

# Documentary photography and indigenous knowledge: Some methodological challenges

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## Abstract

The paper focuses on the role that documentary photographs may play in indigenous knowledge research. Visual methods, or qualitative research where visual images play an integral part of the study design, have the advantage that power imbalances between the researcher and the study population are typically low in comparison to more conservative research designs, especially when the visual material is produced by the members of the study population themselves. The paper specifically discusses methodological aspects of scenarios where (1) the researcher that produces he documentary images is an outsider to the study population and there is researcher reactivity, (2) the images are produced by members of the study population after receiving training and the creative possibilities of the photographic medium interfere with the accuracy and reliability of the visual data collected, and (3) documentary images are used as a prompting device during interviews in a study population with low levels of visual literacy.

## Introduction

In his 'South African Memories', Percy Fitzgerald describes a meeting with Arthur Balfour that took place in England shortly before news about the outcome of the Battle of Colenso (15 December 1899) reached Arthur Balfour via the War Office. During the meeting, Arthur Balfour pressed Percy Fitzgerald to disclose his views about General Buller's battle plans, to which Percy Fitzgerald responded that "it is sheer nonsense for amateurs to offer opinions. I know only one rule: Trust the man on the spot..."(Fitzgerald, 1932:119).

Trusting the man on the spot, or the person on the spot, is a central feature of indigenous knowledge research, which broadly refers to the study of local knowledge and local logic (Griggs, 1999:1) that may range from publicly accessible to reserved for the initiated. Indigenous knowledge scholars tend to proceed from the standpoints (1) that there is a distinction between indigenous or traditional knowledge on the one hand and scientific knowledge on the other hand, where the acquisition of scientific knowledge is seen as the more legitimate method of inquiry, and (2) that indigenous knowledge research involves a developed/undeveloped polarity, i.e. that a 'developed' giver assists an 'undeveloped' recipient (Pfeifer, 1996:41).

That is not to say, however, that the study of local experiences, expectations, practices or understandings is restricted to learning more about indigenous knowledge in developing communities alone. For example, Steiger (2000) photographically documented commuters on trains between the Swiss cities Basel and Zurich as part of a project that was both 'an empirical record and an interpretation of social life on rails', designed to reconstruct and arrive at a deep understanding of the social reality that is created in local train stations and in the limited space of train compartments (Steiger, 2000:155). Visual methods, or qualitative research where visual images play an integral part of the study design, as applied by Steiger have the main advantages that:

- Visual records such as documentary photographs can reveal what we are normally unable to perceive because we cannot focus on all items of the visual field simultaneously or because significant events occur very rapidly, and
- Power imbalances between the researcher and the study population are typically low in comparison to more conservative research designs, especially when the visual material is produced by the members of the study population themselves.

### **Main types of visual methods**

Visual images may play an integral role in any one of the three established social research paradigms; i.e. quantitative, qualitative or participatory research, where the dominant researcher status is respectively that of an outsider, insider or participant (see Babbie and Mouton, 2001: 48). As noted by van Maanen (in Bartunek and Louis, 1996:v), insider, outsider or participant status may be highly relative, shifting and ambiguous, with a good deal of 'identity bending' taking place in the course of a project. In the light of the above, the main types of visual methods may be described as follows:

- Visual records are produced by members of the research team with outsider status
- Visual records are produced by members of the study population who hold insider status
- Visual records are used as prompting device during a photo-elicitation interview where the respondent has participant status.

Specific methodological challenges arise in each of the three categories when documentary images are used during indigenous knowledge research. These include scenarios where (1) the researcher that produces the documentary images is an outsider to the study population and there is researcher reactivity, (2) the images are produced by members of the study population after receiving training and the creative possibilities of the photographic medium interfere with the accuracy and reliability of the visual data collected, and (3) documentary images are used as a prompting device during interviews in a study population with low levels of visual literacy.

### **Reactivity**

Main methodological concerns with visual methods are (a) procedural reactivity in the sense that cameras and other recording devices damage rapport and interfere with every day behavior and activities in the study population, and (b) personal reactivity because the personal characteristics and idiosyncratic behavior of the researcher impacts on the visual material produced as the act of creating an image involves personal awareness and technical and artistic judgments (Prosser, 1998:104).

Procedural and personal reactivity belong to the data collection phase of the research process and thus relate to the reliability of a study (Mouton, 1996:111). Other typical threats to the reliability include context bias, or factors within the research setting that may significantly affect the way data is gathered such as changes in behavior over an extended period of time or cultural factors such as customs or traditions (Mouton, 1996:155). For example, Rich and Chalfen (1999:56) describe how participants in a study using visual methods had “brief, intermittent periods of “goofing” for the camera or behaving in self-conscious ways, but this usually dissipated within minutes, once the novelty of the camera’s gaze had worn off”.

In order to raise the robustness of the evidence gathered in the course of a project where visual methods are used, and to increase the conceptual density of the final research report, the nature of the reactivity encountered needs to be made as explicit as possible. Good practice in this regard

includes videoing the photographer while she/he is working, reflexive activities on the part of the photographer (e.g. logbook or diary), and interviewing members of the study population about reactivity experiences.

### **Creative controls of the medium**

With straight or pure documentary technique, an attempt is made to produce an unbiased record of what would have existed in the absence of the photographer and to provide a substantially similar visual experience that the original subject would have elicited (Fergus-Jean, 1995:223). This is typically achieved by means of direct framing, extensive depth of field and an avoidance of pictorial distortion and other forms of manipulation. The photographic medium, however, also allows for numerous creative controls, such as selective focus, double exposure, digital manipulation and so on (see Lester, 1995:84; Messaris, 1994:188), which may be employed to encode the image rhetorically. With snapshot aesthetics, for example, a photographer may intentionally mimic careless framing and tilted horizons in order to mock conventional rules of composition handed down from painting (Zakia, 1995:725).

In a scenario where the study population is supplied with cameras or video equipment and asked to record significant events with a view to eliciting local knowledge and local logic, a potential methodological pitfall is that the creative controls of the medium play a dominant role in the final images and the content of the visual material becomes secondary. In the above cited study by Rich and Chalfen (1999:54), an interesting way of dealing with the role of the creative controls of the medium was to lock camcorders supplied to the study participants in automatic focus and exposure modes with zoom lenses locked in their wide-angle position. The participants only received training about changing tapes and switching the camcorders on and off and how to mount the camcorder on a tripod. Similarly, Steiger (2000:156) used the same lens and film for all images recorded during her project about commuters on trains between the Swiss cities Basel and Zurich. Good practice regarding the role of the creative controls of the medium, then, involves making technical decisions explicit and where appropriate standardizing the data collection procedure. Specific suggestions include compiling an aerial plan of important camera positions during field observations (especially when multiple video cameras are used in fixed positions), standardizing camera settings and the image framing approach, and interviewing members of the study population about their experiences with the creative controls of the visual medium used.

### **Vocabulary of visual terms**

As mentioned briefly above, photo-elicitation involves using visual images produced either by members of the study population themselves or by an outsider as prompting devices during a research interview. The main reasons for showing photographs during an interview are to explore values, beliefs, attitudes and meanings about topics related to the depicted subject matter, to trigger memories or to explore group dynamics during the viewing process (see Walker and Weidel, 1985, Harper, 1988; Schwartz, 1989; Hethorn and Kaiser, 1999, Clark, 1999).

In a scenario where a visually literate person holds a dialogue about a documentary photograph with someone who is unfamiliar with established visual conventions, does not possess an advanced vocabulary of visual terms and is consequently unable to articulate complex visual statements verbally, the formation of common ground during the dialogue may be impeded because the one party is unable to articulate verbally for the other party what the stipulable signs in the image are, how the image is experienced as an object and what meanings are attached to the stipulable signs in the image (see Johansen, 1993:79).

In addition to established interview guidelines such as ensuring that the interview takes place in the participant's language of choice (usually the home language) or ensuring a suitable interview environment, good practice for the photo-elicitation interview includes formulating questions in such a way that the response does not require a high level of verbal articulation, offering training in visual terminology and visual literacy concepts before the photo-elicitation interview and interviewing members of the study population about their experiences during photo-elicitation.

### Conclusion

In many ways, the axiom in the German language "Es ist schwerer die Wahrheit zu sagen, als sie zu verschweigen (it is more difficult to state the truth explicitly than to conceal it or keep quiet about it)" summarizes the above listed main methodological challenges that arise when documentary images are used during indigenous knowledge research. In other words, raising the validity of a study in which documentary photographs were used during the data collection phase requires (1) that the nature of the reactivity encountered in the field is made explicit, (2) that technical decisions and standardization procedures during the production of the visual records are stated in detail and (3) that the role of the visual literacy of the respondents during a photo-elicitation interviews is described as comprehensively as possible. Opportunities for future research arising from this paper include exploring the trustworthiness of visual methods from the perspective of post-structurally conceived types of validity, such reflexive, ironic, neo-pragmatic, rhizomatic and situated validity suggested by Lather (1993). Operationalizing these types of validity in an image-based research setting would represent a further step towards answering the question by Prosser (1998:109) that "...if we believe that image-based research is undervalued by the orthodox qualitative research community and that it can make a proportionately greater contribution to research, how is this to be achieved?"

**Table 1** Key methodological challenges using visual methods

Potential pitfall	Good practice includes...
Reactivity	Making the nature of the reactivity explicit by: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Videoing photographer while working</li> <li>• Reflexive activities on the part of the photographer (e.g. logbook or diary)</li> <li>• Interviewing members of the study population about reactivity experiences</li> </ul>
The creative controls of the medium are primary and the content of the image is secondary	Make technical decisions explicit and where appropriate standardize data collection procedure, e.g. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Standardize camera settings</li> <li>• Develop standardized framing approach</li> <li>• Compile aerial plan of camera positions</li> <li>• Interviewing members of the study population about experiences with the creative controls of the medium</li> </ul>
Lack of vocabulary of visual terms by respondents during photo-elicitation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Formulate questions in such a way that the response does not require a high level of verbal articulation</li> <li>• Offer training in visual terminology and visual literacy concepts before photo-elicitation interview</li> <li>• Interview members of the study population about their experiences during photo-elicitation</li> </ul>

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