The use of visual methodologies in social work research over the last decade: a narrative review - and some questions for the future

Abstract

This paper outlines the use of visual methodologies in international social work research over the past ten years. It presents a narrative overview of the types and range of visual methodologies that have been used, explores the benefits of employing visual methodologies in social work research and outlines some considerations for researchers thinking of working with the visual. The review is not intended to be an exhaustive overview of the field but rather highlights important issues and concerns when using visual methodologies. A deeper, reflexive engagement with complexities (practical as well as methodological and epistemic) of undertaking visual research is required. By necessity, this will be situated within a specific research project, but importantly, engaging in the issues we raise will enable social work research to make valuable contributions to the wider field of visual researching.

Key words

Social work; Visual research; Visual methodologies; Photo-elicitation; Photovoice; Visual representation

Introduction: the rise of a more visual social work

In this paper we consider how the visual has been used in social work research. We approach visual research as a particular way of experiencing, expressing, sensing and of course, seeing social work worlds. In this sense we contribute to a growing body of work applying, creative, multi-sensory and multi-modal approaches to understanding the craft, themes, and substance of social work (e.g. Shaw and Holland, 2014). The impetus for this paper developed after Lisa, a social work academic, invited Andrew, a sociologist with experience of undertaking visual work, to talk about visual research as part of a MA in Social Work module in Research Methods. The social work students fully engaged with the visual and requested examples from the social work field. In turn, this led to us giving a paper presentation at a social work conference where several researchers expressed a keen interest in exploring visual methodologies and requested advice (Morriss and Clark, 2014). So, this paper reflects the coming together of our disciplinary perspectives, as well as outlines the use of the visual in social work research and raises some of the issues that researchers using this approach may want to consider.

We do not intend to be prescriptive about what visual research should entail; any individual project will have different and distinct issues for the researcher(s) to think through. Rather, we aspire to engage social work researchers in considering the complexities involved when

using visual methodologies with the aim of fostering a continuing dialogue as part of a general commitment to fallibilistic, open-minded debate (Seale, 2007). Our focus on the visual is not 'simply' to catalogue the variety of its techniques and uses in social work. We suggest that critical consideration of the creation, use, analysis and display of visual materials in social work gives rise to some important questions which researchers need to consider. Thus, we are advocating a deep and thoughtful engagement with the complex issues associated with undertaking visual research which will need to be contextualised and situated in relation to each specific research project. Crucially, such endeavours are far from myopic or inward looking. For critical reflection on the production, analysis, dissemination and consumption of visual research has the capacity to provide insight into the substantive and methodological challenges and opportunities afforded by working with the visual that will be of concern far beyond the discipline.

Current developments in visual research have a long history; perhaps longer than (some) researchers remember or perhaps give credit for (Agee, 1941; Bateson and Mead, 1942). Visual methodologies have been used considerably in allied disciplines across the social sciences; a movement that heralded the advent of what might be termed a 'visual turn'. In terms of social work, we note that the word 'visual' did not appear in the subject headings index within key texts on qualitative social work research (Sherman and Reid, 1994; Shaw and Gould, 2001; Shaw et al., 2010) until very recently (Shaw and Holland, 2014). Moreover, Chambon (2008: 592) concluded that 'save in rare instances, social work has had little to do with visual or other plastic modes of representation'. Notably, in their review of the first 10 years of publication of *Qualitative Social Work* up to 2011, Shaw et al. (2013) found that only 3 articles (out of 237) used visual research as the main fieldwork method. So, in social work at least, visual research may offer a potentially innovative (Phillips and Shaw, 2011) way of researching the world.

The visual turn has generated a plethora of approaches, from data gathering to the visual representation of big data, to the exploration of visual manifestations of social phenomena (e.g. Knowles and Cole, 2008; Pink, 2013). It thus constitutes a way of seeing, reporting, representing, and performing (Lomax et al., 2011) the world of social work. Indeed, something of a 'visual canon' has emerged to guide students and neophyte researchers through the process (e.g. Banks, 2001; Pink, 2013; Rose, 2012). Indeed, one does not need to look far to find someone developing, deploying or just considering using visual methodologies in empirical post-positivist and qualitatively driven social science research and social work has provided no shortage of enthusiasm, energy and input to this sphere. Given the shift from the methodological margins to the mainstream, now is a useful time to take stock of what visual research has brought to social work research practice.

We draw upon a review of published studies that make use of visual methodologies, most drawing on approaches identified in existing typologies and taxonomies (Prosser and Loxley, 2008; Pauwels, 2013). While we outline some of these approaches here, our analysis raises

epistemic and ontological questions about the content and form, as well as the production and consumption of visual approaches and materials in social work research. For example, what insights can be gleamed from adopting this approach; how is it being used; what claims are being made of the approach and the data; what questions (methodological rather than substantive) arise; and what issues and contentions are yet to be settled? To be clear, our aim is not to dissuade others from engaging in visual research, nor is it to provide definitive answers to the questions we have just raised. Rather, our intention is to raise some critical questions about the nature of understanding social work worlds through visual means.

Searching the literature

Our review and discussion is based on an initial literature search conducted in April 2014. The databases Academic Search Premier, CINAHL, and Swetswise were searched using the following keywords: 'social work' AND vis* OR photo* OR art* OR draw* OR collage. The inclusion criteria consisted of peer-reviewed articles published since 2005 and written in English. Articles were then excluded or included on the relevance of the abstract, followed by a review of the full-text. The articles were included in the review if (at least part of) the discussion was around the use of visual methodologies and reference was made to social work within the article. As most of the articles were published in *Qualitative Social Work* and the *British Journal of Social Work*, we further searched articles published on Online First for these journals. A total of 43 (out of 1,744) articles were identified as being relevant for inclusion in the review. It is important to note that a number of projects may have been omitted from the search due to the limitations placed on publishing outcomes from visual work. Some projects may make use of alternative forums for displaying or disseminating findings, including physical and virtual exhibitions, and other, non-printed locations.

It is necessary to consider what constitutes *social work* research. Arguably, social work research does not have a distinctive theoretical or methodological base (Orme and Briar-Lawson, 2010; Shaw and Norton, 2007). Instead, it is the core purposes and contexts of social work that give its research methodology a distinctive 'shape' (Shaw et al., 2010: 14). Shaw and Holland (2014: 22) argue that as social work is constituted by material, cultural and embodied fields and practices, and in this respect, qualitative social work research differs from research that emerges from other disciplines. We also agree with Shaw (2007: 663) that 'on most occasions the right question to ask is not what makes social work research distinctive, but what might make it distinctively good?' So, for the purposes of this review, including 'social work' as one of the keywords for the search means that we have included papers written by social work researchers as well as papers included in social work journals which may have been written by non-social workers.

On the heterogeneity of visual methodologies

Our review reveals a variety of uses of and for visual methodologies in social work research. Visual methodologies have been deployed across the globe: Australia, Canada, Israel, Japan, Kenya, New Zealand, the UK and the USA and with a variety of participants including (but not restricted to) looked after children, adults and children with learning disabilities, adults experiencing mental distress, women diagnosed with a life-threatening or chronic illness, older adults, female sex workers, young people, homeless people, gay men and lesbians, Bedouin women and children, and women and children following domestic violence. Numerous methods and techniques have been used including photography, Photovoice and photo-elicitation; visual mapping and visual timelines; drawing and painting; collage; calligraphy; quilting and embroidery; clay-modelling; doll-making; film and video; and animated vignettes. In our discussion below we adopt Pauwels' (2013) dual typology of *pre-existing visual* materials; and the use of *researcher instigated* visuals.

The use of pre-existing visual materials

This involves researchers making use of existing materials in order to understand what might broadly be termed the 'visual culture' of an organisation, group or setting. Hubka et al. (2009) analysed Disney animated feature films with respect to representations of child maltreatment and social work interventions according to criteria set out in the US National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect. Phillips and Bellinger (2010) include 'conversations' between the authors and their analysis of three of the photographs from Diane Matar's exhibition, *Leave to Remain*, on the subject of asylum seeking in the UK. In a Canadian study, Fudge Schormans (2010) encouraged people with learning difficulties to critique pre-existing public photographs of people with learning disabilities. The participants felt that the images portrayed people with learning disabilities as 'frightening', 'different', 'unlovable', 'not wanted' and 'powerless'. The project involved the transformation of these images in a number of different ways; for example, by taking new photographs to challenge the original images and by using image altering software to portray an alternative narrative.

The use of researcher instigated visuals

Here, visual materials are 'provoked or prompted' (Pauwels 2013: 5) by the researcher and can either be researcher-produced or participant-generated. The former, where researchers create their own images, seems to be a less common approach among the work we identified. In a comparative ethnography of child protection practice in England and Belgium, Leigh (2014) used photography to explore the impact organisational space can have on identity and practice. Leigh used the photographs to inform her discussion of the importance of the agency building; the impact of the office space on identity and child protection practice; and the use of symbolic gestures to build relationships with children and parents. Leigh explicitly analysed the photographs, using the work of Banks (2001) and Rose (2012), and used observations and extracts from her ethnographic fieldnotes to support her analytic insights. Wilinska (2014) also produced photographs (and was

photographed) in her study with older people in Japan following the introduction of the Long-Term Care Insurance system in 2000, a scheme that emphasises self-care and self-reliance. Disposable cameras were distributed to an older woman living in a three-generational household in a rural area and she was asked to portray her life in old age and tell a (visual) story of what it means to be old. Wilinska suggested that the photographs portrayed shame as one of the feelings accompanying ageing in Japan.

Researchers have produced other types of visual materials as part of the research. For instance, Humphreys et al.'s (2006) action research project produced activity packs designed to assist mothers and their children to re-build their relationships following experiences of domestic violence. Visual material in the packs included photographs (such as a child being hugged by their mother; a child hiding under a blanket on the settee) and pictures for younger children (a little squirrel feels scared and alone and a wise owl helps him feel safe). Elsewhere, Mitchell et al. (2009) developed visual research materials such as cards and booklets to explore the views of children and young people using specialist mental health services for hard of hearing children and their families.

Participant-created material appears to be the most common dataamong the work reviewed; often with a particular emphasis on participative and collaborative modes of inquiry. A number of studies adopt variations on participant-driven photography and Photovoice in order to achieve the photo-documentation (and subsequent elicitation) of everyday lived experiences. For example, Burles and Thomas (2013) used Photovoice to explore the lived experiences of women living with life-threatening or chronic illness in Canada. The women were asked to take photographs that 'captured aspects of their illness experiences' (p.674). Photovoice was also used as part of a participatory methodology to engage the voices of older lesbians and gay men in an exploration of their experiences of living in rural communities in the UK (Fenge and Jones, 2012).

Capous Desyllas (2014) used Photovoice to gain a deeper, more complex understanding of the lived experiences of female sex workers. The women attended two group dialogue sessions where they shared photographs and selected images for display in community art exhibits. The photographs were subject to interpretive phenomenological analysis and are presented in the paper under four themes, each illustrated by an image: the diverse experiences of sex work; the shared experiences of stigma and stereotyping related to working in the sex industry; the use of art as activism and a form of resistance; and empowerment through the arts. Aldridge (2014) adopted a similar approach to illustrate the 'inclusive and democratising aspects' (p.117) of photographic participation research with vulnerable participants. She considers together two UK Photovoice studies in which she was a researcher in order to understand the lived experiences of children who care for parents with serious mental health problems; and people with learning disabilities. Aldridge suggests that the participants in these studies can more accurately represent and show

(rather than 'tell') their lived experiences, within limits, and which places emphasis on their capacities and abilities rather than their vulnerabilities.

Other studies that make use of Photovoice include Dakin et al.'s (2014) exploration of the experiences of young people living in a Kenyan informal settlement. The young people were asked to take photographs that showed individual and community strengths (rather than simply documenting their lives). Groota and Hodgetts (2012) analysed photographs taken by a homeless man, Daniel, in New Zealand to explore the cultural, material, spatial, and relational contexts of homelessness that were then used to elicit his reflections on his experiences of being homeless. With permission, the photographs were shown to social workers to assist them in developing appropriate approaches to working with Daniel. Finally, Freedman el al. (2014) also used Photovoice in their study examining the socio-environmental factors perceived to be strengths and weaknesses of public-housing community for African American young people and adults. The images were analysed through group discussion and later, the participants identified illustrative photos relevant to each theme.

In a different use of photographic data, Russell and Diaz (2013) supplemented a grounded theory analysis of interview data with photographs in their study of identity, culture and oppression among lesbian women in the USA regarding their experiences of identity, culture, and oppression. The women were asked to take photographs to represent the theoretical codes that emerged from the original interview-based study. For Russell and Diaz, adding the images symbolised the codes identified in the original research, and made the invisible visible in order to increase understanding of lesbian cultural experience.

Beyond photography, other researchers have used visual mapping. Jackson (2013) asked adults with dual or multi-ethnic heritage to create visual representations of the timeline of significant events impacting their identity development. Echoing analytic approaches recorded elsewhere (Rose, 2012), Jackson analysed what she called the three critical sites of the visual images: the production site (the context of the research project); the image site (the image itself); and the site of the audience (the researcher's interpretation). Jackson showed how the use and symbolism of colour emerged as central. Bentley (2010) used participant drawings to explore the meaning and impact of taking psychiatric medications in the lives of adults with severe mental health issues. Alongside interviews, participants were asked to 'try to convey your thoughts, feelings or experiences with medication by making a picture' (p.484). They were then asked to title their picture, to describe it and to note what was most significant or meaningful about the drawing. Similarly Matthews (2014) asked five Approved Mental Health Professionals to draw 'rich' pictures (Checkland, 1981) of their experiences of undertaking complex Mental Health Act assessment(s) and then describe the picture.

Huss (2009) used drawing alongside calligraphy, clay model making and doll-making to explore the lives of Bedouin women in Israel. A group of fifteen Bedouin women (part of a

long-term group) met six times to use visual and creative methods to 'express cultural world views' (p.601) as well as their individual experiences of those views. The women's explanations and discussions around the art works were used to inform the analysis by the researcher and a Bedouin social worker. For example, one woman made dolls of a Sheik and his wife and explained that 'while the wife says 'yes yes' she isn't doing what her husband says' (p.605). The discussion of a picture of 'how when we are together, outside the house, talking, laughing; we feel better' (p.611) led to the creation of a club house for the women. In another study, Huss, Kaufman and Siboni (2013) used painting to explore and clarify the experiences of food insecurity with Bedouin children living in Israel. The children were asked to paint a drawing to answer questions such as: Did you ever feel hungry?; how did you feel when you saw your friend hungry and can you try to try to draw or paint that feeling? Thematic analysis of the content of the drawings showed the children's physical experience of hunger; the children's emotional pain of hunger; the emotional pain of family members; and social explanations of hunger.

Moxley et al. (2012) presents an overview of three projects which made use of drawing and Photovoice, alongside collage and quilting to explore the lives of homeless women in the USA. In one project, the women produced collages consisting of photographs, original drawings, and poetry to tell their stories. They also collaborated to tell their stories through the preparation of a quilt in which each participant crafted a patch to capture a theme of her homelessness and/or her transition out of homelessness.

It is becoming more common to find examples of film-making methods. In the study by Foster (2007), female parents from an ex-mining community in Northwest England made short films (as well as art work) to document their lives. Young people living in Philadelphia in the study by Vaughn et al. (2013) developed a digitally animated film to depict the assets available and stressors affecting them in the community. In a series of papers from the Extra(ordinary) lives project, the lives of 'looked after' children and young people in Wales were explored using a number of visual methods, including videos and video diaries (Holland et al., 2010; Renold et al. 2008; Ross et al., 2009). Finally, photographs, video and music recordings have been used to develop a multimedia computer package with the aim of supporting people with dementia to participate in satisfying and meaningful social interactions with their caregivers (Astell et al., 2009).

What does the visual bring?

We now turn to a discussion of the possibilities that engaging with the visual can bring to research. Russell and Diaz (2013: 433) proposed that visual images can exemplify 'experience, humanity, and meaning… and thus … edify the significance in the humanness and affectivity of research participants'. This seems an apposite, if complex, way of claiming the benefits of visual materials in research. Such benefits stretch beyond the photographic image to include all manner of methodologies, mediums and approaches. For instance,

visual materials and data may enable a deeper perspective on the world, or offer what we might term alternative (perhaps even new) ways of seeing and knowing (Sinding et al., 2014). Of course, the world does not simply exist to be represented in texts and numbers, but through a whole range of media and sensorial experiences; of which the visual is but one addition. This can include found data - as representations of a given cultural milieu (as used by Phillips and Bellinger, 2010) - or aspects of personal and social life that may be difficult to express in words (as discussed by Jackson, 2013 and Huss, Kaufman and Siboni, 2013). So, analysis of existing and new visual materials may provide insight into alternative dimensions of life that some claim to be deeper and more complex (Capous Desyllas, 2014: 478). Underpinning this is an assumption that it is better to recognise the complexity of the world, and we would support this view. But, as Aldridge suggests, it is important to question the extent to which this is *necessarily* a 'better' or more accurate depiction, or a more complex one.

Alongside recognition of complexity, visual methodologies can be seen to provide insight into difficult, emotional or otherwise sensitive issues and experiences. This is particularly important for some of the topics addressed by social work research. For some, this allows researchers to not only understand but also empathise with participants (e.g. Burles and Thomas, 2013: 685). This may be because such issues are difficult to articulate, or because at least in the case of elicitation techniques, the visual can provide an apparently 'neutral' - or at least somewhat displaced - element around which to formulate and advance discussion, acting as a kind of 'third object' around which participants and researchers can focus. Visual methodologies also appear particularly useful where language may provide a barrier such as research with children who have difficulties in communicating verbally (Mitchell et al., 2009) and adults living with a dementia (Astell et al., 2009, see also Capstick and Ludwin, in press 2015).

Claims of and for the empowering potential of visual materials and techniques mean they are often used as part of a participatory framework to engage more 'marginalised' and 'oppressed' groups who may, perhaps, be distrustful of more formalised means of conducting research such as the survey and the interview (Fals-Borda and Rahman, 1988: 44). For instance, Dakin et al. (2014: 20) argued that Photovoice research 'seeks to highlight the perspectives of largely invisible individuals and communities and to promote individual and collective empowerment'. Huss (2012: 694) also considers drawing an empowering practice that is important 'for symbolization and for self-interpretation, enabling more self-control and ownership' while Capous Desyllas (2014: 478) argued this approach 'transforms, empowers, and has the potential for creating social change through creativity'. Perhaps as a consequence, and as we explore shortly, visual methodologies can be seen to provide a more 'authentic' perspective compared to more conventional research methods.

Five considerations for social work researchers working with the visual

We now explore some of the tensions and complexities driving the development of visual methodologies. First, it is important to acknowledge the ongoing tension between the visual as a mode of inquiry and a means or representation. For the latter, this involves analysis drawing on semiotics and related approaches to assess the symbolic, metaphorical, associational qualities and tendencies of images. At one level, this is about assessing whether the visual material we develop is being used as the medium through which reality is being expressed, or as a phenomenon to be analysed in its own right and speaks to an age-old methodological issue about the visual as either a iconic or indexical *representation*, or as a social *construction* of reality.

Pauwels (2012) has been critical of such dualistic labelling, calling instead for more inclusive, and as a consequence, more thoughtful, understandings of visual materials. In the work reviewed above we can, of course, see both at play; from the analysis of existing films, through to how different groups 'read' or interpret images. It is possible to disrupt this binary to suggest that while the data (in this case, the visual materials), are at one level constructions and the partial outcome of a performed method, they nonetheless has real outcomes in so far as they will inform subsequent action and agency, and have their own (internal, but real) referentials including form, index, iconography and so on. Nonetheless, it remains important to recognise the ambiguous ontological status of visual data which, perhaps because of its form may be viewed as more 'authentic' than other data forms, while avoiding the temptation to succumb to a position of naive realism that implies that the visual reveals a more accurate portrayal of phenomena as a consequence of this assumed authenticity. Here, awareness of the reflexive nature of visual research, including the situatedness of the data being presented, as well transparency to the techniques of data collection and analysis account of procedures and methods, that detail how particular conclusions were reached (Seale, 1999).

Second, and related to the first point, it is important to understand how the process of creating or producing visual material becomes as important as the product (or what could be termed the 'data') itself. Many have drawn on a participatory and emancipatory ethos to outline the need to focus on the processes, power-dynamics, negotiations, and intentions that go into its production. This requires recognising the visual as a practice of inquiry as much as it is a mode of representation that can provide a useful way of overcoming the authenticity/ subjectivity of interpretation (see for example Jackson, 2013).

The third consideration concerns the visual as an interpretive process from production to analysis and subsequent 'reading' or viewing (Rose, 2012). The implications of this for enabling an appropriate analysis or reading are complex, leading to questions about whether some are appropriate, authentic, or perhaps even accurate. Space does not permit discussion of these issues here, and indeed, others have already done this admirably (see for example Rose, 2012; Ball and Smith, 2011). Still, it is pertinent to ask questions about

who is doing the interpretation, by whom, and for what purpose. Some researchers have used other methods to triangulate the knowledge gained from visual data (e.g. Leigh, 2014; Wilinska, 2014), while others have relied on interpretations and meanings offered by participants who are the image producers. As we have noted, Rose's (2012) guidance in particular, namely, to focus on the production, form and audiencings of images, has been followed in much of the work discussed above, even if this seems to be more implicit at times. The visual is frequently analysed alongside, and at times secondary to, the (verbal) text that accompanied its production. Often such explanations are offered by the image makers (viz. participants) themselves, rendering the work of the researcher to analysing lay or vernacular interpretations of the visual materials. While this approach may better satisfy questions about the accuracy of interpretation, it may do little to support some of the claims that accompany visual research methods with respect to accessing or producing 'hard to get at' knowledge or insight.

Given that visual methodologies are often triangulated with other modes of data and analysis to make for a more nuanced understanding of lived experience, this somewhat sidesteps the issue of what, if anything, the visual is capable of revealing in and of its own right. To draw on Rose (2013: 30) here, the versions of the social work worlds produced by the accounts of visual research offered earlier do not produce a version of the social that is visual insofar as:

> … they are not concerned with that notion of visuality; that is, of offering a cultural construction of visual experience. Instead, they are more concerned with 'making meaning by working with what images show, than they are with unpacking the effects of contemporary visualities on the processes of making and interpreting visual materials. (Rose, 2013: 31)

This is not another argument for greater scrutiny of how images are produced (though this is important), but rather, a call for the consideration of the wider 'cultural' context within which they are produced, and thus also informed and influenced by. Alongisde an understanding of the 'referentiality' (Pauwels, 2012: 250) of matieral, this is an important issue for social work researchers. Given that the visual methods reported on are often presented as part of a wider goal of either reflexive-practice or participatory and action research, then it becomes necessary to understand the institutions, structures, and cultures, that participants and researchers interact with, and which may come to bear on how and why certain images get produced.

Fourth, the visual can have an aesthetic, almost alluring, quality. We may engage with the visual, and with the techniques that produce it, because we want to not only see, but also, perhaps, show others, what the world looks like. Yet dealing with the aesthetics of visual materials, at least in a wider epistemological framework is, we contend, something that researchers have thus far shied away from. Certainly, there are a number of research projects that make use of exhibitions and presentations that display some of the material

collected and analysed for research. For example, Dakin et al. (2014) displayed the photographs taken by the young people in Mathare in an exhibition and a book with the aim of raising awareness, and which raised enough funds to cover the school fees of all the participants. The collages, quilts, and photographs produced by the homeless women in Moxley et al. (2012) were also exhibited; as were the children's paintings from the study by Huss et al. (2013). This implies a further benefit of using visual methods and materials as a means of disseminating findings and promoting 'impact'. Of course, this can bring ethical considerations to the fore in terms of maintaining the anonymity of participants where their photographs are included in the exhibition (see Clark, 2013 for a discussion of this issue). More broadly though, it also raises questions of how we are to approach the aesthetic dimensions of the work. For example, should we place equal value on the appearance of visual material as much as the data it contains? Can - and should - we value the aesthetic qualities as equal to the scientific; and what are the dangers - if any - of prioritising one over the other? And does paying attention to the aesthetics mean we have to sacrifice our adherence to the (social) scientific method?

Finally, while there has already been considerable commentary on the ethical development of visual research (Clark et al., 2010; Clark, 2013), some specific issues arise from the studies we have reviewed. For example, who has the 'right' to claim ownership of images to in turn show to others (Groota and Hodgetts, 2012)?; Are visual methodologies really any more (or less) 'participatory' or empowering as other approaches? And do they have any greater capacity for instigating change than other methods? It is also important to recognise the politics to the display(ing) of visual materials. For ultimately, in displaying we are offering opportunity for further readings and interpretations that may build on (or maybe even detract from) those intended by the researcher, who in turn may have done the same *vis a vis* the perspective/intentions of the original creator. This gives rise to the question of how many rounds of interpretation visual material can be subjected to without succumbing to the dangers of relativism or misrepresentation. And more importantly, who has the right to re-present other people's visual endeavours?

Concluding comments

We recognise that we have presented a partial outline of the extant and variety of visual methodologies in social work. However, our aim has been to provide a sketch of the field and identify important methodological issues to consider. Visual methodologies are being used in social work research, often in creative ways, with a range of participant groups, and in a myriad of contexts and topics. There is much to be gained from embracing techniques, approaches and methodologies that have been progressed in other disciplines and social work is in a position to make its own distinct contribution to this development. It is certainly clear that, while perhaps coming late to the table, social work has engaged enthusiastically with visual methodologies. The challenge now is to continue this engagement while remaining critically reflexive of the type, and quality of the knowledge we purport to

present. As the popularity of visual methodologies continues to gain momentum, it is vital that a critically reflexive appreciation of the power of not only its materials, but also their socially and culturally situated production, interpretation, and display is brought to the fore.

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