Visual Communication

Book Review: Paula Reavey (ed.), *Visual Methods in Psychology: Using and Interpreting Images in Qualitative Research* , Routledge: New York, 2011; 370 pp.: ISBN 978 0 415 48348 3 (hbk)

Rosie Flewitt

The online version of this article can be found at:

Published by:

$SAGE

Additional services and information for *Visual Communication* can be found at:

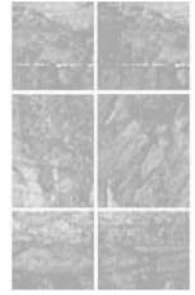**Email Alerts:** http://vcj.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts

Subscriptions: http://vcj.sagepub.com/subscriptions

Reprints: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav

Permissions: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav

>> Version of Record - Apr 15, 2013

What is This?

Book review

The use of visual methods in social science research has grown significantly over the past 30 years or so, driven partly by an increasing recognition of social and cultural practices as central to our understanding of human experience, and boosted in more recent years by the ubiquitous presence of images in global and local communication and by the affordability of visual media for data collection and analysis. Despite this trend, comparatively little visual research has emerged from the discipline of psychology, which has tended to cling to its established focus on language and cognition. In *Visual Methods in Psychology*, Paula Reavey addresses this gap and draws together a rich body of visual research conducted primarily in the field of psychology, complemented by rich insights from such diverse fields as social policy, environmental science, psychogeography and Fine Art. The multiple authors reflect critically on how diverse visual media, including photography, film-making, drawing, model-making, walking, map drawing and digital technologies, can be used to research human experience. Throughout this ambitious and accomplished edited collection, the authors problematise the theoretical and methodological implications of conducting visual research in psychology, and reflect on the unique perspectives offered by participatory visual methods.

Reavey opens *Visual Methods in Psychology* with a sound review of how visual approaches to psychological research have evolved over time, arguing that visual methods offer a new channel for psychological research to investigate the material settings of experience and how people interpret and narrate their experiences. The volume is then structured in four parts: the first presents research using the 'static medium' of photography; the second examines how moveable features mediate interaction, such as social networking sites and video; part three focuses on how visual methods can be used to promote participatory methods and increase the dialogue between researcher, participants and research audiences. In the final part, authors reflect on the ethical and methodological dilemmas encountered during visual research, and the challenges of trying to strike a balance between participant and researcher voices throughout the research process. For the purposes of clarity and

brevity in this review, I have grouped the chapters within each Part thematically rather than sequentially.

The five chapters in Part One report on a variety of projects that have used photographs and interviews to explore memory, illness, embodiment, appearance and intimacy, drawing on diverse theoretical approaches, including social and health psychology, feminism, phenomenology and post-structuralism. These chapters include reflection on the need to distinguish between the content of images (*image*) and individuals' emotional and more general responses to images (*depiction*). For example, Alan Radley presents two studies which illustrate how making and/or talking about photographs can help participants to express aspects of their understanding that might otherwise remain unspoken. In the first study, participants were asked to rank a series of UNICEF fund-raising images and to consider which would be more likely to spur them to donate money. In the second study, patients in a surgical ward took photographs and used these as a springboard for reflecting upon their hospital experiences. Both studies indicate the need for researchers to take into account not only what is visible in a photograph, but also the history of human experience that lies behind individuals' interpretations of images. Similarly, in Chapter 4, Lilliana Del Busso reports on how she used pre-existing photographs and photo-production to tap into and ground women's accounts of specific lived experiences, arguing that visual methods offer fruitful insights into the multimodal and multi-sensory nature of experience, and help to contextualise women's accounts in wider social dynamics. Using photo-elicitation and photo-production, Anamika Majumdar presents two studies of UK-resident South Asian women's subjective experiences of 'closeness' in their lives, particularly in marriage. Majumdar illustrates how visual methods lead to the inclusion of spaces, places and objects which bring to the fore taken for granted aspects of the everyday 'doing' close relationships. In a powerful chapter on the painfulness of experience, Hannah Frith explores the place of images in women's experiences of cancer and chemotherapy, revealing how photographs can create a bridge between past, present and future lives in narratives of ourselves and others, and how absent images create boundaries around what selves are available to be remembered. With a focus on advertising campaigns, Rosalind Gill discusses cultural shifts over the last three decades in the depiction and objectification of the male body in mainstream visual culture, and the theoretical, methodological, cultural and political vocabularies that might enable critical engagement with how visual images are read.

The authors in Part Two report on studies that have investigated 'moveable' rather than 'static' visual features, including online social network sites (SNSs) and video data. Goodings and Brown propose that online social networking offers rich opportunities to rethink how visual methods can be used in social psychology as an essential part of a multimodal matrix of 'urcommunication', rather than as an adornment to textual analysis. The authors explore

the complex ways that the visual and the textual constitute the mediation of meaning in MySpace, and how the 'urcommunicative' function changes when communicating across MySpace profiles and across different profiling practices, leading to stimulating reflection on the relationship between psychology, the visual and the virtual. The remaining chapters all adopt a critical and reflexive approach to the use of video data both in social life and as a methodological tool. In Chapter 8, Johanna Motzkau investigates the role played by forensic video data in legal practice. Motzkau skilfully reveals how the 'gaze' of video, which is intended to provide better access to justice for child and vulnerable witnesses in sexual abuse investigations, emerges as an active yet ambiguous arbiter of victims' memory and credibility in the legal process. Drawing on ethnomethodology and conversation analysis to analyse his own daughter's language development from the age of 12 to 41 months, Michael Forrester observes in Chapter 9 how the physical presence of the video camera alters the course of his child's social interactions. Even from a very young age she shows awareness of the camera 'watching' them and uses it as a kind of mirror to rehearse a variety of behaviours and self-positionings. In Chapter 11, Helen Lomax continues this theme of video and identity formation with a focus on mothers' experiences of birth, again using conversation analysis to reflect on the interactional exchanges between mothers and midwives. Lomax's close and careful work shows how certain social orders, such as the dominance of clinical discourse and a distancing between midwife and mother, are realised through embodied enactment. For example, by attending to paperwork rather than to mothers, midwives disengage visually from interactions and this disrupts conversational turn-taking, forcing the mothers into passive and compliant postures and roles. Like Forrester, Lomax reflects on the presence of the video in research, viewing the mothers' recognition of the recording equipment as a positive and potentially empowering sign of their active engagement with the research process. This notion of 'authenticity' in visual research data is discussed in Chapter 10 by Maria Pini and Valerie Walkerdine, who tackle theoretical and empirical questions about access, empowerment and surveillance in video-based, social-psychological research. Focussing on a study of young, black, white, working and middle-class women's video diaries, the authors demonstrate how the young women draw on material, linguistic, imaginary and social resources to fabricate multiple 'visual fictions' of self and subjectivity.

The eight chapters in Part 3 are diverse, and at times the reader might struggle to find continuity between the disparate projects reported here. However, Reavey has grouped them together because in varying degrees they all describe how visual research can contribute to participant, research audience and/or researchers' engagement with particular studies. Chapters 12 and 16 discuss the use of visual methods in participatory action research. Katherine Johnson opens this section by reporting on her research into mental distress for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered people. In this study, developed

with Mind (a UK-based voluntary organisation dedicated to improving social attitudes and services for individuals who are mentally distressed), participants were asked to take photographs relating to their feelings and experiences of both sexuality and mental distress. These images then formed part of a visual exhibition which provided a highly productive and reflective space for dialogue between the research audience and participants. Also working with a community-based arts project, Caroline Howarth (Chapter 16) used images to explore the experiences of young people of mixed heritage in London. Howarth argues that racism is often enforced through minority individuals being 'seen' as different, which can lead to feelings of entrapment and potentially to the desire to change physical attributes to reduce the degree of visible difference, such as hair straightening and nose reduction. In this exhibition, visual data, which included photography and fabric weaving, provided a space for young people to challenge representations of difference and to discuss the potential of the visual to recast the self in the eyes of others.

With a focus on arts-based projects and research dissemination, Riley, Brown, Griffin and Morey discuss in Chapter 13 how their community-based arts exhibition provided a fruitful means of disseminating and increasing audience engagement with their research into electro dance music culture. In this innovative and creative project, academics worked with artists in an attempt to summarise and simplify their findings without losing depth. The authors report how the academic/artist joint vision often involved a shift from the verbal to the visual, and suggest that combinations of photography and fine art created vibrant and accessible forms for audience engagement with complex psychological ideas.

Discussing research participant rather than research audience engagement, Angela Cassidy and John Maule (Chapter 14) report on how they turned to visual data collection methods when the initial interviews and focus group approach they had devised to investigate diverse food industry stakeholders' views of food safety failed to elicit the kinds of responses they needed. When participants were asked to represent the food chain and attendant risks using ready-made 'fuzzy felt' images and shapes, and then write about the models they had created, the insights gained were more telling. In the field of education and therapy, Alex Iantaffi (Chapter 18) also employed visual methods to enable research participants' explorations of their life narratives via the medium of the drawing technique 'the river of experience'. Iantaffi found that referring to these drawings in his qualitative interviews with disabled women in higher education and therapy settings meant that significant moments were highlighted in their life histories which might not have emerged in purely verbal accounts. Similarly, Bowes-Catton, Barker and Richards describe how visual data were used in a community-based project to explore experiential and embodied accounts of bi-sexual identity through photo diaries, model-making activities and workshops at a UK BiCon conference. Like Johnson in Chapter 12, the authors of this Chapter 17 argue that such creative visual

techniques open up spaces for participants to explore more thoroughly their embodied feelings and situated experiences. Taking visual methods into the realm of film-making, Janice Haaken (Chapter 15) discusses how the production of a community documentary film project *Moving to the Beat*, enabled African and African American youth in Freetown, Sierra Leone and Portland, Oregon to reflect on how they used hip-hop to communicate their ideas and as a force for social change.

The final chapter in this section (Chapter 19) sits less easily within this particular set of papers, but is no less interesting for that. Here, Alexander Bridger draws on literature from geography, psychogeography, critical psychology, cultural studies and urban theory to show how the use of walking, narrative and creative maps can enable autoethnographic explorations of the interrelationships between material environments and subjective experience. Focusing on an empirical project based in Ground Zero, New York, he uses the situational concepts of *dérive* (a playful but mindful drift through one's material environment) and *détournement* (a deliberate changing of words, images and sounds) to theorise the impact of space on material environment and subjective interpretation.

The four chapters in the final Part offer deeper discussion of ethical and methodological issues. Hodgetts, Chamberlain and Groot reflect critically on using photovoice and photo-production techniques for advocacy in their participatory research with homeless people. The authors argue that although photovoice, as informed by Freire's (1993[1970]) work on critical consciousness-raising, can bring to the fore the perspectives of marginalised groups, it also risks invoking naïve assumptions about voice and romanticising the lives of marginalised groups. In Chapter 21, Kate Gleeson switches the focus back to methodology and argues that visual methodology in psychology rarely makes explicit the processes of data selection and analysis in a way that permits replication. With an eye to the notions of systematic analytic procedures with clear sampling strategies that are all too familiar to psychologists, Gleeson sets out a systematic account of her analytic framework for visual and accompanying verbal texts, which she refers to as Polytextual Thematic Analysis. In the following chapter, Henwood, Shirani and Finn present a reflexive account of using three different visual techniques (visual collage, visual sequence and personal photographs) in their longitudinal study about 'men as fathers'. They found that the initial collages they had put together to stimulate debate tended to elicit judgemental good father/bad father responses from the male participants, whereas personal photographs brought to the project by participants offset the problem of culturally primed responses, allowing concrete, personal and more complex accounts of their lived experience of being fathers. Finally, Ilana Mountain and colleagues discuss how they used diaries and photography as part of an experience sampling method (ESM) in their study of well-being in higher education. Acting as participants as well as researchers, the authors discuss divers ethical dilemmas that arose from the use of images, particularly

regarding the power dynamics associated with the intended audience (in this case, work colleagues), and how to balance self-reflection with confidentiality in the context of on-going working relationships.

A FEW FINAL THOUGHTS

Without doubt, this edited volume gives a strong flavour of the creative potential of using visual approaches to explore experience and subjectivity. The chapters illustrate how combinations of visual and verbal data can reveal the complex tensions inherent in situational, societal, material and relational influences on people's lives on a wide range of topics such as memory, child development, emotions, perceptions of experience and personal narrative.

The volume also opens up, but does not fill, a space for much-needed critical debate in psychology and complementary fields about the ethics of using visual methods to explore how people interpret and negotiate the textures of their lifeworlds. Although the multiple authors do sometimes touch upon ethical dilemmas, there is no extended reflection and as I read through the chapters I found myself becoming increasingly concerned about what sometimes seemed like nonchalance on the part of some authors towards the profound ethical dilemmas and unknown short- and long-term consequences of using powerful visual images as stimuli for participant reflection and for research dissemination. Across many disciplines, the increasing use of visual methods has slipped into research convention as a largely unchallenged practice, and I am reminded of Denzin's (1989: 83) advice to qualitative researchers:

> …our primary obligation is always to the people we study, not to our project or to a larger discipline. The lives and stories that we hear and study, are given to us under a promise, that promise being that we protect those who have shared them with us.

I do not mean to suggest that participants should be disempowered as victims in need of protection, rather that, as Christensen and Prout (2002) put it, there should be an 'ethical symmetry' between participants and researchers where shared values are worked out and made crystal clear to all stakeholders, including readers of research. Despite these reservations, the quality and interest of the individual chapters is high, and it is to be hoped that this volume will mark a step change in the use of visual methods in psychology research.

REFERENCES

Christensen, P. and Prout, A. (2002) Working with ethical symmetry in social research with children. *Childhood* 9: 477–497.

Denzin, N.K. (1989) *Interpretive Biography*. London: Sage.

Freire, P. (1993[1970]) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

ROSIE FLEWITT

Faculty of Education and Language Studies, The Open University, Milton Keynes, UK

[email: Rosie.Flewitt@open.ac.uk]