Chapter 1

The Return to Experience: Psychology and the Visual

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The Visual has Always been there: An (In)Visible History of Continuity in Psychology?

# Psychology has a long-standing concern with the visual and with technologies of visualisation. This stretches beyond the specialised subdiscipline of the psychology of perception; it is instead part of the conceptual roots of the discipline as a whole. The emerging visual technology of photography was a central part of how the nascent discipline of psychology established its scientific credibility in the late nineteenth century – through the visual recording of scientific observation. For example, in The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*,* Charles Darwin made comparisons across photographs and illustrations of children and animals as the evidential base for his theory of universal emotional expressions. This approach greatly influenced the growth of Comparative Psychology in the late nineteenth century (Richards, 2002). Moreover, photographs and minute observations of his son William Erasmus Darwin, which Darwin and his wife collected as a ‘developmental diary’ from his birth, are arguably the template from which Developmental Psychology established itself (Fitzpatrick and Bringmann, 1997).

The use of visual records to differentiate species and meticulously categorise plants and animals into various types and subtypes became the hallmark of nineteenth-century natural science (Daston & Lunbeck, 2011). It marked the systematisation of observation, indicating accuracy, evidential recording, and careful attention to detail. What is measurable, therefore, is assumed to be what is observable. In the case of psychology, the fledgling discipline sought to separate itself from philosophy, and the myriad metaphysical difficulties which appeared to prohibit a ‘science of mind’, by emulating the natural sciences such as functional physiology as far as possible (Richards, 2002). Recent successes at that time in physiology had arisen from mapping functional connections between anatomy and behaviour. This same logic was applied to what Gustav Fechner (1860) called ‘an exact theory of the functional relationships between body and soul and between the bodily, mental, somatic and physiological world’ (cited in Meischner-Metge and Meischner, 1997: 102).

Two technologies of visualisation made this Functional Psychology possible. The first of these was the development of time-measuring devices such as the kymograph and chronoscope. This made it possible to record the time taken for the perception of stimuli and the execution of a response. Careful manipulation of stimuli under controlled laboratory conditions along with precise recording of the timing of responses became the basis of psychological experimentation (see Danziger, 1990). The second, and no less important, was the use of ‘graphic notation’ and ‘chronophotography’ by Etienne-Jules Marey and Eadweard Muybridge to study the behaviour of animals and subsequently humans (see Rabinbach, 1992). Chronophotography is a process of taking rapid exposures (around a dozen per second) on either a single photographic plate or on a series of cameras. The aesthetically striking images which result – such as Muybridge's famous photographs of galloping horses – provide a detailed visual description of the body's movement in space over time. This impressive oeuvre clearly anticipated moving film and the culture of viewing more generally. Muybridge's descriptions also proved invaluable for Industrial Psychology (e.g. the time and motion studies conducted by Frank and Lillian Gilbreth) which found them to be an inspirational ‘visual vocabulary’ for the project of restructuring and retraining the bodily movements of workers in order to maximise efficiency (Corbett, 2008).

Photography also greatly influenced the development of Psychopathology and Clinical Psychology. Visual categorisation of different personality types and the categorisation of the ‘mad’, ‘subnormal’ or ‘criminal’ was performed by assembling photographic arrays in which purported mental differences could be made legible to the ‘trained eye’ (Jackson, 1995). Photographs were also commonly used to lend visual credibility to diagnostic categories of mental defects or ‘feeblemindedness’. Through careful visual recording, the spaces between a person's eyes, the size of a forehead or the body posture of an asylum inmate could provide supposed direct evidence for an observable and thus categorical difference in the person under study from a ‘typical’ person. The multiple exposure technique used by Marey – where a series of images are exposed on the same photographic plate – was also used by Francis Galton (see Draaisma, 2000). Galton argued that his ‘compound photographs’ of criminals and of ‘consumptives’ taken one-by-one onto the same photographic plate showed their common features, since individual or non-common features would be effectively washed out during the process. The technique was, Galton claimed, a sort of ‘pictorial statistics’ where norms of human development and diversity could be visually represented. This idea fed into popular notions of normality and abnormality around mental health which gained currency in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century (Porter, 2003). Visual techniques such as the Rorschach ink blot tests – surely one of the most recognisable representations of psychology – and the Thematic Apperception Test (see Cramer, 1996) were and still are used to provide insight into a person's personality type, his/her unconscious motivational state, or used to detect signs of ‘mental illness’[[1]](#footnote-2). Finally, contemporary forms of visualising the differences between ‘normal’ and ‘abnormal’ individuals are now reported to be ‘captured’ in the magnetic resonance techniques commonly used in psychiatry, behavioural genetics and neuro-psychology. However, the dangerous over-interpretation of these visual markers – that they represent enduring and static biological markers of diseases and brain dysfunction – should be approached with extreme caution (Bentall, 2009; Cromby, Harper & Reavey, 2013).

Social Psychology has throughout its history used film and photography as a means of documenting research and shoring up the ‘face validity’ of its pronouncements. The images of participants presented in Stanley Milgram's (2005) infamous studies on obedience in the early 1960s have long been treated as a valid demonstration of his claims, despite longstanding concerns around the rhetorical framing of these images by Milgram and his interpreters (Gibson, 2019). However, close analyses of the statistical evidence (and the ecological validity of the experimental set-up) about the tendency for ‘ordinary’ people to follow orders that can lead to the harming of others is somewhat overshadowed by these powerful images. Similarly the video recordings taken by Philip Zimbardo and colleagues of the Stanford Prison Experiment (SPE) have been promoted as powerful testimony to the ease with which people take on the aggressive or passive behaviour in their respective roles as prisoner or guard (although in this case video and audio records of the experiment recently made available have led to calls for a significant re-evaluation of Zimbardo’s claims – see Reicher et al, 2018) . This material was captured using the sort of ‘hidden camera’ techniques that have become the mainstay of reality-TV shows such as Candid Camera or Big Brother. Interestingly Zimbardo himself has claimed that Alan Funt, creator of the first reality-TV show Candid Camera, was ‘one of the most creative, intuitive social psychologists on the planet’ (Zimbardo et al., 2000: 197). Kurt Lewin also used hidden camera techniques to make a series of films which focused on the spaces of child development, the best known being the 1931 film The Child and the World. This film work led to a meeting with the Russian auteur Sergei Eisenstein (director of Russian classics including Battleship Potemkin and October) and subsequent plans for a psychological laboratory to be established in Moscow in collaboration with the local state film academy (Lück, 1997: 285). To summarise, an historical analysis of the role of the visual within psychology can reveal its instrumental effects in providing the context for ‘the psychological’ to become observable and, therefore, measurable and more ‘scientific’. In using visual images as evidence, and in employing visual technologies to increase the accuracy and thus the status of psychological observations, the discipline of psychology has also made its findings more publicly accessible. And yet, despite these noteworthy uses of visual images throughout the history of psychology, there has been very little in the way of the development of methodologies attempting to accommodate the visual on its own terms. This is especially difficult to understand with regards to qualitative methodologies that claim to capture more readily, meaning making in everyday experience. To understand why this is so, it is necessary to review briefly the emergence of qualitative research in psychology to grasp why it is that everyday experience has been in the grip of language-based methodologies for the past four decades.

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# Qualitative Research in Psychology; experience, discourse and Visual Myopia

# During my time as an undergraduate and postgraduate student in Sheffield, in the North of England, I was fortunate enough to be taught and supervised by a leading phenomenologist (the wonderful Peter Ashworth), discourse analysts (the super Brendan Gough and Kathy Doherty) and a leading feminist research in the field of health and gender (the marvellous Paula Nicolson). This methodological and theoretical plurality led to a delicious confusion and excitement for the potential of a multi-layered account of experience – an excitement that has yet to dissipate.

# This exposure to multiplicity was formative in the development of my subsequent work on the felt quality of our experience, its narrative-discursive construction, its emplacement in the world and the political consequences of being located within particular geographical, social and cultural landscapes. For me, the issue was never about choosing qualitative over quantitative, it was how to best capture the layers of lived experiences and answer questions of theoretical and political relevance.

# Though there remain many scholars seemingly determined to disparage qualitative research in psychology, it is now well established in its subdisciplines (critical, community, social, health, forensic, clinical, educational), even though it can still be positioned on the margins of the mainstream. At best, qualitative research slips into mainstream circles as an adjunct of ‘mixed methods’ approaches, rather than standing on its own as a mode through which the ‘psychological’ can be studied. Largely this is due to its overarching focus on human meaning making, rather than the establishment of generalisable laws. Qualitative researchers continue to pursue the variety of ways in which people make and interpret meaning, make sense of and feel their way through the experiences they encounter and how they tell stories about their lives and communicate with others (Willig, 2001; Parker, 2004; Stainton Rogers and Willig, 2008; 2017). The aim of this approach is to explore the rich texture of experience and its interpretive possibilities, not only for research purposes, but in the service of social change (see Parker, 2004). The participant, and not the researcher thus provides the focus for meaning generation and is heralded an active agent within the research process – the antithesis of an objectivist scientific approach.

# In the United Kingdom, there exists a range of theoretical traditions adopted to make sense of what it means to study human meaning making and experience. Phenomenology, post-structuralism and postmodernism in particular have dominated the scene, situating experience in first-person perspectives and/or discourse. Furthermore, a-theoretical approaches are now widely adopted within mixed methods studies, where qualitative research is used as a means to describe processes of change in treatment interventions and primarily used as a means to ‘back up’ quantitative data (sometimes known as a ‘confirmatory’ approach – Creswell, 2013). Whether theoretical or a-theoretical, accounts of experience are unified in locating experience at the level of the spoken word.

# The take up of post-structuralism, in particular, has been somewhat esoteric and has tended to promote the linguistic and the discursive, above other modalities (e.g. visual, sound, affect). There are a number of reasons underpinning this. First of all, Anglo-North American critical social science has been greatly influenced by ordinary language philosophy (e.g. Wittgenstein, Austin, Ryle) and the development of linguistically oriented ‘phenomenological sociology’ in the form of ethnomethodology. It is notable, for example that three of the major figures in Anglo critical psychology of the 1970s and 80s (i.e. Ken Gergen, Rom Harre and John Shotter) were deeply immersed in the work of Wittgenstein. Second, the reception of the semiotic tradition in the UK has tended to focus on a narrowly linguistic reading of De Saussure rather than the huge variety of other forms of semiotics which deal with other modalities of understanding and expression – such as C. S. Peirce's pragmatist semiotics, A. J. Greimas's comparative/structuralist semiotics, Thomas Sebeok's zoosemiotics/biosemiotics and Felix Guattari's schizoanalytic semiotics. Finally, key post-structuralist authors such as Derrida and Foucault have mistakenly been read as discourse theorists. Derrida's (1976) phrase ‘there is nothing outside the text’ (p. 158) has been itself read outside of the text as a claim that there is no intelligibility outside of discourse, when in fact it is a highly nuanced technical point about the hermeneutics (interpretation) of philosophical discourse and the metaphysics of graphism (writing in a very broad sense).

The treatment of Foucault is also of particular note, not least because a methodology known as ‘Foucauldian Discourse Analysis’ is now recognised in UK qualitative research (Willig, 2013). The method draws inspiration from The Archaeology of Knowledge, where Foucault makes the claim that ‘discourse constructs the objects of which it speaks’ (Foucault, 1972/2008: 54). As with Derrida, this very playful claim is made as part of a broader set of arguments, in this case with the history of ideas and Frege's philosophy of language. Moreover, the book, along with the lecture The Discourse on Language from the same period, make it abundantly clear that at this time Foucault was concerned explicitly with the relationship between the discursive and the ‘extra-discursive’. This concern came to full fruition in Foucault's subsequent investigations of the relationship of knowledge and power, where the visual plays a central role in terms of the organisation of bodies (i.e. panopticism) and the representation of the population in terms which enable its management as a productive and reproductive force (i.e. biopolitics) (Foucault, 1977; 2008). To selectively read Foucault as a discourse theorist is then to miss the richness and subtlety of his thinking for psychology (for a ‘non-discursive’ reading of Foucault and psychology, see Brown and Stenner, 2009).

Similarly, within phenomenological traditions in psychology, such as interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA), though the emphasis is on felt, first person accounts of experience, thick description and the idiographical nature of experience and its expressive content *in the world*, much of the research until recently has based itself on an analyses of verbal accounts only (see Boden & Larkin, 2019).

Despite the theoretical or descriptive orientation of qualitative work, it seems that the majority still overly rely on *spoken* semi-structured and unstructured interview data, natural conversations, focus group discussions, diaries or written reports, which focus on either the broad sense-making patterns, or the minute detail of the way in which the language is structured and performed in social interactions. Recent developments in conversation analysis (CA), using video data to record verbal and non-verbal contexts in interactional exchanges are gaining ground (Green, 2010), however, and Helen Lomax’s work in this volume highlights the strengths of a CA approach that considers the entire interactional exchange, moving beyond language alone. What many qualitative techniques share in common nonetheless, is a reliance on the spoken or written word as the only source of data – a fundamentally mono-modal approach. This approach is problematic for a number of reasons, not least its obfuscation of the immediate material settings that foreground lived experience (McGrath & Reavey, 2018), the feeling and affectual aspects of experience (Cromby, 2015; Stenner, 2018) and its multi-sensorial nature. In other words, the ‘world’ from which experience emerges should sit at the centre of our studies of experience.

In the following section, examples from visual research in psychology will illuminate the contextual and situated nature of meaning making and lived experience and how experience might be more fully captured in all of its rich embodied and spatial texture.

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# Why Qualitative Psychology could use visual approaches: The Potential for Multi-Modal Approaches

# To date, visual approaches in psychology have tackled a range of experiential issues, including embodiment (Del Busso, 2009; 2011; Gillies et al., 2005; Brown et al, 2015), violence and abuse (Kanyeredzi et al, 2015), health and illness (Radley and Taylor, 2003a, 2003b; Radley, 2009), remembering (Middleton and Edwards, 1990; Radley, 1990; Middleton and Brown, 2005; Brookfield, Brown and Reavey, 2008; Brown & Reavey, 2015), identity and appearance (Gleeson and Frith, 2006; Capdevila & Lazard, this volume) and mental health and distress (Silver and Reavey, 2010; McGrath, 2012; Reavey et al, 2019; Tucker et al, 2019). This multi-modal work has combined visual and verbal data to create a richer picture of the topic under study, using various visual techniques, from the use of already existing images (e.g. in the form of family photographs, here referred to as photo-elicitation) to the use of images generated within the context of the research, here referred to as photo-production [[2]](#footnote-3) (participant-generated photos, photo-diaries, paintings and drawings), through short films and social media more broadly. What these authors share is the acknowledgement that (a) individuals experience the world not only through narrative, but other sensorial forms such as visual images that are situated in specific settings (space) and bodies (embodiment) and (b) individuals are already using multi-modal forms of expression and communication when not only (re)presenting experiences, but feeling their experiences in everyday life. The renewed interest in affect and emotion in psychology (e.g. Cromby, 2015) has been influenced by social psychology’s observation that social and cultural practices shape affect and feeling – the visual of course is a large part of this (Reavey & Johnson, 2017). As people become more proficient in their use of communication technologies to convey ideas and feelings and engage in forms of social interaction, relationality and subjectivity, it is ever more vital that researchers in psychology engage with them, to better understand lived experience in contemporary settings.

How we use and interpret the visual in research, of course, is in turn informed by the kinds of questions we wish to ask and the theoretical frameworks that inform those questions. Authors in this volume have adopted visual techniques in a variety of ways to address complex issues relating to the study of experience; from phenomenology, social constructionism, process theory and psychoanalysis. By outlining how visual methods are used to address particular experiential issues throughout the volume, we can begin to see their utility in taking the study of experience beyond textual representations and into the realm of multi-modality. We will also see how researchers have created a space to examine ‘hard to reach’ issues, such as the environmental settings that individuals experientially inhabit and the emotional and embodied elements of experience that are always present but rarely directly acknowledged (Brown et al., 2008; McGrath & Reavey, 2018). In visual research using painting, maps, drawing, photography and film, my colleagues and I have explored topics ranging from mental health, space, embodiment, memory and ageing; here we have also found that the visual can successfully work to disrupt well-rehearsed present narratives on a topic (Gillies et al., 2005; Brookfield et al., 2008; Reavey, 2008; Silver and Reavey, 2010; McGrath, Mullarkey & Reavey, 2019). When confronting a photograph from their past, participants can suddenly be faced with and are able to imagine, the emotions or their embodied states from that time, such that the past can enter into the present moment and create a new narrative, or a more complex, layered account (especially if the re-emergence of the past collides with narratives of the present). This is not to suggest that the visual *catches* the person out or *forces* them to tell the truth about the past, but that it might serve to initiate a more complex and layered account; one that is more seeped in emotional resonances and reminders and one in which the setting (the actual place) of the experience is brought into sharper view. In one research group meeting on embodiment,[[3]](#footnote-4) my colleagues and I were looking at photographs of ourselves, for the purpose of studying embodiment; it was of interest that one of the group members was genuinely surprised by how the photograph of a particular time in their life disrupted their initial narrative memory of that period in time. Before viewing the image, they had spoken about this period as a ‘messed up’ time in their life and yet the photo reminded them of the complexity of this memory; in the photo they appeared well presented and celebratory. Thus, the account became more complex and more layered as a result of combining the visual with verbal recollection. The visual jolted them into an alternative narrative position, which cohered and collided with their initial narrative recollection. I would argue this collision is productive, in so many ways.

Part of the reason for greater opportunities for ‘emotionality’ (explored below) is an emphasis visual researchers place upon participation and agency within the research process. In many visual studies, participants are actively encouraged to make their own choices about the photographs they take and/or select to discuss in any subsequent interview (Mitchell et al., 2005; Radley and Taylor, 2003b). In studies using drawing or mapping, participants can actively produce images that contain both direct and metaphorical references, serving as a useful way to unlock contradictory or difficult emotions, using interpretative phenomenological analysis and/or process theory (see Boden & Larkin, 2019; McGrath et al, 2019 – see Boden & Larkin and McGrath & Mullarkey, this volume).

In other words, participants are more involved in what is seen, as well as how the images are used in the research process. This in itself can provide a space for participants to focus on images that have emotional resonance. However, the emotional resonance of some images may also lead to active avoidance by the participant, especially in times of loss or grief, so it is vital that as analysts we do not assume that images will necessarily evoke emotions; and if they do, we cannot assume individuals will want to pursue them in a research context. In the next section, the emergence of interest in affect and emotion, as well as space in studies of experience has contributed to a call for qualitative research to be more mindful of the multi-modal nature of our lived experiences and the need for a multi-modal methodological approach.

Situating and feeling experience: multi-modal perspectives

It is self-evident that lived experience is multi-layered and multi-sensorial – phenomenologists have built this into their theorisation of experience as a set of meaning making practices. And process theorists, following Whitehead among others, have highlighted how the person and the world are not separate and that feeling precedes thought (see Brown & Stenner, 2009 and Stenner, 2018 for an excellent discussion of the adoption of process thinking within the social psychology of experience). Rather than entangle ourselves in philosophical wranglings over the nature of experience, I wish instead to discuss how considerations of these theoretical traditions might lead to a more nuanced and rich methodological orientation. Despite differences between phenomenological and process thought, there are some interesting similarities regarding the need to consider the world and experience as entirely connected – at least in Merleau Ponty’s later writing (1969 – for a detailed discussion of the relationship between Merleau-Ponty and Whitehead, see Hamrick & Der Veken, 2011).

Merleau-Ponty, one of the twentieth century’s greatest phenomenological thinkers, was keen to stress how perception, thought and feeling are emotionally driven, through interconnections with others, in space and time. ‘Thinking’ and ‘Language’ perspectives must incorporate this fundamental emotionality in order to embrace their interconnected and dynamic nature. Similarly Whitehead insisted on studying experience as part of the natural order and the emergence of feeling prior to thought (Hamrick & Der Veken, 2011).

[[4]](#footnote-5)This relates both to the use of the visual in ‘real-time space’, through the examination of how people use the visual in ‘live’ social interactions; or in the context of ‘ﬁnished and ﬁnite’ images that can be used as an anchor for present discussions (Iedema, 2003: 30). Many researchers now recognise how visual media is productive as a reflective of lived experience; of self, other people and the world (physical and virtual space) (Reavey & Johnson, 2017). Projects within psychology and allied disciplines have formed part of a wider objective of developing an understanding of experience that explicitly attends to the material/virtual spaces in which human experiences emerge and flow (Ingold, 1996; Brown & Reavey, 2015). Furthermore, the perceived failures of wholly linguistic epistemologies, to analytically attend to what many consider to be central tenets of our experience, namely how we feel our way in the world, have led to a renewed interest in analytical pluralism, including visual methods (Cromby, 2015).

The rise of affect and emotion in qualitative research: being ‘seized’

This ‘turn to affect, emotion and feeling’ as a central analytical orientation toward experience of the world has necessitated a rethink of methodologies more generally. The term ‘affect’ has several meanings, commonly tied to specific disciplinary frameworks. Drawing on neuroscience, ecological psychology, feminist and queer theory, certain qualitative researchers are now oriented towards analyzing more of the experiential landscape including the study of affect and emotion in relation to embodiment (how one feels in one’s body), the physical space or setting (which may of course include virtual space – social media etc.) and the interdependency between ourselves and other bodies and environments. Affect is not clearly structured, but rather felt as an intensity and unstructured potential for action. Affect’ in Spinozist terms, is the term for the ‘actions and passions’ our body experiences in relation to other bodies[[5]](#footnote-6). A ‘body’ can be defined here as an organic or inorganic thing which acts upon us and on which we can act. To put it in James J. Gibson’s terms[[6]](#footnote-7), we might say that affect is the ‘feeling’ of affordance – our sense of the ways in which we might engage with some other body, what it offers, what we can do with it and through it, and what it might do to us (Brown & Reavey, 2015: 12). If affect is the entirety of this assemblage, then feeling is the sensation that we ourselves encounter (the personal sensation), which we then check against previous sensations encountered over time. Emotion[[7]](#footnote-8) on the other hand is considered to be the cognised and socio-cultural rationalisation of affect and feeling, wherein we organise and make sense of feeling, in the context of culturally constructed meanings, signs and expectations (Stenner, 2015). Though often used interchangeably, concerns about how we feel our way in the world, and how the world offers us sensations to feel. One argument for using visual images as a means to capture affect is the potential for the visual to seize or prick us. In Camera Lucida, Roland Barthes’ describes this as a ‘punctum’ – which can literally mean ‘to wound’, as the visual usefully steers us away from too generic or ready-made narratives of experience, thus providing access to a more specific and intense moment or feeling – a feeling that is grounded in our experience. 'It is this element which rises front the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me. (Roland Barthes, Camera Lucida, pp. 27) Barthes discusses this potential for the image to seize us through his description of one specific photograph (The Winder Garden) of his mother, which formed part of a deep visual memory of her. Via the image, this emotional seizure provided access to memories which were not otherwise obvious, accessible or narratable. Barthes thus distinguishes between provides two terms for directing an analysis on an image. These terms are the studium and punctum. The studium is identified by Barthes as a kind of general and easily narratable aspect of an image. A photograph might directly portray something about the historical or social context of the image, where the photograph was taken. Barthes describes how the *studium* means that one can read the photograph as a historical and political document, as well as a cultural testament to the gestures and habits of past societies (Camera Lucida, pp.26).

Emotions evoked and engaged through the visual

Researchers in psychology have observed how images might afford the possibility of accessing the un/speakable and to evoke emotions that are otherwise put to one side, or reconfigured to fit with a well-rehearsed narrative (Reavey, 2011, Cromby, 2015).

Charity campaigns use powerful visual cues to incite emotional reactions, and incite people to financially dig deep. Without visual cues, it is difficult to see how many charities would survive, as potential donators must witness and emotionally respond to the difficulties their benefactors endure (Radley, 2011). Literally, they must enter into and momentarily share their experience of pain and suffering, otherwise they remain a more of a distant ‘other’; their story cast to one side in a sea of text. In visual research, images are used to remind participants of feelings associated with a particular event, because they have perhaps chosen to move on from, or have actively forgotten a difficult or traumatic experience (Frith, 2011; Brown & Reavey, 2015). Given the majority of qualitative researchers deal with participant memories when they conduct research, it is worth noting how emotions can be examined for their complexity and multiplicity when more aspects of the experiential field (visual, sound, tactile) are incorporated.

In everyday life of course, individuals can use the visual to willfully engage with emotions, as opposed to avoiding or forgetting them. A video of a wedding, or a child’s first steps may be played over to activate distant or emotionally intense memories which serve a particular purpose in the present - to reignite a bond, or sense of duty. It is unsurprising that photographic and video footage of this kind is part of the domestic assemblage in industrialized societies, where the impetus to remember and how things feel can be intrinsic to the sustaining of collective memory and familial identity[[8]](#footnote-9) (Kuhn, 1995/2002; Brown & Reavey, 2015).

Visual researchers in psychology have embraced the power of the visual to incite emotion and bring feeling to the conversational fore in an interview or focus group (see Frogett; Langridge et al, this volume for contrasting psychoanalytic and phenomenological approaches to this, respectively). Part of this project has been to directly involve the setting in which affect and emotions emerge, following a Spinozist and/or process tradition of affect theory (see McGrath, 2012; Smith & Tucker, 2014; Brown & Reavey, 2015). In recent work on affect and atmosphere in psychiatric settings, my colleagues and I have used photographs produced by staff and service users in hospital, and observation of sounds on the ward, to explore with participants how feelings and thoughts emerge and move through the spaces they and others occupy across time; and how such environments afford (make possible) particular thoughts and feelings at given moments (Brown et al, 2019; Kanyeredezi et al, 2019; Reavey et al, 2018; Tucker et a, 2019). We argue that this enables a situated reading of how distress is interactionally and spatially interdependent with the affordances of the hospital setting itself. This rich and multi-layered analysis of the service users’ experience is only possible, we would argue, once we attend to the multiple experiential modalities that include the visual, verbal and sonic, as an interdependent nexus.

A powerful example of how the visual can bring to the fore difficult to reach emotions can be found in Radley & Taylor’s (1993) photo-production study of hospital patients’ recovery on a general hospital ward. The study involved participants taking pictures of the hospital spaces where they were recovering, as well as an interview one-month after they had left hospital. Radley & Taylor facilitated participants in using the photographs to navigate the interview discussion, and found that an image itself rouses the participant towards addressing inaccessible feelings, such as fear, frustration and anger. Other studies have used visual cues to move from overly generic narratives to more specific and detailed emotional narratives that are complex and multi-layered.

A photo-narrative study with Japanese-Canadians interned during the second-world war revealed how different kinds of memories and emotions to the ones initially spoken could be invoked using visual cues. Kunimoto (2004) notes how photographs were able to elicit accounts that were far more emotional, specific and rich; accounts which contrasted significantly with the ‘dry’ narratives offered in their absence. In this study, the visual brought to mind deeply concealed feelings of pain, betrayal and shame, even though the images both betrayed and captured participants’ experience. According to Kunimoto, however, the image does not contain the emotion; rather the mutual intertwining of the visual and verbal narrative enables the exploration of the often contradictory and taut movement of emotions, as they flow through autobiographical and collective memory.

It is now well established that autobiographical memory is heavily shaped by our sense of self and emotion in the present (Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000; Berntsen & Rubin, 2012). Images can be useful ways in which to examine the interrelationship between the past and the present, and the emotional fluctuations and changes, as well as the similarities that continue through time. A more direct exposure to a past (a photograph, for example) can facilitate a discussion on how certain feelings might be both connected and disconnected to how I am feeling now (Brown & Reavey, 2014), allowing the researcher and participant to explore a richer and more diverse engagement with feeling and emotion through time.

The possibility for exploring emotions and feelings across different developmental time periods was explored by Silver & Reavey, in a study of selfhood with individuals diagnosed[[9]](#footnote-10) with Body Dysmorphic Disorder (BDD)[[10]](#footnote-11). Silver and Reavey (2010) adopted a visual narrative approach, using both drawing and photo-elicitation to explore with participants, aspects of their appearance across different developmental time periods. What Silver & Reavey found particularly interesting was the way in which participants moved away from accounting for their distress in the present and brought an intensely emotional account of their idealisation of their childhood self, on which present judgements about facial disfigurement were grounded. (Silver & Reavey, 2010). The emotional connection between past and present had been absent up until this point in the clinical literature. Silver & Reavey argue that visual methods were particularly apposite to examine the emotional connection between past and present, as participants directly accessed a visible portrait of the self physically (and thus emotionally) changing over time, enabling greater opportunity for emotional seizure.

# Viewing Experience From the Perspective of Time and Space.

# A further potential of visual methods is in their capacity to explore the spatial dimensions of experience. Almost all qualitative methods involve asking participants to recall and reflect on experiences and, when using purely verbal methods, this organises such narratives exclusively in terms of time. Visual methods can disrupt such temporally oriented narratives by encouraging participants to reflect on the social and material contexts of their experiences. Not just *when* but also *where* experiences emerge (see also McGrath & Reavey, 2018 & McGrath, Mullarkey & Reavey, 2019.

Biographical or narrative research in psychology has stressed the importance of gaining access to participants’ experiences as they occur across time, in order to establish patterns of continuity as well as change (Wengraf et al., 2000). Unless we are studying real-time interaction (as many conversation analysts and discursive psychologists argue we should), qualitative research deals largely with recollections of events and versions of self, or discourses relating to personal narratives/stories, that are both past and present. Time and memory thus looms large in the experiences that individuals recall in the context of qualitative research (see Reavey, 2017). And yet, time and memory do not stand alone, and are interlaced with space – in other words, the settings/places where experiences occur. Whilst many narrative researchers have long argued for a greater sensitivity to the specifics of personal narratives over time (Wengraf et al., 2000), there has been less attention to the setting out of which such narratives emerge. A number of authors in this volume, however, point to the importance of viewing experience and subjectivity as situated in specific locations (see Andriolo, Pini and Walkerdine, Majumdar, McGrath et al, Hodgetts et al., this volume). The process by which we story ourselves into being is thus spatially framed, not just time-framed. We can accept this if we embrace the self as a process and form that shifts according to context. As Foucault wrote (2000: 290–291):

It [the self] is not a substance. It is a form, and this form is not primarily or always identical to itself. You do not have the same sort of relationship to yourself when you constitute yourself as a political subject who goes to vote or speaks at a meeting and when you are seeking to fulfil your desires in a sexual relationship. Undoubtedly there are relationships and interferences between these different forms of subject; but we are not dealing with the same type of subject. In each case, one plays, one establishes a different type of relationship to oneself. And it is precisely the historical constitution of these various forms of the subject in relation to games of truth which interests me.

Following Foucault (2000), the argument is that recollections of experience should not be read as a product of a coherent self, or a self made up of a stable substance (which we then believe makes our biographies coherent). By treating the self as a substance, the implication is that whilst there is a change and development over time, which can lead to reframing and interpreting the past in line with our current state of self-hood (see Reavey, 2010) it nevertheless implies a narrowing of interpretive flexibility.

Thus, self should be treated as continually varied, depending on the setting in which it emerges. As Brown and Stenner (2009: 168) note,

If it is possible to speak of a subject at all then it must be done with reference to the ‘various forms’ subjectivity takes and the multiplicity of relationships and connections that pertain between these forms.

Furthermore, the spaces wherein the self unfolds directly leave their mark on any subsequent recollection of this self. By ‘leaving their mark’ what I mean is the space is an integral part of the sets of relations that contribute to the patterns of self-hood over time (Reavey, 2010).

Different kinds of spaces also make possible different versions of agency; our capacities for acting and self-making are affected by the meanings associated with certain spaces. In a photo-production diary study by Del Busso (2009) on young women's experiences of embodiment, participants were asked to take pictures of objects or spaces that reflected experiences of embodied pleasure (eating, having sex, exercise etc.). In subsequent interviews with women, who presented their photos and diaries, it became clear that the manner in which participants experienced embodied pleasure was intimately tied to the setting in which those experiences occurred. Some women felt greater embodied agency in outside natural spaces where they were able to move freely without being restricted by expectations of what they should look like and without fearing for their safety. In other public spaces, such as built-up spaces or heterosexualised spaces (clubs and pubs) their agency was felt to be restricted and feelings of powerlessness increased. The visual display of spaces and settings thus afforded greater room for women to be able to explore the different possibilities for self-hood and agency. Space is therefore an integral component of the selves that we can be. Attention to space can thus afford greater awareness of experience as embodied in a variety of intersecting locations in which various aspects of self-making are practiced and emergent (McDowell, 1996).

Integrating space into qualitative studies of experience is by no means straightforward. Participants can feel under pressure to present certain versions of self, or feel unable to draw images that they deem meaningful. However, visual approaches can be useful in bringing to the fore the spatial locations (and the objects that inhabit them) in which experiences occur by at least putting them on the discursive agenda in the research context (Brookfield et al., 2008). If we can take a visual record at the time at which we experience something or can gather together existing visual images of an event (e.g. our existing personal photographs), we can bring the space and setting of the experience to the foreground and make it explicit in the context of discussion.

Moreover, visual research in psychology can bring to the fore the spaces through which people experience themselves so that the various forms of self-hood reported (verbally) and shown (visually) are contextualised. The gap between the material and the discursive thus becomes significantly reduced and seen in connection with one another – ‘as one in a web’, as Brown and Pujol pronounce (Brown and Pujol, 1998; Brown, 2001).

Increasing participation

Finally, an important argument for using visual research within qualitative research is the potential for increased participation in the generation and organisation of data, thus allowing the participant to shape the context out of which personal stories are told. If participants are offered the opportunity to ‘show’ their experiences and lives, rather than ‘narrate’ them, they are able to expand their story to show where and when their experiences occur with greater freedom. One could say that in some sense this process invites the reader and researcher to begin from the position of bearing witness to the participant's ‘world-making’ (to borrow a phrase from Radley, 2009), rather than acting from the position of detached observer of a person's verbal narrative only (see Radley, 2009 for an extended discussion of narrative, art and testimony). Many researchers using photographs, for example, involve participants in organising images for further discussion within an interview or focus group. This provides greater space for participants to order the material and speak to issues in a particular sequence that makes greater sense for them personally (Radley and Taylor, 2003b). As a result, participants find they have more time to reflect on their experiences when they are more in charge of the data collecting and organising process. One could also argue that this process affords greater creativity within the research process.

For some visual researchers, involving participants in data organisation and collection is central to the aim of democratising the research process. It is also a growing requirement of many funding bodies, insisting on stakeholder engagement in all stages of recruitment, data collection and analysis. This is a welcome move, but one that is far from straightforward and not always successful (see Henwood et al., and Mountian, this volume) and yet there are examples of greater participant agency using visual approaches, at least in terms of defining the parameters of the research activity, and providing a space to challenge dominant cultural and social labels and representations (see Bowes Catton et al; Johnson, Hodgetts et al & Howarth, this volume).

# Summary

Psychology has a long history of engaging with the visual. And yet the visual has not been a prominent feature of methodological procedure in psychology, including social constructionist or more broadly qualitative approaches. I have proposed a number of reasons for this, including the uptake of language-based philosophies in social constructionist traditions, and the over-emphasis of language/discourse in readings of Foucault's work, among others. Following this, I have pointed to the process through which visual approaches can open up possibilities for understanding people's experiences – as the multi-layered and multi-modal phenomena they inevitably are. This, I contend, is why we may be better able to engage individuals in the process of exploring the link between past and present in a way where the past can be more present – in terms of its setting (space), emotion and embodiment – through the use of ready to hand visual (re) presentations of it. I have of course cautioned against reading this process as one that assumes ‘a/the truth’ lurks behind those images, or that images serve to catch people out or force them to confront a ‘true self’ or what is ‘really there’. We have already seen how the visual is just as much subject to interpretation as any other modality, replete with plurality and ambiguities. With this cautionary note in mind, the visual nonetheless can be seen to bring to the fore, emotions, embodied states and spaces that enable us to ground or contextualise our experiences more readily. It can also provide the opportunity for participants to begin the research process by showing us how they have made their worlds, rather than answering our questions or beginning with an explanation. In doing so, the multi-layered aspects of those experiences – that include both space and time – can be explored by the participant and researcher as a joint negotiation.

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1. This is not a term I agree with but reflects the parlance of that time – see Cromby, Harper & Reavey (2013) for further discussion. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Sometimes authors refer to *photo-elicitation* to describe both approaches. However, for the sake of clarity, I have decided to separate the two terms to distinguish between these two very different approaches. The authors of this volume, in the main, also make this distinction for continuity and clarity. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. This research group was made up of six researchers dedicated to the empirical study of embodiment. In the group, we experimented with a variety of methodologies to examine the question of how one might access embodiment, which we took to mean how one feels, senses and expresses bodily sensation and action. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. This section is based heavily on the section written with Katherine Johnson for our chapter on visual methods in C. Willig & Stainton Rogers (2017) The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research in Psychology. London: Sage. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Note that the terms affect, feelings and emotion, and the stated differences between them can be highly varied, depending on theoretical orientation. Here we provide a circumscribed reading of the terms, taken mainly from writers working within poststructuralist theory, drawing on the works of Spinoza and Deleuze. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. James and Eleanor Gibson were ecological psychologists who argued that experience was only comprehensible by studying how environments *afforded* particular modes of perception and experience. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. See Darren Ellis and Ian Tucker’s excellent overview of differing theories of emotions, in Ellis, D. & Tucker, I. (2014) *Social Psychology of Emotion*. London: Sage. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. For a very insightful discussion of images within memory, see Anette Kuhn’s text *Family Secrets* (1995/2002) London: Verso. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. Silver & Reavey use the term ‘diagnosed with BDD’ to emphasise that BDD is a term used in clinical literature, not a term the authors consider to be an unproblematic or ‘true’ disorder/illness (see Cromby, Harper & Reavey, 2013) [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. BDD is a psychiatric diagnosis, described as a distressing preoccupation with an imaginary or minor defect in a facial feature or a localised part of the body. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)