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Understanding Visual Inquiry: A Review of Researching the Visual (2nd ed.)

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Abstract

The growing popularity of visual research in social sciences along with the new possibilities offered by the developments in technology necessitate including visual inquiry in research methodology classes. *Researching the Visual* by Emmison, Smith, and Mayal (2012) offers a good introduction to visual research and can be used as a textbook for beginners in social inquiry. In this book, Emmison et al. carefully combine the history, examples, explanations, and new trends in visual research. Careful consideration is given to new approaches emerging within visual inquiry. In summary, while this book may be too basic for the experts in this field, it is an excellent introductory text for beginners—clear, engaging, and stimulating.

Keywords

Visual Research, Visual Data, Sociology, Social Science, Data Analysis

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Understanding Visual Inquiry: A Review of *Researching the Visual* (2nd ed.)

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*The growing popularity of visual research in social sciences along with the new possibilities offered by the developments in technology necessitate including visual inquiry in research methodology classes. *Researching the Visual* by Emmison, Smith, and Mayal (2012) offers a good introduction to visual research and can be used as a textbook for beginners in social inquiry. In this book, Emmison et al. carefully combine the history, examples, explanations, and new trends in visual research. Careful consideration is given to new approaches emerging within visual inquiry. In summary, while this book may be too basic for the experts in this field, it is an excellent introductory text for beginners—clear, engaging, and stimulating. Keywords: Visual Research, Visual Data, Sociology, Social Science, Data Analysis*

As visual research is growing more popular and widely used, it is important to properly introduce this type of inquiry. *Researching the Visual* by Emmison, Smith, and Mayal (2012) is a thorough introductory text on visual research, its history, uses, and emerging directions. In the last decades, social research has been rapidly changing, requiring researchers to update and revise traditional approaches to data collection and interpretation. It is likely that these changes are more noticeable in visual research due to the new opportunities offered by quickly developing technology of the modern day. *Researching the Visual* not only introduces visual research but also examines traditional and new approaches to gathering and analyzing visual data.

This recent book is the second edition; the first edition was published in 2000. Emmison et al. update their book accounting for the new directions that have emerged in visual inquiry over the last decade, and offer a clearly written, well structured, and easy to follow introduction to researching the visual data. The second edition emphasizes the changing landscape of visual research that has been moving from a marginalized secondary approach to a stand-alone method, gaining popularity in social sciences. The authors emphasize the move from two-dimensional images (e.g., photos, cartoons, advertisements) to three-dimensional type of visual representation (e.g., statues, public spaces, cemeteries) and explain how this move affects visual inquiry. Compared to the earlier edition, this version clearly outlines what the book covers and what it does not aim to include; offers an updated content (both textual and visual); and guides readers to other books and articles on visual research available on the market. Finally, this edition is restructured and offers new chapters on ethics in visual research and on the new directions in visual research such as lived and living forms of visual data.

Structurally, this book is organized in eight chapters, covering major topics pertaining to visual research. Numerous examples of visual data are provided along with the detailed explanation and interpretation. In addition, this edition offers exercises, activities, and projects for students related to the content covered in each chapter. Conveniently marked by visual identifiers, these exercises may be used by the instructors to lead student activities or may serve as a guide for personal exploration of the world of visual research and its numerous directions.

Chapter 1 is brief and offers an introduction to and scope of visual research. While I found introducing visual research by way of an example an effective way, I would appreciate the working definitions of the major concepts covered in this book provided at the end of the chapter. In addition to introducing visual research, this chapter references different types of visual data (e.g., two-dimensional; three-dimensional) and provides a brief overview of the content of the forthcoming chapters, thus serving as an advanced organizer.

Chapter 2 examines ethics in visual research. The chapter starts with discussing ethics in social research and then shifts to examining ethics in visual inquiry. The authors outline general ethical considerations (e.g., integrity, respect), detail common ethical issues (e.g., anonymity, deception, working with vulnerable populations), and discuss ethical concerns pertaining to visual research (e.g., anonymizing visual data; using aggregate data; contextual issues; informed consent; using data from the Internet, etc.). While ethics is important to all types of research; however, privacy and confidentiality issues are more pronounced in visual research and need more careful examination and consideration. Therefore, separating ethical concerns in a separate chapter is an effective way of emphasizing its importance. The authors' choice to place this chapter at the beginning of the book also emphasized its importance.

Chapter 3 outlines the history of visual research, emphasizes the diversity of current directions in visual research, and examines how visual data have been used by different disciplines. Contrary to the commonly shared perception that visual inquiry is a current method, Emmison et al. prove the contrary by laying the historical foundation of this approach. In addition, the authors detail four major approaches to conducting visual inquiry and explain their uses in social research. The approaches are: (a) using researcher-produced visual materials; (b) participant centered approaches to using visual materials; (c) analyzing existing visual materials; and (d) analyzing existing visual materials. The chapter ends with the discussion of how visual research has been used in anthropology, sociology and ethnography. While this is an improvement over the first edition that focused mainly on sociology, to reach broader audiences, the authors may want to include examples of visual research from other disciplines such as education, criminal justice, mass communication, and social psychology.

The remaining chapters detail different forms of visual data—from the simplest two-dimensional data that has been used in research for over a century to the emerging types of visual data retrieved from web cameras and the Internet. Chapter 4 focuses on the two-dimensional visual data. While presenting different types of two-dimensional visual data (e.g., photos, advertisements, cartoons, signs), authors explain how they have been analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively. The main appeal of the chapter is the examples of visual data analysis provided—from the field of cultural studies, the authors offer detailed qualitative analysis of a poster and they also present an ethnomethodological analysis of direction signs (as a type of common-sense interpretation of daily life). These examples would be especially useful to students new to this type of inquiry.

Chapter 5 delves into the three-dimensional data in visual research. The authors emphasize the need to move beyond the simple two-dimensional visual representation and suggest the multitude of new avenues for visual research: examining objects in particular special contexts; studying material culture; analyzing TV as an object of consumption; interpreting photos as part of interior decoration; understanding objects and possessions; and studying museums, statues and memorials, cemeteries, cars, houses, and gardens, as well as wear, tear, and rubbish as objects of visual inquiry. These numerous avenues indicate both the potential of visual research and the complexity of this type of inquiry.

Chapter 6 through 8 continue exploring the new directions for visual research introduced in the previous chapter and focus on different forms of lived, living, and virtual visual data. Chapter 6 presents the study of the locale or the study of the entire setting (e.g.,

institutional setting: schools, offices, hospitals; public spaces: malls, parks, streets) as lived visual data. Focusing on the relationship between people and environments and on decoding places, the authors discuss the issues of visibility and social control and surveillance and design and suggest a need to move to less interpretative, more objectivist visual sociology. Chapter 7 examines the living forms of visual data by exploring how people react to each other. This chapter is more grounded in the theory of sociology and thus, may be less clear to the readers without the background understanding of Goffman's ideas. However, the authors provide a good explanation to the concepts they use to examine anonymous interaction in the city; space and interaction in a setting; public interaction; personal space; and body, clothing and display. The chapter concludes with the discussion on how digital technology transformed how we look at visual data. Chapter 8 discusses virtual visual data. As concluding ideas, the authors examine the changing area of obtaining visual data from the Internet and drawing readers' attention to the related ethical issues of anonymity, impression management, and data representation.

I have discerned major themes permeating the book:

1. Visual inquiry is a complex, rapidly evolving field;
2. Visual research is a powerful dimension of social and cultural research; and,
3. There is a need to expand the boundaries of what is visual data and visual research

From the preface to the last paragraph of final chapter, the authors emphasize that visual inquiry is no longer a secondary approach, but rather, a stand-alone field with its own history, uses, emerging directions, and ethical challenges. Along with positioning visual inquiry as a distinct field, Emmison et al. assert that visual research should be considered a powerful dimension of social and cultural research that has the potential to broaden and enrich other types of social inquiry. Finally, the authors claim that there is a need to expand the boundaries of what is visual data and visual research. While visual research is usually equated with the use of images only, Emmison et al. broaden this view to include spaces, places, and visible material world.

In summary, this book achieves its goal—to introduce the reader to visual inquiry. Written by sociologists, it is best suited for sociologists and sociology students. However, students of other disciplines within social sciences will find this book just as useful and clear. Given the rapidly changing nature of visual research, the book will have to be regularly updated to include new directions and approaches. However, at the moment, *Researching the Visual* is one of the best available introductory texts to visual data analysis and interpretation. Finally, a preview of the book (table of contents and some chapter content) is available at www.amazon.com and on the GoogleBooks website.

Reference

Emmison, M., Smith, P., & Mayall, M. (2012). *Researching the visual* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Author Note

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