

2



ATMOSPHERIC METHODS GUIDE:

PHOTOGRAPHY

Dr Chloe Steadman & Loretta Lipworth

BACKGROUND

Visual methods are geared around producing non-verbal and non-textual knowledge. As one of the most commonly adopted visual methods, photography involves making a still image recording of something of research interest using a camera or smartphone. Photographs might be taken during a fieldwork trip either as a lone researcher, as part of a walking tour group, or by participants during their everyday lives or when taking part in a 'go-along' walking interview. Photography especially helps attune to the sights of place; but photographs can also elicit embodied reminders of the multisensory experience of being in the field when revisited during data analysis, writing-up, or when viewed by audiences of the research. Photography is frequently combined with other methods during fieldwork, such as field interviews, observational methods, and videos.

“There is a manual and mechanistic process of winding the film onto the next shot which I find really attunes you to the photos you plan to take next. Rather than just easily whipping out your smartphone where there can be endless images taken and retaken”

(Chloe's research diary)



Loretta's photo of a community garden

HOW TO GET STARTED

Remember, this is a flexible method you can adapt to your particular research situation, but here are a few tips to get you started...

- Consider what type of device you want to use to take photographs, whether a disposable camera, digital camera, or smartphone and acquire this equipment. This will depend on your research aims, ethical guidance of your institution, and budget.
- If using this method with participants, think about whether you are able to do a go-along or follow-up interview in order to establish the links between the photo taken and that person's atmospheric experiences of the place being studied. If this is not possible, consider creating a photography form to be used alongside taking photographs.
- Make an initial visit to the place being researched and try out taking some photographs, especially if using a device you are unfamiliar with. You might want to establish a walking route through the place during this initial visit if using this method with participants, or if you will be returning to the same place multiple times.

WHY USE PHOTOGRAPHY?

Photography can help capture how a place and its atmospheres have changed, especially if photographs are taken of the same place across multiple points in time. The use of a manual disposable camera can heighten the focus on visual drivers of a place's atmospheres through the manual and embodied process of using the device. Within a smartphone and social media-driven societal context, photography is often very familiar to people, meaning it can feel comfortable and enjoyable to use this method.

“I just like photography. I like taking photographs. That’s how I like to capture things. So that’s my thing”

(Chimp, Interview participant)

WHAT MIGHT BE CHALLENGING?

People often take photographs of visual features provoking a particularly positive or negative atmospheric charge, meaning the everyday and mundane can be neglected. If using a disposable camera in a public space, feelings of awkwardness can arise due to seeming more conspicuous than a smartphone, whilst the photograph limit might also be a source of frustration. Ethical guidance of institutions can also place some constraints on photographing people, which can lead to images of empty landscapes not fully able to capture how people co-create a place's atmospheres.

"I did feel a bit limited by not being able to take pictures of people. Obviously there's ethical reasons. But I think that people can capture a lot about a place"

(Jimbo, Interview participant)

PRACTICAL TIPS

- If taking photographs of the mundane features of place is beneficial for your research project, participants could be administered a disposable camera for use in their everyday lives, rather than the researcher selecting the research time and walking route, which might jolt participants out of their usual habitual routines, in turn heightening focus on the spectacular.
- To establish the links between a photograph and a participant's atmospheric experience, you can pair photography with a follow-up interview or photography form, including information such as: a description of the photograph, the location it was taken in, and what about atmosphere the photograph was taken to represent.
- If doing fieldwork in an outdoor environment open to inclement weather, a paper photography form is not very weather-proof. If you have access to a digital device, it might be useful to instead create a digital version of this form. If not, you can use plastic folders to shelter paper forms from the wind and rain.

PHOTOGRAPHY IN ACTION

As part of a broader collaborative sensory ethnography, Sarah Pink used photography, alongside walking methodologies, field interviews, video recordings, and eating and drinking with participants to research the Slow Cities movement. During an urban tour around the Welsh town of Mold led by local residents, Pink used her own camera to take photographs of the town, whilst residents also took photographs of Pink with others using their own cameras at various points during the tour. The photographs helped with recalling embodied memories of the materiality, sensoriality, and sociality of being in the town, and several photographs are included in Pink's [published article](#) about the research to help bring the place to life.

TO LEARN MORE ABOUT PHOTOGRAPHY

Pink, S. (2008). [An urban tour: The sensory sociality of ethnographic place-making](#). *Ethnography* 9(2): 175-196.

Sumartojo, S and Pink, S. (2019). [Atmospheres and the Experiential World: Theory and Methods](#). Oxon: Routledge.

To reference this guide:

Steadman, C and Lipworth, L. (2025). Atmospheric Methods Guide: Photography. Manchester: Manchester Metropolitan University.

To read about other atmospheric methods, search online for the full guide titled 'Atmospheric Methods Guide' by Dr Chloe Steadman and Loretta Lipworth