Visual Methods in the Study of Religion

Sarah Dunlop

Visual research methods use images of society and images produced by society to better understand the social situation. Researchers using images usually work within the framework of qualitative, case study approach.

Since the 1860s, anthropologists have used photography to provide visual information about their subjects. Historically, photography was considered to be a recording device for surface data, as opposed to in-depth data, which needed to be unearthed by other methods. (Edwards 1992: 4) Anthropologists still use photos as a recording tool, but some have moved beyond this to explore it as method itself (Collier & Collier, 1986).

Visual data was also used as a form of cultural critique in the 1920s. For example, photographers El Lissitzky and Alexander Rodchenko sought to inform understanding of social revolution in the early days of the Soviet Union using a photomontage approach. Photojournalists such as Alfred Eisenstaedt and Erich Salomon used photo-reportage or photo-essays to communicate social situations (Gidal 1973). The *Picture Post* in England and *Time, Life,* and *Fortune* in the United States published the work of photojournalists such as: Margaret Bourke-White (the first female war correspondent), Walker Evans, W. Eugene Smith, and Robert Capa. Later sociologist Howard Becker (1974) recognised that both photography and sociology emerged around the same time and that both explored society. But Becker was concerned that photography had come to be viewed like an art form, and sociology was treated like a science. He called for them to be reunited and to work together to uncover different aspects of social life. Some sociologists took up the challenge, and visual research methods were increasingly used in various sociological studies (Ruby 1976, Becker 1978, Wagner 1979).

In the past thirty years, an increasing number of social researchers in the UK have recognised that the visual is a growth point in the social sciences and cultural studies, drawing together researchers from a wide range of fields: anthropology, sociology, cultural studies, media studies, visual communication, photography, film, history and sociology of art as well as photojournalism and documentary film. Visual anthropology and visual sociology overlap in many areas and often are indistinguishable from each other. Sarah Pink (2007) has given a detailed account of the development of visual ethnographic research within anthropology and sociology.

Using Visual Methods for studying religion

Visual methods bypass cognitive thought processes to engage with the emotive, reactive, subconscious ways that people live out religion. Spirituality and religious belief involve abstract concepts that may be difficult to express in words. Harper

writes, "images allow us to make statements which cannot be made by words, and the world we see is saturated with sociological meaning. Thus it does not seem peculiar to suggest that images enlarge our consciousness and the possibilities for our sociology." (1998, 38) Talking about religion or spirituality in terms of a personal search to find ultimate meaning can be difficult, but these ideas can be expressed through interacting with images.

Visual material, due to its ability to evoke embodied experience, opens opportunities for deeper conversations about what is sacred with people than the traditional interview question and answer format within qualitative research (Pearmain 2007, 76). McClintock Fulkerson (2007:50) has found that taking photos can be one means, amongst others, of observing the use of tradition in 'distinctive bodily practices' and the 'ceaseless interplay between the messages of bodies and the messages of explicit discourse'. Talking about images enables the researcher to move beyond the participant's thoughts and beliefs to take into account their practice of religion.

Material culture is an aspect of visual studies. Paying attention to the images that are important in the daily lives of people open up conversations about values and aspirations. As David Morgan (1999) argues, the meaning of an image is not merely the act of putting it on the wall, but also exists in its display and ongoing presence in the owner's life.

The collaborative approach that most contemporary visual methods employ suits a power-sharing approach to research. Informants are given a voice in the study in order to shed light on the cultural situation. This approach is respectful toward a person's religious and spiritual beliefs and practices. Visual methods not only may encourage the participant to provide the images but also allow them to invest them with their own personal meaning and interpretation. The participant can speak as personally or superficially as they choose regarding the images, thus allowing them to control how much personal religious information is shared.

The visual enables identification with personal, subjective themes within lived religion. Society has shifted from a textual culture to a complex, multi-faceted culture full of unmediated images. Since people are used to processing visual information, visual disseminations of research findings become accessible to a wide range of people. Thus, visual methods also represent a shift away from the epistemology typical of sociology of religion, because knowledge can be represented and communicated through images rather than through text alone (Harper 1996).

Methods for conducting visual research
This section describes four methods for using the visual within qualitative research: see 'What is visual sociology' from the British Sociology Association's Visual Sociology Study Group website http://www.visualsociology.org.uk/whatis/index.php

1. Collection of visual data
A video or film camera can record things that happen more quickly than field notes can be taken. The use of a remote camera enables the recording of social

phenomena that might be dangerous or that the presence of the researcher would change the situation. (For example, children playing, etc). The camera or video camera can also collect data that is non-verbal. Documentary photography would be included in this type of visual research.

2. Photo Elicitation
'Photo elicitation' involves using images to invoke comments and discussion in the course of a semi-structured interview. The images used within the interview can come from various sources. For example, with an archive of photographs provided by the researcher, the interviewee looks through images and talks about them or answers questions about them. Or, the interviewee instead of the researcher could provide the images used for elicitation (such as the pictures on their walls or in photo albums). This ensures that the pictures have personal meaning, but gives the interviewer has less control over what is discussed. Reflexive photography puts the camera into the hands of the interviewee, whereby the researcher gives the informant the power to represent their world. Narrated photography combines reflexive photography with interviews, inviting informants to narrate their own photographs. (see Dunlop & Ward, forthcoming)

There are several significant advantages to using photo elicitation within interviews. First, using the pictures within the interview relaxes the interviewee, because the spotlight is on the pictures, not the person. Less eye contact needs to be maintained as both interviewer and interviewee gaze at the images, and handling the pictures can fill gaps in the conversation. The image gives the interviewee the opportunity to discuss vague memories, associations or connotations that are related to the image. This method empowers the individual informant, because the participant is able to invest the pictures with their own personal meaning and interpretation. They can speak as personally or superficially as they choose regarding image, thus allowing them to control how much personal information is shared.

3. Studying visual data created by a social group
As mentioned above, this method is closely linked to studies of material culture and entails observing the visual landscape and artefacts of society -- their production, consumption and meaning – this includes art, photographs, film, video, advertisements, fashion etc. The researcher can discover the use and understanding of visual images as dictated by socially established symbolic codes, which can be analysed through content analysis, semiotics, ethnography and other methods.

4. Visual communication of findings
Many different types of research outcomes can be represented visually. Since people receive information in general visually, it makes sense that research findings and theories can be communicated visually as well. Visual research may produce visual results that are social knowledge in and of themselves, which convey findings on an emotive, intuitive level to a wide audience.

Critique of visual methods
Visual research methods are not without limitations and using these methods within research can create new challenges.

The first limitation is that a photograph or a film is visual information that has been framed by the producer. The process of choosing what to include or what to exclude from view is made by person who stands behind the camera, whether this is the researcher or the informant. The photograph or film is a representation of, not an exact replication, of a social situation. Thus it is essential, particularly when the photographer or filmmaker is the researcher, that the project is conducted reflexively. Drawing on a measure of self-awareness, the researcher should document not only the content but also the context of each visual recording and why it was shot in a particular way. The same issues applies to cropping photographs, which can have considerable effects on the way in which an image is experienced and interpreted.

Visual researchers may find they are limited by their own concern for the aesthetics of the visual material they produce. If the researcher hopes to use images produced within the research process in publications or other research outputs, there may be a certain degree of pressure to create images pleasing to the eye. This understandable concern for the aesthetics of images produced can limit which photographs are used and will certainly influence how photographs are framed. Some of these difficulties may be over come by allowing the informants to take the photographs or shoot the film, as well as providing workshops in camera skills for participants.

Another difficulty faced within visual research is that the process of 'seeing' and interpreting what is seen is bound up in the culture of the person who 'sees.' The owners or originators of the images should narrate their meaning and context. This approach is subjective, involving co-operation between the researcher and subject. For example, Sol Worth and John Adair (1972) applied this concept to their research by teaching Navajo Indians to use filmmaking techniques to create a film to visually depict their own culture. This type of collaboration not only allows the participant to provide the images but also encourages them to invest them with their own personal meaning and interpretation.

Furthermore, taking photographs may be seen as an act of aggression, which can damage relationships between researcher and informant. Susan Sontag (1979: 14) suggested that taking photographs can be a hostile act and that the photographer aggressively objectifies others. She writes that 'to photograph people is to violate them…it turns people into objects that can be symbolically possessed'. Photographs do not need to objectify people if they are sensitively executed and permission is respectfully sought. Collaboration gives those researched a measure of control over the images produced and can take place on different levels: agreeing to meet and talk, allowing photographs to be taken, and even taking the photographs themselves. There has also been a recent shift toward inviting the participants to be involved in some level on analysing the visual data as well.

This leads us to another challenge of using visual research methods - the ethics of using photographs or film of research participants. It is important that all the ethical

implications are considered before embarking on a project that uses visual methods. In the UK there are no legal restrictions on taking photographs in most public spaces, however on private land permission must be sought. In terms of research ethics, it is respectful to ask permission to take or to keep a photograph. The researcher can carry a large 'obvious' camera so that people know that the researcher is taking photographs (Dunlop & Richter 2010). When it comes to disseminating photos, the copyright rests with the creator of the image, so in research that involves the participants taking pictures, the researcher should ask permission to use those photographs in a publication or can ask the participants to waive the their copyright and pass it onto the researcher. It is also important to consider whether publishing a photo of someone might somehow endanger them or reflect poorly upon them. Even if a person gives permission for a photo to be used, the researcher should use their discretion as to whether it would be in the person's best interests.
A full discussion of research ethics for visual research ethics can be read on the Visual Sociology website. (see
http://www.visualsociology.org.uk/about/ethical_statement.php).

Using an Archive

Providing a collection of images to evoke some form of response from an interviewee can be a telling means of opening up conversations about religion and belief. If there are certain themes that the researcher would like to visually include, then using the same archive in a series of interviews with different participants insures a measure of similarity, prompting each interviewee to respond to the same images. For example, when I conducted research into youth spirituality in Ukraine, I included an Orthodox icon in the archive, amongst fifty other images, drawn from various religions but also including famous people and art prints and advertising. This meant that although some participants did not relate to the traditional religion in terms of their personal spirituality, the icon forced them to respond in some way. This lead to interesting data not only about existing beliefs and spirituality, but why some beliefs were absent. I was able to test each participant's reaction to the same icon.

Care should be taken when choosing the archive and there are several issues to keep in mind. First, the images themselves should be good quality prints. In my experience, attractive images evoke much more interest and conversation. For example, my research assistant in Slovakia told me that the young people she interviewed were not really giving much response to the icon she included in her archive. When she showed me the actual image as she had printed it, I discovered that it was heavily pixelated. I believe that the young people did not engage with this image because it was unclear and unattractive. It may seem obvious, but it is worth emphasising that it is important that the image is printed and presented clearly. Second, if the aim is to encourage the participant to respond to an image of a famous person or place, then use an image that is iconic of that person or place, or in a context that gives clues to the identity of the person or the location. Third, use ambiguous image wisely. In their research with an archive with young people, Savage et al. (2006, 107-110) discovered that when responding to ambiguous images there was much more open thinking evidenced, compared with the closed thinking

elicited by the images that clearly represented something specific. I would agree that ambiguous images that require some engagement or decoding tend to interest the participants and invite them to add their own meaning and interpretation, often leading to useful data about personal belief and worldview. However, it is important that images are not so abstract that valuable interview time is taken up with explaining what something is or might be.

One final, practical point on using an archive of images in an interview: Since I usually audio record the interview, I have found that later, when I transcribe the interview, that it can be difficult to determine which photograph is being discussed. Therefore, I number each image in the archive, and when it is being discussed I quietly say the number. I usually explain to the interviewee that I am just noting for myself later which image we are talking about.

Narrated photography

Narrated photography entails inviting a participant to take photographs that portray some aspect of their personal conceptions. This research method produces 'narrated' photograph because through interviews and focus groups, the photographer is invited to produce a narrative that invests their images with personal meaning. The resulting collection of images and text mediates the subjective into a form that is perceptible, thus making the intuited concrete and open for study.

There are several key points to keep in mind when conducting this type of visual research. First, when placing the camera into the hands of the participant, it is important to give a clear indication of the theme or question that they are being asked to address through the images they produce. Not only should this be discussed in person with the researcher so that clarification can be given if needed, but a set of written instruction to take away is very helpful too. Of course, the researcher should decide how prescriptive or open their research question should be, but the actual instructions regarding how many photographs to take, at what quality level setting on their camera, the number of photographs to be taken – all this should be clearly set out at the start. If a camera is loaned, then the participant should have clear instructions on how to use it.

Second, since the camera is in the hands of the participant, it is very difficult to control the quality of the photographs. I would strongly recommend offering photography workshops that cover just some of the basic principles for taking good photographs, such as framing, composition, lighting, flash and focus. With this knowledge, the participants are prepared to produce better photographs and are more likely to be pleased with their own representations that they produce.

Documentary photography

A researcher may wish to photograph the context and people being studied. The photographs can become visual field notes that supplement notes taken during participant observation. Covert photography may leave the researcher with difficult

ethical issues to resolve, so, as mentioned above, it is better to carry a large, obvious camera and openly take photographs. If one is photographing religious sites, particularly interiors of buildings, it is essential that permission is gained from the gatekeepers. Since a flash may disrupt the environment of a sacred site, I would advise taking photographs using a tripod without a flash and increased ISO. Although this may yield grainy or yellow-tinted photographs, this is far less of a disturbance to the natural setting. With some creativity and precise timing, the researcher may be able to stage photographs using natural light.

Consent should be sought from human subjects either before the photograph is taken, or afterward, when permission can be given to 'keep' the photograph. When photographing people, Howard Becker advises using a wide-angle lens instead of standing at a distance and using a zoom lens. For him, the process of taking photographs should be part of building interpersonal relationships with those being researched (Becker 1974: 12). Indeed, consideration of those being photographed is essential. Philip Richter helpfully outlines some of the issues the photographer faces when pointing the camera at human subjects in an article for the *Journal of Contemporary Religion* about using photography to study local churches (forthcoming).

Of course, as previously stated, with this style of visual research, a high level of reflexivity is absolutely necessary. Coming into a certain context and taking photographs will have an affect on the situation being observed. The researcher should be open about this and incorporate it into the study. Although the image of the researcher may not appear in the frame, the presence of the researcher will still be felt in some way. Since the researcher is holding the camera, it is important to consider that the subject of the photograph and the framing and lighting are not merely reflections of a social situation, but are an interpretation by the researcher

Bibliography

Banks, Marcus. 2001. *Visual Methods in Social Research*. London: SAGE.

Becker, Howard S. 1974. "Photography and Sociology." *Studies in the Anthropology of Visual Communication* 1 (1): 3-26.

Dunlop, Sarah, and Philip Richter. 2010. "Visual Methods." *Religion and Youth*. Ed. Collins-Mayo, Sylivia and Dandelion, Pink. Farnham: Ashgate, 209-16.

Dunlop, Sarah and Pete Ward. "Narrated Photography" Forthcoming.
Morgan, David. 1999. *Visual Piety: History and Theory of Visual Images*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Morgan, David, and Sally Promey. 2001. *The Visual Culture of American Religions*. London: University of California Press.

Pink, Sarah. 2007. *Doing Visual Ethnography: Images, Media and Representation in Research*. 2nd ed. London: Sage.

Prosser, Jon. 1998. *Image-Based Research : A Sourcebook for Qualitative Researchers*. London: Falmer Press.

Savage, Sarah, Sylvia Collins-Mayo, Bob Mayo and Graham Cray. 2006. *Making Sense of Generation Y: The World-View of 15-25 year olds*. London: Church House.

Sontag, Susan. 1979. *On Photography*. London: Penguin.

Worth, Sol & John Adair. 1972. *Through Navajo Eyes: An Exploration in Film Communication and Anthropology*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.