VISUAL SOCIOLOGY AND INTERCULTURAL RESEARCH: THEORY AND PRACTICE IN SOCIAL AND EDUCATIONAL CONTEXTS

Martina Crescenti & Marta Scocco & Isabella Crespi

Visual methodology and the importance of images in research contexts

Visual methodology consists of research methods for gathering visual data, and conceptual tools with which to interpret these materials (Mitchell 2011; Spencer 2011; Rose 2014; Pauwels 2010, 2015). This branch of qualitative sociology considers the study of the iconic as an important technique and method in social research, and identifies the primary role of visual experience in cognitive processes through the visual data itself.

The duality of word and image has influenced social sciences. The movement which developed in response to increased production of images in "high" (late) modernity has been defined as the "visual turn" (Bartmanski 2014). Social scientists undermined the strict division between the two concepts, and began searching for the theoretical footing in visual studies and researching with the visual.

By emphasising the key role played by the "picture" in theory, the researchers laid the ground for the "pictorial turn" (Mitchell 1995), while through the underlying logic of pictorial representations and by framing them in terms of "visual hermeneutics", the authors paved the way for the "iconic turn" (Boehm 2001) in the studies of the visual. The researchers did not place the visual study on an equal footing with the study of images, but considered it a study of how social reality was observed. They aimed to include visuality into the master categories of sociological analysis of reality and created an integrative framework to overcome word/image dualism.

The images produced may remain an intermediate product in the course of sociological research, or may constitute the final product. Images can be considered instruments of observation themselves, not only as products; the visual analysis of which enables the understanding of social reality. An example is the analysis of children's drawings in studying possible familial problems. Images can also be considered a research tool; for example, in a focus group by showing previously taken photographs which can stimulate a conversation. Finally, they can also be the final product of field research, the observation of which enables different forms of reflection. In this case, the results of the study are disseminated in two different ways: to the scientific community, remaining faithful to the specific language (visual sociological essay); to a broader public, with a language that, starting from the data collected, can stimulate and involve its attention (exhibitions, social networks,

public meetings). Besides, visual research methods involving the production of images could be used to elicit an answer to a research question that may have little to do with the visual per se (such as inclusion, racism, migration process, cultural studies, etc.).

Visual methods and video have interesting potentialities in research because they allow the application of the most traditional qualitative research tools (Jupp 2006; Harper 2012; Frisina 2013, 2016a), thus strengthening some peculiarities (reflexivity across cultural perspective, relevance to others' point of view).

Many scholars (Erickson 2011; Rafiee et al. 2021) have claimed that the use of audio-visual instruments is still a sort of frontier worth investigating, and effectively not much progress has been made in recent years. Instead, moving within a visual and iconic society, the image that the research video proposes allows us to generate a change, to trigger a deconstruction of prejudices and stereotypes to which we are often accustomed and that we reproduce unconsciously; it is possible, in Mitchell's words, to use "visual methods for a social change" (Mitchell 2011, p. 8).

Visual methods and intercultural research: Beyond traditional qualitative research tools

As we live in a digital and symbolic age full of images and representation possibilities, it is somewhat unexpected that only a few types of research and study systematically use visual products (photographs, films, videos, drawings, etc.) in the construction of academic knowledge about intercultural and inclusion processes. Considering the barely explored or utilised potential of visual methodology in intercultural situations, it is clear that it needs to be developed further. It is unnecessary to substitute other research methods to produce sociological films or photographic reports. It would be useful to discuss what can possibly be gained from different uses of images in the research process, and in making our results public.

Let us analyse most of the research on intercultural contexts produced in recent years. We can see that the use of visuals is rarely practised or contemplated among the methodological choices, except in cases of anthropological and ethnographic studies where, historically, the use of photography and video are more used and recognised (Pink 2011; Knoblauch 2012; Krase 2016; Sebag et al. 2018). Although the scientific literature still shows some reluctance in accepting the requirements of validity and reliability of the video as a qualitative research tool, we can consider it advantageous in intercultural contexts if used thoughtfully in technical-operational procedures and thanks to the researcher's reflexivity[24] (Sorrel Penn 2012).

The use of these methods and approaches in the intercultural context, in particular, has interesting advantages and potentialities because it allows the

24 Reflexivity is a key term in the dramatic and rapid changes confronted by the human sciences (especially sociology) during the last four decades. In general, reflexivity was comprehensively defined by George Herbert Mead as *"the turning back of the experience of the individual upon [her or himself]"* (Mead 1934, p. 134). It still constitutes a rather ubiquitous sociological and epistemological problem. In particular, the radical reflexive awareness of the mutual dependency of sociological categories (e. g. risk, citizenship, space, time, modernity, morality) and social practice has been increasingly brought right at the forefront of hot academic/epistemological debates.

application of the most traditional qualitative research tools (Jupp 2006; Spencer 2011; Harper 2012; Frisina 2013, 2016a), strengthening some peculiarities, such as reflexivity across cultural perspective and relevance to other points of view.

In this sense, the use of the visual methodology in an intercultural context seems more useful and practical than ever (Ball, Gilligan 2010; Sirkeci et al. 2019; Vaughan 2020) to contrast the hegemonic, stereotyped and negative representation of the concept of "others". Nothing can be more powerful and incisive than the use of other images produced in or by different people from different cultures, which tell another narrative and provide another representation.

The meaning of images in visual studies facing multicultural contexts includes the need for awareness of the multiplication of visual culture(s), understood as a set of different images, united by being produced and reproduced socially, and the visual relevance. Ways of seeing always accompany vision because they inevitably contribute to visual culture production, which is inscribed in it and are suggested and reproduced through it. It is essential to pay attention to what significance images take on within different cultures and the function that an image can play within a society at a specific historical moment and in a specific culture, i.e. its capacity to act within the socio-cultural context that welcomes it.

Knowledge and learning about others' subjective culture – temporarily looking at the world through other eyes – is the backbone of the development of migration research in a reflexive perspective. Therefore, a new capacity for observation integrated into the everyday culture will lead us to the change of attitude we expect. This perspective also applies to contact between cultures, which inevitably leaves traces in each ones (Knoblauch 2012; Vaughan 2020).

This chapter focuses on the potential advantages of using the visual methodology in researching intercultural processes and inclusion, introducing two cases in which documentary was used as a specific technique to investigate intercultural elements: the documentaries "Italians in Belgium" and "Who I am". Studying particular aspects of relationships among people belonging to different cultures and backgrounds through a qualitative and visual approach allows creating a relationship of trust between researchers and research actors, investigating personal and sensitive issues, and bringing the researcher "to enter the world" of social actors.

In particular, the proposed studies dwelt on some aspects that are extremely interesting and decisive for the analysis: to conduct an investigation that takes into account the different (two or more) contexts of life in which the interviewees move; to conceive migration as a total social fact that involves the subject in his whole being, before and after the migration, and then to look for an approach that involves the here and there, keeping these multiple references intertwined; give importance to the phase of the presentation of the research results, also as a key moment concerning the possibility of giving voice to those who often cannot speak for themselves or cannot do so in specific situations.

Italians in Belgium: Emigration explored through "frames"

This paragraph discusses a particular case study in which visual methodology was applied to social research. The documentary "Italians in Belgium"[25] was designed to explore the migration phenomenon from a unique point of view: Italians living abroad. It is relevant to investigate a different perspective on migration, the ones of Italians as foreigners and migrants, often set aside, even if the most recent statistics reveal that new Italian emigration is constantly growing (McAuliffe, Khadria 2019; Fondazione Caritas Migrantes 2021). The study "Italians in Belgium" (Crespi, Scocco 2018) analyses the existing relations within Italian communities abroad, where different migrants arrived in the country in different years, and their descendants today live together. From a cultural point of view, the socialisation processes and renegotiation practices between the various generations involved in the migration routes are of particular interest (Schmoll et al. 2017). Also, for this reason, the research was carried out in Belgium, where the Italian presence is among the most relevant and rooted in the territory: from the mineworkers who emigrated just after the Second World War (Tintori, Colucci 2015) to more current flows (Fondazione Caritas Migrantes 2019, 2021; Martiniello et al. 2017).

Considering visual potentialities in migration research and intercultural studies, including the relevance for a different point of view (Jupp 2006; Mitchell 2011; Harper 2012; Frisina 2013, 2016a, 2016b; Martiniello 2017; Vecchio et al. 2017), but also taking into account the topic and the main aim of the project in itself, this research involved the use of a visual technique.[26] In particular, thanks to the support of the *SeaMedia* partner, each semi-structured interview was also video recorded (Creswell, Poth 2018).

Filming was found to be a good methodology in this study for several reasons: firstly, the use of video-documentary appeared to be most valuable, as mentioned above, in the society of images to engage a deconstruction of prejudices and stereotypes about migration (Lagomarsino 2015). Secondly, this technique seemed appropriate for comparing and representing the heterogeneity within the Italian communities (Frisina 2013). Moreover, considering the participants involved in the project, especially those Italians who emigrated to Belgium just after the Second World War, it seemed helpful, to collect a visual testimony of Italian emigration's history.

Thanks to the collaboration of Italian cultural associations in the country and migrants' local organisations, from September to November 2014, 14 semi-structured interviews were carried out (Creswell, Poth 2018). The respondents who took part in the research were selected based on two main characteristics: 1) their residence in the country (at least 12 months); 2) the migration project.

Although the questions and interview structure were the same for each participant, videotaping tried to capture each respondent's unique, cultural, and

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25   More information about the research project Italians in Belgium is available on the website: italiansinbelgium.wordpress.com. The full version of the documentary is available at the website: https://studio28.tv/italians-in-belgium/.

26   In 2014 the European project Perypezye Urbane, the Seamedia project in collaboration with Howest University College and the University of Macerata produced this documentary about the Italian communities in Belgium. The video was then also sponsored by the Marche Region.

relational context involved in the research (Bauer, Gaskell 2007). Therefore, footage was filmed not only in the interview setting, but also in different places belonging to everyday life and considered relevant by the participants. From the interviewees' point of view, this allows more opportunities to continue their narration about migration experience. From the researcher point of view, this allowed, during the final editing phase, to analyse more visual material and has different frames that "show" the interviewees' words.

In the "Italians in Belgium" project, the video could be considered de facto as a complementary methodology. Using a camera was possible for the researcher to generate first and then analyse a different and powerful typology of data (specifically the visual one), related to cultural and human behaviour. As already highlighted in the literature discussed (Frisina 2016a, 2016b), video can offer the researcher the opportunity to investigate a more profound social and cultural complexity that moves around the interviewees and deepens the analysis of each interview.

The use of video was crucial, for example, to observe non-verbal aspects (gestures, expressions, etc.). In this specific project, during the interviews, participants used various forms of dialects or Italian language mixed with the local one, more prevalent in their common use. For the researcher, linguistic comprehension was not always immediate. This condition was general, especially considering the migrants arrived in the country just after the Second World War and their descendants. Therefore, filming more details related to non-verbal communication allows the researcher more data with which to compare and provide a visual interpretation as complete as possible on the investigated dimensions.

In this regard, it is essential to specify that in this study the researcher was part of the entire visual process, acting in each phase of the video production (pre-production, filming, editing, post-production). Video editing was not co-participated, nor influenced by the respondents involved in the research. The documentary "Italians in Belgium" represents a visual product that belongs fully to the researcher, built and thought through the whole research experience.

From a cultural point of view, it certainly provides an opportunity to remember and at the same time re-discover a migration that belongs to Italian history. Its narrative thread follows the same structure used during the interviews and shows through frames the different views expressed by emigrants and their descendants (Bauer, Gaskell 2007).

Compared to other research products, video turned out to be a powerful research methodology, but at the same time, a powerful dissemination tool. Between 2015–2016 the documentary was officially presented in various screenings organised between Italy and Belgium to share the research project realised[27]. The use of visual methodology allows reaching different and "non-expert" public, with a more immediate communication that crosses the boundaries of disciplinary knowledge and cultural background (Pauwels 2010). From this perspective, the potential of the documentary as a dynamic tool in many educational and activist settings is confirmed.

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27   On 18th April 2015, the video was awarded by the Regional Museum of Emigration "P.Conti" in GualdoTadino – Perugia in the competition "Memorie Migranti 2015".

"Who I am": A look at a multicultural educational context

The video documentary "Who I am" (filmed between May and June 2019) is a documentation project of three after-school services in Florence.[28] These services were born from the collaboration of three social promotion organisations: Anelli Mancanti, Iparticipate and Giovani Musulmani d'Italia. The planning of these after-school activities by volunteers, linguistic mediators, and educators (September 2018) aimed to build a point of reference for families and children in a central district of Florence, characterised by a high rate of immigration and housing emergency (Primi et al. 2006). These activities are conceived as an aid to study for children aged 6 to 11 years, a space for intercultural encounters, a supportive network for social services through neighbourhood contacts.

The documentary filmed interactions between volunteer operators and children during lessons and playtime and moments of dialogue with parents and educators in after-school settings. To bring out the different reflections, by those who use the service and those who manage it, about the needs, weaknesses and potentials of the extracurricular educational context, we also conducted ten semi-structured interviews with families of foreign origin and Italian educators. Only through the expression of both points of view is it possible to enhance the "educational pact" (Miur 2017), an agreement between educators and families that is indispensable for the support and educational growth of the young student.

Concerning the analysis of intercultural educational dynamics, the use of video as a documentation tool made it possible to crystallise, through recording, moments of relationships between all the people involved. The possibility of re-observing these dynamics on video helped the operators and volunteers understand where the moment prevented it and the potentialities, weaknesses, and critical situations in this multicultural environment. The observation of the video can also serve as visual training for educators to better understand in a more complex way the context they organise and manage.

The documentary also allowed the involvement of people not included in these services to break down cultural boundaries (Pauwels 2010): it has been presented in various associations located in Florence, open to the public, as a cue to reflect on the ethnic and religious heterogeneity of the school and extracurricular services, such as after-school. Starting from this aspect, the use of the video was helpful in face a discussion led by the operators on the instances and challenges about contemporary educational context: in what way do the intercultural dynamics of after-school activities represent the daily social reality? What are the tools to build a relationship of enrichment and respect between families of foreign origin and the educators of Italian institutions? What are the premises for building dialogue and forming an "educating community"? As mentioned by Mitchell (Mitchell 2011), in the group reflection and discussion, the use of visuals was useful to stimulate a social change.

In order to be able to reflect on these issues, it was useful to use the visual tool of the video in the final return of the documentation project, given the immediacy of images and sounds compared to audio-only tools, such as recorded

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28   The video documentary is available on the Vimeo platform: https://www.vimeo.com/345300940.

interviews or writing tools, such as an essay. These can be limiting in the overall understanding of the context. The visual and audio richness of the recording helped people who were uninformed or not very knowledgeable about these contexts to define a mental image adhering to the reality of the facts and to build a group reflection on the challenges and potential of a "communicating" network between social promotion organisations, schools and families.

For those who work as researchers and intervene as educators in an intercultural context, video recordings also support the avoidance of misunderstanding the "contextual and personal meaning or simply, but not trivially, risking not considering it" (Crespi et al. 2021). For example, interpretative difficulties may also be due to linguistic gaps of foreign-born persons, which may emerge during interviews. When communication is not clear, recording allows the watching of the video again and filling language gaps. As in our case, the fragmented audio interview with a Nigerian mother was made more evident in the listening phase.

Some studies have also shown to what extent the visual medium can bring out the possible contradictions between the discourse and people's attitudes (Pinheiro et al. 2005). For example, we were unable to interview some Muslim mothers of different foreign origins because, as we came to understand at a later stage, being registered would have put a strain on their intimate rule of modesty. This confirmed to us that this reticence was not due to their lack of interest or hostility towards our project: on the contrary, they showed great appreciation for the kind of context offered to their children, although using a video camera and microphone could generate suspicion, mistrust, apprehension, and loss of confidence (Sorrel Penn 2004; Garcez et al. 2011). Being filmed can influence the spontaneity of being invisible; i.e. the condition of disinhibition and security one feels in remaining anonymous (Suler 2004). In particular, research in the intercultural context generally needs further reflection on the issue of trust on the part of people of foreign origin in exposing themselves and participating in a study project. Due to their economic and cultural condition, they might avoid exposing themselves for various reasons: a lack of trust in Italian institutions, discrimination already suffered, forms of social isolation, etc.

On the other hand, as we have noted, the use of a videocamera by families with mobile phones in their daily lives stimulated the curiosity of some fathers and their children. The videocamera can indeed be used as a tool for play, creativity, and interaction between people of different cultures. Without the visual medium, simple observation would only consider what the gaze can manage to grasp (Wang, Lien 2013), whereas, as in our case, we were able to reread the complexity and simultaneity of cultural factors in the different relational dynamics. From a technical and methodological point of view, the researcher may have time after the data collection phase to visualise the work done and analyse any procedural and methodological difficulties of the interview due to language gaps, for example, also with the help of specialised collaborators, or to forms of mistrust caused by different ethnic backgrounds.

Finally, visual methods research applied in cross-cultural contexts can be considered a valid and useful approach, despite our noted limitations. Video grants the researcher the opportunity to analyse the cultural complexity that moves around a context. Through videotaping, the researcher can discover during analysis the relational dynamics between people from different cultures that may be difficult to understand at the time of data collection.

Some considerations when using visuals to analyse multicultural experiences

The reflection in this essay allows us to underline some significant aspects of researching multicultural situations using visual methods. It suggests how and why to use visual methodologies to improve and implement some practices during research in multicultural environments related to social and educational processes.

First of all, the extent to which visual methods can explain cultural and social differences are analysed, which are not easily obtainable through other more traditional methods. Specifically, the documentaries discussed in this contribution relocate the image of others' experiences into their most general context, and allow the documentation of certain social activities which require observation of in-place actions to be better observed and explained by the researcher.

Moreover, they enable the analysis of multicultural relationships and interactions over time, involving visual images and audio. In practice, in our research design, the visual instrument (camera) acted as a mediator between people belonging to different cultures, a participatory tool and a facilitator of reflexivity among both parties. It expanded on the context of the situation and activities and, in doing so, also provoked participants of different backgrounds to refute and highlight what was important to them. From the methodological point of view, reflexivity included the positionality of researchers and an open process of discussion about the technologies, the choice of filming and its rationale, and decisions about which footage to retain or reject.

Secondly, such methods allowed us to explore the potential of truly interdisciplinary work that synthesises empirical and methodological insights from the social sciences and visual culture.

Finally, it contributes to providing (through case studies) useful tips and suggestions to visual methodologies for those who are unfamiliar with them, yet work in social and educational contexts where different cultures live together.

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