

Image-Based Research: Ethics of Photographic Evidence in Qualitative Research

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Abstract

The traditional mode of text as the dominant form of research dissemination has been challenged by the use of visual representation. This paper discusses the historical and contemporary use of photographs to aid understanding of the research phenomena, and highlights ethical and moral considerations for researchers.

Introduction

“Images provide researchers with...an alternative to the way we have perceived data in the past” (Prosser, 1998, p. 1). The purpose of this paper is twofold: to illustrate that visual images have the potential to significantly contribute towards understanding the human condition, and to highlight ethical and moral responsibilities of collecting and presenting photographic evidence.

Visual research incorporates photography, film, video, artifacts, diagrams, maps, symbols, and art among other forms of non-textual data (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993; Pink, 2004; Prosser, 1998). As it is not possible to discuss each type of visual data in such a short article, this paper presents an opportunity to consider the viability of one method; use of photographic data through examples from an ethnographic case study of female grassroots leaders conducted in Ahmedabad, India during 2004.

Why are images important? They signify multiple representations of a culture and enrich understanding of the phenomena under investigation. Image-based research has been used to enhance and even replace textual communication. Interdisciplinary methods of research have gained ground in recent years providing multiple opportunities for scholars and practitioners concerned with the needs of diverse audiences. Images honor the preferences of visual learners so have much to contribute to adult education. The proliferation of digital media research has made visual research methods particularly appealing for researchers with basic technical skills.

Images provide powerful portrayals of individuals and their contexts such as the study of gender disparities. University Institutional Review Boards (IRB), however, are extremely wary of the ethics of visual data because of the potential to harm study participants. Current debates focus on the production and interpretation of knowledge. No researcher or data collection method is free from bias, but careful consideration and planning of visual methods can enhance research and communication of data.

Image-Based Methods



Figure 1: Self-employed vegetable vendor on a street in Ahmedabad.

Towards a Visual Method

Visual methods of data collection are recognized in ethnography as a valuable resource (Pink, 2004). Ethnography requires the ability to provide “thick” description and realistic accounts (Geertz, 1973, p.9).

...Theoretical approaches to subjectivity, experience, knowledge and representation... and an emphasis on interdisciplinary have invited exciting new possibilities for the use of photographic technologies and images in ethnography. (Pink, 2004, p.2)

Pink critiques Prosser’s (1998) image-based methods as being too prescriptive and argues for a more humanistic approach to production and understanding of visual ethnography. Pink cautions “methods should serve the aims of the research” and not vice-versa (p.3). According to Pink, each research design necessitates the need for creativity. Edgar (2004) argues that images have the power to “access the latent knowledge and unexpressed feelings of respondents” (p.104). Debates surrounding the merits of visual data are similar to dialogue regarding other research methods.

Harper (2003), discusses the evolution of using photographs in research: from recording history, conducting interviews, or discussions about societal change. Whether visual methods are used for documentation, theoretical support, comparative studies, confirmation of fieldwork observations, confirmation of textual reports, or recording evolving societies, the purpose of visual data is dependent upon the research design. Photography as a method to generate theory was pioneered by Mead and Bateson (1942) during their study of Balinese culture. Over time, however, the use of photography in research seems to have declined (Harper, 2003). Harper believes that the camera can “present reality almost as the eye sees, only slightly narrower than a normal view” (p.

258). Although visual methods can be problematic, careful planning and ethical considerations can warrant their use in research studies.

Issues and Ethics

Issues

Text as the standard paradigm for research dissemination dominates scholarly practice because of concerns regarding the use of images. Merriam and Simpson (2000) recommend that in considering reliability and validity in research one should ask, “how congruent are one’s findings with reality?” (p.101). Simco and Warin (1997), offer a discussion of methodological problems in the use of visual data. Scholarly resistance towards visual data is fueled by questions of ethics, validity, reliability, rigor, moral conduct, and trustworthiness (Harper, 2003; Pink, 2004; Prosser, 1998). Practices such as early British colonial studies attempting to prove Social Darwinism were highly criticized (Harper, 2003), and raised concerns regarding scholarly conduct. Ambiguity in the research process makes it difficult to reach a consensus among scholars and practitioners.

Ethical Considerations

Multiple fields such as education, anthropology, sociology, and psychology, have used images for different purposes. A range of experiences in the use of images for research defies the formation of rigid rules and guidelines. However, most agree on a general code of conduct that includes ethics and moral responsibilities of the researcher: “informed consent, opposition to deception, privacy and confidentiality, and accuracy” (Edgar, 2004, pp. 101-102). Operationalizing the code of ethics in practice, however, becomes a challenge.

The need for an ethical code dates back to the Nuremburg military trials during the 1940s that instigated The Nuremberg Code in 1947 introducing the term “informed consent” (Merriam & Simpson, 2000, p. 205). During the 1960s and 1970s, government agencies created strict regulations for government funded research projects (2002). Subsequently, most IRBs have required researchers to obtain informed consent from study participants to ensure their rights and well-being. University IRB guidelines stress that respect for individuals and their dignity must take precedence over any particular method. When in doubt, it is wise to follow the do no harm policy.

Critics challenge the bias, purpose, and analysis of visual data, but similar debates continue regarding textual representation. Edgar argues that any data collection method has the potential to be intrusive. Even interviews “can suddenly trigger a sensitive area” (p. 102). One major concern is that researcher’s repressed feelings may be portrayed in the images captured (Edgar, 2004). Pink (2004), questions the source and intent of ethical codes and wonders whether they are equally transferable to differing contexts. Pink chose to remain neutral in her study of Spanish bullfighting. As in written text, the description and interpretation of visual data carries with it the bias of a researcher’s frame of reference, personal background, descriptions, purpose, and theoretical and conceptual framework. The lens from which images are captured, analyzed, and presented are similar to textual representations of data. Researchers determine what to include and what to leave out dependent upon their research designs.

Any strategy that aids the collection and analysis of data without violating ethical considerations is relevant in qualitative studies. Captured images can provide a historical archive for future studies as a comparison of development in a topic, or with other study groups. Photographs provide a sense of awareness of oppressed groups as well as evidence of their marginalization for court cases as in Indian women's struggle for emancipation. The Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) in India has a video team of trained staff members who produce and present evidence of marginalization at government meetings, national, and international conferences (SEWA). Because of high visibility, the government of India took steps to rectify gross discriminations and exploitations of low-income women.

Ethical considerations apply to all phases of the research design: from idea generation to data presentation. Protection of study participants takes precedence over any particular method. Following IRB regulations will help to guide the research design.

India Case Study

A case study exploring experiences and perceptions of poverty alleviation among female grassroots leaders in India provided the opportunity for a critical examination of a low-income community. Poverty, caste, class, gender, and low levels of education marginalize low-income Indian women. Data collection for this study included interviews, observations, documentation, artifacts, and photographs. In a complex society where multiple sensory data made it difficult to capture accurate field notes during observations, memory alone could not be relied upon to facilitate recall during analysis that took place several months later. Photographic evidence provided insights that were missed on site, enabled the recognition of patterns, enhanced notes that were too brief or incomplete, and helped to recall observations and experiences in a manner that textual representation could not replicate. Photographs of working women documented their poverty and inferior working conditions within the informal sector.

The purpose of this feminist ethnographic inquiry was to bring awareness of issues of culture, equality, and social justice from Indian women's perspectives. While photographs provided illustrations of working women in their natural environments, supported textual descriptions, and were a powerful tool to help western audiences understand the conditions of low-income self-employed women; images of paper-picking and vegetable vending women struggling in hot dusty streets left no doubts of their marginalization and exploitation within an informal economy.

During research in India, confidentiality and respect of study participants were honored in several ways. Images of informants or their homes were not collected to protect their identities. Rather, images of similar women in similar environments provided a good substitute for the study of low-income women. Sensitivity to people's circumstances and cultural taboos were vital to avoid potential conflicts during fieldwork. For most researchers, ethics are also based on personal convictions. For example, to protect their dignity, I refrained from collecting images of females bathing or dressing although many poor women were forced to bathe in public areas due to a lack of private bathrooms.

Photographs of a good resolution were captured with a Sony Cyber-shot Digital Camera (5 Megapixels) during fieldwork (see Figure 1). Digital camera prices range from

under \$250 to over \$1,000 for professional models. PC Magazine's website: www.pcmag.com offers current product comparisons.

Equipped with extra batteries and memory sticks, research began immediately upon arrival in Ahmedabad. Images were downloaded daily and saved onto a computer hard drive. Thus, photographs could be copied onto compact discs, and printed or transferred onto PowerPoint presentations. In this study of gender disparities and social transformation, photographs greatly enhanced and facilitated data collection, analysis, and presentation of findings.

Implications

Implications of visual representation reflect upon issues of knowledge production and dissemination. A discussion of how visual methods impact research and adult education provides an opportunity to consider their merits and challenges for research.

Implications for Research

Scholars and practitioners are responding to the growing demand of audiences for multi-media presentations of knowledge; especially within alternative delivery styles of education such as online learning. Alternative research methods that incorporate a multidisciplinary approach can inform scholars and practitioners in various fields ranging from anthropology to human resource development.

Answering some basic questions will help to optimize appropriate use of a visual method: "Does it enhance the research study?", "Does it add value?", "What are the lenses that frame and describe images?", and "Does it protect the identities and well-being of study participants?" The researcher's intentions ultimately guide and affect research efforts.

Implications for Adult Education

Images have the power to contribute an understanding of non-western and non-dominant contexts to wider audiences with differing learning styles. In addition, visual data can overcome learning and linguistic barriers in adult education. Those concerned with multiple intelligences, will find visual data particularly appealing. While critics contend that visual research methods are problematic, others argue for the need to meet diverse learning needs. Adult audiences appreciate visual representations of data in the form of charts, graphs, and tables in traditional reports. Images offer additional opportunities for researchers to communicate information.

Conclusions

Multidisciplinary methods of research are not new, but they rarely include the use of photographs. Ethics of image-based research is a complex issue that necessitates careful consideration and practice. Justification must be made with university IRBs to gain permission for any method of data collection prior to conducting research. Each research method brings strengths and challenges so a visual approach offers one more way to leverage optimal results. Narratives are, of course, powerful testimonials that project the voices of the informants. Visual data have the potential to support and

enhance narratives, as well as provide a tool for theory building. Careful consideration and planning of image-based methods can enhance research studies, and provide creative strategies for critical understanding.

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