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.[1] 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.[2] 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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[1] For example, see, among others: Caroline Knowles and Paul Sweetman, *Picturing the Social Landscape: Visual Methods and the Sociological Imagination.* (New York: Routledge, 2004); Gillian Rose, *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to the Interpretation of Visual Materials.* 2nd edition (London: Sage, 2007); Naydene de Lange, Claudia Mitchell and Jean Stuart, eds. *Putting People in the Picture: Visual Methodologies for Social Change.* (Rotterdam: Sense Publications, 2007); Marcus Banks, *Using Visual Data in Qualitative Research.* (London: Sage Publications, 2007); Christopher J. Pole, ed. *Seeing Is Believing? Approaches to Visual Research.* (Amsterdam and Boston: Elsevier JAI, 2008).

[2] Jason Hughes, ed. *Sage Visual Methods.* (London: Sage Publications, 2012), 4 volumes.

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).[3] 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.[4]

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.

[4] Penny Tinkler, *Constructing Girlhood: Popular Magazines for Girls Growing up in England, 1920-1950* (London; Bristol, PA: Taylor & Francis, 1995); Penny Tinkler, *Smoke Signals: Women Smoking and Visual Culture* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2006).

this material. Tinkler begins this section by suggesting five lines of enquiry for the study of photographs: identifying basic details; scrutinizing the image (art historians would refer to this step as "visual or compositional analysis": examining how such elements as pose, composition, lighting, and vantage point, etc., contribute to meaning); conducting contextual research; and interpreting the photograph. Subsequent chapters detail specific approaches to images including material culture, social historical and autobiographical (or auto-ethnographic) research in Chapters Three and Four. Chapter Five takes us to a consideration of the production of photography including the work of photographers, institutional uses of the medium and the material properties of the photograph. Chapter 6 (the last in this lengthy section) looks to the archive (analog and digital) as both a site for research and, itself, a carrier of photographic meaning.

Tinkler follows the material on using photographs as primary source material with two chapters on generating photographs within a research project. Making photographs as part of a research project has become an increasingly popular tool; it is probably best known in research (such as "photo-voice") in which participants or research subjects take photographs often as part of an autobiographical exercise. Most familiarly it is seen in research with children and youth as well as groups for whom textual literacy is limited. Here, Tinkler outlines approaches to making photographs by the researcher or by research participants.

The final theme addressed in this book is one that will be of most interest to oral history researchers: photo interviews. Unfortunately limited to one chapter, Tinkler outlines and debates the key arguments for employing photographs as part of an interview process. This chapter includes subtle discussions of "photo-elicitation" (the use of photographs, particularly within cultural anthropology, to prompt memory), how memory is conceptualized by various theorists, and Gillian Rose's concept of the "materiality of seeing." Tinkler also recounts her own experiences in using photographs in interviews. She candidly discusses the benefits of photo-interview research and the ways that images can, despite the best intentions of researchers, limit discussion. This chapter, in particular, will provide oral history researchers with a rich blending of theory and practical examples.

Across all of these chapters, Tinkler includes the perspectives of a wide range of scholars implicitly acknowledging that there is no single, simple template or recipe for conducting research (with or without photographs). Every research question approached by every researcher has its own unique methodology usually developed through some combination of disciplinary precedent, community or research participant input, modeling earlier research, improvisation, and trial-and-error. To this end, Tinkler includes interviews with researchers or synopses of their research (usually written by Tinkler but at times by the researcher in question). They include Elizabeth Edwards, James Ryan, Darren Newbury, and Alistair Thomson. These excerpts, along with references to dozens of other scholars and an extensive bibliography, provide us with a rich sense of the many possibilities for historical research employing photographs. While the interdisciplinary reach of these excerpts and the book as a whole is welcome and truly reflects the trans disciplinary nature of photography, I do wish that she had also

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.