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## Planning and Practising 'Visual Methods':

### Appropriate Uses and Ethical Issues

#### Why use visual methods?

It is impossible to predict, and mistaken to prescribe, precise methods for ethnographic research. Similarly, it would be unreasonable to 'require that visual methods be used in all contexts'. Rather, as Morphy and Banks have suggested, 'they should be used where appropriate, with the rider that appropriateness will not always be obvious in advance' (1997: 14). In practice, decisions are best made once researchers are in a position to assess which specific visual methods will be appropriate or ethical in a particular research context, therefore allowing researchers to account for their relationships with informants and their experience and knowledge of local visual cultures. Nevertheless, certain decisions and indicators about the use of visual images and technologies in research usually need to be made before commencing fieldwork. Often research proposals, preparations and plans must be produced before fieldwork begins; the fieldwork may be in an area where technologies are difficult to purchase or hire; if the project is to be funded and equipment purchased from a research grant, technological needs must be anticipated and budgeted for. Most researchers work with or for or study in universities and other organizations. Usually such institutions also require that their committees should formally scrutinize and approve of research ethics that any project involves before fieldwork begins.

#### The appropriateness of visual methods

Banks has divided visual research methods into three broad activities: 'making visual representations (studying society by producing images)'; 'examining pre-existing visual representations' (studying

images for information about society); 'collaborating with social actors in the production of visual representations' (Banks n.d.). These activities can, in a general way, be anticipated before one begins fieldwork. However, in reality our specific uses of visual images and technologies tend to develop as part of the social relationships and activities that ethnographers engage in during fieldwork. Some of these will be purposefully thought out and strategically applied. In Chapters 3 and 4 the specific applications of general models of visual research methods are discussed in detail. In other cases unanticipated uses of the visual may be discovered by accident and retrospectively defined as visual methods. Ethnographers might repeat such activities (sometimes in collaboration with informants), thus developing and refining the method throughout the research. However, methods developed within one research context may not be transferable to, or appropriate in, others. For example, when I started to research Spanish bullfighting culture I began photographing people at the many public receptions held to present trophies, exhibitions and book launches. After my first reception I showed my photographs to the organizers and participants and they asked me for copies of certain photos, some of which they gave to their colleagues. By keeping note of their requests and asking questions about the images I gained a sense of how individuals situated themselves in relation to other individuals in 'bullfighting culture'. As I attended more receptions I consciously repeated this method and developed my use of the camera and the photographs in response to the relationship that developed between my informants, the technology, the images and myself as photographer (see Chapter 3; Pink 1999b). This method of researching with images was appropriate in bullfighting culture partly because it imitated and was incorporated into my informants' existing cultural and individual uses of photography. Yet in other fieldwork contexts it will not work in the same way. The ethnographer needs to consider both local photographic conventions and the personal meanings and both economic and exchange values that photographs might have in any given research context. An increasing number of social scientists do research with people who are more technology literate and (especially for doctoral students) wealthier than them. For example, in John Postill's research about ICT uses in Malaysia he found that many of his informants, who were mainly middle class Chinese suburban residents, had more sophisticated photographic technology than he was using himself. At public events he was often surrounded by local people photographing the proceedings with their mobile phones and key local actors tended to use digital cameras to produce images for their own websites. One local politician had a portable printer that he used to print out a photograph of himself photographed with Postill at a community basketball match (an enviable technology to any visual researcher) (Postill, personal communication).

Here Postill was able to sometimes share his own digital images of events with his informants.

In other research contexts ethnographers' equipment might well exceed the economic possibilities of their informants. This might be the case both in developing countries or when researching less powerful groups of people in modern western countries. Radley, Hodgetts and Cullen's photographic study of how homeless people both survive and make their home in the city is another example of how in a context where photographic practice was not part of the everyday lives of their informants, photography was in fact an appropriate research method. In this study they asked twelve homeless people to take photographs, using disposable cameras, of 'key times in their day, of typical activities and spaces, or anything else that portrayed their situation' (Radley et al. 2005: 277). Their photographic production was both preceded and followed by an interview. The researchers argue that their emphasis on the visual 'as a way of engaging the participants' (2005: 292) meant that for this research that had a particular focus on appearance, materiality and the use of space (2005: 293) the data provided more information than simply interviewing would have. Importantly, they also report that 'the participants said that they enjoyed making the pictures, enjoyed having the opportunity to show as well as to tell about their lives, their constraints and their possibilities' (2005: 292).

Before attempting visual research it is useful to read up on visual methods used by other ethnographers. However, it is also crucial to evaluate their appropriateness for a new project. This includes considering how visual methods, images and technologies will be interpreted by individuals in the cultures where research will be done, in addition to assessing how well visual methods suit the aims of specific projects. In some situations visual methods appear inappropriate. Moreover researchers should not have fixed, preconceived expectations of what it will be possible to achieve by using visual research methods in a given situation. Sometimes visual methods will not support the researcher's aims. Hastrup's (1992) description of her attempt as a woman anthropologist to photograph an exclusively male Icelandic sheep market demonstrates this well. She described the difficulty and discomfort she experienced while photographing this event but notes that having accomplished the task she felt a sense of satisfaction 'to have been there and to have been able to document this remarkable event' (1992: 9). She had left with the sensation that she 'even had photos from the sacred grove of a male secret society' (1992: 9). However, her photographic method was not appropriate for recording the type of information she had anticipated and she wrote of the disappointment she experienced on later seeing the printed photographs: 'they were hopeless. Ill-focused, badly lit, lopsided and showing nothing but the completely uninteresting backs of men and rams' (1992: 9). She emphasized the difference

between her experience of photographing and the end results: 'While I was taking them I had the impression that I was making an almost pornographic record of a secret ritual. They showed me nothing of the sort but bore the marks of my own inhibition, resulting from my transgression of the boundary between gender categories' (1992: 9). Hastrup's expectations of what she might obtain by using this visual research method were not met. She anticipated that her photographs would represent ethnographic evidence of her experience of the event: 'a record of a secret ritual'. To assess why this was not achieved she generalized that 'pictures have a limited value as ethnographic "evidence", and the "secret" of informants' experiences can only be told in words (1992: 9). While I would agree that as ethnographic 'evidence' photographs indeed have limited value (see Chapter 1), this does not necessarily indicate that one may only represent ethnographic knowledge with words (see Chapters 6–8). The potential of photography or video as a realist recording device or a way of exploring individual subjectivities and creative collaboration will be realized differently in every application.

Sometimes using cameras and making images of informants is inappropriate for ethical reasons (see below). In some situations photographs or videos of informants may put them in political danger, or subject them to moral criticism. The appropriateness of visual methods should not simply be judged on questions of whether the methods suit the objectives of the research question and if they fit well with the local culture in which one is working. Rather, such evaluations should be informed by an ethnographic appreciation of how visual knowledge is interpreted in a cross-cultural context. Therefore decisions about the particular methodologies and modes of representation to be used should pay attention to intersections between local visual cultures, the ways in which the visual is treated by wider users or audiences of the research and ethnographers' own knowledge, experience and sensitivity. By thinking through the implications of image production and visual representation in this way ethnographers should be able to evaluate how their ethnographic images would be invested with different meanings by different political, local and academic discourses.

### Planning visual research

Without good knowledge of the context in which one is planning to do ethnographic research it is very difficult to predict how and to what extent visual images and technologies may be used. Similarly, the basis upon which one may judge if visual methods will be ethical, appropriate, or a useful way to participate or collaborate with the people with whom one is working, will be contingent on the particular



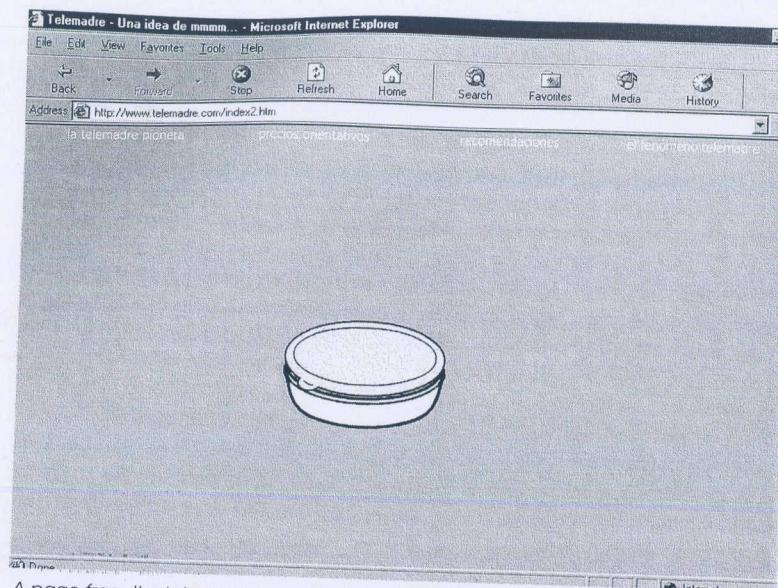
The women bullfighter Cristina Sanchez performing. © Sarah Pink 1993

**Figure 2.1**

When researching gender and bullfighting in Spain, one of the roles I played was as amateur bullfight photographer. My photographic prints, taken mainly in black and white, using a traditional stills camera, provided me with a way to fit in with and share one of the activities that local bullfight aficionados were involved in at that historical moment. Since doing that research both technologies and local practices have shifted. Were I to begin similar fieldwork now in 2006 I would not be able to take for granted that exactly the same method would be appropriate. I would need to review the extent to which amateur bullfight aficionados now use digital photography and the implications of this for their practice.

research context. Plans to use visual methods made before commencing the research may appear unnecessary or out of place once the research has begun. For example, my original proposal to do research about women and bullfighting in southern Spain anticipated the extensive use of video. However, once in the field I found my informants only occasionally used video cameras. I was working in a culture where photography was a dominant source of knowledge and representation about bullfighting. In this situation it was usually more appropriate to participate in local events as a photographer than as a video maker. Since some of my informants also participated in their 'bullfighting culture' as amateur photographers, I was able to share an activity with them as well as producing images that interested them. At the time photography fitted the demands of the project. However, retrospectively, I was able to identify ways in which video could have supported the research, fitted into the local bullfighting culture and also served my informants' interests. Such insights could be used as the basis of future research plans, but would need to be reviewed on the basis of any changes in contemporary local practices at the point that new research commenced.

Usually ethnographers with some experience of working in a particular culture and society already have a sense of the visual and technological cultures of the people with whom they plan to work. Ethnographers should have an idea of how their photographic/video research practices will develop in relation to local practices and a sense of how they may learn through the interface between their own and local visual practices. Such background knowledge makes it easier to present a research proposal that defines quite specifically how and to what ends visual technologies and images are to be employed. This may entail developing insights from prior research in the same culture, doing a short pilot study, or researching aspects of visual cultures from library and museum sources, ethnographic film and the internet. This need not be solely a traditional literature review about visual culture. The first stage of the research process may be an interactive exploration of websites and e-mail contacts where elements of the visual culture of a research area are represented. For instance, if I was to begin research into the visual representations of bullfighting culture now, in the first decade of the twenty-first century, rather than the early 1990s, the starting point from my base in England would be to examine the now numerous bullfighting websites and on-line magazines. E-mail communications and electronic exchanges of digital images are clear options for researchers working with informants who are technology users themselves. When starting research about the 'slow living' movement in Britain in 2005, all my initial contacts were made on-line. My web searches included reading on-line materials but also discovering the snail logo of the movement and the visual images that form part of its internet presence. In some cases, a desk-based analysis of web pages can form the first stage of ethnographic fieldwork (see Figure 2.2).



A page from the telemadre.com Website. Reproduced with permission of mmmm...

**Figure 2.2**

In collaborative research with Ana Martínez Pérez, I am analysing social and gendered relationships that are produced in relation to a Spanish website: [www.telemadre.com](http://www.telemadre.com). The web site represents what its producers call a 'social model', by which, for a fee, unemployed mothers (the *telemadres*) cook meals for young professionals (the *telehijos*) who do not have time to cook for themselves. Our wider research will include visual ethnographic fieldwork with the *telemadres* and *telehijos*. However, as a precursor to this we have developed an analysis of the visual and written texts of this website (Pink and Martínez Pérez 2006). The analysis both builds on existing theoretical and ethnographic research about Spanish gender and domestic life and will inform the research questions that guide our fieldwork.

For example, in our analysis of the web page above that represents a Tupperware® container as the preferred method of storage for the prepared food we note how we have learnt from our existing ethnographic experience that: 'When adult sons still living at home worked away from the parental home it was common on their weekend visits for them to leave with a set of Friday, to be returned and re-filled by their mother the following weekend. This occurred even in cases of sons who lived relatively independently in their own homes' (Pink and Martínez Pérez 2006). The Tupperware container thus becomes a culturally relevant image. The implication is that when we follow this study up with our fieldwork we will need to attend to this question of the meaning of Tupperware to our informants and the extent to which this helps to embed the economic exchanges between *telemadres* and *telehijos* with sentiments of kinship.

More generally, the internet is part of many contemporary ethnographic field sites.

Pre-fieldwork surveys of literature, electronic and other visual texts and examples of how other ethnographers have successfully worked with visual images and technologies in specific cultures can indicate the potential for using visual methods in particular fieldwork contexts. Combined with some considered guesswork about people's visual practices and discourses, this can form a basis from which to develop a research proposal. However, neither a researcher's own preparation, nor other ethnographers' accounts can predict how a visual method will develop in a new project. Just as ethnography can only really be learned in practice, ethnographic uses of visual images and technologies develop from practice-based knowledge. Moreover, as projects evolve novel uses of photography or video may develop to explore and represent unexpected issues. Indeed, some of the most thought provoking and exciting instances of visual research have emerged unexpectedly during fieldwork. A good example is Gemma Orobítg's research amongst the Pumé Indians of Venezuela. Orobítg, who notes that 'During the initial design of my fieldwork ... I did not consider using a camera. Rather it was a fortunate coincidence that led me to first experiment and then reflect methodologically on the value of visual technologies in anthropological research and for anthropological analysis' (2004: 31). Orobítg was asked to take photographs for some documentary filmmakers who wanted to develop a film project in the area and needed some images to support their application. However, from the moment she showed these photographs to the Pumé people she was working with, the images began to inform her research in some key ways: as a visual note book; as a way of communicating with the Pumé; and as a medium through which to reconstruct the imaginary sphere of Pumé life (Orobítg 2004: 32). In Chapters 3 and 4 I discuss a series of examples that are intended to offer ideas and inspirations through which ethnographers may develop their own styles.

### Choosing the technology for the project

Like images, and any material object, technologies are also interpreted differently by individuals in different cultures. If possible, ethnographers should explore the meanings informants give to different visual technologies before purchasing equipment.

The selection of a digital or 'traditional' camera, a semi-professional video camera or the cheapest hand-held domestic model may be related to economic factors, but should also account for how the equipment one uses will become part of one's identity both during fieldwork and in academic circles. Individuals constantly re-situate themselves and construct

their self-identities in relation to not only other individuals but also to material objects and cultural discourses. The visual technologies ethnographers use, like the images they produce and view, will be invested with meanings, inspire responses and are likely to become a topic of conversation. Some informants may have a shared interest in photography or video (in some cases they will have better cameras and skills than the researcher). For example, in Spain my amateur interest in bullfight photography was shared with several local people. This led us to discuss technical as well as aesthetic aspects of bullfighting photography. Then, in the early 1990s, this included themes such as the best film speeds, zoom lenses and seating in the arena. Later in 1999 and 2000, in video interviewing projects in the United Kingdom and Spain, interviewees appeared relaxed with my domestic digital video camera, simply seeing it as one of the latest pieces of new video technology. In comparison to solitary field diary writing, photography and video making can appear more visible, comprehensible activities to informants, and may link more closely with their own experience. Photographs and video tapes themselves become commodities for exchange and the sites of negotiation, for example, among informants, between researchers and informants, between researchers and their families and friends at home and among researchers. In short, the visual technologies and images associated with ethnographers will also be implicated in the way other people construct their identities and thus impact on their social relationships and experiences.

Therefore, when selecting and applying for funding for technology it is important to remember that a camera will be part of the research context and an element of the ethnographer's identity. It will impinge on the social relationships in which he or she becomes involved and on how informants represent themselves. Different technologies impact on these relationships and identities in different ways. In some cases image quality may have to be forsaken to produce images that represent the type of ethnographic knowledge sought. For example, the relationship between ethnographer and subjects that can develop in a photographic or filmic situation created by the use of professional lighting and sound equipment will differ from when the ethnographer is working alone with just a small hand-held camcorder or stills camera. The images may be darker and grainier, the sound less sharp, but the ethnographic knowledge they invoke may be more useful to the project.

In tandem with the social and cultural implications of the use of visual technologies, practical and technical issues also arise. How will a camera and other equipment be powered and transported? (Will there even be electricity?) What post-production resources will be available? Finally, what resources will be available for showing the images to informants? In some locations cameras can be connected to TV

monitors and video recorders. In others, a solar-powered laptop computer might be used to screen digital still and video images. When purchasing equipment it is important to keep track of technological developments and also of post-fieldwork equipment requirements. How and where will editing be carried out? Will any extra computing hardware, software or expertise be needed? The precise technology available and skills needed can change within a year or so. For example, for my 1999 video ethnography research I needed to ask skilled computing staff to support me by digitalizing my video footage and saving it on CD. In contrast, in 2006 I am able to do this myself using the software that was supplied with my domestic digital video camera and laptop computer. However, both equipment and additional production facilities, if they are used, can be costly and it is important to budget realistically for the cost of tape transfer, use of editing facilities, printing and computing equipment.

### Ethics and ethnographic research

A consideration of the ethical implications of ethnographic research and representation should underpin any research project. Most guides and courses on research methods dedicate a section to ethics. Such texts usually cover a standard set of issues such as informed consent, covert research, confidentiality, harm to informants, exploitation and 'giving something back', ownership of data, and protection of informants. These indisputably relevant issues are critically reviewed later in this chapter. However, the issue of ethics in ethnographic work refers to more than simply the ethical conduct of the researcher. Rather, it demands that ethnographers develop an understanding of the ethical context(s) in which they work, a reflexive approach to their own ethical beliefs, and a critical approach to the idea that one ethical code of conduct could be hierarchically superior to all others. Because ethics are so embedded in the specific research contexts in which ethnographers work, like decisions about which visual research methods to employ in a project, ethical decisions cannot be concluded until the researcher is actually in the field.

In practice, ethics are bound up with power relations between ethnographers, informants, professionals, sponsors, gatekeepers, governments, the media and other institutions (see Ellen 1984: 134). Ethical decisions are ultimately made by individual ethnographers, usually with reference to personal and professional codes of ethical conduct and the intentionalities of other parties. Researchers from different disciplines will need to refer to the ethical guidelines of the professional association that they feel most closely aligned with, and at times to those of other related disciplines when their work crosses disciplinary boundaries. Most

professional associations now keep their ethical codes and other guidelines and discussions relating to this on-line. In Britain the Association of Social Anthropologists (ASA) and the British Sociological Association (BSA) provide important documents. The ethical practices of academic researchers are now often also scrutinized by both the research ethics committees that have been set up in the institutions in which they work and the research funding councils that support their work. The personal dimension of ethnographic research, the moral and philosophical beliefs of the researcher and his or her view of reality, also impinge greatly on the ethical practices that he or she applies in research and representation.

Ethics are also bound up with the epistemological concerns of academic disciplines – they both inform and are informed by theory and methodology. For instance, a research methodology that is informed by a relativist approach requires that ethics becomes not simply a matter of ensuring that research is done in an ethical way (that is, conforms to a fixed ethical code or set of rules), but that ethics becomes an area of philosophical debate in itself. If difference denotes plurality and equality rather than hierarchy, then it would seem unreasonable to argue that one ethical code would be superior to another. This problematizes the idea that there is one set of rules that defines the ethical way to undertake ethnographic research and challenges the assumption that ethnographic research may be guided by one code of ethical conduct rather than by another. However, such a relativist approach to ethics raises difficult questions. For instance, how relativist can ethnographic research and representation afford to be in relation to ethics while remaining an 'ethical' activity? Should ethnographers accept all ethical codes as being equally permissible? Clearly there are some activities that ethnographers would wish to render 'unethical'.

Rapport has suggested that the inadequacy of a relativist approach for dealing with ethics may be resolved by a focus on the individual. He argues that '[i]nstead of relativistic making of allowances for different cultures maintaining different traditions – whatever the consequences to their individual members – I want to outline a liberal basis for social science which recognises individuals as universal human agents above whom there is no greater good, without whom there is no cultural tradition' (Rapport 1997: 181). For Rapport, the ethical approach of social science should be one that responds against 'the violation of individual integrity, the threat to the individual's conscious potential, the ideological prioritising of community above and beyond the individuals who at any one moment constitute it' (1997: 181). Therefore he is able to argue that social scientists should be able to see a number of practices (such as 'Nazism, religious fundamentalism, female circumcision, infanticide and *suttee*') as unethical 'because of the hurt they cause to individuals, because of the harm which accrues in those social milieux where an ethic of interpersonal tolerance is not managed' (1997: 181).

Rapport's principle offers a basis upon which ethnographers may evaluate the ethical practices of themselves as researchers, their informants and other individuals, agencies and institutions with whom they come into contact during research. Ultimately, the decision will be a personal one for each ethnographer has to decide whether his or her research practices and representations are ethical before these are held up to the scrutiny of others who will then interpret this question for themselves. Similarly, the question of the ethics of those whom we study, and the ethics of studying and/or making moral judgements about them, is one that individual ethnographers must address for themselves at some stage in their research. It will also be addressed by those who read or view their representations at another stage. During my research about bullfighting I was often confronted with the question 'was bullfighting morally right or wrong?' While carrying out this research I felt morally able to 'stand on the fence'. I did not commit myself to a moral judgement either way, and still maintain that I don't. However, I was aware that some of my Spanish informants and some acquaintances in the United Kingdom felt that not only bullfighting, but also my research and my participation in bullfighting culture by attending (and sometimes enjoying) bullfights was unethical. They felt that by researching and writing on the subject I was effectively condoning what they regarded as an unethical practice. On occasion I could empathize with their subject position, but I felt I was doing nothing more than shifting subject positions; I was never making a personal commitment to either standpoint. Aware that some people, especially animal rights activists, would judge my informants' practices as unethical, and having heard their views that bullfighting fans were 'blood thirsty', 'violent' and 'barbaric', I felt obliged to 'protect' my informants by attempting to represent them as sensitive and moral human beings and to describe their understanding of bullfighting in a way that indicated they did not fit the unethical profile others had associated with them. The ethics that guide ethnographers may be a critical discourse on the ethics of the people they study, or of an individual or institution who has power over them. Rapport admits that his perspective on ethics (see above) is personal. Similarly, my own approach to the ethics of bullfighting was based on a personal conviction. Another ethnographer might argue that any activity that causes harm or hurt to animals is unethical, thus taking a different approach to the representation of ethnographic work on bullfighting.

As Peter Pels has pointed out for anthropology, in the contemporary world:

Globalizing movements have resulted in a situation in which the ethics of anthropology can no longer be thought of simply in terms of the dyad between researcher and researched: anthropology is placed squarely within a more

complex field of governmentality, cross-cultural conflict and global mobility. Some of these developments seem threatening to anthropology, others seem to provide new opportunities, and all raise novel questions about the ethics of anthropological research. (Pels 1996: 8)

It is not solely ethnographers and informants who are implicated in the ethical issues researchers confront during fieldwork. Indeed, there may be a whole range of other interested parties and agendas that shape the ethical conduct of ethnographers and their informants either by enforcing their own guidelines, or by posing a threat to the safety of those represented in ethnographic work. Ethnographers therefore need to understand how plural moralities are at play in any ethnographic situation, and the extent to which these different ethical codes are constructed and interpreted in relation to one another. Ethnographers should seek to identify where the ethics of the research fit in with these other ethical codes with which it intersects. Ultimately, ethics in ethnography is concerned with making decisions based on interpretations of the moralities and intentionalities of other people and the institutions they may represent.

### **Visual research methods and ethical ethnography**

The theoretical underpinning of my approach to ethics and visual research methods is based on the relationship between vision and reality discussed in Chapter 1. This emphasizes the specificity of the visual meanings that operate in the different cultures and societies in which ethnographers work and in the different ways ethnographers' images can be interpreted by other bodies such as academics, informants, professionals, sponsors, gatekeepers, governments, the media and other institutions. However conscious ethnographers are of the arbitrary nature of photographic meanings, ethnographic images are still likely to be treated as 'truthful recordings' or 'evidence' by non-academic viewers. Ethnographers should pay particular attention to how different approaches to the visual and different meanings given to the same images may coincide or collide in the domains in which we research and represent our work.

Below I critically review existing approaches to ethics in ethnographic research methodology, to consider their implications for the use of visual images.

#### *Covert research and the question of informed consent*

As a scientific-realist strategy, covert research was assumed to enable ethnographers to better observe an 'objective truth'. In the case of the covert use of video recording and photography the same principle was

applied: the use of a hidden camera was thought to allow researchers to produce images of an objective reality, less 'distorted' by their own subjectivity and by the self-consciousness of their informants (see Chapter 1 and also Banks 2001: 120–1). Nevertheless, as I have noted in Chapter 1, such objectivity can never actually be achieved. Although some would argue that not all covert research is necessarily unethical (see, for example, Hammersley and Atkinson 1995: 263–8), any type of covert research requires a careful consideration of ethics and any decisions made should be contingent on the specific research context. In my view, however, it would be extremely difficult to justify undertaking covert research as part of a visual ethnographic project.

The approach to photography and video in ethnographic research I propose in Chapters 3 and 4 emphasizes the idea of collaboration between researcher and informant (which is also fundamental to Banks's approach to visual research [see Banks 2001]). Covert research implies the researcher videoing and photographing the behaviour of informants in a secretive rather than collaborative way, for example, using a hidden camera or using the camera under the guise of a role other than that of researcher. A collaborative method, in contrast, assumes that researcher and informant are consciously working together to produce visual images and specific types of knowledge through technological procedures and discussions. As such, in my view, a collaborative method provides a more appropriate ethical approach to visual ethnography.

The distinction between overt and covert research is, however, further complicated by challenging the notion of 'informed consent'. First, because cross-culturally consent may take different forms, involve different individuals and relationships and have different meanings. Secondly, informants may be keen to collaborate without actually engaging fully with *why* a researcher would want to video-record certain activities. Even if informants collaborate or participate in the production of ethnographic video and photography, it is unlikely that their understanding or intentions *vis-à-vis* the project will coincide exactly with the ethnographer's. In such cases it could be argued that even if consent is given, it is not *informed* consent, and the researcher is (even if unintentionally) keeping his or her real agenda hidden from the informants.

The ethical implications of covertly shot video or photography vary at different stages of the project at which the images may become accessible to different parties. If the ethnographer is to publish covertly produced images, this raises a range of new issues (see below).

#### *Permission and the right to photograph/video at public events*

It is good practice to ask permission to photograph in any public context or event, as well as seeking the consent of the individuals

photographed, and in some situations official permission is required. Permission to photograph and video at public events may be granted in a variety of ways. During my fieldwork in Spain, like many of my informants, I often photographed the bullfight. While it was not allowed to video-record a bullfight without formal permission, photography was usually freely permitted. Much of this involves photographing individual performers, however their permission is rarely asked and their fans tend to assume their right to photograph a public figure. Bullfighters are frequently photographed before and after as well as during their performances. Fans queue up at their hotels, hoping for a chance to pose with the performer, while the arena is packed with many aspiring bullfight photographers with a range of different types of camera and skills. In this research context public photography was freely permitted and acceptable. In other field contexts formal permission might be needed before photographing in any public place or event. It is best to seek guidance locally, both regarding the public rules and regulations and local cultural conventions. Both when formally permission is not required, or when it has been given formally, it is nevertheless polite to ask people if they would mind being photographed in public contexts.

The question of whether an ethnographer has permission to photograph or video differs from situation to situation and according to who we listen. Often it seems obligatory initially to negotiate official permission to video or photograph with institutional gatekeepers. However, permission to video or photograph individuals in their capacity as participants in events is usually best negotiated with each individual or group. The ethics of obtaining permissions vary in different research contexts, according to project aims and the agendas of researchers, informants and other interested parties. To clarify permissions to photograph or video and the possible future uses of any images produced, some researchers use consent forms that the subjects of their images are asked to sign. However, getting an informant's signature on a consent form should not be considered to give the researcher the moral right to then use the image in unrestricted ways; as I detail below, ethical questions will continue to be considered as the process of representation begins.

#### *Harm to informants*

While ethnographic research is unlikely to cause harm as, for example, drugs trials may, it can lead to emotional distress or anxiety (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995: 268). Sensitivity to how individuals in different cultures may experience anxiety or stress through their involvement in research is important in any ethnographic project. However, rather than prescribing actual methods of preventing harm to informants in visual research, my intention is to suggest a way of thinking about how

research, anxiety and harm are understood and experienced in different ethnographic contexts. General methods of preventing harm to informants may not be locally applicable. First, there are culturally different ways of understanding harm and of causing it with images. Therefore, in order to prevent harm being caused, a researcher needs a good understanding of local notions of harm and anxiety, how these may be experienced and how they relate to images. Secondly, the idea that informants may find the research process distressing is usually based on the assumption that the informants are having the research *done to them*. In this scenario the researcher is supposed to be in control of the research situation and therefore also assumes responsibility for the potential harm that may be done to the informants. This approach requires that in taking responsibility to protect their informants, researchers should be sensitive to the visual culture and experience of the individuals with whom they are working. For instance, ethnographers need to judge, or ask (if appropriate), if there are personal or cultural reasons why some people may find particular photographs shown to them in interviews or discussions offensive, disturbing or distressing, or if being photographed or videoed themselves would be stressful.

Anxiety and harm to informants can often be avoided through a collaborative approach to visual research and joint ownership of visual materials. Here researchers and informants should maintain some degree of control over the content of the materials and their subsequent uses.

#### *Harm, representation and permission to publish*

Above I have discussed the issue of permission to video or photograph during ethnographic research. The publication of the research raises new issues. Sometimes this is already a concern when the images are shot, especially if the ethnographer's project is to produce a documentary or photographic exhibition. These intentions should be made clear to the subjects of the images. Some ethnographic filmmakers ask the subjects of their films to sign consent forms (see Barbash and Taylor 1997; Banks 2001: 131–2; Marvin 2005). However, if this is not done, moral and legal issues of ownership of the images and of consent may arise. If the images were produced covertly, without the permission of their subjects, the moral right of the video maker or photographer to publish them could be questioned. Moreover, it cannot be assumed that people have consented to being in a publicly screened video or to have large images of themselves exhibited in a gallery simply because they have allowed the images to be taken or have responded to the camera. This raises questions such as should the subjects of photographs and video be allowed to see printed or edited copies before they consent to their images entering a public domain?

Different filmmakers, photographers and ethnographers have their own opinions and practices regarding this. Much of ethnography is about making private aspects of people's lives public. Therefore, who should be responsible for deciding the content of the visual representation of other people's lives?

Questions of harm to individuals or institutions become pressing when it comes to publication. For photography and video this is particularly important since it is usually impossible to preserve anonymity of people and places. Ethnographers have to make choices regarding if and how video footage will be incorporated into the final publication of the research. This requires a serious consideration of ethical issues and possibly the participation of the informants or the subjects of the images. The publication of certain photographic and video images may damage individuals' reputations; they may not want certain aspects of their identities revealed or their personal opinions to be made public. People express some things in one context that they would not say in another, and in the apparent intimacy of a video interview an informant may make comments that he or she would not make elsewhere. Institutions may also be damaged by irresponsible publication of images. The public front of any institution is often a veneer that holds fast the conflicts and organizational problems that are part of its everyday order.

Finally, once visual and other representations of ethnographic work have been produced and disseminated publicly neither author nor subjects of the work can control the ways in which these representations are interpreted and given meanings by their readers, viewers or audiences. In Chapters 6, 7 and 8 these issues are raised in a discussion of the visual representation of ethnographic work.

#### *Exploitation and 'giving something back'*

Usually ethnographers stand to gain personally from their interactions with informants, through an undergraduate or masters' degree project, PhD thesis, consultancy project or other publication that will enhance their career. In contrast, informants may not accrue similar benefits from their participation in research projects. Conventional responses to this ethical problem focus on how ethnographers may 'give something back'; how the participants in the research may be empowered through their involvement in the project, or that research should be directed at the powerful rather than the weak (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995: 274–5). None of these responses, however, provide satisfactory solutions to the exploitative nature of research (see Hammersley and Atkinson 1995).

The idea of 'giving something back' implies that the ethnographer extracts something (usually the data) and then makes a gift of something else to the people from whom he or she has got the information.

Rather than making research any less exploitative, this approach merely tries to compensate for it by 'giving something back'. Ironically, this may benefit the ethnographer, who will feel ethically virtuous, while the informants may be left wondering why they have been given whatever it was they 'got back', and what precisely it was they got it in return for. Rather than try to redress the inequalities after the event, it would seem better advised to attempt to undertake ethnography that is less exploitative. If ethnography is seen as a process of negotiation and collaboration with informants, through which they too stand to achieve their own objectives, rather than as an act of taking information away from them, the ethical agenda also shifts. By focusing on collaboration and the idea of 'creating something together', agency becomes shared between the researcher and informant. Rather than the researcher being the active party who both extracts data and gives something else back, in this model both researcher and informant invest in, and are rewarded by, the project. Recent work with video and photography shows how these media can be used to develop very successful collaborative projects. In some cases this has empowered informants/subjects and can serve to challenge existing power structures that impinge on the lives of informants and ethnographers. In a project developed by Barnes, Taylor-Brown and Weiner (1997), a group of HIV-positive women collaborated with the researchers to produce a set of video tapes that contained messages for their children. This use of video allowed the women to represent themselves on video tapes to be screened in the future. Simultaneously, the agreement allowed the researchers to use the tapes as research materials (see Chapter 4).

As I have suggested above, the concept of 'giving something back' often depends on the idea of ethnography as a 'hit and run' act: the ethnographer spends a number of months in the field gathering data before leaving for home where this data will be written up. Very little remains once ethnographers leave their field sites, apart from (in the case of overseas fieldwork) those domestic and other things that did not fit into a suitcase. Field notes and papers are of little use or interest to most informants, and at any rate researchers may feel these are personal documents. However, video tapes and photographs are usually of interest to the people featured in them and the people who were involved in their production. If an ethnographer is working on the 'giving something back' principle, copies of video and photography of individuals and activities that informants value could be an appropriate return for the favours they have performed during fieldwork. However, a collaborative approach to ethnographic image production may do more to redress the inequalities that inevitably exist between informants and researchers. Beate Engelbrecht's collaborative work with ethnographic film shows how visual work can become a product in which both informants and ethnographer invest. Engelbrecht (1996) describes a number



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**Figure 2.3**

As part of my research in Aylsham, Norfolk, I provide copies of my own photographs of the Slow Food and Cittàslow events to the people who are developing local projects. In 2005 the town was a finalist in the international LivCom Awards (see [www.livcomawards.com/](http://www.livcomawards.com/)), where it won a silver award. As part of the preparation for the event, I sent a set of photographs and video clips of the town and from its carnival and regional agricultural show which, combined with images produced by other peoples, provided a range of materials used to develop the presentation given at the awards event in Spain.

of filmmaking projects that involved the collaboration of local people in both filmmaking and editing. In some cases people wanted their traditional festivities or rituals to be documented, and were pleased to work with the filmmakers to achieve these ends. Others realized the commercial potential of their participation in film projects. For example, Engelbrecht notes how the artisans who were represented in her film *Copper Working* (1993) participated actively in the film and 'were also thinking of the potential of film as a marketing instrument [for their copper artifacts]' (1996: 167). In this case, the subjects of the film had their own agenda and were able to exploit the project of the filmmakers for their own purposes: 'it was agreed upon that one copy of the film should be given to the local museum exhibiting the best of the recent copper work of the village so as to use it for tourist information' (1996: 167).

A further problem with the notion of 'giving something back' is that it neglects the interlinkages between the researcher's personal autobiographical narrative and the research narrative. Fieldwork, everyday life and writing-up may not necessarily be separated either spatially or temporally in the ethnographer's life and experience (see Chapter 1). Ethnographic research may not entail the researcher going somewhere, taking something away and being morally obliged to 'give something back'. Instead, the ethnography may be part of a researcher's everyday interactions. There may be a continuous flow of information and objects between the ethnographer and informants. This might include the exchange of images, of ideas, emotional and practical exchanges and support, each of which are valued in different ways.

*Ownership of research materials*

In some cases visual research materials are jointly owned by a set of different parties such as the researcher, informants/subjects, funding bodies, bodies involved in post-production and other institutions and universities or organizations. While researchers may consider their own practices to be ethical, this may be challenged by any joint owners of the photographs or tapes. Such problems may arise if a project is sponsored by an institution that claims ownership of the data, or the project has involved teamwork and photographs or video tapes are joint possessions of the members of the project team. Moreover, if video or photographic images have been produced in collaboration with informants, the collaborators may wish to use the images in ways that the researcher feels are unethical. To attempt to avoid such problems it is advisable to clarify rights of use and ownership of video and photographic images before their production. This will inevitably bear on the ethical decisions taken during the research and may influence the types of images that are

produced. In some cases it is appropriate to use a written agreement that states who will use the video or photographic materials; the purposes for which it will be used; and whether the participants have consented to its use.

### Visual research with children

In recent years the ethics of doing research with and about, and of producing visual images of, children have come under increasing scrutiny. This, of course, has important implications for visual ethnographic research. As I have noted above, much contemporary research is scrutinized by institutional ethical committees, and these will pay specific attention to research involving children. It is important to gain consent not only of the children themselves but also of their parents or guardians in order that they should participate in research. Phil Mizen provides a useful discussion of this in an article about research about children's labour in which children were asked to photograph the contexts in which they worked. Through this research, he notes that

our approach had been to carry through the belief that children are rational agents actively engaged with the social world around them . . . , and thus capable of providing informed consent or, conversely, of withdrawing this at any time. Even so, we were equally mindful of their subordinate status: a fact reinforced from the outset by our need to obtain prior consent from parents and guardians before any of the fieldwork activities could begin. (2005: 126)

Questions surrounding photographing and video-recording children are important not only amongst researchers but also in wider society. This will vary in different cultural contexts but, for example, in Britain photographing children in schools and for press reports is becoming increasingly complex. As a modern Western parent myself, I feel the importance of this when I am asked for sign consent forms for my children to be photographed during activities organized by my childcare provider. Researchers create similar paper-trails of documentation of consent when they wish to photograph a young person who is someone else's son or daughter.

Here I discuss briefly some recent visual research projects involving children and young people as examples that will provide useful case studies in existing practice. In some research projects it is the children themselves who are depicted visually during the research process and in representations. For example: David MacDougall (2005) discusses both his own ethnographic documentary film work with children in his 'Doon School' projects in India, and examples of other documentary

approaches to representing children; Rossella Ragazzi's (2006) video work on migrant children in Paris involved screening back 10-minute episodes of her footage at the school, generating comments and new understandings; in Chapter 1 I noted Hyde's (2005) discussion of Wendy Ewald's portraits of children as an interesting example that suggests how social researchers might also engage collaborative photographic practices to both understand and represent children's experiences; Andrea Raggel and Michael Schratz have used their own photographs of children, taken in school, to inform a rather different type of collaboration with children – as a way to ask pupils to 'recall learning situations' and to 'reflect on or about action' (2004: 151); other projects like Mizen's cited above ask the children themselves to photograph their own worlds. In the case of Mizen's research the children became 'researcher photographers' who were invited to make a 'photo-diary', 'in which they were encouraged to use photography to illustrate, document and reflect upon their work and employment' (2005: 126) (see also Chapter 3).

These projects cited above all take children and their experiences as the main focus of their research. However, it is worth noting that children will be implicated in many of the social and cultural contexts in which visual ethnographers work, even if it is the adults with whose lives theirs are interwoven who are the key individuals a researcher is collaborating with. Therefore it is advisable to gain an awareness of the methodological and ethical issues involved with working with children before embarking on any project.

### Summary

Preparing for ethnographic research is a complex task. It is impossible to predict exactly how fieldwork will proceed and many decisions about using visual methods and the ethical questions they raise are taken during research. Often ethnographers cannot answer the questions that inform the use of photography and video in particular social and cultural contexts, until they have experience of the visual culture and social relationships with which they will be working.

### FURTHER READING

Banks, M. (2001) *Visual Methods in Social Research*, London: Sage. (Provides a useful discussion of the ethics of visual research that could be used alongside that given in this text)

Pink, S., Kurti, L. and Afonso, A.I. (eds) *Working Images*. London: Routledge. (An edited volume of case studies about the use of visual research methods. The first set of chapters in particular tell the stories of how different types of visual research projects developed)

Ruby, J. (2000) *Picturing Culture*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. (Offers an approach to visual anthropology that equates a reflexive with an ethical approach to research and representation)

## Part 2

# Producing Knowledge

Doing fieldwork is a unique and personal experience. While different ethnographers may purport to use the same methods, they will in fact do so in different ways. In Chapters 3 and 4 I draw from some of my own and other ethnographers' experiences of doing research with photography and video to offer some ideas and possibilities for a reflexive approach to visual methods. Analysis can take place at any point in the research process, and may be combined with some of the methods described in Chapters 3 and 4. In Chapter 5 I focus more specifically on the storage, analysis and interpretation of research materials.