

# RESEARCHING THE VISUAL

SECOND EDITION

MICHAEL EMMISON, PHILIP SMITH  
AND MARGERY MAYALL





RESEARCHING  
THE VISUAL



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# Acknowledgements

It seems appropriate that we commence the second edition of our text by thanking all those unknown readers who helped make the first edition a success. Your interest in the book convinced us that a second edition was required and we hope you, and a next generation of readers, will find some use in the ideas we express here. As with our first edition we are indebted to a number of colleagues, friends, students and partners for their generous donation of materials, skills and time. We thank in particular Alexander Riley for permission to use two photographs and some unpublished material from his 'Flight 93' research project which appear in Chapter 1. Moritz Eyer supplied us with the 'Ampelmännchen' images from Berlin which appear in Chapter 6, and Janelle Webster allowed us to use some of her tourist photographs from Kenya which appear in Chapter 8. Gioia Rosina and Toni Liu provided us with translations of the inscriptions on the Nambucca Heads breakwater boulders to be found in Figure 5.6. A number of our students agreed to pose for the images in Figure 7.2, and family members were happy to share their photos relating to Facebook profiles which appear in Chapter 8, along with Ian Gillott whose image appears in this chapter. We thank the University of Queensland's Property & Facilities Division for permission to include a number of the poster images from its campus safety initiative – UniSafe – which are found in Chapter 4. Laura Emmison was responsible for much of the graphic design and artwork in the book. Funds from the University of Queensland's School of Social Science supported some of the costs involved in our fieldwork trips to obtain a number of the photographs.

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# About the Authors

**Michael Emmison** is an Honorary Research Fellow and formerly Reader in Sociology in the School of Social Science at the University of Queensland. In addition to his interests in visual research he has published widely in several fields, most significantly the sociology of culture and language and social interaction. His previous books include *Accounting for Tastes: Australian Everyday Cultures* (Cambridge University Press 1999, with Tony Bennett and John Frow) and the edited collection *Calling for Help: Language and Social Interaction in Telephone Helplines*. (John Benjamins 2005, with Carolyn Baker and Alan Firth).

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# Preface to the Second Edition

We are delighted to have this opportunity to revise a book that over the years became much more widely used than we had anticipated. In this new preface we want to briefly recapitulate our motives for writing the first edition, to revisit its principal arguments and reflect on the way it has been received by the academic community. We will also suggest some reasons why a new edition is now required and provide an overview of the key changes we have made to this edition.

---

## What the first edition tried to achieve

When the first edition of this book (hereafter RTV1) was conceived by Michael Emmison and Philip Smith in the late 1990s, the practice of visual research was very different from the multi-themed, interdisciplinary field we find today. Although at that time visual research was not exactly in its infancy – for after all episodic initiatives to establish it as a sub-discipline can be found throughout much of the twentieth century – our overall impression was that it was significantly marginalized from the main concerns of the social sciences. This was not just our perception: many of the then leading visual researchers voiced this complaint in one form or another. Visual research has never presented a unitary theoretical or methodological face, so summaries of what it entails are notoriously difficult to make. Nevertheless it appeared to us that the bulk of what then passed as visual inquiry in the social sciences and humanities fell into one of two broad categories. Dramatically oversimplifying, one branch stemming from the Anglo-Saxon traditions of ethnography and social anthropology promoted the use of the camera in the generation of a visual record of the research setting. The second branch, one with closer affinities to the continental schools of semiotics and cultural studies, advocated the investigation of commercially produced images. These were generally media texts of one kind or another that were



taken to contain implicit ideological messages. Both of these approaches appeared to us to have limitations. Those championing the generation of photographs (and occasionally film) generally lacked clear theoretical aims for this practice and utilized their images – still and moving – in a purely illustrative way. At the end of the day these images and films were clearly subordinate to the written component of any research report. Those advocating the decoding of media texts were generally strong on (front-end) theory but often paid scant regard to the methodological conventions of the social sciences and were notoriously indifferent to matters such as sample size and the limitations on the inferences that could be made. Of course there were some notable exceptions in each of these branches and we duly acknowledged these in the book. But overall it appeared to us that social science academics who worked with visual materials had been largely ‘ghettoized’. Further, this was partly their own fault. They were communicating with each other about a relatively narrow range of issues of little interest to the wider community of researchers.

As a path towards building a more vigorous programme of visual research, we introduced a novel way of thinking about the concept of visual data. This sought to clarify the status of ‘the visual’ as an empirical domain. The core feature of this new approach was the suggestion that we should move beyond the two-dimensional photographic image which had hitherto largely dominated agendas, and embrace a much more extensive conception of the visual aspects of social and cultural life. A necessary corollary was that we needed to bring in a much wider range of tools and data sources as ‘visual research methods’ than the familiar camera and photograph.

RTV1 was thus something of a hybrid in that it steered a path between offering a theoretical account of the principal currents in visual inquiry and their limitations, and a discussion of the wider methodological approaches and research questions that visual researchers might draw upon. Our starting point was to rethink ‘data’, the empirical stuff that is at the centre of visual inquiry. We did not reject the study of or use of photographs – as some of our critics have claimed – but called for photographs to be recognized as just one kind of data. They were just part of the wider category which we referred to as the ‘two-dimensional’ – a group which also included various media elements such as magazine advertisements, billboards, cartoons, as well the ubiquitous information posters, instructional diagrams and directional signs which we readily encounter in our daily lives.

But thinking of visual inquiry even as the collection and study of these diverse various two-dimensional surfaces seemed unduly restrictive. What about objects? We proposed that visual research should also recognize the existence of three-dimensional data. We had in mind here the parts of material culture which operate as purposive or accidental signifiers in social life.



These ranged from the items of everyday life in the home which carry personal meanings to those in public spaces, such as statues, which represent official public discourses. Our argument was that such objects provide a rich vein of visual information which can be read for clues about selves and societies. We soon realized also that while such forms of data can be analysed in traditional semiotic terms, they are also implicated in human actions. Exploring how people react towards, use and modify these items was therefore an important research issue as well.

Pushing further down this analytical path we argued that the physical spaces and places in which humans conducted their social lives – domestic homes, educational institutions, shopping malls, boardrooms, as well as larger geographical spaces – parks, city centres and the like – could also be amenable to visual inquiry, and especially observational sociology. Finally, of course, these spaces and places were generally populated by humans in interaction and this in turn provided us with a further analytic category of data. People are ‘living visual data’ and we can therefore study how they signal to each other. What is loosely termed ‘people watching’ can offer a way to answer diverse questions about the ordering of human interaction.

So the core focus of RTV1 was to tease out the differences between these – and other – types of visual data, and to demonstrate with numerous examples and research exercises their relevance for conventional sociological research. In so doing we reconstructed a field of visual research that was far wider in scope and also far more developed than had previously been imagined in sociology as a discipline.

## **What the second edition adds**

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We welcome the opportunity to revisit the themes of RTV1 in this new edition of our book. We have, however, revised our treatment. Fat has been trimmed. We have retained classic theoretical statements and exemplary studies, both famous and obscure, but have removed some optional and illustrative material that now appears dated. This has been replaced with more contemporary references. Our theoretical gambit having served its purpose, we have also moderated our tone with regard to the use of photography as a research tool. Published reviews and critiques of our work were important here, and we thank our interlocutors for helping us to reflect a little more on the possible benefits of photography for the research process (Wagner, 2002; Pink, 2007; Prosser, 2008).

More importantly the new edition provides us with an opportunity to extend our analytical gaze in a number of new directions. In the decade or



so since RTV1 was published there have been numerous significant developments in the visual culture of modern societies. By far the most notable of these has been the exponential growth of the Internet with its wealth of non-textual data and non-textual communicative options. Sites such as YouTube, Flickr, Second Life and Facebook have millions of users and contributors. They are both part of our social landscape and an irresistible source of limitless, free data. In response to this seismic shift we have added a new author to the team with expertise in this particular field: Margery Mayall has conducted research on online share trading, markets and the role of visual fields and visual information in this process. Drawing on this background, she has been largely responsible for an entirely new chapter dealing with what we term 'virtual visual data'.

In addition there have been important technological advances in the practice of visual research. The decreased costs of video recording and the availability of editing software have seen an explosion in experimental or multimedia ethnographic techniques. This has also impacted on ethnomethodological work investigating the organization of naturally occurring social interaction in minute detail. Photo-manipulation software such as Photoshop has allowed experimental designs to be more precisely targeted and far cheaper to implement. We treat these new developments as needed. Finally we note that some fields of visual research have become more popular than ever. For example, in working on our revisions we noted a growing interest in photo-elicitation, auto-photography and on the coding in situ of graffiti. Whereas we had to scratch around before to find credible work in this genre to illustrate research possibilities, today we could pick and choose from numerous high-quality studies. Where we sensed a field had grown or moved on in such a way, we expanded our treatment. Where there has been little change (e.g. in the semiotic decoding of advertisements, in the study of parks and plazas) we have retained about the same volume of coverage as before.

One final trend we have observed over the past 13 years has been a growing concern with ethical issues in qualitative research generally and in visual research in particular. Concerns about privacy, about the appropriate capture and use of images, about spying and snooping, about manipulation and deception, and about generating fear in research subjects have all grown in magnitude. RTV1 tended to avoid or brush aside ethical issues. Today this is not an option. Nor is it desirable. Accordingly we have a new and dedicated chapter written largely by Margery Mayall that places ethical themes squarely up front. We have also provided ethical warning signs in the suggested exercises scattered throughout the book. Finally we have retained a large number of 'observation-only' exercises where ethical concerns are likely to exist in a diminished form. These may well provide a resource for students who do not have the time to pass through any required ethical clearance process.



Over the last decade the marketplace for books on 'visual research' has become crowded and competitive with a number of full-length treatments of the entire field of visual techniques as well as a number of more specialist texts devoted to particular methods, approaches and technologies. We review some of this material in Chapter 3. Nevertheless, there is, in our opinion, still no other book which attempts to do what *Researching the Visual* does. It conceptualizes visual data in a more all-embracing way than the other texts do, as well as exploring the connections between the more restricted field of image-based visual inquiry and analytical approaches grounded in traditional observation-based methodological techniques.

Because our book engages with the topic of visual inquiry in this distinctive way it is helpful to point out at the beginning, in summary form, what the reader will find in the chapters which follow.

---

### What this book does do

- We provide an overview of the various forms of visual data that are available for social research by bringing together in one accessible text a variety of approaches and perspectives which have previously been unconnected.
- We broaden the concerns of visual research to include issues of visibility, invisibility, surveillance and presentation of the self, in addition to established understandings which centre on the study of the image.
- We offer an approach which is grounded in both social science and cultural inquiry. We anticipate that this book will be of most relevance to researchers in disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, cultural and media studies, geography and urban studies. There are also scattered themes and ideas that will be of interest to those in history, political science, economics, environmental science, criminology, psychology, and art and design.
- We suggest numerous small-scale, low-budget exercises and projects that students can undertake. Some involve pure interpretation, others involve testing a hypothesis. **Exercises** are generally activities which can be completed in an hour or so by an individual student. They are intended to be thought-provoking as opposed to formal explorations of an issue. Exercises can often form the basis of a tutorial, with material collected or reflected upon during these activities being used to generate group discussion on methods and findings. **Projects**, on the other hand, will require a longer time to complete and are often best accomplished by a group of students. A project involves collecting data using systematic sampling and recording techniques and often involves testing a hypothesis or resolving a puzzle derived from the literature. For these reasons many projects could be expanded in scope and sophistication to form the basis of a thesis or a published article. Many of the exercises and projects which we have retained for the revised edition of the book have been updated, and further suggestions about such things as research design, tips on data collection and analysis have been added.



- Where possible we point to links between the kinds of data we discuss with social and cultural theory. This will demonstrate the rich theoretical heritage available to visual inquiry and enable researchers to conduct projects that have a strong analytic purpose. We are particularly concerned to show how visual data can be used as an indicator with which to explore somewhat abstract theoretical ideas.

### **What this book does not do**

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- While we devote some space to the analysis of photographs and images, much of this book will be given over to other visual resources and data forms, such as objects, places and people. We certainly do not claim to offer an exhaustive treatment on what to do with photographs. Other texts are available which provide these skills (see e.g. Banks, 2007; Pink 2007; Pauwels and Margolis, 2011).
- We do not claim to provide specialist knowledge about how to take photographs or produce a video. Nor do we provide lengthy classifications of types of image and the ways in which visual language works. We are also unable to address important debates about the philosophy, psychology and physiology of perception which consider how the brain processes visual information.
- The analysis of moving images requires a detailed exposition of techniques that is beyond the scope of this text. Consequently, we will pass over the analysis of film and television material. Studies of kinesics likewise generally make use of videotapes of human movements and gestures. We provide only a brief discussion of this field and suggest some simple projects which do not require this technology.
- We also do not treat the analysis of artworks or themes of social iconicity and iconic power (e.g. Alexander et al., 2012). This is a growing and often somewhat subjective and philosophical field that sits at the interface of sociology and the humanities. However, we do mention some recent studies in this tradition that are closer to conventional semiotic readings of signs and objects.
- We will not go through basic methodological issues like sampling techniques, coding sheets, displaying and writing up results, remaining unobtrusive, staying out of danger. Again these are covered in numerous other methods texts (e.g. Bryman, 2012). When we suggest exercises we often rely on common sense for our readers to develop protocols that will make these tractable in the field.
- The book is intended for the most part as a student text. It also offers seasoned academics a way to get up to speed on visual methods and to think about visuality in social life. We do not claim to be constructing a profound new theory of the visual nor a pathbreaking method for studying visual materials. We do claim, however, some originality for our argument that visual research should expand in scope and theoretical orientation beyond the study of photographs. We also see the organization of this book as a modest innovation. In so far as we show there is extreme and unexpected diversity in visual research and data, imposing some kind of order on the field is of great importance. The conceptual categories informing the division of material in the five core chapters provide a noteworthy initial step in accomplishing this task.



# A Very Short Introduction: The Scope of Visual Research

After reading our preface you might still be in the dark. What do we understand by visual research? What is its range? What exactly is this book about? Perhaps the most efficient way to answer these three questions is in the concrete rather than the abstract. So we turn to a study by Alexander Riley that recently appeared in the journal *Visual Studies*. In it, Riley (2008) explores the aftermath of the crash of United Airlines Flight 93. This was one of four airliners that were hijacked on the morning of September 11, 2001. As a result of the efforts of a number of passengers and crew in fighting back, Flight 93 did not reach its intended target – believed to be the Capitol Building or the White House – but crashed instead into a wooded field in Shanksville, Pennsylvania, killing all on board. Much less attention has been given to the crash site of Flight 93 compared with that lavished on Ground Zero, the site of the World Trade Center in New York, or to the Pentagon – the targets of the three other terrorist airliners. The World Trade Center footage in particular offers powerful confirmation of the role of iconic images in contemporary culture. Still, Riley suggests that Shanksville offers equally compelling material for the visual sociologist.

Riley's theoretical approach is derived from neo-Durkheimian insights into the role of symbols in the construction of culture. More particularly his aim is to discover 'precisely how sacredness is constructed from the events of Flight 93' (Riley, 2008: 4). He starts with an examination of what we term an item of 'two-dimensional' data: the so-called 'End of Serenity' photograph. The photograph (subject to copyright but still easily found on the Internet) was taken by a local Shanksville resident, Val McClatchey, some moments after the crash. The scene depicted in the photograph is not that of the crash site per se but something perhaps even more evocative. McClatchey's photograph captures what Riley describes as a 'picturesque



country scene from a mythical American rural past' (p. 5). Under a clear blue sky stand red barns on gently sloping green pastures, but disturbing this image of sacred pastoral harmony is an element of profanity – the black cloud of smoke from the burning wreckage of the aircraft rising ominously behind the distant line of trees.

Riley makes a semiotic and narrative reading of the End of Serenity. He works out what it means and what its implications might be. His argument is that the End of Serenity photograph has the effect of turning the events of 9/11 into a more fundamental attack on the wider American cultural tradition, with its connections to pastoral tranquillity. In his view it matters little that this is largely a fictional narrative or that the countryside was not the intended target of attack. As he puts it, 'The narrative power of the image draws on facts larger than those of mere logic and reason' (p. 6).

Surprisingly the End of Serenity is the *only* example of two-dimensional data that Riley includes in his article and the only photographic image he sets out to explain per se. For the most part he is concerned with describing the various efforts that have been made to memorialize the tragic-yet-heroic end of Flight 93. In this task he uses photographs only in an illustrative way. Riley focuses on two of these efforts: first an abandoned church located several miles from the crash site which, at the initiative of a priest named Alphonse Mascherino, was transformed into a memorial chapel; and second a temporary memorial which was erected on a hilltop overlooking the crash site approximately a quarter of a mile below. Riley's discussion dwells primarily on the civil religious symbolism which he uncovers through his cultural investigation of the two sites (see Figures 1.1 and 1.2). For example, hanging outside the memorial chapel is a large bell bearing the title 'Thunder Bell: voice of flight 93' which he interprets as a direct reference to the Old Testament story of God (Yahweh) summoning Moses to the top of Mount Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments. Inside the chapel the altar has been constructed to resemble the US Capitol Building, to honour the presumed target of the hijacked airliner. The closer temporary memorial features a 40 foot long by 9 foot high (about 12 m by 3 m) steel fence on which are now draped numerous objects left by visitors and chosen for their association with the flight – uniforms worn by the emergency workers, medals, other items of clothing bearing messages of sympathy for, and identification with, the passenger and crew, personal possessions deposited as gifts and 'many, many American flags'. Riley observes that the length of the fence was chosen to symbolize the 40 passengers on board, a count which significantly does not include the four suspected hijackers.

Riley offers an imaginative reading of these assorted things, taking them to be symbols through which he can reconstruct myth-making activity. We wish to draw your attention to their ontological status. In claiming that they represent examples of 'three-dimensional' visual data we want to highlight the fact that the objects Riley decodes exist ontologically in their own right.





Figure 1.1 The temporary memorial fence at Shanksville, PA (photo courtesy of Alexander Riley)

Because in his article Riley includes several photographs of the memorials, this fact is occluded. Yet in contrast to the End of Serenity, the memorial objects have an existence which transcends the photographic records he has made of them. We need a photograph of the End of Serenity in order to study it. We do not need a photograph of the Shanksville memorials to make sense of them as we could also visit the site to look at them, to investigate their display or count themes, to see what people do with them – these would also be a visual social inquiry. As material culture with which people can interact, the memorial objects can be understood as having their own ‘social life’ as things (Appadurai, 1988). The memorabilia placed on or near the temporary steel fence are continually changing as waves of visitors seek to record evidence of their encounter with the site. National Parks Service employees periodically remove items from the fence to create more space for new visitors but all items are stored and will be put on display once the proposed permanent memorial is completed. Well over 1 million people have visited the temporary memorial since its inception. Here we have a lot of material for visual analysis.

In the final section of his published article Riley turns to the controversy over a permanent memorial at the crash site. The central feature of the design, created by an architectural firm from Los Angeles, was to comprise



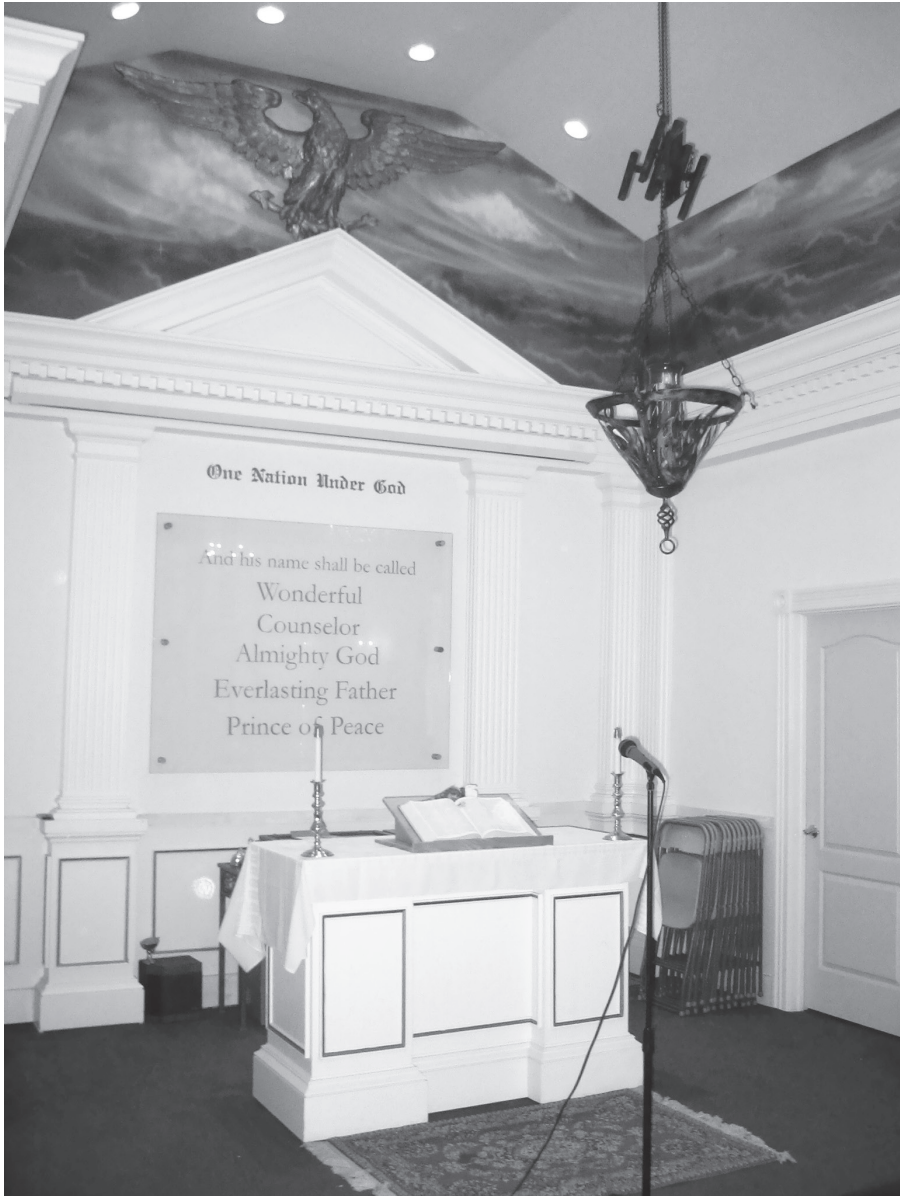


Figure 1.2 The altar in the memorial chapel at Shanksville, PA (photo courtesy of Alexander Riley)

a large crescent-shaped array of maple trees that would border a black slate wall with the planting to follow the existing land contours. Critics and conspiracy theorists were quick to suggest that it contained coded Islamic themes: that the memorial design was little more than a celebration of the crescent moon and star, traditional symbols of Islamic faith and which are



included on the national flag of a number of Muslim-majority countries. Pushing this dispute to one side, we suggest that when it is completed the memorial will constitute a third level of visual data, referred to in the book as 'Lived visual data'. By this term we want to suggest that the built environment – the buildings, locales and physical spaces that we inhabit – constitute a form of 'lived text' which can be investigated to uncover insights into cultural values and norms, insights which are generally not available to social researchers through more conventional forms of data. The majority of settings which make up the built environment – shopping malls, hospitals, museums, schools and universities, and even the humble suburban home and garden – are innocuous and their design seldom engenders any public comment let alone the kind of controversy that the 'Crescent of Embrace' gave rise to. However, paying close attention to the way these everyday spaces and locales are organized and the assumptions they encode about such things as privacy, taken-for-granted gender roles, civilization, hierarchy and progress is a valuable possibility for the visual researcher. We consider these themes in Chapter 6.

At the time of writing, Riley's book on Flight 93 has yet to be published. However, we have read the manuscript. There he refers to yet another aspect of social life that we feel is amenable to visual inquiry. This is the movement and activity of people. We refer to this as 'Living Visual Data' in Chapter 7. Riley noticed that at Shanksville people were respectful and serious. There were relatively few conversations. Moreover, photography and videotaping were rare. He contrasts this demeanour with the more crass touristic behaviours to be found at the World Trade Center crash site. The meanings of the sites and the kind of people who visited them seemed to be objectively reflected in behaviours. Later in this book we suggest ways that such ordinary behaviours can be systematically investigated through observation, coding and low-key experiments. For example, the argument that the World Trade Center site is now understood as a global tourist experience and Shanksville is a pilgrimage might be tested through a comparative observational research design that codes and counts particular human behaviours and interactions.

Finally we might point to Shanksville's presence on the Internet. Here it exists as what we call 'Virtual Visual Data' in Chapter 8. Riley himself made use of the Internet to trace the beliefs of conspiracy theorists – people who could not find reputable publishers for their views. True enough on photograph and video sharing sites such as YouTube, we can find a large volume of conspiracy materials, but there are also a range of ordinary commemorative images. These offer researchers further opportunities. What do people consider worth posting online? What aspects of the Flight 93 memorial might be selected as interesting by people from different national backgrounds? What about those with varying demographics? More generally do people represent Flight 93 with reference to its tragic or heroic narration?



In Chapter 8 we suggest ways that Internet sources can be used for systematic visual sociology.

Flight 93 is, we suggest, a fascinating and thought-provoking example of the kind of options that are open to the visual researcher. Put simply we can:

- Look at images, objects, built environments, interactions and behaviours using visual research methods. Visual sociology is about so much more than just the analysis of photographs.
- Treat each of these in a hermeneutic way as something to be read for encoded deep meanings, or simply taken in a more positivistic sense as an indicator of more diffuse social processes and beliefs. Visual research as a field is not defined by any methodological or theoretical presuppositions. It simply explains or makes use of that which is visual, visible and therefore observable, or visually regulated.

Finally let us turn to the contents of this book chapter by chapter. Chapter 2 looks at ethics. We talk through some of the common ethical concerns that confront visual researchers and introduce some familiar protocols for resolving these. Chapter 3 cuts to the disciplinary core. For those of you wishing to understand what is most commonly understood by the terms 'visual sociology', 'visual research' and 'visual methods' this should be your first port of call. Here we review the uses of photographs in research as a means of recording research settings, eliciting information and generating reflexivity. After reading this chapter you will be part of the conversation. Chapter 4 opens up the use of two-dimensional (2D) data more widely. It begins our attempt to expand the referents of 'visual sociology' beyond the photograph in less recognized directions. We suggest that posters, maps, signs, cartoons and advertisements all offer opportunities for creative and innovative research. Chapter 5 is all about objects. We suggest that this three-dimensional (3D) visual data or material culture can be read for meanings. Further it can also offer an unobtrusive measure of various social processes. For example, we show that tombstones and statues provide a way to explore themes related to social inclusion and exclusion over time. Chapter 6 looks at the spaces people inhabit. We think of these as 'lived visual data'. We show that the seemingly functional design of houses and hospitals in fact reflects societal norms and taken-for-granted expectations. We can explore these visually through in situ observation or the analysis of architectural plans. Chapter 7 investigates people in interaction. We demonstrate that ordinary social life is regulated by visual cues; that people signal to each other; and that patterns of association offer a resource for the objective observation of public spaces. Our final chapter, Chapter 8, looks at the Internet. We explain the opportunities and challenges this provides, point to some interesting recent studies and suggest some feasible research projects that can be undertaken with what we term 'virtual visual data'.



# 2

## Ethics in Visual Research

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### This chapter will:

- Discuss the ethical considerations which are an important part of all research.
- Highlight issues which are of particular importance for visual research.
- Introduce a coding system which is used throughout this book as a quick and easy guide for thinking about ethics in visual research.

Ethical concerns are an important part of all good research, and should be present from the moment you start considering any research project or exercise. However, if you do a cursory inspection of the layout of many of the numerous books on the market specializing in social research methods, you may notice an interesting pattern. Ethics is all too often included as a chapter at the end of a text – almost as an afterthought – after the far more interesting nitty-gritty of theory and method. Sometimes, ethics is not even afforded its own chapter. Instead, a perusal of book indexes finds ethical issues scattered throughout the texts or, sometimes, not even included at all.

What message do you think this is sending to the readers of these books? At a time when many societies are experiencing increased social rights awareness, greater participation by citizens in moral and ethical debates, and a profusion of legislation and litigation in relation to individual and social group rights, is it a good idea to ignore or downplay ethics?

Our own previous edition was guilty of not devoting specific attention to ethics as a fundamental characteristic of visual research. It may be easy, as you read through many of the exercises and projects that we include in this book, to wonder how and why the general public (or university ethics committees) could possibly have any concerns with some of the activities if they appear as innocuous as walking the dog, unobtrusively counting people interacting with



statues, or looking through publicly available websites. Of course, sometimes they do not. But until you have considered the moral, legal and practical challenges and responsibilities that may be involved in doing research, then you should not even begin to start your own empirical investigations.

In this chapter, we discuss the general principles which should apply to all social research. We then look more specifically at the ethical issues which are relevant for the various types of visual research discussed in this book, including a section devoted to the Internet. Finally, we will detail a visual coding system which we have used throughout this book, to help you understand quickly and easily what sort of ethical issues may arise in each of the exercises and projects we have included. These symbols should cause you to stop and reflect. They will help you to understand that even the act of seeing comes with responsibilities; that the active researcher has to be able to justify his or her actions; and that a little bit of forethought can later save time, money or – at worst – a legal imbroglio!

## General ethical considerations

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Research ethics is fundamentally about two very important issues:

- Acting with integrity.
- Respecting the rights of others.

Ethics is also about timing. In research, the best time to consider ethics is:

- Before you start researching (Preparation).
- While you are researching (Fieldwork).
- When you are analysing and presenting the results of your research (Post Research Phase).

In other words, there is no time when you should not be alert to the possibility of issues arising, regardless of whether you are doing a small assignment for a university course, or a large-scale project for a well-funded organization.

We cannot include an exhaustive manual of ethical issues and situations, because technology and society are constantly changing and new challenges will continue to emerge. Also, although there tends to be agreement among the research community at a general level about what ethics involves, there has been and will continue to be considerable debate about the details (for instance, the question of what constitutes informed consent in certain situations). Add to this the fact that legal obligations differ from country to country, and ethical regulations vary between institutions, and you may start wondering whether it is possible at all to be definitive when considering ethics! But do not despair. The key, as Rose Wiles et al. (2008) note, is to



Table 2.1 Most common ethical issues to consider when undertaking research

Ethical Issue	Description	Discussion
Informed consent	Participants involved in research should have the right to voluntarily participate – and to understand exactly what they are participating in	This principle usually involves participants in research being advised of the nature and purpose of the study, and informed of their rights about participation, including the right not to participate. Consent forms are often provided. However, as noted in this chapter, the issue of when consent is required is not always clear cut. A famous example of research which has been criticized for not obtaining consent is Laud Humphreys' (1975) work on homosexual encounters in public toilets
Absence of harm	All steps should be taken to avoid the possibility of harm to the participants and the researcher/s – whether physical, psychological, legal, financial, or any other foreseeable type of harm	It is usual to do a risk assessment analysis prior to research to ensure that all possible harm – to either participant or researcher – is minimized. Researchers should think laterally as risk does not just include direct physical harm, and consequences may occur even after the research is finished. For example, poorly worded comments made in a research report about observed activities, which is then available to the study participants, may cause psychological distress if the participants perceive that they are being judged negatively
Privacy, anonymity and confidentiality	All precautions should be taken to ensure that participants' privacy is protected, identifying information should be anonymized, and confidentiality and security of information should be prioritized	When considering how to protect the privacy of individuals, think about not just anonymizing their names but also any other information which could identify them, such as Internet monikers or specific details about a small group or community in which they operate. All information should also be stored securely, whether physically and/or electronically
Deception	A grey area; the general principle is that lies or deception in research should always be avoided unless there are valid and justifiable theoretical or methodological reasons for their use	What constitutes deception is a debatable topic – some would argue that observation without acknowledging your role would constitute deception, whereas others are more concerned with deliberate manipulation in order to obtain data. An example of a researcher who declared the necessity of using deception in certain situations is Goode (1996), who studied the responses to bogus advertisements he placed in a personal column. He argued that he would not have had valid data if he had declared his interest in the research, and that there was minimal risk or negative impacts on the respondents. The important consideration is the effect on parties to the research because of any practices which may be seen as deceptive
Vulnerable populations	Some populations have special needs or considerations which mean that extra care should be taken when doing research	Examples of this would include research involving children or mentally incapacitated hospital patients, which may require the consent of guardians; or the situation where particular indigenous groups may be hostile to approaches if not done in culturally appropriate ways



consider the fundamental issues, and then to be able to justify your decisions based upon the contexts.

Alex Broom (2006: 152) notes three basic considerations which are usually taken into consideration when deciding if a project is ethical. The first is a concern with the people who are the participants in a research study. Their rights, well-being and self-respect should not be negatively impacted upon during the course of the research. Secondly, the researcher's right to a safe and respectful working environment should be considered. Finally, Broom notes that research should be planned to ensure that it does not breach collective standards of justice: for example, undue pressures should not be placed intentionally on relatively neglected groups in society.

In Table 2.1 on the previous page we summarise the most common ethical considerations that have been identified by authors such as Babbie (2010) and Neuman.

Along with these general fundamentals, the researcher also has to consider any particular requirements or obligations which must be satisfied, in relation to the institutions and environments in which he or she will be working. University students reading this book will be aware that tertiary institutions usually have proscribed ethical standards to which students and staff are expected to adhere; they also have ethical committees which review and approve (or not) planned research projects. While many undergraduate class activities and projects – such as the ones mentioned in this book – may not require formal approval, you should try to ensure that you are complying with the requirements and guidelines as laid out by your institution.

### **University Ethical Guidelines**

Through an Internet search of your university website, you can generally find the organization responsible for ethical guidelines. It is variously called the Ethical Clearance Board, the Internal Review Board, the Human Subjects Committee, or something similar depending on the institution. That website should contain instructions on the sorts of projects that require clearance and those that do not. It should also contain examples of the forms that you may need to fill in, and the questions you will need to answer concerning themes like 'harm to subjects', 'anonymity' and 'informed consent'. The process is rarely as difficult as it looks at first, and most organizations have helpful staff who can walk you through the process and answer many of your questions before you submit your application.

Another important consideration is the regulatory and social environment in the region or country in which you are working. Projects which comply with all ethical standards in one country may fall foul of institutionalized expectations in another country. For instance, the personal safety of female