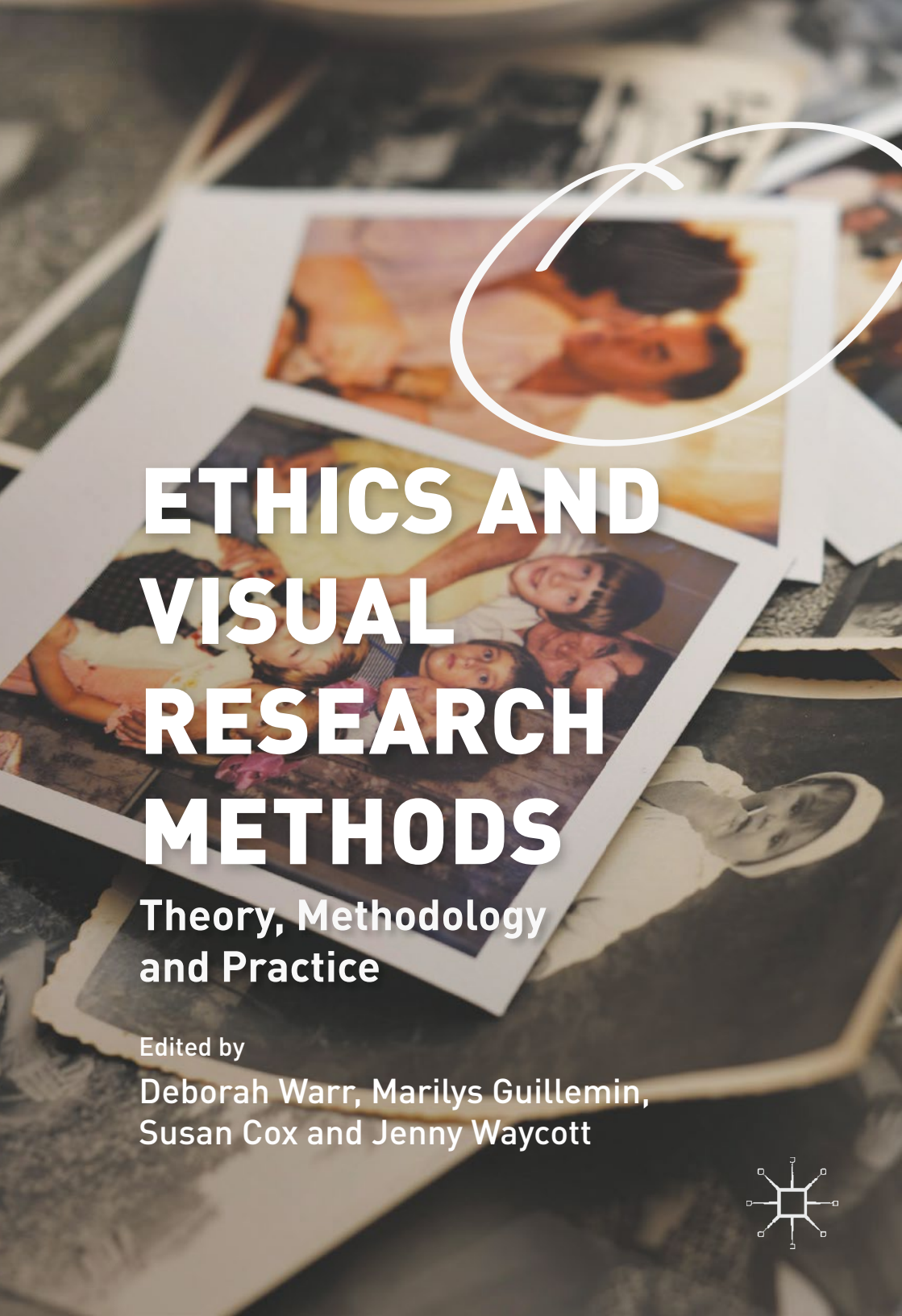

ETHICS AND VISUAL RESEARCH METHODS

Theory, Methodology and Practice

Edited by
Deborah Warr, Marilys Guillemin, Susan Cox and Jenny Waycott

Ethics and Visual Research Methods

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Theory, Methodology, and Practice

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In memory of
Dr. Sarah Drew

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CHAPTER 1

Ethical Issues in Visual Research and the Value of Stories from the Field

Deborah Warr, Jenny Waycott, Marilys Guillemin, and Susan Cox

Introduction

Visual research has been gaining prominence since the 1940s. One of the best known and earliest uses of visual methods in research is Bateson and Mead's 1942 study, *Balinese Character*, documenting ethnographic analyses using photographs of Balinese village life (Bateson and Mead 1942). Visual research in anthropology continued to dominate, until the rise of visual methods in sociology in the 1960s and 1970s. Prosser (1998) and Harper (1989) documented the move toward visual research in sociology during this period, highlighting the use of photographic representations of social life and social inequalities. Visual sociology is indebted to Howard Becker (1974a, b) who sought to develop the rigor of visual methodologies, including the role of theory, reliability and validity in the field of visual research. Since these early beginnings in anthropology and sociology, visual research has since been incorporated into the methodological toolboxes of many other academic disciplines including geography, cultural studies, health studies, psychology, urban studies, design, art research and performance studies. Expansion into these varied disciplines

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has occurred in parallel with a proliferation of approaches for conducting visual projects and visual media that can be analyzed. Visual data analyzed by contemporary researchers includes photographs, video stories, video diaries, drawings, portraits, cartoons and 'found' images that are generated or gathered by participants and researchers in 'stand alone' and mixed methods studies.

Research involving human participants is inevitably laced with issues of ethics, and social science research that probes individuals' experiences of personal and social worlds poses particular kinds of ethical obligations. In a foreword to his collaborative book that explored situations of social and economic disenfranchisement, *The Weight of the World* (1999, 1), sociologist Pierre Bourdieu asks, 'How can we not feel anxious about making **private** worlds **public**' (emphasis in the original). For Bourdieu, social research is grounded in tacit (and therefore potentially problematic) conditions of trust between researchers and participants. Researchers bear responsibility to protect participants from the dangers of exposure and misrepresentation (Bourdieu 1999). Visual research methods that offer new modes of private expression should elicit, if not anxiety, then conscientious attention to risks that are arguably heightened by the descriptive and explicatory potential of images. It is only relatively recently, however, that attention has focussed on specific ethical dilemmas and challenges that are associated with the evolving possibilities of visual methods (e.g., see Gubrium and Harper 2013; Clark 2012; Pink 2011a; Prosser et al. 2008; Rose 2012; Wiles et al. 2008).

These discussions grapple with the ways in which visual methods are reworking familiar ethical principles and introducing new kinds of ethical risks. Following other discussions of research ethics, there is consensus that ethical issues cannot be boiled down to a set of instructions, and necessitates careful and open reflection on the practice of research, including the contexts in which it is conducted. There is also broad agreement that some ethical issues encountered by visual researchers are familiar to all social researchers. Such issues are typically framed by ethical principles that require researchers to prevent or minimize potential harms associated with participation in research, protect participants' anonymity and confidentiality and ensure participants are able to give informed consent to participate. Other ethical issues become more prominent in visual research than they might be for other methods. They are associated with authorship and ownership of data, the circumstances of projects that have multiple and disparate aims and issues of representation and audience reception

(Waycott et al. 2015). This summary of key ethical issues does not cover the gamut of ethical issues that may arise, but encapsulates sets of issues that are particularly relevant to visual research.

Ethical research builds on a professional culture that has a shared understanding of the aims and risks of research, and which generates grounded precepts that can guide its everyday practice (Kendig 1996, 143). These precepts are grounded because they crystallize insights gleaned through sharing stories from the field in ways that seek to identify common issues and effective strategies for promoting ethical research. This collection contributes to efforts to generate grounded understanding of methodological and ethical dilemmas that are encountered by visual researchers, and the practices they develop to address them. Researchers consider real-world ethical issues, explain the strategies that were used to address these issues and note those that remain unresolved. The breadth of settings and methodological approaches that are discussed reflect our conviction that visual researchers should aspire to transcend disciplinary differences and establish common understanding of what constitutes ethical practice when using visual research methods.

Ethical Regulations and Guidelines: Where Are the Gaps?

Ethical challenges arise at all stages of the visual research process: from research design, recruitment of individuals or collectives, data collection, analysis and presentation and dissemination of research findings. Guillemin and Gillam (2004) provide a helpful framework that identifies two dimensions of research ethics. The first dimension, conceptualized as 'procedural ethics', refers to the ways in which researchers must abide by the formal regulatory systems that guide institutionally based research. Most developed countries have research ethics boards or human research ethics committee (REBs or RECs, depending on the national or institutional context), and protocols and systems of governance that operate to review, approve and monitor the processes of procedural ethics for human research. Researchers must be able to demonstrate that they have satisfactorily addressed a number of requirements, including providing a detailed plan covering such things as how research participants will be recruited and how meaningful informed consent will be obtained, in order to gain approval to commence data collection. This process of 'procedural ethics' requires researchers to identify in advance, and be prepared for, ethical

issues that are likely to arise. In some instances, procedural ethics requires researchers to justify why the research is needed and that it is methodologically sound.

The other dimension of research ethics is conceptualized as 'ethics in practice' and refers to the unanticipated and contingent ethical issues that arise in the process of conducting research in real-world settings (Guillemin and Gillam 2004). 'Ethics in practice' requires researchers to uphold key ethical principles while responding to ethical issues that may present in unexpected ways. Ethics in practice can be particularly fraught for researchers working at methodological frontiers where experimental research practices generate emerging and unanticipated ethical issues. As visual methodologies become established and continue to expand, both researchers and REB/REC members must learn to recognize the spectrum of potential risks and assess the adequacy of ethical responses.

The failure for REB/REC members to grasp the potential and risks of methodological innovations results in two sorts of problems in relation to procedural ethics. First, projects may gain approval to proceed although there are outstanding ethical issues that have not been considered. Conversely, worthy and rigorous studies may fail to gain approval to proceed because visual methodologies are not well understood by review board members (Daly and McDonald 1996). The latter is perceived as a widespread problem that discourages researchers from pursuing methodological innovation (Nind et al. 2012) and can foster antipathy between researchers and ethics review boards (see Cox, Chap. 19). Ethics review boards therefore need to be reassured of the value of visual methods so that they can assess relevant projects fairly. Once projects have gained ethics approval, researchers are likely to encounter issues of ethics in practice because they are operating in complex and dynamic settings. Responding appropriately to emerging ethical issues when conducting and disseminating research is enhanced through shared understanding of ethical issues among researchers using visual method sacross diverse disciplinary and research contexts, and engaging with those charged with overseeing the processes of procedural ethics.

Codes of practice and disciplinary guidelines are important resources for visual researchers, although they do not all address the specific circumstances of visual methods (see, e.g., the *National Statement of Ethical Conduct in Human Research in Australia*, 2007, and the *Canadian Tri-Council Policy Statement*, 2nd Edition). The International Visual Sociology Association (IVSA) has produced a helpful Code of Research

Ethics and Guidelines (2009) which sets out general principles followed by ten statements of ethical standards that the IVSA expects of its members. Wiles et al. (2008) have also provided a review outlining key ethical issues for researchers using visual methods. These guidelines tend to be disciplinary specific. Within contexts of advancing methodological innovation and increasingly hybridized disciplinary fields of research, inclusive discussions of ethical issues are invaluable for navigating uncharted waters and cross-fertilizing good ideas. It is also useful to understand the methodological potential of visual research because this is strongly related to the ethical issues that may be encountered.

Why Use Visual Methods?

Drawn by the potential for research participants to reflect on and describe experiences in new ways, social researchers are collecting and analyzing an expanding range of visual data. Gillian Rose (2014) identifies three key claims that are made about the methodological appeal of visual methods. These are capacities to generate rich data, often in combination with other modes of data collection such as oral, textual and sensory experience; explore 'taken-for-granted' experience and tacit forms of knowledge; and foster participatory and support collaborative processes of knowledge creation. While it should not be assumed that these varied capacities are to be achieved simply by using visual methods, they may be realized through the skill, imagination and thoughtfulness of researchers and the involvement of interested and committed research participants.

In addition to now well-established visual methods, such as photovoice and photo-elicitation, the possibilities for visual research are flourishing through developments in, and the growing availability of, digital technologies. These technologies offer capacities for research participants to produce images and videos, sometimes independent of researchers, while geospatial mapping techniques and 'wearable' cameras create new forms of visual data enabling researchers to systematically collect volumes of visual data in ways that research participants may be scarcely aware of. The contemporary proliferation of visual culture is also demanding the attention of researchers who are analyzing content posted on social media, gaming sites, video blogs, online memorials and other online platforms to gain insights into transforming social worlds.

Researchers have recognized the potential of visual methods to engage populations who have been marginalized from processes of research. They

can also supplement or even supplant 'standard' research techniques that use discursive methods, such as interviews, questionnaires and focus groups. Visual methods are increasingly being used in combination with other novel methodologies, such as mobile methods (Hall 2009; Ross et al. 2009), to generate 'multi-sensory and multi-model' data in the form of images, sounds and movement (Pink 2008, 2011b). This expanded expressive potential has led to visual methods being considered useful for researching experiences that participants may not be able to readily formulate and communicate in words, and for research involving participants, such as children and people with cognitive and physical disabilities, who may not always be able to articulate their thoughts and experiences in words.

The participatory possibilities of visual research methods are also of considerable interest to researchers. Participants can have active roles in visual research by creating drawings, photographs, videos and other artifacts that communicate ideas in ways that make subjective sense. Giving presence to experiential accounts of social life that have otherwise been overlooked imbues research with potentially significant epistemological and political effects. Visual methods can reframe what counts as valid forms of knowledge, and compelling visual representations of social issues can be used to foster public interest and galvanize social action (Pink 2008).

Visual research methods are also being adapted to explore and reflect on the significance of arts-based, performative and aesthetic practices. In these fields, visual researchers study art works and installations, theater and dance performances, relationships between art and social and political practices, representational effects and the personal and social outcomes of involvement in creative processes.

With expanding applications for visual research methods, it is not surprising that they present new ethical dilemmas and challenges and there is much to be learned from researchers working at these methodological frontiers. To facilitate this learning from practice we developed an international project that comprised a series of interactive forums involving visual researchers and members of REBs/RECs. The structure for the project demonstrated our conviction that formulating ethical tenets requires processes that serve to build consensus within communities of practitioners. The project also stimulated the reflections that are collected here so we briefly explain how we went about it, and the six key sets of procedural and ethics in practice issues that were identified as particularly relevant to visual research methods (Waycott et al. 2015; Cox et al. 2014).

Engaging Visual Researchers in Discussions of Ethical Issues

We describe our approach as an *in vivo* (within the living) method that refers to research conducted in natural environments. It is a description that conceivably applies to many social research projects, and particularly ethnographic projects, but they are rarely explicitly described as such. A vivid exception is found in Loic Wacquant's book *Body & Soul* (Wacquant 2004, 16) where he describes an extended participant observation study that he conducted in a boxing gym in South Chicago as an *in vivo* approach. We invoke the notion of an *in vivo* method for an enquiry that draws on research stories from the field to answer a series of questions: Were visual research methods generating new kinds of ethical issues? What strategies had researchers developed to respond to these ethical issues? What are the unresolved ethical issues?

We asked researchers working in universities from around the world who are using visual methods for social research to prepare discussion papers that responded to these questions, and invited researchers and REB/REC members to participate in facilitated discussions, workshops and consultations (Howell et al. 2015). Some workshops were standalone events and others were included in the programs of international conferences. Discussion papers and notes were analyzed for content and themes, and the preliminary findings were tested at subsequent workshops and obtaining written feedback from key informants. This iterative process crystallized six categories of ethical issues: consent; confidentiality; minimizing harm; fuzzy boundaries; authorship and ownership; and representation and reception. These categories informed the development of ethical guidelines for visual researchers that have been widely disseminated (Cox et al. 2014). Notably, the guidelines address separately both visual researchers and REB/REC members; and they are not intended to be prescriptive but rather to identify critical questions for researchers and REB/REC members to consider. An overview of the six categories rehearses key issues that are explored in the following chapters.

Consent

Respect is a key ethical principle that is upheld by enabling individuals to make informed decisions about whether they want to participate in research. Consent must be voluntary and based on having access to sufficient information that clearly explains the purpose and aims of research, what is required from participants and any risks that are posed to them. The conditions for obtaining informed consent are now well established

in research practices, and include thoughtful understanding of the circumstances in which participants may lack capacity to give informed consent. The exigencies of visual methods, however, are likely to require standard processes for gaining informed consent from participants to be reconsidered. For instance, it may be preferable to negotiate consent in stages (e.g., to collect data, to analyze data and for dissemination and public engagement). This is because visual research projects are more likely to involve discrete, but interlinked, creative and research components. Participants may also need opportunities to consider plans for how visual data will be used in reports or exhibitions before giving their consent. Researchers may also need to consider issues of consent in relation to the depiction of third parties who may appear in visual data generated in the processes of research, and which can involve legal considerations. Cultural protocols and sensitivities may also apply to the dissemination of photographs of deceased persons.

User-generated content posted onto social media sites are potentially rich veins of data that are also being mined by researchers. Research involving 'found' images, videos and other visual artifacts can present barriers to obtaining informed consent from the subjects and/or owners of images that are used as forms of data. Social media has notable tendencies to dissolve distinctions between public and private with effects of complicating issues of consent. Researchers therefore need to consider the intended audiences of material found on social media sites, the feasibility of seeking consent to analyze visual data or devise alternative ethical strategies that uphold the principle of respect for individuals who may not be aware that they are the subjects of research.

Confidentiality

Researchers should protect participants' privacy and confidentiality. Confidentiality is an obligation not to use private information for purposes other than those for which it was given. Participants must trust researchers to maintain their anonymity and confidentiality even though they usually will not know them. The implications of camera-based methods for visual research are particularly important to consider here because photographs and videos are capable of creating highly detailed and intimate portraits of individuals.

Among qualitative researchers, preserving research participants' privacy and confidentiality typically involves tactics such as assigning pseudonyms to participants or using numbers or personas when quoting data. These

strategies are less effective when referring to visual, rather than textual, data. Blurring or pixelating faces or other image content to de-identify participants or their associates, either directly or indirectly, is sometimes used; however, it may be impossible to completely de-identity participants without diminishing the richness of the data (Prosser et al. 2008). Further, such tactics can be in tension with expectations for research integrity that obliges researchers to be accurate and honest when presenting their data (Jordan 2014). Jordan (2014) also argues that although image management can be justified in some circumstances, researchers should avoid manipulating images in ways that can be construed as deceptive, misleading to the expectations of participants or causing harm. She offers succinct and useful guidelines for altering identifiable images when reporting the findings from visual methods studies (Jordan 2014, 451).

Complicating these issues is the ease with which digital images can be replicated and shared, and this means that researchers may have limited control over images that are generated for research purposes. Technological advances, including automated facial recognition and Global Information System/Global Positioning Systems technologies, can also subvert the efforts of researchers to promote the confidentiality of research participants. Automated cameras such as the SenseCams, small portable cameras that are usually worn around participants' necks, are also increasingly used for the purposes of research (Kelly et al. 2013). The cameras capture an image every five seconds and thousands of images over the course of a day, potentially intruding into the private spheres of participants' lives and those of others they encounter. Preserving confidentiality in visual research projects is becoming increasingly complex with the use of these visual technologies.

Some researchers suggest that ethical norms for maintaining confidentiality can be in tension with other aims for visual research, including objectives of promoting participant empowerment by dispersing autonomy and ownership in research relationships, and enabling socially and politically marginalized participants to have visual presence and voice (Tilley and Woodthorpe 2011). This can introduce thorny ethical dilemmas when multiple objectives involve diverging rationales. Nespor (2000) has explored tensions that arise when ethical obligations to anonymize research sites can limit the local usefulness of research findings; and may be ineffective if key words typed into search engines easily circumvent researchers' efforts to obfuscate the distinctive features of towns and suburbs. These issues are also relevant to funding contexts that increasingly