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Photography as a Social Research Method

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This book is dedicated to my parents.
They taught me to see.
                              —Sten Langmann

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Research Photography Is…

> I've always felt that about photography, that it is a medium that has been applied endlessly with very little understanding of its relevance.
>
> —Nathan Lyons

Photographs captivate and it has become almost impossible to pass a day without seeing a photograph (Burgin, 1982). Contemporary society has witnessed an explosion of the visual through photographs and the immediate and multisensory impact of photographs (Spencer, 2011) has been recognised and elevated photographs into a position of power to access cognitive memory and communicate seemingly complex messages with visual simplicity (Bell & Davison, 2013). Photography forms *one* element and *one* form in the field of 'visual research' and 'images', which are both umbrella terms that refer to loosely connected research practices which are linked to the visual appearance of the surrounding world (Warren, 2005).

Traditional social research methods often represent access barriers, for example, to people with intellectual disabilities (Boxall & Ralph, 2009) and perceived vulnerable groups or children; yet visual research methods, especially photography, have increasingly proved its usefulness as a social research method when working with people who belong to marginalised groups. Photographers have long realised the potential of photographs to reveal information, which is difficult to obtain from other sources (Peters & Mergen, 1977). However, the full potential of photography as a social research method is yet to be realised and the use of photography in social research studies overall remains relatively scarce (Ray & Smith, 2011; Roberts, 2011).

1.1 The Power of a Photograph

The following '*Untitled*' photograph (Fig. 1.1) first appeared on Twitter without an extensive narrative. It shows Laith Majid clutching his son Taha and daughter Nour, embraced by his wife Nada, on a beach of the Greek island of Kos, after having

Fig. 1.1 'Untitled' © Daniel Etter/Redux/Headpress (Reproduced with Permission)

safely arrived on a flimsy, partly deflated boat. The photograph held an expression of people who fled their homeland, escaping a fate of many other refugees, whose lives ended in the Mediterranean Sea (Aubusson, 2015). Aubusson (2015) of the *Sydney Morning Herald* saw a moment in this photograph, in which desperation gave way to joy. Among the many comments that this photograph received, two notable Twitter comments underline the significance of this image. O'Brien (2015) described that 'all the words and TV reporting of the refugee crisis in a single image'. Fitzgerald (2015) wrote that 'an entire country's pain captured in one father's face'. Photographer Daniel Etter witnessed an extraordinary moment and more so, was able to spatialise (we intentionally do not say 'capture' or 'freeze') this moment in a photograph. The message and effect of the photograph went beyond its printed borders and became a *thoroughfare*, spurring interpretations, implications, social action, raising critical awareness and most importantly in this context, rehumanised an often dehumanised group of people.

Daniel Etter's striking photograph reminds us that we need to go beyond the image itself and explore its conceptual complexity, its insights and its many interpretations, which help us to begin to understand what photographs in a social research context represent and why they are an important component to and in social research. It follows then that one approach to understand what a photograph represents is learning to see.

1.2   Learning to See—What Does a Photograph Represent

Photographs have capabilities of representation (Scruton, 1981), but *what* they represent warrants close attention. For the naïve observer, a photograph may simply represent a 'truth' and the photographic universe and the world universe would be one and the same (Flusser, 1983). Yet, even the naïve observer sees photographs in between the borderlines of black and white and all wavelengths in between. Black and white are theoretical concepts of optics, which can never *actually* exist, but arise out of theory (Flusser, 1983). Colour does not rest within objects, it is only when white light hits an object that selectively absorbs and reflects different wavelengths, and is transmitted to our eyes, that the colour of an object becomes real to us. As soon as the naïve observer asks the question of how they see, they are inevitably embarked towards a debate of what they see and what a photograph truly represents (Flusser, 1983). If we do not engage in the same debate of what photography represents as a research method and photographs as research, photographs will remain an immobile and silent surface and will continue to claim to be an automated reflection from the world onto its surface (Flusser, 1983).

Efforts to understand what a photograph represents from different perspectives have yet to produce unequivocal conclusions (Soszynski, 2006). Photography as a medium is both increasing in size and also inhabiting different spaces and extending in its dimensions (Plummer, 2015). The representational attribute of a photograph covers a range of concepts. A photograph can represent a *relation*: *x* (the photograph) represents *y* (the subject). Yet, a simple causal relationship fails to explain the full representation of a photograph, as it is absent of thought, intention or other mental acts (Scruton, 1981). Instead, a photograph represents a site of a complex intertextuality with overlapping series of texts, becoming object texts with social intention and meaning (Burgin, 1982). This relational intertextuality of a photograph is defined by Brummitt (1973) as representing a *communication*. A successful photograph communicates an idea. The skill of the photographer determines the extent to which the produced photograph represents and communicates that idea to the viewer. It follows then that the photographer is a more important contributor to the production of images than the camera apparatus itself. The camera does not discriminate between the important and the inane (Brummit, 1973). Therefore, photographs also represent a reflection and communication of the photographer's meaning and intention, and what is important to them.

Gerhard Richter claims that a photograph does not represent anything and introduces the need of interpretation by the viewer for the photograph to attain a representative status. Richter (1995) argues that much like the human eye, 'a photograph, or an artist's rendering of an object can never represent 'the real' because we never know the real—merely the appearances behind which the real remains hidden'. For Richter, photographs are not a reality-bearing medium but one that challenges the real and argues that photographic representation is closer to an enigma that needs to be deciphered, than one of clarity and ideology (Coulter, 2013).

It is perhaps Henri Cartier-Bresson, who provides the most telling idea about what a photograph represents. Cartier-Bresson (often characterised as a documentary photographer and the father of photojournalism) argues that a photograph represents a 'reportage' (Davies, 2008). It is the photographer's ability to 'report' on the world that confers meaning to the world, represented in a photograph (Davies, 2008). The photograph does not presume clarity or ideology, yet also does not shroud itself in mystique or enigma. What a photograph represents therefore is a patterned social activity that is shaped by a multitude of social, cultural and group-specific influences (Schwartz, 1989), suggesting that photographs are a *gateway* to building relations and telling a story. Photographic 'truth' therefore may not be understood by the relation between the photograph and the world, but by the relation of what we see in the photograph, our understanding of the world and how we see it. To develop this argument, the Deleuzian concept the *fold* provides a useful way forward.

1.3 Photography and the Fold

An important element of Deleuze's philosophy is that of *becoming*. Becoming is based on the argument that the world and everything in it are in a constant state of folding, unfolding and refolding (Deleuze, 1993). For Deleuze (1993), the fold is firstly a point of inflection where things change their form as forces are applied. It is where variation takes place. Secondly, the fold is form in that folding involves enveloping/developing and involution/evolution. This is illustrated by Deleuze (1993) who uses the example of how a caterpillar envelopes a butterfly (it is folded inside it), that then develops (unfolds) into that butterfly. He goes on to explain that when it dies, the butterfly involutes (refolds) back into its constituent parts. These constituent parts become inorganic folds waiting to evolve once again into an organic fold—though in a different form. So, there is constant movement from fold to fold that together form a multiplicity.

Deleuze (1993) discusses the idea of a *continuous multiplicity*. Multiplicities are made of *becomings* and bring with them the art of implication (Lomax, 1995). Those implications are continuous, one implication implicating another, folding upon folding (Lomax, 1995). Lomax (1995, p. 46) has considered the possibility of the photograph as a *becoming*, as 'partaking of a *continuous multiplicity*'. A becoming occurs when something affects another, its doing creating a composition with each other and something new becoming between the two (Lomax, 1995). This is because photographs are always involved with something else, either in a visual, metaphorical, literal, abstract, actual or a virtual sense. They are always combined with something else, therefore always partake in becomings, constantly folding and devoid of any delineated 'inside' or 'outside' (Lomax, 1995). The state of the image in the fold becomes fluid, extensible; it is a stretching, and folding, rather than a cut (Lomax, 1995). We cannot draw a neat boundary around images, nor should we argue that multiplicities in photographs are indivisible, messy and

disorderly. One logical step would be to turn to binary opposition to counter the disorderly multiplicity, to divide and to draw boundaries to the photographic image. However, this would again reduce a photograph to merely representing some elusive truth or fact. Instead of binary opposition, we can *enfold* photographs. To enfold means to fold-in, to adopt a practice of inclusion and involution, with one side implicating the other, being both and neither, being in-between (Lomax, 1995). Deleuze encourages this involution with AND, which has its place between sets and elements, neither one nor the other, constituting a multiplicity (Lomax, 1995). AND divides, it divides continuous multiplicities, which pertains to a fold (Lomax, 1995).

The becoming of photographs is achieved by folding its meanings we derive from it, implication upon implication connected with 'and'. The folds in the photograph demand us to be responsive to the possible multiplicities enfolded in a photograph and unfolded by a researcher; a responsibility which Lomax (1995) explicitly argues is held by *both* the image maker and the image viewer. The application of the concepts of enfolding and unfolding then appears to have a strong influence of which photographs appear and disappear (Dados, 2010). Similarly, enfolding and unfolding also influences the way researchers or participants perceive photographs for their research projects as useful or useless. This *selected unfolding* of images (choosing some over others) appears to be a relationship between experience, information and the image (Marks, 2008).

1.4   Selectively Unfolding Photographs—Image, Experience, Information

Why do only certain events and photographs draw the attention of people? Marks (2008) conceptualises images as vehicles that enfold the past through experience and hypothesises a triadic relationship between image, experience and information, by which we as viewers selectively unfold its meaning and perceive its usefulness. Images are selective unfolding of experience and are determined by information. They are enfolded through experience, but are also unfolded through experience, which is translated into information, which for the viewer becomes useful (Marks, 2008). The selecting and unfolding of images happens in accordance with the viewer's interests at hand, determining which images are worthy of circulation (Dados, 2010). Dados (2010) argues that images are not unfolded by experience alone, yet are also selected and unselected on the basis of information, rendering enfolded experiences within image either accessible or inaccessible.

1.5   Enfolding Experience and Information into Research Photographs

Researchers are often observed to code the surface signification of research photographs, thereby reducing their philosophical and contextual beyonds to insights, which can be articulated (Dados, 2010). The articulated insights and how they are unfolded are dependent on the chosen analytical approach of the researcher (see Chap. 5). This is determined by what one wants to find in the photograph, influenced by either a research question or exploring a phenomenon. Following Dados's (2010) development of Mark's experience–information–image relationship, research photographs can be a fold of information over experience, or experience over information. An image of experience is opaque and an image of information floats unanchored above experience (Dados, 2010), both in the same need of unfolding and analysis by the researcher. Photographs in their *becoming* can be argued to be a flux of two separate events—the spatialising and the interpretation— and the link between the two resides in the photograph (Dados, 2010).

1.6   Photography in Social Research

The reasons for employing photography in social research vary from the discovery and understanding of contextual social circumstances and structures of people (Miller, 2015) to its use as a theoretical vehicle for practical change. Such *use* of photography for anthropological reasons beyond illustration was first exhibited by Bateson and Mead (1942) in their field study *Balinese Character: A Photographic Analysis*, in which they visually documented the lives of Balinese women. However, only since the days of Collier (1957) have social scientists used photography as a valid and useful *method* for collecting data. Photographs were thus able to replace written field notes (Kanstrup, 2002) and have since found increasing functionality in research. For example, in Brekke (2003) study of daily lives of asylum seekers in Sweden, photographs created a positive effect on the relationship between Brekke and the refugees. By being engaged in taking photographs combined with the intended, the purpose of these images gave the asylum seekers time to think about their situation, consciously selecting what they themselves wanted to express. Brekke (2003) reported that the asylum seekers looked forward to seeing how their images turned out and displayed a sense of ownership in that the photograph were *theirs*, held in their hands. Using photography to explore society is capable of giving us more than good research relations a single striking image (Becker, 1974). Researchers can generate, utilise and create scholarly value with photography in different ways with the aim to ask questions, invite participants' responses, shifting its meaning and emphasis and presenting subjects or situations.

Photographic research *methods* are essentially modes of engagement which spatialise the concept of enfolding and unfolding of photographs for researchers.

This opens new understandings to existing photographic research methods and to the roles of the researcher and participant and the types of input they have in each method: *who* enfolds photographs and *who* unfolds and interprets them. After all, Chaplin (2002) recognises that photographs in sociology are *made*, rather than *taken*, its meaning constructed, instead of discovered (Felstead, Jewson, & Walters, 2004). This raises questions about the relative advantages and disadvantages of different photo-research methods particularly how to choose the most *appropriate* method(s). While there is no one 'right way' to employ a photographic research method, the researcher's choice of method is undoubtedly influenced by the research questions, the context, as well as any additional underlying philosophical foundations (Ray & Smith, 2011).

1.7   Photo-Elicitation

The most widespread application of photography as a research method is photo-elicitation. Photo-elicitation means to 'insert a photograph into a research interview' (Harper, 2002, p. 1472) and was first employed by Collier (1957) as an alternative method to open-ended interviewing. Photo-elicitation presents a unique attribute in that it almost *instantly* meets the same objectives as a well-prepared open-ended interview (Lapenta, 2011). By asking participants to view and interpret photographs with the researcher, perhaps similar to viewing a personal family album, the estrangement and distance so often attributed to traditional interviews fizzles (Schwartz, 1989), which stereotypical clipboards and audio-recorders are often argued to create (Woodward, 2008). People naturally appear to have a stronger familiarity with photographs than with clipboards or audio-recorders. Photographs have developed to be an embedded part of daily visual culture (Woodward, 2008). Photographs can also trigger sensory experiences within participants, which can be of intuitive, interior, or aesthetic nature (Warren, 2005); and photo-elicitation *elicits* such experiences and higher level values, assumptions, beliefs and cultures of participants.

1.7.1   Participant Insights

Photo-elicitation enjoys a continuous and increasing application in research in anthropology and visual sociology, mainly due to its emphasis on an ethnographic focus and its redirection and repositioning of authority from researcher to participants (Hurworth, 2004; Parker, 2009). Photo-elicitation does not presume an underlying objectivity, but instead acknowledges the powers of social constructions and individuals' unique elicitations and personal narrative after reviewing a photograph (Harper, 2002). Photographs are not neutral evidence and contain subjective meaning instilled in their make and use; therefore, a photograph is a subjective

composition of observation, production, reproduction and display (Rose, 2000). Adding a photograph to the interview process provokes more than a response from participants (Hurworth, 2004) and 'acts as a medium for eliciting the actors' perceptions, memories, concerns, and social constructions' (Parker, 2009, p. 1115). Photographs therefore can acquire multiple and unpredictable meanings by participants (Lapenta, 2011) and photo-elicitation supports those critical explorations, which holds the potential to uncover very specific, local or indigenous knowledges for researchers (Packard, 2008). The 'polysemic quality of images' (Harper, 2002, p. 15) allows for different interpretations by observers based on their views, local knowledge and insights, as well as the exchange of personal meaning and values that the images and their content might hold for them (Collier & Collier, 1986).

1.7.2 Research Relationships

A strong feature of photo-elicitation remains as its ability to redefine the research relationship between the researcher and the participants. Harper (2002) suggested that photo-elicitation is a postmodern dialogue based on the authority of the subject, instead of that of the researcher. For participants, this overarching approach offers more autonomy in the research project and process and being able to add topics to the research agenda important to them (Lorenz & Kolb, 2009). Collier and Collier (1986, p. 105) argue that the images and the new communication situation, which these images create, 'invited people to take the lead in the inquiry, making full use of their expertise'. This can create a foundation of co-creation of knowledge and build alliances with participants that can span throughout the entire research process (Lapenta, 2011; Lorenz & Kolb, 2009). In essence, the photographs and their elicitation become a vehicle of engagement between researcher and participant; those engagements can create alliances, which can be invaluable to researchers and participants alike and allows researchers to be able to consult participants in different stages of the research process. At the same time, those alliances can create opportunities to bring participants' and communities' *real lives* into a research process. The awareness and understanding of participants' challenges from their perspective can influence policy-making efforts intended by the researcher, collaborations with other nonprofit organisations or governments, or other methods that can lead to actionable programs to address their concerns (Lorenz & Kolb, 2009).

Photo-elicitation as an overarching research approach has remained a polysemous phenomenon and different research methods have emerged with which researchers can elicit information with participants through the means of photos. The next section outlines different methods of photo-elicitation. Those methods somewhat overlap; however, each method has its own objectives, participants and role of photographer (Warren, 2005). Despite their extensive coverage in the literature, it is important to summarise the different methods briefly in their general understanding to isolate their different uses and approaches. We further want to