**Methodological Article**

# Use of Photography in Organizational Research: Legitimacy and Potential

## Uso da Fotografia na Pesquisa Organizacional: Legitimidade e Potencialidades

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■ **ABSTRACT**

**Objective:** to discuss the use of the photographic method to produce evidence in organizational research and contribute to the debate so that the method achieves greater legitimacy from the nuances that delimit the organizational field. **Proposal:** present characteristics, approaches of the photographic method, limitations, and possibilities of its application as a means of producing evidence in organizational research with rigor, relevance, accuracy, and impact, discussing practical aspects of photographic analysis and the dilemmas that accompany the researcher in its use. Examples of reflections helpful to researchers when using photographic analysis are also presented. **Conclusions:** given the restricted use of photography in organizational research, the reduced scope of articles published with photographic analysis, and the potential that the method has to produce evidence, the essay encourages actors in the field to expand the use of photography. Moreover, the article discusses how photography can achieve more significant space among researchers, editors, reviewers, and readers. Given the broad theoretical and methodological scope in which photography can be applied and the contemporary technological facilities, overcoming this reduced use is more related to the need for greater legitimacy of photography by peers than the specifics of the method.

**Keywords:** qualitative research; visual methodology; organization.

■ **RESUMO**

**Objetivo:** discutir o uso do método fotográfico como meio de produzir evidências na pesquisa organizacional e contribuir com o debate para que o método alcance maior legitimidade a partir das nuances que delimitam o campo organizacional. **Proposta:** por meio de um ensaio são apresentadas características, *approaches* do método fotográfico, limitações e possibilidades de sua aplicação como um meio de produzir evidências em pesquisas organizacionais com rigor, relevância, acurácia e impacto. Discutem-se ainda aspectos práticos da análise fotográfica e os dilemas que acompanham o pesquisador em seu uso. São também apresentados exemplos de reflexões que são úteis aos pesquisadores quando fizerem uso da análise fotográfica. **Conclusões:** diante do restrito uso da fotografia no contexto da pesquisa organizacional, do reduzido escopo de artigos publicados com análise fotográfica e do potencial que o método possui em produzir evidências, o ensaio instiga os atores do campo a ampliar o uso da fotografia e discute meios para que ela alcance maior espaço entre pesquisadores, editores, avaliadores e leitores. Dado o amplo escopo teórico e metodológico no qual a fotografia pode ser aplicada e as facilidades tecnológicas contemporâneas, a superação deste uso reduzido está relacionada mais à necessidade de maior legitimidade da fotografia pelos pares do que por especificidades do método.

**Palavras-chave:** pesquisa qualitativa; metodologia visual; organização.

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# INTRODUCTION

This essay aims to discuss the use of the photographic method to produce evidence in organizational research and to contribute to the debate for greater legitimacy of its use from the nuances that delimit the organizational field. The central argument is that photography is not used to its full potential more due to legitimacy than to characteristics of the method itself. To support this argument, in addition to a presentation on the characteristics of the method, it will be discussed that legitimacy can be expanded from two perspectives. The first perspective is the method itself, which involves (a) photographic analysis and (b) the limitations of the method and the researcher's dilemmas. The second perspective is the action of peers to consolidate legitimacy in the organizational field.

Numerous social research methods are applied in organizational studies, with varying complexity and purpose. For example, researchers using a qualitative approach extensively use interviews, documentary research, focus groups, etc. On the other hand, it is not difficult to assume that most researchers have not used photography in the organizational field at its potential level (Davison, McLean, & Warren 2012; Warren, 2005).

Photography is part of the so-called visual methods, including films, drawings, collages, and cartoons (Glaw, Inder, Kable, & Hazelton, 2017). In addition, there is a tradition of using photography in sociology and anthropology as an efficient means of producing evidence complementary to non-verbal or non-textual data, where this method has been used to analyze both specific phenomena and what is produced by a culture (Harper, 1988).

Since its origins in the social field, the method has expanded to various fields of knowledge (Pain, 2012). However, despite recent growth in interest (Li, Prasad, Smith, Gutierrez, Lewis, & Brown, 2019), such expansion has not been applied to its potential in the organizational field (Greenwood, Jack, & Haylock, 2019; Meyer, Höllerer, Jancsary, & van Leeuwen, 2013; Shortt, 2015). Moreover, the photographic method has even been neglected, as Davison, McLean and Warren (2012) argued, although these authors emphasize that there has been a recent growth in interest among researchers. One reason given by Bell and Davison (2013) for this restricted use is that researchers face challenges in demonstrating the scientific character of their research due to the inherently ambiguous and polysemic nature of the visual.

This reduced use of photography in organizational studies contrasts with the technological advancements and the diversity of the means of photographs, which has enabled greater ease of use and provided high levels of photographic quality (Soares & Storm, 2022; Steyaert, Marti, & Michels, 2012). Thus, this reduced application is not linked to technical limitations but to researcher choices, often based on analyses of legitimacy in the field (Dimaggio & Powell, 1983; Shortt & Warren, 2019; Skjælaaen, Bygdås, & Hagen, 2020).

Although articles cite the question of legitimacy in research using visual methods, this is not the main issue present in the organizational literature. Thus, this article advances knowledge by centrally discussing the legitimacy of photography in organizational studies by addressing the characteristics and limitations of the photographic method and the role of field actors.

In this sense, the justification of this essay arises from the pertinence of instigating a debate on the intensity of the use of photography in organizational research and expanding the discussion among peers about the legitimacy of photography as a source of evidence. Moreover, the photographic method can bring gains to researchers in particular and to the field in general, given the ability to explore non-textual or non-verbal elements that can be a rich source of evidence of organizational phenomena without prejudice to analytical rigor.

The use of visual elements in research and scientific articles, such as graphs, diagrams, and tables, is already legitimized in the organizational field. However, in qualitative research, these elements only seek to facilitate the transmission of information from written or verbal evidence. In the case of photography as a source of evidence, there is still no perceived legitimacy consistent with the potential of the method, unlike the interview, a more legitimate method in the organizational field (Sølvberg & Jarness, 2019). By offering this space for discussion and encouraging the applicability of the photographic method, this essay seeks to reduce this legitimacy gap.

The photographic method can be a fruitful way of supporting research that presents current and relevant themes for society to understand reality and transform it at the level that a vast scope of society, not just some social groups, understands as more relevant and positive for its development. This ability of the photographic method is achieved due to the ability of an image to produce reliable evidence, with high power of synthesis and ease of comparison. Thus, the greater legitimacy of evidence from the photographic method contributes to understanding the social context and the managerial field when it highlights the concrete and lived world to be positively transformed more effectively.

# PHOTOGRAPHY FEATURES, APPROACHES, AND APPLICATIONS

Visuality offers a distinct philosophical basis for observing the complexities of relationships, interactions, space, objects, self, identity, and others (Shortt, 2012). Visual manifestations show aspects in form and content; thus, the visual mode increases the potential to express identities and values through the latent dimension of artifacts (Meyer et al., 2013). Likewise, recording spaces and environments in organizational research expands the potential for explaining the most varied organizational phenomena (Shortt, 2015).

Society makes extensive use of photography (Bell & Davison, 2013). One of the reasons for this use is the practicality of photographing, whether by cameras or smartphones (Wilhoit, 2017), with vast technical possibilities for registering, improving, and disseminating (Soares & Storm, 2022). Photographs subjectively connect the viewer with the argument (Harper, 2005) and can be read to understand the nuances of interaction, self-presentations, and relationships between people in their material environments (Harper, 1988). Photographs have a rich vividness in the quality and depth of sensory information, helping individuals encode their information more readily and with a more significant accumulation of information (Machin, Moscato, & Dadzie, 2021) and can even reveal aspects that are not made explicit in interviews (Buchanan, 2001).

There are multiple perspectives for classifying photography. Regarding the level of analysis, photography can focus on the individual, on a group, or on the organization in general (Ray & Smith, 2012). As for the centrality of the method concerning the object, photography can be used as a complementary method in the triangulation process (Warren, 2005), as it can be used as the primary research method to elucidate evidence. As examples of complementary methodology, Buchanan (2001) makes joint use of photography and traditional qualitative research methods to analyze the reorganization of organizational processes in a hospital. Pullman and Robson (2007) combine interviews and photography-based surveys to understand the consumer's perspective on hotel design and its implications for guest satisfaction. Finally, Shortt (2012) uses self-photography and photo interviews to analyze how a group of UK hairdressing workers uses the spaces, objects, and things in their workplaces to form a visual narrative of who they are, that is, how they use aspects of their material landscape of work as essential resources in the production and reproduction of their work identities.

As an example where photography is the primary method, Anjo (2020) analyzes, under the organizational lens, the backstage of the film production of a university extension project. Muzzio (2021) applies photography to analyze two experiences of creative cities approved by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in the Brazilian Northeast: Fortaleza, in the Design category, and João Pessoa, in the Handicraft category, as well as the respective contributions to the consolidation of these cities as centers of creativity. Li, Prasad, Smith, Gutierrez, Lewis and Brown (2019) uuse photography to analyze the formation of bonds between a Canadian community and the sociocultural, natural, and political environment, highlighting the role of visual resources in consolidating the pride of this community. Byrne, Cave and Raymer (2021) use photography through coding to unravel an organization's culture through its artifacts.

Regarding approaches, Davison et al. (2012) and Steyaert, Marti and Michels (2012) divide visual studies into those in which researchers use previous photographs produced by actors in the field and those in which researchers themselves or those surveyed produce new visual data to study an organizational phenomenon. Meyer, Höllerer, Jancsary and van Leeuwen (2013) make a more specific division of visual research using five approaches: 1. Archaeological, when previous images are used, produced by organizational actors and interpreted by the researcher. 2. Practical, which focuses on understanding how artifacts are part of daily organizational life, with data generated and interpreted by field actors. 3. Strategic, which analyzes how organizations use images as a means of persuasion, where data can be generated by both field actors and researchers and are interpreted by field actors. 4. Dialogic, where images stimulate debate about the organizational context, with data produced by actors in the field and, eventually, by the researcher. 5. Documentary, when the researcher generates and analyzes images to capture a phenomenon.

In addition to these classifications, from a practical perspective, photography can be used in cases where people involved with the phenomenon under analysis do not feel comfortable responding to an interview or participating in a focus group, for example, but allow recording of their work routines. Photography can also be used in research as a means of communication between the researcher and the investigated (Wilhoit, 2017).

It is also possible to analyze the photographic method from a temporal perspective. In addition to the contemporary application, photographic records are for the future and can be very useful for emerging scholarship, just as it is possible to use historical records to understand ancient phenomena. Like the photograph of the past

in relation to the present, today's acts can be objects of study to comparatively analyze the physical and symbolic organizational transformations and the behaviors and configurations that, although currently in force, will not be standard in the future.

From a political perspective, visual methods have occupied a growing social space in the media world that permeates contemporaneity. Digitization, social media, and information sharing platforms structure the new digital economy model, where information and communication technologies create global networks that drive economic and social change (Williams, McDonald, & Mayes, 2021). In this context, the photographic method in organizational research can be a powerful tool, occupy a privileged place, and be a valuable resource for a more genuine and valid apprehension of reality.

From an application perspective, photography has a broad scope of compatibility with different research approaches, such as interpretive, realistic,

sociomateriality, and critical. Furthermore, photography is suitable for different methodological approaches, such as grounded theory, ethnography, or case study. This allows organizational researchers an extensive prism of action.

The application of the photographic method in the organizational context can be used for human and non-human records. In the non-human context, examples are layout records, industrial plants, production environments, service spaces, meeting rooms, offices, service areas, inventories, bathrooms, adornments, furniture, and clothing. Figures 1, 2, and 3 exemplify organizational spaces in research on creative work. Unfortunately, there is no space in this article to carry out an analysis of such photographs. However, the possibility of analysis is reported, for example, on production technology, type of products, linkage of products with the local culture, production space, and creativity (see topics of study in the next section), from different theoretical lenses or epistemological perspectives.



**Figure 1.** Handling.
Source: Author's collection.



**Figure 2.** Production.
Source: Author's collection.



**Figure 3.** Marketing.
Source: Author's collection.

Photographic records can relate physical aspects to behaviors. For example, ornaments or environments can be photographed to reveal elements of organizational culture (Byrne, Cave, & Raymer, 2021), such as interior design, facades, furniture, paintings, photography of the founder, and use of colors in environments.

Concerning the human context, photographing moments of individuals' behavior in the various activities of the organizational environment, such as meetings, training, creative processes, customer service, productions, conferences, and moments of relaxation are possible examples.

Finally, these characteristics exemplify the versatility and application potential of photography in organizational research, where researchers have a range of choices consistent with different research strategies, which enhances the use of the photographic method in organizational studies.

## PHOTOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS AND LEGITIMACY

It is argued that legitimacy will be increased both by actions related to the method itself and by behavioral actions of field actors. Therefore, the first discussion focuses on the analysis stage.

Rigor and a pertinent research question are required from the planning stage. A vast literature addresses rigor, relevance, and reliability issues in qualitative research (Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2013; Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olson, & Spiers, 2002). More practical aspects will be discussed as these precautions include the photographic method. Among the approaches mentioned above by Meyer et al. (2013), the documentary one, whose research focus is the content and meaning of the visual artefact, is the least usual in organizational research and, in this sense, the comments here will focus on this approach, although they are not, sometimes, undue to other approaches.

Initially, photographic analysis is tasked with ensuring that: (1) what has been observed is 'true,' and in some way acceptable; (2) the data were analyzed in such a way that the meanings attributed to them are acceptable (Laroche, 2020).

The researcher must provide a detailed description of all record preparation procedures, the analytical step, and the entire investigation process. The photographic analysis must also use recursion, with the researcher and his team carrying out rounds of analysis, refinements, and revisions. Given the subjectivity involved in this phase and the positive externality that complementarity makes possible, the use of triangulation of researchers and methods (Farquhar, Michels,

& Robson, 2020) can contribute to filling gaps in individual perception and interpretation, mitigating subjectivity and increasing rigor (Byrne et al., 2021) to photographic records. For Harper (1988), many of the methods used in research can be better understood if frozen in a photographic image than written in a field memo.

The researcher must seek exemption, eliminate biases, and perform exhaustive reflexivity (Cassell, Radcliffe, & Malik, 2020), even though there are recognized limits of exemption in qualitative research (Berger, 2015). When carrying out the photographic records, the researcher must make notes in his field notebook (physical or digital) to produce complementary and explanatory information or highlights of what was recorded, which will be insightful in the analysis stage. Despite the confirmation of evidence, confrontation with written or spoken reports may be contradictory to photographic records. New reflections, comparisons, or new records may be necessary.

Eventually, the researcher may access previous photos belonging to the organizational collection or an organization member. Such artifacts could be a valuable object of investigation for the researcher. In this case, it is a hybrid method (Meyer et al., 2013), which demands the researcher to examine the pertinence of using the hybrid method based on his objectives and guarantee all the precautions discussed here, making it clear if he uses such records.

The analysis can be facilitated if there are multiple records of the same environment or people in their functional routines, as this strategy makes it possible to capture many nuances in organizations (Byrne et al., 2021). Furthermore, the photograph analysis can be done without or with soft (Ray & Smith, 2012), allowing access to many facilities and functionalities. Finally, in addition to soft, analysis by the researcher allows perspectives only accessible from subjectivities and the researcher's experience.

Consistent with qualitative studies, there is not just a single analysis strategy, and this depends, for example, on the purposes of the research, the relevance of the method in relation to the object, and the familiarity of the researcher (Byrne et al., 2021; Greenwood et al., 2019). Nevertheless, content and thematic analysis are standard in photographic records analysis and are at the heart of the first-, second-, and third-order phases. In content analysis, it is possible to carry out quantifications, enumerations, and descriptions. However, despite the possibility of being interpretively rigorous, it would be pertinent not to forget that content analysis is limited in its ability to explicitly link visual content to the rhetorical use and ideological aspects of visual elements and, therefore, limited in its capacity for criticality (Greenwood et al., 2019).

The thematic analysis aims to identify nuclei of meaning (Bardin, 2010). At this point, manifest or latent elements can be identified. Themes can emerge from photographic patterns, field diaries (Ray & Smith, 2012) or supporting theories. In the quest for rigor, the use of a researcher from the team who acts as an auditor of the entire analytical process should be ensured. The thematic analysis involves interpretation and, as such, involves second-order abduction, with a cultural component that guides the researcher's interpretation (Greenwood et al., 2019).

One way is to review the photographic records and, eventually, delete what is necessary for technical or ethical reasons. Subsequently, it is crucial to compose the photographic records according to criteria that the researchers understand best meet their objectives, for example, chronological order, events, or organizational spaces. Then, all human and non-human elements in each record must be identified. These data can be linked, for example, to spatial configurations, orderings, scales, and quantifications, all endowed with symbolisms that can bring out evidence about the object of investigation. This process requires 'educated eyes' (Laroche, 2020) to extract the unsaid or the camouflaged details. Recursion, reflexivity, and discussion between members must accompany the entire process.

Practically, without claiming to be exhaustive and prescriptive and without necessarily implying a sequence to be followed, Figure 4 presents a list of questions that can guide the analytical process:

- How will the data be ordered? What criteria will be used?
- Which photographs should be excluded from the analyses?
- Which recorded photographs can be linked to the object of investigation?
- How do the photographs fit into the categories of analyses?
- Which personal items were photographed? How do they dialogue with the object of investigation?
- What evidence emerges from the photographs?
- How does the evidence dialogue with the object of investigation?
- How does the evidence relate to other methods used?
- Were there registers taken at different moments? Did this generate any changes concerning the object or interfere in the investigation?
- Can the angle of the photographic record induce a different interpretation?
- How does the evidence relate to previous research? Does it support or contradict previous findings?
- How does the evidence dialogue with existing theories?
- Does the evidence support theory development?
- What could not be captured? How does this gap limit the results?
- How can knowledge of the field be advanced from the results?
- Did any record surprise the researcher? In what respect?

**Figure 4.** Questions to guide the analytical process.

In parallel, research with a photographic method can comprise several organizational themes. Table 1 presents non-exhaustive examples of contexts and focuses of study that can inspire researchers on how photographs can participate in producing evidence of various organizational phenomena, which can be analyzed by a broad epistemological and theoretical scope.

Finally, this section discussed strategies, practices, behaviors, and choices that the researcher should consider when carrying out photographic analysis in the organizational field. By making correct use of what was proposed, by observing the coherence between the epistemological, theoretical, and methodological choices, by establishing a protocol coherent with his object of investigation, by providing the public with all possible information (observing ethical aspects) of the process developed, by seeking to use the method with the necessary rigor, in short, by seeking to carry out the investigation and analysis with quality, the researcher both enhances the legitimacy of his research and contributes to the legitimation of the photographic method in this field of knowledge. Thus, despite the ambiguous and polysemic nature of the photographic method (Bell & Davison, 2013), the scholarship will contribute to this legitimation process by maximizing the potential of this method and reducing its limitations.

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**Table 1.** Photographable organizational aspects and themes/focus of studies.

| Contexts / Environments / People | Themes / Study Focus |
|---|---|
| Staff / Leaders | Leadership / Functional behavior / Diversity / Inequality / Gender |
| Functional clothing | Identity / Organizational culture / Power |
| Artifacts | Organizational culture / Design / Technology |
| Furniture / Equipment | Design / Technology / Ergonomics |
| Dialogue between participants | Communication / Power / Team spirit |
| Spatial configuration | Design / Communication / Inequality / Layout |
| Organizational spaces | Culture / Technology / Design |
| Protective / Preventive equipment | Occupational safety / Functional well-being |
| Living / Leisure spaces | Functional well-being / Quality of life at work |
| Customer service spaces | Customer service / Design / Organizational processes / Layout |
| Factory environment | Production technology / Production process / Safety at work / Quality / Layout |
| Meetings | Functional routines / Leadership / Decision-making |
| Goods / Products | Quality / Technology / Innovation / Creativity |

## RESEARCHER'S DILEMMAS, LIMITATIONS OF THE METHOD, AND LEGITIMACY

Choices and care researchers must have to expand the legitimacy of their research and the photographic method in the organizational field are discussed. Firstly, the researcher's epistemological choice will influence the entire investigation. The visual can be analyzed by different epistemological, conceptual, and methodological conceptions (Boxenbaum, Jones, Meyer, & Svejenova, 2018). For example, Hultin (2019) uses sociomateriality to analyze the practices in the reception area of the Swedish Migration Board. The author discusses how an ontological position implies epistemology and how it is possible to act from this perspective with photographs. On the other hand, Walker, Osbahr and Cardey (2021) carried out action research using thematic collages to support dialogic generation to elucidate subjective motivations in an agricultural context in India.

As with all research methods, photography has limitations, and its use must consider the collective conventions of the field. In this sense, the researcher must be aware of the ethical problems involved with photography, which has proven to be an excellent instrument to see what the photographer wants to see (Laroche, 2020), a condition that is not consistent with what is expected of research.

Among the concerns are: having consent for the production and use of the image, disseminating the image only in the sense that it was authorized, not registering unauthorized spaces and people, not invading privacy, not disclosing facts that can be embarrassing to individuals, and not using the image for profit (Prins, 2010). According to Harper (2005), if the researcher understands that the photographic record may infringe legislation or what had been agreed with the participants, or that this may have unintended consequences, the photograph should not be produced.

Another aspect concerns the manipulation of photography. Of course, it is possible to make use of manipulation techniques that allow, for example, improving image quality through development techniques or the use of software, but it is not expected that such manipulations can distort reality or falsify evidence, as it is known that photographs can hide or lie (Laroche, 2020).

In this sense, the representation of the photograph should not be considered realistic in the face of the interpretive mediation of the researcher and of those who view the images for photos are dependent on the intention of researchers, on their object of investigation, on how they obtain consent from research participants, on issues of style, framing, etc. (Buchanan, 2001).

It is also expected that the researcher seeks to ensure that people have prior knowledge of their presence in the designated research period (Ray & Smith, 2012), based on information from those responsible for the investigated organizational context. This prior information can mitigate resistance and facilitate the registration of respondents. However, this does not eliminate the need for the researcher to explain to the participants the nature and objectives of the study, clarify any doubts or questions, and respect denials of participation, even throughout the process and after records have already been made. Formally, participant informed consent is required by signing a free participation term. There is also the need to clarify the means and purposes of disclosing photographic records.

Another aspect of concern is the need for data transparency, that is, from the perspective of open science (Vicente-Saez & Martinez-Fuentes, 2018), allowing the various actors in the field, provided they have permission or do not cause ethical problems, to have access to the photographic records used to support the claims of the empirical research, which would enable readers to appreciate the richness and nuances of what the sources highlight and to assess the robustness of the research. This data access action may involve appendices (Moravcsik, 2014). However, the spaces of the articles are not enough to guarantee access to several photographs. This limitation can be overcome by using digital repositories, which are widely available, even free of charge.

Lastly, every method results from choices that require adjustments to the investigated object and has limitations. Even the interview, a method with broad legitimacy, must be the object of concern. For example, Nunkoosing (2005) cites power problems in the interviewer-interviewee relationship, resistance, consent, greater control in structured interviews, cultural distinctions, privacy, and directing the interviewer to specific subjects or aspects that most interest the research. Such concerns can be developed to the photographic method to a reasonable extent.

From the epistemological point of view, the debate should not move toward the right or wrong dichotomy. Instead, it makes more sense to observe the logic of choices or clashes, which are carried out as a function of field configurations, power, or institutionalized hegemonies (Dimaggio & Powell, 1983; Suchman, 1995).

Regarding the limitations of the method itself, researchers must expand the legitimacy of their research and collaborate in legitimizing the photographic method. By respecting legal issues or ethical principles, seeking to be reliable in what they record, making the purposes of the study precise to those investigated, being transparent about the procedures carried out, and being rigorous in their choices, researchers will contribute to a process of maturation and acceptance of the method. Naturally, this process involves peers and requires time to consolidate, but when this collective act carefully and attentively to the limits of the method, it will play an essential role in this process of legitimacy.

## THE ORGANIZATIONAL FIELD AND THE LEGITIMACY OF THE PHOTOGRAPHIC METHOD

The question of the legitimacy of the photographic method reflects a larger reality that involves qualitative research itself. Faced with the hegemonic position of quantitative research in the organizational field, actors who use qualitative methods are in constant defense of the ability of such methods to subsidize the production of knowledge. However, the legitimacy of qualitative methods will not come from direct comparisons with quantitative methods. In this sense, this legitimacy can be achieved, for example, by building a solid discourse on the distinctions and characteristics of qualitative research and its ability to produce knowledge about another logic that involves, among others, subjectivity, emotion, intuition, interpretation, or even, as Bispo (2017) argues, performative judgment.

In this context, the photographic method is inserted, which is still included in the clash between verbal and written languages, predominant in the organizational field (Meyer et al., 2013, Sølvberg & Jarness, 2019), and visual language. In addition to actions related to the photographic method itself, the central argument of this analysis about its legitimacy includes actions developed by actors in the field. Legitimacy is a medium-/long-term process of social persuasion (Suchman, 1995). Achieving legitimacy requires a collective action orchestrated by peers, where it is recognized that there must be a multilateral action that builds both social arrangements and the actors themselves, a task facilitated by the action of leaders in the field (Thomas & Ritala, 2022).

In search of an understanding of the reasons for this reduced use of the photographic method among qualitative methods, it is argued here that the main reason is the mimetic behavior (Dimaggio & Powell, 1983) and the fact that academics automatically reproduce specific procedures considered correct, without reflecting on them (Bispo, 2017). As the photographic method is not widely used in research published in the leading journals in the organizational field (Bluhm, Harman, Lee, & Mitchell, 2011), there is a mimetic and uncritical reproduction of its non-use without further reflection on its potential and how it can be a method capable of producing robust evidence, from a perspective different from the mainstream. This appears in a review investigation with 198 studies that applied multiple qualitative methods in the organizational field between 1999 and 2008 in leading North American and European journals. Among the articles, 168 (84%) used interviews, 90 (45%) used documents, 80 (40%) adopted observations, and 26 (13%) applied questionnaires. Focus groups, informal conversations, and diaries were also used. However, photography was not used (Bluhm et al., 2011).

Specifically, there is no single strategy that would guarantee the expansion of the legitimacy of photography as a source of evidence in research in the organizational field. Once again, without prescriptive pretensions, we highlight examples that can be carried out in the most diverse academic and non-academic channels, such as: (a) recognizing that the

meaning that seeks to be elucidated is prone to ambiguities and subjective interpretations (Greenwood et al., 2019), as well as that photography has a polysemic content (Pain, 2012); (b) defend that photography is not just a mere illustrative medium or complementary to other methods, but a method capable of centrality or be protagonist in triangulations; (c) propagating that the method is more accurate than other methods, such as the interview (Ray & Smith, 2012); (d) corroborate the argument that it is pertinent to overcome the binary opposition between writing and visual and value the combined use of these two perspectives at the epistemological level (Bell & Davison, 2013); (e) disseminating that the method allows the construction of photographic records and memory that facilitate the recursive analytical process, enables narrative descriptions of organizational practices, and allows expanded access to reality for the collective construction of interpretation.

Regarding the channels of diffusion of this persuasion process, journals are a natural medium. In this case, editors can expand the availability of sections and special calls and allow the use of repositories that contain photographic records linked to published articles. In addition to journals, access to diverse audiences can be expanded through project-based websites (Bell & Davison, 2013). Finally, it is also possible to offer tracks at events in the organizational field and hold lectures or workshops to improve, disseminate, and encourage the use of the method.

As in other fields of knowledge, legitimation is also associated with the actions of gatekeepers. These actors' theoretical, methodological, and empirical productions on or with the photographic method can induce actors who do not occupy central positions in the field.

Another fundamental aspect is the ethical question. The observance of legislation and social conventions is a behavior convergent with legitimation. For example, respect for different international laws on personal data protection and submission to ethics committees, when necessary, support the method's legitimacy.

Finally, another action bias could also occur in the training of research professors through broad and effective teaching of qualitative methodology at the doctoral level, which goes beyond simple training on methods and their rules, and includes an education that enables the doctoral student to make a critical judgment on the applicability and limitations of the methods, with the possibility of extrapolating current standards (Bispo, 2017). In this way, the most legitimate use of the photographic method would also involve the training of researchers based on a critical recognition of the virtues and limitations of the photographic method concerning its object of study, overcoming the simple mimetic choice for traditional methods in the field.

In summary, the legitimacy of the photographic method as a producer of evidence in the organizational field is a process under construction (Greenwood et al., 2019; Shortt, 2015) that still requires actions from actors in the field to consolidate. In addition to technical issues or the observance of the method's characteristics, the collective construction of a new stage of legitimacy requires adequate training, the intensity of use, expansion of means of dissemination, appreciation of its potential, and observance of ethical aspects.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

This article argued that the use of the photographic method, below its potential in organizational studies, occurs more due to legitimacy than to the method's characteristics. To support this position, an argument was developed in which such legitimacy can be consolidated by practices and care related to photographic analysis and limitations of the method and by convincing actions by field actors.

The contemporary social context is marked by wide use of images, mainly due to the capacity of digital propagation (Bell & Davison, 2013; Soares & Storm, 2022). In the organizational context, this valorization of imagery can expand the use of the visual in research (Byrne et al., 2021). However, the fact that verbal or written data have a high explanatory power of organizational nuances does not invalidate the use of photography for the same purpose. On the contrary, its use, as well as of other visual methods, can be stimulated and gain greater legitimacy in organizational understanding.

In step with Meyer et al. (2013), it is essential to expand the number of organizational research that uses photography. Furthermore, it is believed necessary to expand the scope of these researches in different methodological and theoretical approaches. Thus, it is argued here that the research agenda should not be limited to specific themes. Instead, given the aforementioned theoretical and methodological plurality, it seems to make more sense to instigate the use of photography on a larger scale, as various organizational phenomena can be captured and understood by visual means in general and by photography in particular.

The challenges posed to the organizational field in enabling a positive impact on society, the concern of management studies in meeting the significant interests of contemporary society, and the provision of answers by researchers to the demands of managers for organizational efficiency are demands that can be met, complementarily, with the support of photographic records and this involves the valorization of the method and greater legitimacy among peers. First, however, it is necessary to value the method and

a greater legitimacy among peers. Discussions that have been dealt with here may contribute to these intents.

The more practical application of the photographic method reveals possibilities that can highlight new management practices or support emerging theories, contributing to positive social transformations for a broad social scope. Therefore, this article argues that contemporary research in administration can use the photographic method as a robust means of highlighting the organizational routine and practices. This is due to its ability to reproduce organizational reality synthetically and reliably to support the researcher's interpretation. Its application must occur under the recognition of its ability to contribute to theoretical and practical advances and a new status of qualitative organizational research.

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