Taking a Visual Turn: Review of *Using Photographs in Social and Historical Research* by Penny Tinkler.

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Today, humanities and social science research is making a “visual turn.” Scholars increasingly recognize how visuality and visual representations shape lived experience not only in our own digital age but also in the image-saturated past. And arguably, it has been the photograph, more than any other visual form since the mid-nineteenth century, that has played that role most decisively. From cheap tintypes made by itinerant nineteenth-century photographers to icons of twentieth-century photojournalism and today’s snapshots on a FaceBook page, photographs have become the medium of choice for defining lives and times. Within this context, Penny Tinkler’s methodological guide, *Using Photographs in Social and Historical Research*, is a welcome addition to scholarship. Addressed to historians and social scientists new to photo-based research, it guides students and scholars through the use of photography in various research contexts. For those undertaking photo-based oral history research, this is an essential guide to the nuances of photographs. The material explicitly discussing oral history is limited to one chapter but I hope that this does not deter researchers; the material included throughout the book is insightful, well researched, and provides a detailed guide to photo-based research.

In recent years (and reflecting that multidisciplinary “visual turn”), a number of methodological studies dedicated to the use of photography in research have appeared. Indeed, Sage, which published *Using Photographs in Social and Historical Research*, is a key press for this literature; its recent four-volume set, *Sage Visual Methods*, for example, is an omnibus of debates and approaches. But often such texts focus on more abstract theoretical problems (including the ontology of the photograph and the semiotics of photographic representation) or exclusively address sociological and anthropological

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applications. Tinkler argues that there are few in depth, practical texts on methodology for historical research with photographs; she aims to fill that void with this comprehensible volume (xiii). And, indeed, throughout the book she is attentive to how “temporalities” are understood with the aid of photographs.

Tinkler is an astute guide to the use of photography in research across several disciplines. As an historian with a background in sociology and a senior lecturer in Sociology at the University of Manchester, she is well versed in the literature and approaches that historians and sociologists (as well as other social science researchers) bring to their research. In her own scholarship, Tinkler has closely examined visual representations (including photographs), attending particularly to the role they play in the construction of gender. Her studies of British girlhood in the mid-twentieth century and the history of women smokers, for example, draw extensively on photographs and hand-rendered illustrations in the popular press as gendered representations and markers of cultural value.

Unlike her earlier work, *Using Photographs in Social and Historical Research*, does not develop an historical argument but rather provides a methodological guide for researchers and students new to the use of photographs. The result is a relatively concise ten-chapter book that is didactic but plainspoken and includes critical theory and direct, practical advice. Indeed, Tinkler appears careful to presume little previous knowledge from her readers, guiding us through fundamental arguments about photographic mediation and key approaches to medium. The first chapter in particular introduces the reader to basic conceptual understandings of photography. Here, Tinkler – countering the surprisingly stubborn belief in photographic directness and veracity – stresses that the photograph is a constructed form of representation, even while acknowledging a spectrum of understandings of photographs as carriers of truth. These opening considerations are bookended by a final chapter, which sends the reader away contemplating the complex ethical considerations that are entailed in photo-based research.

The eight chapters that fill the centre of the book are organized into three loose themes: working with pre-existing photographs (especially archival photographs); generating photographs (by the researcher or research participants); and using photographs in interviews. The first section – working with preexisting photographs – is the most extensively developed material in the book, covering chapters two through six. Here Tinkler addresses some of the considerations historians and other scholars will encounter in using photographs as primary source material and innovative approaches to

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3 Indeed, the book is accessible in language and cost, both. Sage’s four-volume reference text, which is priced at £300, is more suited for a research library than a cash-strapped researcher.


ISSN 1923-0567

ISSN 1923-0567
highlighted disciplinary distinctions (between, for example, historical anthropology, cultural history, and historical sociology), which in turn inform scholars’ approach to the use of photographs. But that is a minor suggestion.

Penny Tinkler’s *Using Photographs in Social and Historical Research* is a welcome addition to the scholarship on photo-based, historical research – including photo-based oral history. For scholars newly undertaking research with photographs, it is invaluable.