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Seeing the Light: Using Visual Ethnography in Family Business Settings

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research note is to illustrate the usefulness of the qualitative method of visual ethnography in producing new insights into family business research by investigating the ‘lived narrative’ of a family business in Scotland. The overarching objective is to provide clarity on the use of the method and its potential value for family business researchers as well as to provide an account of the benefits of the approach.

Introduction

In this journal, Sharma and Carney (2012) argue that to build impactful research it is necessary to focus on methodologies that expand the scope and dimensionality of the scholarly pursuit of family enterprise research. They suggest that considerable imagination and ingenuity is called for to shed light on this enigmatic organizational form. Furthermore, Litz, Pearson and Litchfield (2012) made a call for the development of innovative measures and the adoption of more diverse subjects and samples; and James, Jennings and Breitzkreuz (2012) suggest a renewed attention to studies which provide new directions to the field. I take up the challenge to consider how visual ethnography can help us uncover new nuances of the meanings that family businesses use in their everyday practices and how they understand their roles (Pink, 2007, 2009, 2011). Visual ethnography has the potential to produce fresh insights for understanding of family businesses because it is under used and can thus add new nuances and dimensions to extant research. This is particularly so because mainstream business research privileges the written word over other semiotic forms such as the visual and sensory (Pink, 2009). Ethnographers aim to understand cultural phenomena which reflect the knowledge and system of meanings guiding the life of a cultural group and visual ethnography is concerned with the visual dimensions of social life not easily accommodated via text (Mannay, 2010). Moreover, images relate, present and encapsulate different aspects of meaning and offer a different dimension to stimulate our attention whilst providing details of context which may not be apparent in the text alone.

Visual ethnography is presented by means of visual images and visual imagery and the images help us to capture, record, and understand lived narrative. Visual images such as oil paintings and family photographs have been discussed in the family business milieu

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– but only in the passing, or in setting the scene. For example they adorn board-rooms and are visible in executive settings to remind us of the links between family and business (McGoldrick & Troast, 1993). Being a semiotic phenomenon (a sign/or sigil) visual images such as those described above constitute a rich qualitative tapestry of business life and photographs, and photography, are part and parcel of business in that photographic illustrations facilitate marketing and promotion (La Chappele & Barnes, 1998). They are artefacts representing family business symbolism as well as possessing a more functional use. Such images act as reminders that work internally to prompt family members to remember they are a family in business. Images endure over time and persist as part of the shared business heritage and practices. For outsiders a similar picture is drawn, but presented and possibly understood as a reason to be a customer. Moreover, according to Wright (2009: Introduction) - “*From the office to domestic interiors to shops, images surround us in modern life*”. Indeed, Wright called for a systematic method for bringing a sense of order to a seemingly endless array of pictures and depictions.

Although interest in visual ethnography and other visual research methods are increasing (Harper, 1984; Emmison & Smith, 2001; Thomas, 2002; Banks, 2008; Mannay, 2010) - in family business settings, such studies are rare. In management studies and in entrepreneurship, the work of Gold (1991); Venkatraman and Nelson (2008); Schembri (2008); Boje and Smith (2010); Clarke (2011); and Berglund and Wigren-Kristoferon (2012) have begun to explore the influence of the visual. Yet, many such studies are published in journals associated with visual media and not business. Thus the way in which the findings of the research are published is limited to the written text.

The focus of this research is on visual ethnography; how it has been used; and more importantly how it could be used in family business research. The purpose is to illustrate the usefulness of the qualitative method of visual ethnography in producing new insights into family enterprise. This is achieved by discussing the basics of the methodology and by illustrating its value in family business studies by presenting novel research into the ‘lived narrative’ of a family business, Bert Fowlie Butchers in Strichen, Scotland in which two family business photographs are analysed to increase our understanding of visual ethnography in family business.

The literature

In this section, I access the literature of semiotics and visual ethnography to demonstrate how it can enrich our understanding of family business *per-se*. I also consider how visual ethnography enriches the family business research process. However, in conducting visual ethnography the researcher may lack cultural or personal experience of the field under study and must rely on what can be observed and inferred. Pictures thus offer context and record and perhaps even ‘frame’ deliberately created context. Yet if scrutinised as a thing in itself, it offers a rich medium to explore meanings. The aesthetic of an image, a sighting or a view (e.g. of a shop front), can conjure up reflections and demonstrate an affinity, even an appeal to remembered meanings. These have the potential to help us better understand family business narratives. Thus visual ethnography and semiotic analysis offer different ways of seeing and understanding the meaning of the business because of the cultural artefacts it uses to proposition itself. Visual ethnography takes cognisance of semiotics being reliant upon semiotic analysis.

Semiotics: Leiss, Klein and Jhally (1990, p.214) stress that semiotics is an impressionistic, interpretative method. Semiotics provide “*a potentially unifying conceptual framework and a set of methods and terms for use across the full range of signifying practices, which include gesture, posture, dress, writing, speech, photography, film, television and radio*” (Chandler, 2007). Heywood and Sandywell (1999) argue that semiotics permit one to interpret and appreciate how visual metaphors and tropes organise and structure our understanding of the world and to explore the creative interplay between “*sight*” and “*insight*”. Semiotic analysis (Chandler, 2007) is seldom used in family business research and when it is it usually manifests itself as an analysis of written words, or texts (Barley, 1983). An appreciation of semiotics adds value by introducing fresh dimensions to family business research (See Culler, 2002 and Rose, 2007 for a fuller discussion of semiotics).

Visual ethnography: The literature of visual ethnography underpins this study. As an emerging research method, visual ethnography (Harper, 1984; Schwartz, 1989; Emmison & Smith, 2001; Banks, 2008; Mannay, 2010) has been used in other social settings to

interpret and re-interpret visual images and photographs. It is a variant form of semiotic analysis (Chandler, 2007) which permits the researcher to read meaning derived from images associated with a particular study. It can be used alone, or in conjunction with other research methodologies allowing the writer to expand upon the verbal act of narration. Visual ethnography is a form of observation where the role of the researcher is to encourage a story to unfold. Indeed, meaning is provided by the observer by interpreting the signs, the symbols embedded intentionally, or accidentally in the text, picture or view. Alternatively, it may entail the researcher viewing and analysing the content of video tapes, or as in this case analysing still photographs, which represent once lived narrative captured for posterity and endowed with historical and cultural meanings (Trachtenberg, 1989). Photographs act as “*visual ethnographic narratives*” (Harper, 2002) and are narrative elements seldom captured in mainstream qualitative family business research. Twine (2006) views photographs as a collaborative methodological tool; as a source of primary data; and as evidence from which one can clarify and challenge theories. For Chandler (2007) reading photographs requires more than a subjective cultural appreciation. One often must have knowledge of the background situation and of semiotics. Whilst photographs present an authentic reality (Tagg, 1988), they are but representations of reality which authenticate narratives particularly when interpreted using cultural codes. Thus observers may, or may not, assume photographs present reality when in fact they do not always do so. This makes the pictures subjective and complex interpretations of meaning. Nevertheless, visual ethnography can inform the family business research process by delivering fresh insights into taken for granted images and artefacts associated with family business. Thus visual ethnography has the potential to be a powerful method for analyzing photographs in business settings.

How visual ethnography enriches the family business research process: Visual ethnography offers an alternative approach to researching family business settings. When conducting such research it is common for researchers to gather background materials and files consisting of press-cuttings, visual images and documentary evidence such as photographs (Scott, 1990) which inform perceptions of the family business milieu. The resultant artefacts provide rich background, or contextual material that reinforces the

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3 textual. Visual ethnography presents essences not depicted by the written word and
4 captures so much more e.g. feelings emotions and values such as, love, pride, irony,
5 sarcasm, or contradiction. Irrespective of how the facts are captured, the visual record
6 preserves data so that it can be studied in detail. Indeed, the camera acts in a similar
7 manner to a tape recorder in gathering data for posterity. However, as researchers we
8 must acknowledge that settings can be staged and smiles falsely induced. Moreover,
9 photographs can be doctored and used out of context as can words.

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11 For Harper (2002, p.13) visual images evoke deeper elements of human
12 consciousness than do words. Nevertheless, according to Harper (2002, p.14) although
13 visual methodologies, such as photo-elicitation, have crept into organizational studies
14 they are – *‘treated as a waif on the margins rather than as a robust actor in a developing*
15 *research tradition’*. Photo-elicitation adds validity and reliability to word-based research
16 and delves deeper into a different part of human consciousness than do words-alone
17 interviews because they add a visual dimension which reinforces the textual. Ongoing
18 developments, in the technique of visual rhetoric (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996; Hill &
19 Helmers, 2004) as an analytic tool are exciting because it has been suggested that visual
20 images are communicated to us via sensory perceptions as well as by linguistic tropes and
21 aesthetics. Visual rhetoric as a form of communication uses images to create meaning or
22 construct an argument. Visual ethnography can also be used by researchers who
23 intentionally create photographs for analysis (see Venkatraman & Nelson, 2010).

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25 In this article, I use visual ethnography to uncover the concept of ‘lived business
26 narratives’ (as opposed to told narrative), in family business settings via symbolic
27 representation through a chain of human events (Hanninen, 2004). Lived narratives may
28 be understood by visual ethnography because a living narrative is composed of a stream
29 of storied images – including those of the business owner, their family, their premises,
30 their staff and products and their public captured in film and in photograph as in this case
31 where it can be read as visual ethnography or as a “*visual language*” (Rigg, 2005). This is
32 important because visual ethnography allows us to study visual images produced as part
33 of everyday life and culture. Benefits of visual ethnography include - readers may view
34 the research through the eyes of the participant and it captures the private worlds of
35 respondents; and it cuts through tired clichés and expectations. According to Davey
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(2010) the strengths of visual ethnography include its increased acceptance by mainstream social scientists; a diverse and interdisciplinary research agenda; synergy between academic and applied perspectives; and the potential of generating new visual methods. Weaknesses include difficulty defining the sub-discipline; and limited collaboration (i.e. single-authored research articles).

Methodological explanation and analysis

Conducting semiotic analysis involves describing what one sees but interpreted through particular conceptual, theoretical or ideological frameworks and involves reading meaning out of or into text and image (Chandler, 2007). As a research method, visual ethnography attempts to capture life as lived (Pink, 2007) and not as told. It thus transcends written description linking the semiotic elements of the textual and the visual and in this case, the unit of analysis is photographs relating to the family business, Bert Fowlie Butchers, Strichen, Scotland. My interest in visual ethnography emerged during research in family business settings when I interviewed Hebbie Fowlie, a second-generation entrepreneur running a family business and together coproduced a family business narrative. In this collaboration, Hebbie provided me with colour photographs from which, I selected two, one of the exterior and one of the interior because they were compatible for comparison. I now provide an overview of the method, purposes and processes used. The analytic stages described below follow the basic process of translating one medium (graphic) into another (text) using robust analytic techniques (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The images analysed individually and collectively in table 1 tell stories of enterprise and family business using a three step process.

Step 1	I viewed the photographs and wrote down my observations as field notes, listing points of observation onto 'post-it-notes'. I conducted the analysis on a 'stand-alone' based on what I saw in the photographs and avoided adding details gleaned from personal knowledge at this stage albeit reading involved visual signs and an understanding of aesthetics.
Step 2	These observations were then coded and collapsed into categories thus permitting the themes to emerge. I arrived at the themes via an appreciation of the sensory as in colours, perceived textures in combination with words. This is an example of 'Aesthetic reading' (Rosenblatt, 1986) when we focus on personal meaning, filling in the blanks while reading. The act of reading is a dynamic "transaction" between reader and text and the meaning of any text lies not in the work itself but in the reader's interaction with it.
Step 3	These themes were then written up in the form of research vignettes (Finch, 1987) or compact stories / literary sketches. Photographs can be visual vignettes when presented with a caption.

Table 1 – The analytic steps followed

These steps were applied to photographs 1 and 2 to illustrate how photographs convey lived narrative and provide examples illustrating the principles set out above.

Photograph 1 – An exterior view of a traditional family business



Source: Provided by Hebbie Fowlie

Vignette 1: The shop is situated in the village High Street. Note the freshly painted frontage which imbues it with a visible air of prosperity. The traditional black / green coloured paint presents an inviting and idyllic visage. A sense of ‘proprietary pride’ can be read out of the brightly coloured visage and the well maintained billboards with copperplate style chalked writing. The front door is wedged open to welcome customers and hanging baskets with flowers and the traditional blackboard upon which the produce is advertised present an idyllic image of rural village life. A sense of tradition is maintained via the prominent display of the business name – *Bert Fowlie*. Indeed, one can read the photograph as an extension of the proprietor’s character. Collectively, the photograph also elicits a sense of order and organisation and a balance between old and new in that both blend in with each other. Tradition is an integral part of family business stories.

Photograph 2 – An interior view personifying proprietorial pride.



Source: Provided by Hebbie Fowlie

Vignette 2: Award winning butchery products are visible in the forefront and the owner Hebbie Fowlie is in the foreground with a smiling, friendly staff. The green coloured work attire continues the links with tradition discussed in vignette 1. Note the awards and certificates mounted on the wall behind the members of staff. The staged photograph exudes a sense of tradition, cleanliness and wholesomeness we associate with quality and family business and links history to heritage. The themes of tradition and proprietorial pride continue as do the themes of order and organisation.

Producing the vignettes and conducting an interpretation is only the first step in a number of possible processes because obviously photographs are only one possible source of information. Other methodologies offer additional ways of receiving empirical material and of triangulating the findings. One can source other photographs and written texts and other documentary evidence (Scott, 1990) relating to the phenomenon under study. Although the vignettes are but one of many possible interpretations of the pictures (Riveria, 2010) individually and collectively the photographs communicate value by presenting lived narrative in its natural setting from which inferences can be drawn. The photographs are evocative and present business values often overlooked in the published writings of family business scholars telling an alternative living story to that told by family business stories. Whilst the above analysis may appear simple it is not. The

presentation masks the complexity of doing. There were challenges with the use of photography. Firstly confining oneself to what one sees is difficult. There was a temptation to skip methodological advice and jump straight into cultural interpretation using personal knowledge. Many visual ethnographers do this and in using photo-elicitation techniques simply add intuitive dialogue under the photograph. Harper (2002, p.13) stresses that photo-elicitation enlarges the possibilities of conventional empirical research and produces a different kind of information by evoking feelings and other sensory stimuli. Indeed, the power of such techniques is that by merely introducing an image into the text one ‘adds value’ by introducing an additional sensory dimension. Whilst there is no simple explanation of what can be done, and not done; or where the borders of the interpretations lie, it is the researcher’s responsibility to relate it to their narrative and to formalise the analytic procedures adopted to add rigour. Pink (2001, p.51) stresses that there are no fixed criteria that determine when a photograph becomes ethnographic and its meaning(s) remain arbitrary and subjective depending on who looks at it. It is up to the researcher to elicit and explain their interpretations. It is vital that photographs are presented so that every reader can follow the logic of the authored argument and confirm or refute the interpretation or read fresh insights from the data. The photographs tell their own short stories providing an ethnographic insight into family business settings. Nevertheless, photographs also have the power to mislead us. This is important because tautologically we expand narration from storybook rendition to a living narrative and engage in visual ethnography (Schwartz, 1989; Pink, 2007).

Highlighting the importance of visual ethnography in family business

Visual ethnography is important because it represents a form of ethnographic knowing encapsulated in a rich knot of inter/intra-textuality and multi-modality (Pink, 2011). It has the potential to contribute to our overall understanding of family businesses. This partly answers the “so what question” by developing our sense of the visual (Edwards & Bhaumik, 2009). This article contributes to the literature by presenting and analyzing photographs of a family business to discover new themes such as proprietorial pride, tradition, order, and organization seldom considered in existing research. It also addresses an identified gap in the literature which is perhaps not so visible to family business researchers. I present a different approach by embedding photographic images into the

text to help identify alternative themes. The article also highlights the potential of the method to generate and challenge theory by taking cognisance of the visual and not merely the textual going beyond the textual description of physical artefacts of family business touched on by family business scholars such as McGoldrick and Troast (1993). There are limitations in that I only scrape the surface in introducing visual ethnography. However, I believe the benefits outweigh the limitations and hope this article will spark interest in the use of such visual methodologies by researchers who appreciate the possibilities of the ethnographic method, recognise its value and consider adopting it.

The unexploited explanatory power of visual ethnography for research in family business is potentially huge as this article illustrates the importance, and potential usefulness of the methodology to the researcher's tool-kit. However, echoing Leavy (2009) and Chenail (2008), conducting arts-based research is problematic because instead of becoming mired in the polarizing conversation relating to the merits of what is "scientifically minded" versus "artistically-focused" research, as researchers we must appreciate these differences along a continuum. Chenail (2008, p.10) argues that all types of research have the potential to "inform, perform, reform, and transform" and be considered art as well as research but visual ethnography can make a difference because being observation based research grounded in (concrete) observable phenomenon it can be visualised and interpreted and used to corroborate other qualitative findings by capturing family business settings in time and context. There is considerable scope for using other techniques of visual ethnography in family business settings such as photo-elicitation; video-diaries; video auto-ethnography; and photo-essays to illuminate the interface between family and business. One can intentionally create photographs for analysis (see Venkatraman & Nelson, 2010). For Berglund and Wigren-Kristoferson (2012) pictures and artefacts enable hitherto silenced stories to be told and create a common understanding which can be compared and contrasted with more traditional accounts and stories thereby allowing us to see family business in a new light.

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