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Reading visual images

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Visual Images in Social Sciences

How do social scientists use visual images?

What does a picture or image tell you? This course is an introduction to analysing and interpreting photographs as social data. Who controls what the image is saying? You will look at how photographs provide visual evidence and how they can illustrate and support our ideas about society.

This OpenLearn course provides a sample of Level 1 study in Sociology.

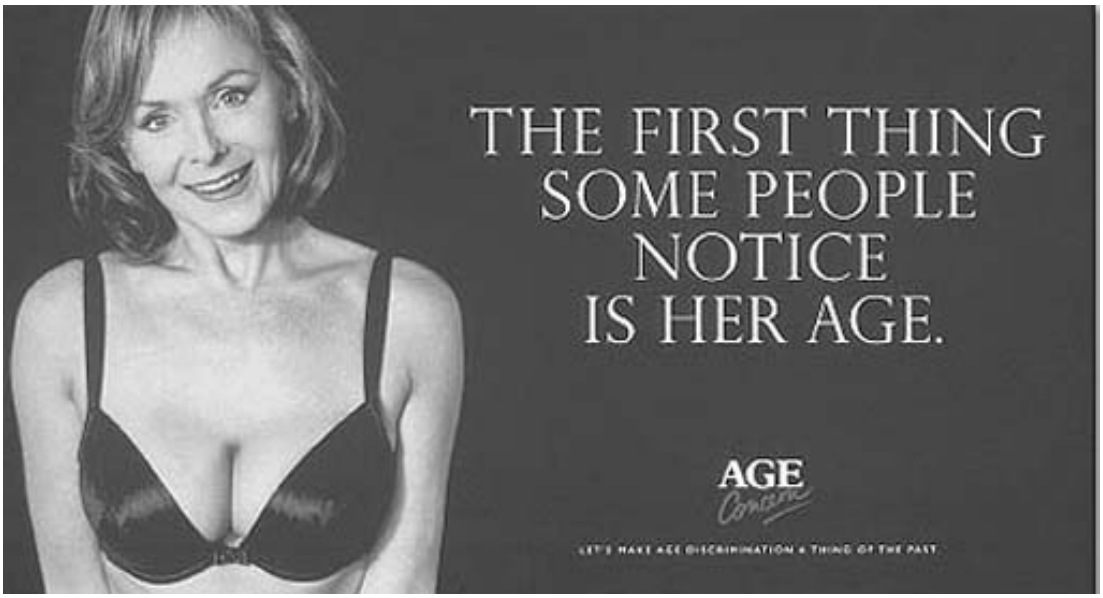
Learning Outcomes

After reading this course, you should be able to:

- recognise how images can be analysed and interpreted
- comprehend how images can be used to express uncertainties
- give examples of images that show change and social and cultural diversity.

1 Images and history

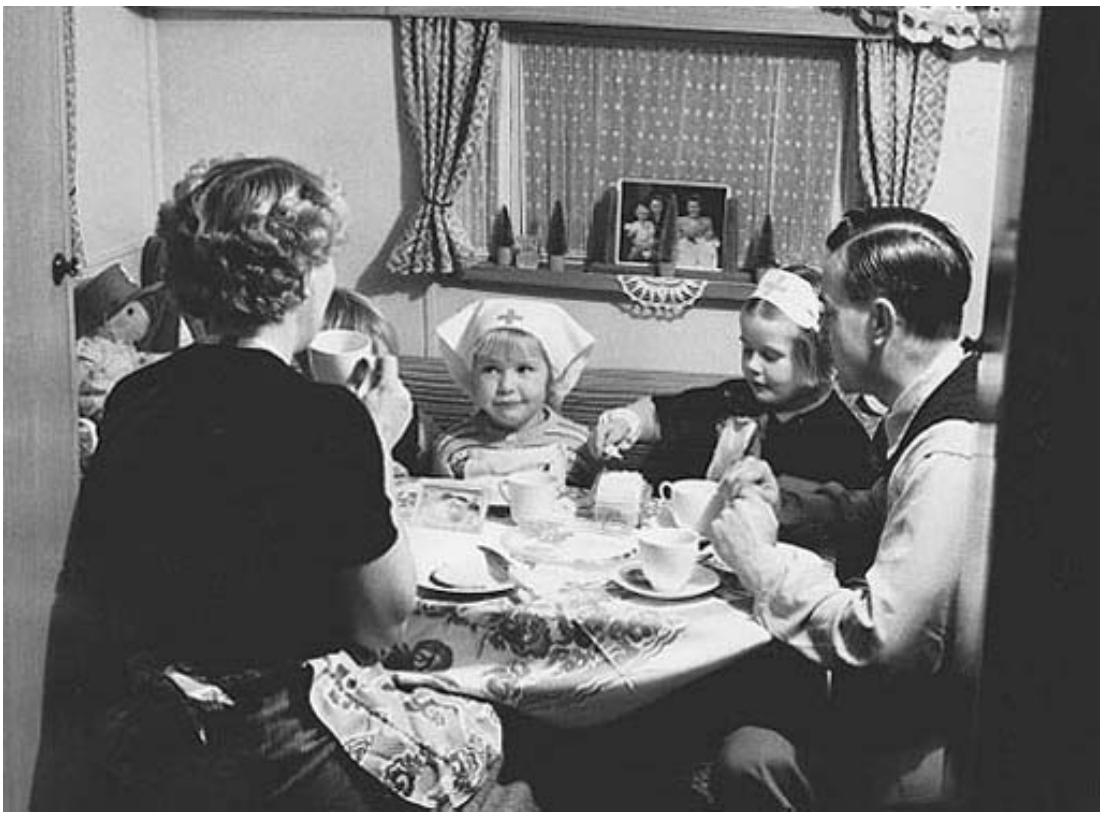
1.1 Why look at photographs?



Age Concern poster: age and identity

The Cenotaph: nation and identity

Images of the family



Happy families in the 1950s

This course is an introduction to analysing and interpreting photographs as social data. Most of us look at photographs almost every day of our lives: in the media, on billboards, perhaps in a gallery, even at work. Often we afford them only a passing glance. Most of us also make them ourselves: pictures of our family, loved ones, friends, events, interests. Few of us, however, look closely and carefully at photographs as visual evidence, yet they often illustrate and support our ideas about society. It follows, then, that in order to be effective as social scientists, we need to examine how images can be analysed and interpreted.

This course is about the methods we can use to study photographs as if we were studying numerical data, interview records, a journal article in an academic journal, or a textbook such as those we find as part of Open University courses.

What is the status of photographs as evidence? Is there any real difference between news and advertising pictures, for instance? How, as social scientists, should we approach the 'reading' or analysis of documentary photographs? Can we use photographs to inform us about key dimensions of modern society such as gender, ethnicity, class and nationality? In each case we must relate our answers to these questions directly to our wider course themes: to *uncertainty and diversity*; to *structure and agency*; and to *knowledge and knowing*.

Visual images are examples of evidence that forms part of the circuit of knowledge and supports the claims made by social scientists. Such evidence is part of the whole social science endeavour to provide explanatory theories and to produce knowledge as well as to deconstruct how knowledge is produced. This links to the course theme of *structure and agency* and raises questions about who produces the images that can be used as evidence. Who has control? Is it the photographer, the viewer or those who may be represented in pictures, or can wider structural forces, such as culture, social expectations or governments and corporations, determine what is produced? Images can

be used to express uncertainties and as examples of change and of social and cultural diversity.

1.2 The immediacy of the still photograph

Let's begin with an example that links an historical event to a photograph. Take a moment to think about the pictures you keep in your 'mind's eye'. Now think about the Vietnam War for a few seconds. Try to recall what images you associate with that period. It may be that you are too young to recall anything about the time; you may remember it all too vividly. It really does not matter too much for this exercise. Just see what images come into your mind when you think about that time in recent history.

Figure 1: Huynh Cong (Nick) Ut, 1972: 'Phan Thi Kim Phuc, centre, her burning clothes torn off, flees with other children after US planes mistakenly dropped napalm on South Vietnamese troops and civilians'

It could be that one particular image jumps into your mind. We think there's a good chance that it may be a 1972 photograph by a Vietnamese photographer, Huynh Cong (Nick) Ut. This picture (Figure 1) shows a young South Vietnamese girl, Phan Thi Kim Phuc, crying and running naked down a road, with other children, her clothes burnt from her body by napalm dropped by US planes.

This 'jumping into the mind' aspect of photographs is noticed by most people. The media often refer to 'iconic' images, by which they mean well-known photographs that are immediately recognised, as 'icons' of a particular time, place, person, or idea. Advertising frequently employs or seeks to create iconic images where it can. Propaganda works in a similar way. A single strong image can catch our attention and remain in our memory for a long time.

This all suggests that there is an immediacy about single images – as opposed to passages of film or TV – that helps them stick in the mind. This is undoubtedly part of the psychological processes of perception and cognition. In the psychological sub-field known as 'perception', the study of how we comprehend images is given much attention. A whole field of psychology has been developed to understand and explain the ways in which our minds attempt to construct meaningful images from the perceptual disorder that surrounds us.

1.3 Nick Ut's 1972 Vietnam war photograph

Figure 1: Huynh Cong (Nick) Ut, 1972: 'Phan Thi Kim Phuc, centre, her burning clothes torn off, flees with other children after US planes mistakenly dropped napalm on South Vietnamese troops and civilians'

The fact that still images can seem to express or crystallise important ideas about society and history is, in itself, of importance to us as social scientists, for we are concerned with the processes by which such meanings are socially constructed and distributed or circulated.

The huge increase in the scale and quantity of images transmitted or circulated via the mass-media over the last 75 years has made us all aware of iconic images; pictures which seem to possess the ability to sum up or symbolise important events, processes, or feelings. Such images provide important points of reference for us, anchoring our sense of identity in relation to ways of picturing ourselves. If the rather shocking image of Phan Thi Kim Phuc has become – as many would see it – 'a symbol of the civilian suffering in the Vietnam war' (Arnett et al., 1998, pp. 96–7), does this mean that a photograph can somehow offer a deeper truth about society and history? And is it a different sort of truth from that disclosed by other social science data?

Activity 1

Now look closely again at Nick Ut's photograph and try to jot down what information you think it provides about the time, place, events, and people it depicts.

- How much of this information is to be found in the photograph?
- If it is not in the photograph, where does such information come from?
- How do we know the date of the photograph?
- How do we know the identity of the individuals in the photograph?

As this example will have made clear, the information actually contained within the frame of the picture cannot answer very many of these questions. We need to find out other facts about why, when and how the picture was made in order to 'know' what it means as a piece of social evidence. So let us go back to Nick Ut's picture of Phan Thi Kim Phuc and try to think about why it is so memorable. One obvious reason will be immediately apparent, and it does not have to do with anything 'in' the picture. It is due to the context of presentation.

1.4 The context of photographs

When this picture first appeared in newspapers and magazines in 1972, it was to be found next to a caption and in many cases a supporting article as well. The caption text might have been simply descriptive (in most cases, probably taken from the agency caption supplied with the photograph). Where there was also an article, this would have been a text that placed the image in context, either in terms of the specific event of which the photograph is a direct record, or in terms of a wider account of what was happening in the Vietnamese War. The point is that the picture formed part of an ongoing narrative of images and text about the Vietnam conflict. By 1972 this had reached a point where public opinion throughout the world took the view that this was not a just or honourable war. Its prosecution by the USA and its client regime in South Vietnam was seen widely as oppressing the civilian population of the country.

These meanings, and the information they supply to us, are transmitted from both the image and the context of its use, and are made up from the relationship between both parts of this equation. We cannot read or interpret the entirety of the meaning of the picture from the image itself. It serves as a base from which a meaning or interpretation can be constructed: it is evidence that something happened, but what conclusions we can draw from that event involve us in activities other than simply looking at the picture.

1.4.1 Summary

- To read an image we need to know its context.
- The image provides a base but we need more information in order to interpret it.

2 Social science approaches to the documentary

photograph

2.1 Photographs as documentary evidence

As the discussion of context makes clear, we can begin to ask many questions about the role that images may play in the social sciences. Photographs are documents and like other documentary records they are a physical trace of an actual event. However, as with all documentary evidence, their meaning is not fixed. Other examples of documents used by the social sciences can demonstrate this point.

Documentary evidence can come from official records such as a marriage certificate, a census return, or a medical certificate. Such records may be 'aggregated' (added together) to offer statistical evidence about social facts. Such statistical evidence might take the following form: 63 per cent of weddings in 1999 were between partners who had not been previously married; 12.5 million people lived in London in 1991; the largest single cause of death in the UK is heart disease.

As with all statistics of this nature we can ask pertinent questions about how the recording process reduces a more complex reality to simple, statistically relevant boxes on an official form. We have the raw evidence, but what does it mean? Of those who were married in 1999 how many had been married before but did not declare that fact? How many had been cohabiting in a stable long-term relationship with their partner before marriage (and are such relationships an 'unofficial' form of marriage?).

If we compared the 1999 statistic with its equivalent from 1899, would we be comparing like with like? Has, for instance, the nature of marriage and the form of social relationship it connotes, changed so much over the intervening century that the comparison of these statistics is less helpful than it seems? What about the fact that there were more marriages in 1899 than 1999, despite the population of the UK being roughly 20 million less?

Presumably in 1899 men and women thought marriage was an important social institution. If they wanted to cohabit did they believe that a marriage ceremony was the essential precondition to such a relationship? We might have to turn to other forms of evidence to give us some insight into this question, comparing, for instance, what people in 1899 and 1999 thought about the relationship of marriage. Perhaps in the case of 1899 we might get such evidence from personal letters or the accounts of social observers of that period who were interested by such questions: both constitute unofficial but clearly relevant forms of documentary evidence.

As this example shows, asking pertinent questions about documents and evidence indicates just how complex the issues around knowledge and knowing in the social sciences can be. Typically, we construct theories that attempt to provide a meaningful account of why social behaviour changes over time. By their very nature, theories are reductions of complex reality to a set of propositions or claims. We use methods for comparing and evaluating evidence that has been defined in terms of these claims.

2.2 Theories, documents and knowledge

Documentary evidence is often messy and inconsistent, and even where it seems to be 'factual' (for example in the form of official records) its precise meaning in terms of wider social processes is far from clear. There is *uncertainty* about what it means, as well as the representation of uncertainty and diversity in the images. In every case, the meaning of

the evidence is dependent on *interpretation*, that is, the part of the theory we employ to understand what is going on. However, theories cannot simply be plausible accounts of the meaning of data, they must also be capable of being tested via the evidence. As social scientists we are not interested in just describing the evidence, but in using it to understand *why things happen as they do*. Theories are essentially **arguments** about the connectedness of the social phenomena that they describe. A social theory attempts to argue that there are mechanisms of society which give a distinctive patterning or 'structure' to social behaviour.

At the same time any proper social theory must get to grips with the fact that, as social beings, our purposes and intentions play a part in the behaviour we exhibit. Our active role as agents must also be taken into account. This is where questions about *structure and agency* enter into the discussion. Can we shed some light on the dynamic interplay of *structure and agency* by using images as part of the research process?

As individuals and as social scientists, we are often confronted with information that is presented to us in the form of images in newspapers, magazines, books, posters, etc. In some cases we may confront the same image in two apparently quite different places: the front page of a newspaper, for instance, and the walls of an art gallery. It is worth asking whether the context of presentation changes the nature of the evidence or information supplied by the image.

2.3 Realist and conventionalist approaches

In most modern, urban, industrial societies, still images surround people for much of their daily lives: at home, at work, during leisure, while travelling. Does the evidence they offer differ fundamentally from that which comes from facts and figures printed on a page? It may be presented differently but we *can* derive socially relevant information as readily from a photograph as we can from written or numerical data. In some ways, it can be argued that the information that we can acquire from photographs may indeed be less abstract or *arbitrary* than that available from words and numbers.

This approach would argue that pictures are not the same as written facts and figures, which are quite clearly abstractions. If we compare the word 'cow' with a photograph of the same animal, it is clear that they differ markedly. The word has no direct relationship with the animal. It is, in effect, a sign in a code whose sound and appearance we take to signify or 'mean' the animal. However, 'cow' is '*vache*' in French, so a different system of coding must be in operation when a different language is employed. However often we might insist on calling a '*vache*' a 'cow' when in France, it will always remain a '*vache*' for '*les Français*'. Although we may represent five cows by the number 5, it remains true that if we say or write that there are 'five cows' a French person will not recognise this as the same as '*cinq vaches*'.

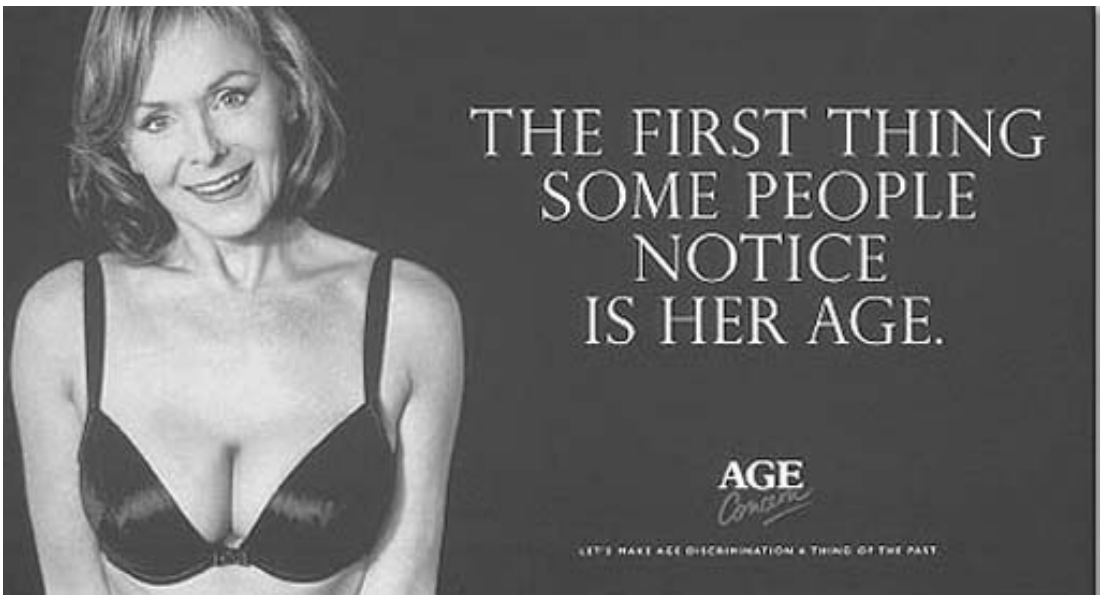
Think again about a photograph of a cow. If we show it to the French person, they will recognise it immediately as '*une vache*'. An English person will recognise it immediately as a cow. A picture of five cows means the same thing in both languages. Now, does all this mean that a photograph is a different sort of mental thing from a word or figure? Or does it mean that pictures are like words and figures but that they operate in terms of a different language, one that may be more likely to be understood by people in many different cultures? (We should point out, however, that some anthropologists claim to have found non-western cultures where people appear not to recognise photographs as pictorial representations of real objects; see Barley, 1983.)

The idea that picture knowledge could be universal relates to what is known in philosophy as the 'realist' approach. *Realism* is the idea that a photograph of an object or a person bears a close relationship to that object or person. There is a link between the object or person photographed, and the photograph. The photograph, in other words, is a trace of something real. Because it was necessary for the object or person to be present at the moment of photographic recording, we can also say that there is a link between the photograph and the events, objects, people, etc., it depicts. However, photographers select images and have some control over how these are depicted.

Let us think of an example. A police speed-camera, for instance, records an event which we all (often rather ruefully) have to accept as realistic, truthful, or in other words evidential. However, notice that the apparent realism of photography also makes it open to fraud and deception. It is possible to manipulate an image so that its 'photographic truth' is subverted. During the Soviet era of Communist Russia (1917–1989), discredited leaders were regularly and most convincingly airbrushed out of the historical record, much in the same way that modern computer technology can merge images or change elements of the picture so that a wholly untruthful set of events is depicted. When Prince Edward married Sophie Rhys-Jones in 1999, the Royal Family decided that they did not like how Prince William appeared in one of the wedding photographs; so his head was digitally copied from one photograph and placed in the chosen image. Although the technology for doing this is very recent, the idea that photographs can be forged is very old. Digital photography has not invented image-manipulation or made deception any easier, it has merely changed the technology.

Running counter to the realist model, we can find another important strand of thought in the social and cultural sciences. This says that photographs are better considered as elements of a visual, symbolic language, which might have similar rules to a written and spoken one. We call this the *conventionalist* model, because it argues that images are best understood as assemblages of conventions about visual symbols that are socially constructed.

In this conventionalist view, pictures are assemblages of conventions, sets of symbols or visual devices that can be constructed so as to give a particular effect, to create a certain meaning. In order to understand the picture those looking at it have to understand the conventions. Think about the 'Age Concern' image seen previously at the beginning of this course. The point would be lost if we did not understand the conventions of advertising. The object of analysis is not, then, mostly what the photograph tells us about the situation of which it is a trace, but the values and norms that it presents.



Age Concern poster: age and identity

It is clear that there are important social conventions that underpin what photographs look like. Whether rectangular, square or even circular, photographs mostly utilise a visual convention established in the European Renaissance, that of the easel picture. The edges of the picture delimit what can be seen. Our own 'binocular' vision operates in quite different ways, it rarely stays focused on one view for a long period and jumps around as we move our eyes, our heads and our bodies. Compositional devices – perspective, dark foregrounds and light backgrounds, strong diagonal forms, etc. – may focus our attention on one particular aspect of a picture. When we look at a photograph, we are looking at something that has been created using the visual language of pictures.

It would make sense to say that both realist and conventionalist approaches are helpful to us as social scientists. The first places emphasis on the information which the photograph can deliver about social practices and processes, the second offers insight into the social values and practices that underpin the making of pictures. In both cases, this may include information about the aesthetic as well as the political purposes of the photographer. All photographs (and all pieces of writing) have an aesthetic dimension since attention was paid to how effective they were as a means of communication when they were constructed. A realist approach does not imply that the artistic form of the image is ignored, similarly the conventionalist approach would not ignore the documentary information contained in a photograph.

2.4 Looking closely at photographs for social data

Activity 2

Look at the photographs of a wedding group in Figures 2 and 3. They were taken at intervals of about 100 years. Let us focus on the concept of identity.

To what extent can the photographs supply us with information about the dimensions of identity (whether of gender, class, nationality, or ethnicity) in the 1890s and the 1990s?

Try to look at both photographs in two ways, first, in terms of the information they provide about the people and events being depicted, and second, in terms of any

evidence you can find which informs you about the visual conventions being employed in the making of the picture.

Figure 2 Wedding photograph taken in 1900.

Figure 3: Wedding group in 1997.

Wedding photographs, like the data concerning marriage we discussed previously, are documents that can offer us information about how the institutions of marriage and the family are socially constructed, and about identity. We've deliberately chosen two quite different types of photograph: one is formal and direct, the other is informal and indirect.

In the case of the 1900 picture, what can we see? First, that it has been made in a room, probably in the dwelling where the wedding breakfast (the reception) was held. However, we cannot know such information from the image itself. We can, though, observe the manner in which the participants have been arranged, in three rows, facing directly towards the camera. In the front row, centred in the arrangement are the bride and groom. They are surrounded by what we can assume (but in fact can only

know from other documentary evidence) are family members from both of the families being united by marriage. Distance from the bridal couple indicates a weakening relationship to them, or a lower social status. For instance, notice how the children are dispersed to the edges of the group. Also, what about the women? It is the men who anchor the composition, and are centred in the frame. The gendered identity of the participants is established by their positioning within the composition.

Now look at the arrangement of the group: there must be some hidden apparatus in place so that each line of people is able to present their face and upper torso to the camera. Yet this apparatus is not merely a pictorial device, for it also structures the group, and places it in a hierarchy. The front row is the most important, followed by the second and then the third: each row denotes a degree of separation from the centre of gravity of this grouping.

We could also note that this tells us something about the nature of the society in which such pictures were made. We can do so because we can observe from other examples of the time that this is a perfectly banal and ordinary depiction of a marriage, which was replicated countless thousands (if not millions) of times in this era. The very 'commonplace' nature of the image suggests that we are looking at a social fact of some significance. The organisation of the picture, made by a professional who specialised in weddings and portraits, reflected a widespread social demand for such images, which were designed to be kept as mementos. We might argue that their making helped secure the new identities that are depicted, and that the picture itself has a dual social function. It not only records the event ('this marriage really happened') in a way that the marriage certificate could not, but is also part of the rite of passage between one social status and another for the participants in the event. In this sense the photograph represents a ritual moment in the lives of individuals. The photograph records an important event, plucked from the flux of time because of its significance to the parties involved. It follows that what is photographed is worthy of such recording: the act of photography is a process by which such rituals are furnished with social significance.

The organisation and arrangement of the participants, then, also tells us something about their status and their identities in relation to each other. The couple are surrounded by members of the two families. Their central and frontal positioning indicates their inclusion within a wider social group. By marrying, their social identities have shifted, they now have to be considered as Mr and Mrs Smith, whereas they were once Mr Smith and Miss Brown. The identity shift is, however, more significant for Miss Brown as she now has a new name. So the picture immortalises a union (a social contract) between individuals and families, at the same time as it records a social process, the reformulation of identity. It places the couple within a social structure, and, by the same token, records their agency, their willingness to be united in such a way, to accept the redefinition of their identities that follows.

The 1990s wedding photograph

Figure 3: Wedding group in 1997.

Now let us look at the 1990s image. This too depicts a wedding. What makes it different from that of 1900? Some aspects of the two pictures are really quite similar, for instance, the centrality of the couple and the arrangement of the participants in rows or planes with the all-too-obvious gendering of the group (although this is rather different in that the men are mostly kneeling in the front row, the women mainly standing behind but in the same row as the couple). The group is more informal, and there is less evident standardisation of dress codes (and fewer moustaches). Masculinity is marked by crouching on the ground rather than sporting a moustache in the 1990s, yet people are still parading their 'best' clothes. They are attired for a celebration. Some of the informality of the picture is a compositional effect, a result of where the photographer is standing. This is not a professional wedding group picture, although it is drawing on the arrangement of the participants made by the professional who was there to produce the official record.

What the picture depicts (and it is, as you have probably guessed, two photographs taken about a second or so apart which have been joined together) is the process of making a document. The 'father of the bride' is making his own record of the event. It will be frontal, composed, organised and balanced. Its depictive power will be at least partly rooted in the official sanctioning of the event provided by the professional photographer's images, which the father's snapshot will reproduce but perhaps with ironic, or even shambolic overtones. It will reinforce the sense that the event itself has been furnished with social significance. The change in identity that the couple has undergone (or is in process of transacting) has been sanctified by the making of a photograph. The event can now enter history.

Thus, despite some obvious differences in terms of perspective, composition, location, clothing, etc., the two pictures are almost equally illustrative of a social process in course of enactment and sanctioning. All of the things we have deduced about the social functions of the 1900 image remain present (though subtly modified) in that of 1997. If we were to bring in additional information as we did for 1900, we might also suggest that, for example, in 1997 Miss Brown kept her original second name.

We have left some important questions about these two photographs unanswered. They concern nationality and ethnicity. Did you guess that one was made in England, the other somewhere else (in France, as it happens). It is hard to interpret much about nationality from the images, but ethnicity may offer a more fruitful field.

Until now we have been primarily concerned with how we can scan the image and any other facts we may know about it to accumulate social science data. However, another

way of understanding such images, considered as part of a visual language, would be to say that they are involved in a wider set of understandings or discourses which serve to locate individual identities within a particular framework of meaning. In that sense the photographs and their symbolic content may be understood as social constructions, images which only make sense because their meaning has already been established by rules and conventions that are socially recognised.

As these two approaches to photography may indicate, the analysis or reading of images is both highly relevant to the social sciences and subject to different interpretations. Like all evidence used in the social sciences, the social processes of image construction must be considered when we look at photographs as documents. Photographs are depictions of what happens, but are produced through a series of operations that must be understood in terms of their social organisation. Only by understanding these operations – their social, economic, political and psychological organisation – can we properly evaluate the depiction.

2.4.1 Summary

- Photographs can provide documentary evidence like other sources.
- Such evidence supports claims and theories in social science.
- Realist approaches suggest the images bear a strong resemblance to what is depicted.
- Conventionalist approaches see pictures as sets of symbols.

3 Photographs and social science concepts

3.1 Photographic content and context

Can we analyse photographs to tell us something valid about gender, ethnicity, class and nationality? As the wedding pictures example begins to suggest, there are traces of social facts embedded in the images, as well as evidence of the social conventions and organisational practices that underpin their production and diffusion or circulation. What will be clear is that there is no simple interpretational tool or reading skill available to us that allows us to reduce the picture to a simple fact or number. However, we can approach the pictures in a disciplined and organised way. We can look at the information that the image itself supplies. We can also look at the context in which the image was made, and the context in which it is seen. This allows us to view such images as complex assemblages of information that we need to interpret.

We can look into the image to explore its informational *content*, that is, what is in the picture in front of us? We can also concern ourselves with *context*, with the social processes and operations that produce the image, and to the mechanisms of diffusion and circulation surrounding its consumption. It is impossible to understand a photograph as social data without performing both stages of the analysis, and it will become obvious that the two go hand in hand.

3.2 Looking at the family

Activity 3

Look at the photographs in Figures 4 and 5. They depict families in different settings. How would we apply a *content*/*context* analysis to them? Make notes on the pictures, particularly with respect to how they deal with questions of identity.

- What information does the image supply?
- What can we interpret from the photographs about the nature of the relationships between the people depicted?
- What are the sources of contextual information that we can bring to bear on the interpretation of the photograph?

Figure 4: 'The Bradleys'

Figure 5 James Ravilious, 1985: 'The French family watch the Cup Final, Holworthy, Devon'

'The Bradleys' seem at first sight to be a relatively ordinary middle-class family. If we saw this picture in the editorial pages of a magazine, we might expect it to be part of a lifestyle feature about a real family and their pursuits. However, as the picture is an advertisement, we would suspect at once that none of the people shown here has any relationship with the others. The information seemingly supplied by the image is contradicted by its context. Or is it? Can we really be sure that this is a collection of 'models' rather than a group of related people, a family in the accepted sense? Let's consider what we can derive from a content analysis:

1. *The composition of the image*. Father sits on a garden chair in the middle distance, next to the trunk of a solid and imposing tree, mother sits on a rug on the grass in the foreground with her two daughters close by her – one snuggles up to the maternal bosom. A boy hangs out of the upper frame of the picture, upside-down in the air (from the branch of a tree?), nearer to the camera. In the background we discern part of a substantial 1930s house, and some tea chests.
2. *The implied social order*. Apart from the disrupting presence of the boy, there is symmetry and order in the disposition of the family: the distance and higher placement of the father might imply his role as breadwinner, the mother and her daughters seem to be presented in nurturing/nurtured roles. Mother has garden tools near her (but nothing too heavy!) while father has a broadsheet newspaper in his lap (is he a professional/managerial type?). The boy is doing 'boyish' things. Wherever we look in the picture there are cues to the social status of the people depicted, and to the gendered structure of the family. You probably do not need us to track down all the stereotypes about identity, but we could add that the nationality/ethnicity cues about the Britishness of the people involved seem to be emphasising their white, middle-class, 'middle-England' position.

In the case of 'The Bradleys', we as observers are expected to perform a simplistic form of content analysis by virtue of the fact that this is an advertisement. The picture

has been designed to create a positive feeling towards the Bradleys. They project aspirational values that the advertiser assumes are congenial to those who read the magazines where the advertisement will be placed. The expectation is that, as viewers, we (or some of us, at least) will identify with the Bradleys, see in them a family that we would like to be part of, and thus be attentive to the message contained in the advert.

If we apply a context analysis to the photograph, we'll begin to flesh out the context of presentation and circulation. However, it will soon be clear that there really is not much to discover. After all, it is only an advertisement and by that very fact we know that the image makes no claims to be socially relevant data. We all know that advertisements are there to persuade us, to offer ideal images that can seduce us to consume a product (or even just recognise a logo!). A context analysis of advertising images would examine those processes within the media themselves that led to the appearance and regular publication of these photographs. It would also examine the creation and definition of a system for making such images on a regular basis, and its wider relationships with the advertising and marketing businesses. It would be concerned with the processes that established the visual conventions of advertising photography. The production of such images presupposes a network of models, agents, and photographers, all specialising in such work. Its economy and organisation are therefore important issues.

Now look at ‘The French family watch the Cup Final’ (‘French’ is the family surname), a picture made in 1985 by James Ravilious as part of a major and long-term documentary project on the people and landscape of North Devon (Hamilton, 1998). This too offers an image of a family. A content analysis of the photograph reveals some information about this family's rural lifestyle. What can it contribute to our interest in identity? You might have noted that the two adults take quite dominant positions in the picture. This is a result of the photographer taking his picture from a position at the side of the television. (Of course we cannot see the television, and indeed we only know that it exists via the information supplied by the photographer.) The young people in the picture are arranged in a mainly subordinate position to the adults, who form a protective barrier between us as viewers, and them, as subjects. All are dressed informally, the adults in what are probably work-clothes: and without knowing that they are farmers, we could easily guess at their way of life. It is hardly aspirational in the sense of ‘The Bradleys’.

The social data available in this photograph will only be supplemented by a context analysis, which would bring in information about its place in the wider project of which it forms a part. Once considered alongside many other pictures of similar people, and supplemented by other information about their way of life, it would contribute some data to a wider sociological understanding of the structure of North Devon's rural society. At the same time it would provide an appreciation of the agency of the people involved. We would also need to know something about the work of the photographer, why and how he made such images. Space precludes further exploration here, but it is relevant that Ravilious was interested in photographing as much as possible the ordinary nature of the people and places that formed his subjects, and in the ways in which that expressed an ethnic ‘Englishness’, typical of this area of North Devon.

Looking at the family: the 1950s

Activity 4

Family photographs may be taken as records, for advertising purposes, or indeed as mementos. Now look at an example drawn from the 1950s (Figure 6). How would you analyse this image? Think about what it tells us of the dimensions of identity, particularly in respect of how such an image might have been used.

Figure 6 Family portrait

This is a picture taken in England around 1955–56 by a professional photographer but for the private use of the people depicted. It shows a family: a woman, a man, and their child, and the family dog, at home. Let us think about the uses to which such an image might have been put. The context of use is important, for it tells us about the social functions such an image performs (Hirsch, 1981).

In this case, the photograph was framed and placed on a sideboard. This tells us two things: first, that it was considered a pleasing likeness of the people depicted: second, that the picture was also an effective depiction of the social group that they constituted: a nuclear family. Notice that the picture was made in the hearth of the room (the 'centre' of the house, of the domestic sphere). See that the father is standing over the mother, the child and the dog, and the picture has been made from a level on a par with the child and woman, but lower than the eye-level of the man. We look up at him, a composition often used to emphasise the heroic or powerful nature of a person. Also notice how the woman and child are closer to the hearth, and that the man is positioned less closely to them. A degree of separation, in status, in gendered identity, could be inferred from this, as well as the separation between the domestic and private sphere inhabited by the woman and child (and dog), and the external sphere which is the man's domain. Notice also the dress of the people depicted and the furnishings on display. These are indicators of class and status, as well as of ethnicity and, by implication, national identity.

We can be fairly sure that, whatever else it is as a picture, this photograph could also be said to be a reaffirmation of the social group that the family represents. Family photography, as one sociologist has pointed out, is an index of social integration (Bourdieu, 1990). However, as we remarked earlier, the act of photography also confers historical importance on the event depicted, more particularly where this has occurred in a formal context such as here, where a professional photographer has been called in to make the group portrait. Thus the picture fixes identity in a socially important manner.

3.2.1 Summary

- A content analysis looks at what is shown in the picture itself.
- A context analysis focuses on the processes involved in the creation of the picture.
- Social scientists need to employ both approaches.

4 Photography and truth

4.1 Are photographs truthful?

In this course, we've looked at several examples of the social processes of identity construction and a number of dimensions of identity. Our discussion has indicated that we cannot try to understand the role of images through one approach alone, but need to utilise both *content* and *context* analyses. It makes sense to ask whether the same sort of approaches can be applied to other types of image. How should we analyse 'factual' images which deal with social issues such as those produced by photojournalists for newspapers and magazines?

One problem that we must deal with at the outset concerns the ‘truth-claim’ of the photograph. We often hear people say ‘the camera never lies’. Another saying suggests that ‘one picture is worth a thousand words’. This suggests that photographs and words offer very different sorts of evidence about the world. Think back to the differences between words and pictures referred to previously when considering ‘realist and conventionalist approaches’ to photographs. It seems obvious that the photograph of the cow tells us far more about that animal than the word can. Because photographs are created by light which comes from the subject and is transmitted through a lens to form an image on film (or on a video chip), they have a direct causal relationship with the event or scene they depict. Not all forms of data that we can use in the social sciences are so directly connected with what they describe or explain: photographs are an ‘evidential trace’ of the reality they depict, as is a tape-recording of a conversation. However, most other forms of evidence/data do not have quite this link back to the events they document. They are records in a different sense – questionnaire items, written notes, entries in an accounting system, etc. – which are already interpretations of the events they purport to record.

4.2 Nation and identity

Yet even if photographs are an ‘evidential trace’ of the reality they depict, they are far from perfect in this respect. Because a photograph could always have been made differently it cannot be ‘the whole truth’ about something (Becker, 1985, p. 101). If we think about photographs designed to inform (i.e. rather than art photographs in which questions of truth or reality are really not at issue) it will be obvious that the photographer's choices have determined what sort of ‘evidential trace’ the image may constitute. Let's look at an example (Figure 7).

Figure 7 James Ravilious, 1977: ‘Hoisting the Jubilee flag, Harepath, Beaford, Devon, 1977’

This photograph is part of the documentary archive about the people and landscape of North Devon made by James Ravilious (Hamilton, 1998, p. 2).

It may seem obvious to say that this is a picture about national identity, about 'Britishness' (or maybe 'Englishness'). Ravilious gives the flag full prominence: it is being raised to celebrate the Silver Jubilee of Queen Elizabeth's accession to the throne. Notice how he has carefully framed the image so that the men appear quite small in relation to the scene and in particular to the flag. The large flag will wave, once erect, over a 'typically English' landscape of small fields, hedgerows, hills and woods – and perhaps typically again, the sky is cloudy and dark for it will soon rain again (notice that all four men wear boots). The composition is quite dramatic and forceful since the flag, pole and men are disposed along the diagonal of the picture. The Union Flag is in a 'dominant third' of the image, which we tend to 'read' from left to right, so we know at first look that this is a picture 'about' nationality. Taking the photograph in black and white has emphasised the graphic aspects of the image, simplifying it to a palette of greys.

We can interpret the photograph in a number of ways, but our 'reading' will offer answers to certain questions. Clearly, these have to do with national identity, with the nature of a rural community, with gender, and with the ritual of a national celebration. The photograph offers information about how people in rural Devon celebrated the Silver Jubilee in 1977. It tells us some interesting things about one aspect of their conceptions of nationality (they celebrated by raising the Union Flag). It also tells us about whose role it was to do this – young white men – and that the event was sufficiently distinctive a feature of that community that a photographer chose to record it, and tried to make an impressive picture of this small-scale event. It is intriguing to note that Ravilious's picture may also have been an unconscious 'homage' to another and more famous image, Joe Rosenthal's 1945 photograph of US marines raising the US flag on Iwo Jima's Mount Suribachi (Figure 8). This is an even more explicit reference to national identity, and to its reaffirmation through conflict and force of arms.

Figure 8 Joe Rosenthal, 1945: 'US marines raising the US flag on Iwo Jima's Mount Suribachi'

If the Devon flag-raising photograph is a picture about 'Englishness' or 'Britishness', it has not been created by accident. The photographer has chosen to make the picture in a certain way, which is faithful to the event, but is only one of an infinite number of pictures that might have been taken. What is left out of the picture may in many ways be more significant than what is left in. It might have been more effective if a crowd of spectators had been included, or some village houses had figured in the scene: but the photographer did not choose to include these things. This might seem like a disadvantage since it 'distorts' the image we can read from this photograph – but how often, as social scientists, would we be content to construct an entire theory of national identity from one item of documentary evidence? The answer is never.

The photograph, then, is only one piece of evidence of how national identity might be celebrated in a rural community. The photograph can answer some questions about that, but not others. At the end of the day, it tells us quite a limited number of things. We have to rely on the reputation of the photographer to establish that it was a genuine document, that he did not ask these men to turn up at a particular place with a purpose-bought flag to make just such a picture – perhaps years after the Jubilee. (This is like trusting that a social scientist has not falsified his or her data.) If we want to understand the nature of community life in North Devon villages in the late 1970s, then photographs like this one would help us to construct a sociological theory about the structure and organisation of communal existence. We would need to look at many photographs and at many other pieces of data, but there is no doubt that the visual evidence – subjected to the type of analyses outlined above – would constitute a significant help in the process of understanding.

Family meal photographs: 1930s and 1990s

Activity 5

As a final exercise, look at the photographs given in Figures 9 and 10, which depict family meals in the late 1930s and the 1990s. Using concepts about gender, class and national identity, combined with the approaches outlined in this course, note down what you think are the major differences between the two pictures.

Figure 9 Hulton Getty Picture Collection, 1938: 'Family at lunch'

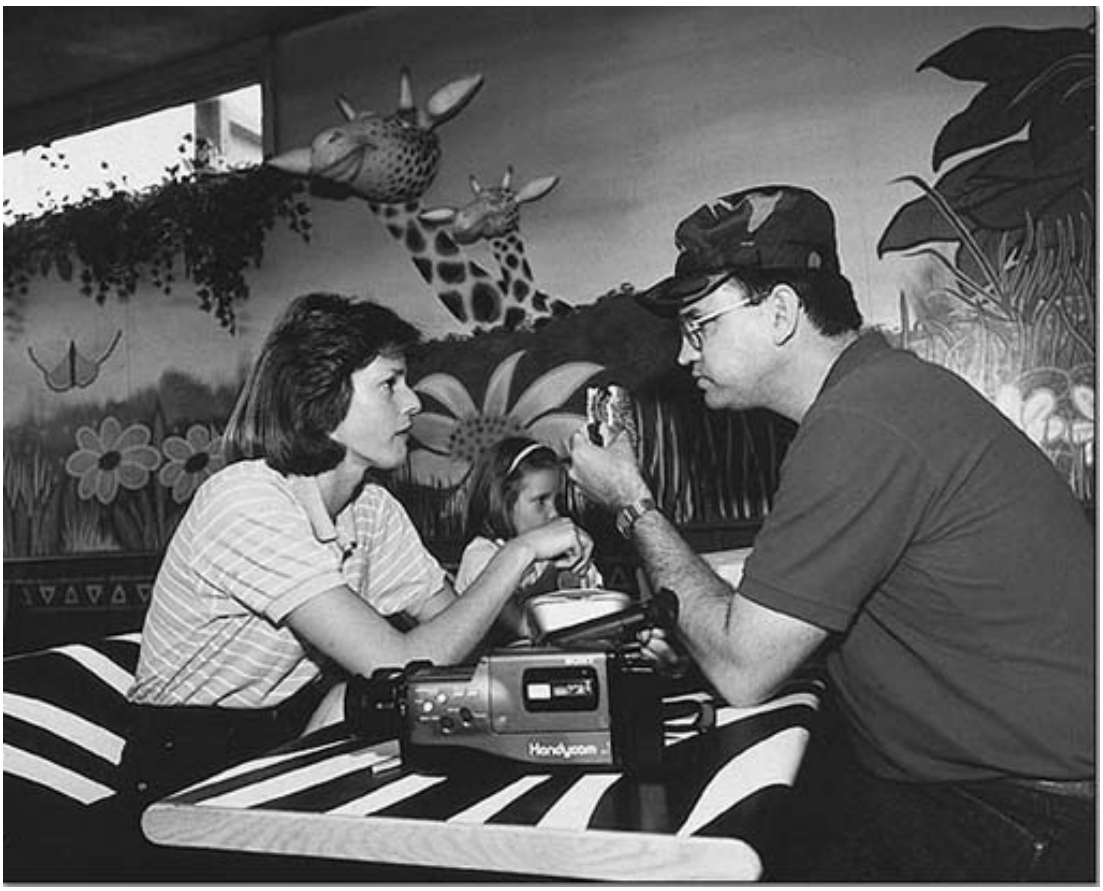


Figure 10 Martin Parr, 1995: ‘Bongo burger bar, Windsor Safari Park’

4.2.1 Summary

- Visual images such as photographs offer ‘evidential traces’ of what they represent.
- Such images are neither ‘all true’ nor ‘all false’.
- Images have to be used together and with other kinds of evidence in social science.

5 Conclusion

Photographs can be used as documentary data in the social sciences. Although they may seem to have a special relation to the events they depict, the social processes of image construction must be considered when we look at photographs as documents. Photographs are depictions of what took place, but are produced through a series of operations that must be understood in terms of their social organisation.

Only by understanding these operations, their social, economic, political and psychological organisation, can we properly evaluate the depiction. In order to read photographs for social science purposes, we need to carry out content and context analyses on them.

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