Chapter 8
Photographs within the Sociological Research Process

Jon Prosser and Dona Schwartz

Abstract

This chapter considers the use of photographs within the sociological research process. In particular it explores issues of research design, data collection and data analysis. Theoretical and practical considerations are discussed within a traditional qualitative framework rather than adopt ideas emanating from post-modern critique. A central theme throughout is how different phases of the research process require the deployment of different photographic strategies.

Any discussion of using photographs in the research process should begin by considering researchers' underlying epistemological and methodological assumptions, since they orientate the way we conduct our studies. How research proceeds also depends on the orientation provided by: an academic discipline e.g., sociology, anthropology, psychology; the theoretical framework guiding the study e.g., material culture, phenomenology, symbolic interaction, and feminist theory; the researcher's role i.e., ethnographer, historian, advocate, biographer, evaluator and interpreter; and personal attributes such as skills, experiences, values and beliefs. These many variables shape the way we design our studies, our views of what constitutes data, and the kinds of conclusions we draw. Uncertainty surrounding the research act, a consequence of recent critiques launched by post-modernists and exponents of new approaches to ethnography, compounds the problems posed by these complex contextual issues. Debates regarding the appropriate relationship of theory to practice, a quandary inherent in any research process, reflect the difficult times in which qualitative researchers work. While recent discussions usefully foreground critical issues facing social scientists, they sometimes threaten to undermine the entire research enterprise and seem to suggest that we surrender our efforts to the truths put forth by fiction.

Discussions of these underpinning issues rarely encompass the use of images, unsurprisingly, since so little has been written regarding the role photographs can play in the research process. In addition, widespread assumptions that photographic images offer a transparent 'window on the world' has discouraged critical analysis of the medium. Just as recent debates have raised questions about the neutral status of data collected by social scientists and the conclusions they yield, so too has photography come under closer scrutiny. Even among practitioners whose livelihood hinges upon the factuality of the photographic image—photojournalists, documentarians, and many scientists—the malleability of photographs has injected formerly secure fields with a healthy dose of circumspection. We take heed of the ongoing dialogues and the arguments put forward by different factions from a variety of fields of endeavour, but, rather than throw out the baby with the bath water, our purpose here is to suggest productive approaches to using photographs in social science research, while simultaneously acknowledging the contingent nature of the empirical research we ourselves conduct. We have elected to discuss a selection of issues that help us do field work,

building on an empirical tradition within Image-based Research initially espoused in the 1960s and 1970s by Sol Worth, Howard Becker, John Collier Jr., and Jay Ruby.

We undertake this task because, as image-based researchers, we have discovered the valuable contribution photographs can make, both in the practice and presentation of our work. Like our field notes and other forms of empirical data, photographs may not provide us with unbiased, objective documentation of the social and material world, but they can show characteristic attributes of people, objects, and events that often elude even the most skilled wordsmiths. Through our use of photographs we can discover and demonstrate relationships that may be subtle or easily overlooked. We can communicate the feeling or suggest the emotion imparted by activities, environments, and interactions. And we can provide a degree of tangible detail, a sense of being there and a way of knowing that may not readily translate into other symbolic modes of communication. So, despite the irksome complexity of travelling through contested territory, the new knowledge yielded by the innovative methods we suggest makes the journey beneficial.

Consider this:

> I am walking along a city street. In one pocket I have a camera and a notebook and in the other two lenses and extra rolls of film. A young couple are peering into a jeweller's shop. I take out the camera and begin shooting, using the wide angle lens and a slow shutter speed to freeze the couple and turn other shoppers into a blur, suggesting and emphasising the couple's stillness and intimacy. I change to a short telephoto, shift position, and shoot against the light to accentuate their intimacy and body language. The couple's reflection in the window catches my eye and I switch to a standard lens and shoot some more, aware that the image is analogous to a theoretical concept derived from interviews with other couples conducted earlier in the study. I put the camera away, take out my notebook and…

No doubt you could, whatever your discipline or theoretical persuasion (but assuming some experience in conducting qualitative research), provide a reasonable account of the *processes* and *techniques* preceding the activity, which were used during the event described, and also those following the 'shoot'. You will be aware that a research focus, a flexible research design and an understanding of theoretical sampling provide me with a rationale to be doing what I'm doing in the place I'm doing it; you will also be aware that I made three different types of photographs, perhaps for different applications; you recognize that I collected interview data prior to taking photographs and that further data based on an analysis of these and other data may lead to further, more focused data collection; and you correctly surmise that this will lead to a formal report—a case study perhaps—in which the photographs, presented in the form of visual quotes, will be used in conjunction with other evidence to support a particular theory or working hypothesis. You are aware of this because there are certain elements commonly applied to a wide range of qualitative studies. Researchers using photographs span multifarious disciplines but share common understandings about what constitutes a 'qualitative' study and that the overall aim is to contribute to a body of knowledge by marshalling evidence to answer research questions. The defining characteristics which shape the way we design and conduct our studies could be described as holistic, contextually well defined, field-orientated, design is emergent and progressively focused, naturalistic and non-interventionist, interpretative, working hypotheses emerge from the data, interpretations are validated by triangulation, multiple realities or single view (adapted from Stake, 1995, p. 48).

In this chapter we aim to 'unpack', explore and refine the meanings of such terms with regard to Image-based Research with one important caveat described earlier: we will focus attention on methodology and the ways in which theory informs and legitimates practice. The remainder of the chapter will, therefore,

consider key facets of conducting research involving photography: research design, data collection, and briefly, analysis.

Research Design

Research design makes explicit a plan for conducting a study, proffers a model and justification for establishing the validity of data and inferences drawn from them, and implicitly indicates a researcher's ability to successfully conduct a study. Research design should be made explicit so that others may gain insight into how the study was conducted and, more importantly, judge its worth. Any design of research operates within a discipline or across disciplines, takes into account the purpose of the study and deploys a particular set of research strategies.

Orthodox qualitative research design offers a 'blueprint' for the conduct of research, incorporating, according to Marshall and Grossman (1995, p. 38): the overall approach and rationale; site and sample collection; the researcher's role; data collection methods; data management; analysis strategy; trustworthiness features; and the time management plan. The future status and acceptability of Image-based Research may depend on working within a relatively conservative framework whilst exploring alternative modes of enquiry which are image-orientated yet sensitive to orthodox researchers, methodological concerns. Researchers using photographs in their work lack alternative over-arching research designs that provide models of good or innovative practice and a rich 'menu' of alternatives. Other more established approaches, for example designs for auto/biographical studies, historical research, or case studies, are sufficiently well rehearsed to indicate potential variations of strategy and probable data collection methods. Image-based researchers have not routinely explicated their research designs and few models of good practice exist outside of anthropology and ethnography.

Bateson and Mead (1942), Byers (1964), Collier (1979), and Collier and Collier (1986) among others, provide models and insights into research design for anthropological and ethnographic studies. Good examples of research design within visual sociology are more difficult to find. An interesting discussion of how to conduct a study, however, is given by Rieger (1996) in a paper which reflects on the relationship between visual change and social change. He uses examples of changes in peoples' lives and to the landscape of small towns in the USA over an extended period to illustrate the ways in which various photographic strategies, combined with traditional qualitative and quantitative data, are able to provide a robust research design. He provides, for example, 'picture portraits' of changes to a mining town over a 100 year period, and juxtaposes Dorothea Lange's famous 'Migrant Mother' image of 1936 with an image exhibiting a similar structure taken in 1979. Within Rieger's paper are features important to the design of a sociological study: theoretical underpinnings (such as the relationship between visual change and social change) are employed and act as a framework within which the study 'sits'; there is a rationale for combining research strategies; various visual methods are discussed (for example repeating photographs of the same site over time, repeating photographs of participants in the change process, and re-photographing activities, processes or functions); complementary non-visual methods are applied (for example examining statistics on changes in population and employment); the use of triangulation of various indicative data to add trustworthiness of findings is discussed; and the problems (such as determining what constitutes an indicator of social change) and limitations of data and findings are aired. An image-based approach, as Rieger points out, 'must adhere to the same standards of evidence and inference' (p. 45) demanded of traditional non Image-based Research and it should make logical connections that start with a study's initial research questions and extend through to its conclusions.

Not all research designs follow the kind of structured approach Rieger describes. If research design is 'colloquially…an action plan for getting from here to there' (Yin, 1994, p. 19), as long as important methodological signposts are present many paths can be travelled. Some designs emphasize the flexibility that distinguishes qualitative research from other approaches. Harper (1992), in a case study of 'Willie', an auto mechanic living in New York's 'Northern County', takes a more responsive and reflexive stance than Rieger. Through Willie Harper he explores the decline of skilled manual labour and the kinds of knowledge lost in the process. As the study unfolds the reader senses a degree of empathy between the researcher and his subject that exceeds the norm in traditional participant observation and we are left with the feeling that the study is as much a statement about Harper as Willie.

One key signpost in research design is how and by what criteria data are to be interpreted. Here Harper draws on grounded theory (Glaser and Straus, 1967) to allow theory to emerge from the data but he adds commentary distinguishing Willie's 'emic', or insider understandings, from the 'etic' sociological framework he uses to characterize that world in terms that have resonance and significance for social scientists.

> I have studied Willie's work from several angles, but the categories I have ended up with are my own. In naming and classifying its elements, I have separated out aspects of Willie's taken-for-granted world, presented them back to him in discussions we have recorded, and finally used them to translate Willie's experienced world in terms that those unfamiliar with the culture can understand. (Harper, 1992, p. 9)

Rieger and Harper offer two quite different but legitimate approaches to research design. However, the outcomes are similar in that they instil a level of confidence in the veracity of their images that is missing in many visual sociologists' work. Whatever research design is put forward as a methodological 'blueprint' of conduct during the research process, the overarching concern must be with enhancing the trustworthiness of findings and the scope and clarity of the constructs developed. Research design translates epistemological principles into pragmatic decisions and explains the choices we make.

Data Collection

Important steps in formulating any study involve identifying, locating, and gaining access to an appropriate research site and the sources of data it can yield. Before qualitative researchers begin to mine a site for the data it holds, we need to consider how we present ourselves to our subjects. Many qualitative methods texts examine the relative advantages and disadvantages of assuming an overt or covert role, of participant observation or observation alone (Bogdan and Taylor, 1984; Lincoln and Guba, 1985), but we consider these dichotomies overly abstract simplifications of the complex relationships formed in the field. The choices we make regarding the roles we play in the field raise a host of procedural and ethical issues, many of which have been outlined in recent critiques of qualitative work. These issues become even more salient when considered within the context of visual research strategies.

Cameras in hand, visual researchers generally take a more pragmatic stance than other fieldworkers, because we need to employ methods that enable us to produce images capable of generating useful data. Recognizing the added complexity introduced when making images in the course of conducting research, we also feel compelled to consider issues regarding 'empowerment' (of subjects) and 'ownership' (of data and findings), especially in regard to photographs. We accept that making pictures can be a threatening act (amply demonstrated by the metaphors photography invokes: we 'load', 'aim' and 'shoot') that yields an

artificial product, an artefact of the idiosyncratic relationship among photographers and subjects, the medium, and the cultural expectations it generates. We also make the assumption that the appearances of naturally occurring objects, events and behaviours provide a gateway to the taken-for-granted and reflects deeply embedded and therefore unquestioned aspects of culture which are critical to studies of society. Therefore, it is incumbent upon us to devise multiple strategies and roles for photographers that allow us to produce images that further our attempts to study the everyday world. While we cannot envision methods that guarantee photographs uncontaminated by reactivity between photographers and subjects, unbiased by cultural expectations shaping the act of making pictures, or unmediated by the characteristics of the technology itself, we do propose to build upon the uniquely iconic capacity of photography to usefully represent the particularities of a specific moment in time and space.

There is a hierarchy of questions to pose when considering the issues of access and role. The nature of the research question, even taken at a pragmatic level, is of paramount importance. A mature female researcher photographing a young man's world or a white middle class academic making a video of low income Hispanics may both claim that as 'outsiders' they have 'critical distance' on the problem at hand. This approach has credibility since 'critical distance' allows them to treat as problematic that which is taken-for-granted—as did Robert Frank (1955) in *The Americans*. Conversely, outsider status may prevent researchers from penetrating a protected domain. We must consider and make explicit the benefits and disadvantages our own positions engender, and the ways in which cameras hinder or help our attempts to gain access.

An alternative to maintaining a distinct separation between 'outsider' researchers and their subjects is to build a bridge between them. Worth and Adair (1972) adopted this approach when they taught the technology of filmmaking to Navajo Indians so that they themselves could represent their traditions and rituals. Worth and Adair hoped that by offering them the means to visually depict their own culture the Navajo would provide an emic account offering the insider's perspective. Worth and Adair did encounter and acknowledge problems with their approach. Since film was not an indigenous representational medium available to the Navajo prior to their study, the researchers attempted to teach film production from a neutral perspective, unbiased by the cultural codes and conventions Worth and Adair themselves had internalized. The Navajo were asked to narrate their culture using an alien communicative medium. Nevertheless, *Through Navajo Eyes* presents an innovative research model that has been imitated in both academic and professional milieus.

Data can be collected covertly, 'under cover'. Photographers may hide themselves from public view, or choose a telephoto lens that allows shooting a scene from a distant berth. Some research questions encourage such a strategy. For example, time samples can be compiled at a particular locale in order to establish patterns of use or activity. But researchers who hope to gain access and be welcomed by members of communities may place future relationships at risk if they begin by employing what appear to be surveillance techniques. What happens further down the line when the 'spy' is discovered? Such revelations can compromise researchers' credibility and, consequently, trust may be impossible to cultivate. In most instances surveillance photography provides only superficial data which can be easily construed the result of 'outsider arrogance'. Covert photography more often reveals researchers' discomfort with their own photographic activity than it does insights into the daily lives of their subjects.

The nature of the research question should determine strategies for gaining access to subjects and constructing the researcher/photographer's role but subjects' own social positions factor into the equation. When qualitative researchers make their agendas explicit they often depend on subjects' willingness to be studied, and members of different social groups may view the research process (and the researcher) with varying degrees of scepticism. And different populations have unequal defence mechanisms to ward off the

intrusions researchers inevitably introduce. In some situations, the power differential between the researcher and the researched may make an overt approach untenable as Taylor (1989) points out:

> You will find many ethnographic studies of relatively powerless groups, such as school-children, the sick and handicapped, gays or dope smokers, but very few, if any, of powerful groups such as leading politicians, senior civil servants or military chiefs. This is not because sociologists are not interested in power and how it is used. They are. It is simply because sociologists (and other potential observers) are not normally granted access to centres of power. The only knowledge we have of what goes on in some powerful groups comes when one of the participants makes disclosures and even then, in the UK at least, there are problems in getting such revelations published. The problem of access illustrates that what can be achieved through participant observation is strictly limited. (Taylor, 1989, pp. 66–7)

This scenario repeats itself in many guises and encourages visual researchers to use covert and devious means to gain access to data. While we acknowledge that elites wield greater power to limit outsiders' access to their social domains, we must also recognize valid ethical and moral restrictions, like religious proscriptions, individuals' and groups' rights to privacy, or threats to security, health or safety. For example, in a comparative study of the daily lives of mothers of different US social classes, Schwartz spent several months locating and interviewing wealthy women, most of whom declined to participate in a photographic study, or were later urged to decline by their husbands. Among the more compelling reasons cited was one couple's genuine fear that publishing photographs of their children could conceivably lead to a kidnapping attempt. It bears noting, however, that economically disadvantaged mothers were equally hesitant to be photographed, although they harboured quite different anxieties. The knowledge that powerful groups are likely to deny access to qualitative researchers, especially camera-toting fieldworkers, increases the likelihood that visual sociologists will adopt a covert stance and employ hidden cameras or craft personae resembling despised paparazzi who stalk celebrities in search of valuable photo opportunities. While going covert may yield usable photographic data, it undermines possibilities for participant observation, an important check on whether the researcher has captured participants' experiences. The flip side of the coin is, of course, the inability of powerless groups and individuals to protect themselves from intrusion. Researchers too often tend to shirk these moral dilemmas; the concrete issues they raise should be addressed in the design and implementation of research strategies so that we do not infringe upon the rights of our subjects.

Deciding on an appropriate role is only the beginning of 'getting in and staying in' the field. All qualitative researchers confront the process of establishing rapport with subjects, but cameras present additional complexities for subjects and researchers alike. Because photography is a popular hobby and photographs pervade western industrialized societies, our subjects are likely to be familiar with both making and viewing photographic images. Snapshooting provides a template for subjects' ability to understand what visual sociologists do and the equipment they use. But as visual sociologists, we often present ourselves as professionally trained camera users and because we photograph a variety of objects, people, and events in the course of research, subjects may implicitly compare visual sociologists with photojournalists as part of their own process of classifying and thereby understanding what is taking place. In the course of our field experiences, the authors have been initially construed curious amateurs, professional freelance photographers, journalists, and artists. While none of these classifications accurately reflect the role we intend to play, these common sense understandings provide a useful starting point for conversation, in the course of which we can clarify our goals and procedures. Whatever the opening, whether discussions of our activities, our equipment, or the weather, these first encounters with community

members can (and should) be used to lay the groundwork for future data collection. Our identity as friend or foe is often established during these initial exchanges.

The introduction of the camera to participants can take place on the first day as a ‘can opener’ (Collier and Collier, 1986; Schwartz, 1989a) or over a period of time using a ‘softly softly’ approach (Prosser, 1992). The ‘softly softly’ approach, in this case, initially entailed walking around the sampling site with a camera in its ‘out of the case over the shoulder like a piece of jewellery’ mode, followed by ‘safe’ photography of buildings, and only much later was ‘serious’ photography attempted when participants were accustomed to photography taking place. Whether the camera comes out immediately or gradually, visual sociologists need to confidently perform the tasks necessary to make pictures and they should handle equipment with apparent ease. Photographers who act nervous or lack self-confidence usually convey those feelings to the people around them and, consequently, their activities may become suspect. In the initial stages of a research project qualitative researchers with little photographic experience do well to begin by mapping the physical surround. This accomplishes several tasks simultaneously: it allows the photographer to ease into the new setting and role; it makes the photographer visible to community members, opening opportunities for interaction; and it provides a visual catalogue of the physical setting in which the fieldwork take place. Not only must visual sociologists feel comfortable with themselves as photographers, they must also be attuned to the comfort levels displayed by subjects. Insensitive photographers who lack the ability act and react to significant ‘others’ as they themselves act and react to them, will damage the quality of their data and compromise their ability to maintain rapport, a necessity if the researcher hopes to remain in the field.

Both the camera and the photograph are flexible tools used to collect data in various ways. In this section we will explore a small range of possibilities. Found photographs, like found or historical documents, are useful for ‘backward mapping’ but often lack important contextual information such as the relationship between the photographer and the subject, why a photograph survived when others did not; and the photographer’s intention in making the image. How can we interpret an image or assess its significance without its context? Alternative forms of data and methods which illuminate, confirm or disconfirm, are used to complement initial interpretation of found images. Found photographs, whatever their age and history, may be enlightening or misleading if viewed without an ‘encompassing structure’ (Trachtenberg, 1989). The ‘encompassing structure’ may come in the form of an analytical framework or constituent data, i.e., from contemporary writings, field notes, auto/biographical details about the photographer or participants. Historical, political, social, and cultural information often aid our interpretation by elaborating the milieu from which a found photograph emerged. But, as in any qualitative study, all data have their limitations and there is danger in over extrapolation, of claiming what cannot be justified. The skills of the historian and archivist extend to us the possibility of judging the significance of found photographs. For example an important icon of the Spanish Civil war that had been reproduced in *Life* magazine in 1936, ‘Death of a Loyalist Soldier’ by Robert Capa, was thought to be a ‘set up’ during the 1970s. However, an amateur historian found evidence that suggested the photograph was authentic and subsequent ‘police work’ re-established the trustworthiness not only of the icon but also of Capa himself.[1]

Researcher generated images are widely used as a ‘visual record’ or as a ‘visual diary’. While these two terms may seem synonymous we see an important, if fine-grained, distinction between them, a distinction that reflects differing positions with regard to the capacities of photography to provide an ‘unbiased’ record of a reality. When viewed as visual records, researchers depend upon photography’s capacity to provide extra-somatic ‘memory’. The ability of the camera to record visual detail without fatigue suggests that ‘camera notes’ may be superior to the fieldnotes recorded by tired social scientists. Even when we become weary or muddled the camera can continue, so long as film and batteries are refreshed. The visual records

produced by the indefatigable camera can be organized, catalogued and analysed at a later date. Thus, the camera's reproductive and mimetic qualities can be used in two basic ways, first as an adjunct or complement to an ethnographic field diary (see Ball, Chapter 8), or, second, to systematically record visual detail with emphasis on reproducing objects, events, places, signs and symbols, or behavioural interactions.

Creating a so-called 'visual diary' carries a somewhat different set of connotations that build upon an alternative conceptualization of the photographic medium itself. As Paul Byers (1966) asserted early in the game, 'cameras don't take pictures', people do. Even though cameras don't tire, the social scientists pressing the shutter release do, and the degree of perspicacity we marshal by the end of a field encounter may affect both what we include or omit, and the way in which we render the activities in front of the lens. Besides the person/machine issue looms a larger critique of factual uses of photography. Choices of types of supplies and equipment make a difference in the view of the world photography can offer. Large or medium format cameras depict the world differently than a thirty-five millimetre; the lens we choose to employ may either collapse or expand space and impart a different feeling to the viewer. The use of natural or artificial light, colour or black and white film stocks, and a myriad other choices shape the nature of the depictions we create. Add to this laundry list such concerns as the aesthetic predisposition of the photographer, his or her own level of sensitivity to objects and events before the lens, and degree of facility with the medium, and the sanctity of the photographic image as a visual record is assailed. All of these factors contribute to the production of photographic images.

The notion of photographs as visual diary reintroduce the researcher and the qualities of the medium into the research process. That is, a diary is a self-reflexive and media-literate chronicle of the researcher's entry, participation in, and departure from, the field. The images generated within this paradigm are acknowledged to be the unique result of the interaction of a certain researcher with a specific population using a particular medium at a precise moment in space and time. Reviewing these many variables in the photographic process more clearly distinguishes the notion of a visual record from that of visual diary. Consonant with these different views, when considered and constructed as visual records, photographs may offer greater potential as comparative data, uncontaminated by the idiosyncrasies different photographers might introduce. On the other hand, photographs intended as diaries of field experiences may better encode researchers' inferences (see Schwartz, 1993 for an example of the visual diary approach). Whatever belief qualitative researchers espouse regarding the medium, whether they make visual records or visual diaries, we advocate researchers making their approach explicit so that colleagues can better judge the conclusions they present. The argument we are making parallels a distinction made by Worth (1980) between 'records of' and 'records about' culture. Records of culture are the documents made by members of a culture themselves, while records about culture are the documents made by outsiders. Taking this point a step further, Ruby (1976) suggests that the images made by anthropologists may be usefully viewed as records of the culture of visual anthropologists, while simultaneously considered records about the culture of so-called others.

Researcher generated photographs are commonly used during data collection as an interview device. This is commonly referred to as 'photo-elicitation' and takes many differing forms including interviews with individuals, with groups, with children, and those who respond more easily to visual, rather than lexical, prompts. We have described elsewhere (Schwartz, 1989b) an important addendum to the use of photographs as an interview device:

> Viewing photographic imagery is a patterned social activity shaped by social context, cultural conventions, and group norms. In order to present photographs to informants for purposes of photo-elicitation, some foreknowledge of the respondents group's use of photographs is required so that

> methodological strategies can be planned, and the resulting data assessed within the context of informants' shared meanings. (Schwartz, 1989b, pp. 120–1)

Although not a homogeneous set of practices, in its conventional form (see Harper, 1988; Schwartz, 1989a; Walker and Weidel, 1985) photo-elicitation can be described as a single or sets of photographs assembled by the researcher on the basis of prior analysis and selected with the assumption that the chosen images will have some significance for interviewees. The photographs are shown to individuals or groups with the express aim of exploring participants' values, beliefs, attitudes, and meanings, and in order to trigger memories, or to explore group dynamics or systems. Of course researchers in different disciplines, with distinct epistemological assumptions may approach photo-elicitation differently (for psychology see Cronin, Chapter 5). A less conventional use of photo-elicitation in sociology draws its inspiration from psychology, using photographs as a projective technique similar to that of incomplete sentences or inkblots. This approach, however, does not draw on the ambiguous nature of an image but is purposefully provocative and disruptive and is intended to elicit suppressed views. Prosser (1992) provides an example of this approach in an educational setting. Figure 8.1 'Pupil Graffiti' was shown to staff in a secondary school. The photograph is of a book whose title was altered form its original *Nine Modern Poets, An Anthology* to *Nine Nude Puffs in an Orgy*. As anticipated, when shown the photograph, staff reacted and reacted differently providing insights that other, more passive means, may not have achieved.[2] The aim was to stimulate comment not on the content of the photograph but what is intimate to the interviewees that is 'triggered' by the photograph. Photo-elicitation used in this way can be provocative but is not necessarily aggressive.

Regardless of the strategy the researcher adopts, the chosen approach must be consistent with the way in which photography has been conceptualized at the outset. Photographs conceived and constructed as records will most likely be used according to a different logic than photographs made as part of the researcher's self-reflexive visual diary. While either approach can yield useful interview prompts, visual researchers need to understand both the processes of encoding meaning in which he or she has engaged, and informants' approaches to decoding photographic meaning. Researchers are often clear about their intentions as they go about constructing a set of images to use in the course of interviews, but they may just as often be surprised (pleasantly or disappointingly) by the nature of the responses their photographs generate. Confessions regarding serendipitous or disastrous interchanges rarely make there way into research narratives. Since many people spend time looking at photographs—in the press, in advertising, in family albums, in galleries—researchers need to carefully explain the similarities or differences between the interview setting and these other familiar viewing events so that subjects can be better informed about the task at hand. It is then the researcher's responsibility to interpret and assess the nature of respondents' interactions with the photographs used for elicitation, and to incorporate those conclusions into the data to be analysed.

Analysis

Analysing photographic data in qualitative research, as with textual data, is a series of inductive and formative acts carried out throughout the research process. As with other qualitative research strategies, visual researchers begin the task of analysis in the course of field research so that new inferences can be exploited before the fieldwork ends. Caldarola (1985) elaborates a plan for integrating photography into ethnographic research that includes regular viewing sessions with informants. In this way visual data can be validated as research proceeds and used to generate new inferences that inform future data gathering. All data have strengths and limitations but poor data, that is data that are invalid, implausible, or untrustworthy,

Figure 8.1 Pupil Graffiti

are not worth analysing. The initial problem for the interpreter of photographs is how to ensure their plausibility and believability. Because cameras do not take pictures (Byers, 1966) the fallibility and selectivity of the picture maker must be scrutinized. Full contextual detail (if this is ever possible) enables the trustworthiness and limitations of photographs to be assessed and this means having an understanding of both the external (see Chapter 6) and internal (see Chapter 10) photo-context. Such contexts are multi-faceted, reflecting: the academic discipline, research paradigm and theoretical framework the researcher works within; the extent of disparity between the picture taker's culture (and the interpreter's) ethnicity, religion, gender, class, and values and the object of the photograph; and the micro-context that shapes the particular dynamic relationship between 'taker' and 'taken';[3] and picture theory. Picture theory is of growing importance to visual sociologists because it takes representation as problematic. It investigates the differences and relationship between images and words, or as Mitchell (1994, p. 5) explains 'the interactions of visual and verbal representation in a variety of media, principally literature and the visual arts'; and questions the relationship between representations on two-dimensional surfaces and their connection with issues of power, values and social influences (see, for example Chapter 18 which discusses a famous picture—the Cornfield by John Constable). Any analysis of photographs without information elaborating the macro and micro contexts is generally unacceptable since image production and image reception informs our understanding of those photographs.

There are numerous theoretical and practical approaches to analysing photographs. One approach is the 'doctrine of signs' which draws on the work of Barthes' *Elements of Semiology* (1964) and denotation-connotation pairing, the semiotics of Peirce, or more recently socio-semiotics (Gottdiener, 1995). At the opposite end of the spectrum Collier (1979) suggests:

> We should first approach photographs *openly* (Hall, 1974) in order to respond to their holistic content. We could call this initial experience listening to the visual voice of imagery'; the researchers respond with all their senses open so that they may be more deeply affected by documentary realism. (Collier, 1979)

Between structuralist and hermeneutical investigation are more specific approaches to interpretation. In addition to Caldarola (1985), Ruby (1976) critiques how anthropologists derive meaning from photographs, suggesting new and innovative approaches to visual anthropology; Collier and Collier (1986, p. 178) provide a four stage generic analytical model applicable to a wide range of research topics; Ball and Smith (1992) describe general theoretical approaches to interpreting images; Collier (1979) suggests three broad approaches to interpreting photographs depending on the nature of the enquiry—macro analysis and open enquiry, structured and micro analytical study, and micro image analysis of behaviour; and Chalfen (Chapter 14) provides a good example of an analytical framework within a substantive area. A common thread running through each approach is the way they move the analyst toward theory generation (substantive rather than grand theory) and the testing of emergent ideas.

Interpretation of any photographic data requires a theoretical framework. A framework aids management of large amounts of (visual) data by providing logic for sorting, organizing, indexing and categorization. The interpretative process begins well before viewing a photograph, and takes place, for example, when decisions are made as to *what* and *how* the photographs are to be taken Harper (1992) honestly describes these early faltering analytical steps that are part and parcel of any photographic study:

> The first photographs I took at the shop lacked any coherence from Willie's perspective. They were really photos by an interested outsider, seeing the exotic forms in the routine of the shop. Howard Becker would say I lacked a theory, which in his terms is 'a set of ideas with which you can make sense of a situation while you photograph it. The theory tells you when an image contains information of value, when it communicates something worth communicating. It furnishes the criteria by which worthwhile data and statements can be separated from those that contain nothing of value, that do not increase our knowledge of society.' (Harper, 1992, p. 12)

Harper adapts, realigns and refines his approach and moves on, illustrating the flexibility and non-linearity of analytic induction required in qualitative studies.

Making sense of photographs is also dependent on what sort of social explanation or intellectual puzzle is to be resolved. Consider, for example, Figures 8.2 and 8.3 of two deputy principals of similar status and carrying out similar roles in an English secondary school.

The photographs were taken to provide data for a *comparative* study of working practices, to explore the similarities and differences in the deputy principals' working practices. They are two 'slices' of constituent data (constituent in that they require separate interpretation informed by the context in which the images were made, and the particular questions being asked of them) which were contrasted with each other and other data sets. A starting point for analysis would be to consider the photographs in terms of what Collier and Collier (1986, p. 47) call a 'cultural inventory': The spatial configuration of otherwise ordinary objects,

Figure 8.2 Deputy principal's room

common to a mass society, may often reflect or express the cultural patterns and values of distinct cultural groups.' Each office contains proxemic information (measurements of space), numerical information, information on the level of technology available, and information on décor aesthetics. The layout of objects in space is not arbitrary but tells us a great deal about the deputy principals, about who they are, what they do, and how they behave in their rooms.

Choosing an analytical framework must be guided by the same logic that under-girds the visual researcher's overall approach. We reiterate that researchers must themselves be clear about the way they conceptualize photographs and their role in research so that methodological strategies can be consistently employed throughout. Photographs prepared as visual records will trigger a different analytic strategy than will photographs intended as visual diaries. Worth's (1980) distinction between records *of* and records *about* culture, which built upon his and John Adair's *Through Navajo Eyes,* exemplifies the kind of theoretical clarity and circumspection we advocate, both for visual researchers in particular and qualitative researchers in general. These same concerns must govern the use of photographs in the presentation of research. While detailed discussion of this issue remains beyond the scope of the present chapter, suffice it to say that the agenda set forth by Ruby in 1976 has yet to be completed. Visual researchers need to attend closely to the ways in which their images are used in the display and/or publication of their findings.

Conclusion

As with any overview we have been both selective and brief in our outline of research procedures, resulting in some important omissions. We have not discussed, for example, notions of 'sampling', 'representation' or 'ethics'. In this chapter we elected to focus on a narrow set of issues that have helped us conduct fieldwork: research design; data collection, and analysis. Nevertheless these issues are crucial to planning

Figure 8.3 Deputy principal's room

and implementing visual research and our discussion will inform, if not enable, new researchers to enter the field. Image-based Research as social enquiry is developing and refining both its theory and methodology. In this chapter we have discussed key methodological issues and we have tried to balance theoretical frameworks with practical insights. A central theme throughout has been to illustrate how different theoretical assumptions and different phases of the research process require the deployment of distinct photographic strategies in order to provide a visual orientation to qualitative research.

Notes

1 Jay Ruby circulated, via the Visual Communications Discussion Group <VISCOM@ TEMPLE.EDU, the following message taken from the *New York Times,* Sunday, September 1996: 'The decisive moment, when it was taken in 1936, it was called one of the great war photographs ever. In the mid-70s it was called a great fake. Now Robert Capa's spectacular image of the Spanish Civil War, a picture of a Loyalist militiaman falling as he is fatally shot in the head, is being rehabilitated. The picture was supposed to have been taken in Cerro Muriano on 5 September. So, an amateur historian named Mario Brotons went to the military archives in Madrid and Salamanca and found that only one man died at Cerro Muriano on September 5: Frederico Borrell, a mill worker from Alcoy. From there Rita Grosvenor picked up the pieces. She tracked down Frederico's brother's widow, who confirmed that the picture was of Frederico. Richard Whelen, Mr Capa's biographer, said, "It has the ring of truth"'.

2 Principal of the school, on seeing the photograph took a stance commensurate with his role, said he 'felt threatened' and believed showing it to pupils would lead to further 'vandalism', whilst the art teacher (taking a

similar 'role' orientated stance) thought it most 'creative' and wished more pupils demonstrated such talent. It is interesting but peripheral that to Prosser the graffiti represented the darker unpleasant side of pupil culture and their perception of sexuality. Any member of the staff who saw the photograph did not raise this interpretation.

3 Because people make pictures, not cameras, personal reactivity needs to be considered. Researchers bring to any study, skills, knowledge, past experiences, abilities, personal values, beliefs, enthusiasms, which are embedded in a culture which directs not only their visual perception and what they study, but the way they conduct that study. Hagaman (1996), in *How I Learned Not to Be a Photojournalist* offers a rare but valuable insight into how she (a photojournalist) produced images useful for sociological purposes. She describes how she put to one side her journalistic skills that produced images with the required impact and drama and learned to be a visual sociologist.

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