ETHICS AND INTEGRITY IN VISUAL RESEARCH METHODS

ADVANCES IN RESEARCH ETHICS AND INTEGRITY

Series Editor: Dr Ron Iphofen, *FAcSS, Independent Consultant, France*

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ETHICS AND INTEGRITY IN VISUAL RESEARCH METHODS

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CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES AND TABLES

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ABOUT THE SERIES EDITOR

Dr Ron Iphofen, FAcSS, is Executive Editor of the Emerald book series *Advances in Research Ethics and Integrity* and edited volume 1 in the series, *Finding Common Ground: Consensus in Research Ethics Across the Social Sciences* (2017). He is an Independent Research Consultant, a Fellow of the UK Academy of Social Sciences, the Higher Education Academy and the Royal Society of Medicine. Since retiring as Director of Postgraduate Studies in the School of Healthcare Sciences, Bangor University, his major activity has been as an Adviser to the European Commission (EC) and its agencies, the European Research Council and the Research Executive Agency on both the Seventh Framework Programme and Horizon 2020. His consultancy work has covered a range of research agencies (in government and independent) across Europe. He was Vice Chair of the UK Social Research Association (SRA), updated their Ethics Guidelines and now convenes the SRA's Research Ethics Forum. He was Scientific Consultant for the EC RESPECT project – establishing pan-European standards in the social sciences and chaired the Ethics and Societal Impact Advisory Group for another EC-funded European Demonstration Project on mass transit security (SECUR-ED). He has advised the UK Research Integrity Office, the National Disability Authority of the Irish Ministry of Justice, the UK Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology, the Scottish Executive, UK Government Social Research, National Centre for Social Research, the Audit Commission, the Food Standards Agency, the Ministry of Justice, the BIG Lottery, a UK Local Authorities' Consortium, Skills Development Scotland and Agence Nationale de la Recherche (ANR the French Research Funding agency) among many others. Ron was founding Executive Editor of the Emerald gerontology journal *Quality in Ageing and Older Adults*. He published *Ethical Decision Making in Social Research: A Practical Guide* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2009 and 2011) and coedited with Martin Tolich *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research Ethics* (Sage, 2018). He is currently leading a new €2.8M EC-funded project (PRO-RES) that aims at promoting ethics and integrity in all non-medical research (2018–2021).

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commissioned by several international NGOs to produce guidelines and training materials on ethical approaches to image gathering and has produced a set of ethical guidelines for the UK NGO sector. Her article with Dr E. Ademolu titled, *Who Gets to Talk about NGO Images of Global Poverty* was published in Photography and Culture journal Volume 12 (2019).

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SERIES PREFACE

Ron Iphofen (Series Editor)

This book series, *Advances in Research Ethics and Integrity*, grew out of foundational work with a group of Fellows of the UK Academy of Social Sciences (AcSS) who were all concerned to ensure that lessons learned from previous work were built upon and improved in the interests of the production of robust research practices of high quality. Duplication or unnecessary repetitions of earlier research and ignorance of existing work were seen as hindrances to research progress. Individual researchers, research professions and society all suffer in having to pay the costs in time, energy and money of delayed progress and superfluous repetitions. There is little excuse for failure to build on existing knowledge and practice given modern search technologies unless selfish 'domain protectionism' leads researchers to ignore existing work and seek credit for innovations already accomplished. Our concern was to aid well-motivated researchers to quickly discover existing progress made in ethical research in terms of topic, method and/or discipline and to move on with their own work more productively and to discover the best, most effective means to disseminate their own findings so that other researchers could, in turn, contribute to research progress.

It is true that there is a plethora of ethics codes and guidelines with researchers left to themselves to judge those more appropriate to their proposed activity. The same questions are repeatedly asked on discussion forums about how to proceed when similar longstanding problems in the field are being confronted afresh by novice researchers. Researchers and members of ethics review boards alike are faced with selecting the most appropriate codes or guidelines for their current purpose, eliding differences and similarities in a labyrinth of uncertainty. It is no wonder that novice researchers can despair in their search for guidance and experienced researchers may be tempted by the 'checklist mentality' that appears to characterise a meeting of formalised ethics requirements and permit their conscience-free pursuit of a cherished programme of research.

If risks of harm to the public and to researchers are to be kept to a minimum and if professional standards in the conduct of scientific research are to be maintained, the more that fundamental understandings of ethical behaviour in research are shared the better. If progress is made in one sphere everyone gains from it being generally acknowledged and understood. If foundational work is conducted everyone gains from being able to build on and develop further that work.

Nor can it be assumed that formal ethics review committees are able to resolve the dilemmas or meet the challenges involved. Enough has been written about

such review bodies to make their limitations clear. Crucially, they cannot follow researchers into the field to monitor their every action; they cannot anticipate all of the emergent ethical dilemmas nor, even, follow through to the publication of findings. There is no adequate penalty for neglect through incompetence, nor worse, for conscious omissions of evidence. We have to rely upon the virtues of the individual researcher alongside the skills of journal reviewers and funding agency evaluators. We need constantly to monitor scientific integrity at the corporate and at the individual level. These are issues of quality as well as morality.

Within the research ethics field new problems, issues and concerns and new ways of collecting data continue to emerge regularly. This should not be surprising as social, economic and technological change necessitate constant re-evaluation of research conduct. Standard approaches to research ethics such as valid informed consent, inclusion/exclusion criteria, vulnerable subjects and covert studies need to be reconsidered as developing social contexts and methodological innovation, interdisciplinary research and economic pressures pose new challenges to convention. Innovations in technology and method challenge our understanding of 'the public' and 'the private'. Researchers need to think even more clearly about the balance of harm and benefit to their subjects, to themselves and to society. This series proposes to address such new and continuing challenges for both funders, research managers, research ethics committees and researchers in the field as they emerge. The concerns and interests are global and well recognised by researchers and commissioners alike around the world but with varying commitments at both the procedural and the practical levels. This series is designed to suggest realistic solutions to these challenges – this practical angle is the *unique selling proposition* (USP) for the series. Each volume will raise and address the key issues in the debates, but also strive to suggest ways forward that maintain the key ethical concerns of respect for human rights and dignity, while sustaining pragmatic guidance for future research developments. A series such as this aims to offer practical help and guidance in actual research engagements as well as meeting the often varied and challenging demands of research ethics review. The approach will not be one of abstract moral philosophy; instead it will seek to help researchers think through the potential harms and benefits of their work in the proposal stage and assist their reflection of the big ethical moments that they face in the field often when there may be no one to advise them in terms of their societal impact and acceptance.

While the research community can be highly imaginative both in the fields of study and methodological innovation, the structures of management and funding, and the pressure to publish to fulfil league table quotas can pressure researchers into errors of judgment that have personal and professional consequences. The series aims to adopt an approach that promotes good practice and sets principles, values and standards that serve as models to aid successful research outcomes. There is clear international appeal as commissioners and researchers alike share a vested interest in the global promotion of professional virtues that lead to the public acceptability of good research. In an increasingly global world in research terms, there is little point in applying too localised a morality, nor one that implies a solely Western hegemony of values. If standards 'matter', it seems evident that they should 'matter' to and for all. Only then can the growth

of interdisciplinary and multi-national projects be accomplished effectively and with a shared concern for potential harms and benefits. While a diversity of experience and local interests is acknowledged, there are existing, proven models of good practice which can help research practitioners in emergent nations build their policies and processes to suit their own circumstances. We need to see that consensus positions effectively guide the work of scientists across the globe and secure minimal participant harm and maximum societal benefit – and, additionally, that instances of fraudulence, corruption and dishonesty in science decrease as a consequence.

Perhaps some forms of truly independent formal ethics scrutiny can help maintain the integrity of research professions in an era of enhanced concerns over data security, privacy and human rights legislation. But it is essential to guard against rigid conformity to what can become administrative procedures. The consistency we seek to assist researchers in understanding what constitutes 'proper behaviour' does not imply uniformity. Having principles does not lead inexorably to an adherence to principlism. Indeed, sincerely held principles can be in conflict in differing contexts. No one practice is necessarily the best approach in all circumstances. But if researchers are aware of the range of possible ways in which their work can be accomplished ethically and with integrity, they can be free to apply the approach that works or is necessary in their setting. Guides to 'good' ways of doing things should not be taken as the 'only' way of proceeding. A rigidity in outlook does no favours to methodological innovation, nor to the research subjects or participants that they are supposed to protect. If there were to be any principles that should be rigidly adhered to they should include flexibility, open-mindedness, the recognition of the range of challenging situations to be met in the field – principles that in essence amount to a sense of proportionality. And these principles should apply equally to researchers and ethics reviewers alike. To accomplish that requires ethics reviewers to think afresh about each new research proposal, to detach from pre-formed opinions and prejudices, while still learning from and applying the lessons of the past. Principles such as these must also apply to funding and commissioning agencies, to research institutions and to professional associations and their learned societies. Our integrity as researchers demands that we recognise that the rights of our funders and research participants and/or subjects are to be valued alongside our cherished research goals and seek to embody such principles in the research process from the outset. This series will strive to seek just how that might be accomplished in the best interests of all.

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INTRODUCTION: ETHICS AND INTEGRITY IN VISUAL RESEARCH METHODS

Savannah Dodd

ABSTRACT

This chapter serves as an introduction to the key themes found within the volume Ethics and Integrity in Visual Research Methods*, and provides a rationale for the volume's focus on photography and film media. Drawing from other literature, the author discusses the significance of indexicality and visual language when working with photography and film in research contexts, and describes how these considerations set photography and film apart from other forms of visual data. The chapter concludes by outlining the format of the volume, which divides the nine chapters into three key areas of exploration: Voice and Agency, Power and Inequality, and Context and Representation.*

 Keywords: Visual data; indexicality; visual language; research methods;
 photography and film; ethics and integrity

Contemporary society is overflowing with images. Images dominate our public spaces. Full-colour billboard advertisements line our highways. Our free time is spent in cinemas, on video-streaming websites, and in social media networks that use images as a central mode of communication. It is no wonder, then, that there has been a growing desire to harness the power of visual media in research over the past decade.

Visual research methods include, but are not by any means limited to: the study of 'found' and archival visual data; the creation of visual data by research participants (including 'photovoice'); participatory creation of visual data that

involves co-production between researchers and participants; the use of visual data in interviews ('visual elicitation') (Pauwels, 2015); and the representation of research through visual data produced by the researcher. Visual methods have enabled researchers to access different kinds of information (Harper, 2002), to record 'thick description' (Kharel, 2015), and to break down power relationships between the researcher and the research participant (Niskac, 2011). While this increase in the use of visual methods represents exciting opportunities for conducting and presenting research in new and innovative ways, such methods are not without their challenges to ethics and integrity in research.

This volume aims to unpack the multiple considerations for ethics and integrity that accompany different methods of visual data generation and analysis. Contributing authors share their experiences of working with visual methods, and make recommendations for best practice. The authors go beyond the idea of 'one-size-fits-all' guidelines, and instead offer advice for contextualised approaches for addressing the unique challenges presented by visual research methods. More than anything, this volume is intended to be practical, rather than theoretical. Although many of the concepts put forward will be couched in theory, the key messages aim to be concrete and applicable for anyone embarking on a visual methods research project.

ZOOMING IN ON PHOTOGRAPHY AND FILM

Although visual methods can include a wide variety of artistic media (such as painting, drawing, and sculpture) in the generation and analysis of visual data, this volume focusses particularly on photography and film because of the unique relationship these media have with the idea of truth in representation. Unlike drawings or paintings, photography and film are indexical, meaning that they have a direct relationship with the 'real'.

The concept of photographic indexicality, a term given to us by Peirce's (1998) study of semiotics, was based on the technological process of photographic image creation through an analogue camera, whereby the image was literally created by the light that bounced off the subject and onto a photosensitive surface. Early versions of the camera first emerged in the early 1800s, around the same time as the rise of positivism, the theory that the truth is directly observable. Significantly, this further coincided with the colonial project and resulted in the application of photography as an instrument of colonialism, 'beginning with the photographic application to anthropometry and intimately connected to the acts of appropriation and objectification' (Jackson & Dodd, 2019). Photography's indexical nature, combined with positivist theory, has meant that photography has traditionally been trusted to represent the truth. In the colonial context, trust in photographs that portrayed others as inferior validated the colonial project in a way that paintings or drawings could not (Jackson & Dodd, 2019; Mabry, 2014).

Today, people may be less inclined to put their trust in photographs. The emergence of post-positivism by the mid-twentieth century has made us aware of that

our ability to observe the world around us is fallible, and, consequently, that there is a lot of subjectivity at play in taking a photograph. While a photograph cannot be understood to represent the 'truth' of an event, it can be understood to represent 'reality'. It was Kracauer (1993) who made this significant distinction that separated indexicality from truth when he wrote that a photographic image cannot give us any greater understanding of a historical event beyond the reality of the 'spatial configuration of a moment' (p. 431).

A photograph might be an accurate reflection of the literal placement of objects within the frame, yet the information that a photograph relays is complicated by the various conscious and subconscious decisions the photographer makes during the process of taking a photograph. By framing an image through a camera's lens, the photographer chooses aspects of reality to capture and aspects to omit. Although the 'reality' of the photographs will be accurate, there is a risk of over- or under-representing certain aspects, thereby misrepresenting the truth of an event.

Brothers writes that indexicality, or perhaps we can understand the use of indexicality here as the 'spatial configuration of a moment', is one way in which a photograph conveys meaning. The second way that a photograph conveys meaning is through iconicity, or the codes and conventions of photographic representation,

> drawn from the fine arts and advertising, from fashion and etiquette, from stereotypes of sex, class, age and race, to name a few, all lifted omnivorously from the culture in which the image is immersed. (Brothers, 1997, p. 18)

She writes that accessing the meaning of a photograph comes from understanding what is literally depicted in the photograph and the iconic functions of a photograph within the context of its production (Brothers, 1997, p. 22).

The first kind of icon that is worth considering here is the icon of indexicality. Tietjen (2018) argues that, although most photographs are now taken using digital cameras, photographs are still imbued with a special relationship to reality because photographs have become icons of index. Although modern-day digital photographic technologies no longer have the same relationship to the real through their production process and can be more easily manipulated, indexicality 'is not a quality intrinsic to analog images and absent from digital ones' (Tietjen, 2018, p. 377). He ties indexicality instead to our recognition of the iconicity of a photograph: we understand that 'that' is what a photograph is and that a photograph is indexical.

However, indexicality is not the only kind of icon at play in a photograph. In addition to conscious and subconscious decisions about what to include or exclude when framing a photograph, the photographer makes a host of other decisions that shape the representation of an event, from determining the perspective from which to take the shot to deciding how to edit a photograph after it has been taken. These decisions, often considered as simply aesthetic preferences, contribute to the visual language that the photographer uses to communicate meaning.

When anyone, researcher or research participant, takes a photograph they are consciously or subconsciously drawing on their knowledge of visual culture,

or the shared system of visual representation and communication in a society (Sturken & Cartwright, 2001, p. 3). Yet, as Rose (2014) writes,

> Participants are asked to draw maps and take photographs and make films as if they had never opened an A to Z, seen a family snap or been to the movies. (p. 11)

A lot of visual data research fails to account for the relationship between visual culture and the visual research methods they are implementing (Rose, 2014, p. 5). Such research is largely concerned with the content of photographs, 'the visible', and gives little consideration to visual language, 'the visual', or the iconicity invoked with those photographs (Rose, 2014, p. 10).[1]

Whether generating, analysing, or co-producing visual data, researchers would be wise to give greater credence to visual language, and to critically consider the etymology of visual language, because even the seemingly innocuous aesthetic choices impact the meaning conveyed in a photograph. For example, choosing to photograph a person from above creates a top-down perspective that might convey a sense of inferiority of the individual pictured, or of superiority of the viewer or photographer. A preference for a top-down perspective when photographing Ugandan children could be understood as an inherited visual trope from the colonial era that used these aesthetics to reinforce existing power relations. This would be a useful frame through which to analyse such a photograph, and it would be an important consideration when choosing a perspective from which to take a photograph.

Since photographs and film, in contrast to paintings or drawings, are considered to be indexical and, therefore, representative of reality, there is added responsibility to ensure that the meanings conveyed through the visual language invoked are accurate and appropriate. While this discussion of indexicality and visual language has focussed on the medium of photography, these concepts are also very relevant to film. In fact, film presents additional considerations that are unique to the moving image, including sequencing and the accompaniment of sound (Davies, 2011; Dymek, 2013; Nichols, 2016). These kinds of structural components involved in image-making impact on the way that meaning that is made through still and moving images. A lack of consideration for these components can present threats to both ethics and integrity in research, especially when using visual data produced by researchers or for the purpose of representing research outcomes. Although indexicality and visual language are not primary concerns of many of the contributing authors in this volume, this discussion is critical to justify focussing this volume on photography and film methods.

ETHICS AND INTEGRITY OF PHOTOGRAPHY AND FILM IN RESEARCH

Having your photograph taken can feel very awkward. It can be uncomfortable to be at the end of a camera lens, reflecting your face in that dark mirror, knowing that you are being looked at, and that you will be represented in a photograph for

others to look at. It is liable to feel even more invasive if you are photographed in your own home or during an illness or when you are at your most vulnerable.

Therefore, the decision to use a photographic or filmic method in a research project must be carefully weighed. Before deciding to incorporate such a visual element into a research project, it is important to determine whether taking photographs or recording film will provide a piece of research with something that could not otherwise be accessed. What are the theoretical grounds for including photography or film in the research design? How will photography or film uniquely contribute to answering the research question? Is photography or film the best visual method for the context? Although photography and film can be extremely useful tools, it is important to remember that these visual methods might not always be appropriate for a research project due to context, relevance, or other important factors.

Once it has been established that there is a valuable and legitimate reason for potentially exposing research participants to the kind of vulnerability that comes with being photographed or filmed, consideration must go into deciding how to approach such a project. There is an undeniable power dynamic between the person photographing and the person being photographed, and this power dynamic must be well managed when collecting visual data. When approached with care, photography and film elements to research can be rewarding for all parties involved, but when handled without consideration for the experience of the participants, it can be extremely damaging.

The following chapters will discuss in detail the in's and out's of approaching, designing, and executing research using visual data in a variety of ways. Before moving into the body of this work, it is important to introduce some key terms that will be significant throughout the volume.

The researchers writing for this volume come from a variety of backgrounds and practice research in a variety of ways. Therefore, the term 'research' in this volume casts a wide net to include basic, applied, action, and practice-led research (Smith & Dean, 2009). Ethics and integrity are concepts that are integral to all types of research, where ethics is the 'balancing harms and benefits' in an 'attempt to ensure harm is minimised or avoided and that benefit is maximized' (Iphofen, 2013, p. 13) and integrity is 'a commitment to intellectual honesty and personal responsibility for one's actions and to a range of practices that characterize responsible research conduct' (Committee on Assessing Integrity in Research Environments, 2002, p. 34). The question is: how can we apply them to research with visual data? Even further: how might practices to ensure ethics and integrity change when applied to visual data?

VOLUME OVERVIEW

Although there are seepages and overlaps between these categories, I have divided the chapters into three key areas of exploration: Voice and Agency, Power and Inequality, and Context and Representation. In the first section titled Voice and

Agency, authors contribute to discussions about the ownership of images, the silencing quality of anonymisation, and the danger of paternalism in risk management.

In Chapter 1, Aura Lounasmaa, Cigdem Esin, and Crispin Hughes reflect on the challenges they faced while facilitating visual story-telling workshops in the Calais Jungle refugee camp in 2016. They illustrate the complexity inherent in balancing a decolonising practice that values authorship and ownership, with the practicalities of managing the risk of jeopardising the participants' future resettlement in the European Union. The authors explain how their multimodal approach created opportunities for researchers and participants to interrogate the asymmetrical power relationships that characterise life both within and outside of the Jungle. They conclude with the observation that listening is key to ethical and decolonial practice.

In Chapter 2, Angela Stephanie Mazzetti outlines the limitations to protecting the identities of research participants when using photographic methods, and explains the potential risk for participants when their identities not protected, especially when depicted as engaged in illicit activity. Drawing from her experience conducting research in the post-conflict context of Northern Ireland, she proposes that participant-produced drawing can serve as an effective alternative to photography in ethnographic research. Drawing enables the participant to deliberately select elements for inclusion in their image, without the risk of including identifying information that may be accidently recorded in a photograph.

In Chapter 3, Siobhan Warrington concludes the section on Voice and Agency by describing research she conducted that aimed to highlight the voices of individuals who are pictured in NGO communications' materials. Her chapter traces the ethical decisions made during the course of research for Save the Children's 2017 report *The People in the Pictures: Vital perspectives on Save the Children's image making.* Warrington explains how she used photo elicitation methods in interviews and focus groups, highlighting the ethical risks of the method and the ways in which she worked to mitigate those risks. Reflecting on her research practice, she concludes by offering key points for consideration to researchers who are planning to use photo elicitation methods. She also draws on her research findings to offer recommendations for responsible image-making practice.

In the second section titled Power and Inequality, contributing authors explore methods of challenging unequal power relationships in visual research processes, and of restoring control to the individuals pictured in visual research outputs through long-term engagement with a community.

In Chapter 4, Robert Godden identifies informed consent as being at the intersection of the rights and the obligations that non-profit organisations have towards the individuals pictured in their communications materials. Godden begins by defining informed consent, and by identifying the risks and challenges, especially with regard to the extra layers of consideration needed when working with children. He then engages in a dialogue with freelance photojournalist Smita Sharma to identify practical solutions for the successful implementation of informed consent in image gathering.

In Chapter 5, Cahal McLaughlin and Siobhán Wills use their experience of producing a film about the violence inflicted by UN Peacekeeping Troops in Haiti as a case study for understanding ethics and integrity in research-based filmmaking. The authors explain the challenges they encountered both at the production stage and at the dissemination stage of the resulting film *It Stays With You: Use of Force by UN Peacekeepers in Haiti.* In particular, they discuss the challenges of applying a participatory approach to filmmaking in the face of barriers like language, distance, and resource inequality.

In Chapter 6, Jacqueline Shaw advocates for long-term, as opposed to short-term or one-off, projects when using visual methods as a more ethical mode of engagement, especially among marginalised communities. In particular, she advocates for long-term, progressive engagement in participatory video projects involving the creation of video content for both internal and external audiences. Creating content for different audiences enables participants to make more informed decisions about consent and to further develop their ideas about the given topic through multiple iterations.

In the third section titled Context and Representation, authors discuss practical considerations for context in the production and dissemination of visual research, and the ways in which context, or a lack of contextual information, can change the meaning of visual data.

In Chapter 7, Ciara Chambers analyses the different ways in which practitioners have recontextualised visual data by using archival material in the production of new films. She describes how these filmmakers have approached the archive, how they have negotiated relationships with relevant stakeholders, and how they have responded to the ethical challenges that have arisen as a result of reuse. She concludes by applying this knowledge to the research process, making recommendations for an ethical approach to the reuse of archival material in research contexts.

In Chapter 8, Susan M. Brigham and Mohamed Kharbach draw on their experience facilitating a participatory photography project among youth with refugee experience in Canada. They outline the ethical considerations that emerge stage-by-stage in research processes using participatory photography methods, drawing attention to the special considerations needed when conducting visual research with youth populations and in transcultural contexts. In particular, Brigham and Kharbach assert the need to situate ethics within the socio-cultural contexts of the production and the reception of research images.

In Chapter 9, Alice Neeson explains that the objectives of action-focussed research often lay in the processes of visual data production, rather than in the analysis of the resulting visual data. However, she highlights the potential ethical implications of disseminating visual data without including analysis. Neeson explains that the presentation of visual data without context or caption leaves them open to the interpretations of viewers who may not have access to important background information. This is further complicated by the online circulation of visual data, which allows viewers to appropriate and create their own pathways to visual data.

In Chapter 10, Jennie Carlsten describes the challenges of image-based research, in particular research focussed on the study of images created by others, within institutional contexts whose frameworks are often not relevant for or applicable to work with visual data. She draws from ethical philosophy to situate the institutional approach to ethics within a wider debate, and highlights alternative models including 'situated ethics'. Carlsten calls for more flexible approaches to research ethics, and for a shift in research practice that is more collective, reflective, and empathetic.

NOTE

1. A notable exception is research that uses archival visual data, for example, the works of Brothers (1997), Banks and Vokes (2010), and Campt (2012).

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