

Anonymisation and visual images:  
issues of respect, 'voice' and protection

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August 2010

ESRC National Centre for Research Methods

NCRM Working Paper Series

07/10

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### **Abstract**

A central ethical issue confronting researchers using visual approaches is how to manage the use of identifiable images. Photographic and other visual materials can make the anonymisation of individuals problematic; at the same time many researchers as well as research participants view image manipulation and anonymisation as undesirable. There may be pressure from a range of stakeholders for images to be anonymised, particularly in relation to research with vulnerable groups, for example children. There are also a range of ethical concerns that need consideration in relation to the use of identifiable images; these include the contexts in which images were produced and may be consumed, the longevity of images in the public domain and the potential for future uses of images. This paper explores the ways in which researchers approach issues of anonymisation in visual research, drawing on a qualitative study of ethical issues in visual research. Focus group discussions and interviews with visual researchers revealed the ongoing challenge of identification and anonymisation. While decisions about visual identification are inevitably complex and situated, our data showed that there is an ongoing tension between, on the one hand, research participants’ rights and researchers’ desire for participants to be *seen* and heard and, on the other hand, researchers’ real and perceived responsibility to protect participants.

## **Introduction**

Visual methods comprise a range of approaches and techniques and are used across a variety of social science disciplines. Visual data can comprise found data (e.g., family photo albums), researcher created data (e.g., photographs taken by researchers), respondent created data (e.g., photographs taken by respondents) and representations (e.g., graphical representations of data) (Prosser & Loxley, 2008). Each of these types of data raises specific ethical challenges which may be distinct from those raised by narrative and textual data. Among these challenges, anonymity has been identified as 'the core problem' (Pauwels, 2008, p244) for visual researchers. While there is some guidance for researchers on ethical issues in relation to visual data (see for example BSA visual sociology group, 2006), this remains rather general and limited (Wiles et al, 2008a).

The ethical regulation of social research in the UK poses challenges for researchers using visual methods (Prosser & Loxley, 2008; Pauwels, 2008). Ethical governance of social research has been steadily increasing over the last decade (ESRC, 2010; Tinker & Coomber, 2004) so that virtually all social research conducted by researchers in a range of settings is now subject to some form of ethical review. Ethics committees vary widely in the ways in which they assess applications for review and the decisions they make. However, the general principles they assess usually include the anonymisation of respondents alongside other issues such as informed consent, confidentiality and the avoidance of harm (Israel & Hay, 2006).

Concerns have been raised that enhanced ethical governance of social science research will render some visual research virtually impossible to undertake, or will

specify limitations to visual researchers' practice (such as obscuring faces to preserve anonymity) resulting in relatively meaningless data (Prosser & Loxley, 2008). This has been a concern expressed among visual researchers in North America in relation to the constraints imposed by Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) (Gunsalus et al, 2007). Indeed some visual researchers have sought to sidestep ethical regulation in the social sciences by referring to their work as journalism or art and, as such, subject to less stringent ethical codes (Pauwels, 2008).

In this paper we draw on a project which aimed to explore the ethical issues and challenges encountered by researchers who use visual methods ('visual researchers'), the strategies adopted and their ethical concerns. A central issue raised by participants concerned the vexed issues of anonymity and identification of visual materials, and that is our primary focus in this paper. In the next section we provide some details about the study.

### **Research study**

The data referred to in this paper are drawn from focus groups and qualitative interviews with researchers with experience of visual methods (n=39). Four focus groups, each comprising seven participants, were run in four different academic institutions across the UK. 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 first time users. The groups included researchers at different stages of their career, including doctoral students. In addition eleven interviews were conducted. These interviewees included those who were unable to attend focus groups and were people identified as having a reputation

in visual methods by focus group participants, interviewees or the research team. Study participants comprised five PhD students, seven research associates, fifteen academics at lecturer or senior lecturer level, eleven senior academics at reader or professorial level and one university legal adviser. Participants were drawn from a range of disciplines, including sociology, education, social policy, social work, law, geography, management and anthropology, but most defined themselves as using sociological methods.

Focus groups and interviews explored: the ethical issues encountered in visual research and how these were managed; views, experiences and management of ethical regulation; and, how visual researchers might be supported in managing ethical issues. Focus groups and interviews were digitally recorded and fully transcribed. Thematic analysis was conducted in order to identify key themes emerging from the data.

There are some challenges in conducting research with academics, researchers and peers, not least ethical issues of confidentiality and anonymity (Wiles et al, 2006). Researchers may be wary of what they are prepared to discuss and be anxious about information given about their own or their peers' practice. This is particularly the case when the research topic is one of ethics. In approaching this issue, our practice was to assure participants that we would not report data relating to their own or other researchers' ethical practice in ways that might identify individuals. While several participants in this study held strong views against the anonymisation of visual data, only one person said that they did not want to be anonymised and several people raised specific concerns about what they had said being kept confidential.

## **Anonymisation and visual data**

Our research participants identified the issue of anonymity as a key ethical challenge with which they had to engage in the conduct of visual research. This issue was discussed in relation to photos, video or drawings of individuals who are potentially identifiable. Issues of whether or not to anonymise, when to anonymise, how to anonymise and how to manage ethical regulation around anonymity were all key concerns. The issue of anonymisation was usually 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 interview and focus group discussions. The focus was on the appropriate use of potentially identifiable visual images rather than the use of real names in research. While some visual researchers view it as appropriate for identifiable images and real names to be used, and we discuss this issue further below, participants’ concerns were largely with the issue of anonymity as it relates to the use of identifiable images of people, whether or not they are identified by their real names. The issue of anonymity in visual research has been discussed in the literature (e.g., Pauwels, 2008) 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 either should or should not be anonymised, they all noted the complexity and situatedness of decisions. Our data indicated researchers’ views were situated on a continuum; strong views for or against anonymity were expressed at the extremes of this continuum. The arguments against anonymisation related to the desire to respect respondents’ rights to be seen *and* heard and ‘given voice’ while the arguments for anonymisation related to researchers’

responsibility to protect respondents. In this paper we present these conflicting arguments and go on to identify the ethical principles and issues researchers can draw on in making situated decisions about the anonymisation of visual data. We also explore how and why the issue of anonymisation is such a central concern to the research community

### **The right to be seen *and* heard**

Researchers expressing strong views about the non-anonymisation of visual data drew on rights-based arguments for their stance. Researchers adopting this approach indicated that the traditional approach to anonymisation was outdated and not applicable to visual research (or sometimes to research more generally):

where I am coming from in terms of my own discussion of ethics for visual methods is along the lines that anonymity may not always be, actually, what is required ... not offering anonymity may offer other possibilities (Focus Group 1).

The arguments put forward by these researchers included a perception that respondents often *want* to be seen and *should be able* to be seen; being identified was a wish and a right. This desire to be seen was viewed as particularly, but not exclusively, the case with research with young people. Researchers noted that respondents' reasons for participating in research was often because they thought they would be identified and they wanted to be able to show others that they had been involved in research and to take pride in their involvement. Respondents, often, could not understand why they would be anonymised if they did not wish to be and were

disappointed when they were. Respondents' right to be identified and researchers' responsibility to enable this to happen and not to override their wishes was repeatedly emphasised. Being identified was often about more than just being seen in a visual image but also about having a message or viewpoint heard and having views made *visible*. Researchers also identified this as a particularly pertinent issue for some stigmatised groups for whom being 'seen' was viewed as a way to challenge stigmatisation. The following data extracts illustrate some of these issues and tensions:

We've just been through an interesting process where, you know, we tried to blur images and then taking them back to young people and they've said "don't do that, we don't like it", you know (Focus group 2)

I don't think anybody has expressed concern about having an image ... being shown anywhere or reproduced anywhere, because they tend to be quite happy about that and they wouldn't agree with things that try to limit that ... some research I did with children making videos they wanted to be seen and that included all of their faces. ... They are representing themselves and their own views and they were happy to be shown doing that and they found it exciting and nice (Interview 4)

The issue of respondents' rights is particularly pertinent in relation to respondent-generated data. A number of our interviewees argued that visual data created by respondents are 'owned' by them and that researchers have no right to alter them in the interests of anonymity. This view was not about legal issues of copyright but



related to moral arguments about ownership and the production of images as a personal, creative process. This view was particularly strongly expressed by researchers working with, or in, arts traditions. It was noted that the move by social science into artist domains have resulted in different views about appropriate ethical practices being placed alongside each other. This view was also evident among researchers working in other disciplines and traditions, such as anthropology and in participatory approaches. Similarly there were moral arguments in relation to anonymisation being a form of ‘violation’ or ‘violence’, with a resultant objectification of respondents.

You’ve actually got different traditions coming face-to-face. You’ve got practices in community arts, working with young people, producing images who wouldn’t dream of kind of violating the image by blurring this young person’s face before it was exhibited in a public space ... and this is coming up against people in social science. There are a growing number of people in social science giving cameras to young people to do what are, effectively, creative projects around identity, and they are suddenly saying “that’s our data, we’re going to, you know, put a bar across you eyes so no-one can recognise you” (Focus group 2)

I’ve seen some really scary things happening, and I know people are just trying to do the best thing but I don’t think they necessarily are. So things like pixelating people’s faces in a photograph I strongly object to and I don’t think pixelating someone’s face or putting a bar across their face anonymises photos.

What it does is criminalise the image and I think they are quite disturbing to look at (Interview 2)

An appeal to respondents' rights needs to be tempered by considerations of harm. Proponents of the 'rights' approach observed that researchers and ethics committees are often over-cautious about the potential for harm from the use of identifiable images and that, given a choice, respondents are far less cautious. Furthermore, while it is impossible for researchers (or anyone) to predict all the potential harms that might result from participating in a study, this should not be a reason for taking a protectionist approach to anonymisation. Researchers with this view argued that the potential harms that have been identified, such as the risk of images of children being inappropriately used or the future discomfort or distress of people whose images are in the public domain, are over-stated and sensationalist. Some of the visual researchers we spoke to argued for the need to enable respondents to make their own informed decisions and that this was possible providing researchers gave adequate information about how visual data are to be used and disseminated. Linked to this argument is the view that the proliferation of images of individuals via social networking sites such as facebook and the use and exchange of images through digital media have changed people's attitudes to the use of visual material, particularly children and young people. In the 21<sup>st</sup> Century the careful use of visual material by researchers stands in contrast to the ways in which some individuals (especially young people) may choose to present themselves in public arenas on the Web. The following extracts illustrate some of these tensions in relation to harm:

The fear about paedophiles. I mean I am not an expert in this but I don't really see ... that pictures of children that have been generated by my research would be any more or less titillating than any of the millions of other pictures [that are available] that feature children ... presumably if you're a paedophile then pictures of ordinary clothed children doing ordinary things are probably not what you're most interested in (Interview 4)

Well they could change their mind in a year and wish they hadn't done it but they're adults and people make decisions all the time about what they do and don't want to do. So I think as long as you are explicit at the start and it's not a one-off decision (Interview 2)

### **The responsibility to protect study participants**

Researchers expressing strong views about the anonymisation of visual data drew on arguments about researchers' responsibility to protect respondents to support their stance. These researchers viewed anonymisation as the norm and as relevant to visual research as other forms of research:

For me this use of the visual sits within the wider context of any research that I gather as part of the activities that I do in which you do have the overriding thing about anonymity and confidentiality and protecting things. ... So it just forms part of that context of social science research, where anonymity and protection of individual identity is a key thing [and] it's an exception not to do that (Focus group 4)

These researchers identified a range of techniques for anonymising visual data without ‘doing violence’ to images and noted that consideration of anonymity needs to be undertaken prior to visual data being collected in order for data to be successfully anonymised. This might involve blurring images by deliberately shaking the camera or filming in ways that don’t focus on identifiable features. Other techniques for anonymisation include animation or the use of actors to re-present data.

There are other ways of constructing anonymity ... so just thinking more conceptually or abstractly about what or where I want them to film, using reflections of people or parts of people (Interview 2)

You have the real dilemma of how you get across your data ... and it’s about where your conclusions have come from and if a lot of that has come from visual data and we can’t display that it get very difficult. So we’ve gone along a very expensive option of commissioning further interpretations of the data that makes them anonymous ... so we’re making films and animating that and using actors (Focus group 4)

Issues of protection were raised in relation to respondents’ understandings of the implications of research participation. Our study participants noted that respondents are often very eager to participate in research and may consent to do so without giving full consideration to what the implications of involvement will be. Even with full and considered consent, unless they have taken part in similar research before it is likely that they may not fully understand how data about them will be used and what the possible impacts of this might be. While researchers’ knowledge means that they can

predict some of the potential impacts of identification in the research, they are unlikely to know all the possible impacts it might have on individuals.

This was viewed as a particular issue over the longer-term, in that respondents may not fully understand that images might be used some time into the future; individuals may change their views quite markedly over the longer term and the type of person they are happy to be identified as or the views they are happy to espouse at one point in time might cause them embarrassment or distress at a later point. The longevity of images and difficulties in removing images once they enter the public sphere was seen as a strong rationale for anonymisation. Potential harms from the use of images over the longer term relating to researchers' lack of knowledge about what might have happened to individuals in images was also raised. Individuals might have undergone personal traumas, may have separated or died, and the use of images in the public arena would then have the potential to cause upset or distress. Obtaining on-going consent for the use of identifiable images may be problematic over the longer term, not least because of difficulties in maintaining contact with respondents. Researchers' inability to predict what the impact of being identified might be was viewed as an appropriate rationale for anonymising respondents in order to protect them from *possible* future harm. This was often viewed as important in relation to work with children and other groups often termed as 'vulnerable' because of their (arguably) limited competence to consent, the likelihood of them changing their views over time and their propensity to change their minds about their wishes to be anonymised or identified. The following data excerpts illustrate these issues and tensions:

People take part in our research and they don't think in terms of publications arising years and years later. ... So I think there are lots of problems, even when you have formally and legally the consent they have signed, because it refers to much earlier ... she might have changed, it's a few years, she might feel very differently, it might remind her now of something very unpleasant (Focus group 3)

The important thing to think about is the implications, what if it shows them engaged in sort of compromising activity that at the time they think is no problem. ... At the time maybe they might think oh this shows I'm not bothered by authority and so on and that's a good thing but then 40 years hence when they are in a career it may be a problem (Focus group 1)

A related issue is the difficulty in obtaining consent from all people in images. This is particularly problematic for research in public places where gaining consent might not be practical or appropriate. It is also an issue in relation to respondent-generated or owned images where it may be impossible to gain consent from people not known to the researcher, and potentially not known or not accessible to the respondent. In those cases many felt that images should be anonymised, even though respondents who own the images may feel able to give consent for their use.

Sometimes the person who owns the photo isn't the person the photo is of. We considered contacting everyone who's still alive who appears in the photos but that's got ethical implications of its own ... we might be getting people back in touch who had fallen out. They might not even like the person

any more. They might not know that that person has a photo of them. It could cause all sorts of ramifications (Focus group 3)

Images that are accessible from websites and data archives are able to be used in ways other than those for which they were collected and this also raised issues of protection of respondents. Researchers also noted the possibility of images becoming more widely available than they intended, for example as a result of presenting a paper at a conference, the presentation of which is then made available on a conference website. While it was recognised that the potential threats of images of children and young people being inappropriately accessed was overstated, nevertheless it was raised as a concern.

### **The tension between paternalism and agency**

We are not intending to imply that there is necessarily a strict division between individual researchers on anonymisation. Although some researchers did argue strongly for one or other position, almost all recognised the complexities and the contextual nature of decisions about anonymity. The arguments for and against anonymity outlined here are ones that researchers draw on in varying ways in relation to the context of specific research projects and the context in which material is being disseminated and made available.

The sets of arguments presented here, however, do indicate the conflict that researchers experience between a desire to protect respondents and a desire to give respondents 'voice'. This could be interpreted as a conflict between researchers' paternalism and respondents' agency. It also recognises that ethical research practice

is complex and complicated. Researchers using visual methods often adopt participatory approaches which privilege the views of respondents about the use of data; indeed various established visual researchers have identified this as both ethical and necessary to obtain 'good' data (Banks, 2001; Gold, 1989; Pink, 2007). However, at the same time visual researchers have an ethical duty to consider the risks that the publication of data might hold for respondents and to give careful consideration to the political, social and cultural contexts in which images will be viewed and interpreted (Pink, 2007).

In reaching decisions about ethical research practise researchers draw on their own ethical and moral views about what are or are not morally acceptable ways to behave towards respondents. There is a considerable amount of agreement on specific moral principles about right and wrong (such as justice, fairness and respect) even though there are inevitably choices to be made (and hence disagreement) about their application in particular circumstances and contexts (Gregory, 2003; Iphofen, 2009). Ethical research practice involves the interpretation and application of these key moral norms and researchers draw on specific approaches to research ethics, or guidance derived from them, to consider the ethical challenges with which they are confronted.<sup>1</sup> Visual researchers interviewed as part of our study appeared to adopt approaches, either explicitly or implicitly, that are congruent with ethics of care approaches in making decisions about anonymity (Clark et al, 2010). Both positions outlined in this paper can be seen to be congruent with the principle of respect for respondents which includes respecting their autonomy over their lives, their right to privacy, the voluntary nature of participation and ensuring their dignity and well-

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<sup>1</sup> Researchers' ethical decision-making is also inevitably influenced by ethical and legal regulation but compliance with such regulation is often the minimum requirement; ethical behaviour demands more careful consideration of the issues involved.



being. However, the operationalisation of this principle diverges within the two positions in relation to anonymisation. One position puts forward the argument that respondents can have research adequately explained to them, that they frequently want and have a right to be seen and heard and that the likelihood of actual harm is minimal. The other position argues that respondents and indeed researchers cannot fully understand what the implications of participation might be, that researchers' greater knowledge about implications should inform the decisions made and that the possibility of harm is enough reason to adopt a cautious approach to anonymisation.

While decisions made about anonymity are clearly situated, our argument is that it is important to move beyond the notion that 'it all depends' and to begin to develop some criteria to guide researchers (and ethics committees) in making decisions about anonymisation. This is particularly the case given the enhanced use of visual approaches within the social sciences, not least in relation to calls to methodological innovation and combination, and the perceived need for ethics resources for visual researchers (Prosser & Loxley, 2008). Based on the data generated in this modest project, we would make the case that i) respondents' status and 'vulnerability' *in combination with* ii) the nature of the research and iii) the ways that visual (and other) data are used and presented should be key issues in making informed decisions about anonymity.

Much of the research drawn on by researchers in this study involved research with young people or other so-called 'vulnerable groups' for whom competence to consent has been identified as potentially problematic. Children and other 'vulnerable' individuals who are able to understand the implications of participation in a research

study are viewed as having the ‘capacity’ to make a decision about whether or not to take part in research (Alderson & Morrow, 2004; Heath et al, 2007; Renold et al 2008). Researchers have noted that it is almost always possible to explain research to individuals, whatever their level of ‘capacity’ in ways that they can understand (Alderson & Morrow, 2004). However, even if people are viewed as ‘competent’ to make decisions about participation, the question remains as to whether they can really understand to what they are consenting (Gross et al, 1988; Prosser, 2000). Research indicates that respondents, especially young people, are very keen to be involved in research without giving due consideration to what the research might entail by reading information sheets and consent forms (Wiles et al, 2008b). Further, while there is some evidence to indicate that respondents are often eager to be identified (Grinyer, 2002), respondents appear to have only limited understanding of what research outputs look like, even when researchers believe they have explained this to them (Corden and Sainsbury, 2005). It is probably the case that researchers are in a much better position to understand the possible risks that identification of individuals may pose for them than are respondents. However, we see no reason for respondents (whether or not they comprise a ‘vulnerable’ group) not to be given the right to make their own decisions about identification in the case of much visual research that is conducted as this poses minimal risk to individuals. This is particularly pertinent in an age in which there is a proliferation of identifiable visual images which are publicly available (Sweetman, 2009). We believe that many of our informants would support such a position, based on the discussions we had with them. We cannot see any arguments for why individuals should not have the autonomy to make their own decisions on this matter. However, when the research topic deals with very sensitive issues or where sensitive or personal issues are disclosed then there is, perhaps, a

stronger case for anonymisation, particularly in relation to so-called ‘vulnerable’ groups or individuals.

Central to such decisions is consideration about the ways that images are stored and used, and interpretations that are made alongside identifiable images. Visual images of individuals alongside their own words or not linked to interpretation, present few risks of harm to respondents unless the research is of a very sensitive nature. It may be the case that individual respondents might change their views in the future but here we agree with the views of one of our participants who noted that we change our minds about lots of things. In any case the impact is likely to be minimal. However, interpretive text or text relating to sensitive issues linked to identifiable images is potentially more problematic. Our study participants noted that a key concern of their respondents was that their images or other visual data should not be ‘psychologised’ by researchers as that had the potential for embarrassment. This does not imply that interpretation of visual data is impossible but rather that interpretation at a general level raises fewer ethical challenges in respect of individuals’ well-being than that at an individual level. But this is not so different from the analysis, interpretation and re-presentation of other kinds of data, particularly qualitative, text-based data. The positioning of individuals’ own words on sensitive or personal topics about themselves or others alongside identifiable visual images does present potential threats to individuals’ well-being, not all of which may be immediately apparent to a researcher. In such cases there is a stronger case for anonymisation; certainly considerations of the ways in which data are analysed and presented need to be key criteria in considerations of anonymity.

In our study, visual researchers focused on anonymisation as a key ethical issue of visual research. There are, of course, myriad ethical issues inherent in visual research, as with all social research. The particular focus on the issue of anonymisation probably reflects the various current public and professional panics about the legal and regulatory constraints on the use of images<sup>2</sup> and about ethical regulation more broadly (Dingwall, 2008; Atkinson, 2009; Hammersley, 2009). These constraints limit the freedom of visual researchers to conduct research in the ways they see fit and they also raise some interesting questions about the concerns that exist about the use of visual material in research. One question is why visual images evoke such concern. Images used without an identifying name or other contextual material offer very limited threats to the identity of an individual being revealed. If people know the individual then they are clearly identifiable but if that person is unknown to the viewer then it is currently impossible to find out anything about them on the basis of a visual image alone (although face recognition software may make this possible in the future). This is in contrast to some word-based research in which attempts at anonymising sites (and thereby individuals) may provide only limited protection; simply entering some information provided in a research report into a WWW search engine can enable some identities to be revealed fairly easily. Why are visual images seen as more personal or threatening than written text about an individual's thoughts or feelings? Despite the proliferation and accessibility of visual images on publicly available websites, and the ease in which images can be shared, it remains the case that researchers and their respondents view it as important to be careful to ensure

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<sup>2</sup> The public and academic panics around photographing children has been widely discussed, see e.g., <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1214039/Paranoia-surrounding-paedophiles-stops-taking-pictures-children.html>. The difficulties of taking photographs in public places have also been highlighted, see e.g., <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/libertycentral/2009/feb/20/police-photography>

there is agreement before images are made publicly available (Pink, 2007). It has been noted that visual images can reveal considerable personal information about individuals (Back, 2004). This perhaps explains a wariness about the use of images. The use of real names alongside identifiable images raises a different, and more problematic, set of issues. However, as we have noted above, the use of real names is often something that respondents want and, in many cases, there is no reason not to afford people that choice.

Identifiable images can and should be used in a range of different ways in social research in order to capitalise on the interesting and innovative methodological developments occurring in social research, particularly in visual and creative methods. The recent moves towards enhanced ethical regulation have stilted real debate about ethical research practice. It is essential that we broaden out these debates to truly engage with ethical and moral questions about anonymity, as well as other ethical issues, rather than have those debates undertaken within, and constrained by, the context of what regulation will allow.

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### Acknowledgements

This project was supported by an NCRM Collaborative Grant. Thanks to Jon Prosser, Jennifer Mason and Graham Crow who were involved with this project and provided support for it in various ways. Thanks are also due to the researchers who gave their time to participate in this study.