

Book Review

Visual, Narrative and Creative Research Methods

Application, reflection and ethics

Dawn Mannay, 2016

London, Routledge, 152 pages. £29.99, Paperback: 9781138024328.

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Visual Methodologies: <http://journals.sfu.ca/vm/index.php/vm/index>

Perhaps the most exciting aspects of visual methods are the wide range of techniques available, questions raised, and questions answered. Fields across the social sciences benefit from studies utilizing found or researcher-created visuals (e.g., Bourgois and Schonberg, 2009; Knowles and Sweetman, 2004; Margolis and Pauwells, 2011; Pink, 2005; Prosser, 1998; Shah, 2015) and participant-generated visuals—including photographs, drawings, collages, and sand box creations (e.g., Mitchell, 2011; Pole, 2004; Stanczak, 2007; Theron, et. al., 2011). *Visual, Narrative, and Creative Research Methods* offers an expanded look at participant-generated visual data.

In this new piece, Dawn Mannay adeptly covers a variety of issues when using such data and, drawing from her own research experience, discusses the benefits and challenges of such research. As she notes in her introduction, her goal is to highlight how visual methods are not a separate entity, but “embedded in the narrative at its inception, reception, interpretation and impact” (p. 1) and highlights the creativity involved in developing the data and disseminating the findings. This fresh approach to visual methods asks scholars to consider how our research can complement and even expand narrative and creative research projects.

The structure of the book works through a research project with each of the chapters addressing a certain part of the process. Mannay begins with an introductory chapter that provides a brief history of visual methods, including researcher-created/found images and participant-generated visuals, and lays out her stated aims. Chapter 2 provides a discussion of the value of participant-generated visuals and how these studies differ from those using researcher-created or found images. Chapter 3 provides insight into how participant-generated data can make the familiar strange, including how researchers can use creativity to fight through assumptions and knowledge about a familiar topic. Chapter 4 helps researchers understand how they can use these methodological techniques to challenge power relationships, not just between participant and researcher, but also among participants during data production process. Chapter 5 discusses several interpretative techniques while chapter 6 reviews the challenges of data production. Chapter 7 focuses on the ethical challenges unique to participant-generated research projects, including a discussion on the possible need for evolving consent and the questions raised by open access publishing and data sharing requirements. Chapter 8 concludes the book with a summary of Mannay’s main points, considerations for future projects, and a reminder of the interdisciplinary nature of visual methods with a caution to avoid re-inventing the wheel.

What makes Mannay’s approach interesting is the way in which she weaves the visual, narrative, and creative together. Specifically, she guides visual researchers through the research process, keeping in mind the various challenges and benefits of such projects. In many ways, this book is a culmination of Mannay’s own research experiences and discusses her “lessons learned,” i.e., what she has learned through

a variety of projects, how she navigated the bumps in the road, and the wisdom she would like to pass on to other researchers so they avoid the same bumps. These bumps include not just the typical bumps around data collection and analysis, but also the bumps that arise when attempting to merge the visual, the narrative, and the creative to develop a sound project, conduct the project ethically and critically, and disseminate the findings in ethical and effective ways.

While the entire book adds great value to the field of visual methods, a few parts are worth highlighting. First, throughout the book, Mannay makes sure to discuss the power dynamics embedded in these types of research projects. As she notes, participatory-centered research projects may reduce research hierarchies, but they do not eliminate them and researchers would be wise to remember this. Chapter 6 is a brilliant chapter as it highlights the ways in which researchers could use their positionality to push participants in unintended ways. Her discussion of the time involved in these types of projects is especially critical as it raises ethical considerations of a new but equally important kind. Chapter 7 continues this discussion by raising ethical considerations on the affective nature of participant-generated visual projects. Specifically, she raises the need to consider the long-term impacts of data dissemination, particularly as images included in publications often have some identifying information and last forever. As a possible response, she encourages more creative forms of dissemination such as theatre productions or poems based on the data. Mannay also reminds us of the need to consider how these ethical challenges need to be expanded to open access dissemination methods and grants that require data to be included in public databases before funding is obtained.

While the information is useful, some clarity upfront is desirable. It is not until the end of the introduction that it is clear the focus is on participant-generated projects. While no book can cover everything, I wish this one were a bit broader in scope as many of the issues raised (e.g., making the familiar strange; some of the interpretative theories; and much of the ethical discussions) easily apply to found and researcher-produced visuals as well. Second, more concrete approaches to addressing the ethical issues raised would help. For instance, Mannay rightly raises the need to reconsider participant consent and suggests a need to consider evolving consent, but it is unclear how this occurs in practice or how one explains how this will function to ethics boards.

These concerns aside, the integrated approach to visual methods, and the reminder to embed such approaches in the narrative and creative worlds, will be useful for scholars across a variety of fields. New and seasoned visualistas will find much to consider as they approach projects using participant generated data. Mannay’s text is an excellent reference to have on hand. It will also be useful in methods courses. While it most directly applies to visual methods, the discussions this book prompts will be useful regardless of the type of data collection or dissemination utilized or the field of inquiry.

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