

FUNDAMENTALS OF VISUAL RESEARCH METHODS

EXAMPLES OF VISUAL RESEARCH METHODS



WHY USE VISUAL RESEARCH METHODS?

- 1. Images can be used to capture the ineffable, the hard-to-put into words.
  - 2. Images can make us pay attention to things in a new way.
  - 3. Images are likely to be memorable.
  - 4. Images can be used to communicate more holistically, incorporating multiple layers, and evoking stories or questions.
  - 5. Images can enhance empathetic understanding and generalizability.
  - 6. Through metaphor and symbol, artistic images can carry theory elegantly and eloquently.
  - 7. Images encourage embodied knowledge.
  - 8. Images can be more accessible than most forms of academic discourse.
  - 9. Images can facilitate reflexivity in research design.
  - 10. Images provoke action for social justice.
- (Sandra Weber)

"Visual methods can: provide an alternative to the hegemony of a word-and-number based academy; slow down observation and encourage deeper and more effective reflection on all things visual and visualizable; and with it enhance our understanding of sensory embodiment and communication, and hence reflect more fully the diversity of human experiences." (John Prosser and Andrew Loxley)

What are your reason(s) for using visual research methods?

THREE SITES OF THE IMAGE

Visual methodologist Gillian Rose argues that every visual research project has “three sites of the image.” Consider your own visual research project, and write or illustrate the different sites of the image. Where will you place the majority of your (analytical) attention in the project?

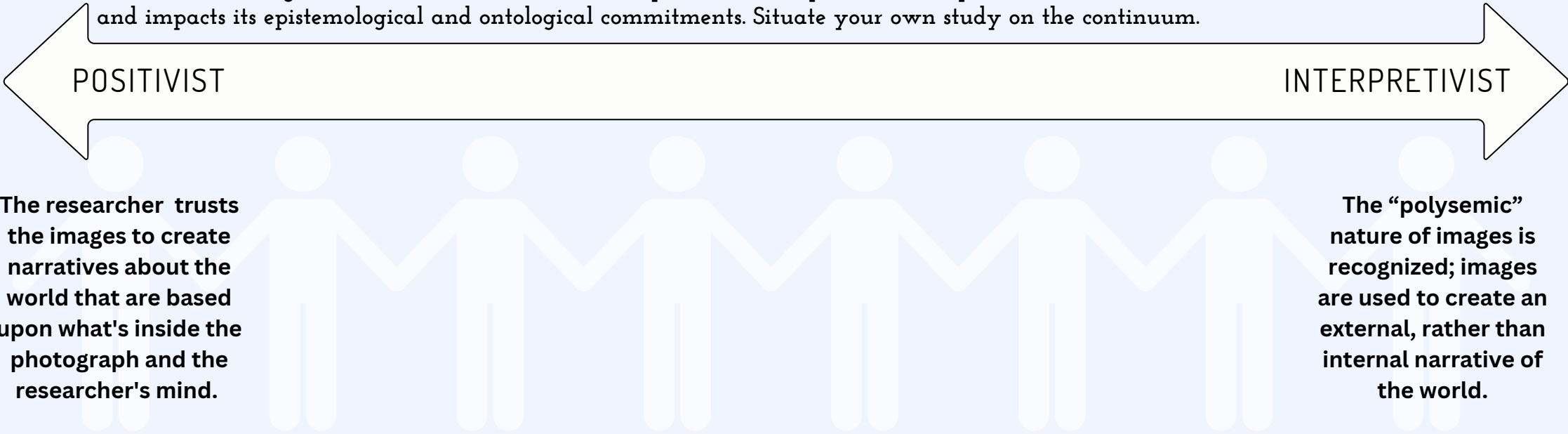
SITE OF PRODUCTION

SITE OF THE IMAGE ITSELF

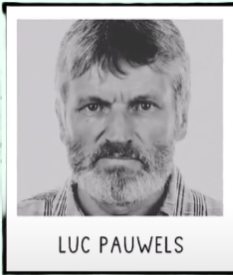
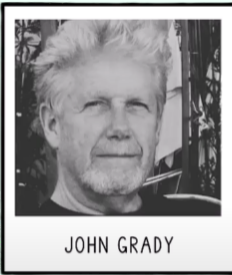
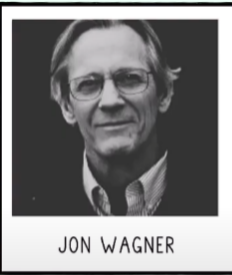
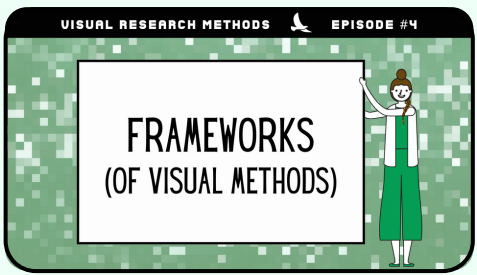
SITE OF AUDIENCING

THE POSITIVIST-INTERPRETIVIST CONTINUUM

Visual methodologists Jon Prosser and Andrew Loxley assert that a positivist-interpretivist continuum underlies all visual research and impacts its epistemological and ontological commitments. Situate your own study on the continuum.



# FRAMEWORKS OF VISUAL METHODS



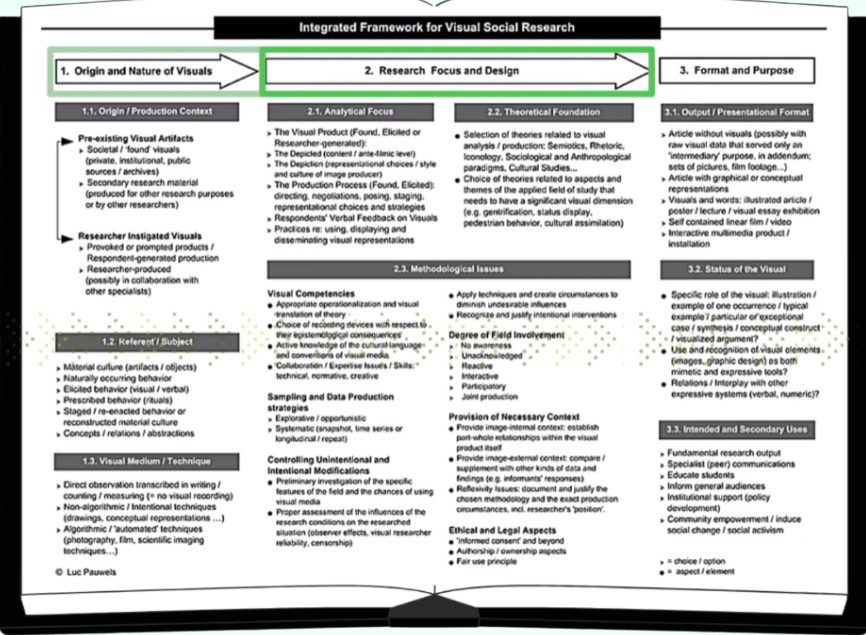
## PHOTOGRAPHS IN SOCIAL INQUIRY

1. As interview stimuli (photographic elicitation)
2. Facilitate systematic recording
3. Content analysis of naive photographs
4. "Native" image-making
5. Narrative visual theory

(See Episode 3, Doug Harper's *Changing Works*)



Visualizing  
Researching  
Producing  
Teaching  
Interpreting  
Explicating



## TWO DOMAINS OF VISUAL SOCIOLOGY

### 1. THE SEMIOTICS OF VISUAL COMMUNICATION

Analyzing photographs others have taken.

### 2. VISUAL METHODS

Taking photographs during the research process.

Scientific  
Narrative  
Reflexive  
Phenomenological

individual and collective action as well as images. Take, for example, the powerful photograph taken by Nick Ut during the Vietnam War of an obviously terrified young Vietnamese girl running naked down a street to flee a napalm fire bomb. It may have done more to galvanize the antiwar movement in the West than all the scholarly papers on the horrors of war. To the extent that various uses of images are authentic, marked, and contextualized, we can create bodies of visual work that may be useful in the service of changes for justice in social policies or cultural practices. This objective is central to a growing number of scholars in a variety of disciplines.

To sum up, this ability of images to evoke visceral and emotional responses in ways that are memorable, coupled with their capacity to help us empathize or see another's point of view and to provide new ways of looking at things critically, makes them powerful tools for researchers to use in different ways during various phases of research.

#### Visual Images and Research Processes

Images can be integral and essential components of different sorts of inquiries on a wide range of topics, and research questions may call for a visual component in one or more of the following ways:

#### PRODUCTION OF ARTISTIC IMAGES AS DATA

Images can be newly produced by participants or researchers: for example, the researcher may invite people to draw or paint or take photographs or make a short video or create an art installation that relates

to the research questions or the phenomena being investigated. Or the researcher might be the one making new images. Once the visual material is produced, the resulting collection might then be the basis of further discussion, interviews, and/or analysis, although the very process of creating images is often a major part of the research process itself.

Examples of the production of images for research include asking people to draw a teacher (Weber & Mitchell, 1995a, 1996) and, in another project, inviting girls to make a short film about their experiences of technology (Weber & Weber, 2007). As a further variation on the production of images, in *Secret Games: Collaborative Works With Children*, photographer Wendy Ewald (2000) bridges the gap between researcher as photographer and participant as photographer by inviting the children she was researching to suggest subject matter, poses, and props to give her directions for the artful photographs she took.

Wang's (1999) articulation of a visual methodology called "photovoice" illustrates how engaging and connected to social issues research can be when it is the participants themselves producing the images. This method is used in the service of social critique and involves group as well as individual interpretations of the photos produced by the participants. Hubbard's (1994) anthropological research on a Navajo reserve, where it was the residents who took the photographs, resulted in an artful book, *Shooting Back From the Reservation*, that brings out the "ethnic" point of view that is so often illusive in the usual volumes of written fieldnotes. Methods that put the production in the hands of nonprofessionals can project a credibility and authenticity that more polished and accomplished works of art cannot always achieve. It is the very lack of artifice in the not-always technically perfect images that sometimes makes them more convincing, more true to life.

#### USE OF EXISTING (FOUND) ARTISTIC IMAGES AS DATA OR SPRINGBOARDS FOR THEORIZING

The primary source of images on which the research question focuses may be found material or already existing images, whether from museum archives, books, billboards, film archives, videotapes, magazines, and so forth, or images already created by or belonging to participants in the research project, including photo albums, artwork, or artifacts. Langford (2001), for example, did a fascinating analysis of a family photo album she found in the archives of the McCord Museum that became a theoretical work on the orality of photo albums. Personal photographs from their own lives became springboards for the insightful work of scholars such as Chalfen (1987), Kuhn (1995), and Walkerdine (1990). Analyzing Hollywood "teacher movies" to see how teachers have been depicted in film over the years (Weber & Mitchell, 1995b) and specializing on the reproduction of cultural images through the phenomenon of school class photographs are two final examples of the use of the visual in different projects (Mitchell & Weber, 1998, 1999a, 1999b).

#### USE OF VISUAL AND OBJECT-IMAGES TO ELICIT OR PROVOKE OTHER DATA

Sometimes data that are the focus of an inquiry are elicited or obtained through the use of images or objects as memory prompts for writing or as points of departure for semistructured interviews. "Photo elicitation," for example, has become a frequently used method of data collection in conducting ethnographic studies. As Harper (2002) describes it, the procedure involves asking people to take pictures and then looking at and discussing the photos with them during

semistructured interviews. Giving people an image or object to talk about sparks multiple reactions, leading often to outpourings of all kinds of information, feelings, thoughts, and situation details. The concreteness, the materiality of photographs, artwork, and objects (see Winterson, 1995) seems to provide a versatile and movable scaffolding for the telling of life history, life events, life material. Things that might be too embarrassing or too painful to ask someone or to tackle head on are often brought to the fore incidentally and gently when the focus is on, for example, the shirt a departed loved one wore rather than on death and loss itself. In *Not Just Any Dress: Narratives of Memory, Body, and Identity* (Weber & Mitchell, 2004a), as a final example, items of clothing and photographs of dress provided the impetus for revealing narratives that give insight into many issues important to the social sciences, including professional and national identities, birth, marriage, aging, conformity, maternity, rebellion, body image, social codes, and death. Asking people to talk about visual images already in their possession is thus a very promising research method.

#### USE OF IMAGES FOR FEEDBACK AND DOCUMENTATION OF RESEARCH PROCESS

Researchers often visually document data collection by using a video or still camera to capture at least some of what happens throughout the project. Not only does this provide a visual running record, it provides another eye on the process as well as valuable feedback, helping researchers assess, adjust, and fine-tune. Image in the research process changes the research, making it more transparent, suggesting new directions, and facilitating self-critique. A telling example from my work concerns the

reviewing of taped interviews with children. It was only when I saw those tapes, and noticed the children's facial expressions, body language, and, most embarrassing, my own rapid-fire delivery, that I realized how little time or space I was allowing for them to address the questions I was too intent on asking. As a result, I changed the questions and my manner of interacting and got much more meaningful data, all the while providing children with a more enjoyable and comfortable experience. Excerpts from those videos provided convincing "evidence" for subsequent conference presentations of my findings (Mitchell & Weber, in press; Weber, 2002; Weber & Mitchell, 1995b; Weber, Mitchell, & Tardiff, 2002).

#### USE OF IMAGES AS MODE OF INTERPRETATION AND/OR REPRESENTATION

As the norms and expectations for communicating research results change, a growing number of scholars are turning to image-based modes of representation, creating art to express their findings and theories (see Bagley & Concannon, 2002a, 2002b; Cole & McIntyre, 2001; Jipson & Payley, 1997; and this handbook). Sociologist Cathy Greenblat (2005) comments creatively on Alzheimer's disease through carefully sequenced close-up photographs of small clear plastic "baggies" that contain a collection of things one would not ordinarily group together. For example, a straw, two pennies, an empty candy wrapper, and a valuable diamond ring. Many such bags were found stashed in various places in her mother's house shortly after she died of Alzheimer's. Greenblat uses her photographs of them to symbolically represent and examine the disease, giving us a peak at the world through her mother's eyes.

Jo Spence's seminal work (1995), as a further example, featured the careful constructing of symbolic images for "visual art," made photographs of herself as "meat for sale") as both the method of inquiry and the mode of interpretation and representation, reminding us that any attempts to completely separate method from findings is artificial and somewhat arbitrary.

The importance of images to presenting research findings was never more apparent to me than when I tried to write about a project on the high school prom. Words alone just didn't do justice to the phenomenon. The studies involved so much visual detail—the dresses, the fabrics, the girls and boys all dressed up, the limos, the dances, the photographs, the disillusioned or happy facial expressions, and the dozens of teen movies—all of which simply refused to be flattened onto a page of scholarly text. A highly ritualized yet complex social phenomenon, the prom is known and portrayed largely through the visual language of popular culture. The question was how to keep all the layers of the phenomenon in view when communicating the results? And so I turned to artistic visual modes to theorize and represent some of our findings, directing two films, *Dress Fitting* (Weber & Mitchell, 2000) and *Canadian Pie* (Weber & Mitchell, 2003), as well as a multimedia art installation, *I Am a Woman Now* (Weber, 2004).

#### Questions and Caveats Regarding the Use of Images in Research

All of the preceding discussions do not mean, of course, that images per se are "good" or guarantee any sort of research outcome or automatically lead to deeper understanding or theoretical insight. Not