

Visual methodologies

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Abstract

Thesis. Visual methodologies utilise strategies with the use of photographic and video materials. Visual materials can be considered factual materials.

The concepts discussed. In the article, the author discusses four main research strategies with the use of photography (Konecki, 2009).

Results and conclusions. Photographing is considered a very good research material. By interpreting and analysing visual materials, one can draw conclusions about specific social phenomena, discover social microworlds and reconstruct individual life stories.

Key words: photography, retography, video, qualitative research, biographies

Introduction

Thanks to visual methodologies, many areas of culture and artifacts can be captured. They may also be used to analyse manifestations of social phenomena (Atkinson, Delamont, 2010). As Krzysztof Konecki (2005) writes, we live in the image culture which requires research methods that makes use of visuals and, consequently, also specific methods of presentation and interpretation of data, as well as research conclusions based on visual imagery. The image culture has shaped homo videns, or the modern man, who puts pictures above verbal communication, using perceptual language instead of a conceptual one. Thus, pictures become for him or her a medium of knowledge, emotions and serve as means of communication. Susan Sontag (2017) even claims that the image has become a sign such as a word, which facilitates interpersonal communication. The image is universal, it is not affected by social or cultural barriers. It is increasingly used in scientific research.

The aims of qualitative research using visual data, i.e. visually perceptible objects or artifacts, are part of the phenomenological tradition and social constructionism (Konecki, 2005). Reality is perceived here through the prism of one's own culture and personal experiences that result in giving specific, subjective meanings to fragments of one's reality. These meanings can be read from gestures, glances, but also objects from the physical environment of photographed people or objects that are located in a physical space themselves (Konecki, 2005). Therefore, an image - in the form of a photo or video material - becomes an object of the researcher's observation.

In social sciences, three basic methods of visual imaging are used: photography, video and graphical representations, such as charts, maps, graphs (Grady, 2009). Images can serve as the object of analysis itself, but also as research tools. Visual methods can be used based on the creation of images or their examination - in the latter case they are materials produced by the subjects, and collected by the researcher (Banks, 2009).

Photography in sociological research and cultural anthropology has been present since the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. According to K. Konecki (2005), from 1896 to 1916, more than thirty articles found in the American Journal of Sociology were based on the empirical and analytical material, i.e. the photographs.

Research strategies

K. Konecki (2005) distinguishes four main research strategies with the use of photography. The first of these is photographing as the basic, purposeful action of the researcher, subjected to later analysis of the induced materials. It is usually used in the field studies. The data is then triggered, which means that the researcher makes photographs (of objects, people, events) in order to obtain

specific visual materials. Therefore the theory in this case takes precedence over the research, which can result in the empirical data not generating new theories. In order to prevent such situation, the researcher should ask questions during the research and search for answers to them with the use of photography. Two photographic research methods serve this purpose: a photographic thematic list (i.e. a list of topics or questions of the researcher which can be analysed by interpreting the information obtained from photographs), as well as interviews with the use of photographs (shown to the respondents during the interview to ask specific questions). The photographic thematic list is implemented in cases where photography becomes the subject of research, whereas the method of interviews using photographs serves as a research tool.

The second research strategy is based on the use of photography as existing materials, i.e. made by a person other than the researcher, e. g. by the subjects (autophotographs). The action of photographing is then not a research strategy – the strategy is collecting materials and analysing them. It is devoid of the researcher's influence on obtaining specific results that may appear during the first strategy, which consists of the researchers taking photographs themselves.

The third strategy is a combination of photos and the narratives of the respondents which are based on their reactions to the photographs shown to them. The place where the visual materials are presented is of importance here. The same picture can cause different reactions depending on the context. Konecki (2005) gives an example of the subjects' reactions to photographs in a museum (it is then perceived as work of art) and the same photo in the newspaper (in which it plays the role of a text illustration). The situations of material presentation are called direct contexts, containing the place of presentation and its immediate surroundings. In the case of too poor for a definition of contexts, it is extended by the experience and predictions of observers, enabling the construction of an extended context and reading meanings.

The final research strategy consists of using photography to support research conclusions or as an illustration for them in the case when verbal texts or numbers are the main empirical data (Konecki, 2005). In such a situation, the presented photos confirm or broaden the conclusions of the research and become portraits or pictures of main concepts – for example, in anthropological texts there are photos depicting the customs or rituals of the cultures studied.

Conclusion

Photography can be a very good research material whose interpretation allows for qualitative reconstruction of the personal world of the subject who is being analysed (Jurczyk-Romanowska, 2013). It is also a form of artistic expression,

and "science as well as art are essential parts of culture and thus areas of human life" (Pryszmont-Ciesielska, 2015, p. 98). The use of visual materials in social sciences may also play a therapeutic role (Jurczyk-Romanowska, 2013; Pryszmont-Ciesielska, 2015). Visual materials can also be considered as factographic materials, analysis of which provides new knowledge about given social phenomena (Kaczmarek, 2004). One can also examine personal documents by means of rephotography. This technique also allows the reconstruction of life stories of individuals and is used in biographical methods.

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