

ESRC National Centre for Research Methods Review Paper

## Visual Ethics: Ethical Issues in Visual Research

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## Contents

1. Introduction
2. Frameworks, professional guidance, regulation and legal rights and duties for visual researchers
  - 2.1 Ethics, morality and legality
  - 2.2 Approaches to ethics
  - 2.3 Professional ethical guidelines
  - 2.4 Ethical regulation
  - 2.5 Legal issues
- 3 Consent Issues
  - 3.1 Researcher-generated images
  - 3.2 Anonymising visual data: reflections on the Young Lives and Times project – Anna Bagnoli
  - 3.3 Respondent-generated images
  - 3.4 Photo elicitation and informed consent: reflections from the Living Resemblances project – Katherine Davies.
- 3 Anonymity and confidentiality
  - 4.1 Photos and film identifying individuals
  - 4.2 Obscuring identity in images
  - 4.3 Reflections on the dissemination process: the (Extra)ordinary Live Project – Emma Renold & Sally Holland
  - 4.4 Identifying people in images
  - 4.5 Images of place
  - 4.6 Reflecting on attempts to anonymise place – Andrew Clark
- 4 Further ethical issues
  - 4.1 The construction of images
  - 4.2 How images are consumed
- 5 Conclusion: towards some guidance for researchers

Useful Resources

References

## **Abstract**

This review outlines the key ethical issues with which visual researchers need to engage, drawing on literature from established visual researchers as well as practical illustrations from current research projects being undertaken within the National Centre for Research Methods (NCRM). Its focus is on the ethical issues associated with research using photographs, film and video images (created by researchers, respondents or others) rather than other visual methods. It is intended as an introduction to assist researchers in identifying what ethical issues might arise in undertaking visual research and how these might be addressed. The review commences with an outline of research ethics frameworks, professional guidance, regulation and legal rights and duties which, to varying degrees, shape visual researchers' ethical decision making. It then goes on to explore the core ethical issues of consent, confidentiality and anonymity and discusses the ethical considerations that these raise with examples of how these can be managed. The paper concludes with a brief discussion of the ethical issues raised in relation to the construction and consumption of images. The authors stress the importance of researchers engaging with theories (or approaches) to research ethics in their ethical decision making in order to protect the reputation and integrity of visual research.

## **1. Introduction**

There has been a rapid growth and re-interest in visual methods in the last decade or so. Researchers using visual methods work within a range of disciplinary frameworks and settings. Visual methods are the traditional domain of anthropologists and have only relatively recently re-emerged as popular among sociologists as well as applied social researchers working in areas such as education, social policy and social work (see Pink, 2003, 2006, 2007a, 2007b).

'Visual methods' comprise a vast array of different types of approaches and data. Prosser (2007; Prosser & Loxley, 2008) identifies four different types of visual data: 'found data'; 'researcher created data'; 'respondent created data' and 'representations'. Visual data include photographs, film, video, drawings, advertisements or media images, sketches, graphical representations and models created by a range of creative media. This review focuses on the ethical issues associated with photographs, film and video images (created by researchers, respondents or others) rather than other visual methods. Clearly there are ethical issues that arise from researcher or respondent created drawings and other creative forms of data (see, for example, Clark, 2006; Prosser & Loxley, 2008) but, arguably, these are not quantitatively different to those that can emerge from particular types of text-based data (Rose, 2007). It is in the types of visual data that produce visually identifiable (or potentially identifiable) individuals that the central issues of visual methods arise. These are the subject of this review. For a discussion of various other types of visual methods and the ethical issues that arise see Prosser & Loxley (2008).

This review outlines the key ethical issues with which visual researchers need to engage, drawing on literature from established visual researchers as well as practical illustrations from current research projects being undertaken within the National Centre for Research Methods (NCRM). It is intended as an introduction to assist researchers in identifying what ethical issues might arise in undertaking visual research and how these might be addressed. The review commences with an outline of issues of research ethics including ethical frameworks and ethical and legal regulation which, to varying degrees, may shape researchers' ethical decision making. It then goes on to explore the core ethical issues with which visual researchers need to engage. The focus is primarily on issues relating to consent, anonymity and confidentiality.

## **2. Frameworks, professional guidance, regulation and legal rights and duties for visual researchers**

### **2.1 Ethics, Morality and Legality**

Clarification of the links, overlaps and differences between morals, ethics, ethical approaches, ethical frameworks, ethical regulation and legal regulation are an important starting point for this paper. These are illustrated, and discussed, below. Figure 1 illustrates the influence of approaches to ethics on regulation, and practice. Figure 2 illustrates the range of factors influencing ethical issues (and decision-making) encountered by researchers.

Figure 1: The Influence of Approaches to Ethics on Regulation and Practice

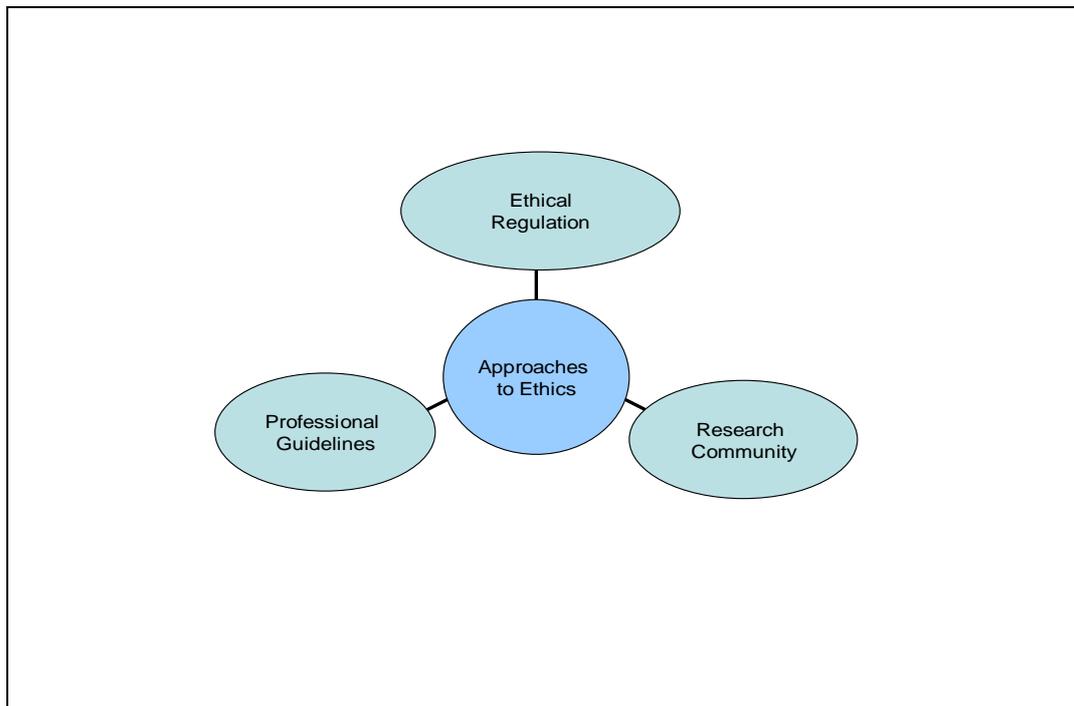
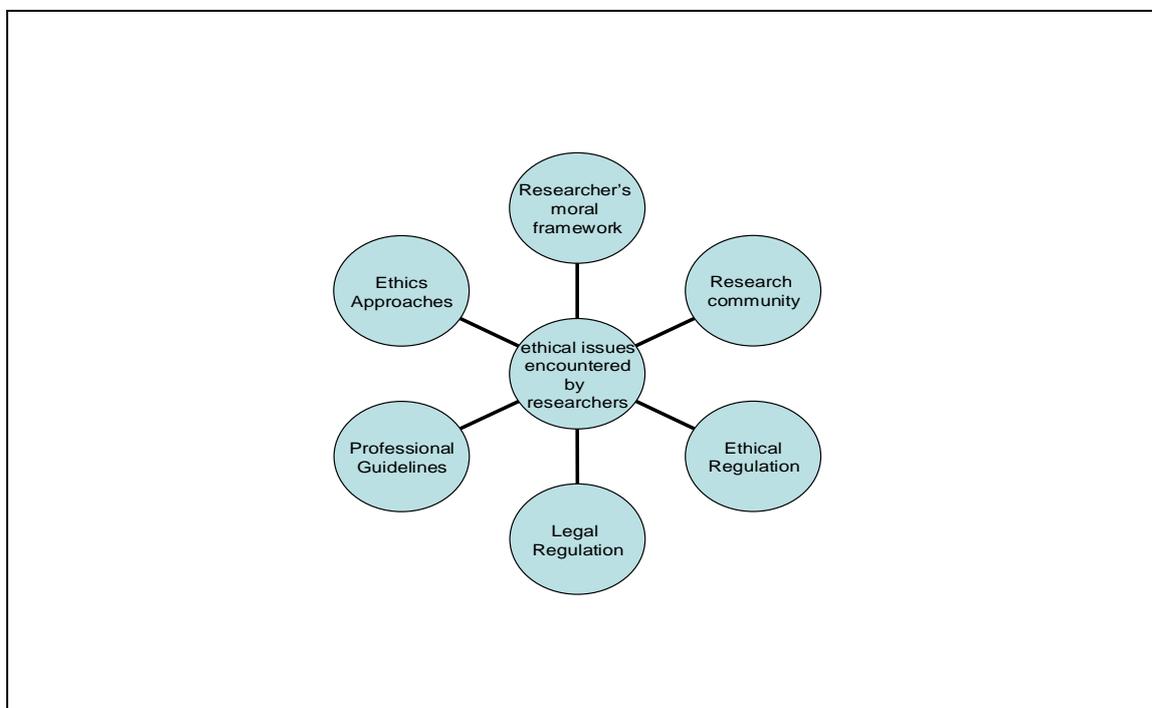


Figure 2: Factors Influencing Ethical Issues and Decision-Making



All individuals have a moral outlook about what is right and wrong that guides their behaviour. This moral outlook is shaped by individuals' experiences and interactions and the specific moral beliefs held are inevitably individual (see Gregory, 2003). Nevertheless society has a large amount of agreement on specific moral *principles* about right and wrong (such as justice and fairness) even though there is considerable disagreement about the application of these principles to particular circumstances and contexts. Ethical approaches and frameworks are the application of key moral norms (or principles). Ethical behaviour in research demands that researchers engage with moral issues of right and wrong. To do this they draw on ethical principles identified by the research community to which they belong. For the purposes of the discussion here ethics and morals can be seen as interchangeable. The specific ethical issues that researchers identify in their research are informed by their own moral outlook and their understanding of ethics in research (so they can be understood as ethical issues or moral issues). The frameworks for thinking about and managing them are informed largely by the ethical principles derived from the various approaches to ethics which are set out in professional ethical guidelines as well as various textbooks on the topic. Some of these ethical issues can be considered prior to the research commencing but many are emergent and only become apparent as the research proceeds. Researchers can draw on a range of resources from the literature and the research community to assist their thinking in how to manage such issues. It is crucial that they resolve the issues in ways that accord with their moral beliefs but also in ways that do not contravene the established ethical standards of their profession.

Researchers' ethical decision-making is also strongly influenced by ethical and legal regulation. Researchers are legally obliged to conform with legal regulation relating to their research. Ethical regulation does not carry such weight but nevertheless researchers are generally obliged to comply with ethical regulation by their institution or by the organisations they are conducting research with or for. It should be noted that conforming with ethical or legal regulation does not necessarily equate with ethical (or moral) behaviour; compliance with regulation in many contexts is often the minimum requirement and ethical behaviour demands more careful consideration of the issues involved. The specific implications of regulation are explored in the relevant sections below. This paper now explores ethical approaches, guidelines and regulation.

## 2.2 Approaches to ethics

There are a range of approaches to research ethics (see Israel & Hay, 2006; Alderson, 2004: 98). Consideration of these is important in helping to guide researchers in thinking through the ethical challenges with which they are confronted. The most common approaches are consequentialist, non-consequentialist, principlist and ethics of care.

People using consequentialist approaches argue that ethical decisions should be based on the consequences of specific actions so that an action is morally right if it will produce the greatest balance of good over evil. Using a

consequentialist approach a researcher would assess what the outcome of a specific decision might be and decide on an action that they believe would result in the most beneficial outcome. For example, a researcher might argue that it would be acceptable to undertake covert visual research, for example on youth crime, if the findings of the research could be seen as benefiting society as a whole.

People using non-consequentialist approaches argue that consideration of matters other than the ends produced by actions need to be considered and that ethical decisions should be based on notions of what it is morally right to do regardless of the consequences. A researcher adopting a non-consequentialist approach might, for example, argue that it is morally right to maintain a confidence even if the consequences of that might not be beneficial or in the interests of the wider society.

Non-consequentialist approaches are related to principlist approaches (see Beauchamp & Childress, 2001) which draw on the principles of respect for people's autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence and justice in making and guiding ethical decisions in research. Respect for autonomy relates to issues of voluntariness, informed consent, confidentiality and anonymity. Beneficence concerns the responsibility to do good, non-maleficence concerns the responsibility to avoid harm and justice concerns the importance of the benefits and burdens of research being distributed equally. People using principlist approaches make ethical decisions on the basis of these specific principles. Each of these principles is viewed as important but it is recognised that they may conflict with each other and in such cases it is necessary to make a case for why one might need to be chosen over another. Principlist approaches are widely used and form the basis of evaluation of applications for ethical approval by many research ethics committees (Israel & Hay, 2006: 37). The principle of respect for autonomy may present considerable difficulties for visual researchers in relation to confidentiality and anonymity.

An ethics of care approach is an important but less common model. In this approach, ethical decisions are made on the basis of care, compassion and a desire to act in ways that benefit the individual or group who are the focus of research (Mauthner et al, 2002). This is an approach used in much feminist and participatory research where researchers develop close relationships with their participants (see Edwards & Mauthner, 2002). Most established visual researchers call for the development of collaborative relationships in research which bears some relationship with an ethics of care approach (Harper, 1998; Pink, 2003, 2006, 2007a; Banks 2001; Rose, 2007). Gold's (1989) argument for a covenantal ethics accords with this approach.

While the specific ethical approach researchers adopt in their research guides ethical decision making, it is recognised that research is situated and contextual and that the specific dilemmas that arise are unique to the context in which each individual research project is conducted. Some researchers have argued that decisions about ethical dilemmas cannot be reached by appeal to higher principles and codes (see Simons and Usher, 2000) and that researchers have to approach each ethical challenge within the context in

which the research is conducted (Renold et al, 2008; Birch et al, 2002, p1-2). Prosser has noted that there is an absence of accepted ethical practice in visual methods and of theoretical positions on which to make judgements (Prosser, 2000). While the emergent nature of ethical issues is not disputed, nevertheless an understanding of, and engagement with, these ethical approaches provides an important basis from which researchers can think through, and argue, their ethical position.

### 2.3 Professional ethical guidelines

There are a wide range of professional guidelines and codes aimed at providing frameworks to enable researchers to think through the ethical dilemmas and challenges that they encounter in their research (e.g. SRA, 2003; BSA, 2002; BERA, 2004; GSRU, 2005). These are drawn, to varying degrees, from the ethical approaches outlined above. Such guidelines are necessarily very general; they do not provide answers to how researchers should manage the specific situations that they might encounter in their research but rather outline principles to enable researchers to think through the specific situations that occur (Wiles et al, 2006). These guidelines recognise the situated and contextual nature of the ethical challenges that arise when conducting research. The principles addressed in these codes generally relate to issues of the well-being and rights of research participants, informed consent, privacy, confidentiality and anonymity. The central issues can be summarised as:

- i) researchers should strive to protect the rights, privacy, dignity and well-being of those that they study;
- ii) research should (as far as possible) be based on voluntary informed consent
- iii) personal information should be treated confidentially and participants anonymised unless they choose to be identified;
- iv) research participants should be informed of the extent to which anonymity and confidentiality can be assured in publication and dissemination and of the potential re-use of data.

These issues are ones that are relevant to all research but the ethical issues raised by visual research are, arguably, distinct from those raised by purely textual data. Discussion of the ways in which these issues impact on visual research and consideration of the issues will be discussed in detail below. Here the focus is on the extent to which guidelines and codes (and regulation and law) provide guidance specifically in relation to visual research.

The general nature of these professional codes and guidelines mean that the ethical issues relating to visual methods are not specifically addressed within most codes. The American Anthropological Association (1998), The RESPECT code of practice for socio-economic researchers (2004), the British Education Research Association Ethical Guidelines (2004) and the Social Research Association Ethical Guidelines (2003) make no specific mention of visual methods in identifying principles of research ethics.

Two general professional guidelines identify visual methods as having specific ethical issues (British Sociological Association, 2002; Association of Social Anthropologists of the UK and Commonwealth, 1999). The issues identified relate to consent for the collection and dissemination of visual material and the importance of copyright clearance (issues relating to copyright are discussed below in the section on legal considerations). In these two guideline documents, these issues are not discussed at length.

The British Sociological Association Visual Sociology Group's statement of ethical practice (2006) also identifies these issues but in considerable detail; this statement provides detailed guidance for visual researchers and is a useful resource to help visual researchers to consider some of the possible difficulties that they might encounter in their research. In contrast to other professional guidelines, these are more prescriptive. The guidelines outline the importance of consent, both to participation and to the ways and forms the visual data collected will be used. Written consent for the use of images that identify individuals is noted as preferable as is providing an opportunity for study participants to see the visual data collected on them and reflect on its proposed use. The importance of careful consideration of issues of consent when conducting and disseminating research over the internet are identified and researchers are advised to err on the side of caution in making judgements about the well-being of on-line research participants. Caution is also advised in relation to covert research which, because of the ethical and legal issues it poses, is deemed as necessary only in 'certain circumstances'. The guidelines note the importance of attendance to national laws and administrative regulation that are pertinent to visual research. In relation to research with children, the need to consider child protection issues and make provision for the potential disclosure of abuse is noted. Legal issues are particularly relevant to the risks relating to the creation, possession and dissemination of images of illegal activity (e.g., criminal damage, assault, hate crime, sexual violence). The statement notes that illegal images should always be given to the relevant authorities. They also note the care that needs to be taken in relation to images of sexual activity. In cases where research raises potentially challenging ethical issues researchers are urged to obtain ethics clearance from a professionally recognised research ethics committee; such clearance is generally necessary for all research conducted by academic and professional researchers working in institutional settings.

Members of these professional organisations would be expected to abide by the principles outlined in these codes and guidelines although, in most cases, these guidelines are not enforceable. There is currently no professional register of social researchers that researchers can be struck off for not abiding by ethical guidelines. However, it is of note that the BSA visual sociology group note that 'if members are found to be using sexually inappropriate or illegal images (as defined by UK law) by the BSA –Visual Sociology Group, the individual will be excluded from participation or attendance at any of the group's events or those of any organisation with which the groups has an affiliation or relationship' (p2). Nevertheless, researchers are not obliged to be members of these organisations. Social researchers can, and do, conduct research without being members of a professional organisation and as such

these frameworks provide a very weak form of regulation of practice. Institutional and legal regulation however does provide more pressing frameworks for the conduct of visual research.

## 2.4 Ethical Regulation

The regulation of social research in the UK has been steadily increasing over the last decade, culminating in the development of the ESRC Research Ethics Framework and the subsequent formation of research ethics committees in universities (ESRC, 2005; Tinker & Coomber, 2004). Research ethics committees have been operating for some time for researchers conducting research in health care settings<sup>1</sup> and a framework has been developed more recently for social care<sup>2</sup>. Organisations outside of academia have also developed systems of ethical review and monitoring (See, e.g., GSR, 2005). The result of these developments has been that virtually all research conducted by researchers (with the possible exception of some self-employed researchers) is subject to some form of ethical review by a recognised ethics committee. This 'ethics creep' is viewed as moving UK social research in the direction of the highly regulated system of review by Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) in the US (Dingwall, 2006). Ethics committees vary widely in the ways in which they assess applications for review and the conclusions they come to, even in highly regulated and established systems such as that for the review of research in the NHS (Edwards et al, 2004). However, the general principles they assess are fairly uniform and are likely to comprise those outlined in the ESRC Research Ethics Framework: 'integrity, honesty, confidentiality, voluntary participation, impartiality and the avoidance of personal risk to individuals and groups' (ESRC, 2005, p26; see also Israel & Hay, 2006: 37). The key issues that are likely to be assessed by all committees are voluntary informed consent, the confidentiality of information provided by participants, the anonymity of study participants, the avoidance of harm and researcher integrity.

There has been considerable criticism of the regulation of social research with concerns raised by ethnographers in particular about the limitations this places on their research (Murphy & Dingwall, 2007). Ethical regulation poses potential problems for visual researchers (Prosser & Loxley, 2008). Concerns have been raised by the visual research community who fear that ethics committees will render some visual research undoable or will specify limitations to visual researchers' practice, such as pixelating or obscuring faces to preserve anonymity, that will result in data becoming meaningless (Prosser & Loxley, 2008; Sweetman, 2008). Concerns have been expressed among visual researchers that research designs with a visual element will be altered or diluted to meet the requirements of Ethics Committees. This is certainly a concern expressed among visual researchers in North America who have noted that the fear of litigation has resulted in IRBs central concern being to protect the institution rather than the rights of participants or researchers (Gunsalus et al, 2007; see also <http://www.c4qi.org/qi2005/papers/rambo.pdf>).

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.nres.npsa.nhs.uk/>

<sup>2</sup> See [http://www.dh.gov.uk/en/Researchanddevelopment/A-Z/Researchgovernance/DH\\_081435](http://www.dh.gov.uk/en/Researchanddevelopment/A-Z/Researchgovernance/DH_081435)

Some visual researchers who are unhappy about the ethical regulation to which they are subject have sought to sidestep it by referring to their work as investigative journalism and as subject to the less stringent code of conduct for journalists. The code of conduct for journalists (National Union of Journalists, 2006) maintains that information should be collected by straightforward means and that journalists should attend to issues of individuals' privacy. However it also calls on the principle of freedom of the press and other media and consideration of the public interest. While researchers may welcome avoiding ethical regulation, many would argue that the common practices employed by the press are not appropriate for social research (Schwartz, 2003). In any case, researchers conducting research as members of staff of an academic or social research institution are likely to find it difficult to have their work interpreted as journalism rather than research and thereby to sidestep ethical review by a recognised ethics committee. Given institutions' concern with litigation they would be likely to be subject to disciplinary procedures if they sought to do so. Researchers working outside of these organisational constraints may, however, be less restricted.

### 2.5 Legal issues

Visual research is subject to a number of legal considerations which relate to both the taking of images (photos or film) and the use to which images are subsequently put. Various guidelines on photographers' rights provide helpful information relating to the UK (McPherson, 2004) as well as other countries (Krages, 2006; Bateman, undated). Williams et al's (undated) discussion of the ethical issues in the archiving of qualitative data also provides useful information on the law in relation to various forms of visual images. In consideration of these legal issues it is important to bear in mind that these provide a framework of the minimum standards that need to be adhered to but that these, by themselves, do not necessarily equate with ethical or moral practice. Masson (2004) notes:

'There is a close relationship between law and ethics but not everything that is legal is ethical. Frequently law ... attempts only to set the minimum acceptable standard. The aspirations of ethical practice are higher ... It can never be appropriate to defend proposed practice solely on the basis that it is legal' (p43)

UK law enables individuals to film or take photos of places or individuals from or in a public place, including taking photos of private property. However, photographing someone in a place where they have a reasonable expectation of privacy might be considered to be an invasion of privacy. There is currently no privacy law in the UK but photographing someone where they might reasonably expect to be private could be considered to be against the article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights (see Williams et al, undated; McPherson, 2004; SRA, 2003: 36). Persistent or aggressive photography could also come under the legal definition of harassment (McPherson, 2004).

While the law in relation to taking images in public places is explicit, what is legal and what is sanctioned in practice do not always coincide. There are

numerous examples of photographers in the UK (and elsewhere) being stopped from filming in public places by various state officials (see, for example, [http://www.bakelblog.com/nobodys\\_business/2008/06/cops-bully-vid.html](http://www.bakelblog.com/nobodys_business/2008/06/cops-bully-vid.html)). The situation is complicated by the difficulties in defining what constitutes a public space. Managers of shopping malls and public service organisations (such as hospitals, Local Authority leisure centres or libraries) may not view their organisations as public places for the purposes of researchers wishing to take images, although this may be largely dependent on what images are being made. There is also the issue that some areas of public places might be viewed as more private than others. Various authors urge researchers to make themselves familiar with their legal right to take images in public places and to resist challenges to this (e.g., Krages, 2006).

UK copyright law in relation to still and moving images favours researchers in that copyright rests with the person taking the image, or their employing institution. Williams et al (undated) note that a research participant who agrees to have their photograph taken or be subject to video recording has no legal rights over the subsequent use of their image. This also applies to the archiving and reuse of visual data (Williams et al, undated). However, they note that a case could be made for a respondent retaining rights over the words spoken in a video recording as the copyright for their words rests with them. They note that, in the light of this, it is advisable to request that interviewees assign copyright to the researcher (p3). In the case of respondent-generated visual data (e.g., photos a study participant has taken), copyright rests with the respondent and it is necessary for them to assign copyright to the researcher for their subsequent use by the researcher. Clearly these legal conditions need to be managed within a context in which researchers need (and arguably want) to develop and maintain good collaborative relationships with study participants; it would be inadvisable for researchers to rely on these legal conditions to determine their research practice.

Visual research with children poses particular difficulties. The law around the process of consent for children to participate in all types of research is complex and relates to the notion of capacity or competence (see Heath et al, 2007; Masson, 2004; Alderson & Morrow, 2004). Children who are able to understand the implications of participation in a research study are viewed as having the 'capacity' to make a decision about whether or not to take part in research. Parental consent is needed if a child is not viewed as having the capacity to consent (Masson, 2004). However, in practice researchers often seek parental consent (in addition to children's consent) regardless of a child's capacity to consent in order to safeguard them from any problems that might arise. In the current climate of concern about photographs of children, it is advisable that visual researchers seek consent from children, parents and any other gatekeepers who provide access to the children; such conditions are likely in any case to be imposed by an ethics committee or gatekeepers. Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) checks are also necessary for researchers working with children and with other groups deemed 'vulnerable'. There are several useful resources which explore the legal issues around research with

children, especially in relation to consent and competence (see, e.g. Morrow & Richards, 2002; Alderson & Morrow, 2004; Farrell, 2005).

A further legal issue regarding research with children concerns confidentiality in cases where a child discloses that they are being seriously harmed or mistreated. Failure of a researcher to take appropriate action in such cases could result in legal liability. In the UK, people who suspect a child is being mistreated are not legally obliged to report this. However, a range of professionals (such as teachers and social workers) are obliged to do so under Local Authority child protection procedures. Images or data of serious crime involving children should be handed over to the police (BSA – visual sociology group, 2006). Serious crime in this context comprises images of physical, sexual or psychological abuse. Researchers need to clarify how the disclosure of such information will be managed as part of the informed consent process with children (Masson, 2004; Wiles et al, 2007). There is no law relating to actions in the case of images or data of less serious crime and researchers are left to make their own decisions on appropriate actions, if any. In the case of adults, there is no law that obliges researchers to pass images or data of adults engaged in criminal activity to the legal authorities. However, researchers should be aware that research data given in confidence do not enjoy legal privilege and they may be liable to subpoena by a court (Wiles et al, 2007). There are no cases of this occurring in the UK. It may be prudent for researchers to think through the implications of giving people cameras to take images reflecting their lives and how they will manage being presented with images that portray some form of unlawful or morally questionable activity.

All researchers are also subject to the Data Protection Act which demands that data is kept securely and does not lead to any breach of agreed confidentiality and anonymity (BERA, 2004: 9; ESRC, 2005, p18). Providing researchers have consent for the use and re-use of images it does not appear that visual data provide any additional challenges in relation to data protection than those posed by other forms of research.

The preceding discussion has illustrated some of the frameworks that inform the ethical issues that researchers encounter. We now turn to the specific issues of consent, confidentiality and anonymity and explore the challenges these raise for visual researchers and the ways in which they can be managed.

### **3. Consent issues**

#### **3.1 Researcher-generated images**

Informed consent is a central principle in ethical research and is no less central to visual research than other types of research. While a case has been made for the importance of enabling researchers to continue to have the right to undertake covert research (Tysome, 2006) there is a general consensus that covert research is not ethical except in some specific circumstances (Rose, 2007). In such cases the onus is on the researcher to

demonstrate that the need for the research outweighs the deceit involved. Still and video cameras provide researchers with the capability of conducting covert research fairly easily. Researchers can easily hide from public view when taking photographs or use strategies that conceal the subject of the photograph or devices, such as a telephoto lens, that enable photographs to be taken from a distance (Prosser, 2000). Direct covert or clandestine photography or film research is viewed by many visual researchers as both unethical and as intellectually limiting given that it often provides 'only superficial data which can easily be construed the result of 'outsider' arrogance' (Prosser & Schwartz, 1998; see also, Prosser 2000; Pink, 2003, 2006, 2007a). Such research provides very limited understanding of people's views and experiences which are central to much visual research (Pink, 2006)<sup>3</sup>.

However, while many visual researchers may not condone covert research, they might question whether it is necessary to always obtain consent from individuals who are the subject of photographs. Clearly when taking images of groups of people in public spaces or at events it is not practical, or indeed necessary, to obtain consent from people present. However, when taking images of identifiable individuals (whether in public or private spaces), or of people in private spaces or organisations where people might reasonably expect not to be photographed or filmed, then it is polite and good ethical practice to seek consent. For much research seeking express consent is also in the interests of obtaining good data (Banks, 1995, 2001; Pink, 2003, 2007a; Prosser, 2000). Visual researchers identify the importance of developing relationships of mutual trust with study participants so that the images that are taken emerge from collaborations between researcher and study participant and are jointly owned (Harper, 1998; Gold, 1989; Pink, 2003, 2006, 2007a; Banks, 2001; Renold et al, 2008). The intellectual reasons for adopting this approach are addressed by Pink (2003) and Banks (2001) who argue that it is only through engaging with participants that a researcher can come to know the phenomenon they are studying. Prosser (2000, p120) too notes the importance of consent for the reputation of researchers in the field:

'Of course, the most dramatic, even sensational images may be of those not wanting their photo taken, but that is no reason for taking photographs. Such actions are not only dishonest, but also counter-productive to the enhancement of sociological knowledge. Ultimately the reason for not taking photographs of participants if they are hostile to the idea is not a matter of privacy or morality but the likelihood of such action compromising rapport – a necessity for any researcher hoping to remain in the field.'

Consent entails not only consent to take or make visual images but also consent to use images subsequently. In the collaborative mode of working, consent to take images and to use them subsequently entails the express agreement of the individual(s) concerned. This may involve gaining express

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<sup>3</sup> The exception to this is ethnomethodological approaches whose focus is the objective exploration of interaction.

consent for the particular images used and the specific formats and contexts in which they are to be used (Pink, 2006, 2007a; Renold et al, 2008). Some researchers might view initial consent to cover both consent for making images and for their use, others might view these as things that have to be negotiated separately. Pink (2007a) notes that there is no consensus on this issue. This is an issue that researchers have to consider within the context of their research.

The precise form that that consent might take is varied and the appropriate means of consent needs to take into account the context of the research. In some cases, for example when visual data is being obtained for illustrative purposes or general but not specific consent has been given, a verbal request before photographing or filming may be appropriate. This might entail simply asking if an individual objects to having their image taken and explaining (if necessary) the purpose of taking the image (Banks, 2001). In other situations, for example when conducting ethnographic work with a community, written consent (or consent recorded by some other means) after extensive discussion is necessary (Banks, 2001; Rose, 2007). This discussion should involve explaining to research participants in detail the purposes of the research, the images that it is anticipated will be taken, the process of consent for obtaining and using specific images and the plans for dissemination (Rose, 2007). Once detailed consent is obtained researchers may still choose, with participants' agreement to this practice, to take photographs or film without study participants' awareness of the specific images being taken in the interests of obtaining 'natural' images.

With the increase in ethical regulation, there has been a significant move to the use of signed consent forms for research participants. Signed consent forms are viewed as safeguarding researchers and their employing institutions, making issues of consent clear to research participants and ensuring attention to issues of copyright (Pink, 2007a). However, using signed consent forms does not negate the necessity of explaining the research to potential participants and for what precisely their consent is being sought to do. Equally, as Pink (2007a) notes, signed consent does not give researchers the right to use images in unrestricted ways. Often it is the case that consent forms are used at various different points during the research process as the need for specific visual data or the significance of particular images emerges. In some contexts, rather than written consent, filmed or audio-recorded consent may be more appropriate. Some researchers are reluctant to use any form of formal consent and view oral agreement from an individual as sufficient. This may be particularly the case where people have low levels of literacy or are wary of legalistic procedures (Banks, 2001). Several authors note that informed consent is a problematic concept in that it is highly unlikely that study participants can truly understand the research, the outputs it may have and what participating in the research will be like for them (Pink, 2007a; Prosser, 2000; Gross et al, 1988); this may be particularly the case in relation to film making (Prosser, 2000) and for visual data that may be archived. An example of a consent form used in a recent study conducted within the National Centre for Research Methods is included in the appendix.

Research involving children will require consideration of issues around capacity to consent as outlined in the section above on regulatory and legal frameworks. This will involve exploring whether the child is able (or 'competent') to consent on their own behalf or whether, additionally, parental consent is also needed. If a child is able to fully understand what participating in a study involves they are, in theory, able to consent on their own behalf. However, gatekeepers of children under 16 (or in some cases 18) who are being accessed via schools or other organisations may insist on parental consent, as may a Research Ethics Committee (Heath et al, 2007). If parental consent is deemed necessary difficulties arise if parent and child have different views on participating; a parent can prevent a child participating if they withhold consent although they cannot force a child to participate if the child does not consent. Particularly problematic may be issues around consent for the use of images where children's and parents' views may not be in accord. The experience of some visual researchers is that children and young people often want their images to be made public. The importance of negotiations with children around these issues is highlighted by many researchers (Renold, 2008; Flewitt, 2005).

The following illustration drawn from a current NCRM research project highlights some of these consent issues in relation to children. This illustration draws on issues relating to both researcher-generated and respondent-generated visual data

### **3.2 Anonymising visual data: Reflections on the Young Lives and Times Project**

Anna Bagnoli, NCRM Real Life Methods Node, University of Leeds

The Young Lives and Times project<sup>4</sup> is a prospective qualitative longitudinal study which is investigating the everyday lives, relationships, and identities of a cohort of young people born in 1992/1993, tracking them over time through their teenage years and into early adulthood. The young people are drawn from metropolitan and rural Yorkshire and come from a variety of backgrounds. In 2008 the project participated in the ESRC Festival of Social Science with a two-day event at the West Yorkshire Playhouse in Leeds on March 14 and 15<sup>5</sup>. The first day of the event was dedicated to the young people taking part in the project as key research users, and involved them in a drama workshop run by a local children's theatre company. The second day was targeted on local practitioners and the general public and included a display of the young people's own artwork as well as multimedia installations about the project. Participation in the Festival was a significant experience which allowed the team to take the research outside of academic circuits,

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<sup>4</sup> Phase 1 of this project (October 2005-September 2008) was funded by the ESRC as part of the NCRM Real Life Methods Node. Phase 2 (October 2008-June 2011) is funded under the ESRC Timescapes initiative.

<sup>5</sup> The event 'Timescapes: exhibiting the Young Lives and Times project through drama and visual display' was funded by the ESRC with grant no. RES-622-26-0074.

engaging with innovative forms of dissemination within the community. Organising the event, however, meant revising the policy on visual ethics and data anonymity that we had followed until that point.

At recruitment, we had collected written consent from both young people and their parents. The forms we used for this purpose, however, proved inadequate to cover our needs in terms of visual ethics. In our initial promise of protecting participants' identities 'at all times' we had not fully taken into account the implications of using the wide-ranging array of visual methods we applied in the first wave of fieldwork. These included drawings and graphic elicitation methods, such as self-portraits, timelines, and relational maps, as well as video diaries, photo elicitation, collages, and videoed walkabouts. Since on the grounds of that initial form showing any of these data outside of the research team was going to be problematic, we produced further consent forms for each of the methods. The new formulation was making it possible for the materials to be shown in academic contexts such as talks and seminars. Ensuring participants' rights to anonymity was thus potentially in tension with our own dissemination activities.

Organising the Festival event posed us further ethical questions. One important change to our initial policy was implied by the decision to organise the 1<sup>st</sup> day of the event as a gathering of our research participants, something that the young people themselves had requested of us in focus groups that we ran when designing the study. Giving the young people a chance to meet each other obviously meant disclosing their identities to the others involved in the project. Setting up a display of participants' artwork on the 2<sup>nd</sup> day meant going through a series of anonymisation issues that depended both on the type of visual method used and on the criteria which were followed in the organisation of the exhibition. Our main aim in running this event was giving something back to the young people involved in our study. Displaying artwork produced by each one of them, so that this could properly be a collective exhibition, was therefore a priority. Organisation of the event, however, had to be done in very short time, with no specialised technical support. Time, technical means and know-how were an issue, and the decisions taken in anonymising data were sometimes only the best I could find pragmatically, yet perhaps not those I would have chosen ideally.

On a technical level, anonymising graphic materials such as drawings is rather straightforward. Removing identifiers from all these data was however rather time-consuming. Identifiers obviously include names of people and of places, and less obviously also the occasional contextual information which might be sensitive. Given that here I was working on putting together a visual display, the aesthetic value of the end result was another important factor in guiding my decisions. For what is the meaning of showing something that has been so much tampered with to end up being extremely different from the artwork that was originally produced? One might wonder whether even the authors might have been able to recognise some of the drawings that eventually went on display, once all the significant names had been removed. Aesthetic considerations were particularly important when anonymising the photographs. In technical terms, the anonymisation of photographs and

videos is rather more complex than that of drawings. Videos in particular require specialised software that we did not have. Within the interactive installations that I created for the exhibit therefore, only one video extract was used in which no people were present, and which showed the camera zooming on a bird jumping in a field. In the case of photographs, good editing can be achieved with software like Photoshop. However, blurring photographs may sometimes be inadequate to keep anonymity and the aesthetic results may not be that pleasing either.

Blurring face details in a photograph sometimes makes little sense: why would one want to show a portrait with a blurred face in an exhibit? One also has to be aware of the fact that, when observed from a close distance, a blurred image may seem perfectly anonymous. But try and put the same picture on a wall and stand away from it: details will become more clearly visible as you increase your distance! In some cases pixelating was perfectly appropriate, for instance with the collages that 5 of the girls involved in the study had produced. The quality of the pictures in these collages was not very high in the first instance, and thus pixelating was not too much of an invasive process. The overall meaning of the artwork was not substantially altered by blurring some of the photographs. More problematic was pixelating high quality photographs. To this end I looked for some effect in Photoshop that could allow me both to cover details and to maintain the sense of the picture. I ended up applying a 'cut out' effect on the faces in the photograph, which made them look like stylised masks, and thus less 'real', whilst keeping something of the original details in a way which I thought was aesthetically acceptable. The feedback we got from the young people on the day though indicated that this work had not been much appreciated. In fact, the very need of anonymising the visuals was questioned by the young people.

### 3.3 Respondent-generated images

Thus far we have focused on images taken by researchers. In cases where images are taken by study participants as part of a research project or where images owned by research participants are sought then different ethical issues may arise.

There has been an increasing trend for researchers to give research participants still or video cameras and to ask them to take images of their lives, identity or communities (e.g., Heath & Cleaver, 2004; Renold et al, 2008) or to conduct video diaries (e.g., Holliday, 2000; Gibson, 2007). These are often then used for data elicitation purposes. Where visual data is being used purely for elicitation purposes then issues of consent are relatively unproblematic. However, if researchers wish to include these photos in dissemination of the research then some particular issues of consent emerge. Consent for the subsequent use of an image in the research in relation to issues of copyright can be managed relatively easy with negotiation with the research participant and, with their agreement, signing of a consent form to assign copyright to the researcher. However, there are additionally issues around consent for any subjects of photographs or film that a research participant takes. While legally the film or photograph taker owns the image,

and can assign copyright to the researcher if they wish to do so, the people in the images have not necessarily given their consent to the image. Even if they have, they are unlikely to know the purposes to which the image may be put (Rose, 2007). Managing this issue is complex. At the very least, it demands that researchers who give cameras to participants think through the implications of what images they might be presented with by study participants and brief them about seeking permission and explaining the purpose prior to taking images of others. In some cases this may be all that is required but researchers are advised to be circumspect in the use of images of identifiable others and to consider whether or not someone might be at risk of harm or moral criticism as a result of use of the image. It may be possible to ask for subsequent consent from the individual portrayed in relation to the specific use to which the image is to be put via the research participant who took the image.

Similar issues emerge in relation to research which focuses on visual material owned, or in the possession of, research participants. Research exploring photos in study participants' photo albums is one example of this type of work. Albums may contain photos taken by the research participant of various individuals for whom issues of consent may arise. Albums may also contain photos taken by others, and therefore in copyright terms, not 'owned' by the research participant. Some of the challenges inherent in this type of work and how they might be managed are contained in the following illustration of research which involved the use of family photographs from respondents' photo albums.

### **3.4 Photo elicitation and informed consent: reflections from the Living Resemblances project**

Katherine Davies, NCRM Real Life Methods Node, The University of Manchester.

The Living Resemblances project is investigating the social significance of family resemblances or likenesses. One of the methods we used in the research was photograph elicitation using family photos as part of a set of interviews in participant's homes.

#### Taking photos of photos – consent for using images for analysis

- Photo elicitation using family albums took place during the course of wider semi-structured interviews
- At the end of their interview participants were asked whether a digital photograph of their photographs could be taken for analysis purposes within the research team. Verbal consent for this was tape recorded

Seeking consent to photograph participant's photographs at the end of the interview can pose practical difficulties for the researcher<sup>6</sup> and decisions about when to raise the issue of consent often need to be made during the

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<sup>6</sup> Participants often showed me lots of photos at once and it wasn't always easy to be systematic when photographing them at the end of the discussion, sometimes resulting in photographs being missed or difficulties matching images to the corresponding extract of the interview transcript.

context of the interview so the researcher can weigh up the potential risks to rapport of asking 'too soon'. Most participants were happy to allow the photographing of their photographs but it is not always helpful to turn the conversation onto 'official business' in the middle of elicitation.

### Negotiating levels of consent

There are a number of different levels of usage of family photographs and it is important to think about the ethical and practical issues involved in seeking consent for these different levels. For example, although we were happy that tape-recorded verbal consent was adequate for us to photograph photographs and use them within the research team for analysis purposes (and the majority of participants were happy to consent to this level of usage during their interview), we felt it was necessary to seek more formal consent before sharing the images with a wider audience. We also felt that showing an image during a presentation (as long as it is not reproduced in handouts or on websites and that the presentation is run from a data stick and deleted from any computers) was different to publishing it in a form where copies are publicly available and that archiving photographs (for example in Qualidata) requires another level of consent again.

We rejected the idea of archiving photographs, figuring the confidentiality issues were too great and that the interview transcripts could be re-used fruitfully without the accompanying images. We also drafted a number of consent forms listing the remaining levels of usage, asking people to decide whether they consented for their photos to be used in presentations only or presentations and printed publications and so on. The resulting forms didn't leave the drawing board; they were complex, confusing and potentially worrying and off-putting to participants. Ultimately we felt we should provide participants with a simple decision where they could answer yes or no to having their photographs published (we made sure to list all possible levels of usage in the form, see appendix for the form used).

### Who can give consent?

During his interview, one participant – Andrew – had only felt able to provide consent for me to photograph images of him and his children, he didn't feel he had the right to give consent for me to photograph a photograph he owned of his brother's children despite us having discussed this particular image at length. This raises numerous questions about who can provide consent for family photos. Legally, the photographer 'owns' the image (although this becomes less clear when applied to photographs of photographs or family photos where it is not always clear who the photographer was) but ethically, is it sufficient to ask participants to provide consent for the use of the photographs they have in their homes or should all the people who appear in the photos (and the parents/guardians of children) be asked to consent before they can be used?

We did originally consider seeking consent for all living people who appear in any photos we might want to publish. After considerable thought we realised that this would prove to be such a huge administrative task that it would prevent us seeking consent for many of the photos collected in the research.

We also wondered about the ethical implications of contacting the family members of our research participants who might not know anything about the project or even be on good terms with the participant. We decided to leave it up to the participants who had shown us the photos to decide whether they needed to ask permission from other family members before consenting to their publication (and although only Andrew raised this issue in the first phase of consent (for me to take a photo to use during analysis) a number did report wanting to do this before consenting for their photos to be used more widely).

#### Image by image consent

Following on from this, one of the most important considerations in negotiating informed consent is that people may feel differently about providing consent for different images. We have already seen that Andrew felt he couldn't give consent for me to photograph all his photos. Isabel also had no problem providing consent for photos of people who are now deceased but before consenting to the publication of the other images she felt she would have to check with everyone who appeared in them. Pauline felt the same and requested more time to contact her daughters and discuss it with them before signing her form. Similarly, some photos may have a particular poignancy or sensitivity to the participant or their relatives, affecting whether consent is given, and which the researcher may not always be aware of.

For these reasons we attached a print out of all photographs with the consent form and gave participants the option of giving consent for us to use some, but not all, of their images (see appendix for a copy of the form used). Although this did complicate the form (in the event all participants managed to complete the form correctly, although I did offer to return to explain the details in person and for this reason I would urge researchers to start negotiating consent for the use of photographs soon after the initial interview) it is a crucial element of ethical practice and many participants took the opportunity to give consent for some but not all of their photos.

The decisions people made regarding consent for particular photographs highlight the importance of thinking about consent image by image. For example, although Isabel had felt more confident giving consent for photos of deceased family members, David and Marilyn had the opposite reaction and gave full consent for the use of photos of their grandchildren and children but wished to keep older photographs (including an old black and white picture of David's uncle) more private. People obviously employ their own highly complex ethical systems of 'consent hierarchies' to their family photos to help them make decisions about their use in projects such as this and therefore as researchers, so must we.

#### **4. Anonymity and confidentiality**

One of the central ethical issues confronting visual researchers is how to manage the research convention of anonymity and confidentiality in relation to visual material. As the preceding discussion has indicated, anonymity and confidentiality are long-established principles in social research practice (Wiles et al, 2007). Yet much visual material makes the anonymisation of

individuals or locations problematic if not impossible (Clark, 2006). This presents a dilemma for visual researchers; on the one hand the purpose of employing visual data is because the visual image is able to reveal more about phenomena than can text alone so, in the interests of research, there is a drive to publish and present unadulterated visual images (Sweetman, 2008; Knowles & Sweetman, 2004) but on the other, there may be pressure from regulatory bodies to uphold the principle of anonymisation. The situation is complicated by the fact that individuals appear commonly to want to be identified in their visual images, a similar situation to that which frequently emerges in text-based research (Grinyer, 2002). This appears to be particularly the case in relation to visual research with children and young people and people with disabilities who have argued for their right to be made visible. The management of these issues and the implications of different decisions will now be explored.

#### 4.1 Photos and film identifying individuals

As a first step in considering these issues, researchers clearly have to carefully consider the implications of using the data they have collected for individuals and the institutions or communities of which they are part (Gold, 1989; Pink, 2007a). They also need to consider how the research, and indeed the images, may be used in the future (Davidov, 2004; Barrett, 2004). This may sometimes mean making the decision not to use aspects of visual data. In other cases, participants may ask for their image to be obscured or not used (Pink 2007a). Similar issues occur for researchers who use text but with visual images the implications are greater because of the likelihood of identification (even if images are obscured). The implications of identification may, of course, not always be clear to researchers but as Pink (2007a) notes, it is crucial that researchers seek to understand the political, social and cultural contexts in which images will be viewed and interpreted (see also Davidov, 2004).

The issue of internal confidentiality, that is confidentiality between members of a specific community or group, is also one that warrants consideration. People who are interconnected can easily identify others in visual images from jewellery, clothes, gestures or gait, even when attempts have been made to anonymise individuals. It can also be difficult for researchers to ensure the confidentiality of images taken by respondents for research purposes. Research participants who make videos or take photographs for the purposes of a research project can use the images as they see fit which may not accord with the aims of the project. This can be a particular problem with young people who may post photos or video created for research purposes on Facebook or other internet sites.

Still and moving visual images may portray clearly identifiable individuals. These sorts of images can be anonymised only by altering the image in some way so as to obscure individuals' identity. More commonly visual researchers present these types of visual material in their entirety thereby enabling individuals to be identified, with their consent (Pink, 2007a). Issues of consent are obviously paramount in decisions about the use of images and, as discussed above, different considerations may be necessary in relation to

researcher-generated images than for respondent-generated or owned images.

#### 4.2 Obscuring identity in images

Methods of obscuring people's identity include increasing the pixelation of facial features in order to blur them (see <http://www.yowussup.com/pixelating-images.php>), the use of specific anonymisation software that converts visual images into cartoons or drawn images (see <http://www.virtualdub.org/> and [http://compression.ru/video/cartoonizer/index\\_en.html](http://compression.ru/video/cartoonizer/index_en.html)) and blocking out eyes, faces or other distinguishing features. In social research, the former approaches are more common. Blocking out eyes or faces is relatively common in medical research, arguably reflecting medicine's interest in people as bodily parts rather than whole individuals. As noted above, obscuring facial features alone may not be adequate to ensure anonymity. Obscuring facial features is a contentious practice and has been subject to criticism by social researchers (Williams et al, p7; Sweetman, 2008). Nevertheless, it is recognised that there are some groups or types of images that necessitate the identities of individuals being obscured. The increasing moral panic over photographs of children makes it likely that researchers will experience difficulties in using identifiable images of children for general viewing and it is common practice for researchers working with children to use specialist software to anonymise children's images (Flewitt, 2005; see also the example below for an illustration of the images produced by this software). Certainly caution needs to be exercised in the ways that images of children are used and stored (see Williams et al, p6).

In other types of research where these difficulties do not exist, obscuring identities is problematic for a number of reasons. First, is that the purpose of visual images is that they can portray something additional to that of text alone so to tamper with images in ways that obscure certain important details, such as people's facial expressions, makes the purpose of collecting visual images questionable. Clearly, if the images collected are not concerned with individuals, identity or interaction but with a more general scene, such as a market place, a street or a festival, then blurring faces, arguably, may not impact negatively on the overall aim of the work. However in much research, obscuring faces affects readers' ability to make sense of visual data because faces are necessary to enable us to interpret physical, psychological, social and emotional aspects of individuals. Without seeing faces we cannot begin to interpret basic social facts about individuals, such as their age and social class, let alone how they feel and what they, or researchers, are intending to portray by the image. Further, many studies using visual data, especially in sociology, focus on aspects of people's identity; people are photographed or filmed dressed in particular clothes or displaying particular aspects of themselves which represent their identities (Back, 2007, Holliday, 2004, Knowles & Sweetman, 2004). In such contexts blurring faces makes no sense.

A second, and perhaps more important, criticism of blurring or obscuring faces is that this objectifies people and removes their identity. Viewing images with faces obscured can be disconcerting. Without faces people appear not

as people at all but as objects, this does not accord with a duty to treat people with respect. Indeed, one might argue that it becomes too easy to fail to treat people with respect when we cannot see their faces (which is why people subject to harm are often hooded). Obscuring or blurring images also has negative connotations which may be communicated to people in their viewing of the research. Pixilation of images has associations with crime; it is a commonly used device in the media when talking with 'criminals' or 'victims' of crime who fear being identified (Banks, 2001). A third implication, if not criticism, of obscuring faces is that it can be difficult to do well with some visual data (where there are a number of people present for example) and may involve a substantial amount of work on the part of the researcher. It also raises questions about the impact on the integrity of the data and whether the result of changing visual data results in 'sanitised' findings. A further implication is that it limits the potential for data to be reused (Williams et al, undated). The following example illustrates some of these issues in relation to research with young people.

### **4.3 Reflections on the dissemination process: the (Extra)ordinary Lives Project**

Emma Renold & Sally Holland, NCRM Qualiti Node, University of Cardiff

#### Background

The (Extra)ordinary lives project was a demonstrator project within the ESRC National Centre for Research Methods' Qualiti node based at Cardiff University. It aimed to explore the ordinary everyday lives of young people who are looked after by the local authority in foster, residential or kinship care. The research design was intentionally participatory with the central methodological aim to develop a research environment in which a small number of children and young people (aged between 10 to 20) could choose their own methods to record and represent aspects of their lives and identities (e.g. visually, textually, orally and aurally). Eight young people took part in fortnightly 'me, myself and I' project sessions over one school year (2006-7), where they could explore any aspect of their everyday lives using any combination of methods and media. One-to-one visits and fieldwork episodes also took place in between the group sessions, by arrangement. During the group sessions young people worked on their own individual projects, but also engaged in much interaction and socialising. These research activities, combined with our critical reflexive participatory approach proved to be quite productive in generating a rich and diverse assemblage of multi-modal representations of everyday lives (pasts, presents and futures). These activities were akin to what Code (1995) terms 'vigilant methods', that is methods specifically aimed to cultivate more equitable and ethical field-relationships through de-mystifying the research process and rupturing the researcher gaze. Our methodology was one which we hoped would maximize children and young people's agency in the research process through techniques which encouraged young people to actively consider and reconsider their participatory status, from data generation, through to analysis, representation and communication of findings. While some of the 'findings' of our research (especially methodological discussions) were of little interest to the participants, we regularly shared parts of papers we had written or presented with the young people, to demonstrate how their data is transformed into academic outputs. Most

were keen to share in dissemination with their immediate carers and with policy makers.

Beyond Outcomes: The Everyday Lives of Young People in Care 18 months from the start of the fieldwork and following the individual analysis sessions with each young participant (see Holland et al, 2008), we invited the young people in our study to take part in a semi-public dissemination of our findings by organising an event<sup>7</sup> for young people in care (including our participants). Due to ethical issues relating to anonymity, three short films were commissioned by a local film-maker (who was also a qualitative social scientist) which would recreate some of the young people's narratives and visual imagery using a combination of animation and actors. Participants were consulted about the content of these films and here is a short extract from a lengthy discussion between a young person and a researcher about what theme she would like represented in film:

Nevaeh: I think family's the big one.

Emma: Family's a big one. So something about the family, you think.

Nevaeh: I've got my own family now. And then like belonging.

Emma: Belonging. Yep, yep, OK.

Nevaeh: Yeah.

Emma: Cause that was a big, that is one of our big themes and, yeah.

Nevaeh: It's mad, like seeing it all –

Emma: Isn't it?

Nevaeh: Like ... that's you (staring down and gesturing towards the folders full of transcribed conversations and interviews)

The 'Beyond Outcomes' event was well attended by local young people in care and care leavers. It featured an address by a Government Minister and involved an actress from a popular fictional television show about children in a children's residential unit. It also raised a number of ethical issues relating to participation and dissemination. Firstly, in terms of content, we wished to give our participants a choice over the aspects of their lives that they wished to portray publicly (and anonymously). The majority of this material was indeed 'everyday' and in line with project aims and tended, understandably, to focus upon the positive and uplifting aspects of everyday life and relationship cultures. Pets, soft toys, football matches, visits to parks and the young people's own photos and videos of themselves and their families and friends were shown in a 15 minute assemblage of still and moving images. All were anonymised using specialist visual software with a selection of quotes adding meaning and direction to the multi-media collage. The following two images of the same photo illustrate the software used (<http://www.virtualdub.org/> and [http://compression.ru/video/cartoonizer/index\\_en.html](http://compression.ru/video/cartoonizer/index_en.html))

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<sup>7</sup> 'Beyond Outcomes': The Everyday Lives of Young People In Care was funded by ESRC Research Festival of Social Science (RES-622-26-0002). The event took place on 10th March (4-5:30pm) at the Millennium Centre, Cardiff. This event was aimed specifically for young people who live in local authority care (foster, residential or kinship care settings) to visually communicate research findings of the ExtraOrdinary Lives research project and generate discussion on young people's representations of the everyday lives of being 'in care'.



The three professional films that drew on and recreated data portrayed both positive and more negative stories from everyday lives, including stories about first flats (disappointments and dreams), a cartoon about a young person seeing

another resident in her former bedroom, and some tales of conflict and violence in school. Some important narratives from the research participants could not be presented at this event due to participants being aware of each others' identities and the potential for unwanted sharing of highly personal material. The film about conflict in school was withdrawn by the young person whose experiences it portrayed, as she was anxious about her foster carer realising it was her and was keen to avoid any negative representations of her interactions with others ("I'm not showing anything bad"). She is happy for 'her' film to be shown to academic audiences when neither she nor anyone she knows is present. Some young people who attended the event, but who had not been research participants, expressed an opinion that the data products portrayed too 'rosy' a picture of the lives of young people in care. The event had indeed censored some of the data due to the wishes of participants and the researchers' own concerns about audience and purpose of the event. Whilst in most contexts the participants would be entirely unidentifiable through the anonymised data, in front of peers and carers they could have been identifiable and it was therefore unethical to present any aspects of their data with which they were uncomfortable.

Our experiences of this dissemination event is that, on a positive note, our young participants were able to make informed choices about how, when and where their experiences could be portrayed. However, it must be recognised that involving research participants fully in dissemination can potentially lead to a less than comprehensive picture of research 'findings', particularly when the research includes personal narratives. If participants are always present at dissemination events, then personal material from other participants may not be able to be included, where participants know each others' identities. Therefore, we would suggest that participative dissemination can risk producing sanitized findings, although we would acknowledge that this will not be the outcome in all contexts

#### 4.4 Identifying people in images

The more common approach favoured by social researchers is to present visual data in its entirety, with consent, and not to attempt to anonymise individuals (see for example, Back, 2004; Holliday, 2004). In this mode of working, pseudonyms are not generally used.

As noted above, visual researchers identify the importance of developing relationships of mutual trust with study participants so that the images that are taken emerge from collaborations between researcher and study participant and are jointly owned (Gold, 1989; Pink, 2003, 2006, 2007a; Banks, 2001; Harper, 1998). Pink (2003) and Banks (2001) argue for collaboration as a means to empower participants to represent themselves in the images that are produced and disseminated in ways that meet their own objectives. Such practice will involve showing participants and allowing them to comment on images prior to wider publication or presentation (Pink, 2006) and consideration of the political, social and cultural contexts in which images will be viewed and interpreted (Pink, 2007a).

These are laudable aims but are far from straightforward. They involve the need for researchers to make efforts to firstly, understand what the implications of identifiable images of individuals being disseminated might be

and secondly, explain to individuals in ways that they can comprehend the various implications. Previous research in relation to text based methods reveal that study participants are often very keen to be identified in research (Grinyer, 2002; Wiles et al, 2007) but do not necessarily understand what the implications may be. There is a tension here between study participants' right to decide how their image is used and researchers' responsibility to inform participants of the implications this might have. Most research participants have limited understanding of the research process and the ways in which research is presented and disseminated. Even with detailed discussion about this on the part of researchers, participants are unlikely to fully comprehend the 'taken for granted' aspects of research practice. The extent to which research participants are aware of the varying ways, and contexts in which, images may be consumed is questionable as is their knowledge about the longevity of images in the public domain and the potential for future uses of images. This is not to argue for paternalism on the part of researchers but rather for the recognition that collaboration with research participants on issues around anonymity and dissemination involve more than meeting participants' wishes; researchers need to carefully consider and explain the various implications to individuals. In some contexts it may be appropriate for researchers to take responsibility for the possible outcomes of research and to protect study participants from themselves.

There are a range of ways that visual research can be disseminated, such as public exhibitions, film showings or events, the use of digital media (such as DVDs or the internet) or more conventional forms of dissemination through presentations at conferences or meetings and book or journal publications. The mode of dissemination presents different implications for study participants in relation to anonymisation and identification and these need to be carefully considered and negotiated with study participants (Pink, 2006, 2007a). Both researchers and participants may be most concerned and aware of issues in relation to a public showing of research in their or the broader community but much less so in relation to an academic presentation or publication. However, this does not negate the need for researchers to be respectful of the ways in which they present their data in these formats. A further issue that warrants exploration with participants is consideration of the implications of images entering and remaining in the public domain through publication in books and articles. While an individual may be happy for a specific image of them to be made public at one point in their lives they may be less so in the future as their circumstances change (See Barrett, 2004; Williams et al, undated), yet once an image enters the public domain it may be difficult or impossible to remove it (see Banks, 2001, p131).

Visual data lend themselves to means of dissemination other than conventional academic publications because these often fail to do justice to the dynamic and interconnected nature of visual and textual data. This is particularly the case with some types of visual data, such as video diaries and observational film. Visual researchers have experimented with various ways to disseminate their research and producing DVDs and the use of hypermedia is particularly popular (Dicks et al, 2006). Consideration of ways of restricting access to these is likely to be important, especially if images involve children.

The internet offers considerable opportunities for global dissemination but, without restricted access to sites, raises the possibilities that images can be copied and reproduced in contexts other than those for which they were obtained (Banks, 2001; Pink, 2007a; Prosser, 2007). As Pink notes these may have negative or harmful consequences for the people represented and can be disseminated globally on-line (Pink, 2007a). The need for restricted access is also raised in relation to the archiving of visual material for reuse (Williams et al, undated).

#### 4.5 Images of place

Still images or videos of private or public places or locations (such as inside houses, schools, in parks and on streets) also present a threat to anonymisation of individuals whether or not individuals are portrayed in images. The inclusion of images of place in studies of community is common practice (Crow & Wiles, 2008) and has also been used in studies of educational and other organisations (Prosser, 1992). While locations are often (but not always) given a pseudonym, the images and descriptions make it relatively easy to identify, or at least make an educated guess, where a study is located (Clark, 2006). Frequently, images of place used in research are absent of people (e.g., Savage, 2002) or of identifiable individuals (e.g., Foster, 1999) but this does not necessarily mean that a community or an institution and the individuals or members that make it up cannot be identified from it. There are considerable examples of community research where people have been unhappy about the way they or their community has been characterised and of the ramifications this has had (see Crow & Wiles, 2008). This indicates a need to consider carefully the implications of taking images of place and that as much care needs to be taken over issues of anonymity and consent in relation to images of place as to images of individuals. Some of the challenges in anonymising visual data relating to place are explored in the following illustration.

#### **4.6 Reflecting on attempts to anonymise place**

Andrew Clark, NCRM Real Life Methods Node, University of Leeds

'Connected Lives' is a project exploring social networks and community interactions through a multi-dimensional inner-city neighbourhood case study. We are seeking to understand how networks, neighbourhoods and communities are experienced and defined in different contexts, over time and across space. We are using a variety of qualitatively-driven methods to collect data including a number of visual methods. Visual data has been generated by participants through a day-diary and a neighbourhood walkaround in which they are provided with a disposable camera with which to photograph aspects of their networks, neighbourhoods and communities. In addition, we have produced a considerable amount of researcher-generated visual data in the form of photographs taken in the field over the course of the research.

The visual data produced through these methods comprises both researcher and participant created images, including images produced by the participant

without the researcher present. The photographs tend to consist of three types of image:

1. Photographs of people in which the locations or settings is not always clear.
2. Photographs of places including panoramic images of the urban landscape, and close-range images of objects within the landscape, including shops, pubs, and places of worship.
3. Photographs of people in place including for example, individuals in street scenes and public spaces.

We are now faced with the challenge of whether to anonymise this visual data relating directly to place and if so how.

### **The challenge of anonymising place**

There were a number of reasons why we considered anonymising place in our visual data. One is to protect the identities of the fieldsite and individuals (participants or others) who live or work there. While it may, in theory, be relatively straightforward to disguise place in text through the use of pseudonyms or limiting the amount of geographical context it is almost impossible to adequately anonymise place in visual data; those familiar with the places will continue to recognise them. Partly due to our aim to disseminate results of the research we did not aim to achieve complete anonymity of place, but rather decide in which contexts to use images of place, among which audience, and the purposes for which we are presenting a photograph of place.

Despite our best efforts, we did not entirely resolve the challenges of anonymising place. In some instances a failure to anonymise place can also unwittingly reveal the identities of individual participants as well. For example, the use of a quotation positioned alongside a particular photograph (in this case, of a patch of waste-ground in my research site) during a seminar paper I gave was sufficient for enable one member of the audience who was familiar with the research site to identify the participant who gave the quotation, even though I believed I had anonymised both participant and name of the fieldsite and ensured there was, seemingly, no identifying feature in the photograph<sup>8</sup>. Perhaps the processes through which histories and individuals combine to produce particular narratives about place may be too powerful to guarantee anonymity of either people or place. Consequently it may not be possible to guarantee anonymity in visual data about place among audiences who are familiar with those places.

A further reason for anonymising place arises from the ways in which visual images can be used to reproduce particular representations of place. Photographs of place can become an accomplice to power, perpetuating particular stereotypes and myths about places. For example, one participant chose to take photographs of rubbish left in a social housing estate in our

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<sup>8</sup> After the event I discussed what had happened with the participant concerned. Ironically, the participant was more interested in why I had wanted to anonymise him/her in the first place.

fieldsite to demonstrate the poor upkeep of the area and what she interpreted to be a lack of care by residents.

It is not the image alone that can reproduce particular views and representations, but the juxtaposition of image with text. A comment made by a participant in relation to particular café in the fieldsite could have significant repercussions if accompanied by the visual image:

*SP: This place here, xxxx [name of a café], I've heard stories about it  
Researcher 1: What sort of stories?*

*SP: Er, that it's basically a drugs haven. Which I'm surprised, I've never seen police here before. So you'd think well surely, I mean it's pretty much advertised, usually has some kind of dubious advertising on the door.*

*(Walking interview)*

For another participant, the power of the image lay in its production. Photographing a particular place provided opportunity to reify a concern she had about assumed exclusivity of a third sector organisation. QS encouraged us to take a photograph as 'proof' that she could then use to demonstrate how a particular organisation was acting, in her view, in an inappropriate way. While, as requested, we took the photograph of the Centre, to reproduce it to other audiences would have repercussions for those who are associated with the Centre:

*QS: I mean I'm bringing you round here.*

*Researcher 1: Yeah.*

*QS: Cos I want to show you, look, xxxx Community [Centre], I want you to get a picture of that.*

*Researcher 2: [laughs] You want me to get a picture of that?*

*QS: Yeah I do cos I want to see when it's gonna become community, that's what I wanna do.*

*(Walking interview)*

We cannot publicly reveal either of the photographs discussed above because of clear implications they would have for the groups and individuals associated with both places. Like textual data, this ongoing negotiation over which photographs we do and do not show to audiences outside the research is central to decisions about how to anonymise place. The process needs to recognise the context behind the production of the visual data and consider the potential implications for revealing particular images not just for participants, but also for those who may not have any connection with the research other than through the accident of geography.

### **Anonymising place through method**

On the whole, when images do not include people's faces, we found that participants raised few doubts about photographing places. They rarely expressed concern about content, even when images included photographs that may identify them or people they know. For example, participants have taken photographs of houses where they used to live, houses where family or

friends currently live, of shops, cafes and pubs they frequent, all of which would be instantly recognisable to those familiar with the places.

However, some participants were aware of broader ethical issues around photographing place which resulted in them practicing their own anonymisation strategy while engaging with the visual methods. The content of participants' photographs was determined not only by what they wanted to reveal to researchers about their lives and their places but also by their ethical concerns over what they were willing, and not willing, to photograph. Some chose not to take any photographs, arguing that they felt uncomfortable or self-conscious producing such data and others were selective about the content of their images. While this was in part due to the degree of comfort using a particular method, it also alludes to a form of censoring of visual data. This included photographing place:

QS: ...Yeah. All these shops here, as you can see, most of them have gone into takeaway. I don't know if they'll be offended [by] you taking pictures here  
(Walking interview)

QS takes pride in calling herself 'local' and was reluctant for us to take photographs in an area of the neighbourhood with which she was less familiar. This was, she claimed, an area where the store owners were not local and lived outside the neighbourhood, where she knew fewer people on the streets, and where, ultimately, we can surmise she felt *out of place*. In determining where, and crucially where not, to take photographs, PR thus reveals how her depth of place attachment intertwines with her ethical concerns about photographing place.

### **On reflection**

It is important to recognise that guaranteeing complete anonymity of place (and at times, people within those places) is fraught with danger. While it may be possible to anonymise people through pixilation for example, this cannot be done so easily with place. Moreover, it is important to question what purpose anonymising place may serve. Would an image of a street scene anonymised so as to disguise people and location (for example by disguising store names) serve any purpose or would it represent a fabricated, sanitised picture to illustrate any accompanying text? It may be more preferable to not include over-anonymised images of place rather than present images simply for illustration. We have found it more appropriate to decide whether particular photographs should, or should not, form part of the 'public face' of the research. For it is not necessarily the image alone that can create ethical challenges, but the combination of image and accompanying text. Comments and stories about particular images can make both participants and place recognisable to others.

The history of anthropology and community research, including those that have used visual methods, is littered with examples of individuals and

communities being distressed about the way they have been portrayed in research (Pink, 2003; Rose, 2007: 252; Crow & Wiles, 2008). Arguably, more collaborative research approaches have made cases where research participants experience dissatisfaction with their treatment by researchers relatively rare. Nevertheless, exploration with research participants of their wishes for the ways visual data should be used and consideration of the implications this might have is a complex task.

## **5. Further Ethical Issues**

Aside from issues of consent, confidentiality and anonymity, there are a number of other ethical issues that arise in the practice of visual methods which it is important for the visual researcher to consider. Central among these are i) how images are constructed and ii) how images are consumed. These issues, taken together with consent, confidentiality and anonymity, do not exhaust the ethical issues that emerge in visual research but we view them as comprising the central ethical issues that all visual researchers need to consider; this does not negate the need to consider the additional and specific ethical issues that emerge within the specific contexts of individual research projects.

In this section we briefly review issues around the construction and consumption of images to aid researchers' thinking on these issues. The issues outlined by Pink (2003) are helpful in this context. She notes that, in any project, a researcher needs to attend to: the internal meanings of an image; how it was produced; and, how it is made meaningful by its viewers. She notes the key issues to be considered by researchers are:

- i) the context in which the image is produced
- ii) the content of the image
- iii) the contexts and subjectivities through which the images are viewed

### 5.1 The construction of images

One of the difficulties with visual data is that images tend to be viewed as representations of social reality but are inevitably constructions of a social reality that are influenced by the attributes of both the researcher and subject (Pink, 2003; Harper, 2004). As Prosser (2000, p124) notes:

‘The still camera and movie camera ... replicate accurately what is set before them. However, importantly, they do so at our bidding’

There are various ways in which researcher and/or subject contribute to the construction of images. Researchers may use a particular lens to photograph a subject, ‘set up’ a specific photograph or use software to alter a photograph in order to make or illustrate a specific point (Gross et al, 2003; Prosser, 2000; Prosser & Loxley, 2008). Similar issues apply to film. There are also a range of less-conscious ways in which a researcher may influence the way in which an image is constructed; social class, gender, ethnicity and other social attributes of the researcher all operate to influence the choice of visual images (Harper, 2004). The same is true for research participants who may choose

to present themselves in ways in photographs or films that differ from their everyday reality (Gianotti, 2004). Ethical research demands that researchers are explicit about the methods and contexts in which the image has been created; it is unethical to use images to knowingly deceive or give a false impression (Prosser, 2000; Rose, 2007). Researchers also need to provide reflexive accounts to enable others to make sense of the visual data presented.

### 5.2 How images are consumed

The issues discussed above are pertinent in relation to the consumption of images. Images are not only created but also consumed within a social context (Banks, 1995). Furthermore, the way that images are consumed may be different to that which the researcher intended (Pink, 2007a; Gold, 1989). It is crucial to consider how the image or film will be interpreted and, in order to minimise misinterpretation, use visual data with text to make explicit the intended meaning (Prosser, 2000). Consideration of how visual data will be interpreted (and subsequently used) involves knowledge about the political, social and cultural contexts in which data will be viewed (Pink, 2007a). Rose (2007) argues that there are two aspects which influence the ways in which images are viewed: the social practices in which images are viewed and the social identities of the viewer. Visual researchers need to carefully consider these issues in order to take seriously the promises they have made to their study participants.

## **6. Conclusion: towards some guidance for visual researchers?**

This review has outlined some of the issues for consideration by visual researchers undertaking research using film, photos or video. We recognise that the ethical issues that visual researchers encounter in their research are situated and emerge in relation to the specific contexts of individual research projects; this inevitably makes providing guidance about good ethical practice in visual methods problematic. This review has, nevertheless, identified some of the ethical considerations that arise in relation to the core ethical issues of consent, confidentiality and anonymity and provided examples of some of the ways in which these issues can be managed. Our aim is that these will provide a useful resource to aid novice visual researchers to think through, and manage, the important ethical issues that visual methods raise. However, we also view it as important that the ethical decisions that visual researchers make are informed by an understanding of, and engagement with, theories (or approaches) to ethics. Ethical decisions in research should not be made in isolation but in the context of a thought-through and considered framework that accommodates a researcher's moral outlook as well as professional guidelines. In the current climate of increasing ethical regulation it is crucial that researchers are able to understand, articulate and argue the ethical or moral case for the decisions they make about the design of their research and the ethical issues that emerge throughout the research process. This is crucial for the on-going reputation and integrity of visual research.

## Useful Resources

British Sociological Association - Visual Sociology Group's statement of ethical practice (2006)

[www.visualsociology.org.uk/about/ethical\\_statement.php](http://www.visualsociology.org.uk/about/ethical_statement.php)

Research ethics in art, design and media

<http://www.biad.uce.ac.uk/research/rti/ethics/bibliography.html>

Software for anonymising visual images:

<http://www.yowussup.com/pixelating-images.php>; <http://www.virtualdub.org/>  
and [http://compression.ru/video/cartoonizer/index\\_en.html](http://compression.ru/video/cartoonizer/index_en.html))

ESRC Researcher Development Initiative on visual methods

<http://www.education.leeds.ac.uk/research/visual-methods/>

International Visual Studies Association

<http://www.visualsociology.org/>

Websites on visual methods and visual ethnography

<http://www.photoethnography.com/>

[http://www.lboro.ac.uk/departments/ss/visualising\\_ethnography/](http://www.lboro.ac.uk/departments/ss/visualising_ethnography/)

Creative visual methods

<http://www.artlab.org.uk/>

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GSR Professional Guidance: Ethical Assurance for Social Research in Government

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## **Appendices: sample consent form**

**Dear**

**Many thanks for taking the time to participate in an interview for our project on family resemblances. It was a real pleasure to talk with you about you and your family.**

**During the interview you showed me some of your family photographs and you agreed to let me photograph them for use in the analysis of the research.**

**During the interview we also discussed some of the possible uses and outcomes of the research data including a report for our funders (Economic and Social Research Council), presentations and publications for academics and use in the training of other researchers.**

**We would like to use some photographs in these (electronic and print) reports, presentations and publications. Real names will not be used with the photographs. We may or may not publish your photographs, but in case we do I would be grateful if you would read the enclosed form and decide if you would give consent for us to use the images.**

**Please complete the form by signing one of the three boxes:**

- 1. Sign box one if you give permission for us to publish the photos**
- 2. Sign box two if you give permission for us to publish some but not all of the photos. Please don't forget to state the numbers of the photos you give permission for us to use**
- 3. Sign box three if you would prefer us not to use the photos outside the research team**

**Once completed, it would be helpful if you could return a signed copy of the form in the stamped addressed envelope enclosed. Please don't hesitate to contact me if you are having difficulty understanding the (rather complicated!) form or if you have any questions. I would be more than happy to come and talk about it with you in person if that would be helpful.**

**Thanks again for your contribution to the project.**

**Kind Regards,**

**Katherine Davies**

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Living Resemblances Project, University of Manchester  
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**Please sign either 1, 2, or 3 below:**

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**OR**

**3.** I do not wish any of these photographs to be reproduced in connection with the Living Resemblances project.

signed.....

date.....

Thank you for participating in our project. If you have any queries about this form or about the project or your participation in it, please do not hesitate to contact Katherine Davies: 0161 275 2516, Katherine.Davies@manchester.ac.uk