

Analysing photographs in qualitative research



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Introduction

In contemporary academia, where an ever-increasing emphasis is placed on participatory and creative research designs, analysis continues to be one of the most intimidating steps in social science research. Many experienced and novice researchers from postgraduate taught through to professorial level ask their participants to supply photographs as part of their data collection, only to then not analyse the photographs but to merely use them as 'a way into a conversation'. In my experience as research methods trainer, the reason for the reluctance to engage with visual materials is a particular level of uncertainty or anxiety around analysis.

The 'aha' moment I try to facilitate is simple but powerful: analysing images is not fundamentally different from analysing texts. Once learners see this, a whole domain of research materials opens up to them.

There's no magic: visual and textual analysis share the same logic

Researchers often treat images as mysterious or requiring special expertise. In reality, the underlying questions of qualitative analysis remain the same: What is here? What does it mean? How does it relate to the context? How does it support or challenge the research questions?

The difference between textual and visual data is only superficial. Textual data offers words to read; visual data offers things to see. But in both cases, researchers need to describe and interpret carefully and transparently. Only, with text, people trust themselves to interpret without overinterpreting because they have a lifetime of experience of reading and interpreting text. With images, people often feel that they lack that experience, although in truth they don't. Nowadays, we are surrounded by still and moving images more than ever before:

advertisements; social media posts; memes; and caricatures. They all rely on their consumers knowing and understanding visual language. Making this equivalence explicit is the first key move to spark the 'lightbulb' moment, as this makes learners realise, they already have interpretive skills they can transfer.

A simple two-step approach: 'What do you see?' and 'What do you make of it?'

Another issue with the interpretation of visuals is that people often look at an image, and interpret it straight away, not realising that they actually do so. As a result, when they sit down in the hope to analyse a photograph, they have practically nowhere to go because they have already jumped to interpretations.

To break down that barrier, I introduce a straightforward process that demystifies visual analysis using the two questions: What do you see? and What do you make of it?

By introducing visual analysis as a two-step process with a descriptive level responding to 'What do you see?' learners are encouraged to slow down and reflect on whether they jump to conclusions early.

At this level of interpretation, researchers are asked to provide careful, grounded description and to observe details without rushing to analysis. The task is to focus on naming colours, objects, composition, expressions, spatial arrangements, or the positioning of light sources.

Once the descriptive level is exhausted, researchers should focus on interpreting the observations they have made to respond to the question: 'What do you make of it?'

Interpretation at this level requires the researchers to connect the visual to theory, context, potential participant meaning and to consider multiple possible, even opposing, readings.

This two-part question acts as a scaffold. It slows learners down and makes their reasoning visible. It also mirrors what they already do with textual data: quoting and then interpreting. This approach consistently generates 'aha' reactions because it reassures people they already know how to analyse. Now they're just applying it to a new medium.

The approach in practice

Whether I teach in-person or online workshops, I always bring examples for learners to engage with. I share a photograph and set the task 'to analyse the photograph'. Learners usually dive right into the process without asking details about the context of the photograph and without focussing on the two questions on the slide. In small groups, they usually agree on a generic interpretation suggesting that the photograph is of a woman who is depressed and/or fatigued. It is only through the plenary discussion, where I specifically ask to respond to the question 'What do you see?' that learners realise that we cannot actually be sure that the person in the photograph is a woman. The collaborative element makes the interpretive process explicit, and the discussion reveals how different perspectives and information about the context enrich analysis. When I share details relating to the context of the photograph, I also emphasise how close to the truth their interpretation of the photograph is without even having known about the contextual details.

For early-career researchers in academia or the third sector, who often work with participatory or creative methods, this two-step approach is especially valuable. When participants in their research produce images or creative outputs, researchers want to analyse them rigorously without flattening participant meaning. The two-step framework preserves that respect: first attending closely to what participants chose to show, then interpreting thoughtfully in context.

So, although I approach the teaching of analysing photographs as a linear, two-step process, there are many more implicit considerations embedded within this framework, which we explore together in our plenary discussions. One such underlying question is, 'What does all of this mean?' This question reflects the deeper interpretive work that must accompany methodological rigour. Drawing meaningful conclusions requires more than technical execution. It demands engagement with context, theoretical grounding, and complementary sources. These elements, though not always overt in my instructional model, are essential for producing insights that are both valid and relevant. As such, my teaching must also cultivate the critical reflexivity needed to navigate the complexities that lie beyond procedural steps. This is why I also model reflexivity, acknowledging that our interpretations are situated. We discuss whose meanings are prioritised, and how to check interpretations with participants in participatory designs.

Conclusion

The goal in all of this is to demystify analysis. There is no special, arcane skill needed to work with visual materials other than what we have a lifetime of experience of. It is the same commitment to careful, transparent description and interpretation that underpins all qualitative research.

By teaching researchers to ask, 'What do you see?' and 'What do you make of it?', we open the door to richer data sources, while keeping the analysis rigorous. That moment of realising 'I can do this' is the lightbulb I am after.

Further reading

Brown, N. & Collins, J. (2021). Systematic visuo-textual analysis: a framework for analysing visual and textual data. *The Qualitative Report*, 26(4), 1275-1290.

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