Book Review

Visual Methods in Psychology:
Using and Interpreting Images in Qualitative Research,
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Psychology is without doubt a broad, deep and well-established research field. Its status as a field that is part-health care, part-science and part-humanities gives psychological research broad terrain to explore, and these explorations regularly provide headline grabbing findings with broad impacts. While it is respected for these strengths, to the uninducted observer, psychology does not come to mind as a field in which diverse visual experimentation readily occurs. The pairing of 'visual methods' and 'psychology' in the title of this book is perhaps initially surprising. Nevertheless, it contains 22 articles on psychological research that involve significant visual elements at some stage of the research process. These articles document research from a broad range of sub-fields within psychological research including conversation analysis, discursive psychology, narrative psychology, personal construct theory and psychoanalysis.

Across these disciplines, the researchers engage with visual material in four main ways. Six of the twenty two authors collect and analyse visual material (such as videos and photographs) to supplement traditional psychological research. In her study of Polytextual Thematic Analysis (Chapter 21), Gleeson observes that this is a frequent way visual material is incorporated into psychological research generally. Researchers who used visual material in to supplement existing, more traditional psychological research commonly expressed an initial desire to incorporate visual documentation into their studies as a way of removing the researcher from the environment. They attempted to do this by employing camera or video equipment either instead of, or as well as, the researcher. However, after their studies were completed, most researchers whose studies involved such equipment noted that the presence and operation of visual recording equipment in a setting was at least as disruptive as the presence of a researcher. Respondents in several studies reported a heightened sense of surveillance in the presence of visual recording equipment,

commenting that they consciously altered their behaviour when the equipment was present.

The second way researchers engage with visual material in this book is by collecting and analysing visual material as the main focus of research. Five of the twenty two studies collected and analysed images, and used those analyses to elucidate broader knowledge about representation generally. The third means of visual material being utilised in these studies was in more theoretical discussions of the nature of moving and still images representation itself. This was the least represented approach in this book, with only three of the twenty two studies including such focus on what one researcher calls 're-presentation.'

The fourth and final way researchers engaged with visual material in this book was by focussing on image production and analysis, supported by traditional non-visual research methods. Images were generally produced by research participants, sometimes with the help of the researcher. The analysis of images varied, in some studies it was done by the participants, in some by the researcher, and in some studies as a collaboration. Overall, eight of the twenty two studies in this book used some variation of this focus.

The research documented in this volume also contains a broad range of methodological standpoints, ranging from those who highly regard and try to maintain the empiricist, objective-researcher gaze as much as possible, to those who embrace poststructuralist relativism. Although Del Busso (Chapter 4), Goodings and Brown (Chapter 7) and Pini & Walkerdine (Chapter 10) use qualitative data derived from visual sources, they combine them with traditional, empiricist methods and strive toward researcher objectivity in their studies. This effort proves problematic for these researchers. For example, because of their unsuccessful attempts at using visual material to increase objectivity, Pini & Walkerdine devoted a considerable part of their

paper to explaining what their chosen method, autoethnography through video diaries, is not. Over the course of the research they found that contrary to their initial hypotheses, video diaries are not empowering, innocent, or removing of the researcher's gaze.

Those researchers who took the opposite approach, embracing the relativism inherent in image production and researcher-participant interaction expressed no such qualms about the nature of visual material. Rather, the use of visual experimentation was perceived as beneficial and unproblematic to those researchers following methods with a relativistic basis. The relative difficulty that those using empirical approaches had in negotiating visual material, compared with the relative success of researchers with a more relativist approach, can be accounted for by the relativist nature of visual material as compared with language. As Mountain et al argue, language is mono-modal, it represents one channel of communication. The ordered and hierarchical nature of language makes it a predictable communication medium for research purposes; although it produces qualitative data, this data lends itself to statistical analysis. When using and interpreting language, participants and researchers can take for granted a shared understanding of the meaning of words, both when they are spoken, and at a later time when looking at a transcript.

This is not the case with images, as they have multiple meanings, none of which are agreed or ordered, as they are so dependent on various aspects of the viewer's gaze. Understanding is dependent on the viewing context, how the image is presented and the space in which it is presented, as well as the viewer's cultural context and prior familiarity with the type of image. This quality of visual material is referred to variously in this book as multi-modal and polysemic. The propensity for visual material to express multiple meanings repeatedly proves problematic in this book for those researchers who value empiricism, while those who embrace a subjective approach more seamlessly integrate visual material into their research.

If there is a shortcoming in this volume, it is that the title is potentially misleading. The term 'visual methods' is something of a misnomer — it is used in this book to refer to the use of various technologies and practices that have visual components. While the actual research methods employed in the studies use the results of these technologies and practices, most of the methods employed in these studies do not have a significant visual component themselves. The subtitle, 'Using and Interpreting Images in Qualitative Research,' suggests the book contains methodological tools for readers to use when dealing with images; this is similarly misleading. While a wide variety of research methods and visual techniques are described in the studies collected here, they are of limited practical use for readers seeking guidance on visual methods. Gleeson notes that a lack of clear, repeatable documentation of visual methods is a shortcoming of psychological research generally, and this book is no exception. In spite of this, *Visual Methods in Psychology* is an interesting read. The wide variety of psychological research case studies it contains, many of which provide thought-provoking and sometimes entertaining reading, provides a helpful insight into the current state of visual experimentation in psychological research for the humanities researcher interested in interdisciplinary work incorporating visual material.

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