# Chapter 6

# Visual Data

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In this chapter, we outline the theoretical underpinnings of visual methods in the context of qualitative research in psychology. We discuss the types of issue for which visual methods are suitable and consider the range of visual methods. We offer some guidelines for conducting a visual study, the forms of data that might be collected and potential forms of analysis. We outline how visual data can used alongside verbal qualitative data. The chapter also includes ethical issues in the use of visual data in research and concludes with a consideration of further work in this area.

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## Introduction

**Images** are a central part of the sociocultural worlds we inhabit and of our overall lived experience. An image constitutes a visual sign – a unit of meaning through which we relate to the world and communicate with others. Personal images have a particular place within our lived experience. Images of ourselves that are central to our memories of good, bad or indifferent times can be highly potent, as are images of those we have loved or those we have lost. Cultural images can create the means through which we draw our sense of how we should look and feel and what constitutes the 'normal' or 'desirable'. Social life is teeming with these kinds of visual signs, which populate social practices and interact in complex ways. The emergence of new kinds of visual communication media has created different ways of interacting and structuring personal and public communication. Critically, it

has enabled novel ways of relating to ourselves and curating our self-image as part of our engagement with others. Images mediate our experience of social relationships and our broader place in the world through visual media as diverse as navigating news streams, scanning online and offline magazine content, and engaging with social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram or Snapchat.

Qualitative researchers in psychology have only recently started to consider how visual resources contribute to meaning-making practice (Reavey, 2011, 2021). Yet images now form an ever-greater part of our public and private life, offering a lens through which to interpret everyday life and experiences. Social networking sites have given rise to alternative forms of seeing, communication and mediation, where thoughts, feelings and identities are expressed and performed in online verbal–visual synthesis. In disciplines other than psychology, these emerging forms of communication have long been recognised as crucial nodes in the formation and performance of identity, embodiment and subjectivity. In psychology, recognition is more recent and somewhat limited, although since the publication of the first edition of the *Visual Methods in Psychology* volume in 2011 (Reavey, 2011), they have grown in popularity and acceptance (Frith et al., 2005; Reavey and Johnson, 2017; Reavey and Prosser, 2012). One of the major concerns for researchers working within psychology is how visual practices impact on how people *experience* the world they live in, how we feel, our social interactions, bodies and identity. A further concern for many has been how to mobilize visual approaches in ways that might enable the participant voice to be more effectively heard through the wider dissemination of their lived experiences to relevant audiences and not just to other academics. Exhibitions, video production, arts-based methods and more creative data presentations involving visual display are all means through which messages are translated into comprehensible, rich, deeply personal and engaging modes of presentation[1] (Reavey and Johnson, 2017).

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[1] We have discussed the tensions within this approach elsewhere (Reavey and Johnson, 2017) and we do not naively accept that adopting visual methods will inevitably offer a voice to participants (see also Chapter 17 in this volume concerning questions of representation). We also agree with Darrin Hodgetts and colleagues, who have argued that we need to be reflexive about what we do with the voices of marginalized individuals, the aim being to develop those voices into a mode of social action

In this chapter, we consider how a visual approach within qualitative research can enable a more in-depth engagement with participant experiences and can address the broader sociopolitical contexts of their emergence. Rather than ending our analyses with the decoding of 'narrative' or 'discourse' as it is spoken in an interview or discursive interaction alone, we argue that the visual can provide richer insight into the manner in which individuals and societies use images in meaning-making practice and how images in research may provide greater access to living contexts (space and environments), senses and feelings that make up our lived experience.

To this end, we will first introduce a brief history of the visual within psychology, followed by an exploration of recent attempts to adopt a visual approach within qualitative research. We will then discuss more specifically how images have been used in the context of analysing qualitative data by examining three trends: (a) the analysis of images alone; (b) the combining of visual and verbal data in the research context and analytical procedure; and (c) combining visual and verbal data in the study of social interaction. We will also consider how a visual approach can change the nature of researcher–participant relations, arguably prompting a more co-produced version of the research process.

## The history of the visual in psychology

Traditionally, psychology has confined its use of images to research involving children or those deemed less 'able' to communicate thoughts and feelings rather than those who use more supposedly sophisticated modes of expression, such as language. In this sense, images have often been viewed as a more naïve or simplistic form of communication, despite there being no simple or uniform way to read them. Yet, the history of psychology indicates that the visual was one of the central ways in which the discipline established itself as a science dedicated to recording observations, measuring and

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(Hodgetts et al., 2011). This involves different forms of **reflexivity** and a different politics of interpretation, which we have discussed elsewhere (see Reavey, 2011, 2021; Reavey and Johnson, 2017).

other activities that were reflective of systematic scientific practice in the late nineteenth century. As the visual technology of photography advanced, so did the credibility of observable records of different types and classes of behaviour, personality types and 'disorders' (Reavey, 2021). In *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*, for example, Charles Darwin compared photographs and illustrations of children and animals to form the evidential base for his theory of universal emotional expressions. This approach greatly influenced the growth of Comparative Psychology in the late nineteenth century. In addition, his photographs and minute observations of his son William Erasmus Darwin, which Darwin and his wife collected as a 'developmental diary' from birth, arguably formed the template from which Developmental Psychology was established. Furthermore, the visual became the hallmark of how interpretations of personality type were founded, famously depicted by the Rorschach ink blot test, used in clinical practice even today (see Reavey, 2021, for a more extended account of this history). In short, what was observable (and presented in visual form) became an equivalent to what could be constituted as scientific, reproducible and validated by aspiring scientists within psychology. Of course, what is observable is not always a comprehensive account of human experience, with the rich texture of human meaning-making neglected in favour of systematic and standardized measures.

The opposition by qualitative researchers to the importing of physical scientific methodologies to psychology, as well as the neglect of human meaning-making and interpretative practices, has called for a set of analytical approaches that focus more exclusively on how individuals *make meaning, reflect and interpret* their behaviour, actions and lives (Willig, 2013; see Chapter 2 in this volume). This project has focused closely on a deep analysis of the manner in which psychological events unfold, shift and change, depending on social, cultural and environmental context and interaction with others. However, this project has often translated into a mode of inquiry that takes as its starting point the spoken word, either via the analysis of interview data (see Chapter 4 in this volume) or social interaction (including on social media: see Chapter 5 in this volume). Most qualitative researchers in psychology continue to use standard verbal techniques, such as individual

and focus group interviews or natural spoken interactions, to study psychological activity. Below, we consider what might be gained from broadening the field of inquiry to involve **visual data**.

## Multi-modal accounts

Qualitative researchers in psychology have written volumes on how to collect and analyse 'textual data' (the spoken word usually) without sufficient attention to the wider variety of **modalities** that surround us (visual, verbal, bodily, audio, spatial). An attention to **multi-modal** communication thus embraces description of different types of psychological activity, environmental spaces and cultural artefacts, including the spaces that either encourage our agency or restrict us, the objects we touch and reminisce with and through, and the sounds we hear that create emotional resonances. Multi-modality is a complex interplay between various meaning-making resources that are part of our experience and a key way in which we communicate those experiences to others. This may include the use of images in (a) remembering people or events, (b) describing how we experience our bodies or (c) locating our experiences by presenting or *showing* the spaces in which they emerge (for example, feeling angry *in* a classroom, feeling shame *in* a public space). When we take seriously the contexts in which experience emerges, it becomes difficult to ignore the rich complex of visual media contributing to this process.

There are a number of types of visual image that count as qualitative data. Forms of visual data include photography (for example, Radley et al., 2005), documentary film-making (see Haaken and Kohn, 2006), paintings (Gillies et al., 2005), graffiti (for example, Lynn and Lea, 2005), and computer-mediated interactions (for example, Jones, 2005). Temple and McVittie (2005) outline three forms of visual materials that qualitative psychologists have used: pre-existing visual materials, time-limited visual data and enduring visual products. They define pre-existing materials as images that exist independently of the research in the form of pieces of art or published photographs. In contrast, time-limited data and enduring visual products are produced within the research process but differ from each other in terms of their relationship to the research once the project has finished. Time-

limited data, such as a collection of observations of individual actions, cease to exist as visual data when the focus shifts on to the interpretation of the observations. Visual data such as video diaries and newly generated paintings and photographs are examples of enduring visual products as they come into being solely because of the research process and have a continued existence after the project. Thus, the distinction between the three forms of data lies in the relationship that the image has to the research process and the context in which it has been produced, but it also has implications for the process of interpretation. For instance, Temple and McVittie (2005) suggest that the researcher needs to decide if the visual material is being used as a trigger for stimulating verbal discussions (image elicitation); as its own creative medium, through which participants can generate their own meanings and experiences of a topic or event (image production); or if the visual is already part of the topic under study with the research focus on participants' use of the visual in communication (use of images in social media use).

Yet, images are never used or read in any straightforward or 'correct' way and this aspect of how to interpret what we are working with is perhaps the most daunting or off-putting aspect of using visual data. Images are open to multiple interpretations and readings: they are **polysemous**. Images are part of culturally available signs, interdependent with language conventions and cultural practice. Images already circulating in wider culture or the images that participants produce themselves are never 'innocent' or 'a-cultural'. They are always already situated in various cultural practices, knowledges, technologies and power regimes. Just as language systems produce subject positions (see Chapter 15 in this volume) and hierarchies, so do images. As Haraway (1991) notes, *who* is seen, *how* they are seen and *who* is viewing are all part of social power relations producing specific versions/visions of social hierarchies.

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## Bite-sized summary 1

Qualitative researchers have criticized mainstream psychological approaches for failing to acknowledge the central and active role of human meaning-making practices in psychological processes. Despite this turn towards meaning-making, however, many qualitative researchers still focus attention on analysing the spoken word as the central analytical unit of meaning-making. Visual researchers have argued that it is important to address human experience as multi-modal, which involves integrating other experiential modes (especially sight, but it also applies to touch and sound) into the research process.

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# Recent uptake of visual methods in qualitative research in psychology

To date, visual approaches in psychology have tackled a range of experiential issues, including embodiment, health and illness, identity and appearance, and mental health and distress. (See Reavey, 2021, for a full overview and Box 6.1 for examples of research questions from studies that used visual data.) Much of this work does not analyse images in isolation – that is, without the person's account of what the image means to them. This multi-modal work has often analysed *both* the image *and* the person's account of the image to create a more comprehensive picture of how the person is making sense of it in the context of their own personal/public experience. A further argument is that the image alone cannot and should not solely 'speak' for the person. Of greater interest for many is shared meaning-making created via verbal and visual modes of expression.

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## Box 6.1 Examples of psychological research questions addressed in studies using visual data

How do people with Body Dysmorphic Disorder make sense of the link between emotion and appearance, from childhood to the present time? This study used photographs of participants, from childhood to the present, and drawings (Silver and Reavey, 2010).

How do medical and surgical patients experience recovery in a general hospital? This was a photo-production study in which participants took photographs of their hospital stay (Radley and Taylor, 2003a).

How do forensic mental health inpatients use and make sense of the hospital space in relation to their distress? This was a photo-production study in which participants took photographs of the hospital spaces (Reavey et al., 2019).

How are bisexual identities felt and embodied? This was a modelling study in which participants created clay and Lego models to help them think about embodiment and identity (Bowes-Catton et al., 2021).

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The combining of the verbal and the visual has been achieved using various visual techniques, from the use of already existing images (for example, in the form of family photographs, here referred to as '**photo elicitation**') to the use of images generated within the context of the research (for example, participant-generated photos, maps, photo-diaries, paintings and drawings, here referred to as '**photo production**'), as well as short films and social media. (Some authors refer to 'photo-elicitation' to describe both approaches. However, for the sake of clarity, we have decided to separate the two terms to distinguish between these two very different approaches.) Researchers who combine the verbal and the visual acknowledge that (a) persons experience the world not only through narrative but also through other sensorial forms, such as visual images that are situated in specific settings (space) and bodies (embodiment), and (b) persons are already using multi-modal forms of expression and

communication when not only (re)presenting experiences but feeling their experiences in everyday life. The renewed interest in affect and emotion in psychology (for example, Cromby, 2015; McGrath et al., 2020) has been influenced by social psychology's observation that social and cultural practices shape affect and feeling. The visual is, of course, a large part of this activity in everyday life (Reavey and Johnson, 2017). As people become more proficient in their use of communication technologies to convey ideas and feelings and engage in more complex forms of social interaction, relationships and subjectivity, it is important that researchers in psychology engage with them, either by analysing the images independently of the person's account of them or by analysing the person's interpretation of the image.

Furthermore, one could argue that, given that persons in everyday life already use images to tell stories, interact with others and create or perform identity, researchers are mobilizing participants' lived practices in a manner which is more familiar to participants, less alienating and perhaps more democratic (Reavey and Johnson, 2017). If the participant is called on to 'show' their world rather than answer semi-structured questions developed by the researcher, the participant has a greater say over what is chosen and how it relates to their own experience. The researcher, after all, cannot know in advance what will be shown and cannot set a schedule for this in advance. Thus, most visual researchers fully acknowledge the active participation of the participant in producing the image. The image is not viewed as independent of the participant but as part of an activity they have engaged in. In the following section, we begin to describe how to analyse images on their own by providing a brief summary of different ways to think about images and then some steps for analysing visual data.

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# Bite-sized summary 2

Qualitative research has largely relied on spoken data as a means of engaging with meaning-making practices. The recent uptake of visual research has used images to encourage a deeper engagement with experience by considering the spaces, bodies and feeling that make up our lived experience.

Some have argued that the research process itself is more democratic via visual research as it mobilizes activities already familiar to participants and does not solely rely on pre-set questions developed by the researcher.

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## Approaches to analysing images

The analysis of images from a psychological perspective is able to draw on long-standing traditions of interpretation within the visual arts, most notably painting and photography. An image such as a painting or drawing may be decomposed into the range of visual elements through which it is composed. These include elements such as line, shape, colour, tone, texture and form. Each element plays a role in affording particular kinds of cognitive and affective experience. For example, classical techniques of perspective locate the viewer 'within' the image, creating a sense of 'being there', while particular colours and tones are associated with specific forms of emotional experience (for example, anger can often be associated with red and low mood associated with blue or black). Boxes 6.2 and 6.3 present Boden and Eatough's (2014) useful framework for the analysis of the content and production of drawings that maps the relationship between visual elements and experience. This framework uses an interpretative phenomenological analysis perspective (see Chapter 9 in this volume).

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# Box 6.2 Boden and Eatough's (2014) framework for the analysis of drawings

**Contents:** Describe each of the distinct elements of the image.

**Composition:** How are the elements spatially laid out on the page? Are they sparse or dense? Are there areas of blank page? Do the elements overlap? Is there a sense of repetition, 'rhyme' or pattern?

**Balance:** How do elements interplay? Is there a sense of equilibrium or disequilibrium? Is there symmetry or pattern?

**Geometry:** What shapes are used? How do these interplay together?

**Materials:** Which material has been used for each element?

**Texture:** What are the textural characteristics of each element?

**Colour:** How have hue (colour), saturation (vividness) and value (lightness/darkness) been used?

**Depth/Perspective:** What spatial depth and perspective has been created through space and colour?

**Temporality/Dynamism:** Is there a sense of rhythm or movement? Does the image suggest a snapshot, continuity or duration?

**Focus:** What is the visual focus of the image? What is your eye drawn to?

**Expressive content/Empathic reaction:** What is the emotional tone of the image? What feelings does the viewer have in response (bodily, emotional, memories, images)?

**Signs/Symbolism:** Are there any overt symbols or cultural references included?

**Style:** Does the image 'shout' or is it 'quiet', or something in between? Does the drawing seem to imitate or reflect a particular trend or style? For example, is it cartoonish, child-like, modern, romantic, pop-art, etc.?

**Text:** Has any text been included – for example, a title? Where has this been placed? In what way has it been included? What style, font, capitalization, etc. is used?

**Distraction/Noise:** Do any elements draw your attention away from the main focus? Is there a sense of confusion or clarity in the image?

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## Box 6.3 Boden and Eatough's framework for the analysis of the production of an image

1. **Speed:** How quickly or slowly was the image produced? Did the participant spend longer on particular elements?
2. **Pressure:** How were materials used bodily? How much pressure was applied to the page?
3. **Colour:** How was colour chosen? With what degree of speed, decisiveness, etc.?
4. **Expression:** What did the participant's facial, gestural or verbal expressions suggest about their process?
5. **Mood:** What was the background atmosphere or 'tone' while the drawing was being created?
6. **Emotion:** Was any particular emotion evident in the production or discussed in the interview?
7. **Gestures:** Were there any notable gestures or movements during the process?
8. **Absorption:** Was the participant involved or distanced from the activity?

9. **Hesitancy:** Were there any false starts or pauses in the process?

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In addition to content, the composition of images can also be analysed in relation to context. Berger's (2008) landmark book *Ways of Seeing* emphasized that the use of particular materials in painting (notably the use of oil colours) was adopted to confirm and enhance the social status of the individuals who commissioned the artwork. The image is not a neutral depiction of an external referent (such as persons, objects and landscapes), but rather it transforms them into symbols of power, property and status. Images act as vehicles of broader patterns of cultural value and ideology. Laura Mulvey (2009) coined the phrase 'the male gaze' to describe how particular sexualized ways of representing women reinforce gender relations such that women are reduced to the status of objects whose purpose is to provoke and satisfy the pleasure of the male viewer. Mulvey's work has been elaborated to posit a range of class, ethnic and sexual 'gazes' in which the contents of an image serve as supports for broader ideological ways of seeing (for example, 'imperial gaze' – Kaplan, 2012; 'tourist gaze' – Urry and Larsen, 2011; 'lesbian gaze' – Lewis, 1997). This leads to a set of critical questions to be asked of any image:

Who is the implied viewer of the image and in what ways is their particular 'view' of the world being reinforced (or contested)?

What are the broader social and cultural values that are being expressed through the image?

What effects does the circulation of this image have on the psychosocial worlds of both viewers and the persons depicted?

Analytic strategies developed in photography and film studies also provide extensive resources for psychological analysis. Susan Sontag (1979, 2004) describes how photographic images do the work of both separating us from the world they depict while simultaneously making that world thinkable. For example, some of the powerful images of poverty which have arisen in the years of the UK

government's 'austerity programme' of social and welfare cuts (from 2010) can be seen both as 'calls to action' and as voyeuristic investments that are obstacles to political intervention (such as the photographs of predominantly Conservative Members of Parliament donating to foodbanks: see Chakelian, 2018). Barthes (1993) describes a similar tension between the aspect of a photograph that may be interpreted in relation to the broader sociocultural field that it depicts (or 'studium') and small details of the image that have a striking and immediate psychological resonance for the viewer (or 'punctum'). For example, Barthes describes a photograph taken by Alexander Gardner in 1865 of the Confederate soldier Lewis Payne (also known as Lewis Powell) awaiting execution in his cell for attempted murder of a government official as part of the plot to assassinate the US president Abraham Lincoln. The 'studium' here is the meaning the photograph provides as an insight into a particular piece of North American history around the Civil War (Barthes notes, for instance, how young and defiant Payne looks in the photograph). But the 'punctum' is the sudden realisation the viewer has that very soon after Gardner pressed the camera shutter, Payne was dead. We are looking at the last moments of his life. On this basis, we can distinguish the broader cultural 'messages' that are encoded or readable within an image from those smaller features that suddenly capture our attention and emotional concerns.

Both film and photography introduce techniques for representing experience that have restructured the psychological in significant ways. For example, the cinematic technique of a 'close-up' shot of a face or hands is a means of heightening the significance of a person's emotional involvement in a scene, suggesting that it is possible to capture unique 'instants' of psychological life. Contrastingly, techniques such as montage sequences, where multiple, very short sequences of action are strung together, perform a compression of time and narrative that could not otherwise be experienced in everyday life. These techniques change our relation to the perception of time and space at a psychological level (see Deleuze, 2013) and have given rise to new ways in which selfhood and identity can be articulated through self-photography ('selfies'), including montage summaries of daily life (for example, Instagram and Snapchat 'stories') and short film-making (for example, TikTok and Twitter videos). Analysis of these kinds of images and videos may ask how specific kinds of image-

capture and manipulation techniques, such as edits, lighting, filters, captioning etc., construct particular aspects of the psychological world of the persons who have constructed and curated them. For example, analyses may explore what is present and what is omitted in a montage 'story' and how this creates a particular narrative; how captions and images are combined to create plausible 'instants' of psychological life; how micro-level features of a selfie are accentuated or manipulated to create preferred affective 'attunements' between the image maker and the viewer.

**Semiotics** – the study of how signs and symbols constitute systems of meaning – can be applied to images in the form of social semiotics (Hodge and Kress, 1988) and visual semiotics (van Leeuwen and Jewitt, 2008). A key tenet of semiotics is that signs acquire value relationally through their juxtaposition with other signs. An image may then be decomposed into a field of signs which have relations in terms of their relative size, place within the field of depth (for example, in the foreground or background), comparative stylistic features, implied actions, etc. Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996) note that readers of Roman-derived script tend to accord primacy to the top and the left in the reading of the features of an image, with the bottom and the right being either subordinate or temporally 'after'. An illustration of this semiotic approach can be found in Jewitt's (1998) analysis of the depiction of male heterosexuality in sexual health resources where she demonstrated features such as men being signified as active, in control, competitive and physically invested in sex through their semiotic positioning.

Conversation analysis is a method of studying 'naturally-occurring talk' which looks in close detail at verbal interactions and how social actions are accomplished within them (see Stokoe, 2018, for an excellent, accessible introduction). While much conversation analysis has unsurprisingly focused on verbal aspects of communication, video-based conversation analysis uses visual materials to provide fine-grained analysis of the embodied aspects of interaction, including gaze, gesture, the positioning of bodies, the use of props and other physical resources, and so on (Parry, 2010). Using video as a multi-modal record of interactions provides a basis to explore the organization of social accomplishments through situated actions such the mobilization of objects, the direction of gaze and the shifting of positions. In Heath and Luff's (2000) studies of work in the London Underground, for

example, the situated use of tools and technologies in the course of interaction provides the means for complex activities to be co-ordinated.

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## Bite-sized summary 3

Visual research in psychology can draw upon well-established interpretative strategies developed in the visual arts. Both the content and the context of the image should be analysed, taking the broader cultural field into account. Film and photography have created new possibilities for psychological experience. These media may be productively studied using insights from semiotics and from conversation analysis.

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# Combining verbal and visual data

## Image elicitation techniques

Because images do not simply speak for themselves, many researchers within the social sciences have argued that we need to study multiple perspectives on the images produced. This means often working directly with the interpretation that the 'audience' produces of the image. **Image elicitation** techniques are techniques used to study what people see in existing pictures/images and what they interpret from them; the interpretive focus thus begins with the *participant's* interpretation of an image. Hence, we arrive at an interpretation of an image from what the person says about it. The photo, drawing, painting, etc. is thus used to *elicit* a specific feeling or identification with a time or place. For example, we might explore sexual identity by asking participants to talk around images that they feel 'speak to them' about the way they identify sexually. The image(s) in question can be deeply personal to the participant (for example, an image they have been invited to bring to the interview from their own photo collection). Alternatively, the researcher can begin by showing participants

images they have selected from cultural sources, such as magazines, newsfeeds or social media, as a means to then locate the participant's more personal story, once they have located their own position with the broader social landscape (see Henwood et al., 2021, for a good example of how this is done).

The image elicits the response and stimulates discussion but is not the central unit through which analysis occurs. The researcher might only present the image in the written analysis as a means of showing the reader where the interview conversation began but the image itself is not then used in a main way to ground the analysis. For example, the analysis might solely concern what the participant said about their feelings around sexual identity and not about the image that was used to elicit this discussion. Images can be used to engage participants in thinking and discussing how they feel about a topic – what they like and dislike, their affiliation with the object or person in the image, and an actual or imagined relationship to the topic under study (see Radley, 2021, for further discussion). The interpretation worked with in the analysis is not just the person's account of the content of the image itself, but the impression and imagination that arises from the person's engagement with that image, the act of viewing it, at a personal and social level. It is important in elicitation work that the analyst captures these aspects of how the person is viewing the image, going beyond content, to gain a more complex reading.

## Image production for research

A different mode of image use is via the technique known as **image production**. Photo production, for example, refers to the process whereby participants are not exposed to ready-made images or asked to bring to an interview existing images from their photographic archive – as happens in photo elicitation (see Reavey et al., 2017, as an example of combining existing images with images produced in research). Instead, they are asked to produce images specifically for the purposes of the research. This can be at one time point or from many different time points (from childhood to the present day, for example) as a way to capture experiences of change or to aid memory. See Radley and Taylor (2003b) for an excellent paper on memories of illness and hospital stays which used photo production. Another example of photo production was a research project that we carried out with

colleagues in a forensic mental health secure unit where we asked service user inpatients to take photographs of the hospital space. We were interested in how they felt about and used the hospital space and how the space itself impacted on feelings of distress (see Brown et al., 2020; Reavey et al., 2019; Tucker et al., 2019). At a theoretical level, we were explicitly concerned with how material spaces co-create experience, such that we had to think of a way of collecting data where the person's living space was directly brought into the research. Starting with photographs of the hospital spaces (where these participants were living for up to several years) was a useful way of more fully situating their engagement with issues of space. Talking 'about' space, we would argue, is not the same as participants looking at and considering their space and then *showing* this to the researcher as a means to begin discussing and interpreting it. The important difference here is in beginning with the situating and showing and not the talking.

When participants had taken their photographs, they were interviewed a week later and the photographs were the focal point of the interview alongside some interview questions. We found that this technique completely altered the mode of the analysis, which became more participant-focused, as the interview itself was led by the participant's interpretation of their images and their subsequent discussion of the images. They were also able to move in and out of discussing the current space in relation to past experiences (which we didn't always ask them about). Consider the following example from an interview with a participant whom we have called 'Vincent' and who was living in a medium secure mental health unit. Here he is showing us a fairly mundane photo of his bedroom (see Figure 6.1) but from it emerges a series of accounts of his life outside in the past.

[INSERT FIGURE 6.1 HERE]

The following extract describes the participant's life in the past, outside the unit:

> Vincent: That's my radio there…it's a way to keep contact, keep up with things what's going on outside … I'm no longer a DJ, but used to be when I was younger. Now I'll be enjoying the music in the crowd, instead of having to worry about what goes on next or what to play next, but I like reggae music. I like the seventies and the eighties. Those are the times

> when things was all right, apart from when the riots happened, everything was running smoothly.

Many of the research team found they had to abandon the interview schedule in favour of simply listening to how a participant used the image to unfold their story. This resulted in us weaving questions in and out of the images shown, with some questions abandoned altogether. We also observed that the dynamic shifted in this interaction, as the interview questions were not 'responded to' in the usual way because the participant was showing the researcher their world in a way that positioned them as more of an authority on what they had seen and experienced. And of course, there is not necessarily a direct correspondence between the content of the image and the participant's discussion of its meaning. The researcher has not been part of this production process, so they are not in a position to know in advance what might be shown or said, suggesting less control on the part of the researcher. The analysis, then, starts via this process of revealing but rapidly becomes an analysis of the person's experience in conversation with the researcher, as the participant negotiates the meaning of the image in the context of talking about it with the researcher or with others (for example, in a focus group).

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## Box 6.4 Question topics for interviews in photo-production studies

In visual research, the interview schedule is often delivered around the presentation of images. In research that uses photo production, we recommend that you consider developing questions for participants around the following topics and asking the questions as they engage with the images they have produced:

What the picture shows.
What the focus of the image is.

- Their response to the objects and places in the photograph.
- The most significant image that captured the experience relevant to the research question (for example, their experience of their time in hospital).
- Reflections on the choice of images, the act of taking pictures and whether they took the pictures they would have liked to (that is, potential limitations).

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## Box 6.5 Designing a study of jealousy using visual methods

Jealousy is a topic that has been studied by many psychologists (see Stenner, 1993, for an interesting introduction). As with all complex feelings, it can be difficult to direct participants towards engaging with this as a specific topic in a study. How would you design a study of this particular lived experience using visual methods? Think about the following questions:

- What kinds of images do you think will be particularly informative in helping the participants talk around this difficult topic? It might help here to think about your own personal experience: would you use images from films or TV or art, memes from social media, or images that the participants select or create themselves?
- To what extent is jealousy something that is personal or something that reflects broader cultural knowledge? If you lean more towards the view of jealousy as a personal phenomenon, then an image production approach might be best, where you ask participants to create their own images. For example, you might ask participants to draw what jealousy feels like to them. If you lean more towards seeing jealousy as something that is structured by social and cultural forces, then an image elicitation approach might be preferable, where the discussion is based around 'iconic' images of jealousy drawn from cultural sources and chosen by you or by the participants.
- Talking about images of jealousy might create particularly strong emotional reactions among some participants. You will need to consider the ethical implications of the study very closely, including the duty of care you have towards participants to ensure they are not

adversely affected by taking part. How might you implement that duty of care in this case? (See Chapter 3 in this volume for more on ethical considerations.)

[END BOX]

Given the constraints of academic publishing (which favours the publication of traditional research formats, such as the analysis of spoken data and written presentations), the main source of data for the analysis remains the spoken interview data. (If you are using visual methods in a student dissertation or thesis, you will have greater freedom.) Nevertheless, when preparing academic articles, the final analysis of the spoken data must situate the image more fully within the analysis section of the publication because it must acknowledge that the final analysis is an analysis of the participant's full engagement with the images they have produced and then interpreted. As Radley (2021, emphasis added) comments:

> This means that the aim of research becomes not so much an understanding *of* the pictures, as an understanding *with* the photographs about the lives of the respondents concerned. A key part of this is that the act of research photography is itself an experiential fragment, providing a biopsy of the respondent's world.

The analysis is then a more co-produced analysis, as our interpretation begins with the participant. In a sense, the researcher's final analysis is a type of **meta-analysis** (an interpretation of the participant's showing and interpreting of their world). The image does not then sit on the periphery, but is a central 'mode' through which analytical engagement is achieved, with the analytical process being perhaps more dialogical.

[START BOX]

## Bite-sized summary 4

Image-elicitation and image-production techniques are often used in visual research in psychology. However, the technique that is chosen alters the mode of analysis. Elicitation techniques are often

used to stimulate discussion but the image itself is not central to the analysis: only the 'responses' are. Image-production techniques are different in that they shift the focus of the analysis from the outset. The participant, by showing the researcher images that they directly associate with their experience, is the person steering the conversation, around which interview questions are then posed. The analysis is more co-produced in the sense that the interview centres on the participant's interpretation of the image. In this case, both the image *and* the discussion of the image are central to the analysis.

[END BOX]

## Analysing visual data in real time

A technique developed largely by conversation analysts has been the analysis of visual and spoken data together in the context of real-time interaction. Unlike the two previously-mentioned techniques, whereby the researcher is still involved in directing the participant to look at images or to talk in an interview, the real-time interaction is recorded by the researcher but without their direct involvement in the interaction. An excellent example of how this can allow the researcher to examine the visual data (gestures, look, environment) *and* to consider how these data either complement or contradict what is said can be seen in the real-time video work of Helen Lomax (2021), whose empirical research focuses on the interactional exchanges of mothers and midwives in relation to the mothers' birth experiences. Drawing on the theoretical and analytical framework of conversation analysis, Lomax examines how certain social orders (the prioritising of clinical discourse in the birth story and midwife–mother distancing) and identities are accomplished through locally and sequentially co-ordinated gaze, body movement and speech. The visual disengagement performed by midwives (not looking at the mother and attending to paperwork – see Figure 6.2), for example, significantly disrupts the usual order of conversational turn-taking and requires the mother to respond in a compliant and passive way as she readjusts her posture and gaze and realigns them with the midwife's more disengaged body movements.

[Insert Figure 6.2 here]

Lomax argues that this visual realignment provides the situational conditions for a more 'clinical' discourse on the mother's experience of childbirth to emerge. Analysing the visual and verbal together, then, provides a means of understanding how both are produced, sustained or disrupted. This is an excellent example of how a multi-modal approach can enhance understandings of interaction and lived experience more generally. It brings into view the variety of modes through which these social and psychological processes emerge but also shift, depending on the context of the setting and the social exchange.

## Main challenges of using visual data and how to address them

The process of using and interpreting visual data comes with a variety of challenges. The first can be to convince participants to create images in the first place. At times, participants may feel nervous that their drawing or painting is not artistically proficient or that their photographs are mundane or lifeless. One of the challenges in producing images for research is to reassure participants that the purpose of image production is not to create works of art but rather works of *meaning*. In our research, we have found that this reassurance is usually enough to free people up to express themselves without concern for artistic merit. However, it is not always successful and if a participant produces an image that does not quite match with what they intended to produce (for example, an unsuccessful drawing or a photograph that turns out to be quite banal), this may create discomfort or distress. It is important on these occasions to talk to participants about the need for flexibility in interpreting images, especially given that we are taught that images should and do have a correspondence with 'the real'.

The unravelling of meaning from images is a major challenge. As we noted earlier, images are polysemous: they contain a number of possible interpretations. The task, then, for many is to ensure that the interview data are used as a means to 'back up' what the image conveys by ensuring that the 'see-able' and the 'say-able' are in unison. However, images do not always directly correspond with a

person's account of their experience such that what is 'see-able' and 'say-able' are not always aligned. In cases such as these, it is important to remember that in qualitative research we are not searching for a direct correspondence between meaning and what is real. In cases where we have encountered a seeming disparity between the image and a person's account of it, we have used this as an opportunity to delve further into these 'misalignments' as a way of unravelling some interesting insights into the tensions in someone's experience – between what they see and what they say (see Brown et al., 2021, for an in-depth discussion of this). Staying with the tension is hard at times, but we have found this extremely productive, especially when exploring tensions and contradictions in what we see, what we want others to see and our experiences and accounts of this (see Gillies et al., 2005, for further discussion).

Analysing images in qualitative research requires even greater flexibility when it comes to working with images and the spoken word together. For example, we found in a number of photo-production studies that we would sometimes have to analyse images together in order to explore the various physical positions through which participants were viewing a space (for example, from their bedroom or from the ward or from the dining area). At other times, we would closely analyse how a person was formulating one particular image in the context of their life history. At other times, we would go beyond an **inductive** use of the image – that is, beyond what appeared to immediately 'say-able' – to explore the social and cultural meaning of an image, which could provide us with an insight into how what is seen is part of our broader visual language. For instance, in some photographs of cooking and food, it was necessary to go beyond what could be seen to consider the broader significance of eating and body-image in institutional settings. This flexibility is daunting at times but it is necessary if we are to weave in and out of images and talk and create inductive and/or theoretically-informed analyses.

Lastly, but importantly, providing participants with the means to create images does not always provide participants with greater opportunity to be listened to or 'heard'. Though a number of researchers have argued that working outside the usual qualitative paradigm of the semi-structured interview format provides a greater opportunity to be 'seen' *and* 'heard', which is especially crucial

for marginalized groups, we have to exercise caution when it comes to the claims we can make in using images in different contexts. For example, in describing their use of photo-voice with homeless participants in New Zealand (in which participants took photos and discussed them), Hodgetts et al. (2021) argued that the photo-voice approach provides the means by which participants can, with researchers, critically reflect on and discuss how they move through space and make sense of their experiences in unanticipated and self-directed ways (as they were the ones taking the photographs). However, they also argue that researchers should be actively engaging with 'life outside the frame' and that researchers have a responsibility in thinking through how to use visual data to inform policy makers and governments and to encourage and enable them to take seriously the lived experiences of marginalized individuals. In other words, the images that participants take may be used in different ways from what they intended and it is the duty of the researcher to think through how different audiences will receive the images. An example would be a group of homeless people collecting together around a warm fire as a sign of community. However, this image may be read by those in authority as a sign of potential risk – a fire spreading or public disorder. Hodgetts et al. (2021) caution against simply assuming that images will translate in exactly the same way across different contexts.

[START BOX]

## Bite-sized summary 5

Analysing visual data is challenging as images are arguably more polysemous than language alone. Researchers must also reassure participants who may feel nervous about producing aesthetically-pleasing images. Researchers often analyse images alongside a person's account of the image in order to uncover a richer, more comprehensive meaning-making process. This moving between the see-able and the say-able can create further challenges as there can be tensions between these different interpretative modalities. Images do not always correspond with a person's verbal description or interpretation of it, but we would encourage researchers to stay with the tensions in order to unravel interesting insights. Finally, working with participants to produce images is creative and potentially

liberating in the research context. However, the researcher must think carefully about how to work with participants to reflect on how the images may create possibilities for action and how service providers and policy makers may read the images and the messages that arise from them.

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## Ethical considerations

The final observation in the preceding section is essentially an ethical question about a researcher's responsibilities in relation to people who participate in their research and the materials that they provide. There are no specific guidelines for researchers working specifically with visual data within the British Psychological Society's (2018) *Code of Ethics and Conduct* or their *Code of Human Research Ethics* (British Psychological Society, 2014). However, the advice set out in their *Ethics Guidelines for Internet-mediated Research* (British Psychological Society, 2017) is pertinent to some discussions of consent and ownership of data in visual research more generally. In this section, we consider three issues relevant to conducting ethical research that are pertinent to these existing guidelines and that are also covered in Chapter 3 in this volume: informed consent, anonymity and confidentiality.[2]

Obtaining informed consent entails not only gaining agreement or permission to take or produce visual images but also to reproduce or display those images to different audiences and in different contexts. In providing informed consent, it is expected that participants have not been deceived or coerced into taking part in research, were informed of the purpose of the research and the research process, and understood the uses to which the research would be put (Wiles et al., 2008). The public display, publishing or wider dissemination of visual data without the consent of the individuals

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[2] Part of this section is adapted from: Reavey, P. and Prosser, J. (2012) 'Researching the visual', in H. Cooper (ed.), *APA Handbook of Research Methods in Psychology, Vol. 2. Research Designs: Quantitative, Qualitative, Neuropsychological, and Biological*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association Press. pp. 313–42.

pictured has been described as ethically questionable (Pink, 2007; Prosser and Schwartz, 1998). Gaining consent is also important for maintaining rapport and a relationship of trust between researchers and individuals in the field and to avoid a detrimental impact on the success of ongoing or subsequent research (Prosser, 2000).

Like other visual researchers, Chaplin (2004: 45) is clear in her advice to 'always ask permission before photographing someone, and always get written permission before publishing the photograph'. However, while this is good ethical practice, obtaining informed consent is not always straightforward. Parental consent is needed if a child is not viewed as having the capacity to consent (Masson, 2004). In some circumstances, both the parents and the children are asked for their consent to the child being photographed or videoed, regardless of the child's capacity to consent. The notion of a person's 'capacity' to give consent is a judgement that relates to so-called vulnerable members of a society, for example, the young, older people and those with disabilities or mental health challenges. In our work, we have used visual methods numerous times but have had to justify how consent can be guaranteed when participants are accessed via the UK National Health Service or within secure settings such as forensic mental health units. In these cases, participants deemed to be at 'risk' are often accompanied by members of staff when they create their images (such as photographs).

Another challenging dilemma concerns what participants are actually consenting to. There are differences between consenting to take part in visual research and providing consent for an image to be used in a publication. While participants might give consent to having their photograph taken, they may not be fully clear that they are consenting to the subsequent display of those images in published research outputs such as journal articles or book chapters, so it is vital to explain this at the time of recruitment.

Visual data present particular challenges to the anonymity and confidentiality of individuals, particularly when photography is employed. The benefits of collaborative or co-produced research, where participants are encouraged to take part in the production, analysis and dissemination of visual research, are well documented. The closer ties between researchers and participants in such instances provide greater opportunity for discussing the implications of showing images and films. However,

participants who engage in the research process because they see benefits in terms of voice and agency may question the need for their images to be anonymized; indeed, they may object if they are not 'seen' (Wiles et al., 2008). If an aim of participatory visual research is to empower and give voice to marginalized groups and individuals but those individuals and groups are anonymized against their wishes, this raises important questions about power relationships in research and the control of the research.

Attempting to disguise visual data can remove the very point of including the data in the first place. Hence, visual researchers tend to favour gaining consent from participants to display their images unchanged. An even better practice is to provide participants with the opportunity to mark images that they do not wish to be included in any public use. A further alternative is partial anonymization, where decisions are made about what to anonymize in an image since clothing, jewellery, tattoos and the spaces and environments where individuals are photographed can all potentially breach confidentiality. In this, researchers can adopt a range of techniques, including using actors to re-enact events or using software packages that render photographs in the form of a cartoon-style graphic or various forms of pixilation for the blurring of faces (Wiles et al., 2008). However, it has been argued that pixelating images can dehumanize the individuals in them and, because of its widespread use on television, can invoke associations with criminality (Banks, 2001).

The digitization of data and the growth of the internet to display, store and exchange visual data have created further ethical challenges (Pauwels, 2006). It is no longer possible to offer assurance to participants that visual data, once disseminated in the academic domain and therefore potentially made public, will be used appropriately. Once in the public realm, participants and researchers have no control over how images might be interpreted by audiences or how they may be used by others for different purposes. This means particular care should be taken to ensure participants understand the implications of consenting to the displaying of images used in research, given that they may be placed online. Of course, the flip-side is that visual researchers may themselves access and use visual data from the internet in their own research. Lee (2000: 135) suggests that images appropriated in this way should still 'fall within the scope of existing guidelines on ethical research practice in respect of

informed consent, privacy and confidentiality and the need to protect research participants from harm'. Given these considerations, there may be a need for an unfolding negotiation of consent between researchers and participants across the course of a research project involving the production of photos or videos as the exact nature and potential implications of the visual data become clearer (for example, see Haaken and O'Neill, 2014).

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## Chapter summary

The (re)turn to visual methods in psychology is part of the more general acknowledgement that the multi-modal nature of knowledge and experience is central to psychological inquiry (see Brown and Reavey, 2015; Cromby, 2015; Stenner, 2018). In psychology, researchers have used images in various ways: (a) as stand alone data; (b) as a means to elicit rich spoken accounts; (c) as a means of creating a greater degree of agency for participants and to open further analytical dialogue between researchers and participants; and (d) as a means of studying real-time interactions where the visual provides immediate context for making sense of what is being said. Working with visual data can be challenging as participants may be reluctant to engage with image-making and, when analysing, images are arguably more polysemous and the see-able and the say-able do not always correspond or cohere.

While visual research arguably gives us 'more' of experience to work with as analysts, it does not give us access to a 'whole'. If experience is characterized by tensions and ambivalences, such as between the see-able and the say-able, then inevitably these tensions will play out in complex and subtle ways and may even be exacerbated within the process of analysis and interpretation. Visual researchers face a number of challenges in using images in the academic world in terms of presenting interpretations that are deemed valid. This may entail playing things safe and presenting only the verbal data in a publication as such data are more amenable to recognized step-by-step analytic procedures and thus fit with the validity criteria of psychological methodologies. Finally,

consideration needs to be given to how visual research can contribute towards social change. While there is ample evidence that visual methods may be empowering for participants, this by itself does not mean that their experiences will necessarily be heard and acted upon. The outcomes of visual research need to be seen as the basis for further discussion and debate in order to connect lived experience to questions around changes in social policies and practices. Visual analysis can then be the first step in a long process of *showing* how people live in order to *say* something about the social world such that we can contribute to *doing* something about changing it.

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## Further reading

Paula Reavey's (2021) text, *A Handbook of Visual Methods in Psychology: Using and Interpreting Images in Qualitative Research*, is comprehensive and reader-friendly. Reavey and Johnson's (2017) book chapter on using and interpreting images in qualitative research, which appears in *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research in Psychology*, provides a good overview of how to use visual methods and identifies some considerations when adapting visual methods to work with other qualitative approaches. Gillian Rose's (2016) *Visual Methodologies* offers a broad social science overview of how to use images and it considers more closely the social and cultural interpretation of images.

Various articles that have been cited in this chapter provide different perspectives on and possibilities for the use of visual data. For example, Radley and Taylor's (2003a) photo production study examined how medical and surgical patients experienced recovery in a general hospital. Haaken and O'Neill (2014) worked with women migrants and asylum seekers to produce a collective account of asylum as a daily process, using photography and videography. In their article, they use psychoanalytic ideas to understand the dilemmas that can be involved in using visual imagery. Boden and Eatough's (2014) article presents their phenomenological method for analysing multi-modal data. In an article analysing photographs, journals and interviews produced by and with young people with

disabilities, McLaughlin and Coleman-Fountain (2019) demonstrate the capacity of visual methods to highlight the social influences on how people represent themselves.