Chapter 3
Ethical Considerations in Photography as a Research Method

3.1 Ethical Considerations in Photography as a Research Method

This chapter introduces the ethical issues involved in producing and using photographs in social research. Photography as a social research method is far from simply taking pictures and the ethics of photography has since become a much debated topic. Images proliferate and social scientists unavoidably will grapple with various tensions and dilemmas in their research (Sweetman, 2009), bringing *ethical* and *moral* implications of photography as a social research method and a data source into the limelight. Despite the terms 'ethics' and 'moral' being used interchangeably in the literature, it is important to distinguish between them. 'Ethics' derives from the Greek word *ethos*, describing the character, nature or disposition of an individual. 'Morality' derives from the Latin word *moralis*, which means custom, manners or character. Kimmel (1988) argues that ethics and morality refer to accepted behaviours and that ethical problems naturally pose moral problems, however, are distinguished in context where codified principles of ethics are relevant.

For research photography, 'ethical' refers to rules and behaviours, which conform to set of principles of what photographs to take, and 'moral' refers to specifics acts of how to take them, consistent with accepted notions of right and wrong. Sontag (1977) in her groundbreaking work *On Photography* pioneered this exploration of ethical and moral challenges in photography. She described the camera as an object that is inherently predatory in nature. She sees photography inherently as an act of aggression, because 'to photograph people is to violate them, by seeing them as they never see themselves, by having knowledge of them they can never have; it turns people into objects that can be symbolically possessed' (Sontag, 1977, p. 10).

Ethics has found a broad voice in photography, including the importance of understanding dignity (Langmann & Pick, 2014), how the photographer negotiates

with those who are being photographed, their motives, and ensuring informed consent (Barker & Smith, 2012; Rolph, Johnson, & Smith, 2009). While ethical research is a cornerstone of good practice (Clark, Prosser, & Wiles, 2010), photography especially presents researchers with challenges when building an interpretation of who they are and what *ethos* they convey.

3.2   Dignity: The Ethical Foundation of Photography

A researcher working on examining the lives of poor people in Chennai observes someone dirty and in rags, lying on a pedestrian refuge used by people crossing the street. This person appeared to be poor and homeless and was surrounded by a noisy tumult of autorickshaws, cars and people passing by. This scene could provide the researcher with a valuable, contextual photograph about the raw disparities of wealth in Chennai. Should this scene be recorded by a photograph? In this case it was not. The person photographed would have clearly not been portrayed in a dignifying manner. Even if consent could have been obtained for this image, it would not have helped create an awareness of wealth disparities in Chennai and perhaps even sensationalised it as this was not a normal occurrence. This encounter between researcher and researched required consideration of dignity not merely as a foundation, but also as a source of inspiration, perhaps similar to Lawrence-Lightfoot's (1983) search for goodness. In an interview, renowned photographer Steve McCurry, famous for one of the most recognised photographs in history, titled *'Afghan Girl'*, said:

> I'm inspired by dignity, by human kindness, by people literally living in the gutter who will smile at you with no expectation. That can be New York or New Delhi. I'm not interested in discovering a new tribe – I just observe. The only thing that would worry me is if someone thought I was disrespectful. That, I'd look into. (Iqbal, 2010, p. 1).

Although the dignity of research participants has been considered in other research studies, the concept itself has not been the subject of close practical attention in research photography and conceptual theorisation. An all-inclusive definition of dignity is difficult to compose (Mehnert, Schroeder, Puhlmann, Muellerliele, & Koch, 2006). Perhaps the most sensible description of dignity is something that is inherent to every individual, a *Wesensmerkmal* (Being), independent of a person's character attributes, intellectual capacity, occupation, traits, skills, as well as their social status. With this in mind, the issue of dignity can be seen to be present in the use of photographic research from early examples through to the present. More recently, the protection of dignity has been paid particular attention to, for example, in general medical/social research (Berle, 2008; Clark et al., 2010; Creighton, Alderson, Brown, & Minto, 2002; Jones, 1994; Supe, 2003), and in research focussing on people with intellectual disabilities (Boxall & Ralph, 2009) and children (Close, 2007). With regards to dignity in photo-research, photography is a subjective process with a significant moral dimension in which

feelings and emotions are important factors in that the camera is a tool that has potential to be lenient and cruel depending on the motives and techniques of the photographer (Sontag, 1977). The research photographer has to listen 'to feelings, to gut reaction in the face of photographs' (Parsons, 2009, p. 290). When we used photography as a method to collect research data in Chennai, we asked ourselves about how we as investigators are able to determine what images to capture to convey accurate and authentic accounts of complex social relationships encountered in widely diverse field situations, and how a research participant's dignity can be protected.

One way is through the application of 'ethics-in-context' in which it is accepted that ethics cannot be exported from one cultural context to another (Riessman, 2005). Based on this idea, we argued for the concept of *dignity in context* for research photography (see Langmann & Pick, 2014). For example, dignity in one culture could be considered an indignity in another and therefore the researcher must be sensitive to the cultural norms of the communities being researched (Lickiss, 2007). That is not to say that certain cultural practices in which one group of people are treated with less dignity than another should be adopted by a researcher simply because it is a cultural norm. In a practical photo-research context, applying dignity in context means being sensitive to the relativistic nature of social and cultural norms and entering into dialogue with research participants underpinned by a set of clear research ethical principles that protect their dignity. These principles of dignity in context have two dimensions.

The first principle is dignity in outcome, referring to the need for those being researched to benefit from the research, to present an authentic view of the situation and to ensure that the research does not demean or reduce the person it involves. This assists in deciding who/what to photograph. For example, when researching communities afflicted by poverty, making sure researchers do not demean or reduce the people they are researching is important (i.e. do no harm to them). This is important in both the data collection stage and the interpretation/presentation stage.

The second is dignity in process that helps to decide how/when to photograph. Photographing people in their social environment is taking something from them they cannot defend. This forces researchers to consider how to involve research participants in the way images are captured, for example, choosing the right angle for an image, the right time to capture an image and the impression it will give if and when it is published. This concept is underlined by a contextual understanding in which the physical and emotional understanding and the overall sensitivity are described when the researcher approaches the subject and chooses the frames. This can be encapsulated by the German word *Verstaendnis* (discussed in detail in Chap. 4). The concepts of dignity in outcome and dignity in process are illustrated by the example below.

The photograph, titled *'Healing Touch'* (Fig. 3.1), was taken during our research in India, in which a doctor was accompanied in their work as they provided free treatment for people in rural areas of Tamil Nadu. In the rural areas of Tamil Nadu and other Indian states especially, many people face multiple health problems resulting from overwork in harsh conditions. Women often carry responsibilities for

Fig. 3.1 'Healing Touch' © Sten Langmann (reproduced with permission)

securing the household income, taking care of the home and caring for children. Due to these stresses being placed on them, women often do not seek medical advice and treatment. We observed more women than men seeking treatment at health centres, as they trusted the doctor. The challenge was to accurately reflect this situation through photographic images. Using an interplay of light and shadow (see Sect. 3.11), it was possible to meet this challenge as illustrated in the above image. The patient's identity is protected, yet a few lit details shed light not only onto the woman herself but also towards people in general who are coming and seeking treatment. The health camps were always set up in rural areas, as healthcare access remains a problem especially there. Despite the doctor treating around eighty patients in one day, each person is given individual care and attention, which is reflected in the doctor's face in the photograph.

3.3 Power Relationships

Photography is inseparable to power. Photography is a practice of power (Prins, 2010). Discussing power dynamics in research photography is important, because 'power' and 'photography' as social processes complement and constrain each other in intricate ways. Power and photography enjoy a constitutive relationship in which a photograph is closely linked to the possessing individual and a photograph being a product of power relationships. The act of photography itself has therefore

always been categorised as a social act involving power relations to a greater or lesser extent (Edwards, 2015).

One way of understanding of 'power' is to use Foucault's (2001) theorisations of power as a form of social control (Gallagher, 2008). Power as social control applies itself in daily life, categorising individuals, imposing a rule of law or truth in them, making individuals subjects (Foucault, 2001). *Subjects* for Foucault (2001), to another person by control or dependence, are tied to this identity by conscience or self-knowledge. Foucault (2001, p. 220) says that:

> In effect, what defines a relationship of power is that it is a mode of action which does not act directly and immediately on others. Instead it acts upon their actions: an action upon an action, on existing actions or on those which may arise on the present or the future.

Power here is not understood as a forced action, but instead, a manifestation of conscious or subconscious conformation by people to imposed societal norms. These norms or 'microphysics of power' exist through all levels of social life, localised in social relations in the encounters of giver and receiver (Foucault, 1977); including the photographer and the participant, the researcher and the researched. Both conscious and subconscious conformation, coupled with possible dependencies and different socio-economic statuses can create an unequal power relationship between researcher and participant in a research. Rodriguez (1998) argues that the relationship between researcher and social scientist is *inherently* one of unequal power. Resultantly, power imbalances between researcher and participants raise complex ethical issues (Pittaway, Bartolomei, & Hugman, 2010) and research photography with an inherited and unavoidable practice of power, an act of recording and owning, needs to pay careful attention to these ethical imbalances.

Power relationships and photography are a twofold argument. On the one hand, photography enables people to *challenge* a historically dominant 'inspecting gaze', an interiorising gaze by which the researcher becomes his or her own observer, which so far defined what researchers constituted knowledge (Chambers, 1997). Researchers have the power to discover and uncover knowledge which was on the one hand inaccessible, and on the other hand if accessed, not deemed valid as it did not adhere mainstream scientific discourse (Foucault, 1980). Photography as a research method and its visual nature has representative powers, producing a different 'knowledge', which is able to influence policies, program designs and others (Prins, 2010). This power attribute of photography can be described as a *power-to* attribute, often described as 'presence' in photographs. Edward's (2015) states that presence is embedded in photographs, from its inception of chemistry or bytes, tracing a standpoint, a lived experience in time of an individual, positive or negative, happy or terrifying; their presence disclosed to the world, giving its photograph power and symbolic significance. As such, photography as a research method becomes a power *to* sociability and *to* affect fieldwork.

On the other hand, power relationships in photography also have contradictory potential in that unequal power dynamics in photo-research can negatively affect the data collection process. Intentional or unintentional visual exploitation by researchers can lead to resistance and refusal by participants to have their

photograph taken in the field, or refusing the researcher to use the photographs in subsequent publications. This power attribute of photography can be described as a *power-over* attribute. Power-over can best be understood by applying Foucault's (1977) idea that the camera is a tool of surveillance. It is susceptible to breed distrust and place researcher participants under an inspecting gaze, its weight interiorised by participants 'to the point in that he is his own observer, each individual thus exercising this surveillance over, and against himself' (Foucault, 1980, p. 155). Participants with past experiences of surveillance or betrayal may resultantly perceive photography by the researcher as that of structural and social control (Prins, 2010). The power-to and power-over attributes of the camera are not mutually exclusive and research photographer can easily carry one over into the other or exhibit behaviours of both powers.

3.4   Photo-Research with Vulnerable Groups

Research with vulnerable groups should empower all participants involved, even if the process of getting there is difficult and perhaps uncomfortable. (Steel, 2003)

Ethical complexities in research with vulnerable groups have been discussed in different contexts in great lengths in academic literature (see Aldridge, 2012, 2014; Hannes & Parylo, 2014; Hugman, Pittaway, & Bartolomei 2011; Jacobsen & Landau, 2003; Sime, 2008; Steel, 2003). Research photography involving vulnerable groups, for example refugees, forced migrants and other marginalised communities, highlights the need for a separate ethical understanding of these. Finch's (1984, p. 80) recalls from one of her studies, in which she interviewed women who revealed private and intimate information, that 'I have emerged from interviews with the feeling that my interviewees need to know how to protect themselves from people like me'. The capacity to harm, intentional or unintentional, is ever present in any research, especially so in photography, which is open to different means by researchers and interpretations by viewers, and researchers working with vulnerable groups must constantly recognise those capacities during their research.

Researchers may face complex ethical challenges by a combination of vulnerabilities experienced by participants and by researchers in that the ends may justify the means and/or creating ethical lapses (Jacobsen & Landau, 2003). A research study itself has the potential to place these communities at risk of exploitation and harmful research practices, no matter how unintentional those might be (Hugman et al., 2011). Aldridge (2014) argues that any research with vulnerable groups creates inevitable ethical dilemmas. Vulnerability itself adds an additional dimension to the ethical research debate, as the 'the p-word', standing for 'poverty' and 'poor', can often be experienced as a stigma and factor of social exclusion (Sime, 2008), which in turn in the research process can exacerbate the disempowerment of

participants (Aldridge, 2014). Photography in its nature is inherently exploitative (Adler, 1996; Sontag, 1977), and when working with vulnerable people, it is crucial to be aware that people can perceive photography in a variety of ways (Thallon, 2004). Photographers need to be aware of these issues and be proactive in addressing them and choose appropriate 'photographic methods [that] can help challenge fixed perceptions and assumptions' (Aldridge, 2014, p. 50).

3.5   Being 'Vulnerable'

Vulnerability remains an elusive term, creating different meanings among people and varying according to the context in which the term is used (Aldridge, 2014; Larkin & Cooper, 2009). For example, vulnerability in health and social research implies susceptibility of participants to harm and risk, as well as positions of need, placing 'vulnerability' in relation to their self-care and capacities in the conduct of their affairs (Aldridge, 2014). Moore and Miller (1999) argue that vulnerability is an inherent lack of ability to make personal life choices, to be independent, to be self-determined. Larkin and Cooper (2009) draw important conceptual distinctions in vulnerabilities due to *circumstance* or *environment* and being vulnerable due to structural circumstances and influences.

Nevertheless, individuals, who are classified by researchers as 'vulnerable', might not describe themselves as such (Aldridge, 2014; Steel, 2003), which, by adopting generalising and overarching understandings in research processes, risks exclusion of those individuals or groups (Hurdley, 2010). Steel (2005) cautions us in that the reasons for peoples' vulnerabilities are not always overt. Photography can bring us closer to understanding this fragility and mortality of human life (Butler, 2005), by unveiling the personal to the visual, and by developing reciprocal relationships *with*, instead of *on* participants (Aldridge, 2012).

3.6   Vulnerability in Research Photography— Contradictions of Representation

In research photography, vulnerability presents an interesting representative contradiction—a direct and truthful opposition between two bodies of opinions, able to reinforce or destabilise vulnerability. On the one hand, the nature of photography has a strong fundamental disposition to vulnerability. The described 'predatory process' by Susan Sontag, in which people become symbolically possessed, adds a strong compound to this. In his work *Camera Lucida*, Barthes (1981) even speaks of the *insistence* of photography on human vulnerability. The nature of photography as a process and method is that a photograph is always *taken from* someone, *by* someone. Photographing people in their social environment is taking something

from them, which they cannot actively defend, nor actively can give. Research participants will always involuntarily relinquish a degree of authority to the photographer who captures their image, irrespective of the participant having given consent or being able to review the photograph afterwards. With informed consent and control over the publication of the image, this vulnerability is greatly reduced, yet part of the vulnerability through relinquishing something will always remain. For example, Adler (1996) in his essay *Photography on Trial* argues that Sally Mann's artistic work exploits this photographic quality by taking advantage of her children's sexuality for her own work. In some of Mann's pictures, her children appear injured and battered, and despite Sally Mann's photographs enjoying artistic admiration, some critics do pity her 'helpless, abused children' (Adler, 1996, p. 145). Adler (1996) argues that Mann's possible exploitation of her children reveals the inherent side of betrayal and violence in photography, as well as the medium's 'heightened sense of the real', promoting the viewers to see the issue itself, instead of the picture.

On the other hand, a contradiction of this vulnerability is that while photography is inherently able to undermine authority and empowerment, 'it could also produce [such] achievements on a grand scale' (Schwarzschild, 1996, p. 56). Numerous studies have reported the use of photographs among vulnerable participants as a success in both depth of visual data collected and equalising research relationships (Aldridge, 2012). Tewksbury and Gagne (1997) emphasise a strong, positive rapport with informants when addressing sensitive topics or working with a stigmatised population. A study by Sempik, Aldridge and Becker (2005) exemplifies this notion, in which the authors utilised participatory photography methods and focused on the social inclusion of participants, resultantly creating both richness and depth in the photographs collected, as well as positive outcomes for the participants themselves. Photography as a method has this potential to bridge gaps between researcher and researchers and provide a strong aid in developing reciprocal relationships and challenge perceptions and assumptions held either by researchers or vulnerable groups (Aldridge, 2012).

Any photo-research with vulnerable groups should empower *all* participants involved, despite this being a difficult and perhaps uncomfortable process (Steel, 2003). Empowerment is a *shared* attribute in photo-research between the photographer and the subject. Within any qualitative research process, Davison (2004) argues that all participants involved may experience vulnerability and conflicting emotions in the process. This quality of empathy and understanding can be distressing and hurtful, yet without that emotional resonance between researcher and researched, an analysis would be incomplete and fractured (Davison, 2004). Demonstrating interest in the lives of people being researched and respect for their dignity and vulnerability can minimise both the researcher's and participant's vulnerabilities and anxieties towards this research. Emotional reflexivity in the data collection process can ensure rigour and quality data results, while constantly being able to address ethical issues on the way. We believe that this is what Butler (2002, p. 243) describes as *empowerment*, 'in which respect for people's moral agency and beneficence is combined'. It will shape a photographic research approach that is

founded on negotiation and understanding between the researcher and the researched. This interplay transcends predetermined principles of vulnerability, with 'resolutions [emerging] from the situated and contextualized practices within which research happens' (Clark, 2013, p. 69).

3.7   Consent in Photographic Research

One of the most important ethical issues when researching humans is gaining informed consent. This does not imply that gaining informed consent is a burden or hurdle for research photographers to overcome, rather, that for the research photographer, the process of *informed consent* is in a constant state of flux. This means that there are numerous understandings, avenues and approaches that require careful consideration (Bhattacharya, 2007). The research itself could have its own contradictions and tensions, such as the researcher-researched relationship, a very unstructured or unplanned mode of inquiry, as well as the shaky meaning of 'consent' in the field of research (Bhattacharya, 2007).

Taking photographs without consent of participants can be interpreted as outsider arrogance (Spencer, 2010), which ethically distorts the research being undertaken as it unequalises the power relationship between the researcher and those who are being photographed. Ethical issues with consent arise when consent is circumvented or violated (Kimmel, 1988). Furthermore, technological advances and research with digital images, which can appear in public domains through the internet, have added an additional dimension to 'informed consent' and are therefore overall indeed in need of revision (Boxall & Ralph, 2009). The concept of informed consent therefore has attained new meaning and scope, and researchers must constantly constitute and renegotiate this meaning in research photography.

3.7.1   Informed Consent

Informed consent in academic literature and research practice is considered a central ethical norm to oversee the relationship between the researcher and the participant (Fitzgerald, Marotte, Verdier, Johnson, & Pape, 2002; Joffe, Cook, Cleary, Clark, & Weeks, 2001; Kimmel, 1988). In social and visual research, informed consent procedures are often less readily available, due to difficulties of ascertaining risk to participants and the extent to which participants are truly informed (Kimmel, 1988). This is particularly important as photographs alone provide only partial understandings of both meaning and experiences recorded. Photographs require further elicitation or discussion with others (Banks, 2008) and additional analysis and interpretation by the researcher. Additional informed consent difficulties lie within the reproduction of images and their presentation to different audiences in different

contexts (Pink, 2012). Photographs, which are intended to be non-issue in nature, can become issue-based when presented to the viewer (Thallon, 2004).

Lie and Witteveen (2017, p. 1) argue that methods of consent have also been less established in social science research and are often addressed as 'principles of good academic practice'. Despite the strong presence of consent in academic ethics literature and inclusion in many institutional codes of research ethics and guidelines (see Appendix 3.1, Table 3.1), the concept of *informed consent* in social research can be challenging, as it might not always be clear what a participant is consenting to, and more important, what participation in this project entails (Lie & Witteveen, 2017; Sin, 2005; Wiles et al., 2008). Becker (1988) summarises the problem of informed consent as one that unless the participant knows as much about the process of photography and the research process, he or she is never *truly informed*. Prosser (2000) argues that seldom will research participants be fully aware and informed of the intentions by the researcher. Therefore, an essential part of obtaining informed consent is the awareness of participant's rights to refuse to partake in a study, understanding the procedures and the extent to which confidentiality and anonymity (or recognition) will be maintained, and their right to renegotiate the terms of consent at any stage in the research process (Corti et al., 2000). Furthermore, the meaning of consent can vary across cultures and the significance of photographs can further vary across societal and cultural contexts (Pink, 2006). In other words, images can have different meaning and emphases in different contexts and 'yes' can have different meaning and inclinations. Studies in different cultural settings therefore require prior negotiated understanding of informed consent and its purpose (Fluehr-Lobban, 1994).

3.7.2   Written Consent

Written consent is an agreement, often via a form that participants sign to ensure validity of consent in a research process (Benitez, Devaux, & Dausset, 2002). A key advantage of signed consent forms is that they entail information to what the participant is consenting to in the data collection process and also address issues of confidentiality and anonymity (Wiles et al., 2008). Written acknowledgement of participation has remained the ethical standard when working with minors (Allen, 2002). Signed consent forms further protect the researcher from future potential participation disputes (Coomber, 2002). However, in research projects in countries with high illiteracy rates, written informed consent procedures may prove problematic, as participants may neither understand the written information, nor can verification of their understanding to the project be obtained (Fitzgerald et al., 2002). Furthermore, signed forms can be regarded as insensitive and show indifference by the researcher and ignores the participants' emic perspectives (Lie & Witteveen, 2017).

3.7.3 Audio/Visual Consent

Audio and visual consent are avenues that researchers can employ in their studies when written consent is not possible or inappropriate. For instance, Benitez et al. (2002) recognised issues with written consent in their study of the Guarani Indians and developed an audio/visual process of oral consent (ADOC), consisting of written steps, oral steps and photography to obtaining informed consent. Information documents were written out in both English and Spanish, and were translated into Guarani by an official translator. That information was read aloud to potential participants and questions by the audience were encouraged and answered. The participants, who stepped forward to signal their participation, gave oral consent, which was recorded in writing, audio and visually. When possible, participants signed a consent form or by fingerprint. The authors believed that this model did not only ensure full consent by participants but also allowed people to exercise their freedoms to deny participation by not stepping forward, which recognises Guarani social norms and customs, in which explicit refusal has no part.

3.8 Consent at Collection and Consent at Re-Contact—an Approach to Informed Consent in Photo-Research

Research photographs in relation to informed consent raise an important ethical issue (Boxall & Ralph, 2009), as photography mediates between 'viewer and viewed by authorizing staring' (Garland-Thomson, 2001, p. 348; see also Palmer, 2011). Additionally, consent is not necessarily confined to the data collection process alone (Wiles et al., 2008). The social sciences have witnessed shifts towards increasingly creative methodologies. Cox et al. (2014) have called for a reconceptualisation of informed consent as a fluid and continuously renegotiated mechanism with research participants. Therefore, researchers might find it appropriate to obtain consent by participants at different stages in the research process, namely before the data is collected and after interpretation or analysis of their photographs for presentation and publication.

We want to introduce a concept of obtaining informed consent via a two-step approach of *Consent at Collection* and *Consent at Re-Contact*. This approach to informed consent is in line with Miller and Bell's (2002) arguments that ethics in research is an *ongoing* process and ethical considerations can arise before, during and after the research. Our main proposition is that a two-step consent framework considers consent as ongoing and as a relationship with a participant and is able to accommodate to unforeseen ethical considerations, especially after the data collection phase when a research is complete. Pink (2012) argues that obtaining subsequent permission from research participants can be a challenging managerial task. Our framework offers different avenues for researchers to obtain subsequent consent, as in this way, the participants will be truly informed of both the purpose
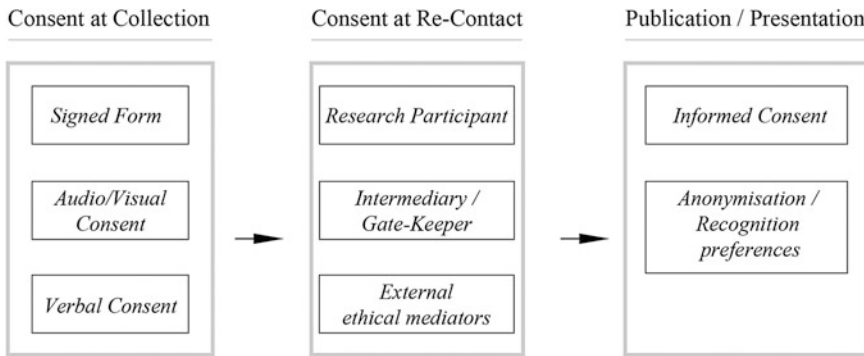
Fig. 3.2 Informed Consent Framework

and context in which their image is being used. Figure 3.2 summarises the Informed Consent Framework.

Consent at collection is the first consent stage, in which research photographers can choose from a variety of methods to obtain consent from ideally the participant or an authorised person to speak on their behalf at the point of data collection. Signed forms and audio/visual consent are suitable consent verification methods, however, we also want to add verbal consent as a viable method. Coomber (2002) argues that in some cases, a Research Ethics Council (REC) may need to trust and accept the researcher's word that verbal consent had been obtained. In some cases, even recording verbal consent can compromise principles of anonymity and confidentiality (Coomber, 2002). The key in this step is that in research involving photographs, informed consent can develop in a natural way and researchers should let the situation decide which consent method at this stage is most advantageous to a mutually beneficial data collection process. Building trust and rapport between researcher and participant is often the most vital motivator to agreeing to participate in a study (Lie & Witteveen, 2017).

The *consent at re-contact* stage forms the subsequent consent stage in our framework, in which the researcher is able to obtain consent for the collected photographs and for its interpretations and uses in publications and/or presentations. Depending on the accessibility or inaccessibility of participants after a study, we propose three avenues to obtain this consent at re-contact. The methods for obtaining consent remain the same. First, the most preferred avenue is to re-contact the research participant(s) of whom the picture(s) were taken and present both the image and context it will be used in. This way, participants have an opportunity to understand, agree on, withdraw from or refine the context and meaning in which the researcher is presenting their image.

Second, re-contacting direct intermediaries or 'gate-keepers' provides another avenue for researchers to present their interpretations and photo uses and obtaining consent for it. This approach is useful when the study focuses on people or groups who are in vulnerable positions or lack the capability to understand their

participation and can therefore not provide informed consent for themselves (Wiles et al., 2008). An intermediary, who has the best interest for the participant in mind, can make an informed choice about whether the photographs and their contexts benefit or authentically represent the participants. Alternatively, the intermediaries or gatekeepers have the power to stop the process if they feel that either the photograph or their representation is exploitative or misrepresenting.

Third, re-contacting other ethical mediators, with whom participants are in frequent contact with, or who are knowledgeable about the research participants, provides an avenue for consent for researchers. Researchers can fall back to this option, if participants are either not accessible anymore or cannot be located and when the photographs form a vital part of their studies or work. Despite extended ethical mediators not being a direct authority or having any sort of decision-making power for and in the name of participants, they can provide useful feedback, whether a participant *would* consent to their image and in which context it is presented, giving the researcher some insight to whether to use the image or not.

The two steps of consent at collection and at re-contact can have positive implications for the research process and lead to positive outcomes in *publications and presentations*. We argue here that a combination two stages to consent provides an overall stronger mechanism of informed consent for both researcher and researched than a singular mechanism at the time of data collection. Both the researcher and the participants have an opportunity to review the photographs and their interpretations in two separate consent stages which further might provide valuable information and feedback to the researcher how participants wish their images to be seen, refining their interpretation and presentation. The presentation and publication intentions of the images might be unclear to research participants and even the researcher at the time of data collection. In addition, this two-step approach also allows participants to choose and consent to their anonymisation preferences after the data has been interpreted. This allows both for ethical guidelines of anonymity and 'ethics of recognition' (see Sect. 3.10), providing an avenue for participants to choose to have their profile hidden or revealed for the final research publication or presentation, giving informed consent to either.

3.9   Anonymity in Research Photography

It is empirical to good ethical research photography to consider and respect the anonymity and wishes for privacy of participants. In research photography, this is a particularly a complex and debated topic, as photography is capable of creating 'highly detailed and intimate portraits of individuals …, which can be shared instantaneously and globally via the internet, often beyond the control of the researcher' (Cox et al., 2014, p. 9). Anonymity remains a key ethical challenge for visual research and researchers (Wiles, Coffey, Robinson, & Health, 2012) and a general agreement has emerged that anonymity in social research, especially in moving and still photography, is an impossible endeavour (Banks, 2001; Clark,

2006; Cox et al., 2014; Grinyer, 2002; Pauwels, 2008; Wiles et al., 2012a; Wiles, Coffey, Robinson, & Prosser, 2012b). The difficulty in assuring anonymisation sits at odds with most ethics review panels (Clark, 2013) and the management of anonymity might make or break a researcher's application for ethics approval (Wiles et al., 2012a, b).

We distinguish between anonymity and confidentiality, terms often used in tandem in a research process. Anonymity is the process of non-disclosure of *identity*, for example that of a research participant, or the author of an opinion piece (Clark, 2006). Confidentiality on the other hand is the non-disclosure of *information or opinions* to other parties, which were collected in the research process (Clark, 2006). While not denying the link between anonymity and confidentiality, our discussion will focus on anonymity.

3.9.1 Anonymising Research Participants

Anonymising participants in research photography appears to be a taken-for-granted ethical necessity, as a range of legal, ethical and governmental ethical pressures stipulate this before any research can proceed (Allen, 2015; Grinyer, 2002; Mertens & Ginsberg, 2009; Wiles et al., 2012a, b). Anonymisation is one approach to which researchers minimise harm to participants by preventing undesired consequences for involved research subjects (Pauwels, 2008). This is especially important when either sensitive, illegal or confidential topics are researched and data are shared (Clark, 2006). It can cause harm in different unforeseen ways, for example subsequent emotional harm by reliving events, unexpected confrontations of feelings by participants, possible later regrets of sharing personal information initially and the feeling of exposure and vulnerability to criticism of outside observers (Cox et al., 2014). Despite the strong ethical call of anonymising research participants, the process presents practical difficulties (Clark, 2006) and various techniques have emerged to anonymise participants in photographs.

3.10 Anonymisation Techniques

A number of practical approaches to protect the anonymity of research involve the manipulation of taken photographs to protect the anonymity of research participants (Pauwels, 2008). Popular manipulation approaches to anonymising subjects are techniques like blurring or pixilation of faces, cropping faces out of photographs, or applying blackout bars to faces (Allen, 2015; Clark et al., 2010). Another viable approach is to photograph the hands of participants or participants with their backs turned to the camera to conceal their identity. We will discuss these next and outline their advantages and disadvantages. It is to note here that the following

anonymisation processes are achieved only post-production of the photograph. This can cause a substantial amount of post-processing time for the researcher.

3.10.1 Pixilation, Blurring and Face Bars

Pixilation obscures the identities of participants by displaying parts of the photograph or the whole photograph at a considerably lower resolution, most often the areas displaying the face. Blurring involves a similar method to pixelating to hide certain elements within a photograph, however, done so by simulating the viewing of the image or parts of it through a translucent screen, instead of a lower resolution. We can still recognise a face, however, cannot truly identify the person being depicted.

The advantage of these techniques is that the image in its composition remains unaltered and no surrounding details or information is lost. For example, cropping a person's face out of a photo can involuntarily remove surrounding photo details important for the photograph's intended meaning or interpretation. Pixelating, blurring and face bars to surrounding bystanders in photographs also avoid collecting consent forms for publication.

Anonymising and obscuring people's identity with these techniques can cause a number of issues for both social researchers and participants. Blurring, pixilation and face bars risk participants being associated with and stigmatised to any predisposition of crime or being a victim of crime (Banks, 2001). As these techniques have been used in popular press and media primarily as a censorship tool, photo-researchers run the same danger of 'censoring' their research participants. For social researchers, although blurring pixilation, and face bars do not alter the image, *some* detail, most importantly the person's facial expression, becomes lost, undermining the purpose of collecting some photographs (Wiles et al., 2008). One can go as far and argue that the absence of people's faces and the association with crime provides an all too easy avenue to not treat the participants with respect and dignity. The integrity of the photograph as *data* also becomes questionable, as the presented result had been altered and it becomes unclear, which parts of the photo remained unaltered.

3.10.2 Cropping Images

Cropping refers to the removal of outer, mostly unwanted parts of an image, often to improve its framing, accentuating its subject matter or in this context, to remove information which reveals identities of subjects. Once an image is cropped, it is not possible to reverse the process and without the original image. The information is lost permanently.

The advantage, which cropping techniques have over blurring, pixilation and face bars, is that the remaining information in the photograph remains unaltered and every detail remains visible. This is particularly useful when the research emphasis is not on the participants per se, but their surrounding environments. It further provides opportunity to improve the overall composition of the photograph, removing distracting elements, and leading the viewer's eye towards important details relevant for the study. The de-humanising argument of anonymisation techniques overall remains a concern, however, cropping allows for such in a more aesthetic and artistic manner. Cropping can also be useful for presentation and publication purposes, as it allows a photograph to be shaped to different aspect ratios, which might be required.

The disadvantage of cropping is that researchers might involuntarily lose details and data of the surrounding areas of a photograph, which they are cropping. As cropping is done linearly, any photo information on the same lines with the information to be cropped is lost. Unlike other anonymisation techniques, cropping can only be achieved from outwards an image towards the inside and would be unsuitable if the subject's face for example is in the middle of the photograph.

3.11 The Ethical Dilemma of Anonymisation and the Ethics of Recognition

> The acknowledgement of the other as a person and not a thing is a precondition for any good ethical engagement (Sweetman, 2009, p. 8).

Anonymisation as an ethical requirement by most research and government institutions presents an interesting problem. Ethical guidelines on anonymisation appear to be based on the premise that research participants not only deserve identity protection, but that they actively *desire* it (Grinyer, 2002). However, this might not be the case for all participants that the researcher encounters. A study by Grinyer (2002) with parents of young adults with cancer revealed that all participants preferred their real names in publications, instead of pseudonyms. One participant especially voiced her concerns towards the pseudonym for her son when she saw her words attributed to the name of another. *Gabrielle* (her real name) said that 'even though my words were there, I felt as though I had somehow lost ownership of them and had betrayed Stephen's memory … without our real names I did not feel part of it' (Grinyer, 2002, p. 4). Sweetman (2009) argues that contemporary visual research offers little alternative approaches to anonymity and the possibility of images as a contributions to an *ethics of recognition*, instead ethics of concealment, is not addressed. Indeed, anonymity as an ethical requirement and the lack of recognition can backfire and create an ethical problem, which anonymisation tried to inhibit in the first place. This is the ethical dilemma of anonymisation.

To illustrate this problem practically, we turn to Allen's (2015) project concerned with sexual cultures in schools and post-structural understandings on the idea of schools as sites of sexual meanings and identity. The study used a combination of photo-diaries and photo-elicitation methods to capture the participants' emphases of sexuality, potentially accessing mundane and unofficial sexual meanings, allowing for discussion of issues and elements they identified as most important (Allen, 2015). Allen (2015) argues that in her study, the ethics committee's directive to anonymise participants, as well as the application of anonymisation techniques, was actually *unethical*. This dilemma occurred much later to Allen (2015, p. 302), when a colleague responded to her book chapter 'I saw your chapter in there, it's the one with the boob pictures'. The lack of recognition of participants, especially their faces, created a de-humanisation effect to those participants via a disproportionate emphasis on their bodies and their meaning changing and becoming difficult to control. Allen's (2015) pictures ran danger of becoming fetishised and adopting a different meaning than intended by the photographer. Allen (2015) therefore argues that due to the anonymisation process in her study, which was intended to protect participants, the meaning of her photographs became somewhat undignified, 'reduced to boobs', potentially realising serious ethical problems associated with unintended sexualisation and exploitation of young people.

3.12 Planning Anonymisation and Planning Identity

The different methods of anonymisation, its contradictions and potential pitfalls call for a different perspective on anonymisation. We propose applying a planned, purposeful approach and present alternative artistic techniques to anonymise participants without de-humanising them or accidentally changing the emphasis or meaning of a photograph. As a fundamental concept, we encourage research photographers to *plan anonymisation* prior to entering the field and taking photographs and continuing to consider this at the time when photographs are taken. A favoured approach by social researchers is to present images in their unaltered entirety, and planning in which way participants are going to be anonymised beforehand can aid in minimising the loss of potential data in the post-processing stage of the study.

3.12.1 Planning Anonymisation

Planning anonymisation means that researchers must be clear on the issues they want to photograph. For example, some studies or insights might not need identifying features of the participants in particular photos, in which the surrounding

circumstances are more important and understanding that prior to the research can help the researcher photography in ways, in which the subject's identity is not present when the photo is taken. This can be done either by photographing the person without identifying features, mostly their faces, composing the photograph in a way that participants have their backs turned, a clever artistic interplay of surrounding light and shadow, or via the camera settings themselves.

For example, Ian Flanders in his project *By the River,* in which he documents the struggles of sex workers in Phnom Penh to draw attention to the sex slave industry in Cambodia, has used a skilful application of light and shadow to anonymise the women he photographed. In one of his photographs, titled *'Untitled'* (Fig. 3.3), the woman and her surroundings are clearly visible, yet Flanders' emphasis of shining light on her surroundings, and his emphasis of shadows on her face effectively anonymises her, without removing the personality and bestowing character of the woman. There is no disproportionate emphasis between the woman and her surroundings, yet one can argue here that this light and shadow approach to anonymisation in the photograph makes the image much stronger, as the focus is on the woman's situation, to which she presents both a real and symbolic character.

In a separate example, street photographer Diego Bardone has actively questioned the often legal restrictions associated with photography and their implications for candid street photography. Despite those restrictions, his pictures and creative approach to anonymisation present a marriage of unrecognisable, faceless people, which nevertheless have a presence and an identity. In the first photograph,

Fig. 3.3 'Untitled' © Ian Flanders (Reproduced with Permission)

Fig. 3.4 'Time goes slow'. © Diego Bardone (reproduced with permission)

titled *'Time goes slow'* (Fig. 3.4), the identity of the person is concealed by the umbrella, yet the posture and body language create a certain presence in tandem with the person's surrounding environment. Bardone further did not have to fall back to post-processing anonymisation techniques to conceal the subject's identity, leaving the image and composition intact, and preventing loss of valuable image details.

In the second photograph, titled *'Frecciarossa'* (Fig. 3.5), Bardone uses motion blur to conceal the running man's identity. This technique presents a creative way to anonymise the subject and creates movement. This effect is achieved by reducing the shutter speed of the camera via its shutter control setting. Even without facial identity of the man in the picture, the man's body language and the motion blur in the photograph create a presence of hurry. His suit indicates a business profession and it appears he is running to catch a train, which fills the background.

Research photographers could emulate the creative approaches used by both Ian Flanders and Diego Bardone; by finding avenues to hide the participants' faces or identifying features within compositions, by utilising strong sunlight to create a contrast, or by deliberately long shutter speeds and camera movement to create motion blur in the image. This is especially possible, when researchers have opportunity or time to compose the scene or composition, which is very likely, once trust and rapport has been established with participants.

Fig. 3.5 'Frecciarossa' (red arrow). © Diego Bardone (reproduced with permission)

3.12.1.1   Planning Identity

In tandem with planning anonymisation, we want to propose *planning identity*, which is based on Sweetman (2009) ethics of recognition. Planning identity considers research participants, who might want to be actively featured in the researcher's study and we encourage researchers to ask participants, whether they want their identities to be revealed or not. If participants actively choose to reveal their identity, the researchers can underline this with a consent form or audio/visual consent at either the data collection stage, or at a potential re-contacting stage. We encourage researchers to think about those approaches and processes before entering the field. The careful planning of both concealing and revealing identities does not only show respect to the identities of participants, however, can also be a convincing point for any ethics panel to approve a researcher's endeavour.

3.12.2   Intervention in Photo-Research

Photography can become a very abstract and distanced approach of interacting with one's surrounding world. Research photography, despite its strong involvement with participants, is no exception to this. Harley (2012) argues that the camera, however momentarily, creates a distance between the photographer and the

participant. Susan Sontag's arguments in *On Photography* speak of photography as an act of non-intervention, with the camera acting like a social and political shield, and that 'the person who intervenes cannot record; the person who is recording cannot intervene' (Sontag, 1977, p. 12).

However, Kevin Carter's iconic photograph, titled *'Girl and Vulture'*, of a cowering young Sudanese girl, naked and starving, being closely watched by a sitting vulture in the background, questioned the gap between the still photograph, and the active practice of photography, between the printed image and the photographic event (Geurts, 2015). Carter's photograph was first published in the *New York Times* for an article on a deadly famine in Sudan. Instead of the viewers forming an emotional connection to the photographed subject, their attention focused on the only thing not visible in the photograph: the photographer (Geurts, 2015). Many readers inquired whether Carter had helped the suffering girl. When revealed that Carter had not helped the little girl, he was broadly criticised by the media for (a) not helping the child, and (b) for prolonging her suffering in order to take the photograph (Geurts, 2015). When the image won the Pulitzer Prize in 1994, public reaction overall remained the same. One journalist criticised Carter to be no different than a predator, the same as the vulture depicted in his photograph (Stamets, 1994). Kevin Carter tragically committed suicide in the same year.

It is not our intention here to condemn or support the actions and inactions of Kevin Carter, however, to bring the debate of intervention into a research photography context and discuss whether researchers are mere observers or active participants in the process—and whether intervention can be expected of them. Pittaway et al. (2010) in their studies with refugees and IDPs argue that a lack of action by a researcher can result in harm or death to participants. In one of their earlier field studies, Pittaway et al. (2010) recall how they intervened in the case of a sexually abused 9-year-old girl, who did not receive adequate treatment or support.

Both Kevin Carter's and Pittaway and Bartolomei's juxtapositional cases of intervention raise the question of the *ethics of intervention* for both theorists and practitioners: 'When should a journalist or documentarian cease to occupy the neutral position of observer to intervene in the lives of his or her subjects?' (Williams, 1997, p. 79).

3.12.3   The Ethics of Intervention

Despite our initial argument of photography being able to foster a certain detached abstract interaction with the surrounding world, we cannot ignore the ethics of intervention of the process, as the 'the production of images (i.e. photographs) exist within wider networks of social behaviour' (Anderson, 2011, p. 5). Marion and Izard (1986) specifically question when journalists (or in our case, researchers) should cast aside their cloak of objectivity and fulfil their function as human beings

within that network of social relations. After their intervention in the case of the 9-year-old girl in 2003, Pittaway et al. (2010) in a later publication conclude that if a human being is in need of treatment or support in a research study, and if a researcher is in a position to respond to such demands, non-intervention for objective research is ethically untenable.

Maizland (2013) in one of her studies recalls her struggles and dilemma to document a Tanzanian Bushmen tribe and the juxtaposition of their wealth and the poverty of the tribe. While she watched and documented the women and children finding their own food while the men quickly ate what little birds and snakes they could find, she asked herself how she could help them. Maizland and her family at that point decided to share some their snacks with the tribe, but upon later reflection, regretted for not having done more (Maizland, 2013). She later concluded that sharing her food with the tribe was an ethical response to the dilemma, as there were no other options of immediate help to the tribe at the time.

Ultimately, the answer to the ethics of intervention for photo-journalists and documentarians may rest on *it depends* (Kim, 2012; Maizland, 2013). Researchers need to be able to read the situation and decide whether the photograph or immediate action will serve a greater purpose to the affected individual or communities. Their response should be built on that assessment. Kevin Carter's choice of taking the photograph of the starving child, despite its public backlash, had led to major financial and non-financial support by many organisations, and 'the photograph itself endures as an indelible symbol of the famine and suffering in the world and as a call to action to the rest of the world' (Witko, 2011, p. 1).

3.12.4 Conclusion

In reflection, the ethical consideration in photography as a social research method pose challenges both to the design and process, and many ethical questions pertaining research photography remain unanswered pose more than one approach. Despite global standards and various RECs (see Appendix 1, Table 3.1) addressing continuous and new ethical challenges in visual studies, which are often *situated* in nature, they cannot always be resolved by simply adhering to predetermined codes or universalistic principles (Pink, 2012). Nevertheless, before embarking on studies involving photography, researchers should consult their associated institutions and their ethical guidelines.

Appendix 1

See Table 3.1.

Table 3.1 Summary of major RECs and codes of ethics

Research ethics council (REC)	Code of ethics	Country of origin	URL
American sociological association (ASA)	ASA code of ethics	United States	http://www.asanet.org/about/ethics.cfm
British sociological association (BAS)	Statement of ethical practice for the British sociological association	United Kingdom	http://www.britsoc.co.uk/media/27107/StatementofEthicalPractice.pdf
European science foundation—All European Academics (ALLEA)	The European code of conduct for research integrity	European Union	http://www.esf.org/fileadmin/Public_documents/Publications/Code_Conduct_ResearchIntegrity.pdf
International sociological association (ISA)	ISA code of ethics	International	http://www.isa-sociology.org/about/isa_code_of_ethics.htm
International visual sociology association (IVSA)	IVSA code of research ethics and guidelines	International	http://visualsociology.org/about/ethics-and-guidelines.html
National health and medical research council (NHMC)	Australian code for the responsible conduct of research	Australia	http://www.nhmrc.gov.au/_files_nhmrc/publications/attachments/r39.pdf
The Australian sociological association (TASA)	TASA ethical guidelines	Australia	https://www.tasa.org.au/about-tasa/ethical-guidelines/
The European charter for researchers	Charter for researchers	European Union	http://ec.europa.eu/euraxess/index.cfm/rights/europeanCharter

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