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# Using Visual Data in Qualitative Research

(2008) Marcus Banks. Los Angeles, CA: Sage.

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**Background:** N/A

**Intervention:** NA

**Purpose:** Review of *Using visual data in qualitative research*

**Research Design:** N/A

**Setting:** N/A

**Data Collection and Analysis:** N/A

**Findings:** N/A

**Keywords:** *book review; data visualization; qualitative research.*

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*Using Visual Data* is the fifth component of eight in the research kit that SAGE Publications has produced, which encompasses a variety of qualitative methods including topics covering designing qualitative studies, conducting interviews, analyzing qualitative data, and more. This specific text offers insight into visual methods, which takes a unique approach to exploring this niche research tool. As a new researcher to the field of qualitative studies, *Using Visual Data in Qualitative Research* caught my eye as an interesting adventure as I seek to continue to shape my framework and philosophy, as well as facilitate the design of future research studies. I am sure it has and will be so for others. "The aim of this book has been to set researchers on a journey into what is, I hope, a new and exciting terrain, during which they may learn as much about themselves as they do about the research subjects" (p. 121).

The intended audience for this book is predominately new and aspiring qualitative researchers at the graduate level as well as current qualitative researchers looking to expand their practice. Since "images are ubiquitous in society," the "study of images or one that incorporates images in the creation or collection of data might be able to reveal some sociological insight that is not accessible by any other means" (pp. 3-4). In other words, conveying the findings qualitative research in the social sciences may be lacking certain insight if the author fails to include visual data representations. Therefore, both novice and experienced researchers alike who want to further expand their methods of collecting and analyzing data would be interested in this user-friendly text; it presents a nice overview of the history of visual data, what these methods can look like, and how such data can be used. "The focus of this book is on historical, theoretical and practical approaches to using visual data in qualitative research" (p. xv).

Organized into six chapters, the author presents an introduction to visual data, then dives into the background and history of this type of method, followed by approaches to visual data, sample methods of collection, and then presentation of such data. The concluding chapter of the book contains a summary, which brings the topics full circle to lessons learned throughout the text. Each chapter builds on the prior, and creates a framework for researchers to experiment with on their own. Each chapter also starts with a unique case study to help lay a foundation and build a practical understanding of these method, and finishes with key points from that section. Grounded in the phenomenology of Schutz and Merleau-Ponty, the author claims that in being

able to "see" in the way others do, researchers are able to draw conclusions. Banks contends that using visual data has the potential to do just that. (p. 117).

Of the total six chapters, the first two chapters serve as the introduction and history of visual data, with Chapter 1 setting the tone for the text. "Visual research should be seen as only one methodological technique among many to be employed by social researchers, more appropriate in some contexts, less so in others" (p. 4). Within this technique, the author discusses the two main strands, which include the creation of images by social researchers for documentation and analysis, as well as the second strand, which includes the collection of images produced or consumed by the subjects of the research (pp. 6-7). Banks also presents a newer strand which includes the co-creation of images through collaboration of the researcher and the subjects of study. The author includes a brief overview of key terms and concepts at the end of Chapter 1 which covers terms such as "agency," "data," "documentary," "figure/ground," "frame," "narrative," and more. The author then presents the organization of the book, briefly summarizing Chapters 2 through 5 as well as an overview of the conclusion.

Each chapter lays out the objectives that the author covers in that section. Chapter 2 explores historical and foundational references in anthropology and sociology, which were noted to have emerged alongside the development of photomechanical image production. Additionally, Banks noted that images are never neutral, but rather construct meaning. It is in this concept that the social science research component comes into play. Within this chapter, the author presents positivist and interpretivist approaches which are sometimes used with this type of social science research. The author presents his argument on this topic as well. He states, "participants and social researchers alike interpreted social action according to a broader set of contexts and meanings...as a story that society tells itself about itself" (p. 22). Therefore, society constructs the meaning, which the researcher interprets.

Chapter 3 and 4 discuss the approaches to studying the visuals and the methods of study. Banks starts off with presentations of theory, which he stresses impacts the researcher's understanding through epistemological reflection and empirical research. With that being said, the findings are therefore either ontologically distinct, or ontologically constituted, which is based on the theory of the researcher. Topics in these sections include the importance of images being viewed in context, presentation of issues of power, and

various forms of content analysis based on the type of media. Additionally, the author emphasized the idea of visuals being in their material form. Shifting gears into the methods, fieldwork can include methods such as photo-elicitation, film elicitation, and collaborative projects, making movies, and making pictures. A discussion regarding the ethical issues and other questions raised in relation to these strategies offers context and a bit of a counter-narrative, as well as points to consider, such as copyrights and permissions.

In Chapter 5, the author mentions the importance of being aware of the audience when presenting visual research, as well as being cognizant of the academic context. Banks elaborates on this, with different modes of presentation as well as the method of organizing this data. Since visual data can present itself in a wide variety of forms, and not always possible to directly infuse in a research paper, the author states that, “the most important issue to think through is the relationship between images and text,” (p. 97) and therefore there is some degree of researcher preference based on the objective and form of media. Once again, Banks presents issues of ethics in this chapter, as visuals are shared with both audience members and research subjects, due to the sensitivity of social research. The last major point the author covered in this chapter was the construction of digital multimedia presentations and the necessity for proof-reading such content.

The final chapter offers a summary with key takeaways and an overview of topics discussed. It recaps major themes such as interpretive analytical strategies, collaborative approaches, and reflexivity. A major question that drives this work is, “can visual methodologies yield any new insights beyond those that could be uncovered by other methodological practices?” (p. 116). This question can lead researchers to reflect when considering the inclusion of visual data in their studies. The author also includes topics of robustness and distinctiveness here.

This highly accessible book serves as a great resource for scholars looking to expand their research with visual data supplements in the qualitative realm. The author has done a fantastic job of introducing visual data research to the reader. The book is well-organized and builds on itself, as the reader is able to develop a solid foundation of where visual data is rooted, how it can be used, why it is important to use, and lastly how to present such data. Overall, this text is a useful resource and tool for scholars interested in infusing visual data in their qualitative social research. Having clear chapter objectives, summative key takeaways, and multiple infused

case studies, the author does a great job at presenting a wide variety visual data methods and points to consider. With a targeted audience of new qualitative researchers, this book does a great job at being informative and thorough while still being an easy and quick read.