

NCRM Collaborative Project

Visual Ethics: developing good practice

Co-Investigators

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Background

Visual methods comprise a range of approaches and techniques for conducting social research, including photography, film and drawings. Visual approaches raise specific ethical challenges which may be distinct from those raised by purely textual data. Central to these are issues of i) anonymity and confidentiality, ii) privacy, iii) copyright, and iv) data sharing and archiving. There is only limited guidance for researchers on ethical issues in relation to visual data. Evidence from RLM, QUALITI and Prosser's RDI project indicate that researchers are developing valuable on-the-ground experience of handling visual ethics, whilst also having a number of concerns. There is a need for resources which enable visual researchers across a range of social science disciplines to fully engage with the ethical dimensions of their research, and to share and develop good practice.

This project aimed to capitalise on the NCRM's networks and innovative work in visual methods to (i) identify visual researchers' everyday practice in relation to ethics; (ii) map the ethical issues and challenges encountered by visual researchers (iii) identify the strategies adopted to manage visual ethics (iv) gain an understanding, and identify exemplars, of good ethical practice in visual research (v) identify any particularly problematic or seemingly 'unresolvable' ethical concerns that would benefit from further and more detailed exploration. It was intended that a resource on good ethical practice for visual researchers would be developed from the project.

Methods

We conducted four focus groups and 11 face-to-face, telephone or email interviews with researchers with experience of visual methods (n=39). The focus groups were run in four different academic institutions in the UK (one in Wales, two in the North West and one in the Southern England). Each of these groups comprised seven researchers (n=28). Participants to the groups were identified by a key contact in each institution who provided names of visual researchers at their own or other local institutions to the researcher. Other individuals located in the broad geographical area of the focus group were identified by the research team. Of the 58 individuals approached, 33 agreed to participate. However of these, five did not attend on the day of the focus group due to illness, pressure of work, travel problems (3 people) or for unexplained reasons (2 people). Participants in the focus groups were researchers with varying levels of experience with visual methods, both those who had been using such methods over a considerable period of time and those who were currently using them for the first time. It also included researchers at different stages of their career, including PhD students.

To supplement these data, eleven interviews were conducted with visual researchers. Seven of these interviews were conducted by telephone, two were face-to-face interviews and a further two participants responded via an email interview. These interviewees included those who were unable to attend focus groups and were people identified by focus group participants, interviewees or the research team as being involved with interesting visual research or with a reputation in the visual methods. Of the 14 people approached, 12 agreed to take part (one of these did not respond to an email list of questions although they indicated that they would do so). Two individuals were approached from outside of the UK

and one of these participated; this individual was based in the US. Two researchers who were not able to take part in a focus group or interview agreed to respond to interview questions by email.

Study participants of both focus groups and interviews comprised five PhD students, seven research associates, 15 academics at lecturer or senior lecturer level, 11 senior academics at reader or professorial level and one university legal adviser. Participants were drawn from a range of disciplines but most defined themselves as sociologists or as using sociological methods although included in this were researchers from the disciplines of education, social policy and social work studies (n=30). Of the rest, three identified their discipline as human geography, two as law, two as management, one as anthropology and one as art and design.

The following issues were explored with both focus group and interview participants: i) the ethical issues they routinely encounter and how they manage them, ii) their views about 'good' and 'bad' ethical practice in relation to visual research iii) their views, experiences and management of ethical regulation in relation to visual methods iv) how visual researchers might be supported in their management of ethical issues. Focus groups lasted for up to 90 minutes and interviews were of around 30 minutes duration (range 20-60 minutes). Both focus groups and interviews were digitally recorded and fully transcribed.

Focus group and interview data were coded and analysed separately. Thematic analysis was conducted in order to identify key themes emerging from the data. The six key themes identified were: anonymity; ethical regulation; consent; use of images; ethical practice; resources. Each of these comprised a number of sub-themes.

Findings

Two of the themes emerged as presenting significant challenges for visual researchers: anonymity and ethical regulation. These two themes have been the focus of further analysis. Participants identified the issue of anonymity as the key ethical challenge with which they had to engage in the conduct of visual research. Issues such as whether or not to anonymise, when to anonymise, how to anonymise, how to disseminate, store and archive visual material and how to manage ethical regulation around anonymity were all key concerns of visual researchers. This issue was the first one identified in response to the question 'what are the key ethical challenges in undertaking visual research?' and discussion of this issue dominated the interviews or focus groups. The issue of anonymity in visual research has been fairly widely discussed in the literature on visual methods but our experience in this study indicates that it is one that is unresolved and is a source of contention and conflict for researchers. While some researchers held firm views that visual data should or should not be anonymised, they all noted the complex process that needs to inform decisions about anonymity.

We identified a conflict in researchers' views between the desire to respect participants' rights to be seen and heard and 'given voice' and researchers' responsibility to protect participants. We have explored this conflict through the data and identified the arguments for the two different perspectives and explored the ethical principles that researchers draw on in making the case for or against anonymisation. We have also explored the implications of this in terms of wider debates about the appropriateness of anonymisation as a concept in visual research.

The second major theme identified, that of ethical regulation, relates to key debates about the appropriateness of regulation for social research raised by Dingwall (2006, 2008) and Atkinson (2009), among others. The regulation of social research in the

UK poses some challenges for visual researchers (Prosser & Loxley, 2008). Concerns raised by the visual research community are that ethics committees will render some visual research undoable or will specify limitations to visual researchers' practice. This is certainly a concern expressed among visual researchers in North America who have noted that the fear of litigation has resulted in IRBs central concern being to protect the institution rather than the rights of participants or researchers (Gunsalus et al, 2007).

Researchers in our study reflected on their experience of the ethics approval process and the broader issue of ethical regulation and its impact. The range of formats for ethical review in institutions gave rise to different strategies for managing the approval process to enable researchers to undertake visual research in the ways they wished. For some researchers this meant 'making the case' for undertaking visual research but for others it involved not drawing a committee's attention to the possible ethical implications that visual research may have. Checking by Committees at study completion that researchers had adhered to approved procedures appeared unusual but this did not affect researchers' practice. Researchers only rarely identified barriers to conducting visual research from committees in the UK but skilful negotiation was sometimes necessary to achieve this.

Further work

Work developing the analysis and papers from the study continues. A meeting is scheduled for June 29th 2009 to discuss a draft paper, conference presentations and the appropriateness of developing a resource on good ethical practice in visual methods.

Outputs

Abstracts have been accepted for the following conference presentations:

- Wiles et al, 'Anonymisation and visual images: issues of respect, voice and protection'. International Visual Sociology Association Conference, Carlisle, July 22-24.
- Wiles et al, 'Ethical regulation and visual methods: making visual research impossible or developing good ethical practice? International Visual Methods Conference, Leeds, 15-17 September 2009.

A paper for publication has been drafted on anonymisation. A second paper for publication on ethical regulation will be drafted over the next few months. Working papers will be made available on the NCRM website.

References

- Atkinson, P. (2009) Ethics and ethnography. *21st Century Society: Journal of the Academy of Social Sciences* 4 (1): 17-30.
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- Prosser, J. & Loxley, A. (2008) Introducing Visual Methods. NCRM Methodological Review.