

# Visual Ethnography

## What you will need

- Camera/camera phone
- Pen and paper
- Copies of photos (depending on the type of ethnography you are using)
- Consent forms (if you take photos of people's property or use them in an image)
- If you require any extra support or help please email The People's Panel. Peoples.Panel@southampton.gov.uk

## Instruction Guide

### Photo essays

- This type of visual ethnography involves you taking photos to tell a story.
- To do this you need to decide on what you are going to take photos of and why. The *why* is very important.
- Take the photo and make sure the photo is clear.
- Annotate your photos. This can take place either on the photos themselves or on a separate sheet. You should write down dates and times for the photos (particularly when looking at a photo diary). The annotations however should be more than that. If it was an emotive photo, how did it make you feel? If it was trying to document something then what was it documenting. Try to be as detailed as you possibly can be.
- If you are making a photo diary then make sure the photos are correctly ordered and labeled.
- Upload the photos and the annotations to the central data gathering area.

## Safety Considerations

- You should make sure you let someone know where you are, who you are with and roughly how long it will take.
- Make sure your phone is charged and with you at all times
- If you want take photos with people in it you will need permission. Also if you are taking photos of people's property or on people's property ask for permission. And if they say no, move on.
- Wear rubber gloves if you are going to go through the recycle bin and be careful not to cut yourself.
- If you feel, for any reason, you are unsafe say you have forgotten something and that you need to pop out to call someone. Trust your instincts. If something doesn't feel right, it doesn't matter if you're wrong, trust your instincts. It is important to remain safe.
- If you are going door to door it is best to do so in pairs.

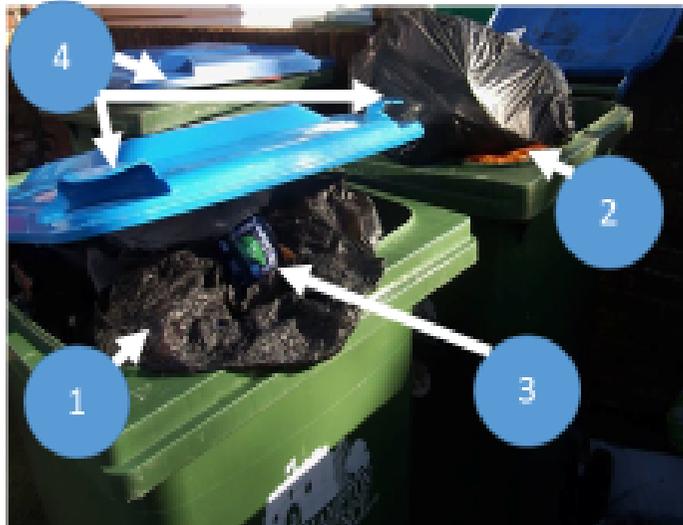
## Where do you put your information?

- Use the link below to upload any information or photographs you have

- Make sure you upload the photograph and fill in all the boxes to give your detailed annotations
- You will have to upload all of the photographs separately, however when you click submit a new page will automatically open.
- If you only have one photograph just close the new pages that has been opened.

**Visual Ethnography URL**

<https://southamptoncitycouncil.researchfeedback.net/wh/s.asp?k=145865988181>



Title (description of photo): Blue lid recycling bins showing recycling in black bags

Time and Date: 09.30 on 2/3/2016

#### Detailed annotations

The photo shows the recycling bins with black bags placed to keep the recycling together.

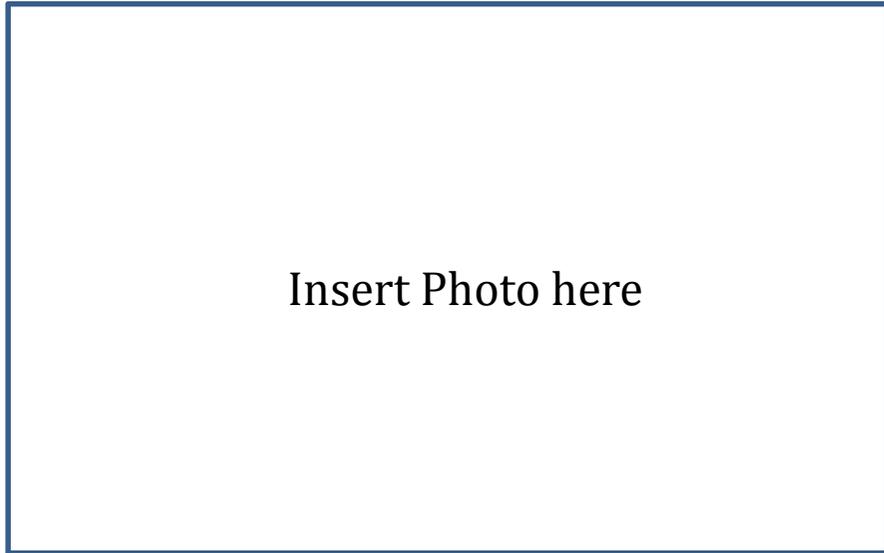
1. Black bins bags can be seen here with the recycling inside.
2. Other bags have also been placed in the recycling bins
3. The bins are from different properties within the same are (housing estate)
4. Some of the recycling seems to be placed on top of the black bags

The errors made here mean that all of this recycling is now 'contaminated' and will have to be incinerated. People clearly feel that this is correct practice and need to be shown that this is not what needs to be done.

Objective this photo answers and why it was taken.

- 1) What explains awareness of and knowledge about recycling in Southampton?

It was taken to show the misinformation that some people have about recycling and how it should be carried out within Southampton. Why these errors have occurred is unclear from the photo.



Title and brief description:

INSERT TEXT HERE

Date and time photo was taken:

INSERT TEXT HERE

Full description and annotations:

INSERT TEXT HERE

Objective met and reason for photo:

INSERT TEXT HERE

## Citizen Recycling Research – Ethnography

Write your name [researcher] here: .....

### Photo essays

1. Decide on what the objective is when taking your photo. This can change with each photo you take if you feel that they answer a different objective
2. Take the photograph of the subject matter you wish to talk about.
3. Annotate the photo with a title which gives a brief description of what the photograph shows. This does not need to be done in a great deal of detail. It is just so that they can be sorted out and grouped later
4. Write down the time and date of the photograph. Try and be specific as you can if you are doing this retrospectively.
5. In as much detail as possible write down;
  - a. What you are taking the photograph of
  - b. Annotations showing the key, specific areas of the photograph you are focussing on. There could be several focus areas.
  - c. What this actually means- What do the annotations show in terms of the objective you are looking at?
6. Finally write down the objective the photo is looking to and why it was taken. Try and link what the photo shows with the wider objective itself.

There is an example in the pack as well as a template.

If you are taking a photograph of someone's property it is always good to get permission before doing so. If a person is identifiable within the photo then it is important that you get their consent. If you require permission there are some instructions below.

Read this out first:

Hello, I am a researcher working with Southampton City Council, and advised by the University of Southampton. We are conducting research on how people understand recycling and how we can improve it within the city. The information we collect will be used as part of a website of information on recycling within the city and will also be used by the council to make changes to the way recycling currently runs. The project is designed to raise awareness of recycling and the problems associated with it in Southampton and help people who are not specialists to get easy access to accurate figures and facts on recycling and the changes that may occur.

If you agree for the photographs to be taken of your property/yourself they will be used anonymously – we will not use your name and you will not be able to be identified.

I have read and understood the information provided and consent to be interviewed and for the answers I provide to be used only for the purposes of this research sheet.

Are you still happy to take part? (If they are ask them to tick the box below showing that they consent for you to continue).

I have read and understood the information provided and consent to be interviewed and for the answers I provide to be used only for the purposes of this research sheet.

Tell them:

You may withdraw your reply at any time. If you decide to do so at a later date please email [peoples.panel@southampton.gov.uk](mailto:peoples.panel@southampton.gov.uk)

**Citizen Recycling researchers - what now?**

If possible, upload the answers to this <https://southamptoncitycouncil.researchfeedback.net/wh/s.asp?k=145865988181>

If you have any questions or concerns please email [Peoples.Panel@southampton.gov.uk](mailto:Peoples.Panel@southampton.gov.uk)

## Citizen Science Recycling Visual Ethnography

### What is photo documentation and visual ethnography?

In our daily lives we are exposed to and 'read' images every day (see Ball & Smith, 1992). For that reason, when conducting social research and scientific projects, it can be an important tool. Photographs and image documentation are often used within anthropology (Banks, 2001 & Collier and Collier, 1986) and record keeping (Flick, 2002), however it is now becoming common in much of the social sciences. Even if visual ethnography is used in a report, many papers will publish the analysis of the photographs but not the photographs themselves (Grady, 2001). Or if the photos are published they are used more for illustrative purposes without the analysis (Banks 2000) or for the purpose of documenting rather than as a research tool (Flick, 2002).

Visual ethnography can be used in various different ways:

- Photo essays – This is where photographs will be taken to tell a story or document a certain situation. These can often be effective when trying to reveal a complex situation or behaviour (Casey & Dollinger, 2007). These photos will have some form of narrative (Harper, 2002) to help describe the story further.
- Photo elicitation and interviewing – This is where a photograph (or series of them) is used to provoke a response. (Harper 1984, Heisley & Levy 1991). The response is then noted and explored further. A real positive to this can be that the person being interviewed often can find the process tiring. By using photographs this fatigue is lowered (Collier, 1957). It can also break up the process meaning it is varied.
- Photo voice (photo novellas) – Participants are asked to take photographs that represent their points of view that may highlight key research questions (Wang & Burris, 1997 and Poudrier & Mac-Lean, 2009). The photographs are then interpreted collaboratively, key themes can be developed and used to better understand the situation that is currently being researched (Catalani & Minkler, 2010). Further on from this, reflective interviews can be conducted to discover a deeper level of thinking behind the questions.

We are looking at using visual ethnography as a form of investigation and to represent possible behaviours, questions or answers to our subject matter (recycling within Southampton). The reason for visual ethnography is to convey an experience (Leavy, 2008). This is one important factor that makes visual ethnography different and extremely effective for the project. Visual ethnography can be used to document something that is important but can also be used to gauge reactions. An example might be using a photograph within an interview and assessing the response given by the person being interviewed. These photographs can be taken by the interviewer

(Heisley & Levy, 1991) or possibly even by the person who is being interviewed and wishes to discuss a particular aspect of the photograph (Flick 2002).

### **What makes visual ethnography effective?**

What we really want is for people to decide to photograph whatever they think is important when looking to answer the original research questions. There are certain considerations on recycling that we wish to address, but this side of the research methodology is more open and allows you, as a researcher, to take a more active role in deciding what you are going to study/photograph. Visual ethnography is often designed to expose you to new ways of thinking, collecting, analysing and presenting data (Holm, 2008). Even seasoned researchers can find this a challenge and, actually, not being completely immersed in scientific research may lead novel citizen scientists to find visual ethnography easier to use.

What makes the research methodology worthwhile is the production of context and annotations. You may think it is easy to just take a photo and be done with it, however for visual ethnography to be worthwhile real detail must be provided with the phot. Each photograph needs to be given a real identity. Times, dates and subject matter should all be noted, but more is needed. You will need to convey the purpose of the photo to outside viewers and readers (Holm, 2008). An example might be to take a photo of your evening meal with all the packaging. On its own this photo means very little. Adding the time and date adds some information, but again isn't useful on its own. Why have you taken the photo? Collecting data (for the most part) should be used to convey something relatively objective. Are you taking the photo because everything is recyclable? Or was it that one part was recyclable but the rest wasn't and you felt it wasted your time having to separate items? Or was it simply because you simply don't know what to do with it all? Suddenly your photo now has context. This is the most important part of your visual ethnography journey.

Denzin (2001) stated that "The meanings of lived experiences are inscribed and made visible in these performances/photographs." The visual ethnography approach is about telling a story or showing an experience that can be useful when answering a particular research question.

Another area which is also important is collaboration. Other people may have ideas of what to take photos of, which could then work as a comparison. Share your ideas with other citizen scientists, as well as the photos themselves. If you have a particular idea that would make for an interesting part of the study then share it.

In terms of the actual photographs there are some possible suggestions that can make the research more effective.

- Annotations are key - Time, date and the reason for the photo. A brief description of why you are taking it (and if it is emotionally driven, how has it made you feel etc.)

- If you are looking to document something over time, try to be consistent on when photographs are taken. If you photographing your bin every day to show how full it is, try and do it at the same time each day to make your results reliable.
- Try to make sure the photos are of good quality (focus and include what you were looking for), unless of course there is a reason behind a blurry photograph. An example of this was a study by Warren (2002) under the title of “Show me how it feels to work here”. Blurry images were used to convey the colour and busyness of an environment without being specific.
- If you take a photo of a person and they are identifiable then consent must be gained to include it in the study!!

## **Advantages and Disadvantages of Visual Ethnography**

### **Advantages**

- Documenting behaviour – This method allows us to document something that can be incredibly hard to capture.
- Accessible – Visual ethnography is a research method that allows many different people to access it and use it effectively. If you have a camera you can give it a go.
- Creative and autonomous – Rather than have a prescriptive set of instructions to follow, this research tool allows people to form their own impression on recycling and the culture that surrounds it.
- “A picture is worth a thousand words” – Trying to convey a complex idea can be difficult in words and sometimes a simple picture can solve that problems instantly.
- Timely – Photographs capture what is happening at that exact moment and that can be incredibly important to researchers.
- Tells a story – Importantly the photographs can tell a story which may be difficult or even impossible in words. Alongside this, the photo represents what is evident in a situation but also what isn't, which can be just important. Sometimes what isn't present in a situation is vital.
- Diverse – One photo can tell many different stories.

### **Disadvantages**

- Manipulation – With almost any data collection you can manipulate the situation to fit your point of view. An example might be taking pictures of bins that are full with recyclable material. Based solely on those photos you have taken you could draw a conclusion saying everyone recycles and does so on a large scale. This conclusion could be an error. You selected those situations to photograph and, possibly by accident, left out the opposing perspective which might be borne out by photographing elsewhere.

- Consent and security – Remember that you need to gain consent if you are using (identifiable) people in your photos. Also consider your actions before just diving in. Confidentiality and people's security and right not to be part of research without consent is a paramount consideration!
- Affecting your results – Your presence (and your cameras) could change the behaviour of someone if you are looking to document something over time
- Subjective – Photos can be subjective and therefore the annotations become all the more important. One image can be interpreted one way by one person and in a completely different way by another.
- Bias – Just because an image looks nice or contains great 'action' does not mean it is more useful. A tendency towards the most impressive photographs is not representative.
- Abstract – Photos can be too abstract and the meaning can become lost.

(Adapted from Petersen & Ostergaard, 2003 & Virginia.edu)

## **In Summary**

Visual ethnography can be a fantastic way to research a topic. It is creative, open and offers interesting insights into something that is often quite hard to document (in this case behaviours and feelings). The biggest thing is remember to annotate your photo and keep in mind why you are taking the photo and what it is adding to the research.

Sarah Pink, an advocate of visual ethnography states:

“There are no fixed criteria that determine which photographs are ethnographic. Any photograph may have ethnographic interest, significance or meanings at a particular time or for a specific reason. The meanings of photographs are arbitrary and subjective; they depend on who is looking. The same photographic image may have a variety of (perhaps conflicting) meanings invested in it at different stages of ethnographic research and representation, as it is viewed by different eyes and audiences in diverse temporal historical, spatial, and cultural contexts.” (Pink, 2001).

## **Dos and Don'ts of visual ethnography**

- **Do** take a lot of photos (not all of them will be useful, but the more you have the better it will be).
- **Do** gain consent if someone features in the photo or can be identified from it.
- **Do** ask for permission before taking photos of or on other people's property.
- **Do** keep detailed annotations. Without them the picture could be useless
- **Do** give yourself time. Ethnography isn't necessarily a quick process. Taking a photo might be, but noting down the meaning and annotations can take time.

- **Do** try to be objective, which is easier said than done. A camera can be used to objectify reality and subjectify it at the same time. The photo itself is objective however the analysis or evaluation you provide will be subjective. That can't be helped and is often the point, however if you are trying to build a conclusion make sure you have considered all perspectives (Virginia.edu).
- **Don't** be intrusive.
- **Don't** be constrained. Be creative. If it doesn't quite work the way you wanted it to, it doesn't matter.
- **Don't** be limited by photos alone. Videos, drawings etc. are also helpful
- **Don't** stage photos. Make sure they are organic and in their natural setting.
- **Don't** concentrate solely on your most 'sensational' photo. Give them all equal time.

For more guidance please see the 10 commandments of Ethnography

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