Picture This: A Review of *Doing Visual Ethnography: Images, Media, and Representation in Research* by Sarah Pink

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In Doing Visual Ethnography: Images, Media, and Representation in Research, Pink (2001) provides the reader with an explanation of an innovative and interesting ethnographic method. She presents two of her research studies as examples. One, of women and bullfighting in Spain, and the other, related to economic inequalities in Guinea Bissau, show the reader the different ways that visual tools can be utilized and manipulated when paired with ethnographic research. She mentions the appropriateness of using photography, video, and hypermedia and why these serve as convenient tools; she also emphasizes the factors that produce the justifiable use for visual ethnography. Key Words: Visual Ethnography, Photography, Video, Hypermedia, and Qualitative Research

"Take a picture, it lasts longer" and "a picture's worth a thousand words" are quintessential statements often used either sincerely or facetiously to make a statement about a specific occurrence. In qualitative research, researchers combine visual media and ethnographic research to provide purposeful presentations of meaning relating to social occurrences. Sarah Pink, the author of *Doing Visual Ethnography: Images, Media, and Representation in Research* (2001), provides a contemporary look into how the arrangement between photography, video, and hypermedia, along with ethnography, has the potential to provide a greater understanding of social phenomena. It is important to note that the author's objective is to offer an additional technique for conducting ethnographic research and not to make this book a guide for conducting visual ethnography.

As with any research project, the researcher must be able identify and defend the need for the method of choice. Visual methods are no exception; ethnography with the use of visual tools must be thoroughly investigated prior to embarking on a project that will utilize this method. The importance of this step is critical to the setting and to the participants who will be studied. Pink (2001) imparts two examples of how and where visual methods seemed appropriate. In a study of bullfighting, visual methods were appropriate as they helped Pink analyze the way that participants positioned themselves within the bullfighting culture. In contrast, Pink's research in Guinea Bissau suggested that visual methods were questionable in that context due to the value that is placed on photographs within that culture. Pink labeled this as an "economic inequality" and a possible reason why ethnographic visual research was not suitable in that setting. The context is a determining factor when contemplating the application of visual methods.

Once it is determined that visual methods will be used for a research study, Pink (2001) encourages the researcher to choose technology wisely. While a camera or other media equipment may seem to be mundane tools, based on the way technology is used in our western culture, they nonetheless inform our sense of identity. Researchers and

participants create a dynamic identity when technology is introduced. The information that a participant shares will vary greatly depending on the type of visual tool used. For example, participants in a study conducted with no visual tools may have the tendency to produce rich narrative information; on the other hand, the use of a still camera may alter the information that is offered by the participants, and their sense of identity may also be adjusted.   A video camera may further alter the way in which participants share information and represent themselves.

As an anthropologist, Pink (2001) offers the use of visual methods paired with ethnography as a qualitative research method. However, an innovative researcher may opt for the use of visual methods with any other form of qualitative research.   A researcher conducting an ethnographic research study will, for the most part, have control of the research. However, the use of visual material, such as still photographs, will carry a variety of meanings to the audience. Pink states:

> [T]here are no fixed criteria that determine which photographs are ethnographic.   Any photograph may have ethnographic interest, significance or meanings at a particular time or for a specific reason. The meanings of photographs are arbitrary and subjective; they depend on who is looking. The same photographic image may have a variety of (perhaps conflicting) meanings invested in it at different stages of ethnographic research and representation, as it is viewed by different eyes and audiences in diverse temporal historical, spatial, and cultural contexts. (p. 51)

To support Pink's statement I will offer a visual example. The picture below shows a patrol cap that is worn with the United States Army combat uniform. Based on Pink's (2001) position, this picture can represent many meanings. Depending on the consumer, it could symbolize patriotic values; it could represent support for our U.S. military; or it may emphasize negative feelings towards current U.S. presence in Iraq and Afghanistan. To members of the military it may represent the soldier; to the members of the U.S. Army, it has the possibility of embodying meaning related to position status based on the rank located on the patrol cap. Family members of soldiers could interpret this photo as pride in having a family member serving the armed forces, and the list could go on. The point is that Pink encourages the use of visual technology, but urges the researcher to be versed on what may transpire as a result of combining this method with qualitative research, especially ethnography.

Figure 1. Part of the United States Army Uniform

Source: Diana Riviera

Pink (2001) dedicates a chapter to the use of video with ethnography. She lends her view on how video preserves the interactions of the culture being studied. During analysis, it enables the researcher to view the content and analyze the meaning in its original enactment. Both photographic and video data morph into various meanings throughout the analysis process and Pink affirms that ".... [analysis] involves examining how different producers and viewers of images give subjective meanings to their content and form" (p. 95).

To this point, in her book Pink (2001) showcases photographs and video used by the researcher in the field to analyze data in conjunction with field notes. Equally as important are studies that use photographs and video to convey important information; however, the data is provided by the participant and not the researcher. This is what Pink describes as "images we can't 'take home'" (p. 101). Examples are family pictures and home movies that are shared with the researcher by the participant and are used by the researcher to analyze memories and histories, but are not removed from the participant's possession. Pink also mentions that the way in which photographs are presented, organized, and discussed serves as an analytical avenue without having to make a possible intrusive request of having copies of the photos.

To Pink (2001), visual ethnography is not simply combining words to produce a desired result. Pairing narrative with photographs and video assists the researcher in documenting and symbolizing the self-representations of the participants. Photography and video also afford the researcher the ability to present a visual sequence of a particular chronology. Manipulation is certainly performed in order to accomplish a specific representation. When done justifiably, manipulating photographs and/or video can emphasize a precise moment, look, action, etc. Pink puts forward a sample of her work in Guinea Bissau where she snapped a photograph of two girls just as they were gazing into the camera. Her manipulation of the photo included placing white dots on their eyes in order to note that the subjects were looking towards the camera at the time that the researcher (Pink) was snapping the photo.

Combining hypermedia and ethnography is another example Pink (2001) introduces of the ground-breaking ways that ethnographic research has evolved. In the heart of the electronic age lies a host of phenomena to be explored by social researchers. Pink asserts that the way in which technology is used and experienced results in the need to explore "theories of electronic communication" (p. 155). In that regard, sociology and cultural studies have focused on issues of cyber-space and cyber identities.

Whether the use of photography, video, or hypermedia in combination with ethnography becomes the research tool of choice, there is a notion that electronic uses for ethnographic representation will replace other methods. While the electronic age certainly has created a convenient mode for information access and storage, electronic techniques cannot completely replace other methods of performing research. Pink (2001) points out that the internet is not completely reliable due to slow connection, loading time, and virus threats. In addition, equal access to the internet does not exist. These are some of the many challenges involved with using electronic tools in qualitative research. As mentioned earlier, the author wished to present this book as a resource tool for conducting visual ethnography and not as a means to guide a researcher on how to realize

a visual ethnographic study. Whatever the motivation is to undertake a research study using visual tools, it is essential to remember that every picture tells a story.

References

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