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## THE PERSUASIVE FUNCTION OF THE VISUAL IDEOGRAPH

### *The Case of Baby Samuel*

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In September 1999, *USA Today* published a photograph taken of a fetus during in-utero surgery. The photograph, known as the “Baby Sam” photo after the baby’s name, showed the hand of the fetus reaching out from the womb to hold the surgeons’ hand. The photograph was adopted by pro-life advocates and serves as a visual ideograph embodying the pro-life belief that a fetus is a functioning human being. This chapter identifies the photograph as a visual ideograph and examines its persuasive function within society.

Different sociological ideologies in 20th-century culture have come to be identified through the visual form. Mitchell (1994) argued that an observable “pictorial turn” has occurred in which a word-dominant media has been overtaken by an image-dominant media. A single photograph can capture and represent a cultural ideology. For example, the horrors and tragedy of the reality of war were visually immortalized in the photograph of 9-year-old Phan Thi Kim Phuc running naked down a South Vietnamese road, screaming in pain from a napalm attack. In 1996, the senselessness of the Oklahoma City bombing attack was captured in the photographic image of a firefighter carrying the limp body of a young child from the wreckage. The

photo so vividly captured the social ideology of the senselessness of terrorism that it was printed nationally and internationally on the front pages and covers of newspapers and magazines. As one picture editor noted, "I knew this was *the* photo of the event" (Newton, 1994–1999). More recently, the photograph of rescue workers raising a flag on a small and tilting flagpole atop the rubble of the World Trade Center has been identified as capturing the social ideology of freedom and the triumphant spirit of good over evil.

In September 1999, a photograph was published that was quickly adopted by the anti-abortion subculture as a representative form of the social ideology of the pro-life movement. During in-utero surgery to correct a spina bifida problem, an incision in the womb of the pregnant mother allowed a surgeon to reach into the womb and seemingly pull the hand of the fetus out of the womb. The unborn child, named Samuel Armas, appeared to grab the middle finger of the surgeon. A photographer quickly snapped the picture. The photograph, entitled "Baby Sam," has been described as one of the most remarkable photographs ever taken in medicine (Harris, 2001) and was quickly adopted by pro-life advocates as symbolic evidence that a fetus is a rational human being capable of human actions. As a result, the "Baby Sam" photograph has become a visual ideograph—a symbolic representation of the ideology of the pro-life culture possessing enormous persuasive intent.

The "Baby Sam" photograph made visual the pro-life message to readily gain the attention of an audience. It reinforced the arguments of the pro-life doctrine. The photograph warrants analysis for its persuasive function and impact. First this chapter analyzes the rhetorical function of the "Baby Sam" photograph by examining the history and development surrounding the photograph. Second, the political ideology of the pro-life movement is reviewed. Third, the photograph is analyzed as a visual ideograph representative of the pro-life movement. Finally, the significance of the persuasive function of Baby Sam is explored.

## THE PHOTOGRAPH

At first glance, the photograph (Fig. 10.1) appears grotesque and confusing. However, on closer examination the small hand of an infant is seen grabbing a gloved hand of a medical personnel. The hand appears to be consciously reaching out from the womb for help. In truth, this is not what happened.

In 1999, then pregnant 27-year-old Julie Armas and her husband Alex discovered that their 14-week-old fetus had developed improperly in the womb and had spina bifida, leaving part of his spinal cord exposed after the backbone failed to develop. The brain of the fetus was also misshapen. Due to religious convictions, abortion was not an option for the couple, and they



Figure 10.1. The photograph known as the “Baby Sam.”

sought medical alternatives. Their doctor put them in touch with Dr. Joseph Bruner, who was part of a pioneering surgical team at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee. Dr. Bruner suggested a ground-breaking surgery based on the theory that attention to the spine disorder before the baby is born would prevent or limit brain damage and provide a better chance for healing. The surgery would not cure spina bifida, but would provide a strong chance of limiting the damage through early intervention.

In September 1999, the ground-breaking surgery was performed on Julie and her then 21-weeks-old fetus. The surgery was carried out entirely through a tiny slit in the wall of the womb that had been moved outside of the mother's body. On an unborn patient no bigger than a guinea pig, the operation was performed without removing the fetus from the womb. The operation was designed to close the gap in the fetus' back and protect the spinal cord. Due to the position of the fetus, Dr. Bruner had to reposition the “patient” to have complete access to the open end of the spine. Once baby Sam was repositioned, his hand was in the way. *USA Today* of May 2, 2000, noted that Dr. Bruner reached through the slit in the womb and moved the hand of the fetus out of the way. In the process, the hand slid out of the slit in the womb and appeared to hold the middle finger of the surgeon. A photographer present in the operating room, Michael Clancy, was about to leave the room when he saw Dr. Bruner “grab the hand” so he quickly snapped the photograph.

The photograph was first published in *USA Today* on September 7, 1999, as part of a story about prenatal spina bifida surgery. It was immediately picked up by news services worldwide, and it soon gained international notoriety. Subsequently, the Baby Sam story has appeared on the Internet

in many different languages. A recent search-engine request for the word *Samuel Armas* resulted in over 16,000 pages referencing the photograph. Baby Sam has also turned up in the U.S. Capital during debates and, according to a follow-up article published in *USA Today* on May 2, 2000, even in newspapers and billboards in several countries overseas. Pro-life activists immediately adopted the photograph, arguing that it was proof that a fetus is indeed a human life, capable of human function like reaching out and grabbing an object.

The pro-life culture has used the ambiguity of the photograph to advance its agenda. The official web page of Samuel Armas, entitled "Holding Hands," states that Samuel actually "reached out from the womb to save other infants from the horrors of abortion" (Armas, 2000, para. 46). Journalist Paul Harris asserted in the November 8, 2001, *Irish Independent* that Samuel is "literally hanging on for life." An anti-abortion Web site sponsored by the Christian Resource Center and updated on December 28, 2001, stated that the doctor seems to be shaking Samuels' hand "telling him 'good luck in life kid!'"

Although none of these statements about the picture is true, they create a powerful and persuasive context for the picture. With the addition of a caption, the photograph embodies the social ideology of the pro-life culture. As a result of this widespread usage, the Baby Sam photograph became a visual ideograph for the anti-abortion movement.

## THE PRO-LIFE PLATFORM

Ever since the Supreme Court decision of *Roe v. Wade* in 1972 legalizing abortion in the United States, the abortion debate has raged. Pro-choice advocates rally around the argument that the decision to terminate a pregnancy is a choice best left up to the mother. The issue of when the fetus becomes a living, functioning human being is not at the crux of some pro-choice ideology. Some pro-choice advocates argue that a fetus is not a living human being until birth.

Pro-life ideology, in contrast, believes that human life begins at conception (Alcorn, 2001). Supported by long lists of medical professionals and physicians, pro-life advocates argue that human life begins at conception—that within days of conception a fetal heartbeat can be measured and within weeks brain waves can be detected. Pro-life advocates refer to the fetus as a "little person," not just a glob of tissue.

The Baby Sam photograph is used to support pro-life arguments. The pro-life ideology argues that only a living, functioning human being could engage in an activity of actually reaching out and grabbing an object.

Printed descriptions of the photograph have incorrectly perpetuated this myth. Julie Armas (2000), the mother of baby Sam, notes on the Armas family Web page "Holding Hands: The Story of Samuel Armas," that "Truly, Samuel's photo states the fetal position better than words can describe. He literally reached out from the womb to save other infants from the horrors of abortion." Colson (2000) further muddled the picture when he wrote, "As the surgeon was closing the womb, the miracle happened. Baby Samuel pushed his hand out of the womb and grabbed the surgeon's finger." As noted in the previous section, neither of these descriptions accurately represents what happened. The truth is that at 21 weeks, a fetus is not developmentally able to engage in motor skill activities of this type. Dr. Noel Tulipan, director of pediatric neurosurgery at Vanderbilt University, who closed the hole in Samuel's spine, noted that a fetus at this stage of development "would have no ability to reach out and grab anything" (quoted in Snyder, 2000, para. 16).

## VISUAL IDEOGRAPHS

### Ideographs

McGee (1980) advocated the concept of ideographs—words or terms that developed their meaning by representing a cultural idea or experience within a larger context. For McGee, words such as *religion*, *property*, *freedom of speech*, or *liberty* are the basic structural elements, the building blocks of ideology. These words may be thought of as "ideographs," for, like Chinese symbols, they signify and "contain" a unique ideological commitment. Through this ideological commitment, the persuasive nature of the word becomes evident.

McGee (1980) developed four characteristics identifying an ideograph. First, an ideograph must be "an ordinary language term found in political discourse" (p. 15). He argued that because ideographs are not reserved for the political elite, they obtain much of their power in their ordinary nature. The best way to trace a particular ideograph is through popular history such as novels, songs, or films.

Second, an ideograph must be a "high-order abstraction representing collective commitment to a particular but equivocal and ill-defined normative goal" (McGee, 1980, p. 15). The term must be clear, but ambiguous enough to affect or "speak to" virtually anyone. The term must be committed to a goal, but this goal must not be clearly measurable or defined by the image, so that it is adaptable. The vague notion of collective commitment is what gives the ideograph its persuasive force, creating endless possibilities.

Third, McGee maintained that an ideograph also “warrants the use of power, excuses behavior and belief which might otherwise be perceived as eccentric or anti-social, and guides behavior and belief into channels easily recognized by a community as acceptable and laudable” (p. 15). The ideology that the term represents is not simply logic, but a powerful force that actually guides behavior and empowers the user with acceptable behavior.

Finally, the ideograph must be culture-bound. Society must interact with the word so that the two are intrinsically tied together. The term is not the culture, but is clearly linked to the culture and will help to define that collective.

## The Visual Ideograph

Edwards and Winkler (1997) argued that the concept of ideograph is not merely limited to specific terms or words as posited by McGee. The authors claimed that because “an ideograph’s meaning develops through its usages and applications” (p. 297), other rhetorical forms beyond mere words could constitute an ideograph. If a picture or, in the case they were interested in, a cartoon could be found to represent the characteristics of an ideograph, then that picture or cartoon would constitute a form of public discourse. The authors successfully defended their position by demonstrating that the image of soldiers raising the U.S. flag over Iwo Jima served as a visual ideograph within the appropriate cultures. This study has paved the way for additional applications of visual ideographs.

## Baby Sam as Visual Ideograph

The Baby Sam photograph serves as a visual ideograph for the pro-life movement. Ever since the Supreme Court decision of *Roe v. Wade*, few issues or words have sparked as much controversy in the American culture as abortion. Popular history of the last 30 years of the 20th century is riddled with court cases, Senate debates, and even medical clinic shootings and killings centered on abortion. Although prevalent in political discourse, abortion is not reserved for the political elite. Both politician and citizen, whether educated or uneducated, can articulate heated positions both for and against the topic.

The level of abstraction or ambiguity of the picture is very high. This allows the pro-life camp to interpret the photograph strongly in their favor. Although it may appear that the hand is reaching out from the womb for help, as noted earlier in this chapter, that is not the truth. Dr. Joseph Bruner told *USA Today* on May 2, 2000, that he simply saw the hand in the way, so

he picked it up to move it. Moreover, the photograph was not taken to produce any particular message. Photographer Michael Clancy was on his way out of the operating room when he happened to notice Dr. Bruner moving the hand so he quickly snapped the picture.

Although innocent in origin, interpretations of the photograph have become anything but. Pro-life advocates claim the photograph suggests that human life from the womb is engaged in human activity. The photograph alone neither supports nor denies this claim, yet its ambiguity allows for the ideographic interpretation.

The power of the topic of abortion in the U.S. culture goes without dispute. Very few presidential, congressional, gubernatorial, or regional political candidates can engage in the election process without attracting or alienating voters with the topic. Many religious leaders encourage congregations to vote for or against a particular candidate based on his or her stance on abortion. Citizens become empowered and justify illegal behavior from protesting and picketing medical clinics or even physically assaulting people who attempt to enter a medical clinic. Sadly, some pro-life zealots believe that murdering abortion clinic personnel is justified behavior when done in the name of saving an unborn child. The Baby Sam photograph is used to support this ideology.

Many pro-choice advocates have reacted to the power of the Baby Sam photograph by rejecting it altogether. Some pro-choice followers have called the picture a hoax. *USA Today* of May 2, 2000, noted that pro-choice advocates have claimed that a team of medical experts reviewed the picture and determined that it was a hoax. The controversy over the picture speaks to the power of photograph.

Finally, a visual ideograph must be linked to a culture. Given the history of the abortion controversy in the United States, it is intrinsically linked to the American culture. The abortion debate has been described as an "all out war"<sup>1</sup> and "one of the most divisive issues in the United States."<sup>2</sup> Controversy over Supreme Court rulings, partial birth abortions, and the RU486 abortion pill are all prominent features in the United States.

Furthermore, Baby Sam is intrinsically linked to the pro-life culture. As has been demonstrated, anti-abortion advocates not only embrace Baby Sam as a manifestation of their ideology, but many members from within the movement have erroneously described the picture to promote their cause. The Baby Sam photograph embodies and personifies the argument for the pro-life subculture that life begins at conception. Pro-life advocates believe that the photograph proves a fetus is capable of human behavior, making Baby Sam a central component to the abortion culture. Thus, this single photograph is capable of representing a sociological ideology.

<sup>1</sup>*The Economist*, January 27, 2001

<sup>2</sup>*The Wall Street Journal*, October 2, 2000



## PERSUASIVE FUNCTION

With the advent of photography, the 20th century has been introduced to a persuasive form that is capable of representing social ideologies and creating visual ideographs. The power of visual imagery has created numerous challenges, many revolving around the representation of truth. A single photograph can influence the perception of truth by challenging the construction of reality. Newton (2001) explained that, "Photographs add and subtract from the whole, in some ways muddling things further, in other ways clarifying" (p. 87). Newton further noted that "some images are designed to manipulate and mislead" (p. 97). This deception is possible because of the physiological tools that guide our perceptions. Graber (1990) and Schultz (1993) determined that we remember better what we see than what we hear, creating a neurophysiological basis in visual information processing for the "seeing-is-believing" phenomenon. This means that, even if given information to the contrary, viewers remember the information that dominated the content of the images (the perceived truth of the picture), rather than the attached verbally corrected information. Baby Sam becomes highly persuasive as a visual ideograph because the visual representation of a fetus engaging in a very human action is hard to deny even if it is not true.

The advent of photography has challenged normal perceptions regarding visual truth. Ivins (1978) argued that

The nineteenth century began by believing that what was reasonable was true and it wound up believing that what it saw a photograph of was true—from the finish of a horse race to the nebulae in the sky. The apparent transparency of photographic representation of the real world led to the idea that one could indeed establish that some things were true. (p. 195)

When presented with a photograph such as Baby Sam, the acceptance of truth in visual form tends to dominate other information. Even if the information connected to the photograph is inaccurate, the perceived "little white lie" of the interpretation is overpowered by the ethos of the visual form. Pro-life advocates are able to cultivate a powerful Aristotelian argument of ethos, which goes virtually unmatched by the pro-choice culture. Pro-choice advocates have no photographs of similar emotional impact and are left to arguments of logos, which can pale in comparison to emotionally driven visual truth.

Central to this persuasive action is the human need to resolve dissonance when presented with conflicting evidence. Even after being presented with biological and testimonial evidence that the Baby Sam photograph is

not a human being reaching out from the womb, many observers are prone to remain wedded to the visual because they can see the truth in the photograph with their own eyes. Barry (1997) explained that because "we have become accustomed to believing that photographs don't lie, we still have a seeing-is-believing attitude" (p. 22).

Compounding the problem of determining visual truth is the ease with which humans read visual information. Newton (2001) explained this phenomenon by noting that "visual perception theory offers empirical evidence that when the human brain comes to know something through its eyes, it tends to respond to that something as if it physically exists" (p. 156). When confronted with the photograph of Baby Sam, it does appear to be a hand reaching out and holding the surgeon's hand. The initial imagery registered tends to dominate the interpretation of the imagery because "if we see it with our own eyes, it must be true." Arguments challenging the perception of the image often go unheeded. Gregory (1970) explained that "even when we know cognitively that something we see cannot be true, or have been told that it is not true, we still tend to believe what we see" (p. 56).

The persuasive function of the Baby Sam photograph as a visual ideograph is compounded by the vividness of the photograph. As a picture, it captures the observer's attention due, in part, to the argument that pictures are more vivid than words. Pictures have the ability to invoke vividness for a number of reasons. Gass and Seiter (1999) argued, "it is more vivid to show pictures of starving children covered with flies than it is to explain in words how much those children are suffering" (p. 152). A picture is able to evoke emotions and provide thousands of information stimuli instantly, whereas words take more time to convey the same amount of stimuli. The instantaneous response is based on the vividness of the photograph.

Nisbett and Ross (1980) explained that vivid information (such as the Baby Sam photograph) captures and holds the viewer's attention and excites the imagination because it is emotionally interesting and imagery provoking. As the vivid photograph holds the viewer's attention, the viewer invests more time in processing and discerning its intent. Gass and Seiter (1999) argued "when messages are vivid, receivers may think about them more and thereby internalize more of the content" (p. 154).

As a photograph, Baby Sam is extremely vivid and fuels its visual ideograph function. Pro-life advocates could write pages of words attempting to describe why an unborn fetus is a human life capable of engaging in daily human activities like grabbing an object (and they have!). The Baby Sam photograph conveys and presents all of those words, and then some, instantly. Although the content of the photograph is vivid and clear—the hand of a fetus holding the finger of a surgeon—the interpretation of the photograph is left to the emotional discretion of the viewer. Members of the pro-life camp have been captivated by the vividness of Baby Sam and emotionally argue the content is clear.

Additionally, the photograph forces viewers to respond to the emotional impact of the visual information before being able to respond rationally. When a photograph is vivid and striking, such as Baby Sam, emotional responses from viewers can be quick. On first viewing the photograph, once the exact nature of the photograph is registered, the vividness of the blood and body parts are strikingly gruesome. The sight of blood alone can turn many a stomach. Once the hand of the fetus is registered, it is difficult not to register empathy for a helpless unborn child. The emotional response makes it very difficult to register a cavalier response to the picture.

Once the emotional response has been registered, the "seeing-is-believing" mentality makes it difficult for a rational explanation to override the emotions. Newton (2001) explained how our emotions complicate the process of determining visual truth by noting that "we tend to see only what we look for. In other words, we believe what we see because we have chosen to see something in a certain way" (p. 90). If a pro-life advocate views Baby Sam and sees it as a visual representation of a fetus as a human life and is then told by leaders in the pro-life movement that the photograph is a functioning human being, the emotional reaction to the photograph will override any rational information presented by an opposing school of thought.

## CONCLUSION

As an ideograph, Baby Sam has intensified an increasingly polarized topic. Pro-life advocates have not only used the photograph to strengthen their cause, but pro-choice supporters have responded defensively to the Web site. [www.abortiontv.com](http://www.abortiontv.com) is the self-proclaimed number one Internet abortion information source. It described Baby Sam as the "forbidden picture, one that abortion advocates do not want you to see." Now that victims of abortion have a name, Baby Sam, and possess a vivid image, the abortion divide widens.

As a visual ideograph, Baby Sam has given renewed steam to an argument that can lose power from frequent use. The abortion debate often grows tired and redundant. But the photograph, with its powerful vivid imagery, has invigorated pro-life advocates with fresh material. The Armas family periodically posts updates on their Web site about Samuel's health and current status. Implicit in these updates is the idea that Samuel is lucky to be alive—lucky his parents did not abort him.

Baby Sam has come to represent the ideology of the pro-life culture in the same way that other photographs have come to represent various sociological ideologies. In so doing, Baby Sam serves as a visual ideograph and

acts as a very persuasive tool for the pro-life culture. Dr. Bruner appears to summarize Baby Sam the best when he claimed that the photograph has become an urban legend.

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