Using Photographs in Social and Historical Research

Penny Tinkler

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To Carolyn

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About the Author

Penny Tinkler is a Senior Lecturer in Sociology at the University of Manchester. She has written several articles and chapters on photographic methods and practices. She has also written extensively on the history of girlhood, including *Constructing Girlhood*: *Popular Magazines for Girls Growing up in England, 1920–1950* (Taylor & Francis 1995), and on the feminization of smoking, including *Smoke Signals*: *Women, Smoking and Visual Culture in Britain 1880–1980* (Berg 2006).

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About this Book

Since the 1850s photographs have become increasingly integral to how we live our lives. They shape what we know, feel and remember about ourselves and the wider world in the present and past, and they play a part in how we work, learn, consume, relax, communicate and relate to one another. Photographs are also of growing importance in research, and they have the potential to become an important element of social inquiry; this is because there is a vast and growing stock of photographs relating to social life past and present, but also because we can generate our own photos on many topics we research.

Confronted by this exciting resource, the question is how to use photos productively in social and historical research. This book will guide researchers and students in working this out. Focusing exclusively on photographs, this book investigates how photos can be used in research and the conceptual and theoretical issues that underpin this practice. It is interdisciplinary in perspective, drawing on developments and examples from history and the social sciences. It approaches photographs as images that can be interpreted as texts and evaluated as evidence of the social and material world they depict, but it also engages with photographs as three-dimensional objects. Discussing and evaluating different research strategies the book offers new critical insights on how to think about and use photos to address questions about social and cultural life. Rather than offer readers a menu of established methods, the book is organised around what researchers do with photographs and engages with established and emergent methods as well as generic research techniques. It covers methods for working with images, for taking photos and listening to people talk about them. It also examines how to research photographic practices, that is how and why people and organisations make and use photographs and what these practices mean. There is an understandable tendency in methods literature to offer sanitised versions of how research is undertaken, even though research is often messy. This messiness is not a failing of individual researchers or research designs but an often unavoidable part of doing research on complex phenomena. Talking to researchers about their practices and experiences and integrating these 'interviews' into this book, I offer glimpses of the messy, pleasurable, challenging and productive dimensions of using photos in historical and social research.

This book foregrounds using photos to research the past, memory, biography and change; this is because these applications have so far received very little attention in methods texts. It is also because these topics are important to historians and researchers of contemporary life; the present is never static and multiple times co-exist and shape it. The book demonstrates how photos can be used to engage with these temporalities, including change and continuity, process, biography and autobiography, also the personal and collective memories[1] that shape identities, historical consciousness and perceptions of the relationship between past and present.

Focusing on the study of social and cultural life in the present and past, this book embraces two overlapping areas of scholarship. First, research within the social sciences – 'social research' – which, though often equated with the study of contemporary life, also includes historical lines of enquiry. Second, branches of history concerned with society and culture, for example, studies of rural and urban life, race and ethnicity, gender and sexuality, the family, education and material culture. Historical research can be as much about social phenomena as 'social research'.

The use of photographs has not always been acknowledged as appropriate in social science and historical research. Sociology and anthropology have long-standing but chequered relationships with photography (Chaplin 1994; Edwards 1992 and 2002; Harper 1998). Around 1900, photographs featured regularly in the *American Journal of Sociology* (Stasz 1979); similarly they had an established role in anthropology, principally as a means to document and categorise different groups of people. But by 1920 and through to the 1960s, photography almost disappeared from sociology, and with a few notable exceptions – Bateson and Mead (1942) and Collier (1967/1986) – it was sidelined in anthropology. In anthropology the decline in status is attributed to a focus on social organisation which was not perceived as a visual phenomenon (Edwards 2002), whereas in sociology it is attributed principally to the privileging of verbal over visual forms of communication and the move towards positivism (Chaplin 1994). In sociology photography re-emerged in the 1970s in the context of the sub-discipline visual sociology (Becker 1974; Wagner 1979). However, as Jon Wagner explains (2011:49), interest in visual methods was confined to disciplinary 'offshoots' until the 1990s after which these 'began coalescing around visual studies as a branch of empirical inquiry in its own right'. Today, photography has a prominent place in a growing body of visual studies and visual methods texts (e.g. Banks 2001; Harper 2012; Knowles and Sweetman 2004; Pink 2007; Prosser 1998; Rose 2007; van Leeuwen and Jewitt 2001; Wells 2000a). Photography is also gaining a heightened profile in social and cultural history; this represents a fairly recent development. Though social historians 'discovered' photography in the 1970s, in the 1990s it was still typically used only for illustration and with little critical awareness (Burke 2001; Samuel 1994). There are now a growing number of histories that utilise photos critically (e.g. Doan 2001; Edwards 1991, 2001, 2012; Freund and Thomson 2011; Hayes 2006; Kuhn and McAllister 2006; Ryan 1997), and texts that discuss ways of thinking about them (e.g. Edwards and Hart 2004a; Tagg 1988; special issue of *History and Theory*, edited by Tucker 2009). However, there are no books specifically on the range of ways of using photos in historical research, so explicit guidance on historical photo methods remains sparse, dispersed or integrated with a general discussion of images (e.g. Burke 2001).

This book consolidates and develops understanding of how photos can be used in social and historical research.

The structure of this book

This book examines three main ways that photos are used in research: researchers work *with* photos in various ways (Chapters 2–6), they *generate* their own photos or ask research participants to take them (Chapters 7 and 8), and they *listen* to people talking about photos (Chapter 9). Throughout, I draw a distinction between two types of photographs: generated photos are those made for the research by the researcher or research participant; found photos are pre-existing photos, including personal and non-personal pictures such as documentary, survey and commercial images.

Chapter 1 – Getting Started: Using Photos in Research This chapter looks at five questions you need to consider before using photos in research:

- How do you conceptualise a photograph?
- Can photos constitute evidence of the social world?
- How do temporalities shape photo research?
- What can you do with photos?
- How do you combine methods in photo research?

Your answers to these questions inform how you approach and design research. How you conceptualise photos is of fundamental importance, and in this chapter I discuss the materiality of photos, debates about the characteristics of photographic images and whether they should be treated as texts. Following this I explain how your conceptualisation of photos relates to your views on the nature of social phenomena and what counts as evidence or knowledge of it; in other words your ontological and epistemological positions. The temporalities of photo research are also explored, including how we think about photos 'capturing' the present, the idea that photos have biographies, and the position and role of photos in the timings of research. To design research you need to know what you can do with photos. I explain how to use photos to generate questions and stimulate memory; how to engage with sensory and affective experiences of, and responses to, photos; and how to 'play' with photos. Photo research often involves multiple methods, so I conclude this chapter with a discussion of combining methods.

Chapter 2 – Image Work: Five Lines of Enquiry This chapter introduces and explains five lines of enquiry that are the foundations of productive work with photographic images:

- Identification of basic details about a photo – because you need to ground your work with images in place and time.
- Careful study of the image – attending to form and presentation.
- Consideration of material evidence – because a photo's materiality has implications for the status and meaning of the image.
- Contextual research – as this is fundamental to all work with photographs and involves researching contexts of production and audience engagements (viewing and using).
- Reflection on the slippery concept of a photograph's 'meaning'.

Chapter 3 – Studying Found Photos This chapter explores how researchers work with found photographs to explore questions about social and cultural life, particularly in the past. I demonstrate how the lines of enquiry discussed in Chapter 2 are the foundations of the photo-researcher's craft. I also introduce creative methods that some researchers use for inspiration when working with images. The chapter is organised around five areas of research and provides examples of how researchers use photographs and the issues they encounter in doing this:

- Using photos to learn about the people and material culture they depict.
- Mapping ideas about, and approaches to, aspects of the social world.
- Researching how and why images are made, used and reused.
- Exploring responses: popular and iconic photos.
- Seeking inspiration from photos.

Chapter 4 – Autobiographical Methods Autobiographical methods were developed in the 1980s and 1990s and have been used to generate intimate insights into the role of photos in family relationships, the contribution of personal photos to people's perceptions of themselves and their history, and the workings of memory. In this chapter I explain why autobiographical methods have a role to play in contemporary research and examine autobiographical methods that you can use with your own photos. I also consider the usefulness of asking research participants to employ these methods. Remembering is to the fore, also feeling and playful techniques such as imagining, juxtaposition and other creative strategies.

Chapter 5 – Researching Photographic Practices It is often assumed that the content of photos is what is most useful for the purposes of research, but a great deal can be learned about social and cultural life from researching photographic practices, namely how and why photographs are made, circulated, presented, used and engaged with and what these practices mean. If you are interested in photographic practices you are typically concerned to investigate: how and why photos are produced and by whom; where, how and why they are presented; who uses photos and what these practices mean; how and why photos circulate or are kept, archived and reused in particular ways and for different purposes. In this chapter I present four case studies to demonstrate different strategies that researchers use to investigate photographic practices.

Chapter 6 – Archives and Digital Resources This chapter considers how you can work with archives and digital photographic resources to do photo research. Understanding the practices that shape these resources is key to good research and so I explain these; in this way Chapter 6 develops the discussion of photographic practices that are the focus of the previous chapter. I start by looking at archival practices and the implications of these for photo research and then consider how researchers work in archives and the issues they confront. Digital technologies have transformed how researchers locate photographs and work with them and I consider the potential and limitations of using digital photographic databases. An important issue that I consider is the implications of digitalisation for access to the material properties of photographs.

Chapter 7 – Generating Photos: Researchers Moving on to photos generated specifically for the purpose of your research, Chapter 7 addresses ways that you can make your own photos in social and historical enquiry. Researchers take photos as an aide-memoire, but more importantly to generate data and to produce photos for use in photo-interviews. In this chapter I start by considering why researchers generate photos and then outline approaches to taking them. I also introduce technical considerations and what you need to think about, and do, when undertaking analysis of your photos. Focusing on the themes of process, change and continuity, I then examine principal methods involving researcher-generated photography – photo-documentation, making photos for use in interviews (see also Chapter 9), generating and sometimes collecting photos for the purposes of overtime comparisons.

Chapter 8 – Generating Photos: Research Participants Inviting research participants to take photos raises different issues than when researchers generate their own photos or use found pictures in research; these issues are examined in Chapter 8. I introduce projects in which research participants generate photographs and consider why researchers find it useful to ask participants to take pictures. I then outline how to set up a project in which respondents generate photos, including what guidance to give and technical matters. In the final section I discuss the analysis of respondents' photos addressing: approaches to image analysis; the importance of contextualising participants' photos; ways of incorporating participants' accounts of their pictures in to your investigation. Most projects involve talking to research participants about the photos they have taken, so this chapter is best read alongside Chapter 9.

Chapter 9 – Photo-interviews: Listening to Talk about Photos Listening to what people say about photos is an increasingly popular method and often integral to projects in which researchers and research participants generate photos. In this chapter I consider claims about the benefits of using photo-elicitation and evaluate why some photos are better than others at encouraging people to talk. I then explore how photo-interviews work, focusing on the relationship between looking at and talking about photos – the visual–verbal relationship. Understanding this relationship can help you make decisions about methods and inform the analysis and interpretation of photo-interview data. This discussion engages with how interviewees conceptualise photos, the temporalities of the visual–verbal relationship, and the relationship between photos, memories and verbal accounts. It concludes with suggestions about how to develop interview analysis to engage with the specificities of how interviewees engage with photos.

Chapter 10 – Ethical Issues and Legalities The final chapter addresses the ethics and legalities of using photos in social and historical research. I examine issues relating to three aspects of research with photos: how researchers and research participants generate photos within a project; the process of photo-elicitation; and the presentation of generated and found photos, including public and old photos and images from personal websites. I draw out key points for you to consider relating to privacy, anonymity, the dignity of participants, informed consent and copyright, but also less frequently discussed issues about the potential voyeurism of researchers and the importance of integrity in *how* photographs are represented in presentations and publications.

Note

1 The terms 'personal' and 'collective' memory refer to interpretations of the past (within living memory) that are widely shared within a particular community (e.g. local or national) and established typically through representations in popular culture and especially the media. Collective memory provides a cultural framework within which people articulate and interpret their personal memories. It is informed and shaped by the experiences and stories of people in communities and so it is different from public history which is imposed top down, usually by governments. Popular memories of the past are modified or superseded as alternative accounts emerge and gain public exposure. For discussion see Abrams (2011).

1

Getting Started: Using Photos in Research

Before you start using photos in research it is important to consider five questions:

- How do you conceptualise a photograph?
- Can photos constitute evidence of the social world?
- How do temporalities shape photo research?
- What can you do with photos?
- How do you combine methods?

These questions are at the heart of this chapter and I address each in turn. First, you need to consider how you conceptualise photos, as this is key to ascertaining how you can use them in research. Though photos are commonly thought of as images they are also objects, so you need to contemplate how the materiality of the image influences what and how you generate data using photos. There is debate about the properties of the photographic image and this also has implications for how you can use them: can an image provide evidence of what was in front of the camera? Should you treat photos as texts? Second, you need to consider how your conceptualisation of photos relates to your views on the nature of social phenomena and what counts as evidence or knowledge of it; in other words your ontological and epistemological positions. Do photos constitute evidence of what you regard as the constituents of the social world, and if so how? These deliberations provide the foundations for thinking about the methods and strategies you use to generate and analyse data. The third question concerns the temporalities of photo research. To use photos in social and historical research requires an appreciation of three temporal dimensions: the temporalities that are conjured by a photo; the life of a photo; the timings of research. Fourth, though researchers appreciate that photos can be looked at, it is helpful to think in more concrete and creative ways about what you can do with them. This includes: using photos to generate as well as answer questions and to stimulate memory; engaging with sensory and affective experiences of, and responses, to photos; and playing with images. Fifth, most research involves a combination of methods, so you need to think carefully at the design stage about how these fit together.

How do you conceptualise a photograph?

The prevailing tendency is to think of photographs as two-dimensional images. This stems from how we apprehend them; as Batchen (1997: 2) explains, 'to see what the photo is "*of* " we ... suppress our consciousness of what the photograph "*is*" in material terms'. Some scholars dispute this way of thinking about photos and argue that they need to be conceptualised as material objects. Concentrating on photographs made from film and photographic plates, I look at both ways of thinking about photos – as objects and images – and draw out the implications for research. I then consider the impact of digitalisation on how photos are conceptualised.

Thinking about photographs as objects

Photographs are three-dimensional objects. They are printed on paper, card, textiles and other material surfaces; in Japan in the 1990s there was a fashion for printing personal photos on stickers (Chalfen and Murui 2004). As Edwards and Hart (2004a) stress, understanding photos – what they mean, why they are or are not significant or valued, how and why they are used – involves engaging with their material properties. This is what Edwards (2002) describes as a material approach. The image is important, but its meaning and significance is inextricably connected to its materiality. This includes what the photo is printed on (e.g. the size, type and quality of paper), and how the photo is physically presented (in an album, in a frame etc.) as this shapes how people can engage with and use the photo and whether and how they can touch it. It also includes signs the photo bears of age and use which suggest the history of the photo. For example, a photo of a child placed in a locket suggests that the person in the picture is special to someone and cherished; the same photo printed on a mass-produced jigsaw puzzle has a different meaning.

Thus, a material approach is not limited to questions about the image, but directs attention to the place of the photographic image-object in personal and social life. In other words, it investigates the material contexts of production, such as: how and why photos are made in particular ways, including the implications of photographic technologies and choices at the point of taking a photo and processing it; the material form of the photograph, for example the choice of paper it is printed on and the finish used (glossy, matt, gold toning) and what these details mean to the people who make and use photos. A material approach also embraces personal and social uses of photographs, such as: how photos are circulated; where and how they are kept and presented; whether they are preserved and how; how they can be looked at and used; how photos are changed by use (damaged, worn) including deliberate acts of modification (cutting, painting over); and what people and organisations think about these practices.

Thinking about photographs as images

The most common way to conceptualise a photo is as an image, but there is debate about the properties of images and how you should use them. There are two main issues. First, can an image provide evidence of what was in front of the camera when the photo was taken? Second, should photos be considered to be texts and treated like paintings and letters?

Can an image provide evidence of what was in front of the camera when the photo was taken?

The answer to this question hinges on how the researcher perceives the relationship between the image and what it portrays. Approaches to the photographic image can best be understood as situated on a continuum; where they are positioned depends on how closely, if at all, the photographic image is considered to relate to the material and social world it seemingly depicts. This could be called the visual reality continuum, although I am referring to a particular understanding of reality that equates it with what is observable. Your position on the continuum will depend on how you answer the following questions, which I explore in detail. Is the photographic image a copy of the real world, or is there a more complex relationship? And if there is a more complex relationship, does the image provide some evidence of what was in front of the camera lens, or is it best conceptualised as independent of it?

At one end of the continuum are those who regard the photographic image as a transcription or copy of the real world; sometimes called a naive realist approach. The photograph is approached as transparent in the sense that it replicates the observable world. There is also an assumption that the photo tells you not only what was precisely in front of the camera lens, but that it is an accurate depiction of the 'reality' of the setting or event. The Victorians, for example, 'invested considerable faith in the power of the camera to record, classify and witness' (Wells 2000a: 55); photography was used to classify races, criminal types, 'lunatics', also to document place. This perspective still lingers; the phrase 'the camera never lies' has held, and continues to hold, considerable sway. The methodological implication of this approach is that researchers can use photos simply as a window for looking at the real world. For example, a photo of a young, slim woman with a flawless complexion would be considered evidence of what this woman looked like (Figure 1.1). Similarly, the photo in Figure 1.2 would be regarded as documenting accurately the appearance of a cottage and children in Evesham village in the 1890s.

Despite the 'temptations of realism' (Burke 2001: 21), contemporary scholars usually reject the idea that photos are mere copies of an observable reality (even if they sometimes slip into treating photos in this way). Instead, photos are approached as constructions that have a complex relationship to the world they depict; this is

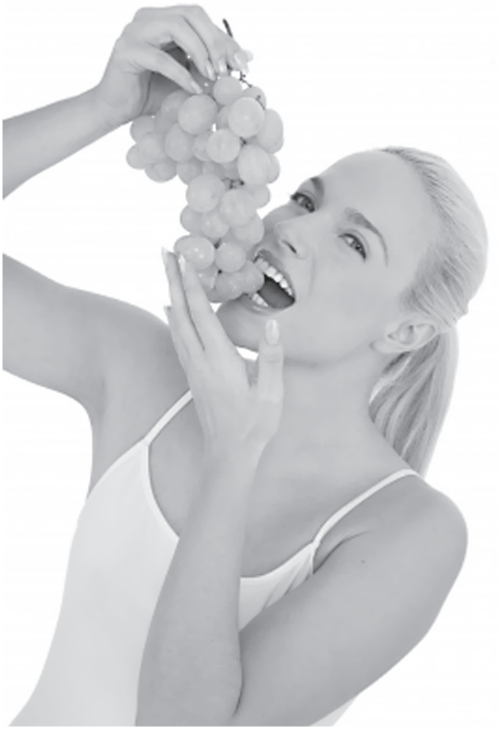

Figure 1.1 Young woman

where a material approach to images (discussed earlier) is relevant, because a photo's construction is shaped by the material qualities and possibilities of cameras and printing processes, how people work with these materials and the choices they make about them.

One reason why images are necessarily constructions is that they are shaped by photographic technologies: 'In the mere act of transcribing world into picture, three dimensions into two, photographs necessarily manufacture the image they make' (Batchen 1997: 12). Moreover, photos never depict what the eye sees, or rather what the brain perceives (Goldstein 2007). Cameras do not register light in the same way as the human eye and they process colour differently. Additionally, a camera fixes a field of vision that is constantly changing in the human eye. Photographers can also set the depth of vision – the distance over which an image is in focus – to achieve results the naked eye cannot achieve and they can use different lenses to 'see' further or to include a wider view. For example, in his photographs of American landscapes Ansel Adams used camera settings that produce results the eye cannot replicate; the photos 'show us the American landscape as we could never view it in "reality"' (Sayer 2008: 59). Importantly, viewers often do not notice that a photo depicts the world differently from how they see it with the naked eye. This is because of historically and culturally specific 'ways of seeing' (Berger 1972) or 'scopic regimes' that are so well established within contemporary Western societies that we rarely consider them (Jenks 1995). Although some argue that in postmodern and digital societies this may be shifting (e.g. Mirzoeff 1998), these particular interpretative strategies remain commonplace. A photo's 'lure of realism' is, therefore, partly a result of how we interpret the image's visual techniques. Although a photo of a street is a two-dimensional representation of a three-dimensional reality, we rely on our interpretation of the image's visual techniques, namely use of perspective and shifts in tone, to 'see' two dimensions as three-dimensional. How people see colour is another instance of this. Before colour photography became commonplace, viewers of black and white photographs commonly interpreted shades of grey as colours (Yevonde 1940: 185–6).

Another reason why photos are always constructions is that the photographer inevitably makes choices about what to photograph and how, decisions that are often about materials or that have material affects. Although there are instances of deliberate manipulation of an image, as Brian Winston (1998: 64) insists, deliberate fraud is less common than 'fine questions of intervention' to achieve a particular effect or impression. These 'fine questions of intervention' include decisions about how to take the photo – lighting, angle and shutter speed – because these all convey meaning. Lighting, for instance, often conveys mood. As Goldstein (2007) describes, temporal and spatial editing also shapes the photographic account of a subject or scene. Temporal editing means deciding what moment to photograph and which, in a series of photos, to print. It is used to catch the moment a person smiles or the few seconds when no one is standing in front of a particular landscape. Whereas temporal editing is about which millisecond to record or print, spatial editing involves decisions about what aspect of a field of view to photograph and from what perspective. The selection process starts with taking the picture but there is often a second stage of cropping what has already been recorded, either manually or digitally. A host of other adjustments are also common once a photo has been taken, from refining colour, tone and focus to editing specific visual details. Not surprisingly, every photograph is shaped, literally, by the photographer's point of view, although there is often more to a photograph than the photographer intended.

While the construction of photos is widely acknowledged, scholars differ in their views about the relationship of the image to what was in front of the camera lens; do images provide some visual evidence of the real world that is photographed or is the image independent of it?

Occupying the middle section of the continuum are approaches that acknowledge photos as constructions, but that also regard photos as offering some evidence of what was in front of the lens. For instance, in *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes (2000) argues that a distinctive feature of a photograph is its 'evidential force' (p. 89). The photograph provides evidence that what is in the frame was actually in front of the camera at some point in time. This is an indexical relationship, like a footprint in sand indicating that a foot has recently been there. Importantly, Barthes does 'not take the photograph for a "copy" of reality'; instead, the photograph's significance is that 'From a real body, which was there, proceed radiations which ultimately touch me' (pp. 80, 88).

Scholars in this section of the continuum *evaluate* rather than *accept* the photo as evidence of what was once in front of the camera. This can be described as a cautious realist position, sometimes called a 'mild realist' (Winston 1998) or 'post-positivist' (Margolis and Rowe 2011) approach. Like many social scientists, Winston (1998: 66) argues that photos 'can only be considered as evidence of the real world in limited and complex ways': 'we are now too sophisticated to believe a photographic image is like a window on the world, a window unmarked by the photographer's finger-prints', but this 'is not necessarily to deny totally that you can still see something of the world.' This stance is evident also in Burke's (2001, 2010) guidance to historians on the 'pitfalls' of using photographs and other visual sources as evidence. Images, he argues, can provide evidence of social reality but they 'distort' it (Burke 2001: 30). Returning to the earlier example of a photo of a young woman (Figure 1.1), researchers point out that while the photo provides evidence that the woman was there, the photo has to be used cautiously as evidence of what this young woman really looked like and what she was doing in front of the camera. Reasons for caution include the likelihood that the picture was posed, that special lighting was used, that this was an atypical pose, and that although hundreds of photos may have been taken only one was selected, touched up and cropped before being produced as a photo of this young woman. Similarly, given there was a convention in the 1890s to depict the British countryside as a rural idyll (Thomas 1978), researchers are cautious about accepting Figure 1.2 as evidence of everyday village life: the area around the cottage may have been tidied up for the photo, or the photographer may have taken this particular stretch because it excluded background that gave a less picturesque view of the village; the children may have been dressed up and posed specially for the picture; and small details may have been edited out at the printing stage.

At the far end of the continuum scholars eschew an approach that looks at an image for evidence of the material and social world it depicts. There are variations in how strongly this position is held. Some scholars, such as Alan Trachtenberg (1990: xiii), provide fleeting acknowledgement of the 'depictive function' of photos within very narrow limits, but they regard this as unimportant for how scholars should work with photos. For Trachtenberg, photos are not simple depictions of what happened in the past, but constructions that produce a particular, visual version of history; the historian's job is to investigate how photos are used to construct particular stories about the past. Others adopt an uncompromising anti-realist position as exemplified by John Tagg (1988). Tagg takes issue with Barthes' claim that photos have 'evidential force' because of their indexical properties for two reasons. First, as discussed earlier, photographic images have a problematic relation to the material and social world because of the technologies and practices involved in producing a photo. Second, photographs are only ever made sense of by social beings, and what viewers think they see in a picture is determined by the discourses and everyday knowledge within which the image is situated. Tagg argues that the status of a photo as evidence is not a product of the photo's intrinsic – indexical – properties, but is a result of how powerful institutions at particular points in history have established some types of