



PRACTICAL MANUAL

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DISCLAIMER: All methods and approaches presented here are discussed keeping in mind the assignment to be done after going through this practical manual.

Learning Outcomes

After going through this manual, the learner will be able to:

- Describe what visual ethnography is;
- Identify how research is conducted in visual ethnography;
- Familiarise oneself with a framework to conduct visual research; and
- Classify the various ways in which to do visual research.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Anthropology as a discipline has had an interesting relationship with visual medium to study human society and culture. It the beginning when anthropology was advocating to put forward the importance of fieldwork and emphasise on collecting data directly from the source of information, visuals came in as validated appendage to verify its purpose. Thus as you have read in your earlier chapters in this course, we find Margaret Mead and George Bateson's work the *Balinese Character* (1942) showed how their many years of fieldwork was then followed by covering the lives of the people through the camera. Harper says (1998), that the theories which Mead and Bateson portray through their photographs were based on anthropological knowledge. They put forth that there is scope for visual ethnography to study culture. Photographs for them were part of using the observation method and thus provided a new genre of combining images and text. In this way, Mead and Bateson suggested that photography can become ethnography too where more concrete happenings of a culture can be represented.

This may be considered as a historical description of how visuals made a legitimate entry into anthropological fieldwork, notwithstanding the fact that

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Franz Boas, Malinowski and others had already used images in their ethnographic work. However this work of Mead and Bateson not only paved the way for use of visuals in ethnography effectively but also led to the beginning of visual ethnography in anthropology.

In this practical manual we will provide a brief outline of what visual ethnography is, what are the means used in visual ethnography and how this means and methods will help you collect data in a way so as to come out with rational visual anthropological knowledge.

1.1 WHAT IS VISUAL ETHNOGRAPHY?

Simply putting, visual ethnography may be viewed as a methodology in ethnographic studies where photography, films and video content are utilised to collect data, get results and create new knowledge. Sarah Pink (2001) explains visual ethnography as a research method which produces “theory and practice of visual approaches to learning and knowing about the world and communicating them to others”. Visual ethnography can influence how to construct research and guide the methods to be selected for data collection.

Sometimes the phrase visual ethnography may become confusing too as it is not only the study and use of visual media and data but it is also used to merge the visual content into conventional ethnography (O’Reilly, 2009). In whatever way visual ethnography is utilised, what you should keep in mind is the result, which brings relevance of the visuals to ethnography, which questions the hegemony of the written text and establishes itself as images which can sometimes supersede writing, and which creatively uses images to build new knowledge.

Going back to Mead and Bateson’s push to introduce visual methods in anthropology, the 1900s to 1950s, mainstream anthropology remained mostly hesitant to use visual methods. It continued to be used as providing a framework to the main written content. It was only after the reflexive turn that anthropological research took in the late 1990s and early 2000s that visual methods boomed in its usage in social sciences along with anthropology, thanks to the availability of digital technology. This Pink postulates as an “anthropology of the relationship between the visual and other elements of culture, society, practice and experience and the methodological practice of combining visual and other media in the production and representation of anthropological knowledge” (2001).

Today visual ethnography is an important part of qualitative research. Marcus Banks explains, “that as images are present in society their illustration should be included in the studies of society, and that study of images in the accumulation of data may reveal sociological understanding that may not be accessible”(2007). Images have now become a crucial segment of the inquiry of socio-cultural experiences developed by both the researcher and/or the participants. van den Scott defines visual ethnography as a method in qualitative research where “the researcher studies an entire

cultural or social group on its natural setting, closely examining customs and ways of life, with the aim of describing and interpreting cultural patterns of behaviour, values, and practices" (2018).

1.2 RESEARCH IN VISUAL ETHNOGRAPHY

In this section we will talk about how visual research is done in present times. After all, as young learners and researchers, you will want to know what are the technical know-how that one needs to be acquainted with when one goes to the field to do visual research or what we have just learnt as visual ethnography. There is no doubt the position of visuals in ethnography is important. Today there have been so many technological advances, like our smart phones with android and IOS enabled applications. With these advances, we can think of gaining so much creatively in our ethnographic fieldwork. We have to apply these systematically to ethically know what to produce and what to disseminate. Like any other contemporary visual researcher, we should be aware that the mediums of visual research can be as diverse as photography, films, hypermedia etc. Not only should we be aware of these if we want to do research of the visual, we should also learn and finally know how to use them. A good ethnographer's sign would be the knowledge of the use of such technologies and their progressions. You should also be well aware of the fact that the increase in the role of visual ethnography assists in production, evaluation and interpretation of the visual in the context of culture. As O'Reilly puts it, "Visual ethnography thus opens up whole new ways of seeing the worlds we study, enabling a focus on the emotions, the sensual, the artistic, and creative elements that digital media, especially, are providing entire new ways to represent" (2009).

1.3 A FRAMEWORK FOR VISUAL RESEARCH

Before we inform you about the various methods in visual research or visual ethnography, let us in this section attempt to learn and decipher a framework as postulated by Luc Pauwels. Luc Pauwels is a visual sociologist and a communications scientist who is known for his immense interest to better visual research methods and is dedicated to widen and reinforce empirical social science. As a contemporary visual scientist, his views will be of help to you when you decide to conduct research on the visual.

Pauwels framework on visual research has been brought out as a book entitled the *Integrated Framework for Visual Social Research* (2010). Pauwels in his own words says that this framework is "an attempt to offer an integrated overview of the wide variety of interconnected options and opportunities researchers have when considering using visual input and/or output in the study of society and culture. These options or choices are discussed systematically and are placed in perspective within the complete trajectory of a visual research project from its conception to the dissemination of the research findings or insights".

According to him, we mostly find authors discussing existing techniques and methods of visual research and how they are represented. He points out that there is hardly any analytical and integrated approach through which visual research can be discussed. His main intent through this framework is to provide a better perception to existing capacities and methods and to encourage novel and more advanced schemes to do visual research. These new ideas are only to accentuate the already existing means of enquiry which will improve the skills of the researcher.

The framework has three themes. They are:

- a. Origin and Nature of Visuals
- b. Research Focus and Design
- c. Format and Purpose of End Product

a. Origin and Nature of Visuals You as a researcher may use existing visual material, also known as found visuals as your primary data of research. Found images are those which are created by the participants of the field in their everyday lives. It may include both actual historical data of a culture or to see it in today's world's context, and even fictionalised images (which comes about from the technological availability of editing and filter tools). These historical and contemporary materials will be as diverse as possible. They will range from mundane visuals of family photographs to professional visuals of advertising, diagrams etc. and may include different sectors of society, like government, educational, medical etc. This will allow access to a huge array of public and private domains. These found materials will inform about the social lives of the culture studied and also inform about plain and intense subtleties of the culture studied.

Knowledge of technology and representation of culture over time and space helps the researcher to build proficiency to examine culture intricately. Researchers should also be mindful of copyright and censorship issues while conducting visual research.

Researchers should also be able to differentiate between found images and researcher generated material. The latter can be either visual material created or collected by the researcher on her/his own or the use of already generated material by other researchers to understand and compare the present work, or to revisit the earlier work.

In this, another method of studying culture is native image production or respondent generated imagery. It is different from the above two techniques as here visuals are clearly created with a research context in mind with the respondent being studied producing their own cultural data visually. An example of this is "Through Navajo Eyes" (1975) created by Worth and Adair.

Researcher may also study material culture and human behaviour as referent subject, visually of course. In human behaviour, researchers may

study spontaneous behaviour which comes out naturally or behaviour which is fetched out through visual stimuli like pictures, videos etc. Other than human behaviour, depiction of important social events, like rituals, if captured visually, the depth and intricacy of the events are more lucidly developed.

b. Research Focus and Design

Here we concentrate on the analytical focus of the visual. This may be diverse. Along with the analysis of any visual data, it may also involve the analysis of the creation of the visual data itself. Also the use of the visual data can be analysed along with this verbal feedback of the same by the respondents. As expected the analytical focus will be influenced by the selection of the visual research problem. The main content which is portrayed is the main focus of analysis. Images which are created in a methodical manner can be treated as the windows to the world that is illustrated. Data can be gathered from visually observable environments which can be directly deciphered (like objects) or may have to be interpreted (emotional state, relationships) and can include a unified whole or minute segment of a culture or group.

Reactions or feedback of respondents to visual content is equally important and researchers use such analysis of oral response (like visual interviewing, photo elicitation etc.) to visual impetus (photos, films, diagrams etc.) in order to gather deeper inputs. Any visual concern can be studied with the help of visual methods as long as that are researched properly and have an imperative visual component (good examples can be role and status, social class, socialisation etc.).

Visual research like other forms of research requires a firm theoretical backing. Theories are the guiding source to gather systematic data and analysis. So when we observe available visual depictions or creating new visual information, both approaches need strong theoretical basis. This provides a path to the scientific research. Theories ranging from semiotics, socio-semiotics, rhetoric, post-colonial theory, feminist theory, cultural studies, iconology etc. can be used for visual research among others. Some theories may suggest proper methodical tools while others may not have a concrete method of study. Here the researcher has to merge qualitative and sometimes quantitative analysis to their findings. The theoretical backing of any visual research includes both the thematic focus and the analytical focus of the investigation.

It is hoped and expected that researchers keen to do research on visual should have or develop some form of visual capabilities. This means, you should at least possess some inert familiarity with the technical and animated facets of imagery and depictive techniques, so that you can utilise them effectively. This knowledge of the visual technological know-how, builds a distinct visual thinking and performing during the whole research procedure.

A visual ethnographer or researcher should keep an eye for unintentional and unrestrained influences on the research scenario. This can come about due to the presence and use of the camera, its presence and things which can be associated to censorship. It is the job of the researcher to examine what can be considered as normal and what can lead to censorship. It is their responsibility to minimise such happenings.

A researcher has to make meticulous and careful groundwork of the field and subject to be visually studied. Depending on the focus and nature of the research, you may choose to involve the respondents in the production, creation and execution of the research in either active or passive ways. The idea behind this may be to yield more in-depth data or also to build an equal relationship with them with an eagerness to share the profits from the research findings for the community's betterment. In many instances if already existing objects are visually researched, there may be zero involvement of the subjects. In another situation, people may be aware of the use of visual devices during research, but may not be too clear of the exact purpose but agree to the researcher's requirements. However various reactions from subjects are always to be expected as the use of camera (moving or still) will elicit some form of reaction, either that of shyness, or excitement etc. Finally however the research is conducted and produced, you should bear in mind that the creation of knowledge is not the end but is "work in progress, incomplete and perspectivistic" and is based on reflexivity (Rosaldo, 1989; Ruby 2000; Pauwels, 2006). Here reflexivity in the context of visual research, as MacDougall (1975:119) puts it, "reflexivity in particular involves giving a concrete shape to the idea that research is a complex 'meeting of cultures'", that of the researcher's and the researched with their diverse subjective beliefs, choices, lived experiences, attributes and cultural environments.

Lastly we have to consider an important aspect while doing all the above in visual research. This is that while collecting and disseminating information, either of human behaviour or of material objects, no harm should be done to the participants, the researched. Camera images carry the burden of taking away the anonymity of the researched. It is a huge task to not violate their privacy and to be careful of how they are portrayed, how data is used and to avoid possible negative effects of the findings. Along with protecting the respondents' identity, issues of authorship and copyright also need to be delicately handled and due credit should be given, as along with the researcher, the researched is an equal participant and producer of visual research, either during the process of the research directly, or the use of their earlier created material.

c. Format and Purpose of End Product

The final part of visual research has to be the product, the result. This can take various shapes ranging from the everyday customary research

paper or article, a research report, to majorly illustrated papers comprising of CDs, films, multimedia packages, or on the internet in various social media platforms, posters etc. We should bear in mind that, the quantity of visuals with other features, like colour, shape, animation is not a sign that the quality of visual research is first-rate. The fitting utilisation of visuals with other fundamentals and their interaction is what matters most. Some research demand minimal use of visuals while others may require a combination of visual and verbal communication, while some others may involve largely the application of visuals.

Visuals collected during fieldwork may be represented variedly in the end. Visual should not be used in the final product as some accessory, it should be used as proper documentation of the research being conducted. Visual not only describe conventional situations, but also illustrates continuous processes, acts as examples and explain aberrant or outstanding instances. Your responsibility is to contain the variedness of the visual to exactly what meaning and purpose it conveys for a particular research at a particular time.

Visual data, for example an already existing ethnographic film, can be utilised as secondary data for a new research work and can be demonstrated to a new audience. However this existing content has to fit to the new research and be placed in its context.

So the above three themes offer a dialogue on how visual research can be used in an integrated, logical and methodical manner. This can be viewed as a starting point to build more, clear, categorical, applicable and advanced visual methodologies to investigate society and culture.

1.4 DOING VISUAL RESEARCH

In anthropology, when you as a researcher will partake visual research you will follow an extensive variety of approaches which will include among others, photo elicitation, photo voice, photography, mapping, both mental and cognitive, interviews along with video and photography, more mapping techniques like GIS mapping, grounded theory mapping, mapping of pertinent social groups, making of art of different kinds (both virtual and actual), study of material culture, and analysis of subjects ranging from murals, graffiti, to animation films and what not.

We can therefore as van den Scott (2018) puts it, these varied material can be divided into three broad categories of visual research matter:

- a. visual things as data (photos, art, comics, etc.);
- b. visual tools to gather data (photo elicitation, cognitive mapping, etc.);
and
- c. visual ways to record field notes and/or memo (photographs of the field site, situational analysis mapping, relevant social group mapping, etc.)

The above visual matter may be in research the narrative itself, or it can be used to create or prompt a narrative which we can mould according to how any situation unfolds. Conventionally we generally tend to carry out evaluation of any content of visual matter that is already available, for example, art work, photographs of families, or other visual symbols and depictions of material which we can view as cultural remains of a group of people, for example pottery, hearths etc. These tell us a narrative itself.

As mentioned above, we can prompt a narrative via means of visual methods. Here participants or respondents are shown visual matter where they respond to these, and data is built through their reactions and replies. These may be called as photo elicitation or cognitive mapping etc. As researchers you may also take photographs, make videos and illustrate and create diagrams, maps etc. as part of your fieldwork which you may use as field notes. This may help you to comprehend your research process better, to create your own narrative. In the end, you may also use some or all of your images (both still and moving), in the process of dissemination of the data and knowledge that you will present to the audience. Of course in all these, you will always keep in mind the concerns related to ethics where you will have to know what you can produce for the public and what you cannot.

ACTIVITY

1. Create a project based on an anthropological depiction of any event through use of images.

We not only use visual methods to create or elicit a narrative but we also use it to tell a narrative. It is truly said that a picture is worth a thousand words. Imagery, pictures, illustrations, art can actually help us portray our research to our audience in a better way. Such form of dissemination of knowledge has the capacity to reach a wider public. It is interesting how markers of sameness, say for example, pictures of people smiling, they do assist in creating a framework which leads to a better interaction with the participants of your research. The data produced thus, has more meaning and builds a connect with the audience. Many scholars however see this process as not analytical though there is no denial that it is an extremely attractive communication between images and the respondents.

What we need to keep in mind how methodical and reflexive our data (images) are while collecting and researching them and with the use of proper visual methods. Just like when we go to the field while collecting ethnographic data, we immerse ourselves in observing, conversing and noting every important thing we see, it is the same when we go to the field and conduct research with visual methods. If you as a student have not used imagery to conduct research, you will learn here that many visual scholars have done exemplary works with the use of visual methods in different ways and that these can give you a clear idea about how to move ahead with your own visual research.

For more learning, you may also look into Sarah Pink (2006) to know about the past and future of visual methods and Gillian Rose (2016) whose handbook on visual methodologies is quite engaging and helpful.

In visual ethnography, you as a researcher can not only use visual aid to explain or interpret what is observed but you can also to produce and conceive fresh elucidations of social experiences that can be shaped from the use of visual methods. You will not only be in a position to test critical theories and approaches, but can also see how visual matter can be empirically used in ethnographic research and interpret peoples' lives. Here the involvement of the people studied also becomes important, if they become active participants. Meaning they too become engaged in taking photographs or making films about their own lives and you can find out the representations that will be built with such an involvement. It may create multiple complexities ranging from making the participants feel in authority, to institutional control of portrayal of the visual data. It is indeed a difficult and involved process and the researcher has to hence tread carefully and meticulously. You may imagine while engaging in participatory photograph method (and you are not wrong) that it is majorly for the benefit of the society involved and to bring about people friendly changes. However such photography can also build an influential aesthetic of societal knowledge.

Films too can create a sense of visual understanding where a reflexive piece can be produced. For example, Laetitia Merli's film depicting the ethnographic detail of shamanism in France where she states that a "virtual capture of a certain objective reality but a collaborative, reflexive and sensitive work" that illustrate social ties. Film can display performances and reinterpret social engagements like shamanistic rituals in this case, and provide as a narrative mechanism or tool bringing out the poignant and unseen aspects of it, thus creating a profound involvement within ethnographic investigation.

ACTIVITY

2. Make a project of an anthropological depiction of any event through use or creation of a film

You can other than photographs and films also use or make drawings as a medium of visual research practice and in the process construct a new form of engagement in the dissemination of knowledge. Material culture of daily domestic life is another way to help create new perceptions on ethnographic research.

ACTIVITY

3. Create a project with the use of already available images, objects or films (from books, social media, places of display etc.) and analytically provide an anthropological interpretation.

1.5 SUMMARY

After reading this manual, now you are in a position to carefully plan out how you would like to conduct research with the help of visual material or directly do research with or of the visual. We can easily say that today visual ethnography has changed the way anthropologists and other social scientists produce and explain knowledge. Myriad possibilities have opened up in the delivery of new information to the public with the use of pictorial and sensorial imagery experienced in such research. It is hence important to employ tools, techniques and research approaches of the visual in a sensible and sensitive manner. It is hoped that this manual will assist you to think creatively and critically in order to undertake investigation with and of visual material and produce original and innovative data.

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