AN EXPERIMENT IN VISUAL ETHNOGRAPHY

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This paper discusses a one-day exercise in visual ethnography using a digital camera to take photographs of Deptford in South East London. For me, this represented an experiment in using photography in social research.

My area of research interest is ethnographic case studies in regeneration areas, looking at processes of change and the relationships between people which drive these. I am interested in how visual images can be used for data collection and presentation to expand an understanding of the dynamics of communities of place.

The exercise here was a first experiment in using visual data. The images were produced as a result of a random walk with a camera in Deptford, so although they are 'about' an area they do not represent it in a systematized way. They instead produce fragments of data, representing the interaction between researcher and the field.

Mirroring the process that exploratory research often takes, the exercise began with photographs of large-scale street scenes and then began to focus on smaller details. A few of the resulting photographs are presented here, following which I discuss issues concerning the collection of visual data and also how it prompted more general reflections on how I engage with material as a researcher.

Door buzzer on red wall

Deptford High Street

Back of street sign, Deptford High Street

Images have the power to portray multiple messages, complexity and layers of meaning, often in juxtaposition. These images are of disposal or neglect but also communicate the value of people or relationships.

The funeral parlour sign above the street reminds us where we are all going. The women disappearing from view reiterate this; the shopping bag being wheeled behind mirrors the idea of a horse-drawn carriage.

The images presented above contain data about Deptford in a way that the written word or statistics cannot; this is a primary rationale for using visual methods. Taken further in a study, these types of images could be used to convey something of the complexity of the social world being described. The application of visual methods did, however, raise several issues for me: tensions between realist and creative impulses and the boundaries between art and science; getting ethical judgements right; and the negative fixations of social researchers.

To take the first issue, in attempting to do visual ethnography I was interested in how photographs as sources of data would reveal something about the area. In attempting to do this, tensions were raised between this fairly realist approach, describing or explaining the 'objective' social world in some way, and acknowledging the influence of the researcher on the research. Photographs can sometimes lend themselves to be taken as unproblematic and true representations of 'reality'. However, this ignores ways in which they are pre-theorized by a researcher who approaches the subject with particular ideas and who comes from a specific social context. Photographs are framed in a particular way to capture a certain meaning in the world; the photographs presented above all emerged from my particular view and contain meanings which were, in part, imposed by me. This is especially true of the later, more detailed images I took which were much more composed by me and had more theory-input compared to the more general large-scale images. It is tempting to be quite creative with photographs, but the question becomes 'How much do the photographs contribute to an understanding of the area?' They may show something interesting in the ordinary, in a similar way that art can, but can they say anything sociologically? These are questions about the validity of the visual data which one could reject as irrelevant if one were to take a strong anti-realist position. However, this would move the exercise perhaps too far towards an artistic project rather than a social science one. In any case, I am interested in using ethnography in public policy evaluation and this type of research normally operates under a fairly realist paradigm. The answer is, in my opinion, to be honest and reflexive about how the photograph was taken, what ideas the researcher had in framing it, what the photograph meant in terms of the relationship between researcher and field, how it might relate to other data, and so on. Visual data should therefore be used with text in the presentation of research, to place it in context and to provide a transparent interpretation for the reader.

The second issue was how to make ethical judgements. Although research always involves invading the subject's world in some way or other, in this sort of exercise the balance between carrying out the research and respecting the rights of the subjects was difficult because cameras can be so intrusive, especially if they are large (ours were). In order to avoid intrusiveness, I chose to not directly interact with people in the area by asking to take their photograph, but to take either large-scale photographs of the streetscape or close up photographs of objects. However, although I tried to avoid interacting with local people, they began interacting with me. I was visible as someone taking photographs of their area, and several people expressed interest or sensitivity about this by making comments. Refraining from actually taking photographs of people, therefore, does not entirely resolve ethical problem of invading space in a community.

Left: This man approached me while I was taking photographs of the street and accused me of taking a photograph of him. Upon hearing I was not he was pleased with an offer to have his picture taken.

Below: Shortly after this photograph was taken at the edge of a churchyard, I was thrown out by the warden who said that people did not like photographs being taken of graves, particularly the war memorial.

Thirdly, one of the things I found most interesting about this exercise was how it made me reflect on what I do as a social policy researcher. Taking photographs captures what the researcher chooses to 'see' when doing research in a very overt way, and this can be used as a reflexive tool. Social researchers normally address problematic aspects of society and therefore focus on negative aspects of life, such as unemployment or social exclusion. Being given a camera and going out into an area as 'a researcher', I was initially drawn to the more negative features in the environment when my overall aim was something different: to capture a general sense of what the area was like. Social policy research inevitably focuses on societal problems, but it is nevertheless useful to keep this tendency towards negative features in mind as a potential source of bias.

Visual methods provide a new way of working for researchers by introducing possibilities for more creative and interesting ways to both produce and review research. To a degree, visual images need explaining in order to place them within the context of the environment or subject being researched and also within the conceptual framework and methods of the research project. Images should therefore be accompanied by text for this purpose. Beyond this, taking photographs also provides an opportunity for the researcher to be reflexive about how they engage with the research field and what they bring to the data. However, while photographs and visual images can be engaging, the taking of photographs can also be threatening for subjects so care is needed in how this method is incorporated into a research project and how it is applied in the field. In this very brief exercise, these emerging issues began to outline some of the parameters of using visual methods. In future, I would use visual methods within the framework of an ethnographic or mixed methods research project, keeping these parameters in mind, and would expect them to contribute to a richer account of the social world.