

Ethics and Visual Research



Visual methods in social research have become more mainstream over the last twenty years, driven in part by the profusion of digital devices with cameras that make access and production of images far easier, as well as the increased interest in and acceptability of arts-based methods. But while images have become more common, ethical guidelines have sometimes struggled to adapt, although organisations such as the International Visual Sociology Association (<http://visuelsociology.org/about/ethics-and-guidelines.html>) and the British Sociological Association's Visual Methods study group (http://www.visuelsociology.org.uk/about/ethical_statement.php) have made good attempts.

There are two key ethical issues which become complicated in visual research: informed consent, and anonymity. *Informed consent* is particularly challenging with photographs because it is difficult to ensure that every subject has given their consent to the photo being taken and used for research purposes. Researchers can work around this by using only photos that were taken in public spaces (where this is allowed), or avoiding photographs of people who are not explicitly participating in the research. In photovoice projects where participants take photos of the world around them, participants are given guidelines around informing photographic subjects about the purposes of the research, although it can be difficult to ensure this has taken place.



Anonymity is a challenge for the obvious reason that a photograph of a person or the places and spaces they frequent is difficult to anonymise. Moreover, strategies for making people anonymous, such as pixelating faces or putting black bars over their eyes to make them less recognisable, are more frequently associated with criminal activity! Strategies for dealing with this include waiving anonymity with the explicit consent of the research participants, or avoiding taking or publishing identifiable images (which often seems unduly limiting). This is also a difficult issue in artworks that are not photographs: people often rightly want to be identified as the creators of their work. Researchers must negotiate the extent to which doing so might compromise anonymity of other data such as interview transcripts, and whether and in what circumstances having it known that they participated in this research might result in harm or reputational damage.

Copyright is another difficult issue. When someone creates an artwork in the context of a research project, who owns it? Legally, copyright generally lies with the creator of the work. To use that work in research and publications, the researcher needs the explicit permission (and sometimes, transfer of copyright) from the creator. In our recent project *Communicating Chronic Pain* (www.communicatingchronicpain.org), we used Creative Commons licensing to deal with this issue. Through Creative Commons, the creator of the work allows others to share and reuse it freely, subject to certain conditions such as attribution or non-commercial use. This is very useful for research as it enables creators to retain ownership of their work and researchers to reuse and reproduce it, but the nuances of Creative Commons licensing require careful explanation!

A final point is the desire many researchers have to showcase the work created in visual research projects. While the tangibility of this can be appealing and may enable the work to reach new audiences, we also need to consider the appropriateness of displaying such work. Are participants comfortable being represented as artists or photographers? Does the work have high aesthetic quality as well as high research quality? Are we as researchers qualified to judge this? Here, it can be helpful to allow participants themselves to choose which works they want to have displayed (allowing the option to opt out), and to involve others with professional arts expertise in the decisions of how and where to show the work.

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