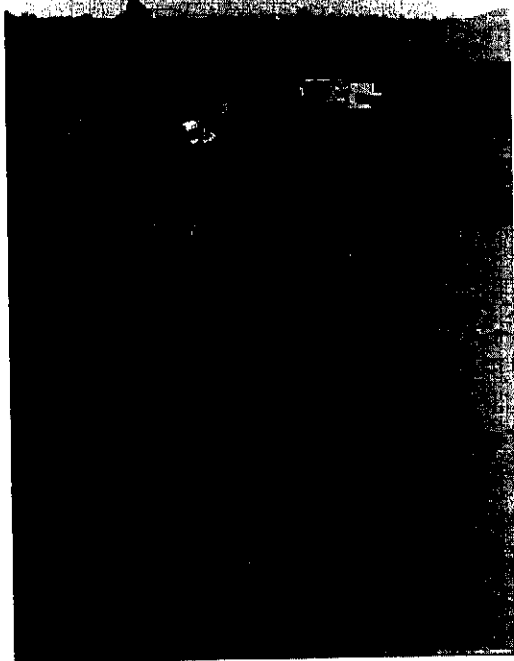


FIGURE 1.1 Alta Kahn shooting *Navajo Weaver II*, Pine Springs, Arizona, July 1966 (photograph by Richard Chalfen)

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 researcher¹ 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.

Planning and executing a visual research project

By the time they have reached the end of this book, together with the other volumes in this *Kit* (in particular Flick, 2007a; Gibbs, 2007; Kvale, 2007; and Rapley, 2007) and any other works on quantitative and qualitative research methodology thought relevant, social researchers should be able to construct an innovative and fully justifiable research project and be able to execute it on time and within budget through to the final dissemination of results. In broad outline, constructing a project involving visual methods is no different from preparing and executing any research proposal, though obviously the detail of any visual methods to be used will need to be given particular attention and justification.

Choosing a method

In general, it is not a good idea to begin planning a research project with a particular method in mind and then casting about for an empirical subject to try it out on. Equally, it is not generally a good idea to begin with a subject and then think of a method or suite of methods to investigate it (though in practice, many research projects begin life this way). Ideally, one should formulate an intellectual problem, then consider the most suitable subject or empirical context for investigation, and then consider which methods within that context are most likely to yield data that will address the problem. I doubt all social researchers will agree with me on this line and in fact, in my experience, most independent social research begins with a concrete substantive issue (see also Flick, 2007a, 2007b).

For example, a researcher may be interested in why British teenage boys of Afro-Caribbean origin generally do less well than their white counterparts in formal education. She may have been led to this question by her own previous experience, or through a newspaper report, or by some other means. An investigation that starts and finishes with this question and its answer is, to be honest, of limited value, however well executed the research. Lying behind the question are one or several more general sociological problems of which this is only a concrete instance. One such sociological problem might be: is inequality within society structured and sedimented through social institutions or is it the cumulative effect of minor acts of social agency? With this question in mind, the study of differentials in boys' educational attainment now becomes broadened out, indeed to the point where visual methodologies could profitably be employed. For example, boys – and girls – could be given disposable cameras to photograph the places at home, in the street and at school where they feel most 'free'; or pupils could be asked to watch and then comment on a number of Hollywood action films that show hero-figures fighting back at society or against injustice, and so forth. I argue in Chapter 6 that image-based research often encourages investigative

serendipity, the following of a line of inquiry that could not have been predicted in the original research design. Following such lines, however, can only be fruitful if the intellectual parameters are sufficiently broad to encompass them, hence the need for a general sociological problem lying behind the specific research problem.

Thus, the line from intellectual abstraction, to particular scenario, to appropriate method is worth defending. Even in contract and policy-related research, which is always driven by real-world problems (e.g. educational failure) rather than intellectual inquiry (e.g. the balance of structure and agency), it is important. For one thing, if the empirical conditions turn out not to be as expected, or the research cannot be executed as planned for some reason, then the underlying intellectual problem can be revisited to provide another empirical test case. More profoundly, without a point of origin in a body of theory and intellectual abstraction (even if located there after the event), the findings and output of any particular study are difficult to take further or generalize – indeed, their very significance may be opaque. While this may seem simply to be a defence of pure or 'blue skies' research and of intellectual integrity and independence, there are practical methodological consequences. For example, many so-called ethnographic films, produced as a mode of inquiry into the social life of another society, appear to have no intellectual underpinning from within, in this case, the discipline of social anthropology. Consequently, few social anthropologists who are not already film fans are prepared to give them much credence as a contribution to the discipline.

In some social science disciplines, establishing the intellectual underpinnings and then deciding upon the empirical context for investigation results in the creation of a hypothesis that can then be tested (for example, voter turnout at elections is correlated with the state of the economy, such that fewer people vote when the economy is strong; or, prolonged exposure to violence on television in childhood results in more persons becoming more violent in adulthood). In such cases, the choice of research methodologies is generally straightforward, relying on past practice and the tried-and-true. In other social science disciplines – including my own of social anthropology – there is a sense that the framework of hypothesis creation and testing forecloses the process of research too early and does not allow for unanticipated correlations or simple serendipity. Here, the programme of research is dictated by a more loosely formulated research question rather than a formal hypothesis (for example, why don't people bother to vote? or what is the role of social memory in the judgement of television programmes as 'violent?'), and the choice of method consequently becomes more open, responding to shifts in the direction of inquiry. In more critical mode the researcher might also go on to ask: in whose interest are these questions asked? Whose agenda does it serve to ask why people do not vote, or what constitutes 'violence' in the first place? In such research contexts, the choice of method consequently becomes more open and a variety of methods can be deployed in a spirit of disinterested inquiry.

In general, visual research methodologies tend towards the exploratory rather than the confirmatory. That is, visual methodologies are not so much employed as a method to gather data of predetermined size and shape that will confirm or refute a previously posited hypothesis, but as a method designed to take the researcher into realms that she may not have considered and towards findings previously unanticipated.

Some practical matters

With these discussions in mind, the construction of a research programme that employs visual methods can now proceed. Once a research question or hypothesis has been arrived at, its connection to a wider body of theory understood, and a specific empirical area of inquiry identified, questions of budget, timetable, research ethics and research methodology need to be addressed, and consideration given to dissemination and publication of the results. A variety of visual methods and forms of dissemination are discussed in later chapters, as are ethics, but some points concerning budget and timetable should be mentioned from the outset. Budgetary consideration should be given not just to the cost of consumables (film, videotape, batteries, digital camera data cards, and so on), but also to the – sometimes unexpected – costs associated with distribution (copies of photographs for return to research subjects, blank CDs, DVDs or videotapes, plus postage costs, for distributing film or video footage). Photographic reproduction costs in particular can be very high if the researcher plans or becomes involved in an exhibition of photographs as part of the research process (see the discussion of Geffroy's work in France in Chapter 5).

That such costs are not always anticipated is related to my opening comments on the ubiquity of images in society. I suspect that there are few people who have been the subject of an academic research project who would be delighted to receive a copy of a professional peer-reviewed academic paper, still less actively request a copy from the author. Conversely, most people who have been filmed, photographed or videotaped as part of a visual research project are very pleased to receive copies, and some do indeed actively demand them. Why should this be, given that the printed word is as ubiquitous as the visual image, at least in some societies? The answer is discussed more fully in Chapter 5, but relates to what some have called the polyvocality of images, their ability to permit multiple readings. To a researcher in behavioural studies, a photograph she took of two elderly men gesturing as they converse on a park bench is evidence of ethnic variation in non-linguistic communication and an important piece of evidence in her research report. To the niece of one of the men, it is treasured memory of recently deceased Uncle Luigi with his great pal Joe. The niece might well be interested to read that 'to reinforce his point, subject A (an elderly Italian-American male) gestures by bringing his right hand down in a closed fist upon the open palm of his left

hand, while subject B (an Irish-American) looks on', but she is hardly likely to frame the page of the article and place it on her mantelpiece.

Research project timetabling is less likely to be subject to research subjects' demands, though the researcher with a video camera should be prepared to meet requests to record wedding ceremonies, children's birthday parties, and the like. What is likely is an underestimate of the time required to view, transcribe and analyze images produced or collected in the course of research. One immediate problem is that there is no cataloguing or classificatory scheme for either still or moving images in universal use, and there is currently very little that can usefully be achieved in the way of computerized image recognition.² This means that most researchers end up indexing their visual materials by hand and to a scheme of their own devising, which normally has to be revised several times along the way. A more detailed discussion of these procedures can be found in Chapter 5.

Key terms and concepts

Although a glossary is provided at the end of this book, visual research employs a large number of specialist terms, often terms in use in daily language but with a distinctive aspect that need to be examined more closely. As with much analytical language in the social sciences, many terms have a literal meaning elsewhere but are used metaphorically; it is always worth reminding oneself of the literal meaning from time to time nonetheless.

Agency

This term is commonly understood in the social sciences to mean the capacity of one person to act upon another, or to influence a set of social relations as a result of such action, and is normally invoked within discussions of power. The relationship between a person's agency, and the structures that constrain the totally free expression of that agency (structures such as a legal framework, the educational system, kinship relations, or 'tradition'), form one of the core areas of investigation within the modern social sciences. Although the term is normally confined to human agents, some anthropologists and others have attributed agency to objects: in the area of visual research, this is best summed up by Mitchell's provocative question, 'What do pictures really want?' (1996, cited in Edwards, 2001, p. 18). While some, especially in science and technology studies, appear to write and construct theory as though objects really were possessed of agency (see Latour, 1991, for an example), most tend to use the term more metaphorically or, following the anthropologist of art, Alfred Gell, in seeing the agency of persons displaced into objects ('secondary agency': see Gell, 1998). An

object, such as a photograph or a piece of art, makes us do things (such as bid a high price at an auction to acquire it) because that is the intention of its creator or owner, or others associated with it or, more sociologically, because a nexus of human social relationships imbues the object with apparently agentive action, regardless of the wishes of any particular individual. Leading on from the idea that images, whether in their own right or as tools of human others, have agency, it therefore follows that images do 'work'. The work that images do or do not do is relevant, for example, to the discussion of the use of photography in attempts to understand the Indian caste system, discussed in the next chapter (the section on early uses of photography).

Data

Although the term is normally associated with a more positivist version of social science than I am comfortable with, it is a convenient shorthand term. I use it throughout this book simply to indicate the objects of sociological attention. From a more positivist perspective the data are already 'out there' waiting to be discovered, while from a more interpretivist point of view the data are brought into being through the process of inquiry; either way, they are all data. In this book, the term simply denotes the visual images and other things that are identified, created or reified by the processes of social research into objects that can be manipulated, tabulated, compared one against another and so forth, regardless of their ontological status. Put another way, visual objects such as photographs can either be considered as data in their own right ('43 per cent of the images in the collection are glass-plate negatives'), or they can be considered as sources of data ('in 43 per cent of the images men are performing agricultural tasks'). For those of a less positivistic persuasion, the latter meaning is more problematic because it relates to an interpretation of content (the internal *narrative*, see below), however apparently objective or obvious. The former understanding is easier to accept, referring as it does to the physical actuality of the object, the most basic aspect of its external narrative. (See also Box 2.1 in Chapter 2.)

Documentary

Although today the term is routinely applied to most if not all kinds of non-fiction film and some kinds of still photography, on the whole it is associated with the films of British filmmaker John Grierson and his mission, from the late 1920s onwards, to 'dramatize [social] issues and their implications in a meaningful way [which would] lead the citizen through the wilderness' of social change and uncertainty, as Erik Barnouw puts it (1983, p. 85). In other words, a documentary film – or corpus of documentary photographs – is not merely a neutral document or record of things that took place before the camera, but a *representation*

(see below) of those things, persons and events intended to explain society and its processes to its citizens.

Figure/ground

In fine art or in descriptive assessments of images, the figure is the main subject of, say, a painting (for example, a vase of flowers or a bowl of fruit in a still-life) and the ground is more or less everything else (which in classical representational European art is normally the background – mountains, buildings, trees, etc., though not necessarily). Less literally, however, the terms are also used to explore the relationship between things that appear to be significant and those that seem incidental and also the extent to which figure is only given meaning by its relationship to ground (in gestalt psychology, for example). In the psychology of perception, a classic case is the simple black and white sketch, familiar to most children as an 'optical illusion', which can be seen either as the silhouette of two faces in profile facing one another as though in conversation, or as an elaborately shaped vase, depending on which of black or white is assigned the value of 'figure' and which 'ground'.

Frame

There are two literal uses one might encounter: (i) the physical, material frame in which a picture is placed when, for example, selecting a suitable frame to exhibit the photographs taken during a field investigation, or perhaps when considering the frame used to hold a family snapshot or memorial portrait that an informant is discussing in the course of an interview; (ii) when looking through the viewfinder of a camera to frame a shot, or when considering the frame that another photographer selected for a shot. These uses of the term concern relatively practical matters, although especially in the latter case this is not without theoretical or analytical importance. More commonly researchers encounter the term in a more metaphorical sense. Sociologists sometimes speak of the 'research frame', indicating what is, and is not, to be included in the investigation. For example, a piece of research into the correlation between children's educational attainments and family income would be unlikely to consider shoe-size as a significant variable, and therefore not include it in the research frame. However, in contemporary Euro-America, children's choice of and access to certain brand-name (training) shoes might be significant and probably should be included within the research frame (Nike or Adidas?). In visual research the frame initially appears to be the frame around the image as published or experienced, but further investigation often shows that the frame needs to be considerably broadened. This can be taken in both a literal sense – what is *not* shown, just beyond the frame of the image seen? – as well as metaphorically – what social and hence sociological

factors influence the photographic frame selected? Research investigations directed towards an image's external narrative (see below) often broaden the frame considerably.

Narrative

At its broadest, the term refers to the intentional organization of information apparently presented within – for our purposes – an image or sequence of images. More narrowly, and deriving from the use in academic as well as non-academic speech, it refers to the 'story' told by these images. At this point cultural specificity must be highlighted: not all societies would necessarily recognize the logical ordering of events that make a 'good' story for Euro-Americans. Narrative structures are established and understood by convention and are not innate or universal. In this book, however, as elsewhere (e.g. Banks, 2001), I take the broader meaning of the term, but distinguish two kinds of narrative – internal narrative and external narrative. The internal narrative of, say, a photograph is simply addressed by the question: 'What is this a picture of?' (answer, in a descriptive mode: a cat, a woman, a man with a gun; but, more interpretatively, also: my pet, his wife, a murder). The external narrative is the story constructed by answering such questions as: 'Who took this picture?', 'When was it taken?', 'Why was it taken?' Although some clues to aid in constructing the external narrative of an image can be derived from the image itself, for the most part the external narrative is constructed by conducting research elsewhere: in brief, by considering the image as a node or a channel in a network of human social relations. Such an exercise enlarges the (metaphorical) *frame* of the image (see above) to consider persons and events that may extend quite widely in time and space.

Ocularcentrism

This ungainly term refers to the apparent privileging of vision above all other senses in contemporary Western society (and increasingly elsewhere). The importance of vision as a way of knowing the world is associated with the rise of modernity and subsequently postmodernity, partly because of the sheer volume of images that surround us in these periods (magazines, television, advertising hoardings, etc.) and partly because, as the French sociologist Michel Foucault has observed, vision becomes a tool and a means by which power is exercised in society. His most famous example, and one much cited and drawn upon since, is the panopticon, the eighteenth-century design for a prison in which the warders can see all the prisoners but cannot be seen by the prisoners (see Chapter 3). For some researchers ocularcentrism is merely a descriptive term, morally and socially neutral; for others it is implicitly a term of criticism, associated with the perpetual surveillance of modern life in the form of CCTV cameras on every street corner (see also Rose, 2001, p. 9). For the social researcher interested in

visuality (the social construction and use of vision) it is ironic that the social sciences, like most other branches of academic study, are profoundly logocentric, preferring the word over the image to present their findings.

Perspective

This again is a term with both a technical meaning (as in 'vanishing-point perspective' as a compositional rule in fine-art painting and technical drawing) and everyday more casual and metaphorical usage, which is constantly invoked in social science, including visual research. One reason for including it here in this list is that its use normally implies a knowing – and seeing – agent, someone from whose perspective something is observed.

Reflexivity

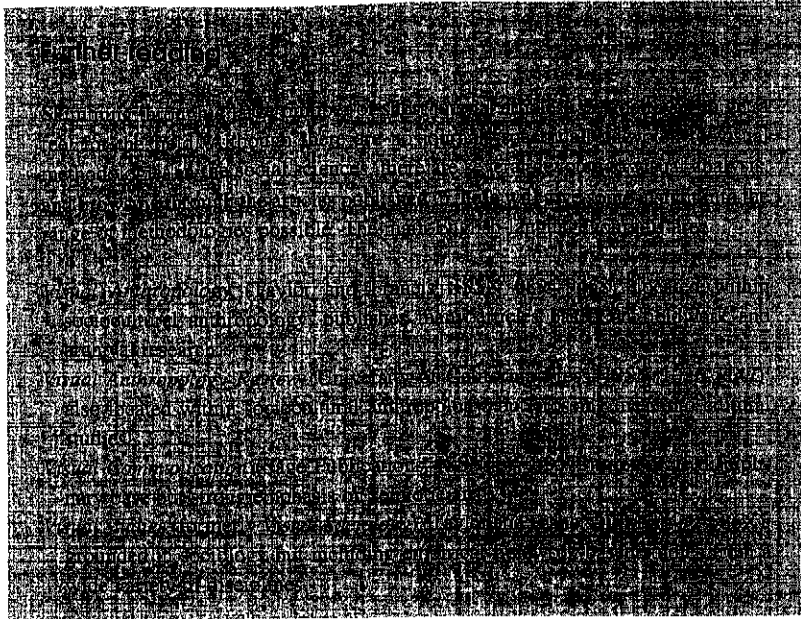
Described more fully in Chapter 3, a reflexive approach in social research implies an awareness of the researcher's own role in the research process (as Becker, 1998, puts it, 'how to think about your research while you're doing it'). This can range from a minimal awareness of one's own biases or subjectivities to a full-blown autobiographical frame for the research. The mode of investigation, and the type of data considered, influence the level of reflexivity to some extent. For example, an analysis of public images used in advertising may require the researcher to confront her own subjectivity – as a woman, as a mother, as a consumer, and so on – but probably only to a minimal degree, or not at all. A project involving the creation and subsequent analysis of a community video, on the other hand, may involve a great deal of consideration of the researcher's relationship to the community in question, which itself will be predicated on her age, gender, class position, and so forth.

Representation

This term dominates much writing on the visual in both sociological writings and that of other disciplines, such as art history. The key point, in the case of visual representation, is that the thing seen – the representation – is a thing in its own right, not merely a substitute for the thing unseen, the thing represented. As Elizabeth Chaplin, amongst others, notes, a (visual) representation has three additional properties: its form is not dictated solely or even at all by the thing represented but by a set of conventions or codes (vanishing-point *perspective*, for example, allows a three-dimensional scene to be represented in two dimensions but only to viewers who understand the convention); it is embedded in, reflects and constitutes social processes (so, for example, a two-dimensional painting of a landscape may reflect and thus represent the wealth and aspirations of the landowner who commissioned it); and finally, the representation has some kind of intentional force behind it (see *agency* above) and presumes a viewer or a consumer

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(for example, the viewer of the landscape painting) is impressed, even awed, by the landowner's wealth and ownership of such beauty (Chaplin, 1994, p. 1). But as Chaplin also notes, terms such as 'representation', 'picture', 'image' and so on are often used loosely in the literature, and readers are advised to study the context within which a term is used in order to assess the specificity of meaning intended (Chaplin, 1994, p. 183).



Key points

- Visual research methodologies should only be used as part of a more general 'package' of research methodologies and their use should be indicated by the research itself, not just because the researcher enjoys taking pictures.
- Visual research can take longer than expected, and may involve additional costs; researchers should plan for this at the outset.
- In planning a project, researchers should try to identify the fundamental sociological questions that lie behind the specific investigation; at the same time, visual research methodologies are often used in an exploratory manner, to discover things the researcher had not initially considered.