Visual Methods

What are Visual Methods?

For a variety of reasons visual methods are becoming more acceptable, viable and increasingly central to qualitative research (Pink, 2012). Pink (2007) explains that images are everywhere from our academic work, everyday lives and conversations to our imaginations and dreams. 'The visual' is interwoven with our personal identities, narratives, lifestyles, cultures, and fundamental to the construction of social life in contemporary Western societies (Pink, 2007; Phoenix & Rich, 2017). However, visual imagery is not neutral, having been constructed through various practices, technologies and knowledges (Rose, 2016), and it is this interest in visual research which continues to gain popularity. This is evidenced in the increasing number of visual science journals, conferences and specialised organisations, as well as the increasing use of visual means to gather data, and communicate findings (Pink, 2012).

According to Harrison (2004), a research design that uses visual evidence can be described as visual methods. Photographic images are the most widely used, however visual methods can also include, videos, drawings, collages, diagrams, posters, sign and symbols (Phoenix & Rich, 2017; Phoenix, 2010). However, it is important to stress that visual methods are not purely visual, focusing solely on images or visual technologies. Instead, visual methods pay attention to the visual aspects of culture, and often need to be supplemented with words (Pink, 2007).

Visual methods, as a field of scholarship, is complex and diverse. Uniting themes, such as media and technologies, a focus on the visual, and attending to a range of ethical issues, position visual research as multi-disciplinary (Pink, 2012). This has been demonstrated within a number of key texts which present visual methods as not being discipline specific (Banks, 2001; Pink, 2007; 2012; Rose, 2016). Visual methods associates itself with a range of different disciplines, in several different ways, and in doing so creates an important bridge between the world of academic scholarship and that of applied practice (Pink, 2012). Drawing on the specific example of physical culture, sport and exercise, it has been demonstrated that visual methods are gaining increasing attention within this domain (Phoenix, 2010; Phoenix and Rich, 2017). In a special issue of *Qualitative Research in Sport and Exercise Sciences,* focusing on visual methods in physical cultures, Phoenix (2010) introduces articles that employ approaches such as visual ethnography, auto-photography and using film to gather respondent data. This would a great starting point for any students considering visual methods for a research project, especially those within the field of sport, exercise and health.

Why Use Visual Methods?

Using visual methods within research can be useful for several reasons. Phoenix (2010) and Sparkes and Smith (2014) present some of these reasons which include the following:

- Visual methods present an alternative way of understanding the world, going beyond that which has been constructed and communicated through the written and spoken word. 'The visual' is ever present in society and hold the power to show things rather than just tell.
- Visual materials are also a unique form of data that have the ability to hold complex layers of meaning. In this form, these layers of meaning are more accessible not only to the audience but researchers and participants also.
- Visual methods can also increase the participation and involvement of the participants, empowering them in the research process.
- Using visual methods can also make points more vivid, evoking a particular kind of response. Thus, 'the visual' can be a powerful medium to create or convey key points, arguments or emotions.
- Acknowledging that 'the visual' can act in powerful ways, both on and in us, it also shapes how we see, how we are allowed to see, what we can and can't see, and as such, what we do and don't do.

While visual methods do offer a valuable alternative approach to research, stepping away from the more traditional research methods, it is also important to highlight that visual methods cannot do everything nor are they "a panacea for understanding" (Phoenix, 2010:94). There is no one way to carry out qualitative research and, as with all methods and methodologies, it is essential that the most appropriate approach to the research context is selected (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). Yet, as Phoenix (2010) explains, visual methods are one valuable way of examining the social world and researchers should consider this potential incorporating them into their methods toolbox.

Types of Visual Methods

Harrison (2002) distinguishes between using 'the visual' as either a topic or a resource. Using visual materials as a topic focuses on 'the visual' itself as the subject of the research (Phoenix, 2010). Studies of art, film, photography and advertising would fall into this category, as well as analysis of how 'the visual' is produced, constructed and consumed (Harrison, 2002). The alternative approach of 'the visual' as a resource, instead uses it as a means for accessing data around wider topics of interest (Harrison, 2002; Phoenix, 2010). For example, using images to provide further context and information on the research environment and the activities that take place there.

Visual methods are often understood in terms of how the visual material has been produced (Banks, 2007; Phoenix, 2010). Visual materials can either be **researcher produced, participant produced** or **found,** meaning that they are pre-existing and drawn upon for the purposes of the research. This is not an exhaustive list, but a starting point, introducing some of the key approaches as to how visual materials are produced and used within qualitative research. Also, acknowledging that visual methods are seldom purely visual, they are often accompanied by other research methods such as interviews or observations, as well as words as the medium of expression for the researcher and participants (Bryman, 2012).

Found visual data is the pre-existing visual representations that exist in aspects of everyday life. This can come in the forms of media, artwork and advertising, and can be found in a variety of contexts including the commercial sector, media and entertainment, and education (Phoenix & Rich, 2017). Therefore, found visual data is not produced by either the researcher or the participants, but is pre-existing and selected based on judgement as to whether the visual materials are relevant to the research topic. Using found visual data, researchers are able to explore social issues through the materials that are produced and shared publicly. Interpretation of found visual data can provide insights into areas such as identity, embodiment, inequality and power, as well as challenge and disrupt dominant practices within the chosen research field (Phoenix & Rich, 2017). Ultimately, found visual data is used as secondary data, as the topic of research and analysis, and as highlighted, this data is plentiful within many aspects of society and therefore inexpensive and readily accessible (Marvasti, 2004).

Within qualitative research, researchers can produce their own visual data to document and analyse. This can include visual materials such as sketches, diagrams and signs, yet video and photography continue to be the most prevalent (Phoenix & Rich, 2017). These visual materials can be used within the research process to document, represent and analyse certain aspects in the research setting of choice, as well as in the presentation of research, using visual materials to represent outcomes and findings. One method within the data collection process that makes use of **researcher produced** visual materials is that of photo-elicitation. **Photo-elicitation** is the use of images (or other visual materials) within research interviews, with them being shown to the participants and then discussed (Rose, 2016). Questioning within the interview is focused around 'the visual' and what it means to the participant and, using the visual materials in this way encourages a more abstract kind of thinking and talk (Rose, 2016). Rose (2016) explains that photo-elicitation as a qualitative research method has a number of key strengths. First, visual materials hold a great deal of information, and therefore using this method can not only provide greater insight but also different perspectives that approaches relying on words alone cannot (Rose, 2016). Similarly, it has be suggested that

discussions around images and other visual materials can also raise topics and themes that the researcher may not have initially considered or were unable to broach with the participant directly (Rose, 2016). This also encompasses the everyday things that are often taken for granted and left unsaid when just relying on words. Rose (2016) also argues that elicitation interviews using visual materials also encourage more emotional talk from the participants, evoking memories that often lead to intense and emotive discussions. Highlighting its strengths, this approach has been used across a wide range of social science disciplines including those focusing on homelessness (Johnsen et al., 2008; Padgett et al., 2013), children's health (Mandleco, 2013; Denford et al., 2019), physical activity and ageing (Phoenix & Orr, 2014; Orr & Phoenix, 2014), and sports coaching (Cope, Harvey & Kirk, 2015). While the focus thus far has been on researcher produced visual materials, in some of these examples the elicitation interviews also featured visual data produced by the participants. This is another approach to photo-elicitation, and more broadly visual research, collaborating with the participants to produce the visual materials that will then be discussed within the elicitation interviews.

The final strand of visual methods is that which uses **participant produced** visual materials. This involved the collection and study of 'the visual' that is created or consumed by the research participants (Phoenix & Rich,2017). Participants are provided with a camera, pencil, or paintbrush and empowered to document whatever they choose. This can include taking photos or videos, or drawing diagrams, maps, timelines or self-portraits (Rose, 2016). Each of these processes can focus in on specific areas of interest, for example, maps can explore the relationships between things or people, timelines can focus in on significant events within the participants biography, and self-portraits can encourage discussions around identity (Rose, 2016). Once these visual materials have been produced, this is then followed up with an interview to discuss what they have created and the meanings they have attached to it (Phoenix & Rich, 2017). There are several strengths to using participant produced images or visual materials, namely that it adds another layer of insight enabling researchers to view and understand the world through their participants eyes (Phoenix & Rich, 2017). This approach also empowers the participants with a sense of agency, providing space for them to speak for themselves, as well as being able to 'show' rather than just 'tell' (Pheonix & Rich, 2017). Phoenix and Rich (2017) highlight that, drawing on these strengths, this approach is especially useful for understanding the experiences of marginalized groups. A specific method that uses participant produced visuals is **photovoice**, an approach often confused with photo-elicitation. Distinguishing between the two, photovoice has been developed from action research working with disadvantage and marginalized groups. Therefore, the focus is not just to study these groups but to engage the participants and researchers in the learning and analysis process, with the intention of

impacting or changing the social situation itself (Rose, 2016). In relation to this, Wang and Burris (1997) outline the three main goals of photovoice: (1) empowering participants to reflect and record their community's strengths and weaknesses, (2) encouraging dialogue and knowledge production around the important community issues though the discussion of visual materials, and (3) engaging policymakers. While the steps of producing visual materials and using them within participant interviews is similar for both photo-elicitation and photovoice, the key differences between these methods are the aims and timescales in which they take place. Photo-elicitation takes place over a shorter period and is generally one or two interviews involving the participants and the researcher, without the necessary intention to directly impact upon the wider community. In contrast, Photovoice is ongoing, spanning a longer period of time and involving a larger community which the research aims to have a constructive impact upon (Rose, 2016). The short researcher vignette below, provides an example of Participant produced video in practice.

Researcher Vignette

As the London 2012 Olympics approached a wealth of researchers clambered over the idea and research questions of the legacy and impact of the games on sport participants (Mackintosh, Darko and May-Wilkins, 2015; Weed *et al.,* 2016). In this short case study I consider my role as a researcher in undertaking a research project that looked at this central social phenomenon as to whether watching, consuming and viewing the Games in all its many formats (TV, media, internet and wider societal discourses and narratives) can and will lead to developing new patterns in sport participation behaviour. Much of the existing literature has either undertaken large scale quantitative self-report studies asking people what 'effect' such consumption of elite spectacles has had or interviews or similar methods which are researcher-led qualitative studies that direct and probe from the perspective of the researcher and their project.

In this project we attempted to move power towards the participant and bring in greater creativity to the research process by introducing cameras to the data collection project. The project was based around a sample of five families of around twenty people predominantly in lower socio-economic areas in the East Midlands region of England. This was done for two fold, it was already known that 'legacy' can be much harder to deliver further from the geographical epicentre of a Games or mega-event, and, that pre-existing conditions in deprived social communities make increasing sport and physical activity much harder. The videos were not collected in isolation, we also used interviews before, during and after the Games to track and probe emergent themes and shape the data analysis

as topics and conceptual links were made. In this case study we will focus predominantly on the practical challenges and enablers of using video-based participant driven visual methodologies. Firstly, it is worth consider three major challenges that the project faced; ethical clearance and the nuance of videos including children under 16; training of the families in video and recruitment to the project and retention within the research.

Ethics is a challenge for any project but by introducing video we opened a further set of tiers of ethical hurdles to enabling the project to go-ahead. We think the richness of the data we got from the hidden world and voices of families in their own homes is worth persevering with this institutional dilemma. Additional guarantees included parental consent for data relating to their own children, approval of transcripts and blacking out the eyes and visual faces of any images used at a later data. Secondly, we had to embed time-consuming training of each family with the ICT and video resources we wanted them to use and provide multiple simplified instructions. These instructions included both technical but also research-led ones. For example, we offered potential themes and routines through which they could structure their family and individual responses. Otherwise, we felt it would just produce 100% open non-structured data with less focus on the broad topic of the research area. Finally, it is a clear area of reflection for the project that initial recruitment was difficult, we used BBC regional radio and our regional networks in sport and physical activity sector, but it was very challenging to get five families to commit to a eight week project. Upon reflection it might be that we could have altered the design so that it was in one week periods but we wanted to 'capture' the entirety of the Games festival period. Once 'in' the project and signed up, one family removed themselves from the project, ironically due to gaining additional work from the Olympics in the manual building and construction sector. This immediately 'lost' one fifth of our data. What we realized was that this actually had little impact as we had an almost overwhelming quality and quantity of data with our four participant families.

In terms of the positives emerging from the use of video, by far the greatest is the freedom extended to the participant to shape, build and get across their own data. We had 11 year old girls that opening new lines of enquiry 'live' on multiple family member video recordings that shocked their own parents. Likewise, parents and children discussed and shaped the agendas themselves as opposed to researchers driving a literature-led theoretically driven topic guide for example. We still used topic guides that research was framed within. But the reactions, uptake of new activity, ignoring of regional and national policy in favour of the excitement of TV and internet-based activity was in the hands of the four families. We are aware there is still a power dynamic of ourselves watching back, transcribing and then analyzing the interviews. We also drew upon Goffman's Dramaturgy and front and back stage concepts to embolden and shape our data analysis (Darko and

Mackintosh, 2016). But in terms of lightning moments of reflection in this project video essentially provides access into the 'private' over the public interview space. It gives scope for reflection and slower delivery of more thoughtful data that immediate and on-the spot dictaphone captured question probing data.

For students considering the research area for the first time, this is an exciting and opportune area, especially with the increasing quality of mobile phone video. Participants can capture, record, upload and transmit data in almost real time to Google-drive for example. Alternatively university accounts that have *Sharepoint* and *Onedrive* offer secure homes for quick data capture to reactions of participants, diaries of their feelings and so on. I have also worked with other researchers on the use of *Padlet* for collating more Instagram style home pages of video (and other reflective account/notes) where we have asked participants to use different media to respond to broad research aims and objectives. It is in these technological spaces of innovation that the next generation of visual and video research projects will sit where the barriers of time commitment, access, retention and flexibility of engagement for the participant can be overcome (Darko and Mackintosh, 2016; Mackintosh, Darko and May-Wilkins, 2015). Video is now available to all, it is no longer the domain of those with an expensive camera, as the average android camera becomes almost ubiquitous in the sport participant world it is simply a case of considering where this exciting and flexible methodology may fit with your student research project.

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