

ESRC National Centre for Research Methods Review Paper

Visual Ethics: Ethical Issues in Visual Research

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Abstract

This review outlines the key ethical issues with which visual researchers need to engage, drawing on literature from established visual researchers as well as practical illustrations from current research projects being undertaken within the National Centre for Research Methods (NCRM). Its focus is on the ethical issues associated with research using photographs, film and video images (created by researchers, respondents or others) rather than other visual methods. It is intended as an introduction to assist researchers in identifying what ethical issues might arise in undertaking visual research and how these might be addressed. The review commences with an outline of research ethics frameworks, professional guidance, regulation and legal rights and duties which, to varying degrees, shape visual researchers' ethical decision making. It then goes on to explore the core ethical issues of consent, confidentiality and anonymity and discusses the ethical considerations that these raise with examples of how these can be managed. The paper concludes with a brief discussion of the ethical issues raised in relation to the construction and consumption of images. The authors stress the importance of researchers engaging with theories (or approaches) to research ethics in their ethical decision making in order to protect the reputation and integrity of visual research.

1. Introduction

There has been a rapid growth and re-interest in visual methods in the last decade or so. Researchers using visual methods work within a range of disciplinary frameworks and settings. Visual methods are the traditional domain of anthropologists and have only relatively recently re-emerged as popular among sociologists as well as applied social researchers working in areas such as education, social policy and social work (see Pink, 2003, 2006, 2007a, 2007b).

Figure 1: The Influence of Approaches to Ethics on Regulation and Practice



All individuals have a moral outlook about what is right and wrong that guides their behaviour. This moral outlook is shaped by individuals' experiences and interactions and the specific moral beliefs held are inevitably individual (see Gregory, 2003). Nevertheless society has a large amount of agreement on specific moral *principles* about right and wrong (such as justice and fairness) even though there is considerable disagreement about the application of these principles to particular circumstances and contexts. Ethical approaches and frameworks are the application of key moral norms (or principles). Ethical behaviour in research demands that researchers engage with moral issues of right and wrong. To do this they draw on ethical principles identified by the research community to which they belong. For the purposes of the discussion here ethics and morals can be seen as interchangeable. The specific ethical issues that researchers identify in their research are informed by their own moral outlook and their understanding of ethics in research (so they can be understood as ethical issues or moral issues). The frameworks for thinking about and managing them are informed largely by the ethical principles derived from the various approaches to ethics which are set out in professional ethical guidelines as well as various textbooks on the topic. Some of these ethical issues can be considered prior to the research commencing but many are emergent and only become apparent as the research proceeds. Researchers can draw on a range of resources from the literature and the research community to assist their thinking in how to manage such issues. It is crucial that they resolve the issues in ways that accord with their moral beliefs but also in ways that do not contravene the established ethical standards of their profession.

Researchers' ethical decision-making is also strongly influenced by ethical and legal regulation. Researchers are legally obliged to conform with legal regulation relating to their research. Ethical regulation does not carry such weight but nevertheless researchers are generally obliged to comply with ethical regulation by their institution or by the organisations they are conducting research with or for. It should be noted that conforming with ethical or legal regulation does not necessarily equate with ethical (or moral) behaviour; compliance with regulation in many contexts is often the minimum requirement and ethical behaviour demands more careful consideration of the issues involved. The specific implications of regulation are explored in the relevant sections below. This paper now explores ethical approaches, guidelines and regulation.

2.2 Approaches to ethics

There are a range of approaches to research ethics (see Israel & Hay, 2006; Alderson, 2004: 98). Consideration of these is important in helping to guide researchers in thinking through the ethical challenges with which they are confronted. The most common approaches are consequentialist, non-consequentialist, principlist and ethics of care.

People using consequentialist approaches argue that ethical decisions should be based on the consequences of specific actions so that an action is morally right if it will produce the greatest balance of good over evil. Using a

consequentialist approach a researcher would assess what the outcome of a specific decision might be and decide on an action that they believe would result in the most beneficial outcome. For example, a researcher might argue that it would be acceptable to undertake covert visual research, for example on youth crime, if the findings of the research could be seen as benefiting society as a whole.

People using non-consequentialist approaches argue that consideration of matters other than the ends produced by actions need to be considered and that ethical decisions should be based on notions of what it is morally right to do regardless of the consequences. A researcher adopting a non-consequentialist approach might, for example, argue that it is morally right to maintain a confidence even if the consequences of that might not be beneficial or in the interests of the wider society.

Non-consequentialist approaches are related to principlist approaches (see Beauchamp & Childress, 2001) which draw on the principles of respect for people's autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence and justice in making and guiding ethical decisions in research. Respect for autonomy relates to issues of voluntariness, informed consent, confidentiality and anonymity. Beneficence concerns the responsibility to do good, non-maleficence concerns the responsibility to avoid harm and justice concerns the importance of the benefits and burdens of research being distributed equally. People using principlist approaches make ethical decisions on the basis of these specific principles. Each of these principles is viewed as important but it is recognised that they may conflict with each other and in such cases it is necessary to make a case for why one might need to be chosen over another. Principlist approaches are widely used and form the basis of evaluation of applications for ethical approval by many research ethics committees (Israel & Hay, 2006: 37). The principle of respect for autonomy may present considerable difficulties for visual researchers in relation to confidentiality and anonymity.

An ethics of care approach is an important but less common model. In this approach, ethical decisions are made on the basis of care, compassion and a desire to act in ways that benefit the individual or group who are the focus of research (Mauthner et al, 2002). This is an approach used in much feminist and participatory research where researchers develop close relationships with their participants (see Edwards & Mauthner, 2002). Most established visual researchers call for the development of collaborative relationships in research which bears some relationship with an ethics of care approach (Harper, 1998; Pink, 2003, 2006, 2007a; Banks 2001; Rose, 2007). Gold's (1989) argument for a covenantal ethics accords with this approach.

While the specific ethical approach researchers adopt in their research guides ethical decision making, it is recognised that research is situated and contextual and that the specific dilemmas that arise are unique to the context in which each individual research project is conducted. Some researchers have argued that decisions about ethical dilemmas cannot be reached by appeal to higher principles and codes (see Simons and Usher, 2000) and that researchers have to approach each ethical challenge within the context in

which the research is conducted (Renold et al, 2008; Birch et al, 2002, p1-2). Prosser has noted that there is an absence of accepted ethical practice in visual methods and of theoretical positions on which to make judgements (Prosser, 2000). While the emergent nature of ethical issues is not disputed, nevertheless an understanding of, and engagement with, these ethical approaches provides an important basis from which researchers can think through, and argue, their ethical position.

2.3 Professional ethical guidelines

There are a wide range of professional guidelines and codes aimed at providing frameworks to enable researchers to think through the ethical dilemmas and challenges that they encounter in their research (e.g. SRA, 2003; BSA, 2002; BERA, 2004; GSRU, 2005). These are drawn, to varying degrees, from the ethical approaches outlined above. Such guidelines are necessarily very general; they do not provide answers to how researchers should manage the specific situations that they might encounter in their research but rather outline principles to enable researchers to think through the specific situations that occur (Wiles et al, 2006). These guidelines recognise the situated and contextual nature of the ethical challenges that arise when conducting research. The principles addressed in these codes generally relate to issues of the well-being and rights of research participants, informed consent, privacy, confidentiality and anonymity. The central issues can be summarised as:

- i) researchers should strive to protect the rights, privacy, dignity and well-being of those that they study;
- ii) research should (as far as possible) be based on voluntary informed consent
- iii) personal information should be treated confidentially and participants anonymised unless they choose to be identified;
- iv) research participants should be informed of the extent to which anonymity and confidentiality can be assured in publication and dissemination and of the potential re-use of data.

These issues are ones that are relevant to all research but the ethical issues raised by visual research are, arguably, distinct from those raised by purely textual data. Discussion of the ways in which these issues impact on visual research and consideration of the issues will be discussed in detail below. Here the focus is on the extent to which guidelines and codes (and regulation and law) provide guidance specifically in relation to visual research.

The general nature of these professional codes and guidelines mean that the ethical issues relating to visual methods are not specifically addressed within most codes. The American Anthropological Association (1998), The RESPECT code of practice for socio-economic researchers (2004), the British Education Research Association Ethical Guidelines (2004) and the Social Research Association Ethical Guidelines (2003) make no specific mention of visual methods in identifying principles of research ethics.

Two general professional guidelines identify visual methods as having specific ethical issues (British Sociological Association, 2002; Association of Social Anthropologists of the UK and Commonwealth, 1999). The issues identified relate to consent for the collection and dissemination of visual material and the importance of copyright clearance (issues relating to copyright are discussed below in the section on legal considerations). In these two guideline documents, these issues are not discussed at length.

The British Sociological Association Visual Sociology Group's statement of ethical practice (2006) also identifies these issues but in considerable detail; this statement provides detailed guidance for visual researchers and is a useful resource to help visual researchers to consider some of the possible difficulties that they might encounter in their research. In contrast to other professional guidelines, these are more prescriptive. The guidelines outline the importance of consent, both to participation and to the ways and forms the visual data collected will be used. Written consent for the use of images that identify individuals is noted as preferable as is providing an opportunity for study participants to see the visual data collected on them and reflect on its proposed use. The importance of careful consideration of issues of consent when conducting and disseminating research over the internet are identified and researchers are advised to err on the side of caution in making judgements about the well-being of on-line research participants. Caution is also advised in relation to covert research which, because of the ethical and legal issues it poses, is deemed as necessary only in 'certain circumstances'. The guidelines note the importance of attendance to national laws and administrative regulation that are pertinent to visual research. In relation to research with children, the need to consider child protection issues and make provision for the potential disclosure of abuse is noted. Legal issues are particularly relevant to the risks relating to the creation, possession and dissemination of images of illegal activity (e.g., criminal damage, assault, hate crime, sexual violence). The statement notes that illegal images should always be given to the relevant authorities. They also note the care that needs to be taken in relation to images of sexual activity. In cases where research raises potentially challenging ethical issues researchers are urged to obtain ethics clearance from a professionally recognised research ethics committee; such clearance is generally necessary for all research conducted by academic and professional researchers working in institutional settings.

Members of these professional organisations would be expected to abide by the principles outlined in these codes and guidelines although, in most cases, these guidelines are not enforceable. There is currently no professional register of social researchers that researchers can be struck off for not abiding by ethical guidelines. However, it is advised in the guidelines that researchers should be aware of the potential for legal action if they do not follow the guidelines.

these frameworks provide a very weak form of regulation of practice. Institutional and legal regulation however does provide more pressing frameworks for the conduct of visual research.

2.4 Ethical Regulation

The regulation of social research in the UK has been steadily increasing over the last decade, culminating in the development of the ESRC Research Ethics

Some visual researchers who are unhappy about the ethical regulation to which they are subject have sought to sidestep it by referring to their work as investigative journalism and as subject to the less stringent code of conduct for journalists. The code of conduct for journalists (National Union of Journalists, 2006) maintains that information should be collected by straightforward means and that journalists should attend to issues of individuals' privacy. However it also calls on the principle of freedom of the press and other media and consideration of the public interest. While researchers may welcome avoiding ethical regulation, many would argue that

children, especially in relation to consent and competence (see, e.g. Morrow & Richards, 2002; Alderson & Morrow, 2004; Farrell, 2005).

A further legal issue regarding research with children concerns confidentiality in cases where a child discloses that they are being seriously harmed or mistreated. Failure of a researcher to take appropriate action in such cases could result in legal liability. In the UK, people who suspect a child is being mistreated are not legally obliged to report this. However, a range of professionals (such as teachers and social workers) are obliged to do so under Local Authority child protection procedures. Images or data of serious

demonstrate that the need fo

| engaging with innovative forms of dissemination within the community. |
Organising the event, however, meant revising the policy

videos is rather more complex than that of drawings. Videos in particular require specialised software that we did not have. Within the interactive

and can assign copyright to the researcher if they wish to do so, the people in the images have not necessarily given their consent to the image. Even if they have, they are unlikely to know the purposes to which the image may be put (Rose, 2007). Managing this issue is complex. At the very least, it demands that researchers who give cameras to participants think through the implications of what images they might be presented with by study

context of the interview so the researcher can weigh up the potential risks to rapport of asking 'too soon'. Most participants were happy to allow the photographing of their photographs but it is not always helpful to turn the conversation onto 'official business' in the middle of elicitation.

Negotiating levels of consent

There are a number of different levels of usage of family photographs and it is important to think about the ethical and practical issues involved in seeking consent for these different levels. For example, although we were happy that tape-recorded verbal consent was adequate for us to photograph photographs and use them within the research team for analysis purposes (and the majority of participants were happy to consent to this level of usage during their interview), we felt it was necessary to seek more formal consent before sharing the images with a wider audience. We also felt that showing an image during a presentation (as long as it is not reproduced in handouts or on websites and that the presentation is run from a data stick and deleted from any computers) was different to publishing it in a form where copies are publicly available and that archiving photographs (for example in Qualidata) requires another level of consent again.

We rejected the idea of archiving photographs, figuring the confidentiality issues were too great and that the interview transcripts could be re-used fruitfully without the accompanying images. We also drafted a number of consent forms listing the remaining levels of usage, asking people to decide whether they consented for their photos to be used in presentations only or presentations and printed publications and so on. The resulting forms didn't leave the drawing board; they were complex, confusing and potentially worrying and off-putting to participants. Ultimately we felt we should provide participants with a simple decision where they could answer yes or no to having their photographs published (we made sure to list all possible levels of usage in the form, see appendix for the form used).

Who can give consent?

During his interview, one participant – Andrew – had only felt able to provide consent for me to photograph images of him and his children, he didn't feel he had the right to give consent for me to photograph a photograph he owned of his brother's children despite us having discussed this particular image at length. This raises numerous questions about who can provide consent for family photos. Legally, the photographer 'owns' the image (although this becomes less clear when applied to photographs of photographs or family photos where it is not always clear who the photographer was) but ethically, is it sufficient to ask participants to provide consent for the use of the photographs they have in their homes or should all the people who appear in the photos (and the parents/guardians of children) be asked to consent before they can be used?

We did originally consider seeking consent for all living people who appear in any photos we might want to publish. After considerable thought we realised that this would prove to be such a huge administrative task that it would prevent us seeking consent for many of the photos collected in the research.

individuals or locations problematic if not impossible (Clark, 2006). This presents a dilemma for visual researchers; on the one hand the purpose of employing visual data is because the visual image is able to reveal more about phenomena than can text alone so, in the interests of research, there is a drive to publish and present unadulterated visual images (Sweetman, 2008; Knowles & Sweetman, 2004) but on the other, there may be pressure from regulatory bodies to uphold the principle of anonymisation. The situation is complicated by the fact that individuals appear commonly to want to be identified in their visual images, a similar situation to that which frequently emerges in text-based research (Grinyer, 2002). This appears to be particularly the case in relation to

researcher-generated images than for respondent-generated or owned images.

4.2 Obscuring identity in images

Methods of obscuring people's identity include increasing the pixilation of facial features in order to blur them (see <http://www.yowussup.com/pixelating-images.php>), the use of specific anonymisation software that converts visual images into cartoons or drawn images (see <http://www.virtualdub.org/> and http://compression.ru/video/cartoonizer/index_en.html) and blocking out eyes, faces or other distinguishing features. In social research, the former approaches are more common. Blocking out eyes or faces is relatively common in medical research, arguably reflecting medicine's interest in people as bodily parts rather than whole individuals. As noted above, obscuring facial features alone may not be adequate to ensure anonymity. Obscuring facial features is a contentious practice and has been subject to criticism by social researchers (Williams et al, p7; Sweetman, 2008). Nevertheless, it is recognised that there are some groups or types of images that necessitate the identities of individuals being obscured. The increasing moral panic over photographs of children makes it likely that researchers will experience difficulties in using identifiable images of children for general viewing and it is common practice for researchers working with children to use specialist software to anonymise children's images (Flewitt, 2005; see also the example below for an illustration of the images produced by this software). Certainly caution needs to be exercised in the ways that images of children are used and stored (see Williams et al, p6).

In other types of research where these difficulties do not exist, obscuring identities is problematic for a number of reasons. First, is that the purpose of visual images is that they can portray something additional to that of text alone so to tamper with images in ways that obscure certain important details, such as people's facial expressions, makes the purpose of collecting visual images questionable. Clearly, if the images collected are not concerned with individuals, identity or interaction but with a more general scene, such as a market place, a street or a festival, then blurring faces, arguably, may not impact negatively on the overall aim of the work. However in much research, obscuring faces affects readers' ability to make sense of visual data because faces are necessary to enable us to interpret physical, psychological, social and emotional aspects of individuals. Without seeing faces we cannot begin to interpret basic social facts about individuals, such as their age and social class, let alone how they feel and what they, or researchers, are intending to portray by the image. Further, many studies using visual data, especially in sociology, focus on aspects of people's identity; people are photographed or filmed dressed in particular clothes or displaying particular aspects of themselves which represent their identities (Back, 2007, Holliday, 2004, Knowles & Sweetman, 2004). In such contexts blurring faces makes no sense.

A second, and perhaps more important, criticism of blurring or obscuring faces is that this objectifies people and removes their identity. Viewing images with faces obscured can be disconcerting. Without faces people appear not

as people at all but as objects, this does not accord with a duty to treat people with respect. Indeed, one might argue that it becomes too easy to fail to treat people with respect when we cannot see their faces (which is why people subject to harm are often hooded). Obscuring or blurring images also has negative connotations which may be communicated to people in their viewing of the research. Pixilation of images has associations with crime; it is a commonly used device in the media when talking with 'criminals' or 'victims' of crime who fear being identified (Banks, 2001). A third implication, if not criticism, of obscuring faces is that it can be difficult to do well with some visual data (where there are a number of people present for example) and may involve a substantial amount of work on the part of the researcher. It also raises questions about the impact on the integrity of the data and whether the result of changing visual data results in 'sanitised' findings. A further implication is that it limits the potential for data to be reused (Williams et al, undated). The following example illustrates some of these issues in relation to research with young people.

4.3 Reflections on the dissemination process: the (Extra)ordinary Lives Project

Emma Renold & Sally Holland, NCRM Qualiti Node, University of Cardiff

Background

The (Extra)ordinary lives project was a demonstrator project within the ESRC National Centre for Research Methods' Qualiti node based at Cardiff University. It aimed to explore the ordinary everyday lives of young people who are looked after by the local authority in foster, residential or kinship care. The research design was intentionally participatory with the central methodological aim to develop a research environment in which a small number of children and young people (aged between 10 to 20) could choose their own methods to record and represent aspects of their lives and identities (e.g. visually, textually, orally and aurally). Eight young people took part in fortnightly 'me, myself and I' project sessions over one school year (2006-7), where they could explore any aspect of their everyday lives using any combination of methods and media. One-to-one visits and fieldwork episodes also took place in between the group sessions, by arrangement. During the group sessions young people worked on their own individual projects, but also engaged in much interaction and socialising. These research activities, combined with our critical reflexive participatory approach proved to be quite productive in generating a rich and diverse assemblage of multi-modal representations of everyday lives (pasts, presents and futures). These activities were akin to what Code (1995) terms 'vigilant methods', that is methods specifically aimed to cultivate more equitable and ethical field-relationships through de-mystifying the research process and rupturing the researcher gaze. Our methodology was one which we hoped would maximize children and young people's agency in the research process through techniques which encouraged young people to actively consider and reconsider their participatory status, from data generation, through to analysis, representation and communication of findings. While some of the 'findings' of our research (especially methodological discussions) were of little interest to the participants, we regularly shared parts of papers we had written or presented with the young people, to demonstrate how their data is transformed into academic outputs. Most

were keen to share in dissemination with their immediate carers and with policy makers.

Beyond Outcomes: The Everyday Lives of Young People in Care 18 months from the start of the fieldwork and following the individual analysis sessions with each young participant (see Holland et al, 2008), we invited the young people in our study to take part in a semi-public dissemination of our findings by organising an event⁷ for young people in care (including our participants). Due to ethical issues relating to anonymity, three short films were commissioned by a local film-maker (who was also a qualitative social scientist) which would recreate some of the young people's narratives and visual imagery using a combination of animation and actors. Participants were consulted about the content of these films and here is a short extract from a lengthy discussion between a young person and a researcher about what theme she would like represented in film:

Nevaeh: I think family's the big one.

Emma: Family's a big one. So something about the family, you think.

Nevaeh: I've got my own family now. And then like belonging.

Emma: Belonging. Yep, yep, OK.

Nevaeh: Yeah.

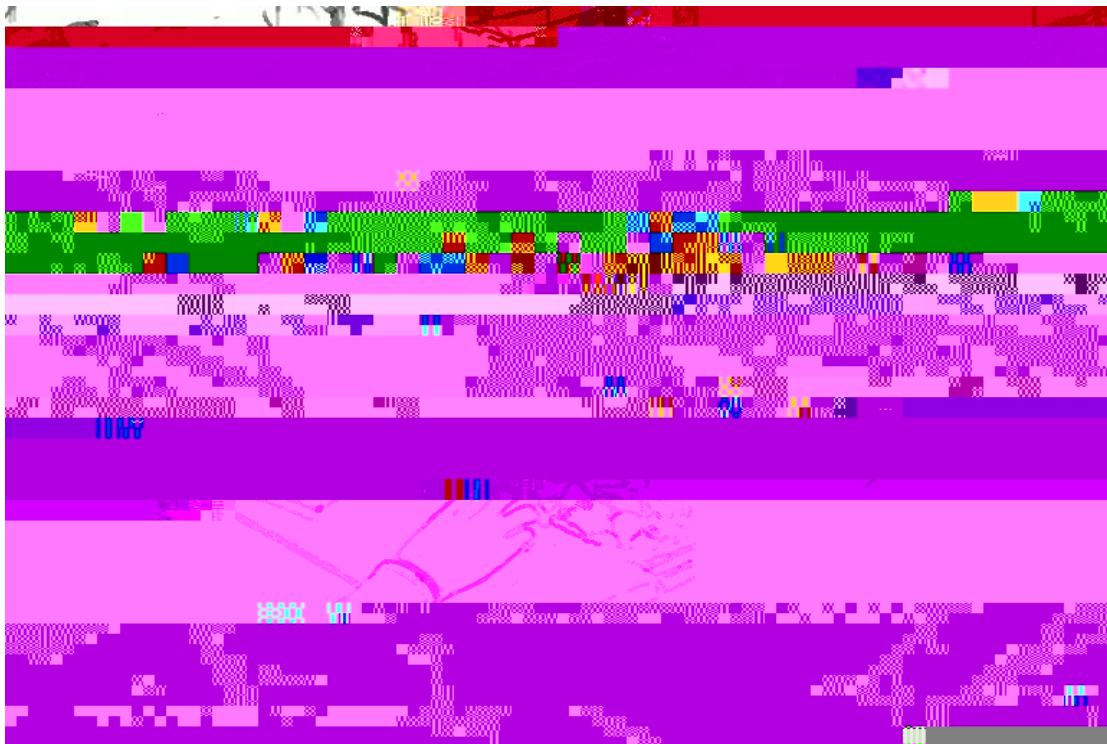
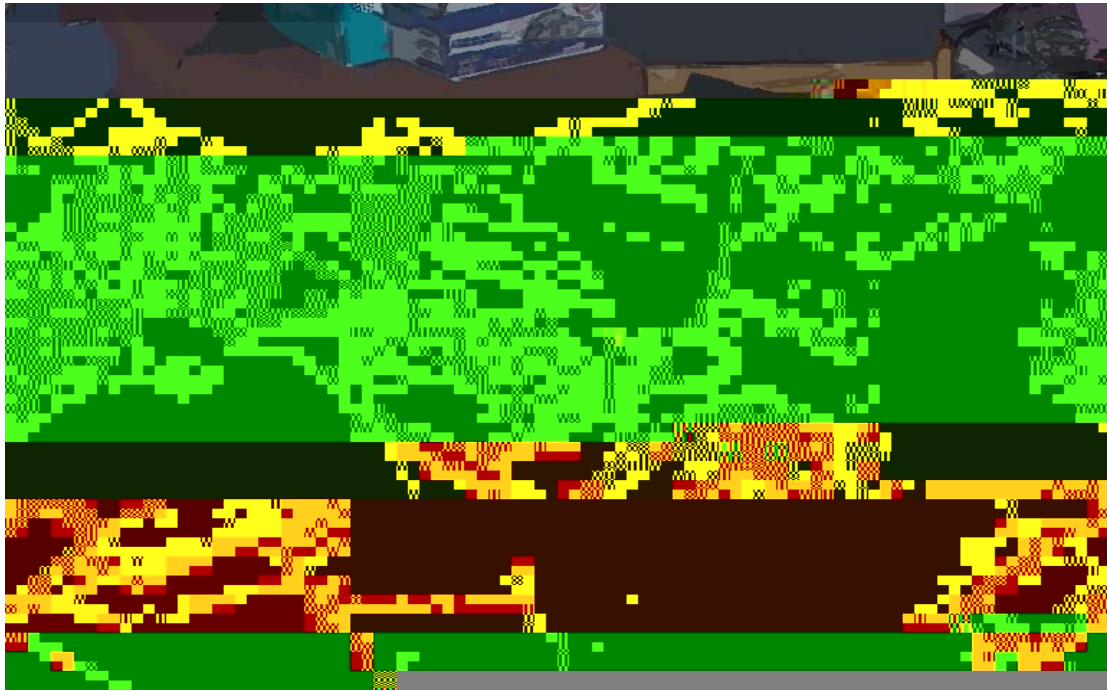
Emma: Cause that was a big, that is one of our big themes and, yeah.

Nevaeh: It's mad, like seeing it all –

Emma: Isn't it?

Nevaeh: Like ... that's you (staring down and gesturing towards the folders full of transcribed conversations and interviews)

The 'Beyond Outcomes' event was well attended by local young people in care and care leavers. It featured an address by a Government Minister and involved an actress from a popular fictional television show about children in a children's residential unit. It also raised a number of ethical issues relating to participation and dissemination. Firstly, in terms of content, we wished to give our participants a choice over the aspects of their lives that they wished to portray publicly (and anonymously). The majority of this material was indeed 'everyday' and in line with project aims and tended, understandably, to focus upon the positive and uplifting aspects of everyday life and relationship cultures. Pets, soft toys, football matches, visits to parks and the young people's own photos and videos of themselves and their families and friends were shown in a 15 minute assemblage of still and moving images. All were anonymised using specialist visual software with a selection of quotes adding meaning and direction to the multi-media collage. The following two images of the same photo illustrate the software used (<http://www.virtualdub.org/> and http://compression.ru/video/cartoonizer/index_en.html)



another resident in her former bedroom, and some tales of conflict and violence in school. Some important narratives from the research participants could not be presented at this event due to participants being aware of each others' identities and the potential for unwanted sharing of highly personal material. The film about conflict in school was withdrawn by the young person whose experiences it portrayed, as she was anxious about her foster carer realising it was her and was keen to avoid any negative representations of her interactions with others ("I'm not showing anything bad"). She is happy for 'her' film to be shown to academic audiences when neither she nor anyone she knows is present. Some young people who attended the event, but who had not been research participants, expressed an opinion that the data products portrayed too 'rosy' a picture of the lives of young people in care. The event had indeed censored some of the data due to the wishes of participants and the researchers' own concerns about audience and purpose of the event. Whilst in most contexts the participants would be entirely unidentifiable through the anonymised data, in front of peers and carers they could have been identifiable and it was therefore unethical to present any aspects of their data with which they were uncomfortable.

Our experiences of this dissemination event is that, on a positive note, our young participants were able to make informed choices about how, when and where their experiences could be portrayed. However, it must be recognised that involving research participants fully in dissemination can potentially lead to a less than comprehensive picture of research 'findings', particularly when the research includes personal narratives. If participants are always present at dissemination events, then personal material from other participants may not be able to be included, where participants know each others' identities. Therefore, we would suggest that participative dissemination can risk producing sanitized findings, although we would acknowledge that this will not be the outcome in all contexts

4.4 Identifying people in images

The more common approach favoured by social researchers is to present visual data in its entirety, with consent, and not to attempt to anonymise individuals (see for example, Back, 2004; Holliday, 2004). In this mode of working, pseudonyms are not generally used.

As noted above, visual researchers identify the importance of developing relationships of mutual trust with study participants so that the images that are taken emerge from collaborations between researcher and study participant and are jointly owned (Gold, 1989; Pink, 2003, 2006, 2007a; Banks, 2001; Harper, 1998). Pink (2003) and Banks (2001) argue for collaboration as a means to empower participants to represent themselves in the images that are produced and disseminated in ways that meet their own objectives. Such practice will involve showing participants and allowing them to comment on images prior to wider publication or presentation (Pink, 2006) and consideration of the political, social and cultural contexts in which images will be viewed and interpreted (Pink, 2007a).

These are laudable aims but are far from straightforward. They involve the need for researchers to make efforts to firstly, understand what the implications of identifiable images of individuals being disseminated might be

and secondly, explain to individuals in ways that they can comprehend the various implications. Previous research in relation to text based methods reveal that study participants are often very keen to be identified in research (Grinyer, 2002; Wiles et al, 2007) but do not necessarily understand what the implications may be. There is a tension here between study participants' right to decide how their image is used and researchers' responsibility to inform participants of the implications this might have. Most research participants have limited understanding of the research process and the ways in which research is presented and disseminated. Even with detailed discussion about this on the part of researchers, participants are unlikely to fully comprehend the 'taken for granted' aspects of research practice. The extent to which research participants are aware of the varying ways, and contexts in which, images may be consumed is questionable as is their knowledge about the longevity of images in the public domain and the potential for future uses of images. This is not to argue for paternalism on the part of researchers but rather for the recognition that collaboration with research participants on issues around anonymity and dissemination involve more than meeting participants' wishes; researchers need to carefully consider and explain the various implications to individuals. In some contexts it may be appropriate for researchers to take responsibility for the possible outcomes of research and to protect study participants from themselves.

There are a range of ways that visual research can be disseminated, such as public exhibitions, film showings or events, the use of digital media (such as DVDs or the internet) or more conventional forms of dissemination through presentations at conferences or meetings and book or journal publications. The mode of dissemination presents different implications for study participants in relation to anonymisation and identification and these need to be carefully considered and negotiated with study participants (Pink, 2006, 2007a). Both researchers and participants may be most concerned and aware of issues in relation to a public showing of research in their or the broader community but much less so in relation to an academic presentation or publication. However, this does not negate the need for researchers to be respectful of the ways in which they present their data in these formats. A further issue that warrants exploration with participants is consideration of the implications of images entering and remaining in the public domain through publication in books and articles. While an individual may be happy for a specific image of them to be made public at one point in their lives they may be less so in the future as their circumstances change (See Barrett, 2004; Williams et al, undated), yet once an image enters the public domain it may be difficult or impossible to remove it (see Banks, 2001, p131).

Visual data lend themselves to means of dissemination other than conventional academic publications because these often fail to do justice to the dynamic and interconnected nature of visual and textual data. This is particularly the case with some types of visual data, such as video diaries and observational film. Visual researchers have experimented with various ways to disseminate their research and producing DVDs and the use of hypermedia is particularly popular (Dicks et al, 2006). Consideration of ways of restricting access to these is likely to be important, especially if images involve children.

The internet offers considerable opportunities for global dissemination but, without restricted access to sites, raises the possibilities that images can be copied and reproduced in contexts other than those for which they were obtained (Banks, 2001; Pink, 2007a; Prosser, 2007). As Pink notes these may have negative or harmful consequences for the people represented and can be disseminated globally on-line (Pink, 2007a). The need for restricted access is also raised in relation to the archiving of visual material for reuse

fieldsite to demonstrate the poor upkeep of the area and what she interpreted to be a lack of care by residents.

It is not the image alone that can reproduce particular views and representations, but the juxtaposition of image with text. A comment made by a participant in relation to particular café in the fieldsite could have significant repercussions if accompanied by the visual image:

SP: This place here, xxxx [name of a café], I've heard stories about it
Researcher 1: What sort of stories?

SP: Er, t

friends currently live, of shops, cafes and pubs they frequent, all of which would be instantly recognisable to those familiar with the places.

However, some participants were aware of broader ethical issues around photographing place which resulted in them practicing their own anonymisation strategy while engaging with the visual methods. The content of participants' photographs was determined not only by what they wanted to reveal to researchers about their lives and their places but also by their ethical concerns over what they were willing, and not willing, to photograph. Some chose not to take any photographs, arguing that they felt uncomfortable or self-conscious producing such data and others were selective about the content of their images. While this was in part due to the degree of comfort using a particular method, it also alludes to a form of censoring of visual data. This included photographing place:

QS: ... Yeah. All these shops here, as you can see, most of them have gone into takeaway. I don't know if they'll be offended [by] you taking pictures here
(Walking interview)

QS takes pride in calling herself 'local' and was reluctant for us to take photographs in an area of the neighbourhood with which she was less familiar. This was, she claimed, an area where the store owners were not local and lived outside the neighbourhood, where she knew fewer people on the streets, and where, ultimately, we can surmise she felt *out of place*. In determining where, and crucially where not, to take photographs, PR thus reveals how her depth of place attachment intertwines with her ethical concerns about photographing place.

On reflection

It is important to recognise that guaranteeing complete anonymity of place (and at times, people within those places) is fraught with danger. While it may be possible to anonymise people through pixilation for example, this cannot be done so easily with place. Moreover, it is important to question what purpose anonymising place may serve. Would an image of a street scene anonymised so as to disguise people and location (for example by disguising store names) serve any purpose or would it represent a fabricated, sanitised picture to illustrate any accompanying text? It may be more preferable to not include over-anonymised images of place rather than present images simply for illustration. We have found it more appropriate to decide whether particular photographs should, or should not, form part of the 'public face' of the research. For it is not necessarily the image alone that can create ethical challenges, but the combination of image and accompanying text. Comments and stories about particular images can make both participants and place recognisable to others.

The history of anthropology and community research, including those that have used visual methods, is littered with examples of individuals and

communities being distressed about the way they have been portrayed in research (Pink, 2003; Rose, 2007: 252; Crow & Wiles, 2008). Arguably, more collaborative research approaches have made cases where research participants experience dissatisfaction with their treatment by researchers relatively rare. Nevertheless, exploration with research participants of their wishes for the ways visual data should be used and consideration of the implications this might have is a complex task.

5. Further Ethical Issues

Aside from issues of consent, confidentiality and anonymity, there are a number of other ethical issues that arise in the practice of visual methods which it is important for the visual researcher to consider. Central among these are i) how images are constructed and ii) how images are consumed. These issues, taken together with consent, confidentiality and anonymity, do not exhaust the ethical issues that emerge in visual research but we view them as comprising the central ethical issues that all visual researchers need to consider; this does not negate the need to consider the additional and specific ethical issues that emerge within the specific contexts of individual research projects.

In this section we briefly review issues around the construction and consumption of images to aid researchers' thinking on these issues. The issues outlined by Pink (2003) are helpful in this context. She notes that, in any project, a researcher needs to attend to: the internal meanings of an image; how it was produced; and, how it is made meaningful by its viewers. She notes the key issues to be considered by researchers are:

- i) the context in which the image is produced
- ii) the content of the image
- iii) the contexts and subjectivities through which the images are viewed

5.1 The construction of images

One of the difficulties with visual data is that images tend to be viewed as representations of social reality but are inevitably constructions of a social reality that are influenced by the attributes of both the researcher and subject (Pink, 2003; Harper, 2004). As Prosser (2000, p124) notes:

‘The still camera and movie camera ... replicate accurately what is set before them. However, importantly, they do so at our bidding’

There are various ways in which researcher and/or subject contribute to the construction of images. Researchers may use a particular lens to photograph a subject, ‘set up’ a specific photograph or use software to alter a photograph in order to make or illustrate a specific point (Gross et al, 2003; Prosser, 2000; Prosser & Loxley, 2008). Similar issues apply to film. There are also a range of less-conscious ways in which a researcher may influence the way in which an image is constructed; social class, gender, ethnicity and other social attributes of the researcher all operate to influence the choice of visual images (Harper, 2004). The same is true for research participants who may choose

to present themselves in ways in photographs or films that differ from their everyday reality (Gianotti, 2004). Ethical research demands that researchers are explicit about the methods and contexts in which the image has been created; it is unethical to use images to knowingly deceive or give a false impression (Prosser, 2000; Rose, 2007). Researchers also need to provide reflexive accounts to enable others to make sense of the visual data presented.

5.2 How images are consumed

The issues discussed above are pertinent in relation to the consumption of images. Images are not only created but also consumed within a social context (Banks, 1995). Furthermore, the way that images are consumed may be different to that which the researcher intended (Pink, 2007a; Gold, 1989). It is crucial to consider how the image or film will be interpreted and, in order to minimise misinterpretation, use visual data with text to make explicit the

Useful Resources

British Sociological Association - Visual Sociology Group's statement of ethical practice (2006)

www.visualsociology.org.uk/about/ethical_statement.php

Research ethics in art, design and media

<http://www.biad.uce.ac.uk/research/rti/ethics/bibliography.html>

Software for anonymising visual images:

<http://www.yowussup.com/pixelating-images.php>; <http://www.virtualdub.org/>
and http://compression.ru/video/cartoonizer/index_en.html)

ESRC Researcher Development Initiative on visual methods

<http://www.education.leeds.ac.uk/research/visual-methods/>

International Visual Studies Association

<http://www.visualsociology.org/>

Websites on visual methods and visual ethnography

<http://www.photoethnography.com/>

http://www.lboro.ac.uk/departments/ss/visualising_ethnography/

Creative visual methods

<http://www.artlab.org.uk/>

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GSR Professional Guidance: Ethical Assurance for Social Research in Government

http://www.gsr.gov.uk/downloads/professional_guidance/ethical_assurance/ethics_guidance.pdf

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Appendices: sample consent form

Dear

Many thanks for taking the time to participate in an interview for our project on family resemblances. It was a real pleasure to talk with you about you and your family.

During the interview you showed me some of your family photographs and you agreed to let me photograph them for use in the analysis of the research.

During the interview we also discussed some of the possible uses and outcomes of the research data including a report for our funders (Economic and Social

Photo Reproduction Rights Form

Living Resemblances Project, University of Manchester

www.reallifemethods.ac.uk/resemblances

This form refers to photographs that you supplied, or photographs that you allowed Katherine Davies to make, as part of the Living Resemblances project in which you have participated. All photographs will be securely stored by the research team. As discussed with you, photographs may be shared within the research team to help them in their analyses. We would also like to use some photographs (in electronic or print form), in reports, presentations, publications and exhibitions arising from the project. Please could you sign one of the boxes below to indicate whether or not you are happy for us to do this. We have attached numbered prints of your photographs to assist you, and for your records. We won't use any photographs outside the research team without your permission.

Please sign either 1, 2, or 3 below:

1. I give my consent for these photographs to be reproduced for educational and/or non-commercial purposes, in reports, presentations, publications, websites and exhibitions connected to the Living Resemblances project. I understand that real names will NOT be used with the photographs.

signed.....

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OR

If you would like to give permission for us to publish some, but not all, of the photos please list the numbers of the photos you will allow us to use:

2. I give my consent for photo
numbers.....

.....(please
specify)

to be reproduced (in electronic or print form), for educational and/or non commercial purposes, in reports, presentations, publications, websites and exhibitions connected to the Living Resemblances project. I understand that real names will NOT be used with the photographs.

signed.....

date.....

OR

3. I do not wish any of these photographs to be reproduced in connection with the Living Resemblances project.

signed.....

date.....

Thank you for participating in our project. If you have any queries about this form or about the project or your participation in it, please do not hesitate to contact Katherine Davies: 0161 275 2516, Katherine.Davies@manchester.ac.uk