Organisational Photography as a Research Method: What, How and Why

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Abstract
The article focuses on the use of photography as a research methodology within organizational studies. It is based on empirical studies of Knowledge Management in a number of management consulting firms in Denmark where photography has been one of the key drivers in the data collection process. A seeming need for additional literature in this area of organisational research methodology and a desire to contribute to its ongoing establishment has motivated the authors to write the article. Hence, the purpose of the article is twofold: To offer a framework describing the various ways of using photography in organisational research as well as their underlying assumptions and implications. And to explore one of these in depth, the so-called Group Photo Views, where photos of an organisation are used as stimuli - or visual questions - during an interview with a small group of employees. In this sense the photos are not research data per se but are used as a mean to create research data. The process of conducting Group Photo Views is thoroughly described and the various methodological issues, problems and potentials that this particular method raises are discussed.

Keywords
Visual Research
Photo Elicitation
Knowledge Management
Introduction

At last year’s AoM meeting, one of the authors of this article presented a paper about knowledge sharing within the Danish management consulting industry\(^1\). One of the methods involved was “organizational photography” where photos were used to prompt people to talk about knowledge sharing in their organization. Many of those listening to the presentation reacted on the method because the things that the respondents had revealed surprised them, and some expressed an interest in knowing more about how the photographic part of the research was conducted, the problems and benefits etc.

The use of photos is a relatively new methodology within management research studies – or at least it is not extensively used. Although photos have appeared for almost a century in connection with the social sciences, usually under the headings visual sociology, visual ethnography and visual anthropology (Collier & Collier 1986, Harper 1988, Banks 2001), photos have rarely been used in relation to organizational studies. Hence we decided to write an article about this intriguing field.

In general, the authors of this article refer to the use of photos in organisational research as “organizational photography”. But organisational photography is a vast concept, which covers a range of different methods from analysing and interpreting photos taken by the researcher to having respondents take photos themselves and/or interviewing the respondents about them. There is a need for a coherent overview of these different methods, their underlying assumptions and implications. Amongst others, this paper is an attempt to provide such a framework.

The framework offers a basic distinction between using photos as research data per se (when the photos are the data) and using photos as a mean to collect research data (for example an interview on the basis of the photos, where the transcribed interview makes the data). The first way of using photos in research has been more widespread than the latter. One will therefore easily find publications on how to interpret and analyze photos for research purposes (see for example Rose, 2001, Van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2001 or Prosser, 1998). But when it comes to the use of photography as a data collection device the amount of literature on the subject has appeared to be very limited (Buchanan, 2001).

Hence, this paper will also explore one way of using photos as a mean to get research data. This method is called Group Photo Views. Briefly described, the purpose of the method is to use photos as a vehicle for making respondents discuss the research issue in question. The idea underlying this approach to data gathering is to use photos as “visual questions” rather than posing semantic ones. When using semantic questions the answers are more likely to fall within the framework of the researcher but when using photos, people are prompted to talk about themselves and their everyday working life in another way. In the best cases the discussion opens a number of new avenues with respect to the understanding of the investigated topic in practice.

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\(^1\) The article “Knowledge Management in Action - a Study of Knowledge Management in Management Consultancies” by Nicoline Jacoby Petersen and Flemming Poulfelt was revised and published in: Developing Knowledge and Value in Management Consulting, Anthony F. Buono (ed.). Greenwich: Information Age Publishing, 2002.
The way research can be conducted using Group Photo Views is thoroughly described and on the basis of our practical experiences we will discuss some of the methodological issues that this method raises. Since our attempt to use photos in organizational research is a modest one, the present article will pose as many new questions as it will give answers to the use of photos within organizational research. Thus we would be pleased if this article will inspire other researchers to use photos within organizational research – be it as described in this article or in other ways – and hence share their experiences so that a more substantial body of experiences and evidences within this field can be built.

A framework for talking about organizational photography

Since the invention of the camera people have been drawn by the possibility of “freezing” a particular moment in time and developing it into a piece of visual memory either to show other people or to keep private. Alongside with its technical development and the following lower prices, the use of the camera has become widespread.

Despite its widespread use in society in general, the camera as a means to gather data within the social science has been rather limited. Until the 1960ies, there was only scarce use of photography (as well as qualitative methods in general) in academic research in favor of quantitative methodologies. Up till this point, photos had mainly served as reflections or confirmations of findings rather than tools for interpretation. Although researchers like Collier have long been arguing that: “[...] photographs are charged with psychological and highly emotional elements and symbols” and that they are capable of “[...] crystallizing [the participants’] feelings into forms they [can] express” (in Carlsson, 2001, p. 131), these fruitful qualities have been overruled by the opinion that emotional aspects should not play a part in scientific research: ”[the visual has been] consigned to the fields of art and subjective expression or persuasion, and the textual (in the social sciences at least) to science” (Holiday, 2000, p. 504-505) Thus it is due to the link between the visual and the emotional (as pointed out by Collier) that qualitative data like photographs until recently have been rendered “unscientific” and have not been accepted amongst scholars (Harper, 1988, Holliday, 2000, Donaldson, 2001).

The area where the most widespread use of photography is to be found (and therefore also the most expanded theory building) is within sociology, ethnology and anthropology where photos have been used to portray, describe and analyze social phenomena and cultures, ranging from Mead and Bateson’s famous studies of the Balinese culture from the 1930ies to moderns times’ exploration of the semiotics of visual communication systems (Harper 1988).

Turning the attention towards our own field, the use of photos has not yet become a widespread method in relation to organizational research (Buchanan, 2001). But drawing on the history of visual research in general, it is possible to divide its use into a number of categories in a classic two-by-two matrix. The framework and the different techniques presented should be seen as an attempt

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2 It is not our intention to provide a historic overview of the development of visual research. See for example Harper, 1988 and Pink, 2001 for a short and long account respectively.
to categorize and reflect upon how to use photos in organizational research. Surely many variations (even new categories?) can be thought of, thus challenging and expanding the framework.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role of the researcher</th>
<th>Status of the photos</th>
<th>Photos as data per se - photo analysis</th>
<th>Photos as elicitation - photo views</th>
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<td></td>
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<td>Photos are taken by the researcher</td>
<td>Photos are taken by the respondents</td>
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<td>1. The researcher takes the photos, analyses them and concludes on the basis of the photo material</td>
<td>2. The researcher lets the respondents take the photos but analyses them on her own</td>
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<td></td>
<td>3. The researcher takes the photos and discusses them with respondents during an interview</td>
<td>4. The researcher lets the respondents take the photos and discusses them with the respondents during an interview</td>
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**Category no. 1**

When the photos are taken by the researcher and used as data per se the researcher usually uses the photos directly as data to be analysed. Depending on the theoretical background of the researcher, the photos can be analysed according to the principles of semiology, discourse analysis, psychoanalysis or be content analysed (Rose, 2001). In some cases the photos are merely used as a photographic record of the research process to supplement other kinds of data and this technique is often referred to as *photo-documentation* (Buchanan, 2001).

In both of the above-mentioned cases, the technique does not involve respondents directly as they are merely being observed. The researcher views the photos as pieces of (factual) knowledge that are to be analysed by the researcher without involving the objects of the research.

As an example Jorgensen (1991) has used photo analysis – as part of a larger cross-disciplinary research project – to illustrate the service production in public organizations and the organisations’ relations to their customers. Her research material mainly consists in photos of (management) meetings, physical surroundings in the organizations and service production with emphasis on social interaction – both internally and in relation to the customers. Jorgensen took around 900 pictures in each of the five organisations involved and the photos were used to supplement the findings of other researchers using more traditional quantitative and qualitative methods.

With the pictures at hand the researcher is afterwards able to analyse their content at different levels (a social level and a structural and so forth) according to the overall aim of the research. But the pictures can also turn out to be an important tool in cases where the research is involving more than one organization or in cases where it is difficult to get sufficiently close to the respondents. Thus this way of using photographs is also fruitful in situations where it is difficult for the researcher to interact verbally with the objects of the research. Whether the problems are due to classic language barriers or because the researcher is investigating tacit knowledge and skills tied to bodily action, photographs are often capable of capturing what is otherwise difficult to express in words.
Category no. 2

In this way of working with organisational photography, the respondents are more involved in the research process as *they* take the photos, which subsequently are analysed by the researcher. As in category no. 1, the analysis is still based on the researchers interpretation of the pictures only this time their content is decided by the respondents themselves. This way the data to a larger extent consist in what Staunaes (1999) refers to as the respondents’ *self-representation* than in representations made by the researcher. As Staunaes (1999) points out, by letting the respondent take photos, they are no longer just being observed and examined. They in fact become *co-researchers*. By involving them directly in the data gathering, the perspective on the respondents changes from viewing them as objects of the research process to become active *subjects* whose action and reflection become part of the data creation.

For example, Staunaes (1999) asked a number of children to take pictures of their everyday life in a refugee centre. By letting the children take the pictures without her being present Staunaes got access to the various dynamics inside the centre and the children’s perception of themselves avoiding influencing the situation with her presence. Being present with a camera, the researcher will never be able to capture the same images as unnoticed as a person inside the group. This has both to do with the above mentioned presence of the researcher but also that the respondent taking the pictures will most possibly choose to focus on issues different from the researcher and thus add different – and perhaps unexpected - aspects to the analysis. Although we have not tried it personally, one can easily imagine this technique being transferred to an organizational context provided that the employees are willing to participate and understand the aim of the research.

An overall difference between category 1 and 2 touches upon the general issue related to theory of science, which has to do with the researchers view upon herself and her view upon reality. In the case where it is the researcher alone who decides what to photograph and what to deduce from their content not only leaves those who are being examined as *objects* of the research process. It also shows that the researcher views reality as a fact that is common to all participants and can be discovered by outsiders. The image of the researcher thus becomes that of a kind of “reporter” who is able to tell the story (based on the content of the photos) to other people (the audience of the research).

The case where the researcher involves the respondents in the data creation depicts a different theoretical point of departure. By treating the respondents as participating *subjects* they not only become co-creators of the research. The choice also indicates a view upon reality as culturally and socially distributed, best known and described by its members (Staunaes, 1999). Building her analysis on data and interpretations provided by other people, the researcher indicates that she doesn’t think of herself as the one telling the story. She rather becomes the *medium* for the narrative that evolves from the story that the respondents choose to “tell” through their photos.

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3 There are several classic anthropological studies using this method, but we haven’t found any records of this method in an organisational setting. We have thus chosen to illustrate the category by describing Staunaes exciting study of the everyday life of children in a Danish refugee camp (1999).
Category no. 3

As in category no. 2, the researcher involves the respondents actively in the research process, only this time she takes the photos herself as in category no. 1. This technique is not based on picture taking alone but is furthermore combined with different kinds of interview where the respondents are involved in the interpretation of the photos. As opposed to the two previous categories, photos are not treated as data per se, but as a mean to collect data. The Collier brothers are among the first to describe the use of images as guides and stimulation in interviews (Collier & Collier, 1986 [1913]) which has since been known as photo-interviewing/photo-graphic interviewing (Heisley and Levy, 1991, Pink, 2001), projective photo interviewing (Carlsson 2001) and finally also as photo elicitation (Harper, 1988).

The point with photo elicitation is that the photos are used to bring out the respondents’ associations and reflections connected to the pictures. In other words it is not the content of the pictures that is of interest to the researcher, but the respondents’ explanations and interpretations of them (Carlsson 2001). As the research analysis is built on the way the respondents think about their reality, Harper (1988) refers to this particular approach to data collecting as “the reflexive mode”. In connection with exploration of consumption behaviour, Heisley and Levy (1991) labels this methodological approach as auto-driving as the feedback from the respondents is driven by themselves by stimuli taken directly from their own life.

When using the photos as a mean to elicit statements from the respondents, it is no longer the researcher who is deciding and posing the questions (as least not directly) but a third party namely the pictures. Even though the photos are subjective and, as mentioned later, represent the photographer’s view of the world, this inter-subjectivity opens up the possibility of negotiation between researcher and respondent about the research topic. Thus the research becomes a matter of creating our story rather than my story and your story.

There are several techniques that fall under this category, and we will briefly touch upon three ways that fall under this category, but there are surely many variations one could think of.

Carrying out Photo Views\(^4\) means that the respondent is interviewed on the basis of photos either taken by the researcher or by the respondent self. (The latter option falls under category no. 4 and will be dealt with below). When the researcher takes the photos it is either possible to walk around the organisation and take pictures prior to the interview. Otherwise the researcher can choose to follow and observe an employee during the course of a day – or even a longer period – and either take polaroids or digital photos (which can be printed immediately) of selected situations that one wishes to discuss with the employee at the end of the day.

On one occasion we have carried out a Photo View based on pictures taken by us and afterwards used in a single interview. Our experience in this case was, however, that the respondent had some difficulties associating from the photos and we wondered whether the motifs were too unfamiliar, whether the respondent found it too difficult to associate from visual stimuli in general or whether

\(^4\) We have been inspired by Siggaard Jensen who uses the term video views (Siggaard Jensen, 2001), which refers to a research method where she films employees doing their daily work using a videocamera while interviewing them at the same time about what they do.
there were other reasons for this outcome. Some of these issues will be addressed in the section **Methodological issues**.

A third variant, which we have tried on several occasions is the **Group Photo View**. Basically a Group Photo View is a group of people discussing photos that are taken by a researcher. The researcher walks around in the organization for a day, taking photos that are related to the topic investigated. In our case we took pictures of various aspects of knowledge sharing. When the film is developed, the researcher selects some of the photos and arranges them into series of pictures. A group of employees (approximately four in each focus group) are then asked to discuss the topic investigated, associating from the photo series. This is done by exposing the focus group to a new series of pictures every twelve minutes, and the researcher remains silent during the one and half-hour session. The discussion is tape-recorded and transcribed like an interview. This way of using photos in organizational research will be described and discussed more thoroughly below.

This way of prompting people to talk about themselves and the issue being researched can be traced to psychology where it is a known technique to use visual objects as helping devises to make people talk (i.e. the Rorschach test and other kinds of projective testing). In this case the psychologist has not taken photos himself/herself but uses general images representing different themes.

**Category no. 4**

In this case, the respondents themselves take the photos and like category no. 3 they are subsequently used as the basis for an interview with the respondent who took the photos. Hence, this way of using photos in research is the one least controlled by the researcher. By letting the respondents both decide what to photograph and afterwards building the analysis of the respondents’ explanations of the pictures, the researcher allows the highest degree of self-representation.

By talking about the photos with the respondent, the researcher not only gains insight in what issues the respondent finds relevant to include. One furthermore has the possibility to find out the underlying drivers of these particular choices and the thoughts attached to them. At the same time, this approach is possibly the most difficult to handle for the researcher. A large part of the research depends on other peoples’ ability to understand what they are supposed to do (and why) and furthermore to actually carry out the task in practice.

Inspired by Staunaes, we asked some employees to take photos of knowledge sharing in their organisation and subsequently we wanted to use the photos as a vehicle for a conversation during single interviews with the respondents. The point was to make the previously mentioned self-representation more predominant than if we were to take the photos and see which aspects the respondents chose to photograph as opposed to ourselves. The first problem that arose in this endeavour was to find employees who wanted to participate. We succeeded in one organisation and

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5 We asked them to photograph "Knowledge sharing in my everyday life". This can be perceived as being non-concrete and even abstract by some, so we added hints like: Think of situations and places where you share knowledge. Don’t mind the quality of the photos. On the other hand, the non-concrete had a point in itself because we didn’t want to impose what may be perceived as restrictions. We discussed whether to ask them to photograph “knowledge sharing in my organization” but thought that it would prevent some from photographing clients or other parts of their external network (maybe friends working at competitors), or at home together with the spouse discussing the course of the day.
found two employees (consultants in a large international management consulting company) – but when the idea had been tested we decided not to pursue it. It simply seemed too difficult for the employees to photograph knowledge sharing. For example, when asked about some photos of her colleagues, a respondent responded that she took them because “these colleagues are nice” and that it was fun having the camera at work, another said that some of the photos were taken because she “had to”\(^6\). This does not necessarily mean that the method is useless and we wonder whether it might depend on what you ask the respondents to photograph? Is there a difference between being asked to photograph a “concept” (like knowledge sharing or timing), a process or daily activity (like a patient trail) or an event (like an evening dinner)?

When this technique works, the strength of the method is of course that it becomes clearer what preoccupies the respondent in relation to a research topic rather than defining these themes on beforehand as a researcher, thus increasing the level of self-representation. This way of conducting research, where the self-representation is higher than normal, implies that the relation between the researcher and the respondent becomes less asymmetric. This touches upon the issue of power relations connected with research which has long been characterized by the researcher in a rather domineering position as opposed to the less influential position of the respondent. So far this debate has mainly been taking place within postmodern feminist writers (Carlsson 2201, Holliday 2000). But it would seem that this highly relevant methodological issue is beginning to spread to other scientific areas, amongst other organizational research.

Placing the above mentioned discussion in a current perspective, it might be interesting to include this year’s AoM meeting, “Democracy in the Knowledge Economy”. In a knowledge economy, where knowledge has become the resource rather than a resource (Drucker, 1993), researchers have gained an immense power in the public debate. Researchers are professional knowledge producers and therefore often assigned the role as experts in the media and therefore have a dominant voice. Talking about democracy it is interesting to address the question on which grounds they talk as experts. Is it the researchers own opinion that is being uttered? Is it the more or less condensed and digested voices of the respondents? Or perhaps of an even larger and more resourceful interest group? So it is interesting to address the question of how this voice has been created.

The framework outlined in this article can be seen as representing a more or less democratic research process, where democratic in this respect means that the more the voices of the people (the respondents) are heard, the more democratic. Category no. 1 could be perceived as being the least democratic research method as respondents are exclusively seen as objects and category no. 4 as being the most democratic research process as respondents are seen as subjects who are capable of being co-researchers. As such, the respondents not only have an impact at the data-level but also at the level of analysis. The question that still remains, however, is a fundamental one (and we do not have the answer): Are research results generated through what could be perceived as a democratic research process with high level of self-representation more valid? Does it make a difference and

\(^6\) This happened even though we – as we experienced it! – made an effort in posing questions that forces the respondent to reflect upon the photos, like: Try to describe the photo. What is happening on the photo? What happened before you took the photo? What happened after you took the photo? What were you thinking when you took the photo? If you were asked to give the photo a title, what would it be?
how? Seen in this light the framework not only becomes a question of selecting the most fruitful method, it also carries a debate about knowledge production within science.

**Group Photo Views**

As described above, we have mainly tried to experiment within category no. 3, carrying out what we call *Group Photo Views*. We will firstly outline some of the reasons behind “inventing” and using the method\(^7\), then we will describe more thoroughly how we undertook the various parts of the research process and finally the problems and potentials that this method poses. The method has been developed and tested in connection to a master thesis dealing with knowledge sharing in one of the largest Danish engineering companies and as mentioned in the introduction, it has been more widely used in a research project dealing with knowledge sharing in the Danish management consultant industry.

All in all we have tried this method in four different organizations. This is obviously not a lot or enough to ground the method as a valid and useful research tool within organizational research method theory and practice. But the aim of this article is not to convince the world that we have *the* answer and present a full-fletched method that has been tested in all kinds of ways, but to explore *one way* of using photos in organizational research and share our experiences in a way that make other researchers feel inclined to do experiments of their own. Hence we can hopefully begin to discuss the usability of photos within the organizational research method community more consistently than we have done so far.

**The point of Group Photo Views**

Human beings are daily exposed to an enormous amount of visual images, which we process more or less consciously. Whenever we are exposed to something visual, it is in our nature to investigate and try to construct a kind of story from what we see in order to comprehend it (Carlsson, 2001). Photographs represent a very direct form of visual stimulus. Our attention towards them is perhaps more immediate than most stimuli and might therefore explain our spontaneous desire to explain their content: “A photograph motivates people to provide a perspective of action, to explain what lies behind the pictures, and to relate to how the frozen moment relates to the reality as they see it” (Heisley & Levy, 1991, p. 269).

Using photos as a research method is an attempt to introduce the visual into an otherwise semantically oriented research world that is very preoccupied with words, be it oral or written. As opposed to semantics, visuals like photos, drawings or comics are capable of capturing and present even very complex situations (Carlsson, 2001), in ways most people can relate to and therefore respond to. Hence the saying that a picture can say more than a thousand words: “*Photos and films can say things that not only would require pages and pages of words to describe, but in the end could not be adequately described with words*” (Eisner in Carlsson, p. 127).

The point about a photo being able to contain so many messages at the same time is an important one in relation to research: In contrast to a phrase, which is inevitably “caught” in the language (due

\(^7\) We have been inspired by Christina Hee Pedersen, Dorthe Staunaes and Henriette Christrup from Roskilde University, who have all influenced our way of thinking about visuals in research through their inspiring teaching.
to the predominantly fixed and collectively decided meaning of words), a photograph contains a variety of meanings. Photos are not merely representations of an objective world but a subjective snapshot of a given frame in time. And it will be interpreted differently by different individuals depending on their cultural background and beliefs.

This power of multiplicity is important when trying to understand a phenomena in practice. Pink (2001) quotes Schwartz who did a photographic survey in the North American Waucoma farming community (p. 58). Schwartz sees her photos to represent her “point of view” and uses this idea to “study the range of meaning they [the photographs] hold for different members of the community” (Schwartz in Pink, 2001, p. 58). As Pink points out, Schwartz “made the idea that visual meanings are arbitrary a key element of her research method” (Pink. 2001, p. 58).

So photos taken by a researcher inevitably limits the possible answers due to the mere fact that they show a particular extract of a particular reality, captured by the subjective eye of the photographer. But since the photos not pose direct or single questions, the range of possible answers still increases compared to the semantic question.

If we take the discussion to a more empirical level, there are two major strengths that we find that the specific method of Group Photo Views poses. Basically, the Group Photo Views process involves two things: 1) taking photos in the organisation(s) and 2) conducting a group interview.

One of the major advantages of taking photographs in organizations is that you get “underneath the skin” of the organization as you walk around – you get a chance to talk informally with employees and you get your own impression of the organization and its culture instead of just being told by an employee what it is like. Ideally the authors of this article have a preference for conducting research in organisations as anthropological fieldwork meaning that we prefer to be part of the organisation in a certain period of time, as were we part of it. This, however, is not always possible – you may be doing a study where you want to include several organisations and this ambition of being present for a longer period becomes unrealistic. Or it might be that the organisation simply does not want you to observe their everyday life and only allows you to come in for a couple of hours to conduct interviews. Consequently the researcher is often left with questions like: Do I know enough about the organisation to pose the “right” questions? Do the respondents tell me what there is to know about the topic I’m investigating in the organisation? Am I missing something? How can I be sure that they actually do what they say they do? Etc. Our own personal experience is that these questions come to mind when you only have a superficial relation to the organisation – you inevitably get the feeling that you haven’t “seen and heard it all”.

It is our belief that organisational photography can – to some extent – help you overcome this feeling. Taking the photos gives you an “excuse”: It looks silly and suspicious to just walk around an organisation with seemingly no purpose plus the fact that most organisations won’t let you do that. But bringing the camera with the purpose of taking photos for later interviews is an argument that management understands (and in general finds innovative).

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8 In this connection one should, however, take into consideration that a large group of theorists (mainly within discourse analysis and social constructivism) would probably object to this by arguing that the language is just as open to interpretation as pictures are.
So the actual photographing process has a double role in our case: 1) To take photos for the purpose of the focus group and 2) to see for yourself what the organisation and its employees look like, to get a feeling of the “vibe” of the company and get other kinds of data: when talking informally to employees or participating in First Fridays and social gatherings the day you are present in the organisation, you are able to “pick-up” things that can supplement or exemplify other kinds of data.

Several other researchers points to this fact: The Colliers call the camera a “can-opener” (1986) and Jorgensen (1991) also points to the fact that moving around the organisation taking photographs is an intimate way of collecting data because you move around the organisation in another way: “When taking photographs, a variety of other legitimate ways to have contact with those people being researched become possible than when using traditional research methods” (1991, p.72 – our translation). This way the camera is not only being used to take pictures. It moreover helps to legitimise and demystify your presence as a researcher: If you walk around with a camera - you have a purpose. If you walk around just looking – you snoop!

The other major strength that we would like to stress here is the point of discussing the photos in a group, instead of doing single interviews. Basically the idea is the same as the one of focus groups and the purpose they serve: “[...] focus groups are basically group interviews, although not in the sense of an alternation between the researcher’s questions and the research participants responses. Instead, the reliance is on interaction within the group, based on topics that are supplied by the researcher, who typically takes the role of the moderator.” (Morgan, 1988, p. 9)

We find Morgan’s point of relying on the interaction within the group very relevant and important. Instead of having one person associating from the photos, it is our experience that a group of employees can provide an “inside talk” on the organisation because they know each other – and the organisation. In traditional interviews, respondents sometimes tend not to tell things because the internal affairs seem too complex or too detailed to explain to a “stranger”. In the focus group discussion, where employees know each other, this barrier is omitted. This kind of inside talk that the focus group produces is very valuable since you tend to get more information about the organisation and you get a feeling of the internal relations between departments or employee groups that are otherwise difficult or time consuming to grasp.

So altogether we find that the method functions as a kind of Trojan horse: it gives access to organizations and employees in an intimate way and compensates for those research conditions where familiarizing with the organization “the anthropological way” is impossible. To this should be added the fact that it broadens the researchers mind and perspective in relation to the research topic by offering new (and perhaps different) questions to pose in connection with other data collecting activities (and therefore can compensate for those situations where the researcher has become to theoretically or conceptually focused). A more critical assessment of the method will be dealt with in the section Methodological issues.

Preparing Group Photo Views

Following the above, it takes quite a lot of preparation before the actual Group Photo Views can be conducted. First you need to take photos in the organization, then you need to select among the photos and form the photo-series that you want expose to the group and finally you have to select
and find four to five employees in the organization who are willing to participate. The next paragraphs will take you through this process in detail.

First of all you need to find an organization that will allow you to take photos inside the organization (considering the risk that the organizations run of industry espionage and other crimes), and you also need to clarify the question of anonymity. We will therefore briefly touch upon the issue of company security and confidentiality.

In the present empirical study it was fairly easy to get the management-consulting firms to allow us to use the proposed method. Consultants are in general eager to try something new and since they are used to interview others and being interviewed, they are often bored with it. As a point of sale we therefore proposed that being introduced to the method could be interesting to their consulting practice in order to perhaps add something new to their method portfolio. It is our impression that Scandinavian companies are not as concerned with security as abroad and so this seemingly “natural” obstacle was never an issue but could be in other industries (like the telecommunication industry) or in other countries, tend to have a higher level of security.

The question of confidentiality was a bit tougher. We had to promise not to show the photographs to anyone, but after they were taken we asked for the organizations permission to show the photos on several occasions and they all accepted. This is important as the photos are much more difficult to anonymise than persons in a text. We have covered company-identifying names on the photos, but if you are Danish and are familiar with the consulting industry, they could easily be recognised.

**Taking photos**

Before we took any photographs in the organization, we made sure that the employees had received an e-mail informing them about our presence, who we were, what we were doing, why and how the photos were going to be used. In cases where we didn’t have access to the mailing system, we asked our contact person to do it. The idea of informing the employees stems from Jorgensen (1991) and turned out to be a fruitful piece of advice. The purpose of the mail was to create awareness and trust because experience shows that employees who haven’t received this piece of information are far more skeptic and suspicious than those who have. In one occasion our contact person hadn’t send the mail despite our request, and we spend a lot of time explaining what we were doing and the purpose of it. Even though one of the benefits of organizational photography is the chance to talk informally with employees, answering the same questions is both time consuming and tiring. When the employees already know what you are doing, you can spend the time talking to them about the subject of your investigation and thereby get valuable extra information supplementing the rest of your data.

It is important to note that there is a difference between walking around in the organization alone and having a manager escorting you, as preferred in some organizations. On one hand being accompanied can bee stressful when selecting motives (since managers often pose questions like: “Why is that interesting? Do you want a photo of...?”). On the other hand it can give access to rooms and situations which would otherwise not be accessible, e.g. meetings in progress and other events. In all organizations where we conducted Group Photo Views we found it necessary to stress
that we needed at least four to five hours for our purpose and that we needed to walk around the organization several times.

On our first roundabout, we checked out every corner of the organization to get an overview and impression of the premises and the people working there. During the second round we started taking photographs. None of us are expert photographers and we used a small pocket camera with a 120mm zoom. The important thing is to be familiar with the camera (in terms of light and cutting) and that its physical appearance doesn’t make you look like a paparazzi. When using recording equipment such as a camera, Hirshman (in Heisley & Levy, 1991) warns against the potential risk of the camera’s appearance to appear obtrusive to the respondents, call for unnecessary attention to the presence of the researcher and might alter the behavior of the people in focus. Heisley & Levy therefore gives the advice that one should use as discrete and easily handled equipment as possible. But they also claim that the presence of the camera becomes less intrusive and the behavior more normal the more the people in focus are left engaged in their normal surroundings, conducting their activities without constant interaction with the person observing them.

We also brought along an observation guide prepared in advance. The guide was merely a tool for inspiration – things that might be interesting to photograph – and not a steering tool to control the process. In fact our aim was to be open towards anything we would come across and which would call our attention. It is, however a valid argument that including an observation guide when taking pictures for research purposes might influence the selection of motifs too heavily and perhaps lead to “blindness” and consequently the exclusion of important aspects.

It is however an illusion to think that it is possible to carry out empirical research without – more or less consciously – forming hypotheses before the encount with the empirical world. Seen in this light, the guide might in fact might help by making some of these hypothesis explicit and thereby help clarifying which view of reality the researcher has and what has been left out. But awareness of this risk is therefore extremely essential, both when preparing the guide and during the photographing process. The issue will be discussed in the section Methodological Issues.

When taking photos of knowledge sharing, we used the following observation guide:

- **Office Facilities:**
  
  Corridors, coffee kitchens, Xerox rooms, meeting facilities (formal and informal), lunch area, library, archives etc.

- **The work space:**
  
  Open workspace, single office, team office, an empty office, management office etc.

- **Signs of knowledge sharing:**
  
  Computer screen showing intranet, computer screen showing email, videoconference, mobile phone, telephone, colleagues talking to each other, meetings, posters etc.

- **Production - employees working:**
  
  Knowledge products (physical manifestations), knowledge production and processes (meetings, events)

- **How can you see that X lives here? Cultural traits and variations:**
  
  - The common vs. the uncommon
  - Standardized aesthetics vs. variation and inventiveness
  - Diversity vs. homogeneity (between departments)
- Personal vs. impersonal
- Signs of past & future

We took around 100 photos in each organization. We not only took photos of situations showing knowledge sharing directly, but also photos where it seemed absent (like an empty hall or walls filled with art). Thus, the photos not only show what is present and therefore evident, but also try to include “what is not”.

We took overall photos (like an office landscape) and more detailed photos showing only parts of the entirety (like photos of a single desk or shelves with documents). When forming the photo series, we found it useful to have several variants of the same motive to choose from, as well as some that were more detailed and specific than others.

**Forming the photo series**

We used an “old-fashioned” camera since prints of digital photos were too expensive at the time of the research. You need several copies of all the photos in hard copy: 1) It is difficult to get an overview of 100 photos on a computer screen when forming the photo series, 2) you need the hard copies to show during the focus groups so they can touch them and see them up close, and 3) we also offered the organizations a copy of all the photos.

Once the photos were developed, we placed them on a large table and started grouping them into six to eight themes (equivalent to photo-series) and finally we selected four to five pictures in each theme. Buchanan notes, that when selecting photos for presentations, be it internally or externally, there is a danger that “[…] visually interesting and photogenic images are privileged in favor of less glamorous or less dramatic shots of otherwise significant aspects […]” (Buchanan, p. 162, 2001). This is also our experience: we have on several occasions chosen to include photographs that were visually strong (in the sense clear and interpretable) in favor of photos that not showed much (but maybe had an interesting point). When doing Group Photo Views where there is no interaction between the researcher and the respondents while they discuss and interpret the photos. This makes the need for photos that are visually strong even more poignant as the respondents cannot ask for clarifications of the motifs chosen – and the researcher cannot offer these. One should not underestimate the power of an aesthetic or visually intriguing photo as long as it is not at the expense of other important aspects with a less intriguing appearance.

The themes, their amount of themes and photos in each theme were not determined on beforehand but “grew out of the photo material”. However, it is not advisable to have too many photos in each photo series. In relation to the number of photographs Heisley & Levy (1991) have experienced that the length of the respondents response decreased when exposing them to too many pictures and somehow became tired and more impatient. This is also our experience, and consequently one should be careful about the amount of photo series; if there are eight of them the discussion is often redundant during the last photo series. But even though respondents are tired at this point and get annoyed, it is also our experience that it forces them to sum up what has been said earlier. Meanings and beliefs are re-formulated and re-fined in shorter versions, which can give some perfect quotes for later use. Also, in some cases, 5 photos in each series are too many, at least if you want the group to discuss all photos. This is of course the risk of not having the researcher moderating the
discussion, but we see it as strength because it can be a sign of which themes preoccupies the respondents.

The sequence of the photos in each series as well as the sequence of the photo series is quite important since they have an impact on the discussion flow. The point of thematizing the photos was to give each series a focus point for the discussion to evolve around. At the same time, thematizing also has an inherent control mechanism that is both desirable and not desirable. We therefore tried to include an inherent contradiction in each series so there was something that could triggers people’s minds and get them talking, disagreeing, discussing. Although we have found the thematizing part useful (and necessary), we have also wondered what would happen if the photographs were not grouped in themes but each photo-series consisted in randomly chosen photos?

When all the photo series had been formed, we numbered them on the back since they are messed up during the discussion, and it is easier to refer to a photo as a number when transcribing the discussion. Two sets of photo series from two different organizations can be seen as examples in the Appendix.

Selection of participants

In one occasion we knew the employees in the organization because we were fortunate to have an office there. Hence we selected the participants on the basis of answers to questions like: Whom do we think has something interesting to say? Who differs in terms of age and seniority? Who is sitting where? Who is interested in our project – and who hasn’t shown the same interest? We wanted the participants to represent different kinds of opinions to get a broader perspective. At the same time we found it important that at least one or two of the participants had an ability to keep a discussion going without being too dominant.

In other occasions we didn’t know the employees in the organization, and we left it to the organization to select the participants. However, we tried to apply the same selection criteria as above when possible. We did it by giving our contact person an instruction like: The focus group should consist of 4-5 employees whom you choose. It is best if they are from different departments and differ in terms of age and gender, in other words: As much diversity as possible is preferred. Since there is always somebody canceling in the last minute, it would be a good idea to book 5-6 employees. In all cases this worked very well.

Conducting the Group Photo Views

Because the participants were not familiar with this kind of interview, we found it important to introduce the session thoroughly. We began the session by introducing the project, its purpose, in what way the material from the focus groups would be used and how the research results would be published. Following this, we introduced the session like this:
We have been around in your organization and have taken some photos. On the basis of these photos we will ask you to discuss “Knowledge Sharing in X”

The session will be conducted like this: I will present a photo series which you discuss. Every 10 minutes I will give you a new photo series. During this period I will be silent, so it will be the photos that pose the questions, not me. There are [number] photo series all in all, so the session will take app. [x minutes]

Since I’m not controlling the discussion, you all have the responsibility of doing so. This means:
- One speaker at the time
- Make sure everyone has a say

Try to interview each other:
- If there is a statement from one of the other participants you don’t understand, ask
- If there is a statement from one of the other participants you would like to have elaborated, ask
- If you disagree with an opinion uttered by one of the other participants, explain why
- If you agree with an opinion uttered by one of the other participants, express this

Since you have no more than 10 minutes per photo series, avoid spending time discussing where the photo is taken and who is in it and what they look like. Instead discuss what the photos tell you about knowledge sharing in your organization, and try to discuss all photos.

When I say STOP the session is over. Any questions before we begin?

Normally the sessions took between 1½-2 hours, which should be the time limit - otherwise the respondents get impatient and loose focus (go to the toilet, fetch drinks etc.). When the first photo series was introduced, it usually took some time (5 minutes) before the participants got used to the idea and really started talking. We introduced a new photo series every 10/12 minutes depending on the flow of the discussion. When introducing new photo series, the photos function as a moderator as new perspectives are introduced. So when the focus group was in the middle of an interesting discussion, we sometimes found it advantageous to wait a few minutes before introducing a new series but if the discussion somehow was getting off track or needed help to keep it going, we sometimes introduced a new series earlier than 10 minutes. Especially in the beginning of the session there were - what can be conceived as - long, embarrassing pauses where nobody says anything. Participants looked at us to get advice or even to pose a question. But we didn’t say anything and smiled as a reply, and they realized that we meant it seriously when we said that we would remain silent. And eventually somebody breaks the silence and normally says something really interesting.
When the session was over, we found it fruitful to get an idea of how the participants experienced the session and if they felt that the topic discussed had been covered (to the best of the participant’s knowledge, of course).

- What was it like to talk about knowledge sharing this way?
- Did the photos represent knowledge sharing in your company?
- Would you have taken other photos? Like what?
- Do we know by now what there is to know about knowledge sharing in your company?

We have never posed questions to statements made by the employees during the session although this is often very tempting. First of all the session can get very long (too long) and secondly it interferes with the point of having photos to pose questions rather than the researcher. We find it more constructive to get answers to those questions in other ways (for example by doing normal interviews with other employees), which leads us to an important point: Group Photo Views should never be used exclusively. Rather it should be considered a very fruitful supplement to other kinds of data gathering. We have had success with doing Group Photo Views as a way to comprehend the issue researched and the cultural traits that are specific to an organization – and then use this knowledge as a stepping-stone to pose more qualified questions when interviewing other employees. The point about method triangulation will be elaborated in the next section, Methodological issues.

The interviews were tape-recorded with a small dicta-phone and a small external microphone so everyone could be heard on the tapes. The interviews were transcribed indicating who said what (like in a movie script) and we also inserted codes referring to the photos mentioned in the discussion to keep track of which photos were discussed. We always took notes during the discussion. We prepared a piece of paper for each photo series, which left room for us to take notes to every photo. These were a great help especially when transcribing the interviews as people during the discussion often point at a photo and say: “In this case, I think that...”.

As mentioned earlier we do not believe in using Group Photo Views as a single method, but prefer method triangulation. This means that the transcriptions have not been analyzed in their own right but as a part of the total data material comprising of single interviews, notes from management meetings, field notes, organizational publications etc.

**Group Photo Views in Perspective**

It is usually argued that good science presupposes an inner consistency between the meta-theoretical, the theoretical and the empirical level. In this perspective it is interesting that many colleagues at our department all see the method to represent something different. One said that the photos are what Stacey (2001) calls *attractors*, another thinks that the method exemplifies Boisot’s (1998) concept of knowledge and a third finds parallels to Leigh Starr’s (1989) concept of *boundary objects*. Hence, the method (having a somewhat constructivist approach) is not confined to fulfill the empirical ambition of one single theory but can be used in a variety of theoretical frameworks.
We see threats to the narrative line of thinking, where Barry talks about visuals (paintings, sculptures, LEGO, photos) as conversation pieces, which can trick a dialogue. Following this point, we find that photos can be a way of materializing the immaterial in for example knowledge intensive companies. Visualizing something as immaterial as knowledge is perhaps not something that knowledge intensive organizations think about, but we propose that it could enhance knowledge sharing as the visual elements function as vehicles for communication. In one of the companies we attended, a participant in a Group Photo Views said: "In connection with a project, I had a large colored poster on our door and a lot of our colleagues knocked on the door asking what it meant – ‘what is it you have here? It sure looks interesting. Can we help, or would you tell us about it?’ The effect it had…"

Manufacturing companies always have showcases or exhibitions of products in public arenas, but in knowledge companies, where the production is more intangible, this dimension is often neglected. This is unfortunate as material objects do play a part in shaping the corporate identity – employees become aware of what goes on in the other departments and it is good public relations (PR), providing greater visibility when clients visit the firm.

Hence, photos can be a way to facilitate organizational development and – as Buchanan explains – help to improve organizational processes (2001). When preparing the slide show of the patient trail in a hospital and showing it to group of employees, Buchanan realized that the slideshow showed the different employee groups dealing with different aspect of the patient trail realized what their colleagues in other departments actually were doing. Also, the slideshow made it possible to include the employees in the discussion of the consequences of the research results and how to improve the quality and effectiveness of the patient trail process.

Methodological issues

When explaining the point of Group Photo Views and how the method has been used in the previous sections, we have already touched upon a number of methodological issues, which we will elaborate and discuss more in-depth in this section. The following will therefore be an outline of problems as well as potentials connected with the use of photos in interviews.

The issue of subjectivity and control

Following the idea that we conduct focus groups but without a human moderator, you could say that the photos represent the focus instead, introducing the themes that are to be discussed (or could be discussed!). The researcher is not moderating the discussion in any way so the discussion can move freely and the researcher can get an impression of what the employees think is important. However, the selection of the motifs in the organisation and the later selection of the photos that finally enters the photo series can be just as framing and controlling as semantic questions in normal interviews.

Since photos often show events and artefacts (i.e. a meeting, the physical surroundings in an organization) rather than processes or concepts (chatting on the internet or knowledge sharing in general), the Group Photo View discussion often run the risk of staying at the artifact level.

9 David Barry at the conference Agora 2002 at Learning Lab Denmark in Copenhagen Dec. 5, 2002.
Examples of this could be: “This looks like a nice office, it is very cozy” or: “That coffee machine really sucks, I hate the coffee so I never go there”.

In order to avoid this one should make sure that the photo material also contains motifs that are metonyms (i.e. a picture of a computer screen as a metonym for electronic knowledge systems within the organization). The implication of this is of course that the researcher decides which metonyms represent the concept under investigation or which artefacts are symbolic and significant to the subject. This is why several point to the fact that “the resultant images may reveal more about the photographer than the photographed” (Buchanan, 2001, p. 162).

But if one bears in mind that the interview data from a Group Photo View are interpretations of the photographers view of reality, we think that the method to a greater extent leaves room for questioning the researchers reality than it is the case in traditional interviews. As mentioned you always have more or less explicit hypotheses about the world as a researcher. Through photographing the world and thereby visualizing what you see (or don’t see), your assumptions become more explicit. And when things are explicit they are much easier to detect and discuss. For example, going through the organizations it struck us that they all had these long, hideous office corridors. We liked to photograph these because we felt they showed “knowledge sharing in absence”. When confronted with photos of these empty hallways, many responded: “Does it really look like that?! This must be angled in a strange way because it is not my opinion that…. I often meet colleagues out there…” etc.

The familiar in an unfamiliar way

Photos can provide the necessary distance to the research topic by “freezing” the image of what is talked about. This not only facilitates the ability to talk about something. It also enables the respondents to: “[…] see familiar data in unfamiliar ways” (Heisley & Levy, 1991, p. 257). The entire aspect of introducing the photos of something familiar through photos framed by the researcher, thus rendering the photo somewhat unfamiliar, presents a very interesting methodological twist. The researcher becomes able to show what she sees, thus materializing and visualizing something perhaps otherwise immaterial. In this way the photos create a distance where the respondents get the chance to reflect on something from their own reality but in a way as if it was about others.

Finally it is our experience that most respondents are curios towards photos, but it is also clear that some people are more easily stimulated by visuals than others. Some people are better at associating from the photos than others in the sense that they not only discuss the artefacts of the photos but also what the photo(s) represent on a higher level. This problem cannot only be explained by personal traits but might also be that the content of the photos simply are not sufficiently representative of the daily life of the respondents – that they are simply too unfamiliar.

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10 In the knowledge society we primarily focus on turning the unknown into something known with the purpose of becoming more knowledgeable and improve our qualifications. When using the photos the idea is reverse: to show known surroundings and ways of acting in a different context and thereby spur new ways of looking upon things we otherwise do without paying particular attention. From a research perspective this may not be relevant but again it shows how photos can be tools for organizational development.
Because photos present multiple meanings – or at least not just one, simple question - some respondents get insecure and use their energy trying to figure out: what is the underlying point of showing this photo? What do they want me to say? And some even express this unsecurity verbally. On the other hand, there is also a risk that some respondents make such an effort to please the researcher that they in fact over-interpret the photos.

The missing why – and the need for method triangulation

The Group Photo View discussion often brings out the respondents different views of the same issue (following the line of thinking that photos invites multi-vocality) and as already mentioned we find this very fruitful. But the backside is that the discussion never tends to reveal why these associations, meanings and beliefs differs. The respondents will often make statements during the discussion like “I think…” and in traditional interviews you would somehow try to pursue why this is so. But this is not possible in the Group Photo View unless the fellow participants pose such questions and challenge each other.

The above-mentioned dilemma is a consequence of the (seemingly) low control in the Group Photo Views. There is always a potential risk of the discussion moving away from the research topic on to general issues that are prevalent in the organization at the time being. If it is i.e. the presumption that in a good interview questions are supposed to stir the respondent and provoke (new) reflections (Fog, 1998), the photo is not necessarily posing sufficiently “disturbing” questions as the respondents only “reply” to the questions they feel that the pictures pose. Thus is of course also one of the points of using this kind of methodology, but it is important to be aware of the what has been left out, meaning that questions that the respondent does not feel comfortable answering will not be addressed.

The issue of “what is not” in visual research is also addressed by other researchers: When analyzing video-diaries of respondents, Holliday (2000) notes that: “Equally important here is not just what is performed, but also what is not performed” (p. 516). And Staunaes (1999) even takes the point a step further by arguing that what is not expressed or shown is perhaps even more important than what is. She gives an example of the fact that the children she asked to photograph their daily lives in a refugee camp never photographed adults. As it happened to be the case this did not mean that adults weren’t important in their lives – on the contrary – but that the adults didn’t want to be photographed.

This leads us to mention an important point: Group Photo Views should not be used exclusively. To ensure the validity and variation of the data material the use of photography should be part of a larger body of different research methods. Hence we suggest that any of the techniques under the heading organizational photography should be embodied in what Donaldson refers to as a multiple-method research strategy (2001), also known as method triangulation (Denzin, 1970)

The point in triangulating several methods is that the research topic is being analyzed from different angles and thereby generating a more qualified picture than when using a single approach. Denzin writes: “Concepts and methods open new realms of observation, but concomitantly close others. Two important consequences follow: If each method leads to different features of empirical reality, then no single method can ever completely capture all the relevant features of that reality;
consequently, sociologists must learn to employ multiple methods in the analysis of the same empirical events” (1970, p. 13).

By viewing the same topic through different optics (from a quantitative as well as a qualitative point of departure) provides a more varied data material and it provides a reciprocal verification of each of the techniques involved. If one part of the research results i.e. stands remarkably out from the other results, it can of course be an empirical curiosity but the contradiction can also be due to a methodological weakness. This would be difficult to detect if the research is only based on one particular method. This is illustrated by the following example.

On the basis of our qualitative data in one organization, one of the results were that the employees were under the impression that knowledge sharing within their own department was fine while knowledge sharing across departments was poor. But we questioned this and made all employees in a department note their daily contacts in a “who speaks to whom and how” scheme, and it actually turned out that they had slightly more contacts with people in other departments than in their own. The results of this quantitative survey came as a surprise to the respondents themselves and it gave us an opportunity to start a discussion with them of why the results were as they were.

In this section of the article we have outlined and discussed some of the methodological issues involved in organizational photography. Other issues have been addressed when appropriate in previous sections, so to sum up the issues that have been raised they have been listed in the table below.
The Photographing Process

- Facilitates getting “underneath the skin” of the organization
- Gives the chance to talk informally with employees
- Makes it possible to form your own impression of the organization and its culture
- Legitimises and demystifies your presence as a researcher

- Company security
- Raises the issue of confidentiality
- The observation guide might lead to “blindness”
- The camera’s and researchers presence might alter the behaviour of the respondents

The Photo Material

- Contains a multiplicity of meanings
- Poses no direct questions thus increasing the range of possible answers
- Makes the familiar unfamiliar
- Makes the respondents tell rather than answer
- Can capture and present complex situations
- Not only shows what is present and therefore evident, but also explicits “what is not”

- The subjective selection of motifs thus representing the researchers view of reality
- Visually interesting and photogenic images are privileged in favour of less glamorous or less dramatic shots of otherwise significant aspects
- Photos can be “seducing” or too concrete leaving a limited space for open interpretation
- Photos can be too unfamiliar

The Focus Group

- Respondents changes from being objects of research to become active subjects
- The traditional power relation between the researcher and the respondent becomes less asymmetric
- The inter-subjectivity facilitates a negotiation between researcher and respondent about the research topic
- Provides an “inside talk” between employees that share the same language
- The open discussion leaves room for multivocality

- Photos of artefacts lead to discussions of artefacts
- Respondents become impatient and answers redundant when the session is too long
- Some respondents are better at associating from visual stimuli than others
- People respond to questions they think or want the photos to pose - some are more willing to let their preconceived beliefs be disturbed than others.
- The potential risk of the discussion moving away from the research topic
- Risk of not getting answers to the why’s

Table 1: Overview of the problems and potentials involved in organisational photography

**Conclusion**

This article has been dealing with the potentials and obstacles related to the use of photography in connection with organizational research. Based on a curiosity towards the subject and a wish to participate in the ongoing development of this particular field within research methodology, the authors has wished to provide an overview of existing methods within the area as well as to open up a discussion of their underlying assumptions and implications. This aim has resulted in a two-by-two matrix where the vertical level deals with the status of the photo – are the photos used as data
per se or are they used as *elicitation*, e.g. as a means to gather data? The horizontal level of the matrix deals with the role of the researcher – are the photos taken by the researcher or are they taken by the respondents? The emerging four categories range from having a low element of respondent participation, where respondents are viewed as objects, to having a high element of respondent participation where the respondent are viewed as subjects.

With this framework as point of departure one particular method, the *Group Photo View*, is described. The Group Photo View is a group of people discussing photos that are taken by a researcher and arranged in a number of photo-series. The group discusses a topic introduced by the researcher associating from the photo series without having the researcher moderate the discussion in any way.

We argue that when combining the picture taking in organisations with a following focus group interview based on the photos, the researcher gets “under the skin” of the organisation in a quick and fruitful way: The photographing process leaves an opportunity to talk informally to employees and the group discussion provides an “inside talk” due to the fact that the employees share the language of the company. The method can therefore compensate for those situations where anthropological fieldwork is not possible but the researcher still wants to interact with and observe the respondents in an unusual way.

The article illustrates that organizational photography is a research method with potential but also that there are a number of methodological issues to be discussed. These issues range from aspects closely connected to the practical carrying out of the method to general ones associated with using visuals in research in general.

On the more practical level, one has to be aware of the potential risk of the content of the pictures either being to “seducing” in the direction of certain answers or simply being too difficult for the respondents to relate to. Having something concrete to talk about both helps initiate the discussion and keeping the intended focus without decreasing the possible variety of the responses. However, the photos can also bee too concrete in the sense that their messages are too obvious and therefore leave a limited space for interpretation. It is therefore a matter of balancing the material in a way where it is still sufficiently open towards various interpretations and at the same time sticking to the actual research question.

The article also argues that the photos are not to be seen as representations of the respondent’s world but representations of their world *as we as researchers see it*. Letting the respondents photograph themselves would increase their self-representation as presented and argued in the framework. However, including visuals one way or the other and presenting them to the respondents help visualize and explicit the presumptions and hypotheses that a researcher inevitably form. But by using pictures and thereby making them explicit can facilitate a negotiation with the respondents about their reality as they see it. And who knows? Perhaps this could even be seen as a minor part in a larger methodological contribution to the restore of “Democracy in the Knowledge Economy”?

After all this has been said, however, some unanswered question still remain and will thus be left behind as future challenges and additional issues to be addressed:
• We have only used the method to investigate the concept of knowledge sharing – what will the method be like if something else is investigated in an organizational setting?

• The body of literature within visual research is mainly based on ethnographic and anthropological research of natives in different cultures. An interesting question when transferring the use of the method to organizational studies is whether the difference in setting between the two areas has an impact on the outcome of the data? Could it i.e. be, that a difference in the conditions from observing people in their work place and studying them in their home has a significant impact on the process, the methodological issues raised and eventually the research results? And if so, what can this tell us about photography as a method?

• Does a high self-representation of respondents in research in fact produce better, more democratic and hence more valid research results?
References


Appendix

We have chosen to show photos from two different organizations. During the Group Photo View in the first organization, the five employees were shown seven photo series with five photos in each series. In the second organization, the four employees were shown eight photo series with four photos in each.

In original, the photos are 13x18 cm and each photo series were placed in the center of the table with a 10-12 minutes interval (and not presented on a piece of paper with numbers like here).
Company no. 1 – Photo Series no.1
Company no. 1 – Photo Series no. 2
Company no. 1 – Photo Series no. 3
Company no. 1 – Photo Series no. 4

A

B

C

D

E
Company no. 1 – Photo Series no. 5
Company no. 1 – Photo Series no. 7
Company no. 2 – Photo Series no. 1

A

B

C

D
Company no. 2 – Photo Series no. 2
Company no. 2 – Photo Series no. 3
Company no. 2 – Photo Series no. 4
Company no. 2 – Photo Series no. 5
Company no. 2 – Photo Series no. 6
Company no. 2 – Photo Series no. 7
Company no. 2 – Photo Series no. 8

A

B

C

D