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## METHODOLOGICAL INSIGHTS SECTION

# Photography and voice in critical qualitative management research

Photography and  
voice

Samantha Warren

*University of Portsmouth Business School, Portsmouth, UK*

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### Abstract

**Purpose** – The main objective of this paper is to discuss how photography might help give research participants a louder voice in (qualitative) critical accounting and management research, enabling their multiple voices to be better represented/performed through the technique of “native image making”. A secondary aim is to familiarise the reader with key developments and debates in the field of “visual research” more generally.

**Design/methodology/approach** – A brief overview of the field is offered, and, drawing on examples from the author’s visual research practice, how the concept of “photo-voice” might increase participants’ involvement in research in two ways is discussed.

**Findings** – First, it is argued that accessibility of the method, control of the research agenda and ownership of the images give a louder voice in the process of research. Second, and following Barthes, it is contended that through their iconic and quasi-representational nature, photographic images can communicate participants’ views of their worlds with more primacy than language alone, raising their voices in the dissemination of research.

**Practical implications** – The paper has especial implications for researchers engaged in critical studies of accounting and management seeking to give voice to marginal groups of people traditionally disregarded by mainstream organization/management studies.

**Originality/value** – The paper contributes to the development of a novel qualitative methodology for accounting and management research.

**Keywords** Critical thinking, Photography, Qualitative research, Visual media

**Paper type** General review

### Introduction

As part of an emerging interest within organization and management studies, attention is increasingly being paid to the visual dimension of social life using a range of methodological approaches. In accounting research this is predominantly taking the form of analyses of the visual elements of annual reports and published accounts (for example Preston and Young, 2000; Preston *et al.*, 1996; Beattie and Jones, 1992, 1999, 2000, 2001). All these writers assume, as their starting point, that visual materials are data in themselves. Their analyses centre on images – for example a photograph or graph in an annual report – as a source of information about the people and organizational communities that produce and consume them. From this perspective, the visual world becomes another “text” to be read giving clues about the cultures that produce it.

More broadly, visual research methods have been used in other areas of organization and management studies, perhaps most notably in the sub-discipline of organizational symbolism which deals explicitly with the corporate and organizational



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imagery that surrounds us (Gagliardi, 1990; Dale and Burrell, 2003), advertising research (Goffman, 1987) and consumer behaviour/marketing research (Belova, 2003; Schroeder, 2003a; Schroeder and Zwick, 2004). Again, what unites these approaches is the assumption that image is the data. However, organization, management and accounting studies that employ “the visual” in the process of research, especially those that use photography, are harder to find, exceptions within organization studies being Buchanan’s (2001) use of photographs to document a re-engineering process in a hospital and Harper’s (1984) study of meaning and work. There are also examples of photography used to explore buyer behaviour and consumer decision making (Ells, 2001; Heisley and Levy, 1991), but in general, these kinds of studies are scarce. This paucity of interest is perhaps set to change with a burgeoning excitement at present in the relationships and possible synergies (and divergences) between art and business in general, of which photography and photographic processes can be seen to be a part. We can observe this in the art world where artists are going into business selling “creative training solutions” and “artistic” human resource management interventions to organizations on the back of claims to increase organizational performance (see for example Art and Business ([www.aandb.org.uk](http://www.aandb.org.uk))). In popular management literature too, the publication of texts extolling the virtues of “corporate aesthetics management” as a resource for securing brand loyalty (Schmitt *et al.*, 1995; Schmitt, 2000; Schmitt and Simonson, 1997) celebrates the role of art in business. More critically, in organization studies writers are beginning to explore some of the problematics inherent in the interface between art and business as well as the potential harmonies (Warren forthcoming; Carr and Hancock, 2003; and the proceedings of the bi-annual standing Art of Management conference)

In accounting research too, there are possibilities to draw together the worlds of accounting and art as Gallhofer and Haslam (1996, p. 23) have pointed out:

While accounting and art function in society as separable and distinct phenomena, they also substantively overlap given their shared character as communicative and representational artefacts.

They go on to remind us that art – particularly that of the early twentieth century and the surrealist tradition – is engaged in an emancipatory project, “challenging current norms, traditions, ways of ‘doing things’ and [exposing] inequalities, injustices, oppression and exploitation” (Gallhofer and Haslam, 1996, p. 27). Clear parallels can be drawn between these aims and those of good accounting and accountability practices within a socially responsible governance frame. I would also add to this my own observation that accountability can be seen to be, by nature, about “making visible” so stakeholders can “see” for themselves the hidden operations of the corporation. Thus, for me, accounting and accountability is inextricably bound up with processes of visualisation, the visual and ways of seeing.

Indeed, on one level all research practice is visual since we are in the business of describing researched worlds to our readers and students so that they can visualise our words (Harper, 1998). From this perspective, the means by which we achieve this are largely irrelevant. Whether we employ descriptive statistics, tables of numerical data, graphs, charts, narrative texts, quotations, photographs, poetry, artistic illustration or diagrams – we are all trying to get others to “see” what we have “seen” as we carried out our research. In practice too, the visual nature of management is being recognised.

Chodzinski & Noppeney Consulting[1] are using visual techniques to effect organizational change, recognising as they put it that "Today's management is deeply interwoven with visual elements. Due to growing technological capacities, the gap between the wealth of visual experience in management and the ability to perceive and use visual elements has been widening."

But does visual necessarily mean visible? Imagination plays a significant part in helping us to empathise with and visualise others' worlds (Strati, 1999) and likewise, visualisation is not an entirely ocular process. Our other senses are often downplayed in imaginary or visual experience because as Berger (1972) reminds us, sight is perhaps the most immediate of our senses and since enlightenment thinking equated the "eye" with the "I", vision has been the primary mode of organizing our experience of external reality (Wright, 1992). Furthermore, in the act of viewing, we are not just seeing, but experiencing with all our sensory faculties and we bring a whole host of cultural, social and psychological knowledge to bear in making sense of what we see – understanding what we experience. Furthermore, gaze is political. Who can be seen and who is invisible? Who looks at who and why? Who has the power to reveal and conceal?

All these issues, and more, point to the complex, ambiguous nature of the field. It is, therefore, important to be clear from the outset what particular understanding of "the visual" I am concerned with in this paper. Photography is only one element of the field known as "visual research" or "visual methodology" and these terms have variously been used to refer to a range of loosely connected and diverse empirical research practices that have some relationship with the visual appearance of the world around us. Although it is not my intention to provide a thorough review of the field here, approaches to the visual can be broadly summarised into four categories:

- (1) Approaches that recognise images as data themselves – visual signs and symbols that provide insights about the cultures, people and societies that produced them. This is the manifestation is most apparent in accounting research through the analysis of visual material in annual reports and other quasi-promotional literature, as already noted. An exemplar of this strategy is Preston and Young's (2000) investigation into how the "essence" of being a global corporation was constructed through the images these companies chose to display in their annual reports. Insights were gained by analysing the iconography and framing of the images involved, for example. Tinker and Neimark (1987) employed a variation on this idea in their longitudinal study of the annual reports of General Motors in order to explore the development of managerial ideologies in relation to women within capitalist labour relations. This approach is largely beyond the scope of this paper, however, since here I am concerned with the role of images made by and talked about by the respondents themselves.
- (2) Studies that use images as a record – especially photography and video – as ways of documenting social, cultural and physical processes as they occur (eg: Buchanan, 2001; Holliday, 1999; Bateson and Mead, 1942). Usually associated with the anthropological tradition, this category covers a broad range of documentary image making and analysis and has its roots in a realist tradition that regards photographic images as essentially representational rather than constructed.

- (3) Methodologies that employ images as stimuli to elicit information from research participants. This is more commonly known as “photo-elicitation” (Wagner, 1979; Collier and Collier, 1986), and would involve a respondent stating their opinions about an image presented to them. For example – shareholders might be asked to articulate their opinions about the ethical conduct or social responsibility of an organization based on images displayed in the annual report or review. Thus the image in this context is used as a prompt to “extract” data from the respondent, rather than as “containing” data in its own right, as in (1) and (2) above, but it is still an image produced by someone other than the research participant.
- (4) Finally and importantly for my purposes here, we can delineate an approach to visual research that uses images and imagery to help participants to express their feelings, beliefs, opinions etc. either as an aid to verbal narrative, or in place of it (Schwartz, 1994; Wang and Burris, 1994, 1997). The concept of the “photo-interview” that is at the heart of this paper would fall within this category including the variants of “native image making” (Wagner, 1979), “autodriving” and “photovoice” (Hurworth, 2003) that form part of the genre that are discussed at length below. The visual here is used as a communicative tool in the process of research as in (3) above but significantly differs in that the images produced or chosen are done so by the research participants themselves.

This list is by no means exhaustive and consequently, the term “visual research” is a broad category of very different practices as I allude to above. Indeed, and further complicating matters, the qualifier “visual” is open to further interpretation too as we have already seen. Notwithstanding this, in order to summarise and set the parameters of this particular paper I offer the following definition of “visual research” which is also an outline of the structure of the rest of the paper.

First, I am talking about photographs as opposed to other forms of organizational image such as graphs, charts, drawings, corporate logos, or images in television and advertising media, for example. Second, I am talking about photographs that have been made by research participants themselves, what Wagner (1979) has called “native image-making”. Third, I am interested here in how these photographs might allow research participants to express their views about their organizational worlds in ways that complement their verbal stories. In particular here, I place emphasis on the “immediacy” of photography which I suggest can give research participants a “louder voice” in the dissemination of research. My approach here, therefore, falls within the fourth category of visual research practice outlined in the typology above. Furthermore – and central to the contribution of this paper – I am interested in how the individual nature of making photographs and the “immediacy” of images means that presentation of multiple “voices” appears to be enabled. Based on personal experience of conducting this kind of visual research, I argue that displaying a collection of photographs aids this multiplicity in a way that written text – say a collection of quotes from an interview transcript – in the main, does not. Finally, I conclude by considering how these photographs can be incorporated (or not) into “end-product” research articles and contemplate some future possibilities as to how photographic research methods might develop. I begin with a more detailed outline of the process of gathering visual data from research participants.

### Native-image making

The term "native image-making" was put forward by Wagner (1979) to describe the process of researching others' worlds by asking them to make photographs that depict some aspect of their experiences. The word "native" hints at the anthropological roots of the technique, although most traditional photographic studies in anthropology do not incorporate photographs made by the research subjects, but ones "taken" by the anthropologist in order to document the visible differences in non-western "primitive" cultures (Edwards, 1992). Therefore it is the anthropologist who remains the author, it is they who choose how to document others' cultures through their eyes and they who choose what is and is not worthy of attention (Harper, 1998). As I have discussed elsewhere (Warren, 2002b also Scott, 1999), the process of making a photograph probably tells us more about the photographer than what he/she has chosen to photograph given that the particular visual cultures they are bound up with will shape their choice of subject, how they locate the subject within the frame and what they choose to leave out, as I discuss in more depth below. Aesthetic imperatives are also at play when we use a camera – preferences for symmetry, balance, portrait or landscape orientation etc. will affect the appearance of the photograph itself. It is for these reasons that I refer throughout this paper to the making of photographs and not the taking of them. Since Wagner's (1979) seminal text on photography as a research method "images of information", there has been a steady growth in interest in handing the camera to those whose lives we wish to explore, mainly in the social sciences of health, education and general sociology because photography offers opportunities for research participants to express their subjectivities as – quite literally – their view of the world. The camera also enables this to take place at a more convenient time and place, minimising intrusion. For example, because of the ethical and practical issues involved in researching children, Ells (2001) asked his primary school research participants to photograph the contents of their lunchboxes, kitchen cupboards and family meal time scenes to talk about their diets with them in school, under supervision.

Of course, this increase in photography as a method is likely at least in part to be due to the falling costs and greater convenience of using cameras and photographic paraphernalia, most recently the advent of the digital camera, which despite a high initial outlay, affords the researcher a whole host of advantages. Digital photography is immediate, requires no chemical processing and images can be readily converted into a variety of file formats for storage and display. The proliferation of affordable software packages for the home PC also aids in the reproduction and publishing of professional quality images.

However, apart from the practical issues, there are wider, theoretical and political factors which may have predicated the rise in interest in "native image-making". The so-called "post-modern turn" in organization studies (particularly ethnographic studies) has steadily chipped away at the supremacy of scientific method and the notion of "grand narrative" in social research so that researchers in this tradition are not concerned with the positivist prizes of objectivity and detachment, but instead, with reflexive practice, subjectivity, and immersion in the worlds they research (Travers, 2001, pp. 151-160). This has also been recognised by writers in accounting research who argue for greater corporate accountability to stakeholders in a more diverse range of ways in the dissemination of published accounts and annual reports. Authors such as Chew and Greer (1997), Broadbent (1998) and Gallhofer and Haslam



(1996) have all variously challenged the hegemonic operation of established accounting structures in relation to gender, race and occupational position, and they call for reporting strategies that embrace differing perspectives on notions of efficiency, profitability, success and so forth to replace them. For example, as Broadbent (1998, p. 291) eloquently expresses it:

I would seek to make issues such as the impact of low pay on people's lives visible, not just through objective statistics, but through addressing the more emotional issues of what it feels like to be at the bottom of the pay range in a company or to operate at the economic margins of society.

She goes on to point out that such a project may well require alternative modes of presentation and she suggests that even music and drama could be considered alongside traditional (numerical and statistical) methods of accounting in published accounts. These calls for greater transparency and diversity in accounting practice resonate with my earlier point about the parallels between art and accountability. Broadbent also notes the potentiality of photography in this "crusade" as a "means of presenting diverse subjectivities" (Broadbent, 1998, p. 292). As Edwards (1997) points out, the subjective nature of photography – especially when used as an expressive media – lends itself well to such a project, since, as I have already remarked, the photograph almost literally acts a lens through which we see what others "see" and importantly, deem important enough to "capture" with a camera. However, as Harper (1998, p. 32) laments:

... there are very few examples of this "new ethnography", applied to visual methods ... from my vantage points there is a flood of critique, yet few attempts to bring the critiques to life.

One such way might be, as Broadbent suggests, to publish photographs made by shop floor workers that depict how they see the company and its success from the perspective of low-paid, deskilled labour that enables that success.

Moreover, increasing interest in visual issues might also be fuelled by post-modernity's sharper focus on the visual in society. This "visual turn" refers to our everyday immersion in visual signs, images and the surface appearances of things (Schroeder, 2003b) what Welsch (1997) has called the "deep-seated aestheticization" of everyday life (see also Featherstone, 1991). It is not unreasonable to propose that academic research – whose protagonists are also immersed in the "image culture" – is also becoming subject to a "visual turn" which, for some of course, may be good reason to resist visual developments in empirical practice.

However, despite my concentration on images, as Pels *et al.* (2002, p. 11) remind us, "[photographs] need symbolic framings, storylines and human spokespersons in order to acquire social lives ...". Here I have merely substituted the word "photograph" for the word "object". A photograph is an object in two senses, first, in its own right as a material thing – whether that be an amalgamation of chemicals and light sensitive paper or a picture on a computer monitor – and second, because photographs always depict something. I would argue that the primary purpose of (non-"artistic") photography is to objectify whatever it is the camera is pointed at, as Barthes (1993) puts it, to render time and experience a singular and unrepeatable event. However, the specific meaning of the event and the reason for its "capture" is known only to the photographer. If we accept this inherent subjectivity of photographs made by research participants, as I argue here, then we must also let them explain their photographs to

us – drawing out their specific meanings for them – which brings us into the domain of the photo-interview. Photography and voice

### **Photo-interviewing**

Hurworth (2003) briefly reviews four slightly different variants on the basic theme of the photo-interview: autodriving, reflexive photography, photo novella and photo voice which have as their focus the possibility of increasing the participation, involvement and power of participants in the research process. In the case of “autodriving” and “reflexive photography”, the benefits of these approaches centre on the richness and “authenticity” of the data gathered.

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#### *Autodriving*

This is a term used in the field of marketing to describe how research interviews are “driven” by the research participants who discuss the photographs they have made. During discussion, the photographer explains their significance and meaning of the image, which proponents of this technique implicitly regard as being “in” the photograph waiting to be verbally released by the photographer during the interview (Heisley and Levy, cited in Hurworth, 2003). In the context of accounting research, for example, this approach might be utilised by asking respondents to photograph objects, places, people and events that symbolise integrity, trust, authority and accountability for later discussion during an interview.

#### *Reflexive photography*

“Reflexive photography” basically extends the notion of autodriving to more explicitly recognise the conversational and emergent nature of interviewing through images and as other commentators have noted discussing photographs in an interview context generates data through the triad of researcher-image-research participant. In other words the data is not contained within the photograph, nor does the “skilled researcher” extract it from the research participant using the picture as a tool as the term “photo-elicitation” suggests (Collier and Collier, 1986). Instead, the conversations that centre on the image generate the data, encouraging both research participant and researcher to be more reflexive in their thoughts and feelings about the research questions and indeed tangential issues too (Schwartz, 1994; Pink, 2001; Walker and Wiedel, 1985; Warren, 2002b). I would argue that it is these qualities that make “reflexive photography” a suitable method to explore complex ethical and moral issues with respondents.

This may seem *prima facie* like an odd research strategy because concepts of this kind are inherently invisible, abstract concepts so how can one possibly photograph “them”? If we think about this a little more, however, we remember that the conceptual is made visible in all areas of life, from war graves, memorials and monuments (Carter and Jackson, 2003) to the architecture of financial institutions (McGoun, 2004). These physical, observable artefacts remind us that trust, respect, integrity and accountability, for example are embodied in the material and moreover, visible world that we live in, with and through. Kwint (1999) has termed this kind of material association with the remembered or conceptual as “material memory”, an idea I return to in more depth below. Therefore, although our personal and private sense of accountability as an “artefact” is indeed intangible and invisible, these tacit cognitive,

moral and affective constructs can be usefully made “visible” by anchoring them in the material world as I discuss throughout this paper and elsewhere (Warren, 2002b). In other words, my contention is that it is possible to reverse this process and explore the invisible through attention to the visible. Of course, this does not exhaust the concept of abstraction – there will always be nuances in individual interpretations of visual (and other) stimuli – and I return to this point below when I discuss the value of photo-interviewing as an empowering method.

For example, through this image of an exam hall filled with desks (see Plate 1) I might discuss the pressure and despair of feeling accountable for the education of an ever-increasing number of minds in a rationalised mass education system[2]. The striking image of a “sea” of desks serves two purposes here. First, in combination with my explanation it symbolises my private and intangible emotions around accountability, acting as a point of reference. Second, it is a powerful graphic portrayal of one manifestation of the concept of “mass education” which I suggest communicates with an immediacy more primal than language. This latter function has been theorised in writing on visual culture and art theory (Berger, 1972; Langer, 1957; Mitchell, 1994) but I would also argue that (in the developed West at least), the supremacy of image over text is now so ingrained in our culture that it is an intuitive point as well as a theoretical construct. Indeed it is interesting to note at this juncture that the word “graphic” is used in common parlance to refer to particularly vivid descriptions. “Graphic” also has strong visual connotations despite its etymological origins being from the latin “graphicus” meaning “to write” which does not necessarily involve seeing. I would argue that this demonstrates how intuitively we embrace the visual as being the most important way to describe something – as the phrase “seeing is believing” illustrates.

In particular, this can clearly be seen in the world of mass media journalism where images are used, for example, to communicate the horror of war, fear of terror, despair of famine or the joy of triumphant sporting success – not as illustrations of the narrative text, but often in place of it, with the text merely a caption for the image – the assumption that “a picture tells a thousand words”. The photographs of the attack on

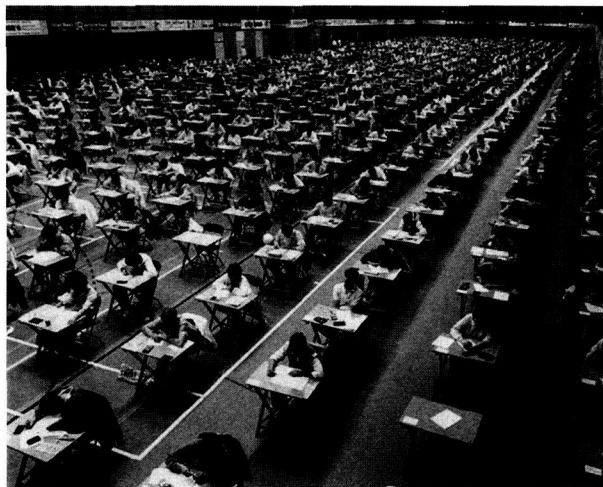


Plate 1.



the World Trade Centre in New York on 11 September 2001 enlarged to fill entire front pages of UK newspapers and printed with no leader or even headline are a case in point.

These facets of the photo-interview are therefore of great significance to all variants of critical management and organization research and native-image making has much to offer our disciplines. In my own research exploring the aesthetic experiences and judgements of IT workers in a UK web design department I found the rich data generated by such interviews of enormous value (Warren, 2002a). Notwithstanding the importance of this, however, my specific interest in this paper is the ethical issue of voice in research, in how photography might offer the opportunity to raise the volume of research participants' voices in our organizational research accounts, to which I now turn my attention.

### **Images as voice**

The remaining categories of photo-interview techniques outlined above are "photo novella" and "photo-voice" (Hurworth, 2003; Wang and Burris, 1994, 1997) which are ostensibly the same thing – photo-voice being a later and more representative title for the technique. Here, the focus is not so much on the validity or quality of data, but on the opportunity it affords research participants to "have their say".

#### *Photo-voice*

Methodologically, photo-voice differs little from any other variant of photo-interview, the research participant is given the camera and makes photographs that tell a story about their everyday life, a story they tell using their photographs and verbal explanations of them during an interview with a researcher. Importantly, the research participants are generally those whose voices have traditionally been silenced in social research, for example children, women, the elderly, the homeless and ethnic minorities. As Hurworth explains:

Consequently, photo novella is meant to be a tool of empowerment enabling those with little money, power or status to communicate to policymakers where change should occur (Hurworth, 2003, p. 3).

Here again we can see connections to critical accounting's emancipatory project discussed above.

As Wray-Bliss (2003, p. 2) notes "voice is suggestive of agency, of speaking not just being spoken about." He goes on to remind us that a defining characteristic of critical management studies in particular is that it "reintroduces the voices of the oppressed and resistant employee and/or disgruntled manager" (Wray-Bliss, 2003, p. 4) to counter the hegemonic discourses of capitalist managerialism in contemporary workplaces. As such critical management – and accounting – studies have much in common with education, health, social welfare, post-colonial and feminist studies who, among others, seek to champion the causes of the oppressed or ignored – to give voice to those who have traditionally been kept silent. One could argue, as is common in "labour-process theory" approaches to organizational research, that those who are dominated/"silenced" do not recognise their own oppression and therefore are unable to resist to any degree – in this case "see" their oppressors. This may be so, but I would argue that allowing respondents to photograph what is important to them –

and so set the agenda for discussion – at least enables us to explore these issues with them. An example from my research supports my point here. I had several discussions with research participants that centred on photographs of locks on office doors. Regardless of whether the photograph was made to symbolise feeling restricted by organizational “access policies” or not, I took the opportunity to draw out this possibility, rather than automatically assuming that a photograph of a locked door symbolised “control” or “oppression” as would probably have been the case if I had analysed the image in isolation as data itself (as outlined in the first facet of visual research on Wray-Bliss (2003, p. 4). Interestingly, while some respondents did indeed see the locked doors as oppression, others saw them as a mark of their “special-ness” to Management in keeping them controlled and “locked in”. I doubt whether these data would have been obtained by simply asking people whether they felt oppressed or not.

It might perhaps seem counter intuitive to be advocating photography – a visual medium – as a voice. However, I am using the term “voice” in its most political sense as a “medium or agency of expression” or “the right or opportunity to express a choice or opinion”[3]. Also, as I have alluded to above, a photograph (in this context at least) requires verbal explanation to make sense to anyone other than the photographer. Thus the photograph both acts as “voice” in that it communicates something to a wider audience through its iconography, representational value or symbolic imagery – but also enables voice in that the photograph gives research participants something to talk about that they actually own in a tangible way because they made it themselves. For instance, I asked the participants in my study to “show me how it feels to work here” by taking pictures of anything in their working environment that they wanted to tell me about. The focus of the research was to explore the impact of an artistically and aesthetically designed workspace on the experiences of those who worked within it. The variety of images was quite surprising with some participants choosing to go outside their office and make pictures and also to photograph quite mundane or ambiguous items in order to tell me how they felt about their organization and the changes that had gone on. For example, the photograph shown in Plate 2 was made by a male participant who felt valued by his employer because he was allowed to listen to

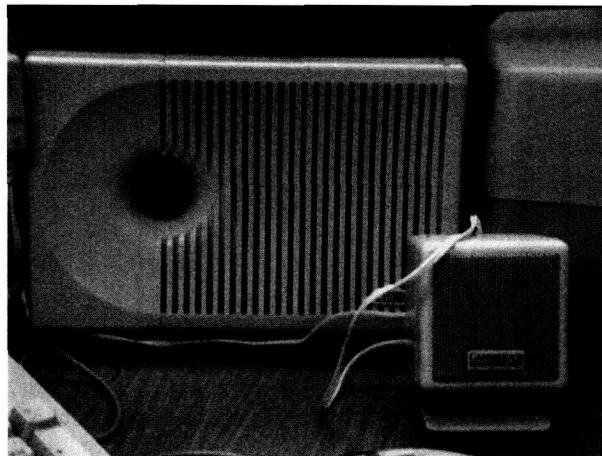


Plate 2.

music as he worked and the speakers represented this for him. Talking about the photograph, therefore, focused and facilitated the discussion.

But what is it in particular about photography that makes it any more suited to this cause of raising voices than verbal or written texts? There are two parts to my reply to this question, the first concerns the process of photo-interviewing and the second addresses the nature of photographic images and their relationships with reality.

### **My pictures – photography and empowerment**

Most people know how to use a camera to “take” a photograph and most people feel able to point a basic non-specialist camera at something that interests them and press the shutter, even if they might temper that ability with disclaimers about them being “no David Bailey”. This is less true of the ability to express oneself in written prose or even verbal conversation. Writing is a skill that is learned according to academic or literary conventions and depends, fundamentally, on the literacy of the writer, the extent of their vocabulary, knowledge of grammatical structure and, in creative writing, perhaps even prosaic construction and poetic tropes all of which are a function of education and by extension, of socio-economic circumstances. Likewise, as I have already noted, most people are also more able to articulate their opinions and feelings about an issue if those sentiments are directed at some tangible “thing” as in the example of the speaker above. As Pels *et al.* (2002, p. 11) tell us, “social relationships and practices . . . need to be materially grounded in order to gain temporal and spatial endurance” – the ability to deal with abstract concepts and theory is, after all, pretty much the preserve of academics. Put another way, “snap-shot” photography is an accessible method that relies little on formal schooling and specialist knowledge and so is ideal for use with people who, for whatever reason, are less able or reluctant to express themselves in a written or verbal form, or for exploring concepts that are inherently difficult to express in language, e.g. ethics and accountability[4]. At this juncture, I wish to make it absolutely clear that I am not suggesting that as academics we are somehow superior to those who we research in any way. On the contrary, I am suggesting that as academics we need to be acutely aware of our own ignorance/arrogance around how we may use language to include and exclude certain categories of people from our research and our communities. Furthermore, these are observations I make on the basis of experience. Many of my research participants commented on how much fun using the camera was to “tell” me about their working lives and that it did not feel like they were participating in a “stuffy academic research project”.

Furthermore, several research participants evidently felt a strong sense of ownership around the photographs; some took physical control of my laptop computer when we sat and viewed them together during interviews, others asked for copies of the pictures and some showed visible delight and pride that I wished to use their images in my research articles. In short, my point here is that you do not have to be a photographer to use a camera and the resulting images were solely the work of the research participant. They had complete control over what to photograph and how to do it – some went to great lengths to compose their images while others were content to speedily take “snap-shots” – but all produced something that was uniquely theirs and moreover, something that would be displayed intact as they intended it to be. Holliday (1999, 2000) found similar “empowering” effects when using video diaries to

research the identity work undertaken by gay, lesbian and bi-sexual people. She notes that giving “editorial control” to the research participant was a major factor in this, and her informants were more willing to speak candidly about themselves “on camera” than they were to write down their thoughts and feelings on paper. I also found these issues significant with my research participants in their explanations of the photographs.

This is one way in which I argue photography enables research participants to have a louder voice – in the process of research – via the accessibility of the method, control of the agenda and ownership of the resulting image. With this in mind I suggest photo-interviewing is more than the collaborative method of research as described by Harper (1998). Through the process of making and talking about photographs, research participants do more than collaborate in the research – they set the agenda and as Schroeder (2003b, p. 83) succinctly puts “treating (participants in visual research) as collaborative coproducers acknowledges both their cohumanity and the social production of knowledge”. Of course, the researcher is ultimately directing the project since the camera will have been provided with a brief for the participant to follow, however “loose” that may be. Likewise, there still remain the ethical issues of interpretation and representation – ultimately my research participants have only my word that I will use their images as they intended them to be used and refrain from digitally manipulating them so as to radically distort their original appearance, or caption them with words and sentiments they did not express. Notwithstanding these considerations, I remain convinced that this approach to research reduces the authority of the researcher at least to some degree and raises the voices of the research participants through the process of conducting photo-based research. In addition, the photographs as “data” themselves are not insignificant in this. Although I have stressed that meaning is produced socially through discussions which intersect at the site of the photograph (Schwartz, 1994), as I have also suggested it is an intuitive point that photography is a medium that is full of impact, arresting, and has the potential to “punctuate” the viewer in a way that is far more immediate, perhaps, than words. I explore this proposition below as the second way I advocate photography as vocal.

### **The camera never lies? – photography and truth**

Photographs have a taken-for-granted status as bearing an evidential relationship with reality. Photographic images are used as evidence that the world is as it is – from travel brochures to post mortem reports, wedding photographs to text-books, closed circuit television footage to gym membership passes, and of course, published accounts – photography is used to say “this is who I am/ this is how it was” in almost every sphere of life. Photographs illustrate written texts throughout our education system and wars, natural disasters and news events from all over the planet (and beyond) are brought to us through photographic images on television and in newspapers that show us what is happening outside our own spatial and temporal boundaries.

Indeed, this emphasis on visual communication in post-modernity, as I mention above, has led some to claim that we relate to images as if they were the real thing – that all reality is mediated and virtual, and we are immersed in an image-inary world (Baudrillard, 1998; Featherstone, 1991; Welsch, 1997). Moreover, as Welsch (1997) reminds us, this “virtual” reality (in all its guises) is aestheticized. For example, people

and events are frequently staged, camera angles have been pre-determined for maximum effect, shots are taken over and over again until they meet with the photographer's aesthetic approval and the finished image is often airbrushed and made flawless – a perfect “copy” of something that has never actually existed (Baudrillard, 1995). Therefore, the images we are immersed in as we go about our everyday lives can never be assumed to be faithful reproductions of reality, e.g. “the truth”. Furthermore, and especially in the context of accounting research and studies of accountability, images are used to persuade and to put forward a very particular (presumably favourable) impression. As Beattie and Jones (2000, p. 160) remind us:

... management uses the corporate annual report to provide a self-interested view of corporate performance ... [that] ... conflicts with a commonly expressed purpose of accounting, which is to present fairly annual financial performance in a neutral unbiased manner.

Variations in the visual presentation of graphs across countries, organizations and even within single annual reports themselves (Beattie and Jones, 1999, 2000, 2001, 2002) have all been shown to affect the perceptions of the viewer in a fashion that distorts the “facts”. Clearly these issues need to be kept in mind if one is conducting analyses of images as data – as outlined above – to avoid the assumption that they represent factual truth and recognising instead that they are more likely to represent one partial and subjective perspective. Moreover, this perspective is almost certainly a reflection of dominant ideological interests, e.g. senior management agendas. With this in mind we might perhaps begin to question the strength of the link a photograph has with reality:

... photographs are used so often and so fluidly for scientific, judicial, and civil evidence that it is difficult to keep in mind that photographs are all mechanically produced images that exist within shifting planes of meaning and significance (Schroeder, 2003b, p. 81).

However, it is undeniable that photographs do hold representational value otherwise the holiday snap-shot would be pointless and school and wedding photographers would be out of business! As Becker (1974, p. 14) points out[5]:

... photographs ... minimally claim to be true in that what they show actually existed in front of the camera for at least the time it took to make the exposure.

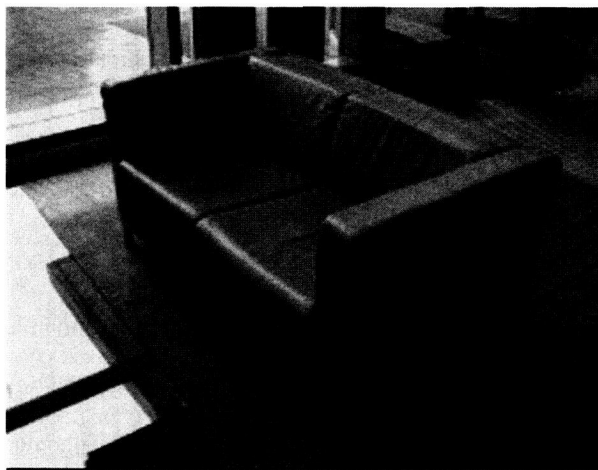
However, as I have insisted throughout this paper, photographs and images in general mean different things to different people according to their cultural context, degree of familiarity with the subject(s) photographed and visual culture. These differences in perception shoot down any claim to the objective status of a photograph since as Loizos (2000, p. 96) puts it “the information may be ‘in’ the photograph, but not everyone is equipped to recover it in full”. I would go further than Loizos, however, and argue that there is little meaning that is in the photograph, that which is really meaning-full is generated through the context it is viewed or made within, and the subsequent discussions that centre on that image – as in the example of photo-interviewing discussed here.

Barthes (1993) elucidates further on the subject of meaning in photographs by setting apart “public” meanings (studium) from “private” meanings (punctum). The former he sees as the universally recognisable elements in a photograph (although even these are highly culturally and contextually bound) while the latter are those “partial



objects” that have an intensely private meaning for us as individuals that is emotional in nature and often hard to express in language. We can apply this analysis to the photograph of the exam hall discussed earlier. The image of the “sea of desks” has a “studium” that conveys meaning to an academic community with a largely shared understanding of the pressures in contemporary (UK) higher education. However, the anxious emotions that this image represents for me is the “punctum” – unless you share with me a similar feeling about the subject you cannot guess this level of meaning from the image alone.

The photograph shown in Plate 3, drawn from my research, is another example of this. The “studium” of the photograph is that it is a sofa, possibly leather and it looks as if it is positioned in the foyer of somewhere that is probably not a private home. The “punctum” for its photographer is as he says, it reminds him of how nervous he felt on his first day at work because of it being his first job out of college and such a prestigious company. The point here is that he would not have recalled this information unless he had seen the sofa which reminded him how “far he had come” from the nerves of his first day. The role of objects in this sense (in this case a photograph of one) is well expressed by Kwint (1999) in his conceptualisation of certain objects as “material memories” whereby emotions, memories and remembrances are embodied in objects either intentionally, as in the case of personal possessions treasured for sentimental value, or unintentionally when one is “transported” back to a prior event in unexpectedly coming into contact with a long forgotten object as is the case here. The sofa is, therefore, a material memory of this participant’s first day



*That's the first seat I sat in when I came here – and that was the seat, that one there with the bum marks and that was where I sat for half an hour c\*\*\*\*\*g myself wondering what was going to happen on my first day here.*

Me: Was it OK?

*“Yeah it was fine, but I didn't know what to expect cos I hadn't been even on the tour . . . so my first day here was my first day at work and this is my first full time job.”*

Plate 3.

nerves[6]. Later, this opened up a rich discussion between us about the organizational issues around his socialisation into a new job, social dynamics and personal development as a graduate.

All of which reminds us, once again, of the need for research participants to be able to explain their photographs. The image of the sofa does not communicate the private “punctum” meaning that it has for its photographer by itself and therefore despite my insistence on the vocality of photography throughout this paper, it is strictly speaking the combination of image and words that allows the photograph to “speak” as I have argued elsewhere following Mitchell’s (1994) idea of the “image-text” and Marcus’s (1995) notion of montage (Warren, 2002b).

There I contend, in more detail, that the relationship between images and words is uneasy and unclear. Language is often an insufficient medium to describe what we see and feel in any depth (Langer, 1957) and yet we can never know something independently of language if it is to have any meaning for us at all. Burgin (1986, pp. 69-70) insists on the inextricability of image and language for this reason, reminding us that:

The significance of photography goes beyond its manifest elements. The significance of the photograph goes beyond its literal signification by way of the routes of the primary processes ... [in] a succession of metonymies and metaphors which transpose the scene of the photograph to the spaces of the “other scene” of the unconscious, and also, most importantly, the scene of the *popular preconscious: the scene of discourse, of language.*

Therefore the photograph’s “voice” in this respect and its value in research is its capacity to evoke feelings beyond the description of the image(s) within its frame. Feelings which, by association – or to use Burgin’s (1986) semiotic terminology “signification” – provide valuable data for organizational researchers in the critical tradition. Each photograph has a different “punctum” – a different voice – for each photographer and each viewer. It is the very existence of the “punctum” that allows for the possibility that photographs – or more accurately techniques of photo-voice – might enable us to present the messy, complex and plural nature of multiple voices in research in a way that does not try to combine them in a chorus but celebrates the often contradictory and discordant nature of multiplicity in critical management research. To ascribe meaning to somebody else’s photograph independently of them is, at best, speculation and at worst a form of appropriation or oppression of their voice. It is probably for this reason that a photograph – in “Western” culture at least – is actually rarely displayed without some sort of caption or explanation that anchors its meaning, despite the communicative power of the image alone as I discuss above with regard to the supremacy of the visual in post-modern culture. This anchoring does not mean that other “readings” are not possible however – on the contrary, as Becker (1974, p. 15 my emphasis) points out we must “distinguish between the statement that X is true about something and the statement that X is *all* that is true about something” the latter being characteristic of positivist epistemologies.

### **Discordant voices – photography and multiplicity**

This legacy of the positivist/realist traditional in organization studies can be seen in one respect in the continued desire of those who write about organizations to talk about “themes” or “strands” within data that exemplify commonalities between research participants’ accounts of their realities. I firmly include myself within this and have

often pondered how to write research accounts that retain at least some of the complexity of people's multiple and often conflicting voices without privileging some over others, including reducing the authority of my own. As Wray-Bliss (2002, 2003) rightly points out, the format of journal article submissions usually precludes lengthy expositions of method and discussions of reflexive ethical stance such as this, meaning that to a large extent, qualitative management research in particular, has to be "taken on trust" by its readers, and likewise so does the integrity of the author. The outcome of this is that research texts are generally "short, accessible, familiar accounts of organisation; accounts which contain extracts of research 'data' edited for their interest, lack of contradiction and clear meanings" (Wray-Bliss, 2002, p. 81). Desire for clarity and coherence inevitably serves to silence those who do not fit or conform and multiplicity of voice gets harmonised. Those who do not sing in tune are, to a large extent, silenced – often as an unintentional "processual" effect.

The term multiplicity is associated, for me at least, with the tenets of actor-network theory (ANT) – in particular the work of John Law (1994) – who stress the fragmented, ambivalent and relational nature of the social and material world. Society is viewed as a performance or assemblage of various human and non-human elements that combine to produce the effect of a whole – we speak of an organization for example, rather than an entity that only exists through the continual endeavours of those engaged in processes of organizing it. As Law (1994, pp. 4-5) tells us:

Many of us have learned to want to cleave an order. This is a modernist dream. In one way or another, we are attached to the idea that if our lives, our organizations, our social theories or our societies were "properly ordered" then all would be well ... So when we encounter complexity we tend to treat it as distraction. We treat it as a sign of the limits to order. Or we think of it as evidence of failure.

This suggests that complexity and multiplicity is not only a politically desirable state of affairs as I have implied throughout this paper, and is recognised in critical accounting research as I outline above, but an inevitable one also.

Consequently, the fact that photographs are unique and have multiple meanings is far from a weakness here, but a strength in recognising and "evidencing" multiplicity of voice. As I have already noted, in the context of my own research project I was shown a range of disparate images all taken to represent "one" thing – the working environment of a group of IT workers – none of them have a claim to be correct and none are more important than others. Some are what might be called "realist" images intended to represent what is depicted, others were more "expressive" made to communicate feelings or opinions, others still were "aesthetic" in nature, made purely because the respondent had an aesthetic reaction to what they were photographing. The value of combining these different types of photographs (e.g. realist versus expressive) made by different people is that by "strengthening or articulating weaker or alternative positions, the motion or energy of the whole is sustained (Feyerabend 1993: 21) thereby reinvigorating still photography's anthropological contribution ..." (Edwards, 1997, p. 56) In other words, a more "rounded" account of reality is possible if we try to incorporate alternative/dissenting views as well as those that corroborate each other (see Plate 4). For example, the picture of the computer covered in small plastic figurines and toys (top middle) and the plasma screen showing a futuristic warrior (top left), symbolised the "sense of childish fun belied by a devil worshipping soul underneath" that one participant told me characterised his department. Similarly



Plate 4.

the basketball hoop and cardboard cut out (bottom right) conveyed the department's sense of humour for the person who chose to photograph them. By contrast, the image of the "cigarette smoker from above" (bottom left) was made to represent the smoker's perception of his exclusion from community because he was one of few smokers in the department and so he smoked alone (this was the beginning of a much deeper discussion of his isolation). The blurred photograph (top right) was made deliberately to try and convey to me the "warm fuzzy" emotional connection its photographer had to his work colleagues while the Russian Doll sculptures (middle left) were iconic for several participants as objects around which the department had united in hatred even attempting to destroy them. I have already mentioned the pictures of the locked doors (bottom centre) and this particular one signified the participant's pride in what she saw as "being locked in somewhere really special". Finally, the bags of biscuits (middle right) and the table football game (centre photograph) were given as examples of social rituals – namely "play time" and "coffee time" both of which created, maintained and symbolised a sense of community for these participants. Although the individual meanings attached to the images differ, the abstract concept – in this case community – is evoked through all regardless. Perhaps more importantly, my written description

of these meanings is undeniably enhanced when juxtaposed with the photographs to which it refers – in short, the communication of multiplicity is made richer when presented as an “image-text” as Mitchell (1994) has advocated.

### Conclusions – developing practice

So what of this for the practice of critical management and – in the present case – accounting research? How might we carry this forward into our everyday research and teaching practice? As with any emerging or developing methodology, a key issue is familiarising others with methods and approaches that have been found to be useful in fieldwork, and this paper is part of that project (see also Warren, 2002b, Buchanan, 2001) as are the recent inclusion of photography and the visual in international conference streams (see “introduction” above). Visual research methods are also notably absent from student methodology texts, reduced to a chapter on “observation” at best. Prosser (1998, p. 98) found that only one classic text on ethnography devoted more than 1 per cent of its content to a discussion of photography and film, and where images were included in these texts they were predominantly black and white line drawing for illustrative purposes. This is an area that needs to be addressed and literature that explores image-based and visual research practice as part of an introduction to methodology is now beginning to appear (see Bryman and Bell, 2004). In my own teaching I have tried to counter this by including “visual methods” lectures on my research methods course and am delighted to be supervising an MSc HRM student who at the time of writing is using photo-voice as a method to research work-life balance issues in a land based agricultural college, and two undergraduates who have chosen to use visual methods in their projects.

Publishing research incorporating photographs initially appears more of a challenge. The limitations of publishing print-based journals and the high costs of colour printing mean that photographs can generally only be printed in black and white, and instructions for authors require “tables and figures” – very few OS journals explicitly mention photographs – to be of a high definition and in some cases “camera ready”. However, when I presented an earlier version of this paper at the British Academy of Management, journal editors were quick to reassure that they would be pleased to discuss more unusual image-based submissions with authors on a one-to-one basis. However, my point remains that such submissions are unlikely to be as straightforward as plain text which does little to encourage their production. One way to circumvent these, probably insurmountable, difficulties is the opportunities afforded by multimedia and the Internet. CD-ROMs and web-based journals allow for full colour photographs to be embedded in the text alongside explanations or quotations by the photographer (Pink, 2001). However, digital images are large files – affecting download speeds, storage space and the ease with which they can be sent by electronic mail.

All this raises the question whether it is necessary to actually include photographs in the finished research paper. This hinges on what the images are intended to convey to the reader. I have argued here that research participants’ voices can be raised through the use of photography in two ways. The first – as a collaborative method in the research process itself allowing greater “ownership” of the data by the respondent – does not necessarily require any of the images to actually be present in the published article. However, the second – the photograph’s punctuating immediacy – clearly



does. Similarly, photographs used as narrative or to convey a richer sense of the research arena (I am deliberately avoiding the word “evidence” here) must be included in the finished article or their value as communicative tools is lost (Warren, 2002b). It is these uses of photography that poses the greatest challenge while academic research is disseminated, judged and prized on the basis of (largely) print-based publications. Images and photographs are, of course, far easier to display at conferences – the poster session, for example, has a long history in the conference arena and increasing numbers of conference organisers are welcoming alternative formats for paper submission.

Despite these difficulties, researchers – myself included – are managing to use photography as a research method in their work and for all the reasons I discuss here, I believe that photography has much to offer organization studies of all kinds, particularly those that take a more critical approach. In studying organizations as cultures we are first and foremost anthropologists, or at least anthropological sociologists/social commentators. These disciplines have been at the forefront of photographic approaches to research for some years now and I assert that we can learn much from them. As critical scholars, we are politically committed to balancing the hegemonic system of business and management through our critical interpretations of established orthodoxy (Parker, 2002) as well as being “good” researchers who treat their research participants with “cohumanity” as Schroeder (2003b) remarks. As I hope to have demonstrated here, photo-voice techniques can play a valid part in this.

### Notes

1. Details of the consultancy and its work can be found at [www.visual-management.biz](http://www.visual-management.biz)
2. The author is indebted to one anonymous reviewer of this paper for the prompt to think through this issue in more detail and for providing the idea for the example that has been used.
3. The American Heritage dictionary of the English Language 2000 [www.dictionary.com](http://www.dictionary.com)
4. Note that the author suggests photographs enable the exploration of abstract concepts – there is no suggestion that these concepts can ever be photographed directly as if they were objects.
5. The author is leaving aside, here, the possibility of false, manipulated or staged photographs and for now attending to the simple unadulterated photo – although in the modern age of increasing digital and electronic sophistication these are issues that are increasingly important to bear in mind.
6. Although it is the sofa that is the material memory here and not the photograph *per se*, photographs in this methodological approach ostensibly “remove” the object to a time and place where it is more convenient to discuss it. A busy office foyer would have precluded the tape-recording of in-depth discussion for example.

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