Towards the development of ethics guidelines for visual psychology: A review of relevant visual research ethics guidelines

Susan Hansen, *Middlesex University*
Erminia Colucci, *Middlesex University*

Abstract

Visual research methods are increasingly popular within psychology and the social sciences. However, psychology has yet to develop its own specific ethics guidelines for visual research methods. Currently, psychologists undertaking visual and arts-based research draw on ethics guidelines developed by and for allied disciplines that have a more established tradition of visual research, such as visual anthropology and visual sociology. While many of the principles of existing ethics guidelines from allied disciplines are applicable to psychological projects, psychological research has a distinct focus and potential applications, which would benefit from the generation of a set of bespoke guidelines. These should reflect our discipline's long standing commitment to ethical research practice, and critical stance towards the limitations of inflexible formalistic principles. This article reviews existing guidelines for visual research and provides recommendations for visual research ethics guidelines for psychology, including the importance of 'staged' consent, anonymity vs. identification, and an expanded field of consideration which may include participants as image producers and owners; the individuals captured in the images taken by participants or researchers; and the impact of the research on the eventual audiences for these images.

Keywords*:* Visual Research, Visual Methodology, Visual Psychology, Visual Sociology, Visual Anthropology, Ethics, Ethical guidelines, Film, Photography

Background

Qualitative researchers use visual research methods in order to study a range of human experiences (from individual to collective) and, particularly with participatory visual methods, to more fully engage participants throughout the research process (Reavey & Prosser, 2012). Visual research has been adopted within a range of disciplines to provide powerful and in-depth insights, by capturing and analysing still or moving images and artefacts (Cox & Benson, 2017). Within psychology, researchers are increasingly finding that the visual methodologies developed in allied disciplines such as sociology and anthropology may offer rich opportunities for qualitative research.

Visual researchers may adopt approaches grounded in researcher/participant generated or already existing visual artefacts. With the former approach, researchers create or facilitate participants' creation of visual 'artefacts', while in the latter they explore existing or 'found' visual artefacts in terms of their production, polysemy, and potential application (Reavey & Prosser (2012). However, researchers' use of participant generated images may raise ethical concerns about authorship and ownership, and similarly for the use of found visual artefacts as data, especially when such images may have been sourced from social media. This may also present ethical issues centred on the logistics of participant consent, and ensuring respect for participants who may be unaware that their visual material is being used in a research project (Warr et al., 2016).

Visual artefacts may be treated as data for analysis, and can also form the basis of creative outputs for the communication of research findings (Haffejee & Theron, 2018). Moreover, visual research methods may be incorporated within more established qualitative methods of data collection, for example during interviews, in order to evoke unanticipated memories, feelings and information through discussing visual materials via photo or object elicitation techniques (Pauwels, 2015; Harper, 2002). These visual methods offer a significant opportunity for qualitative researchers in psychology to augment the conventional semi-structured interview format that has long been the standard method for qualitative data collection. However, paradoxically, the analytic output of such visually-grounded interviews is often primarily text-based, and reliant on the transcription and analysis of the verbal information 'elicited' via the use of visual materials. It remains less common for visual researchers in the social sciences to extend their analysis to the

visual objects used in interviews as discussion prompts. Indeed, to do so would require participants' consent to reproduce these visual materials in subsequent publications, in either the original or in an anonymised form. Much as the integrity of text-based forms of analysis requires the inclusion of verbatim interview quotes in order for the reader to critically interrogate the analytic claims of the writer, the inclusion of visual extracts may be necessary in order to ground the analysis in the data. However, the reproduction of visual materials in academic articles presents a novel set of ethical considerations, including the extent to which participants have consented to the presentation of their images in this form, and whether these images may potentially identify participants. These ethical issues may conflict with accepted scholarly expectations that one's analysis should be clearly grounded in 'verbatim' data extracts.

Visual methods may also involve participants as producers, or co-producers, of visual data, for example, in participatory videos, photovoice projects, arts-based methods, and digital stories (Haffejeea & Theron, 2018). Involving participants as producers has been argued to offer a creative means of self-expression and exploration that does not rely on verbal interaction. This may be particularly fruitful when working with sensitive or challenging topics, or with vulnerable participants (e.g. young people, sexual violence survivors, people living with dementia) who may find the conventional semi-structured interview format challenging (Haysom, 2015).

It should be noted that visual methods also depart from conventional research methods in that they are not restricted to strategies for the collection and production of visual data for analysis and conventional academic publication. Visual research may also yield compelling and non-conventional forms for the dissemination of research findings, and for the engagement of non-traditional audiences, through creative works including films, video-installations, exhibitions, visual essays and multimedia projects (Hansen, 2018; Pauwels, 2015). Visual methods of dissemination may also be used to engage audiences and communities beyond academia, although critics note that such 'public' displays of visual material that participants may consider to be 'private' or personal may represent an ethical challenge in terms of ensuring that participants have the opportunity to meaningfully consent to the conditions for the viewing of their data. Some researchers suggest a staged consent process that enables participants to review their visual data,

to suggest edits and amendments, and to discuss possible audiences, before the release of this output (e.g. Pink, 2013).[1]

Indeed, Haffeeji and Theron (2018) point to the importance of carefully planning the dissemination of visual research projects. They demonstrate that visual methods may create a greater awareness of, and identification with, the experiences of participants, and that these methods may even be effective at creating social change, given strategic dissemination. Their participants created digital stories based on drawings, images and music that related to their experience of child sexual abuse (CSA) and their positive adjustment and resilience post abuse. Notably, participants were asked to nominate their preferred audiences for their digital stories – in this case, other young women who had experienced CSA, professionals who worked to support CSA survivors, and perpetrators of CSA. Unusually, Haffeeji and Theron (2018) did not assume, but rather evaluated the extent to which these audiences felt that they now had a deeper understanding of the experience of survivors of CSA, and the extent to which they were influenced to engage in action, based on their viewing of these digital stories. It is uncommon for psychological research to consider dissemination plans that may potentially feature such 'personal' and public facing visual data. However, as we will see, allied disciplines have established strategies designed to protect, empower, and involve participants in this process, through an active process of ongoing consent.

This paper will critically explore contemporary ethics guidelines for visual research methods in the allied disciplines of sociology and anthropology. Recommendations will be provided for developing ethics guidelines specifically for visual research in psychology, based on the current guidelines that exist for visual research methods in other disciplines.

Visual research in psychology and allied disciplines

Visual research has long been used in disciplines such as sociology and anthropology, but has only recently been embraced within psychology. A growing number of qualitative psychologists are

---

[1] Indeed, this approach was adopted by one of the authors (Hansen) in her video-based study of people's household activity spaces during the COVID-19 pandemic. She invited participants to view their videos and to indicate any personal details they would prefer to be obscured or edited out. Participants were also given the opportunity to have the audio of their voices replaced by subtitles, and to view and comment on the final edited version of the video before any public screenings (Hansen, Hernández-Albújar & Scott, forthcoming).

now working with a range of visual methodologies. For example, Colucci and McDonough (2019) used digital storytelling to explore, document and share concepts of recovery from mental illness and suicidal behaviour among people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, particularly immigrant and refugee/asylum seeker backgrounds (Colucci & McDonough, 2019; McDonough & Colucci, 2018). Visual narratives produced by South African students through drawing outlined body portraits demonstrated how their lives have changed in post-apartheid and postcolonial South Africa (Botsis & Bradbury, 2018). In Segalo's project (2018), women narrated their lived experience through embroidery and poetry, while the Mmogo-method of using beads, straws and clay enabled elderly subjects to create a visual representation of their personal feelings and translate it into an art form (Roos, 2012).

Psychology has a long established relationship with visual methodologies and visual technologies, although early psychologists' use of visual methodologies were unexamined as such and represent a 'pre-history' (Reavey & Prosser, 2012). As with sociology and anthropology, the emergence of visual technologies such as photography were an essential part of the discipline of psychology establishing its scientific credibility during the 19th century (Edwards, 2015). Photography had a key role in studies of psychopathology, particularly within the sub-discipline of clinical psychology. Within the Victorian era, photographs were regarded as a reliable source of data for the establishment of diagnostic categories for mental disorders (Porter, 2002).

Social psychologists have also long used film and photography to document their research, though the resulting footage was not considered as visual data. For example, Stanley Milgram (1963) filmed his obedience to authority experiments, which involved participants administering what they thought were real electric shocks to others, and Phillip Zimbardo (1971) used hidden cameras to document his Stanford Prison Experiment (Haney, Banks & Zimbardo, 1973). These now infamous social psychological studies are often cited as pivotal in inspiring the development of more rigorous ethical standards and review processes for psychological research, and from the late 1960s onwards, psychologists increasingly offered incisive critiques of psychology's methods, ethics and epistemology (e.g. Tajfel, 1972). Feminist psychologists in particular developed an emphasis on an alternative ethics of care. Gilligan (1983) asserted that ethical dilemmas and responsibilities are gendered, and that women (and girls) have a 'different [ethical] voice' to men (and boys), which is grounded in a tendency to sublimate their own wants and needs over those of others. Indeed, this early ethics of care approach within psychology meshes well with

contemporary visual researchers' focus on the importance of a 'situated ethics' grounded in considerations of care (e.g., Banks & Zeitlyn, 2015).

Within sociology, there is a well-established tradition of visual research methods.[2] Indeed, visual sociology is now a recognised 'para-field' of sociology (Cambre, 2020). Pauwels notes that visual sociology is "not just a "sociology of the visual" (as subject), but also a method for sociology in general (whatever its field: law, religion, culture, etc.) and a way of thinking, conceptualising, and presenting ideas and findings" (Pauwels 2010, p. 559). Visual sociologists work in many subfields of relevance to psychology and its own subfields (social psychology, organisational psychology, forensic psychology, etc.). For instance, visual sociologists with a focus on the sociology of mental health provide a clear account of the benefits of using visual methods in this area, in terms of attaining deeper insights into people's experiences of mental health challenges (Manikonda & De Choudhury, 2017).

The main forms of visual data used within visual sociology are pre-existing, researcher-generated, and participant-generated images (Cox & Benson, 2017). Visual research has been argued to provide a voice for those from disadvantaged groups as visual methods may enable participants to share their stories, experiences and issues through photos, videos, and associated written stories (Schwartz & Harris, 2018). However, critics note that aspirational claims that visual research methods may empower participants and give them 'voice', and offer transformative interventions that effect social or individual change, are yet to be fully validated. Indeed, visual research projects, and their impact, require critical examination, evaluation and documentation (Pauwels, 2015) as "there is nothing inherently empowering in the creation and use of images" (Fairey, 2017; Haffejee & Theron, 2018, p. 5).

Anthropology also has a long tradition in the implementation of audio-visual tools for research purposes. Cinematic technology was first adopted for scientific purposes by early ethnographers who used the new medium of moving pictures to augment their ability to collect detailed visual data and indeed, this technology is inextricable from many subsequent 'anthropological discoveries' (El Guindi, 2015). Visual anthropology puts photography at centre stage and this remains a primary source in anthropology. However, the use of film for

---

[2] See Cambre (2020) and Harper (2016) for more detailed historical accounts of the para-field of visual sociology.

anthropological research has grown in importance and is now regarded by many as the guiding visual tool within in the field (Banks & Ruby, 2011). Modern visual anthropology employs ethnographic fieldwork, participant observation, and documentaries of various cultures and subcultures, and contemporary anthropologists often draw on a variety of forms of ethnographic visual media, including digital multimedia (Pink, 2012).

Visual methods, in the form of a reliance on photographic methods of documentation and classification, were integral to psychology's emergence as a scientific discipline in the late 19th and early 20th century, alongside sociology and anthropology. However, it is only recently that visual research has been undertaken using explicitly visual research methodologies within psychology and mental health, and thus there is as yet very little guidance on how to conduct visual research and ethics in psychology (see Reavey & Prosser, 2012 for a notable exception). Given the complexities of ethical research in psychology, there is a clear need for the development of specific guidelines for psychology. Guidelines from clinical contexts, as well as art therapy guidelines, have been used in visual research, for example in the use of neuro-images in clinical settings and images in art therapy (Schloss et al.,, 2018). However, these guidelines do not provide specific guidance for the range of potential uses of visual data in contemporary psychological research.

Because of the lack of discipline-specific guidelines, psychology researchers engaging in visual research tend to resort to guidelines from sociology and anthropology. For instance, Colucci (2016) carried out an ethnographic documentary project on violations of human rights of people with mental illness based in West Java, Indonesia, which culminated in the film "Breaking the chains" (Colucci, 2016). As there were no ethics guidelines available from within psychology, Colucci had to rely on the guidelines developed by allied disciplines both for that project and for her current "Together for Mental health: Using collaborative visual research methods to understand experiences of mental illness, coercion and restraint in Ghana and Indonesia" (see https://movie-ment.org/together4mentalhealth/). These guidelines are discussed below.

Visual research and ethics committees

Most research conducted by academic and non-academic researchers is subject to some form of ethical review by a recognised ethics committee. The general principles ethics committees assess are fairly uniform and are likely to mirror those outlined in the Economic and Social Research

Council's (ESRC) research ethics framework: "integrity, honesty, confidentiality, voluntary participation, impartiality and the avoidance of personal risk to individuals and groups" (ESRC, 2015, p. 26). The key issues that are likely to be assessed include voluntary informed consent, the confidentiality of information provided by participants, the anonymity of study participants, the avoidance of harm and researcher integrity.

Rigorous ethics review standards have been long set by psychology as a discipline. Wertz (2011) asserts that psychology's history of commitment to human research, compared to allied social scientific disciplines, has led to more rigorous scientific research, as well as contributing to social justice. This may be partially due to the fact that some approaches to research ethics within psychology have been closely aligned to medical research ethics (Reavey & Prosser, 2012) in contrast to humanities and other social sciences' approaches to ethics. However, visual researchers in psychology report that stringent ethics guidance paired with reviewers' unhelpful assumptions, in the worst case scenario, and lack of topic or method-specific understanding, in the best case scenario, have caused drastic alterations, if not outright cancellations, of potentially ground-breaking visual studies within psychology. Similar concerns have been expressed among visual researchers in allied disciplines that research designs with a visual element may be altered or diluted to meet the requirements of ethics committees (Wiles et al, 2012). This concern was expressed, for example, among visual researchers in North America who have noted that the fear of litigation has resulted in Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) being concerned with protecting the institution rather than the rights of participants or researchers (Gunsalus et al., 2007).

It is not uncommon for visual researchers to feel constrained by the requirements of formal disciplinary ethical frameworks, and to report that ethics committees may request substantial methodological changes to their planned visual research projects (Mitchell, 2011). This may in turn impact on the quality of visual data available for analysis, and the integrity of the visual research produced. Wiles and colleagues (2012) report that some researchers have sought to circumvent these restrictions by redefining their research as investigative journalism or as privately produced documentary films or photographs. This means that such work would in theory be subject to the ethical codes adopted by journalists, which tend to be far less stringent than those adopted by formal institutional research ethics committees (e.g. British National Union of Journalists, 2020). However, Wiles and colleagues also note that this course of action could well lead to

disciplinary action from the researcher's employing institution, as this could leave the researcher, and the university, vulnerable to litigation.

Visual researchers located in more traditionally quantitative disciplines, such as psychology, may find it particularly challenging to comply with current ethics guidelines. This may be especially the case when ethics approval is a highly regulated and often lengthy process. Whilst psychology ethics guidelines (e.g. BPS, 2014) have certainly adapted to encompass talk and text-based qualitative research projects, visual research projects arguably present a new set of challenges. Just as ethics guidelines were eventually specifically developed for psychologists conducting once novel internet-based research (BPS, 2017) ethics guidelines should also be generated for visual research within psychology, so that assessments are based on knowledge of established ethical considerations in conducting visual research rather than on assumptions and practices grounded in the assessment of non-visual research projects. Accordingly, in the next section, we will summarise some of the key recommendations for visual research generated by other disciplines to inform the development of ethical guidelines for visual psychology.

Current ethics guidelines

General guidelines

Pink (2013) notes that visual researchers are ultimately responsible for ensuring that research is undertaken ethically, and in accordance with the epistemological concerns and specific/local ethical contexts in which researchers are situated. She recommends that visual researchers should refer to appropriate available resources, including the ethical guidelines of the professional association they feel mostly aligned with, and "at times to those of related disciplines when their work crosses disciplinary boundaries" (p. 59). However, as indicated in the ESRC National Centre for Research Methods' Review Paper, 'Visual Ethics: Ethical Issues in Visual Research' (Wiles et al., 2008) such guidelines tend to provide frameworks that do not always provide clear answers for how researchers should manage the particular circumstances that they may encounter within their research, but rather outline the principles generally related to issues of the well-being and rights of research participants such as informed consent, privacy, confidentiality and anonymity.

The following institutional bodies provide useful resources for ethics frameworks, guidelines and processes for visual research: Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), the

British Psychological Society (BPS), International Visual Sociology Association (IVSA), Association of Social Anthropologists of the UK (ASA), British Sociological Association (BSA), British Educational Research Association (BERA) and the Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR). These professional associations share broadly similar guidelines and are grounded in principles that centre on integrity and transparency, the protection of participants' rights and the communication of the risks and benefits of the research to participants.

The BPS (2014) Code of Human Research Ethics is framed around 4 principles:

Respect for the autonomy, privacy and dignity of individuals and communities

Scientific integrity

Social responsibility

Maximising benefit and minimising harm

The principle of respect is grounded in recognizing participants' rights, and in underlining psychologists' responsibility to protect participants' rights in the course of their research activities. This may include developing and implementing "procedures for valid consent, confidentiality, anonymity, fair treatment and due process that are consistent with those rights." The principle of scientific integrity asserts that research should be conducted at a high level of quality, and should accord with scholarly standards. Further, research aims should be transparent, and robust protocols for dealing with potential risks of harm should be developed. The principle of maximising benefit and minimising harm asserts that the benefits of psychological research should be maximised at all stages of the research project – from proposal to dissemination and archiving. Researchers should be mindful of potential harms to participants, including unanticipated impacts, such as participant distress. Potential harms should be no greater than those encountered in 'everyday life.' The principle of social responsibility emphasises that research "generating psychological knowledge" should ultimately contribute to 'the common good' and result in beneficial outcomes at an individual and a collective level. The final principle of respect involves recognising the "autonomy, privacy and dignity of individuals and communities" regardless of their social status, gender or ethnic origin. Any specific guidelines developed for visual research in psychology should be grounded in these existing established ethical principles for psychological research, and should highlight what special considerations may apply for research projects which adopt visual methodologies.

<u>Visual Ethics in Sociology</u>

Photography-based methods, including photo-elicitation and photo-voice, alongside video-ethnography, and other visual methods, are all commonly used by contemporary visual sociologists. Schwartz and Harris (2018) clarify that the use of photovoice in sociology comes with ethical expectations that there should be no related harm to the participant or others and that privacy and anonymity should be guaranteed. Photovoice research should not be intrusive nor exceed the boundaries set by the participant. They assert that photovoice has clearly defined processes designed to protect participants that should be followed, with participants deciding which photos should be pixelated and obscured. However, some have argued that there are issues with this practice. For instance, information from pixelated images can still be drawn from if in the background there is a recognisable object or person (Clark, 2013).

Banks and Zeitlyn (2015) use the term 'situated ethics' to explain the importance of care in the relationship between the participant and the researcher. This is where it is the responsibility of the researcher to understand their own actions the way the participant would see them. This is particularly important in visual research to avoid the possibility of harm to the participant through the use of visual materials that may identify them. Mitchell (2011) suggests that researchers could resolve issues of informed consent, confidentiality and anonymity when using photographs, videos and film through engaging in reflexivity, which should encompass an ongoing dialogue with participants, the research team and the community. Pauwels (2010) stresses that this should ideally extend to considering the 'cultural stance', expectations, and experiences of the audiences or users of the final visual output.

The BSA's Visual Sociology Group developed a statement of ethical practice when it was first formed as an official study group in 2006. Wiles and colleagues (2008) note that the latter is a helpful, if somewhat prescriptive, set of ethics guidelines for visual researchers. The IVSA has also developed a code of ethics for visual sociologists, published in its flagship peer reviewed journal, *Visual Studies*, and also available on its public website. The IVSA's (2009) Code of Research Ethics and Guidelines provides a comprehensive series of ethical principles and standards. The IVSA is an interdisciplinary organisation with a 40 year history. While grounded in sociology, it also includes researchers from allied disciplines. Accordingly, the preamble to the IVSA's Code explicitly extends its remit beyond visual sociology, to all those "doing visual

research from a diversity of cultures, disciplinary orientations and methodological approaches, including but not limited to multi-national professions: sociology, anthropology, communications, art, history."

The IVSA's ethics standards are of clear relevance to psychologists conducting visual research. However, some of these may conflict with existing ethics guidelines for psychological research. For instance, the IVSA's Code has a very different stance on anonymity and confidentiality than the position ordinarily adopted by psychologists. The Code makes it clear that some research methods simply "do not require anonymity." Included in this category are community and participatory research and research projects where individuals have consented to the inclusion of identifying information. Further, the Code specifies certain conditions where confidentiality is neither required nor expected. These include observations and recordings in public places and settings where the rules of privacy (whether by custom or law) do not apply, and when the recording could not cause harm; alongside archival research and public records.

The IVSA's Code also regards "formal consent mechanisms [as] not feasible in all forms of visual research." However, it does require that researchers should be accountable in providing a reasonable rationale for using images that contain identifying information – for example, public images of individuals. Consent is approached as a process which should be negotiated with participants, over time. This may include a period of long-term trust building with participants and their communities, subject to changing social conditions, and the ongoing negotiation of the use of visual images, with attention to the principle of social responsibility and the "benefits and burdens" of research participation. Of note, the IVSA's Code of Research Ethics and Guidelines also addresses issues that may arise in the publication or exhibition of images. Here, researchers are expected to consider the rights and interests of participants and to ensure that any such publication or display is executed in accordance with the agreements negotiated with the various parties – participants, image creators, image owners, and those who appear in any images.

Visual Ethics in Anthropology

Despite anthropology's long tradition of visual research, Marion (2010) notes that until recently the American Anthropological Association's ethics code did not include any reference to visual research. Indeed, there is only a single direct reference to visual research in the current (2012) version of the code. However, the AAA's engagement with visual research ethics is considerably

augmented by the Society for Visual Anthropology (SVA), a section of the AAA founded in 1984. The SVA advises the AAA on the evaluation of visual research, and has established its own ethics committee (AAA, 2015). It also hosts annual ethics forums at the AAA's meetings. These provide an opportunity for critical debate on a range of ethical issues raised by visual anthropological research, using case studies as a focus. These annual roundtables have raised crucial issues that might otherwise not be considered by researchers or ethics committees, for instance, the importance of considering the "ongoing life of images" and the unanticipated ways that images may be used, beyond the original research framework of production and planned distribution.

The AAA's (2012) Statement on Ethics highlights the importance of participants' expectations surrounding both anonymity and credit, and asserts that visual data should be treated particularly carefully. Limitations are also raised with regard to dissemination, in cases where dissemination may pose a risk to participants and their intangible cultural/intellectual property or cultural heritage. In fact, the AAA states that in some cases, "preventing dissemination may sometimes be the most ethical decision" (n.p.). The Statement also emphasises the centrality of the process of consent as "an ongoing dialogue and negotiation with research participants" but, as with visual sociological guidelines, it also notes that "the observation of activities and events in fully public spaces is not subject to prior consent."

The Association of Social Anthropologists' (2011) Ethical Guidelines for Good Research Practice also considers consent as a process, and as something that should be continually re-negotiated to confirm that participants agree to their data being used. Pink (2013) describes this as a 'staged consent' approach, whereby consent is re-negotiated at different stages of the research process. She asserts that a key ethical concern for visual anthropologists is the recognition that consent may take different forms and indeed need not be limited to formal written consent. With regard to audiences and dissemination issues, the ASA advises that participants should also be informed about, and consent to, the specific contexts where their visual data may potentially be used or presented, whether in ethnographic films, photographic essays, or exhibitions in particular locations, and recommends that participants' rights of use and ownership of images should be clarified.

These are essential considerations for visual researchers. Visual anthropology's existing guidelines provide a valuable framework for considering the ethical issues that may arise from visual research projects in psychology – particularly those involving fieldwork and vulnerable

populations. These guidelines are also helpful in terms of addressing ethical issues not ordinarily considered by psychological ethics guidelines, including the 'ongoing life of images' and the potential impact of unconventional research outputs such as exhibitions, films and other public displays. Visual anthropologists' strategies for conceptualising and ensuring active and ongoing consent should be considered in future guidelines for visual psychology. However, as with visual sociology's stance, these process-based approaches to consent may potentially clash with psychological research ethics committees' traditional approaches to informed consent, which are often grounded in a conceptualisation of consent as a form of permission obtained at the outset of a study. As Edwards and Mauthner (2012) note, by this absolutist approach, consent is commonly reduced to an 'either/or' state to be established on a singular occasion, and not as an ongoing process of negotiation.

Within visual anthropology, agency is a central ethical concern for all participants, but even more so for those who are potentially vulnerable or disempowered (for instance, people experiencing mental health issues or from marginalised communities).[3] Pink (2013) asserts that by focusing on collaboration between the researchers and the participants and the idea of co-creation, agency becomes shared between the former and the latter. In this way, visual work can become a product in which both the participant and researcher invest and have potential gain from, as was the experience for Colucci in her main ethnographic documentary project 'Breaking the chains' (2015) as well as the participatory projects 'Breaking the chains: Anto's story' (Anto SG & Colucci, 2015; Colucci & Sugianto, 2020); 'Finding our way' (Colucci & McDonough, 2019; McDonough & Colucci, 2018); and 'Inspired lives' (Eales & Colucci, 2017; see also https://movie-ment.org/inspired-lives/).

Internet-based research

---

[3] One of the main issues that one of the authors (Colucci) has encountered in her visual research with people with lived experience of mental illness, suicidal behaviour or domestic violence, is to convince (usually medical) ethics committees about the importance of giving participants (who showed mental capacity to do so) agency in deciding how to represent themselves, including potentially disclosing their identity by showing their face and using their real name instead of a pseudonym. In discussions with ethics committees, the author had to emphasise the disempowering nature of assuming participants' inability to make 'the best decision' for/by themselves as well as, as also observed by Mitchell (2011), the risk that anonymising may erode the benefits of the research itself.

Within psychology and the social sciences, research increasingly involves the use of the internet and social media, which often incorporates visual data such as images, gifs and videos - even if researchers and reviewers may not consider these to be visual data, nor their work as visual research. Further, human research ethics review committees have not always construed internet research as involving human participants, which may cause complications in the ethics review process (Warr et al., 2016). For instance, Manikonda and De Choudhury (2017) report that some visual researchers in sociology have not sought to have their work approved by IRBs when using material from social media. The AoIR (2012) asserts that further guidelines need to be developed, so that the rights of participants are balanced with the social benefits of research.

The BPS (2017) recently produced a series of ethics guidelines for internet mediated research (IMR) designed to supplement the BPS's existing Code of Human Research Ethics (BPS, 2014) and overarching Code of Ethics and Conduct (BPS, 2009). These guidelines are framed around the four main principles of the Society's Code of Human Research Ethics and provide a critical discussion of ethical issues in IMR, alongside relevant examples. As such, this document provides a feasible working model for the generation of ethics guidelines for visual research in psychology.

From the perspective of the BPS, internet-mediated research involves acquiring in-depth information from human participants using online surveys, questionnaires, blog posts, and social media. The BPS Ethics Guidelines for IMR highlight the challenges of using 'public' content on social networking sites as data. The ownership of such data (whether textual or visual) may be complex, and researchers may need to seek permission from both individual users and web service providers. The guidelines also note that it may be very difficult in practice to anonymise some online data, which in turn may pose risks to confidentiality. While the examples given in the guidelines are text-based (e.g., discussion list postings) this note of caution may also apply to visual data. Applications like Google's Reverse Image Search function may potentially be used to identify participants, just as text-based search engines may identify verbatim quotes from discussion lists.

The guidelines suggest that researchers and ethics committees should critically consider whether publishing "traceable quotes" means that valid consent should be sought. They recommend that this "should be avoided in any cases where possible consequential risk and harm to participants is non-trivial." The guidelines further recommend that rigorous anonymization procedures are used, even when it may seem highly unlikely that a participant might discover their

posts have been included in a research project. Again, the examples given are text-based, and include "paraphrasing any verbatim quotes so as to reduce the risk of these being traced to source, and participants identified." While images collected online could be blurred or pixelated in an attempt to anonymise individuals, in some cases online search engines might still potentially identify the original image and its source. Further, as mentioned previously, distorting images in this manner may compromise their integrity as data, and preclude their detailed analysis - much as paraphrasing textual data reduces the details available for analysis, and prohibits forms of qualitative analysis which rely on such detail for their analytic claims (e.g., conversation analysis).

Ethics and visual research in psychology

What has been described here and elsewhere as 'visual research' is arguably already embedded in the visual culture of our daily lives, with an increasing number of people using mobile phones to represent themselves via now ubiquitous social media platforms. As observed by Reavey and Prosser (2012, p. 20) "visuals are pervasive in public, work, and private space, and we [psychologists] have no choice but to look". Indeed, a growing number of qualitative psychologists have taken up the challenge and the opportunity to use visual methods to explore individual and group behaviours, and our shared social world. Indeed, visual research is now included in the qualitative methods curriculum for psychology students in some departments in the United Kingdom.[4] It is recommended that psychology students learning about visual methodologies should also be introduced to relevant ethics guidelines and the resolution of possible ethics dilemmas.

Guidelines for visual psychology should consider the general ethics guidelines of our own national and international psychological professional associations, and should incorporate existing visual research-related guidelines, as well as country-specific legalities with regard to the capturing and use of images (still and moving) in private and public spaces, and the definitions of these spaces. Although the legalities of visual research and copyright are beyond the boundaries of the current review, Wiles and colleagues (2008) provide a detailed discussion of the legal

---

[4] For instance, Middlesex University currently includes an optional module in visual research methods (Visual Psychology: Arts, film and photography in psychology) for third year psychology students as well as a Postgraduate Research Masters course in visual and arts-based research methods.

considerations that ethics committees and researchers should consider when conducting visual research using film and photography.

Existing ethics guidelines in psychology often overlook the utility of active and process-based conceptualisations of care and consent, which may be particularly relevant to those embarking on visual research projects, where the use of visual data risks potentially identifying participants. We have much to learn from established visual sociological and visual anthropological ethics guidelines, as researchers from these fields have been thoughtful in approaching the key concerns of care and consent, and have attended to the complexities of working with participants in a range of different contexts. While many of the principles of existing ethics guidelines from allied disciplines are applicable to psychological projects, psychological research would benefit from the generation of a working set of guidelines specifically for visual psychology. These should reflect our discipline's long standing commitment to ethical research practice, and should acknowledge our own tradition of critique of psychology's scientific methods, epistemology, and ethics, and the perils of inflexible formalistic ethics principles. Accordingly, below, we present a summary of our working recommendations for the development of specific ethics guidelines for visual psychology.

Working recommendations for ethics guidelines

Visual researchers in other disciplines have argued that ethics for visual research require an expanded field of consideration, beyond the immediate impact of the research on participants. The rights of, and risks to, the various parties involved should be considered during all stages of the research project. This may include participants as image producers, and thus as authors and owners of their images; the rights of the individuals and communities captured in the images taken by participants or researchers; and the impact of the research on the eventual audiences for these images.

<u>Staged consent</u>

For many visual psychological research projects, it may be more appropriate to build in staged, or rolling consent, than to approach consent as something to be established on a singular occasion. Staged consent effectively means that consent should be re-negotiated at different stages of the research process, from data collection to the exhibition or screening of visual data, and the potential

archiving of the data for future use. Indeed, the BPS Code for Human Research Ethics (2014) recommends that the "renewal of consent" may be appropriate for research that requires a considerable time commitment, such as longitudinal studies. The strategy of "staged consent" for visual research projects seems aligned with, and could effectively build on, this existing guidance.

Moreover, the BPS Code (2014) asserts that "additional informed consent procedures" for research using methodologies that may render an individual identifiable may sometimes be appropriate. Indeed, formats other than standard written consent forms may be helpful tools for visual research and should be considered as legitimate alternatives to standard consent protocols. For instance, Mitchell (2011) uses visual consent forms, which clearly illustrate the various stages of the research process, and the consequences of the decision to consent at each juncture. She asserts that visual consent forms may facilitate questions and critical discussion, unlike text-based forms which tend to be passively read and signed.

Anonymisation vs. identification

The BPS (2014, p. 9) also recommends that "a reasoned balance should be struck between protecting participants and recognising their agency and capacity." In order to protect participants' identities, the BPS Code advises that researchers should "ensure that individuals are not personally identifiable, except in exceptional circumstances and then only with clear, unambiguous informed consent… [and] that information or data collected about individuals [should be] anonymised… *even if the participants themselves are not troubled by a potential loss of confidentiality*." However, encouragingly, the Code also states that "where a participant wishes to have their voice heard and their identity linked with this, researchers will endeavour to respect such a wish (BPS, 2014, p. 9)."

Despite the existence of the latter recommendation in the BPS Code, in practice, ethics committees in psychology seem often to work on the default assumption that all data should be anonymised to protect participants. However, as Clark (2008) notes, while anonymising text-based transcripts is a relatively straightforward process (by using pseudonyms and altering potentially identifying details) anonymising visual data is far more challenging, and in some cases, may be 'almost impossible'. Even if potentially identifying details are blurred out or pixelated, or identifiable images are not in the frame, there may be other aspects of an image that could identify

participants, especially when such images are paired with quotes from participants. Ideally, the combination of images and text (visual and text-based data) should be considered as a possibly synergistic amalgam, as together these may potentially identify participants, even when this is not the case for the images or text considered in isolation.

Mitchell (2011) argues further that anonymising visual data may not always be the most ethical course of action, and that in some cases this may even pose a threat to the potential benefits of the research for participants. This is particularly the case for participatory projects where participants may wish for their work and identities to be recognised in order for this to have a positive impact on audiences and relevant communities. She also notes that some participants may not want their visual work anonymised as they may feel that such image doctoring leads to the loss of the aesthetic value and integrity of their images (Mitchell, 2011). Participants should ideally thus be respected, not just as research participants, but also as the authors and owners of their images, and researchers should discuss the benefits and potential drawbacks of anonymising visual data with participants. However, unless participants choose to be identified, they should be anonymised, and their personal information should remain confidential.

Audiences and dissemination

The primary focus of the BPS Code of Human Research Ethics (BPS, 2014, p. 6) is on research participants or "the individuals who are primary data sources." However, the Code also states that "the ethical conduct of research will often need to be informed by the interests of other stakeholders." Notwithstanding this recommendation that 'other stakeholders' are considered, it is relatively uncommon for psychological ethics committees to consider 'audiences' as stakeholders, and to ask critical questions about the conditions under which images may be exhibited or screened – to whom, where, and with what impact on audiences and participants? However, this is a key consideration for many visual research projects, and one that should be reflected in any guidelines for visual psychological research. Participants should ideally have the right to be consulted on, and to consent to, the final form and the audiences for their visual data, as part of a staged consent process. Further, the impact of viewing visual outputs on audiences should also be considered, particularly where this content may be sensitive or distressing (Haffejee & Theron, 2018; Pauwels, 2015).

Concluding thoughts

We invite official regulatory bodies and professional associations such as the BPS to lead a consultation process with experienced visual researchers in psychology to develop a consensus-based set of ethics guidelines for visual psychologists. Following the precedent established by the BPS (2017) internet mediated research guidelines, these supplemental guidelines should be articulated with reference to the four main principles of the Society's Code of Human Research Ethics and should provide a critical discussion of ethical issues that may be particularly pertinent for visual research, alongside relevant illustrative examples. These guidelines should ideally be based on inter- and multi-disciplinary experiences and understandings to reflect the variety and complexity of visual research so that instead of representing a barrier in the pursuit of visual research in psychology, they represent an enabler and facilitator, both for researchers and for ethics committees who may be less familiar with these emerging methodologies.

References

Anto S. G., & Colucci, E., (2015). Free from pasung: A story of chaining and freedom in Indonesia told through painting, poetry and narration. *World Cultural Psychiatry Research Review, September/December, 149-167*.

American Anthropological Association (2012) Statement on Ethics. Available at:
https://www.americananthro.org/LearnAndTeach/Content.aspx?ItemNumber=22869
[Accessed: May 15 2020]

American Anthropological Association (2015) Guidelines for the Evaluation of Ethnographic Visual Media. Available at:

https://www.americananthro.org/ConnectWithAAA/Content.aspx?ItemNumber=1941

[Accessed: May 15 2020]

Association of Internet Researchers (2012). *Ethical decision-making and internet research: Recommendations from the AoIR ethics working committee (version 2.0).* Available at: http://aoir.org/reports/ethics2.pdf [Accessed: May 15 2020].

Association of Social Anthropologists (2011). *Association of Social Anthropologists of the UK and the Commonwealth (ASA): Ethical Guidelines for good research practice.* Available at: https://www.theasa.org/downloads/ASA%20ethics%20guidelines%202011.pdf [Accessed: May 15 2020].

Banks, M. & Ruby, J. (2011). *Made to be seen: Perspectives on the history of visual anthropology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Banks, M., & Zeitlyn, D. (2015). *Visual methods in social research.* London: Sage.

British National Union of Journalists. (2020). *British national union of journalists' code of conduct.* Available at: https://www.nuj.org.uk/work/nuj-ethics/ [Accessed: August 18 2020].

British Psychological Society. (2017). *Ethics Guidelines for internet-mediated research.* INF206/04.2017. Available from:

https://www.bps.org.uk/sites/www.bps.org.uk/files/Policy/Policy%20-%20Files/Ethics%20Guidelines%20for%20Internet-mediated%20Research%20%282017%29.pdf [Accessed: August 18 2020].

British Psychological Society. (2014). *Code of human research ethics. 2nd edition.* Available at: https://www.bps.org.uk/.../bps-code-human-research-ethics-2nd-edition-2014 [Accessed: May 15 2020].

British Sociological Association. (2017). *Statement of ethical practice.* Available at: https://www.britsoc.co.uk/media/24310/bsa_statement_of_ethical_practice.pdf [Accessed: May 15 2020].

Botsis, H., & Bradbury, J. (2018). Metaphorical sense-making: visual-narrative language portraits of South African students. *Qualitative Research in Psy*chology, 15(2-3), 412-430.

Cambre, C. (2020) Visual Sociology. In K. Purgar (Ed.) *The Palgrave Handbook of Image Studies.* (n.p.). London: Palgrave MacMillan

Clark, A. (2008). *Anonymising research data.* Real life methods working paper. ESRC National Centre for Research Methods. Available at:

http://eprints.ncrm.ac.uk/480/1/0706_anonymising_research_data.pdf [Accessed: August 24 2020].

Clark, A. (2012). Visual ethics in a contemporary landscape. In S. Pink (Ed.), *Advances in Visual Methodology* (pp. 17-35). London: Sage.

Clark, A. (2013). Haunted by images? Ethical moments and anxieties in visual research. *Methodological Innovations Online, 8*(2), 68-81.

Clark, A., Prosser, J., & Wiles, R. (2010). Ethical issues in image-based research. *Arts & Health, 2*(1), 81-93.

Colucci, E. (2015). *Breaking the chains* (64 min DVD), Royal Anthropological Institute https://raifilm.org.uk/films/breaking-the-chains/

Colucci E. (2016). Breaking the chains. Ethnographic film-making in mental health. *Lancet Psychiatry, 3*, 509-510.

Colucci, E. & McDonough, S. (2019). Recovering from mental illness and suicidal behaviour in a culturally diverse context: The use of digital storytelling in cross-cultural medical humanities and mental health. In V. Lo, C. Berry, & G. Liping, (Eds), *Film and the Chinese Medical Humanities* (pp. 205-225). Oxon: Routledge.

Colucci E., & Sugianto, A. (2020). *Breaking the chains: Anto's story* (30 min video).https://movie-ment.org/breakingthechains/

Cox, A., & Benson, M. (2017). Visual methods and quality in information behaviour research: The cases of photovoice and mental mapping. *Information Research: An International Electronic Journal, 22*(2), n2. Retrieved from: http://www.informationr.net/ir/22-2/paper749.html

Cox, S., Drew, S., Guillemin, M., Howell, C., Warr, D., & Waycott, J. (2014). *Guidelines for ethical visual research methods*. Parkville: Visual Research Collaboratory.

Eales, M., & Colucci, E. (2017). A vibrant living process: Art making and the *storying* of suicide. In K. Andriessen, K. Krysinska & O. Grad (Eds.), *Postvention in action* (pp. 212-222). Gottingen/Boston: Hogrefe.

Economic and Social Research Council. (2015). *ESRC framework for research ethics*. Available at: https://esrc.ukri.org/files/funding/guidance-for-applicants/esrc-framework-for-research-ethics-2015/ [Accessed: 15 May 2020].

Edwards, E. (2015). Anthropology and Photography: A long history of knowledge and affect. *Photographies,* 8(3), 235-252.

Edwards, R., & Mauthner, M. (2012). Ethics and feminist research: Theory and practice. In T. Miller, M. Birch, M. Mauthner, & J. Jessop (Eds.), Ethics in qualitative research (pp. 14-28). London: Sage.

El Guindi, F. (2015) Visual anthropology. In H. Bernard & C. Gravlee (Eds.) *Handbook of methods in cultural anthropology* (pp. 439-464). Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield.

Fairey, T. (2017) Whose photo? Whose voice? Who listens? Giving, silencing and listening to voice in participatory visual projects. *Visual Studies*, 33(2), 1–16.

Gilligan, C. (1983). *In a different voice: Psychological theory and women's Development*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Government Social Research Unit. (2005). *Ethical assurance for social research in government.* Government Social Research Unit, United Kingdom.

Gunsalus, C., Bruner, E., Burbules, N., Dash, L., Finkin, M., Goldberg, J., Greenough, W., Miller, G., Pratt, M., Iriye, M., Aronson, D. (2007) The Illinois White Paper: Improving the system for protecting human subjects: Counteracting IRB "Mission Creep". *Qualitative Inquiry* 13(5), 617-649.

Haffejee, S., & Theron, L. (2018). Visual methods in resilience research: Reflections on its utility. *Qualitative Research in Psychology,* 1-24.

Haney, C., Banks, W. C. & Zimbardo, P. G. (1973). A study of prisoners and guards in a simulated prison. *Naval Research Review*. 30, 4–17.

Hansen, S. (2018). Video installation as a creative means of representing temporality in visual data. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 15*(2-3), 292-297.

Hansen, S., Hernández-Albújar, Y. & Scott, G. (forthcoming). Navigating the new normal: Shifting household activity spaces in the UK, Spain and US during the COVID-19 pandemic. Working paper.

Harper, D. (2002). Talking about pictures: A case for photo elicitation. *Visual Studies,* 17(1), 17-26.

Harper, D. (2016). The development of visual sociology: A view from the inside. *Società Mutamento Politica, 7*(14), 237-250.

Haysom, L. (2015). Interventions to address sexual violence: Transforming violent cultures for and with girls and young women. *Agenda, 29*(3), 1–2.

Manikonda, L., & De Choudhury, M. (2017). Modeling and understanding visual attributes of mental health disclosures in social media. In *Proceedings of the 2017 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems* (pp. 170-181). ACM.

McDonough, S., & Colucci, E. (2019). People of immigrant and refugee background sharing experiences of mental health recovery: Reflections and recommendations on using digital storytelling. *Visual Communication 10*(4), 527–540.

Milgram, S. (1963). Behavioral study of obedience. *The Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology, 67*(4), 371–378.

Mitchell, C. (2011). *Doing visual research*. London: Sage.

Pauwels, L. (2010) Visual sociology reframed: An analytical synthesis and discussion of visual methods in social and cultural research, *Sociological Methods & Research* May, 38, 545-581.

Pauwels, L (2015). 'Participatory' visual research revisited: A critical-constructive assessment of the epistemological, methodological and social activist tenets, *Ethnography*, 16(1), 95–117.

Papademas, D., & International Visual Sociology Association. (2009). IVSA code of research ethics and guidelines. *Visual Studies, 24*(3), 250-257.

Pink, S. (Ed.). (2012). *Advances in visual methodology*. London: Sage.

Pink, S. (2013). Doing visual ethnography (3rd edn). London: Sage.

Porter, R. (2002). *Madness: A brief history*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Reavey, P., & Prosser, J. (2012). Visual research in psychology. In P. Camic, K. Sher, A. T. Panter, D. Long, & D. Rindskopf (Eds.), *APA Handbook of research methods in psychology* (pp. 185-207). Washington: APA.

Roos, V. (2012). The Mmogo-method™: An exploration of experiences through visual Projections. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 9*(3), 249-261.

Schloss, K. B., Gramazio, C. C., Silverman, A. T., Parker, M. L., & Wang, A. S. (2018). Mapping color to meaning in colormap data visualizations. *IEEE Transactions on Visualization and Computer Graphics, 25*(1), 810-819.

Schwartz, M., & Harris, H. (Eds.). (2018). *Visual ethics.* Bingley: Emerald Publishing Limited.

Segalo, P. (2018). Women speaking through embroidery: Using visual methods and poetry to narrate lived experiences. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 15*(2-3), 298-304.

Tajfel, H. (1972). Experiments in a vacuum. In J. Israel, & H. Tajfel (Eds.), *The context of social psychology: A critical assessment* (pp. 69-119). London: Academic Press.

Warr, D., Guillemin, M., Cox, S., & Waycott, J. (Eds.). (2016). *Ethics and visual research methods: Theory, methodology, and practice.* London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Wertz, F. J. (2011). The qualitative revolution and psychology: Science, politics, and ethics. *The Humanistic Psychologist, 39*(2), 77-104.

Wiles, R., Coffey, A., Robison, J., & Prosser, J. (2012). Ethical regulation and visual methods: Making visual research impossible or developing good practice? *Sociological Research Online, 17*(1), 3-12.

Wiles, R., Prosser, J., Bagnoli, A., Clark, A., Davies, K., Holland, S., & Renold, E. (2008). *Visual ethics: Ethical issues in visual research.* (NCRM).