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The Promise and Potential of Visual Organizational Research

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This article aims to convey the promise and potential of visual methods in organizational research. It begins by reviewing the status of visual research in the social sciences in order to explore its potential contribution to organizational research, distinguishing four categories of visual data used by organizational analysts. Using examples from our own ongoing research, we argue that the collection and analysis of visual images has the potential to enhance organizational research by encouraging a focus on aspects of organizational culture that are less easily captured through the collection and analysis of written or spoken words alone. We review the challenges posed by use of visual methods, including issues of access, ethics and copyright law and the importance of theoretical perspective in informing data analysis. Finally, we argue that visual methods have the potential to enable development of a more reflexive approach to organizational research, using examples from our own research to illustrate how this can be developed.

INTRODUCTION

Visual representation is argued to be increasingly influential in shaping our view of the social world (Chaplin, 1994). Organizations are a key aspect of this social world that is represented using a variety of visual forms, including artefacts, still pictures, television, video and through the typescript and layout of verbal text. The visual should therefore be of concern to all organizational analysts, both as a topic of social analysis and in terms of its communicative potential. However, despite the increased availability and use of visual technologies that have the potential to enable new and innovative approaches to visual organizational research, the use of visual methods in organizational studies remains relatively limited (Strangleman, 2004).

Visual research is a subfield of qualitative research that involves researching social life through the mediums of photography, film and video. Visual sociology, which has its historical roots in anthropology and documentary photography, provides the most developed application of visual methods in the social sciences. Visual sociology became established during the 1960s through the work of documentary photographers (Harper, 1994). Sociological researchers such as Pink (2001a; 2001b; 2003; 2004) have systematically explored the potential of visual research methods in relation to ethnographic study. Research that relies on visual data is being published with increasing frequency

in journals such as *Qualitative Inquiry and Symbolic Interaction, Visual Anthropology* and *Visual Studies* (Harper, 2005).

Collier and Collier (1986) argue that one of the advantages of visual research over other research methods stems from the means by which data is preserved. In comparing photography with the practice of writing fieldnotes, they argue that although photography is an abstracting process of observation, it is different from writing fieldnotes or carrying out interviews, where information is preserved in literate code. Although they acknowledge that photography is a selective process of data collection, it has the potential to reveal information about contextual relationships that is often missing from fieldnotes or interview data. In relation to the study of organizations, Meyer (1991) argues that visual research has the potential to enable a more sophisticated understanding of organizational systems because visual and verbal forms of information are encoded and processed differently; visual inputs are synthesised by the brain into images thus taking into account the multidimensionality and interrelationships of various components within the data. Verbal information on the other hand is processed and encoded into hierarchical, linear categories making it a more reductionist undertaking.

However, Banks (1998) argues that people who use photographic images for social science purposes sometimes become confused by the status of their empirical data, treating their research pictures in a similar way to documentary photography or photojournalism. The question therefore arises as to whether the use of visual data can be understood as research. Becker (1998) claims that the label assigned to an image, whether it is a photograph, existing image or a video clip, does not refer to an essential meaning of what constitutes research but instead reflects the ways in which people have found visual images to be useful. He thus argues these ways of making pictures are whatever they are come to mean or been made to mean, that they are social constructions. Similarly, according to Pink (2001a: 28), «No photographic or video image need have one single identity and (…) no images are, for example, essentially 'ethnographic' but are given ethnographic meanings in relation to the discourses that people use to define them».

In an opening article for *Visual Anthropology,* Becker (1974) argues that the photographic exploration of society is characterised by a lack of theory arising from the commonly held misconception that the camera records objectively, regardless of who is pushing the button. Becker (1974) argues that the photographer exerts enormous control over the final image and the information and the message it contains. Visual research is thus «a process of seeing guided by theory» (Harper, 2000: 717) that reflects the researcher's underlying epistemological and ontological assumptions about the nature of knowledge, truth and reality. Like any other research method it is dependent on the perspective and approach of the researcher. Therefore, organizational researchers who use visual data must convince others that their images enable greater understanding of organizations than simply relying on written or spoken text alone. Moreover, in addition

to convincing others they must also convince themselves that what they are doing is not just making pretty pictures. One way of doing this is by emphasising the differences in the way that researchers consider images compared to other forms of picture making and showing how this can contribute to enhanced organizational analysis. The focus of this paper is on how such an understanding can be developed.

THE ADVANTAGES OF USING VISUAL DATA IN ORGANIZATIONAL RESEARCH

So what are some of the advantages of using visual data in organizational research? Organizations communicate using a vast array of visual resources, including products and other artefacts, architecture and workplace design, websites, printed literature and the physical appearance of their members. By accounting for the visual aspects of organizational culture purely through textual data collection methods, researchers continue to position the interpretation of images in a way which implies they are subservient to the text, despite the vast quantity of organizational data which suggests visual images constitute messages in their own right. Hence although it is possible to produce a cultural analysis of an organization based entirely on textual data such as written fieldnotes and interviews, a more subtle understanding of an organizational culture and the contextual relationships within the social setting under investigation (Collier and Collier, 1986) can be obtained by analysing visual data. Visual data also enables greater understanding of the contested nature of organizational cultures, since pictures and photographs may be used by organizational members to resist the dominant organizational culture represented through language, these often being used by organizational members to communicate a more emotional message than is possible through language alone (Bell, 2005). Visual data also has the potential to enhance organizational analysis by enabling a more complex understanding of organizations as complex, evolving networks of interrelationships (Meyer, 1991). It thus can be used to gain greater insight into organizational processes and to gain a more holistic, longitudinal understanding of the organization as it develops over time. In addition, because visual data draws attention to the embodied identity of the researcher and the research participants, this can provide a basis for developing enhanced reflexivity. By using visual data obtained during interactions with research participants, in particular photographs taken in the research setting, one of us has found visual data to be helpful in emphasizing the embodied aspects of the research process, enabling reflection on the identity of the researcher in relation to the social setting.

Furthermore, these advantages are more readily realisable as a result of technological changes which enhance the possibilities for recording, representing and accessing visual data. These technological changes can be traced to the introduction of portable video cameras in the 1960s which reduced the perceived hegemony of the author, as image

and sound could now be recorded simultaneously, without the need for added commentary. This facilitated a move away from modernist pre-conceptions of the subject, towards a more equal power relationship between the researcher and the research subject. More recently, the use of the Internet, interactive CD (CD-ROM) and DVD technologies mean the viewer can have greater control over the dissemination of visual data. Images and video can be quickly and easily uploaded onto the Internet and watched by anyone in the world at any time. The speed of dissemination is reduced to the time it takes to download the image and watch it back on a screen. In presenting data, the technology of a CD-ROM allows a viewer to watch a film in a variety of different ways, forwards, backwards, in slow motion, in relation to specific concepts, alongside accompanying text about context or as a sequence of still images. A book or PhD thesis can be published with an accompanying CD. This approach has been called «a post-modern argument against the hegemony of its own form» (Harper, 2005: 748) because it enables greater control over the dissemination of the data and supports and encourages the possibility of multiple interpretations of the same dataset. Dissemination is more personal and experiential having the effect of helping to deconstruct the author by making the reader the author of their version of the text and giving them greater control over their learning experience.

An example of how the emergence of new visual technologies provides new opportunities for researchers using visual research methods is provided by Ruby (2006) in a forty year ethnographic study of Oak Park, a Chicago suburb where the author attended school. The study published on a website is described as a series of experimental, reflexive and digital ethnographies which are interactive and non-linear, containing photographs, video and text. There is no defined beginning, middle or end to these texts; the reader is free to begin anywhere they please and ignore what does not interest them. According to Harper (2005), it is precisely that a variety of communication modes (text, still and moving images) can be integrated in this study that makes this mode of dissemination attractive and effective. These technological innovations have the potential to making organizational research findings more accessible and thus dissemination more immediate and effective, since images can be added to a project at any stage of the research process. They also have the potential to be used in ways which destabilise the traditional conception of the author to a greater extent than written formats, in which the process of authorship is hidden to a greater extent from the reader of the text.

CATEGORIES OF VISUAL ORGANIZATIONAL RESEARCH

Organizational researchers have used a variety of different kinds of visual data within ethnographic and qualitative case study research. A basic distinction can be made between the analysis of visual data in combination with the analysis of written or spoken language, and the

use of photographs and pictures to build theory independently of language. On the basis of a review of organizational studies that use visual methods, we develop four categories based on the source of the data and the way in which it is used. These distinctions broadly conform to similar categorizations made by other writers on visual research in general (see for example Banks, 1995; Harper, 2005). The four categories of visual data that we describe are often used in combination within the same study. Their usefulness therefore derives from enabling the researcher to be clear about the kind(s) of visual data they are analysing within a particular research study.

Our first category refers to instances where the researcher takes photographs and uses them as data from which they derive their interpretation, treating them as a primary source of data used to generate words. Examples include Buchanan's (2001) study of the introduction of business process re-engineering in a UK hospital in which he took over 150 photographs of the patient trail as one technique of data collection used alongside other qualitative methods including interviewing. He argues that using photographs in conjunction with other methods of data collection helps the organizational researcher to develop a richer understanding of organizational processes, enables the capture of data not disclosed in interviews, reveals to employees aspects of work in other sections of the organization with which they have little or no regular contact, provides a novel means of achieving respondent validation of data and involves staff in debate concerning the implications of research findings (Buchanan, 2001: 151).

Our second category includes research where the informant takes photographs and the researcher uses these as data which they use for their interpretation. Bolton, Pole and Mizen's (2001) research into the meaning of child employment in Britain involved giving the young people a disposable camera with which to take photographs of their workplace. The photographic aspect of the study was part of a wider year long research project that included interviews, written diaries and focus groups. The researchers argue that their primary purpose was to generate data through visual techniques and sources, rather than to collect visual material to represent, illuminate or document known processes, events or meanings. Hence, in addition to confirming written and spoken accounts of the content of the jobs and the nature of workplaces, the photographs portrayed areas normally unseen by customers or researchers, such as stockrooms, rubbish skips and toilets. Consequently they claim that photography has the capacity to facilitate analysis «which may tell us more about social phenomena than analysis of textual, verbal or observational data» (Bolton et al., 2001: 516). Another example involving the use of visual methods in this way is a study by Warren (2002) that explores the aesthetic dimension of organizations. Warren argues that visual methods are particularly useful in enabling analysis of experiences that are non-rational and ineffable. Informants were given cameras and asked to take photographs to show how they felt about their workplace. The photographs were then used in a photo-elicitation exercise involving discussion of the images with informants in the form of a semi-structured interview where

respondents gave a verbal account of the experiences they had chosen to communicate via their pictures.

Our third category involves the researcher taking a visual artefact (a photograph or an artwork or an artefact containing photographs or artwork) generated by organization members and obtained by the researcher during their fieldwork and interpreting it in words. Examples include Dougherty and Kunda's (1990) study of organizational beliefs about customers, which uses company annual reports as a source of visual data. The researchers analyse photographs of customers contained in the reports that reveal «aspects of an organization's theory of its customers in a non-verbalized yet substantive way» (Dougherty and Kunda, 1990: 187). Another example is Schneider and Dunbar's (1992) study of hostile takeover events, which analyses the way they threaten identity and integrity. The use of visual images is interpreted by the researchers as an indication of conflict and uncertainty within a particular social group, familiar imagery bringing some certainty to the situation, in this case in the form of newspaper cartoons. The authors argue that it is the interaction of the text with the reader that creates meaning and they use images from newspapers to illustrate the psychoanalytic themes in their research.

Hardy and Phillips (1999) also use newspaper cartoons to investigate the broader societal discourse around immigration. In this study, cartoon images are suggested to be a useful data source because they are relatively easy and inexpensive to gather and also because they can function as self-contained texts illustrating an alternative discursive position. Through their analysing of visual data, the authors show how images are used in this case to turn institutional assumptions on their head and to bring a fresh perspective to an existing situation. Another example is provided by Phillips and Brown (1993) who take a structural-symbolic view of culture in studying meaningful actions, objects and expressions in relation to context. In this study, images from public service advertisements are analysed in relation to the organization that produces them.

The analysis of existing visual images raises important issues concerning the relationship between written text and images. Mitchell (1994) argues that neither the written text nor the image have authority over one or the other. This informs an approach that seeks to avoid a reductionist division between image and text, instead treating text and images as inseparable, working together to communicate a message. **Photograph 1** illustrates this point (as also does **Photograph 2** referred to later). This example involves an image taken from a study of a car manufacturing organization where fieldwork traced the changing visual representations of the Jaguar wild cat that represents the brand, showing how this was used by members in the symbolic construction of organizational identity. The image is an official design used by the union to protest against the closure of a factory in the city widely regarded as the organization's birthplace. It appeared on all the literature associated with the protest against the closure and on the protest website. As **Photograph 1** shows, the image comprises a cartoon picture of Uncle Sam holding the Jaguar cat, a bloody knife in

one hand and the cat's bleeding heart in the other. Uncle Sam has a Ford logo on his hat. The cat has a tear drop falling from its eye. Around the picture are the words "Jaguar workers fighting for a future". The written text that encircles the image indicates its lesser significance relative to the image in the centre. The pictorial image conveys a much harsher and more powerful sentiment than the written text that accompanies it but the message relies on image and text in combination to convey its meaning.

The fourth and final category refers to cases where the researcher takes a photograph in the fieldwork setting and presents it as the analysis, rather than as a supplement to or illustration of the analysis provided in written form. There are very few examples within organizational studies which fall into this category, since it is more acceptable in documentary photography than social science. One example is provided in the work of visual artist Carey Young (2002) who uses visual displays to expose the ways in which business organizations organize their employees and customers. Young (2002) uses video, sculpture, installations and photography to show how organizations operate. Another example is provided in the exhibition The Office at the photographer's gallery in London in 2003/2004. According to the article by Cohen and Tyler (2004), photographs from 11 contemporary art photographers, including two video artists, were exhibited, as well as historical photographs. Various organizational themes were presented by the images through also the use of lighting and modes of presentation.

Photograph 1. Jaguar campaign logo
Reproduced courtesy of the Transport and General Workers Union and graphic illustrator, Peter Millen.

Photographs were used to illustrate various themes within the work-place.

These four categories may be used in combination; furthermore, the boundary between them is not always clear. For instance, researchers may take their own photographs that show visual artefacts that have been produced by the organization (**Photographs 2** and **3** illustrate this). The rest of the images in this article are derived from a study of an organization which will be referred to hereafter as Angelic. Field-work was carried out in this organization while the researcher was employed there on a full-time basis. The period of time spent in the organization was six weeks, for an average of forty hours per week. The role of the researcher was to work across the various departments in the organization as summer helper. Part of the fieldwork involved attending a free one-day summer music festival held annually in a Lon-don park organized by Angelic. The festival provided an opportunity for photographic data collection, to explore the visual culture and embod-ied identities of employees and potential consumers and the cultures of members of other organizations which were aligning themselves as similar to Angelic in this context.

Photograph 2 was taken by the researcher and used as data from which interpretation is derived. However, the photograph contains images generated by members of the organization in the form of the logo on the banners around the main stage at the festival, representing a childlike drawing of a face with a halo above it, connoting goodness and spirituality. The banner also contains written text which reads "hello everyone", a message that serves to invite and welcome everyone to the festival. The visual aspects of the written text which accompanies

Photograph 2. Angelic festival stand

this image are also significant in revealing the culture of the organization. The words are written in lower-case letters reinforcing the childlike theme which can also be seen elsewhere in the organization (this lower-case text even being used in employment contracts). It reflects organizational members' verbal use of childlike, non-businesslike and friendly language. This visual image thus reflects, and helps to create and reinforce, a highly specific organizational culture where employees are treated in a childlike way, for example by being rewarded with cake for good work and having the song "Happy Birthday" sung to them by the whole company on their birthday. As in Photograph 1, in this picture the image and the text work together to communicate a message about the organization's culture to consumers and employees. This image also highlights the role of visual methods in considering the entire scene and thus the broader context within which the organization is located. Hence, in addition to the organizational artefacts which constitute the subject of the photograph, it is also important to consider the contextual aspects of the image, the event (a music festival), the crowd (the type of people and how they are behaving) and the band on the stage (type of music, who this appeals to) in analysing the meaning of the picture as a representation of organizational culture. This contextual information, combined with the analysis of data that was obtained through participant observation, was used to inform the analysis of the culture of the Angelic organization in relation to it environment and the other organizations with which it is associated.

Photograph 3 was taken during an initial visit to Angelic. In addition to reinforcing the themes highlighted in the analysis of Photograph 2, Photograph 3 highlights the visual nature of the culture of the organi-

Photograph 3. Wall in the Angelic office

zation. The picture shows a series of baby photographs hung on the wall in the kitchen. Each new employee at Angelic was asked to provide a photograph of themselves as a baby to hang on the wall, as if it was a wall in a family home. The photographs are also used on the company website alongside current photographs of employees. First names only accompany these images of the employees on the website as contacts for the organization, creating a very familiar environment for those working there and for their customers, similar to a family. The use of photographic data collection methods in this context thus facilitated analysis of the importance of the visual in defining the culture of this organisation to its members. Although fieldnotes or interviews could have been used to collect this data, it is unlikely that these methods would have facilitated such a convincing analysis as enabled by visual methods.

THE CHALLENGES OF USING VISUAL DATA IN ORGANIZATIONAL RESEARCH

One of the challenges in using visual data is developing a theoretical basis for its analysis. In discussing the theoretical assumptions of visual ethnographic research, Harper (1994: 404) locates much of this research at the experimental end of what Van Maanen (1988) calls the realist tale. This project seeks to eliminate the presence of the author from the finished text, where only the studied culture is revealed. Having collected the data, the researcher «vanishes behind the descriptive narrative justified largely by the respectable image and ideology of the ethnographic practice» (Van Maanen, 1988: 46). The basic assumption of the realist tale is that whatever the researcher sees during the research process, this is more or less what any other well placed and well trained observer would see.

In discussing the issue of realism and photography, Becker (1974) suggests the question of whether or not someone else could have photographed the same people, places or events and produced a quite different account of that social reality is misguided, since reality can always be presented in alternative ways. Becker (1974: 15) argues: «I don't know why photographers are as sensitive as they are about this, since they have a simple counter available to the accusation of "bias". The answer lies in distinguishing between the statement that X is true about something and that statement that X is all that is true about something». In discussing the presentation of his own photographs as being processed, juxtaposed, deconstructed and captioned but also as evidence of something seen, Harper (2005: 748) argues that the way in which we interpret images «is a reminder, once again, of photography as both empirical and constructed». Pink (2001a) goes on to argue that when individuals take photographs they draw on their own cultural and personal resources of visual experience and knowledge to compose images that are embedded in particular cultural and social contexts (Pink, 2001a). Visual ethnographers are thus creative individuals drawing a variety of influences and resources. Pink (2001a) argues

that a photograph taken by an individual can represent the perception and thought common to a whole group of people. According to Chaplin (1994: 1), «images and texts (…) do not reflect their sources but refashion them according to pictorial or textual codes, so that they are quite separate from, and other than, those sources. Further than this, 'representation' can be understood as articulating and contributing to social processes. These social processes determine the representation but are also consequently influenced and altered by it». Far from being an exercise in capturing reality objectively, visual research reflects and represents elements of the context in which the image is made.

Visual research has moved away from an objectivist treatment of social entities as having characteristics that can be captured and recorded using visual technologies towards a more constructionist attitude towards the interpretation of images within social science research that treats social reality as something that is accomplished as an ongoing project. Visual methods are a means of representing this process of accomplishment. On the basis of this review, we suggest there is considerable potential in organisation studies for the application of visual methods. So why have visual methods not been used more frequently within organization studies? The challenges we identify here relate to four main issues: access, ethical and legal considerations, methods of analysis and reflexivity.

ACCESS

Our experience suggests that it can be more difficult to gain access to organizations to do visual research than it is to gain access for research involving methods of data collection that rely on the written and spoken word. One reason for this might stem from a reluctance to be caught on camera: «The video revolution has not worked hand in hand with experimental ethnography to redefine the social science. Indeed, the social effects have been trivialized into "funniest home videos" television programmes (now worldwide), in which the extraordinary power of the camera is used to present the lowest common denominator of public life» (Harper, 2000: 719).

The preoccupation with catching people out in photographs may influence perceptions of visual technologies in general, making people suspicious of the intentions of those holding a camera. This can affect the researcher's chances of gaining access to organizations to conduct visual research. The equipment required in order to carry out visual research can be intimidating for those being studied in that photographic images can reveal sensitive aspects of organizational research, such as faces, geographical location, identities and brands.

Pink (2001a) suggests the use of visual methods may be unanticipated and researchers should be flexible in their expectations of this method in a given social setting. This can also make access difficult to negotiate. In both of the studies described here, visual methods only emerged as a method for collecting data about the culture of the organizations after access had already been negotiated. This may provide

a clue as to why visual methods are relatively uncommon in organizational research, as their use relies on a high degree of flexibility. Alvesson (2003) makes a distinction in qualitative research between a planned-systematic approach to data collection versus one that is emergent-spontaneous. Researchers who take a planned-systematic approach have a reasonably clear idea of their subject of study and plan the process of data collection with the aim of producing a pile of notes and interview transcripts at the end of it that they can then analyse. Notes that they make during fieldwork and the questions they ask in interviews reflect this subject focus. The results of this data collection process then forms the basis from which they write up their findings, whether or not the data that they collected is interesting or not. An emergent-spontaneous study, on the other hand, is carried out when something revealing happens. «In such a study the researcher waits for something interesting/generative to pop up» (Alvesson, 2003: 181).

Although there are disadvantages associated with such an approach, namely it might appear somewhat arbitrary and unscientific, there are also some advantages, «the most significant one is that it increases the likelihood of coming up with interesting material. The researcher does not find the empirical material, it finds him or her» (Alvesson, 2003: 181). By developing sensitivity for rich empirical data and a willingness to respond to situations where it arises, the researcher takes a more opportunistic approach to their task. The experience of both of us in using visual research methods suggests that an emergent-spontaneous approach to data collection is often required. For example, in the study of Angelic, the importance of the visual for employees and customers was only fully realised after an initial visit to the organization during which some preliminary photographs were taken. However, as Alvesson (2003) notes, the conventions among academics causes many of them to respond unfavourably to this more unsystematic method of research topic selection, even if the research strategy and design is well informed and the results generated by it are interesting.

ETHICAL AND LEGAL CONSIDERATIONS

Although there has been significant expansion in recent years of ethical oversight regimes that are intended to regulate the conduct of management research and a substantial literature debating these developments (e.g., Bell and Bryman, forthcoming), this discussion rarely makes specific reference to the ethical implications associated with the use of visual methods. Visual research raises specific ethical and legal issues that fall into three main areas. The first relates to the perceived intrusiveness of the camera. As Warren (2002) notes, «the very act of holding a camera up to one's eye and pointing it at someone is an obvious and potentially intrusive activity which cannot be 'disguised' in the same way as making fieldnotes in a journal or even tape-recording an interview» (Warren, 2002: 240). Issues of anonymity and confidentiality are also potentially more problematic in visual research because of the instant recognisability of photographic images. Some visual organiza-

tional researchers have chosen to anonymise their data through blurring and distorting of their images, omitting names and geographical detail (Warren, 2002). Making photographs of people, things, places and events makes issues of anonymity and copyright far more visible than is often the case with word-based research (Warren, 2002). Whilst carrying out her research, Warren (2002) felt that revealing distinguishing features about the respondents and the organization would cause harm, and so these features were edited out of the images.

In carrying out our own visual research, as part of a doctoral thesis and a research paper, we found issues of anonymity and copyright to be especially complex in relation to visual data. These principally relate to consideration of whether or not to anonymise visual data. As a precaution, Warren (2002) did not use in her analysis photographs that revealed distinguishing organizational features such as logos. She also used digital image manipulation software to obscure the faces of the few people in the photographs to protect their anonymity. Another example that illustrates the ethical sensitivity of using photographs in research is found in Bolton et al.'s (2001) research into child employment where the researchers gave the young people involved in the study a disposable camera for them to take photographs of their place of work. Several young people involved in the study chose to opt out of the photographic part of the data collection because they were worried taking photographs might jeopardize their employment while others who had wanted to participate found when they took the camera into work they were only able to take one or two shots before being asked not to take photographs by their employer. The researchers conclude «in these situations it is the absence of photographs that begins to tell us something about the work experiences of the children by providing an insight into the power relations that govern their employment» (Bolton et al., 2001: 512).

The second issue of ethical consideration arises from the dependency of analysis on the identity of the organization and the people who are represented in the visual images and relates to the issue of informed consent. With no procedure or framework to work from in seeking informed consent when carrying out visual research, it has, by other researchers, been suggested that researchers apply their own judgement and experience to individual situations, in the form of a covenant. According to Harper (2005), unlike a contract that simply specifies rights and duties, a covenant requires the researcher to consider the implications of their research both on the researched and society through using their experience to judge and assess a particular situation. The practical implications of this approach by researchers is that they will inevitably find themselves in situations where the doing of photography would violate the norms of the setting, and in such cases it is argued that photography should not be done (Harper, 2005).

The third ethical issue relates to the implications of analysing visual aspects of organization that are protected by copyright law, such as logos and branding. Pink (2001a) claims legal issues can be more complex in visual research because of the ambiguity surrounding the ownership of photographs. Because of joint ownership problems,

researchers should be careful when assuming that they own their photographs. In the case of visual research, it is advisable to clarify the rights of sue and ownership of images before the research is carried out (Pink, 2001a).

MODES OF ANALYSIS

A further challenge in visual research relates to the adequacy of methods of analysis for dealing with visual images. According to Becker (1974), we need to learn to look at photographs more attentively; many of us read photographs like we do headlines, skipping over them quickly just to get the gist of what is said. Visual analysis entails studying pictures with greater care, paying attention to detail and giving the photograph the attention it deserves. «The statement the image makes —not just what it shows you, but the mood, moral, evaluation and causal connections it suggests– is built up from those details. A proper 'reading' of a photograph sees and responds to them consciously» (Becker, 1974: 9).

Banks (1995) divides the analytical concerns of researchers into two categories. The first concerns the content of any visual representation. What is the meaning of a particular design motif or an object of art? Who is the person in the photograph? The second relates to the context. Who produced the art object? For whom was it intended? Why was the photograph taken of this particular person? (Banks, 1995: 2) The second category is derived from ideas in the fields of iconography and iconology and seeks to explain how and why certain imagery is selected in terms of the broader cultural background of the image. The idea is to explain why we can see these images as «symptomatic or characteristic of a particular culture» (D'Alleva, 2005: 23) It is further argued by Banks (1995) that when looking at visual representations created by others, the dual strands of content and context are often well investigated. However, when the visual representations are produced by the investigator themselves there is often a danger of the content taking priority over the context. In other words, the conditions of picture making are overlooked and little is known about the person who made them.

One way of systematically considering the contextual nature of visual data is using the method of analysis provided by visual social semiotics (Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996; Jewitt and Oyama, 2001). The social semiotic approach assumes visual communication fulfils two major functions. First, an ideational function, representing the world around and inside us in either abstract or concrete fashion, and second, an interpersonal function, enacting social relations by creating an interaction between producers and viewers (Halliday, 1978). It is a key feature of semiotic resources that they are cultural as well as cognitive. As well as being «resources used to create meaning in the production and interpretation of visual and other messages» (Jewitt and Oyama, 2001: 136), semiotic resources have a history related to specific interests and specific purposes that is reflective of ideological attitudes and power differences. Analysis therefore entails scrutiny of the process

whereby makers of signs «seek to make a representation of some object or entity (…) in which their interest in the object, at the point of making the representation, is a complex one, arising out of the cultural, social and psychological history of the sign-maker» (Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996: 6). Power differences between sign-makers lead to differences in how they seek to achieve the understanding of readers. Sign-makers in positions of greater power will require readers to make greater effort of interpretation. The messages communicated by different participants are thus likely to «reflect the differences, incongruities and clashes which characterize social life» (Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996: 18).

Interpreting the representational meaning of an image entails exploration of its visual syntactic patterns which may be narrative or conceptual. Narrative images locate participants (people, places or things) as doing something that involves unfolding actions, events or processes of change. Within this, actions are carried out by actors towards participants who constitute the goal of action. Narrative images may thus be transactive, involving actions taking place between two parties or non-transactive, not having a goal towards which action is directed. The concept of narrative can be used «to "interrogate" a visual text, to help to frame questions such as who are playing the active roles of doing and/or looking and who the passive roles of being acted upon and/or being looked at» (Jewitt and Oyama, 2001: 143). Conceptual images, on the other hand, enable participants to be classified within a structure based on the use of symbolic attributes and involving props or settings. A social semiotic approach involves exploring the interactive meaning of images based on the relations between the viewer and what is represented. Images may show people who make contact with the viewer, looking from inside the picture frame directly at them, the manner of this imaginary contact being significant in their interpretation. The distance of participants in an image is significant in indicating the degree of intimacy invited between the subject matter and the viewer. Images may also use point of view (frontal, sideways or angled) to indicate the power relations between the participant in the image and the viewer. The final aspects of a visual social semiotic approach involve analysis of compositional meaning, comprising information value, framing, salience and modality. Information value is derived from the placement of elements in a composition, the role of any particular element depending on how it is placed in relation to others. Framing indicates that elements of a compositional image can have separate identities —discontinuous—, or be represented as belonging together –continuous. Salience emphasizes that some elements of an image can be given greater prominence than others, for example through size, colour or tonal contrast. Modality refers to the relationship between the image and the reality it represents, which may be more or less naturalistic. Finally, multimodal texts, those that comprise images and writing may carry conflicting, rather than complementary meanings. This method provides a descriptive framework for the analysis of visual images which helps to bring out their hidden meanings and provides the basis for their sociological interpretation.

REFLEXIVITY

One of the advantages of visual research methods stems from their ability to capture the context and process of fieldwork. This helps to lay the foundations for development of more reflexive research practices. Pink (2001a) advocates a reflexive approach to visual ethnographic research which recognizes the centrality of subjectivity of the researcher to the creation and interpretation of ethnographic knowledge. Visual methods are thus used to create and represent a particular knowledge about the culture based on the ethnographer's own experiences. The aim is to offer versions of the ethnographer's experience which are as faithful as possible to the context in which they were produced.

Reflexivity is also enabled by technological developments. Pink (2001a) suggests that hypermedia technology and the creation of hyperlinks between different types of data about the same topic can develop the potential for reflexivity. It is through the structuring of data in a visible and non-hierarchical way, in other words not privileging one type of data over another, that a more reflexive approach can be achieved. This allows other researchers to interpret data and their development and to understand the ideas in a non-authoritative way. Pink (2001a) argues conventional linear ethnographic texts do not represent the complexity or diversity of contemporary culture, society and experience. The technique of the montage, a cinematic technique whereby data can be presented in non-linear way can help to bring us closer to representing the multiple locations in which culture and individuals simultaneously exist. Finally, electronic hypermedia, with its ability to represent still and moving images, sound and written words in a multi-layered but closely associated narrative can offer possibilities for multi-vocality in research.

According to Coffey (1999), aspects of self-identity that are central to reflexive research are concerned with self-appearance and social relations. The construction of self-identity in the field is concerned with the acquisition and presentation of local and esoteric knowledge. In self-consciously seeking to acquire knowledge of social organizations and cultures, the fieldworker may be involved in a more personal process of redefinition (Coffey, 1999). Interestingly for visual research, this involves recognition of the embodied aspect of fieldwork activity, our bodies being central to the accomplishment of the task. Coffey (1999) argues that fieldnotes and observations are often scattered with references to the body and she therefore calls for more attention to be given to the body in ethnographic research and its symbolic significance in the event of social interaction. We argue that the use of visual methods in organizational research provides an opportunity to capture embodied fieldwork interactions in a way that has the potential to complement and extend written and spoken textual forms of data collection such as fieldnotes and observations by enabling the researcher to reflect more deeply on their embodied experience in the field in relation to other social actors. To illustrate how we believe this potential can be realised, we will analyse examples from the experience of one

of us, from the study of Angelic. **Photographs 4** and **5** that follow were taken at the festival by a friend during the time fieldwork took place.

RESEARCHER'S ACCOUNT OF PHOTOGRAPH 4

«I am on the left of the image and next to me are two members of the environmental campaigning organization, Greenpeace. The members of the organization I am interacting with here are of a similar age to me (mid-twenties) and a similar style of dress. Looking back at this photograph, I realise I was more able to relate to the members of the organization, Greenpeace, than I was to the members of Angelic. During the festival, I had access to a special area for Angelic employees and invited guests, called the "Very Nice People" (VNP) area (the red band around my wrist was my pass), where there was complementary food, champagne, seats and nice toilets. However, I only entered this area once during the day to use the toilet. The picture confirms my greater level of comfort talking to the members of Greenpeace and looking at this picture helps me to realise my affinity towards them, rather than towards the journalists and suppliers I was supposed to be entertaining in the VNP area.»

RESEARCHER'S ACCOUNT OF PHOTOGRAPH 5

«I am even more similar to this girl whom I had just met when this photograph was taken. We both not only have a similar style, age and clothes, but also have nose studs and project apparently quite energetic personalities towards the camera. I was quite surprised by the way in which this girl behaved towards me which is why in the photograph I am not responding with my body language.»

Photographs 4 (left) and 5 (right). Researcher with members of Greenpeace

Reflexive analysis of this data involves consideration of the different types of relationships formed between the researcher and the members of these organizations and exploring what this reveals about the culture at Angelic and the researcher's own identity. It is possible that the researcher's own prior assumptions regarding the organizations she was interacting with and this may have affected the information accessed and the interpretations made. According to Coffey (1999), much of the work of fieldwork is about locating ourselves as bodies within the context of our research. There is also the issue of the interpretation of the data and how this is affected by any assumptions that may exist. Many researchers are a part of the active production of an acceptable bodily image they feel fits with the research setting. Clothing can establish an acceptable (and unacceptable) bodily image. Props such as jewellery and artefacts are used to decorate and often legitimise the body during fieldwork (Coffey, 1999). According to Alvesson and Sköldberg (2000), researchers carry with them conscious and unconscious thoughts, emotions and attitude to the outside world. How we speak and how we are addressed by others constitutes our subjectivity at any moment depending on the various fields of discourse we have access to.

By analysing photographic representations like the ones above that illustrate the researcher's interaction with research participants, the embodied aspects of the ethnographic research process can be considered in more detail. Visual methods also enable consideration of the researcher's cultural and contextual alignment in relation to the social setting and invite a focus on how the researcher's embodied identity influences the interpretation of data. The incorporation therefore of the ethnographic self in ethnographic research involves treating the researcher not just as a separate narrator of the story but as an integral part of it; according to Bell (1999: 24), this forces «consideration of the cultural baggage, personal idiosyncrasies and implicit assumptions which the researcher inevitably makes».

In the research study of Angelic, acknowledgements regarding the affinity of the researcher with certain cultural groups and in turn the researcher's reactions to those people has helped the researcher to analyse reflexively the nature of her access to data and how it is interpreted. This entails the researcher developing a reflexive understanding of her own identity and having a willingness to engage on a personal level with these issues in writing up the methodology and developing conclusions based on the data. The use of photographs alongside other data that reflects the researcher's fieldwork experiences enables this move towards greater reflexivity. In the study of Angelic, the photographs helped the researcher to realize her emotional involvement in the case study and to question and explore some of the assumptions carried into the field.

CONCLUSION

This paper has argued for greater recognition of the potential for using visual methods in organizational research. We have highlighted

changes in the technologies of image production which have opened up new opportunities for the development of visual ethnographies and which have the potential to enable the hegemony of the author associated with realist tales to be challenged and to allow the researcher to communicate their findings in more inclusive and accessible ways. However, we have noted that these opportunities have only limitedly been taken up by organizational researchers. We have highlighted the main challenges that are associated with visual methods that provide insight into why this is so and proposed how the use of visual methods might usefully be extended. Finally, we have argued that there is much potential for visual research to represent the embodied and emotional interactions involved in fieldwork, so enabling greater reflexivity.

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