Using visual methods: guidance for ethical research

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Introduction

This document gives an overview of the current ethical guidelines on visual methods to assist researchers and research ethics committees at the University of Portsmouth. The structure is as follows:

1. **An overview of the most relevant guidance documents from academic bodies**
2. **A brief look at the legal framework**
3. **An outline of the four main ethical dilemmas that researchers should be aware of when using visual approaches.**

Please note this document is to be used as initial guidance and researchers should look into the specific ethical dilemmas and literature related to their particular topic.

1. An overview of the most relevant guidance documents from academic bodies

With the use of visual images, there are always ethical issues around potential vulnerability and the discussions around anonymity, which cannot be preserved if faces of people or specific geographical locations or other spaces can be identified in visual images (e.g. photographs, drawings).

In summary the most relevant guidance documents to date are as follows:

- American Anthropological Association Guidelines for Evaluation of Ethnographic Visual Media (2015) https://americananthro.org/about/policies/aaa-guidelines-for-evaluation-of-ethnographic-visual-media/

- Association of Social Anthropologists of the UK and the Commonwealth (ASA) Ethical Guidelines for good research practice (2011) www.theasa.org/ethics.shtml

- British Psychological Society (BPS) Code of Human Research Ethics, 2010 http://www.bps.org.uk/sites/default/files/documents/code_of_human_research_ethics.pdf

- Hansen, S. and Colucci, E. (2020) Towards the development of ethics guidelines for visual psychology: A review of relevant visual research ethics guidelines https://explore.bps.org.uk/content/bpsqmip/1/30/83#b3

- Howell, C., Cox, S., Drew, S., Guillemin, M., Warr, D., & Waycott, J. (2014) Exploring ethical frontiers of visual methods. *Research Ethics*, 10(4), 208–213. **https://doi.org/10.1177/1747016114552685**

- International Visual Sociology Association Code of Research Ethics and Guidelines (2009) https://visualsociology.org/wp-content/uploads/IVSA-Ethics-and-Guidelines.pdf

- Salway et al (2011) Ethnic diversity and inequality ethical and scientific rigour in social research. Joseph Rowntree Foundation www.jrf.org.uk/publications/ethnic-diversity-social-research

- Wiles, R., Prosser, J., Bagnoli, A, Clark, A. Davies, K., Holland, S., Renold, E. (2008) Visual Ethics: Ethical Issues in Visual Research, ESRC National Centre for Research Methods Review Paper, http://eprints.ncrm.ac.uk/421/1/MethodsReviewPaperNCRM-011.pdf

2. A brief look at the legal framework

The legal frameworks on taking photographs in public/private places and the copyright of images should also be taken into consideration. If images are taken in countries outside of the UK, also check their guidance as they can vary. Taking photographs in public or private spaces should always comply with the data protection acts of each country.

In UK law, individuals can take photographs or film individuals or places that are in the public domain and require permission from individuals or employers if taken in private spaces. Definitions of public domain can be difficult and if individuals have a reasonable expectation that a space is private, then images could be deemed an invasion of privacy under UK law. Furthermore, there may be ethical concerns about taking such images – so research ethics should always comply with the law whilst also considering what is ethical.

In the UK, the main privacy requirement is the Data Protection Act 2018, found here: https://www.gov.uk/data-protection

In the UK, the government guidance 'Copyright notice: digital images, photographs and the internet' (updated 4 January 2021) can be found here: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/copyright-notice-digital-images-photographs-and-the-internet/copyright-notice-digital-images-photographs-and-the-internet

And there is more UK government guidance specifically for photographers and the UK's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR[1]) here: https://ipo.blog.gov.uk/2019/06/11/copyright-and-gdpr-for-photographers/

In brief: When research participants capture images for the research, the copyright of those images is owned by the research participant. The researcher needs to get written consent from the research participant to transfer the copyright to the researcher. Researchers should remember to address both copyright issues and ethical issues, which may overlap but should be considered separately as well.

There is a useful guide to street photography and the law in the U, with links to relevant official guidance on the Photography News website, see here: https://www.photographynews.co.uk/inspiration/the-laws-of-street-photography/

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[1] To understand the implications of GDPR for research projects more widely, see the Information Commissioner's Office guidance here: https://ico.org.uk/for-organisations/uk-gdpr-guidance-and-resources/the-research-provisions/

3. An outline of the four main ethical dilemmas that researchers should be aware of when using visual approaches.

The use of visual images produced by research participants is a relatively recent approach in social research seen as particularly helpful for engaging with marginalised or difficult-to-reach groups (Guillemin & Drew 2010[2]). However, the fact that this approach is used to engage with often vulnerable people or challenging situations brings its own ethical dilemmas with regards to four main issues:

> **(a) Identification vs. Anonymity:** as faces and places are shown in the photographs which could be potentially published in the research; 'wish to be known' vs 'wish for privacy'

Anonymity is not always possible when visual images are a part of the methodology. However, steps can be taken to minimise any risk to the participant by: gaining informed consent and continuing these dialogues with participants during the course of the research (Salway et al 2011 'Research design and conduct', pp.34 - 36[3]); describing any visual images in publications if the participant does not wish to be identified visually; pixellating faces of participants who do not wish to be identified visually; changing places and names in published accounts of the data collection to make participants hard to trace. This may lead to discussions in which participants express views of wishing to be identified in the research findings, i.e. the 'wish to be heard' and the 'wish to be known' in research findings (see BPS Code of Human Research Ethics 2010: 9). The researcher should consider what is appropriate and be able to explain to the participants (e.g. the researcher might not have control over where such information might get published on the internet). Having a 'staged' or layered process of consent can be useful to ensure ethical dilemmas are engaged with during the research process. (Pink quoted in Cox et al 2014: 13[4])

> **(b) Disclosure vs. withholding:** The photographing of illegal or reputation-harming activities that could place the research participants or others (including the researcher) in ethically difficult or dangerous situations versus biased reportage through exclusion of certain aspects.

Visual sociologists have reported cases of research participants taking inappropriate images or images showing harmful behaviour, for examples: young people taking 'surprise' photographs of siblings naked (Clark-Ibanez 2004: 1518[5]) or images of drug use (Joanou 2009: 219[6]). In any research project, the researcher should consider what they would do in instances where harmful behaviour or adverse experiences are exposed by the research or even created by the research process – e.g.

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[2] Guillemin, M. and Drew, S. 2010. 'Questions of process in participant-generated visual methodologies'. In Visual Studies, 25: 2, 175-188

[3] Salway et al 2011. Ethnic diversity and inequality ethical and scientific rigour in social research. Joseph Roundtree Foundation www.jrf.org.uk/publications/ethnic-diversity-social-research

[4] Cox, S. Drew, S. Guillemin, M. Howell, C. Warr, D. and Waycott, J. (2014) Guidelines for Ethical Visual Research Methods, The University of Melbourne, Melbourne

[5] Clark-Ibanez, M. 2004. 'Framing the social world with photo-elicitation interviews'. American Behavioural Scientist, vol. 47 no.12. 1507 – 1527

[6] Joanou, J. P. 2009. 'The bad and the ugly: ethical concerns in participatory photographic methods with children living and working on the streets of Lima, Peru', Visual Studies, vol. 24, no. 3, pp.214-223

photographs taken of intimate spaces that would not normally be visible or shared by other research methods, or images that evoke painful experiences or memories. The guidelines usually recommend two ways forward: first, to have a plan in the original ethics form to minimise harm (e.g. making the researcher's position clear in the research briefing for participants; being able to signpost to relevant services should participants need support); and second, to show an iterative, flexible approach to research ethics to cope with unforeseen circumstances (Howell et al 2014[7]).

> **(c) Valid consent:** Gaining informed consent from participants so they understand the implications of taking photographs for research; gaining informed consent from other people present in the photographs; written vs verbal consent and cultural expectations; trust vs. suspicion.
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> - All participants must be fully informed about the project and sign a consent form and/or have given oral consent. Included in this consent should be the consent to hand over copyright to the researcher.
> - Other people in the photographs should also be asked for consent to have their images used in the research in the same way, using a consent form. Images of children under 13 years of age needs consent from parent/guardian.
> - Cultural expectations of photography and sharing images should be considered for each region/setting, along with any concerns about stigma/discrimination against any groups of people or settings (see point (d) below).
> - It is suggested that researchers have a process by which they can review images one by one with research participants, to double check they consent to each image (they can withdraw consent for particular images whilst still giving consent for others). Researchers should consider asking if some images can be produced in other ways – e.g. a drawing of a photograph might be used as an illustration, or obtaining a similar image from the internet as an illustration.
> - Researchers need to consider what they will do when consent cannot be obtained – are there other ways of creating images with participants that don't identify their faces/locations? (for examples drawing, collages, visual descriptions etc – see literature on creative methodologies in research, e.g. Kara 2020[8], Rose 2022[9]).
> - Ethics and copyright need to be considered when taking any images from the internet, see UK Government guidance 'Copyright notice: digital images, photographs and the internet' (updated 4 January 2021, see here: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/copyright-notice-digital-images-photographs-and-the-internet/copyright-notice-digital-images-photographs-and-the-internet)

> **(d) Voyeurism vs. reality:** Researching with a frequently stigmatised, marginalised group or in a challenging situation can lead to sensitive stories that can be upsetting for participants, arouse

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[7] Howell, C., Cox, S., Drew, S., Guillemin, M., Warr, D., & Waycott, J. (2014). Exploring ethical frontiers of visual methods. Research Ethics, 10(4), 208–213. https://doi.org/10.1177/1747016114552685

[8] Kara, H. (2020) Creative Research Methods. A Practical Guide. (2nd edition). Bristol: Bristol University Press.

[9] Rose, G. (2022) Visual Methodologies. An Introduction to Researching with Visual Materials. (5th edition) London: Sage.

emotions in readers, attract unhelpful media or other unwanted interest (e.g. far right groups), distract from the main research questions.

Ethical issues can become all the more salient when research participants may be considered from vulnerable groups or backgrounds (e.g. children, see Luttrell 2010[10], or in vulnerable populations, see Pepe and Addimando 2023[11]) or in challenging situations (e.g. imagery in global health, see Charani et al 2022[12]). There is a debate as to whether such research is unethical because of its focus on 'victims' which gives only one dimension to social life and can give a skewed vision of people's lives if we consider them only as 'the oppressed' (Stoczkowski 2008: 349[13]) or indeed as solely 'research participants'. This is a very immediate and difficult challenge which should be addressed throughout any project, both through close adherence to the latest social science and social care guidelines which offer useful and stringent advice, along with continuing reflexivity throughout the research process (Salway et al 2011[14]).

- There is a useful discussion on the ethics of image use by non-governmental organisations and charities and the 'aesthetic turn' in international relations, e.g. Bleiker et al 2013, Bleiker 2009[15], and see the report 'Putting the people in the pictures first. Ethical guidelines for the collection and use of content (images and stories)' 2019 London: Bond, available here: https://www.bond.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/bond-ethical-guidelines-for-collection-and-use-of-content.pdf

This document is intended as a starting point for understanding the ethics of visual approaches in research – it does not cover all the literature or guidance. Specific considerations will depend on the research project's particular field and intended research participants/topic.

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[10] Luttrell, W. (2010) 'A camera is a big responsibility': a lens for analysing children's visual voices, Visual Studies, 25:3, 224-237, DOI: 10.1080/1472586X.2010.523274
[11] Pep, A. and Addimando, L. (2023 Using Innovative Qualitative Research Methods in Vulnerable Populations Image-based research as culturally sensitive approach. *The Routledge International Handbook of innovative Qualitative Psychological Research*. London: Routledge.
[12] Charani, Esmita et al. (2022) The use of imagery in global health: an analysis of infectious disease documents and a framework to guide practice *The Lancet Global Health*, Volume 11, Issue 1, e155 - e164
[13] Stoczkowski, W. (2008) The 'fourth aim' of anthropology. Between knowledge and ethics. Anthropological Theory 8 (4), 345-356.
[14] Salway et al (2011) Ethnic diversity and inequality ethical and scientific rigour in social research. Joseph Roundtree Foundation www.jrf.org.uk/publications/ethnic-diversity-social-research
[15] Bleiker, R. David Campbell, Emma Hutchison & Xzarina Nicholson (2013) The visual dehumanisation of refugees, Australian Journal of Political Science, 48:4, 398-416, DOI: 10.1080/10361146.2013.840769
Bleiker, R. (2009) Aesthetics and World Politics. Palgrave Macmillan.