Visual Sociology: Expanding Sociological Vision

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This article is an overview of the contributions of photography to sociology and a discussion of potential uses of photography in sociological research. Visual sociology, after contributing to several studies in the early decades of American sociology, disappeared to reemerge during the 1960s. In the meantime, the use of visual methods in ethnographic description, the study of social processes in the laboratory, in studies of social change, as a key to interviewing grounded in the perspective of the subject and as a means through which phenomenological sociology may be constructed and communicated. Visual sociology, with increasing organizational success and emerging electronic aids, appears to be on the verge of greater recognition and use within mainstream sociology.

Introduction

This article is a clarification of the state of "visual sociology." Although photography and sociology have existed for about the same period of time, visual sociology—the use of photographs, film, and video to study society and the study of visual artifacts of a society—is underdeveloped and largely peripheral to the discipline as a whole. There have been, however, many sociologists who have used visual data, and their work has added unique knowledge to sociology. I begin by analyzing the relationship between visual sociology and related movements in anthropology and documentary photography, tracing visual sociology to traditions in documentary photography that began over a hundred years ago in Europe. I then suggest several approaches to visual sociology in field resesarch, noting the unique contributions and potentials of visual methods. I conclude by projecting a

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future of visual sociology that will take advantage of new visual and electronic technologies and an increasing willingness of the discipline of sociology to apply visual methods to the study of both conventional and new research problems.

Visual sociology is a collection of approaches in which researchers use photographs to portray, describe, or analyze social phenomena. Visual sociology can be, however, broken down into two major areas. The first area involves using photographs in the conventional sense of data gathering. The "visual-methods" people are usually working on a specific research problem and a middle-range theory. Visual sociologists also study photographs produced by the culture, for example, in advertising, newspapers or magazines, or family photo albums.[1] Using this approach, sociologists typically explore the semiotics, or sign systems, of different visual communication systems. These two areas of visual sociology remain fairly distinct from each other. Put simply, the distinction between these approaches is that some sociologists *take* photographs to study the social world, whereas others *analyze* photographs others have taken in institutionalized occupational settings or in their family lives. The distinctions between these approaches are not hard and fast, and many visual sociologists work in both areas with equal energy. My purpose in this paper is primarily to discuss photographic methods. My overview will be both historical and theoretical.

History

It is often noted that sociology and photography were born during the same decades in Europe, and, as products of the same social events, one would expect cross-fertilization between what was, in fact, a new way of seeing (photography) and a new lens of interpretation (sociology). Sociology came about as the result of industrialization and bourgeois revolutions in Europe; photography, too, was a child of the industrial revolution and had the effect of democratizing a new kind of knowledge. Although in the past only the powerful could appropriate the world visually (through painting and other arts), the photographic image was mass-produced and soon mass-distributed, making knowledge based on visual images available to all.

The great figures of early sociology, however, did not use photographs. From the beginning, sociologists produced abstract images of society rather than literal renderings of particular social processes. It would have been just as reasonable, however, to use photographs to pursue certain research questions as it was to use descriptive surveys or statistics to pursue others. Karl Marx, for example, used Engles's descriptions of the English working class to provide detail and descriptive substance to his analyses of capitalism. Photographs such as were produced by Lewis Hine and Jacob Riis a few decades later would show the conditions of the working class (as well as the capitalist class), the urban squalor of the industrial city, the working conditions of children, and many other subjects that play a predominant role in Marx's analyses. Durkheim's use of suicide statistics to measure social and moral integration was based on a highly abstract inference, yet it

gained legitimacy because as sociology defined itself as a science only certain kinds of data, in this case numerical, were accepted as legitimate. As I contemplate such concepts as social or moral integration, my mind produces *images* of what societies that are more or less integrated look like. The images are simplistic; extended families, on one hand, working in rural settings with a ritual-filled life as opposed to the individualized, isolated, fragmented existence of modern folk living in mass-produced suburban housing, commuting on packed freeways to jobs in bureaucracies and factories and even eating alone, either grazing through their own kitchen or a fast food restaurant. These images resemble the photographs by Robert Frank, made in the 1950s America (1978). Frank shows people crowded together at lunch counters, each looking directly ahead yet nearly touching their neighbor, or symbols of American culture such as patriotic statues isolated in the middle of concrete parking lots—certainly a commentary (if not analysis of) social or moral integration in American culture. Indeed his images have had a profound effect on how Americans have looked at themselves, although most of Frank's, and similar photographers' work, has been lost on sociologists.

Visual sociology, however, gradually emerged from and retains a kinship with the documentary tradition in photography, which, in turn, gradually developed from fine arts and portraiture photography. Early photography in Europe, speaking of the 1840–1860s, consisted primarily of portraiture, consumed by the increasingly dominant bourgeois culture. Artists also saw photography as an aid in painting, a means by which a "preliminary sketch" of landscapes could be made. Early debates (that have continued to the present) concerned whether photography was merely a way of capturing an objective reality or whether, as a medium, it allowed for artistic expression. With the rise of realist schools of art in the nineteenth century, however, photography became an art form in its own right, used by artists to document social settings as well as natural landscapes and individuals. Photographers working in these traditions are now considered important documentarians, precursers to the modern documentary and visual sociology movement. P. H. Emerson's (Newhall 1975) images of rural life in England in the late Victorian era for example, although intended as art, tell us about social life in the same way Pieter Bruegel's paintings told us about the peasant society of the sixteenth century. Emerson was one of the first photographers to photograph in society rather than in the studio. His images are of specific class-bound locations or activities: eel fishermen at work, village cottages, details of working-class life such as fish processing or sail making, and the leisure activities of the bourgeoisie such as sailing matches and snipe hunting. Similarly, Eugene Atget, who photographed Paris in the first two decades of the twentieth century, is now considered one of the most important documentarians of his era; yet his photographs of street scenes in Paris (typically devoid of people) were sold to artists to aid their painting.

Documentary photography, from the beginning, played opposing social roles. Photographs could expose social problems[2] and potentially destabilize a regime,

or they could be used by the state for social control. For example, Parisian Communards took photographs of their briefly successful uprising that were used, after the revolt was broken, to identify participants who were then executed (Freund 1982, p. 108). This ambivalance was particularly evident in the portrayal of war. Matthew Brady believed that his photographs of the American Civil War, for example, would show the terribleness of war in such a way so as to end it forever, whereas Roger Fenton's photographs of the Crimean War reinforced the image of war as a gentleman's noble calling. Both photographers worked with awkward, slow, and cumbersome equipment that made it impossible to photograph war as it was being waged. Brady stressed the aftermath: battlefields strewn with corpses or the wounded in primitive field hospitals—whereas Fenton posed his officers in clean uniforms, cleaning weapons, or playing chess. Similar uses have been made of the portrayal of war in the twentieth century. *Life* magazine, a largely photographic weekly newsmagazine, was begun just before World War II and presented an unabashadely patriotic vision of the war to the American public. In the 1960s the images of war in the popular press had the opposite effect. Photographs of wounded or dead American soldiers, murdered civilians, children aflame from napam or the execution of Viet Cong suspects contributed, it is generally agreed, to the critical view of the war that came to dominate American thinking.

The documentary tradition that emerged in the United States around the turn of the century is closely identified with the photographs of urban squalor and the immigrant experience made by Jacob Riis (see Hales 1984, p. 161-219, and Riis 1981) and photographs of child labor done by Lewis Hine.[3] This era of muckraking journalism and photography loosely coincided with the "Chicago school" of sociological research, and although one would expect that field researchers would find a role for methods that would enlarge and expand the capacity of observation, these technologies were largely ignored. Between 1896 and 1916, however, thirty-one articles in the *American Journal of Sociology* used photographs as evidence and illustration (Stasz 1979), but by 1920 photographs had largely disappeared from sociological publications.

The documentary tradition thus grew aside from the university. This tradition took several forms. For example, during the 1930s, the American government, under the Farm Security Administration, sponsored a decade-long photographic documentation of the American Depression and the effect of the social legislation of the New Deal. Photographers such as Russell Lee, Dorthea Lange, and Walker Evans made photographs that, although considered compassionate and humane, carried the implicit ideology of patriotism and social stability. Families in the most difficult of circumstances reenact such important rituals as Thanksgiving dinner and baptism; American institutions such as schools, churches, and government, although looking a bit worn, are intact. The social and economic contexts remain in the background whereas individuals, down as they may be, are shown in heroic poses; low camera angles often emphasize their strength, and the subjects typically wear expressions of grim determination.[4] The Film and Photo League, a collective of socialist intellectuals, photographed the Depression from a quite

different perspective. Their images were of strikes, state violence, and mass protest marches of the homeless and hungry. Although the FSA photographs have been republished extensively, the work of the Film and Photo League has gone largely unnoticed.[5]

Photography might have played a central role in the community studies tradition that was of great importance during the 1930s and 1940s in American sociology. The Lynds' (1929, 1937) study of an American community, for example, would have been enriched with a systematic photographic documentation of such subjects as work, neighborhood development, or the house interiors of different social classes, to name but a few. But although the contemporary restudy of "Middletown" includes still photographs and five films, community studies in general did not make use of visual documentation.

In anthropology, the picture was a bit brighter. Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson were the first to base a large research project on still photography, and their *Balinese Character* (1942) remains a model for photographic analysis. The study has a lengthy introduction, followed by 100 "plates," which are individual pages containing from five to twelve photographs each. On pages facing the photographs are ethnographic analyses of the photographs. The subject matter ranges from an overview of a typical village (here the camera records spatial relationships more efficiently than would a written description), to subjects such as the "integration and disintegration of the body" (including trance and posture), the social definitions of bodily orifices and their products, and relations between siblings, parents, and children, and childhood development. With somewhere between 800 and 1,000 photographs organized around specific ethnographic themes, which are developed in concise accompanying statements, their book is a monument to photographic analysis. Much respected, it has been little emulated. Noteable exceptions are Collier and Buitron's visual ethnography of Ecuadorian village life (1949), Robert Gardner and Karl Heider's visual ethnography of the Dani of New Guinea (1968), and Frank Cancian's photographic study of Mexican village life (1974), although none of these, or other visual ethnographies, have matched the depth and analytic sophistication of Mead and Bateson's pioneering work.

Sociology, in the meantime, found little place for a visual approach. It is fair to say that from the 1920s to the 1960s there was no visual sociology. One can ponder the reasons for such a complete rejection of an information-gathering technology during a discipline's formative decades. I think that there are several reasons. The field research tradition developed at the University of Chicago did not include photographic methods; this, I believe, cast the original definition of a major methodology in terms that excluded a meaningful visual component. In addition, by the post-World War era, survey methods and other approaches that distanced the researcher from the subject had come to dominate American sociology. The research program of sociology became the examination of statistical patterns among variables rather than the description of social life woven so convincingly into the earlier community studies and fieldwork traditions. With the

growing importance of photojournalism, particularly during the 1930s, sociologists appeared to relegate photography to the lesser status of mass communication. Indeed it is impossible to know how the sociologists of the day viewed the medium; there is simply little, if any mention of it.

Sociology during the 1960s drew to the discipline a large number of people who rejected the dominant paradigms in both research and theory. The society as well as the discipline of sociology was in turmoil over issues of war, race, class, and gender. Conflict theory led to several research programs, some of which included photography. Danny Lyon and other photographers, for example, published a photographic study of the black struggle for equality in *The Movement* (Hansberry 1964). Photographs of black culture are the backdrop for images of southern police violence, demonstrations, and early SNCC activity. Bruce Davidson's portraits of East 100 Street in Harlem (1970) presented black ghetto life in a way that, if anything, erred in the direction of prettying up racial poverty. Photographers working for the Liberation News Service, a countercultural photograhic syndicate, published images of a society characterized by violence, inequality, and racism,[6] and Peter Simon (1972), among many others, photographed demonstrations, hippies, and general countercultural life. It is probably not easy for people who did not live through the 1960s to understand the effect of its extensive photographic documentation. Whether it be images of peace activists pushing flowers into the loaded barrels of National Guardsmen's rifles, or images of hundreds of thousands of citizens massing and marching (many with their Nikons!) in protest of the war, or photographs of rural Communards circle dancing in the nude to celebrate winter solstice, the cumulative effect was to provide both a vision of what was wrong with society and how, it was thought, to change it. Many who were drawn to sociology during this period were, it is fair to say, compelled by photographic images of society.

Not all of the photographers documenting the 1960s were sociologists; in fact relatively few completed degrees and went on to create a visual sociology. A few events, however, were important in building on the early momentum. *Trans-Action* magazine (later named *Society*) began and continues to publish "photo essays," and thus remains nearly alone among social science journals in recognizing the potential of visual sociology. *Studies in the Anthropology of Visual Communication* began publishing in 1974 and continued for ten years to present the analysis of visual communication in a scholarly and visually effective manner. The first issue included a seminal statement on visual sociology by Howard S. Becker (1974). Becker related the emerging visual sociology to the ongoing projects of documentarians, reaching back for roots through the work of Robert Frank, the FSA, and the early reformers like Hine and Riis. Becker also analyzed several methodological questions such as sampling, reliability, validity, and the role of theory in visual research. Although the journal ceased publication in 1984, a recent journal, *Visual Anthropology*, has picked up where the earlier journal left off. Several university presses have published visual monographs and books, by both sociologists and documentarians, and Temple University Press has,

in the past year, announced the series, *Visual Studies*, to concentrate on the publication of photographic studies. Collections of article-length studies in visual sociology were complied by Wagner (1979) and Becker (1981). Two things can be said of this publishing activity. First, the subject matter, born out of the social problems' orientation of the 1960s, has grown to include nearly all areas of sociology. Second, although visual sociologists have been successfully publishing their work and even establishing a stable organizational base,[7] by and large their contributions to sociology are only now being recognized.

Theory

It may be that visual sociology is discredited in the minds of many precisely because everyone can (and does) take photographs. Sociological methods, people tend to believe, must be mysterious and difficult. Photographs, especially with today's automated cameras, come into existence almost without effort. It is unacceptable for many that anything so simple can be useful as a sociological tool. The ease with which a person makes photographs, however, has little relevance to whether or not photographs may be useful in research. Visual sociologists know from their own experience that it is no less difficult to take theoretically meaningful photographs than it is to make useful observations or to identify relevant variables. The camera is merely a means through which an informed vision can be made concrete. Unfortunately (depending on your point of view), we do not train our students to use this technology, aside from a small number of courses and workshops.[8] As a result, sociologists do not know how to use still cameras, movie, or video cameras *as a sociologist*, and they are not trained to distinguish sociologically useful images from those that are less useful.[9] Sociologists are, thus, largely untrained in evaluating photographic research, whether it be in a professional publication or a photographic archive. For these reasons, it is difficult but not impossible to establish one's academic reputation as a visual sociologist. Aside from the tribe of visual sociologists, one's peers are less familiar with and less able to critically judge sociological research that depends on visual material than they are able to evaluate more conventional research.

Photographic methods fall in the same broad categories that exist for conventional sociological methods, but, I shall argue, they contribute to each a unique element. I shall now describe a typology of methods I have previously introduced (Harper 1987c) that sorts earlier work and suggests possibilities for future research. I have labeled the categories, or modes, of the typology as the "scientific," "narrative," "reflexive," and the "phenomenological." This typology arises from common sense categorization of sociological methods and approaches to the study of nonfiction film. Although this typology can take on the appearance of scientific precision, it is important to realize that the categories overlap and blend into each other. Several examples of visual research could be profitably discussed within more than one of the elements of the typology.

The logic of the typology is found in the idea that sociologists apprehend

information from the world in several ways. Sociologists categorize parts of the world, thus creating data (the scientific mode); sociologists use their own subjective experience as a source of data (the phenomenological mode); sociologists structure their data into accounts (the narrative mode); and sociologists build data from the point of view of their subjects (the reflexive mode). The differences between these approaches are partly in the relationship between the researcher and the data. In the scientific mode, the sociologist looks outside his or her experience for data; as a phenomenologist, the sociologist looks within for knowledge. The narrator structures data to analyze social life as social process, and the reflexive sociologist seeks data in the expression of the subject.

I shall, in the following discussion, refer to still photography, film, and video similarly. This is making a leap that not all will accept, for still photographs may present images isolated from other images and words; film necessarily involves connected images, evolving one to the next as a viewer experiences the time structure assembled by the filmmaker. Still I believe it is useful to see the theoretical commonality of different forms of visual communication; still or moving images may be scientific, narrative, phenomenological, or reflexive depending on how they are constructed, presented and viewed.

The Scientific Mode

Photographs can be used in empirical research in several ways. Many sociological categories are based on observable phenomena, and indeed, many of these can be understood better if frozen in a photographic image than they can if written about in a field memo. Suppose, for example, that I am studying culturally defined categories of railroad tramps. I know from previous research that tramps categorize themselves, among other things, as rubber tramps, bindlestiffs, airdales, homeguards, and riffraff, but the distinctions between these groups may be subtle to an outsider. Because these categories are signaled not only by what the various groups do but also by how they look and what possessions they carry, preserving one's observation through photographs may produce a record of information that would be too fleeting or complicated to remember or to describe in writing. The point can be applied to many settings sociologists and anthropologists study. Photographs can be read to understand nuances of interaction, presentations of self, and relations among people to their material environments. Mead and Bateson's previously cited study of Balinese character (1942) puts photos to use in this way. Categories of cultural definition such as trance, or "awayness," in addition to studies of dwellings or cultural use of space, are photographed and explained in accompanying text. Collier and Collier (1987) show how photographs can be used to do basic cataloguing of cultural artifacts or architectual spaces such as house interiors. I have used aerial photographs to show housing patterns, farming practices, and field conditions in an agricultural neighborhood (Harper 1987b), and Whyte (1980) used photographs to study the social interaction in an urban public area. Not all sociological data

can be photographed, of course, but in studies of social or environmental ecology and social interaction, the camera can gather information that cannot be gathered with the human eye or other recording devices.

Because the photographic image isolates a moment in time, one can measure change by rephotographing the same or similar social phenomena. This requires an archive or collection of photographs from an earlier era. One can take a precise and exacting view toward this methodology, as did Mark Klett (and his team) did in the rephotography of Timothy O'Sullivan's nineteenth-century western landscapes (1984). Klett used a similar camera and waited for similar light conditions to produce as exactly as possible a duplication of an earlier image. The photographs show the effects of human habitation in buildings, roadside signs, roads, erosion, and different vegetation patterns. Garry Rogers (1982) took the same exacting method to a rephotographic survey of the Great Basin Desert of Utah to show the effects of 100 years of overgrazing, forest fires, and other natural and man-made uses of the land. Jon Rieger (1987), in an ongoing project, has documented the social changes in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan by photographing exactly the same settings at ten- to fifteen-year intervals. The pace of change, Rieger's images tell us, has been rapid. Towns prosperous in opening images are now deserted; industries have closed, and churches have been converted to residential and other uses. Rieger's photographs, even aside from text, show the devolution of community in rural areas in which industries shut down or leave. Bill Ganzel (1984) duplicated several photographs from the Farm Security Administration's Depression project. In some instances, Ganzel returned to the site of an earlier image to record changes in farms, architecture, or other uses of the land, and, in other images, Ganzel rephotographed earlier subjects in their contemporary settings. Dorthea Lange's "migrant mother," in the 1930s desperate, dirty, and uprooted, sheltering her children with an embrace, is in the modern image a plump, normal-looking elderly woman in a suburban setting surrounded by attractive, prosperous-appearing grown children. But not all images speak of such comforting social mobility. Several of Ganzel's subjects are rooted in the same poverty in which they were photographed fifty years ago. Finally, two rephotographic projects (Anderson, Buechel and Doll 1976; Farr 1984) show the evolution of native American culture from the first reservation experiences, through decades of enforced enculturation, to the reemergence of Indian cultural self-assertion.

The potential of this method is great. Archives and collections are common and provide a data base from which contemporary photographers and sociologists can rephotograph. Although it is possible to describe many of the elements of a photograph, it is not feasible to describe all the elements of a complex image, and it is not easy to describe the spacial relationships among the different elements, or the gestalt of the image. In the case of studying social change of the material environment or the social lives of a group in different historical periods and circumstances, the rephotographic survey does what no other social method can.

Ethnographic film typically falls within this scientific mode. It is the intent of

most ethnographic filmmakers to visually record the same things that are described and analyzed in conventional monographs. The process of information transfer, however, is different. In an ethnographic film, the eye registers information that is explained in narration. The visual component establishes a reality that is both independent of the narration and yet dependent upon it. In *Dani Sweet Potatoes* (Heiden 1974), for example, we see natives cooperatively building drainage ditches as the narrator tells the viewer about the division of labor in the village. Seeing twenty or so men in waist-deep water, pushing mud up the banks of ditches, communicates the visceral as well as the physical nature of the activity in ways that only rare written ethnographies do. The emotional character of the experience is, indeed, the most difficult to communicate in scientific texts. Although it is important not to assume that one *understands* only by watching, it is fair to say that the viewer of an ethnographic film has a different kind of information from which to build knowledge of social phenomena than does a reader of texts.

The Narrative Mode

The visual narrative, most simply, suggests a role for still photography similar to that of narrative ethnographic films or ethnographies that are built around social life as it naturally unfolds. Transferred into theoretical terms, the narrative shows social life as a *process* made up of social interaction. Well-known ethnographic narratives include Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* (1922) and Robert Gardner's *Dead Birds* (1963). These are similar to feature films in that they include identifiable characters who are faced with solving a problem and a sense of time that moves characters through action. For the narrative to be ethographic, of course, the events must proceed as they would naturally in a culture. The logic with which one would construct and arrange events would presumably derive from the ethnographic knowledge accumulated in the larger research project.

There are several projects by documentarians that fall within the general category of visual ethnographic narratives. I would mention, for example, Eugene and Ailene Smith's photographic portrayal of a social movement in rural Japan (1975) and Richards and Lynch's visual and narrated chronicle of Lynch's death from cancer (1986). These studies are visual narratives rather than written texts with accompanying photographs. The Smiths show the interaction between poor and seemingly powerless peasant fisherfolk and a powerful corporation. The interactions include demonstrations and a trial in which the peasants present their children, deformed from exposure to the mercury dumped into their fishing grounds by the corporation, to the corporations. We read the faces of the participants and see in their postures the nature of their interaction. In one blurry sequence, Eugene Smith is attacked by corporate goons, who temporarily blinded and crippled the elderly photographer. A final frame shows a club descending into Smith's body. Although even my brief description shows that images may be made into

words, the photographic form communicates more specific detail as well as a more complete overall statement.

Researchers have constructed visual narratives in several studies. Robert Gardner and his associates, in their photographic study of the Dani of New Guinea (1968), use photographic sequences to show cultural events such as the enactment of ritual war and a funeral. Berger and Mohr experiment with images and a fictional historical ethnography (1982). I have organized photographs of railroad tramps to show how tramps get drunk on skid row, dry out on a cross-country freight ride, and take up work once again, a typical "cultural story" (Harper 1982, 1987c). Sociologists could construct visual narratives in conventional ways, or they might study frames from movie or video cameras that continuously film public behavior to study such things as the presentation of self during bank robberies or crowd interaction in shopping malls.

Carl Couch's pioneering work (1987) with video to study small-group processes in laboratories is another form of narrative visual research. I include Couch's research in the discussion of narrative because it is precisely the processual character of social life that he studies. The video camera in the small-group laboratory, Couch tells us, has several advantages over conventional observation. The video recordings allow for more accurate and precise observations; the video camera produces data that are more reliably retrievable than are memory and field notes; replay and slow motion features make possible more thorough and systematic analysis; a video recording makes possible the analysis of the sequential order, the "social geometry," and the precise quantification of elements of social interaction. Video recordings, as well, often lead researchers to overlooked phenomena such as subject nonresponsiveness, and multiple camera recording and split screens make it possible to systematically analyze, for the first time, encounters among triads. Drawbacks in the video system include the problem of perspective. Although the human eye sees a large field (with deep focus), the video camera must be positioned to select a portion of human field to examine. Couch suggests that the camera be positioned to roughly equate human perspective, foregoing telephoto shots of facial expressions or odd camera angles that produce so much data that they overwhelm the researcher. The promise of Couch and his associates' research lies primarily with the study of small groups in a laboratory. Sociologists interested in ethnomethodology and other forms of naturalistic inquiry of social interaction could use photographic or film recording to add the kind of rigor to their observations that Couch has done in the laboratory.

The Reflexive Mode

The reflexive visual sociology method posits a different relationship between the sociologist, the image, and the subject. In the scientific and the narrative mode, the authority of definition rests with the sociologist. In creating categories such as "social class," the "division of labor," or any of the concepts of social science, we give to the sociologist the implicit power to define social reality. In

the reflexive photographic method, the subject shares in the definition of meaning; thus the definitions are said to "reflect back" from the subject. Although this is difficult to do in conventional research, it is more easily done through photographic methods. The researcher may begin the same way, that is, photographing a subject or an environment, but then turns to the subject for the definition of meaning in the images. In this process, which has been called "photo elicitation," the roles of researcher and subject are altered. The interviewer, more like a student of the subject, is less likely to ask questions that may not make sense to a subject. As the informant studies images of his or her world and then talks about what elements mean, the interview produces information that is more deeply grounded in the phenomenology of the subject. A photograph, a literal rendering of an element of the subject's world, calls forth associations, definitions, or ideas that would otherwise go unnoticed. The subject may tell the researcher how to photograph a topic more completely or even how to approach a topic from a completely different perspective.

There are several forms of photo elicitation. A collection of photos showing typical scenes from subjects' lives can be used to stimulate discussion among several individuals of similar social status or position. Ximena Bunster B. (1978), for example, used this technique to study the attitudes of proletarian mothers in Lima, Peru, toward specific issues such as gender roles and family life, and Curry (1986b) elicited from college athletes cultural definitions of sports violence. Photographs for elicitation interviews may be done over a long period of time with a single subject, to look more and more deeply into his or her life as I did in a study of an auto mechanic's work (Harper 1987a). Using this technique, I was able to describe the subtleties of a particular type of mechanical skill as my subject explained how he did (and how he had learned to do) jobs I had photographed. Photographs of particular machines led my informant to discuss the nature of a barter system in a rural neighborhood (and how reputations among people are created and changed) and how types of machines evolve through distinct stages in the evolution of an agricultural community, and thus change the nature of farming and community life. Although our discussion focused on cultural definitions of social processes, my subject also explained his values and the norms of the community. From other interviewing experiences, I know that, without the photographs, it would have been difficult, if not impossible, to sustain interviews over a long period of time and to accomplish the kind of depth we were able to achieve. With the photographs, the interviews moved almost effortlessly, opening up subjects, in many cases, I would have never anticipated.

A further variation is for people to photograph their environments (and comment on the photographs) to see social definitions even more from the point of view of the subject. In *Portraits and Dreams* (1985), for example, Wendy Ewald taught grade-school children in Appalachia how to take photographs. Through their images, we see the social world of the Appalachian poor from their point of view. Seeing common stereotypes from the inside humanizes what are otherwise one-dimensional social types. Ewald (who is not a sociologist) has produced data

that could be integrated into research projects on such things as social definitions of the self.

The photo-elicitation interview is one of the most promising areas of visual sociology for it confronts a seminal issue in sociology of getting at the point of view of the subject—Weber's concept of *verstehen*—in a novel and effective way. The photo-elicitation interview could be used in nearly all research settings in which the goal is the discovery of cultural definitions and categorizations.

The Phenomenological Mode

In the 1930s, the fine arts photographer Alfred Stieglitz suggested that photographs can express spiritual, or psychological, equivalents. Minor White, one of the most influential fine-arts photographers of the twentieth century, developed this idea in his own work and exhibitions he curated and books he edited. It was Roland Barthes (1981) who applied this idea to social inquiry as he "made himself the measure of photographic knowledge." Barthes asks the question of why and how some photographs move him emotionally, others communicate to him in a rational manner, and some do both and others do neither. He suggests two terms, the ***studium*** and the ***punctum***, to distinguish these properties. The quality of photographs (or elements in photographs) to raise a rational or sociological interest, he calls the studium; the quality of photographs that prick his consciousness in the manner of an object of art, he calls the punctum. Barthes, in making this distinction, shows that the photograph is more than a record-making device, and this opens, for visual sociologists, the question of how our data may play two roles. Photographs may literally describe but leave us unmoved; other images may inspire our emotions but not be useful (or even lie) sociologically. Some photographs may, however, do the opposite; that is, communicate sociological insights in an artistically stimulating manner.

Phenomenally minded sociologists and artists, following Barthes, have used photographs to explore the nature of their own perception and knowledge. George Psathas, for example (1985), combined slides projected simultaneously from several projectors, a musical soundtrack, and images of repeated words to communicate his subjective interpretation of a public square in Boston. Ronald Silvers (forthcoming) combines photographs, nonlinear written reflections, and meditations on his experience and that of the monks to whom he has journeyed. In both of these instances, we assume that the individual experience teaches us about the general class of events the sociologist observes. It is through the unabashedly subjective potential of photographs that the communication is made.

This phenomenological approach is, in a sense, the elicitation of one's own knowledge through the analysis of photographs that have personal meaning. Larry Sultan (1986) searches through old home movies to construct not only his own childhood memories but also to partially understand what his father, who made the movies, experienced. Nancy Rexroth (1974) finds in the two-dollar Diana camera a soft-focus lens that produces images of past that she believes are the

equivalents of childhood dreams. These are perhaps the most experimental areas of visual sociology and the places where sociology most closely approaches art. Indeed, the personal interpretations of experience and meaning may be the beginning rather than the end of sociological analysis.

The Future of Visual Sociology

There are several trends that suggest that visual sociology is on the verge of greater acceptance. Editors of several journals, such as *Symbolic Interaction, Qualitative Sociology*, and *Contemporary Ethnography*, have expressed interest in publishing studies that rely on visual methods. *Sociological Abstracts* has, in the past few years, catalogued articles on visual sociology and, although their cataloguing strategy tends to limit their entries to articles that study visual information in the culture (rather than studies that use photographs as a research method), it is, at least, indication that organized sociology has begun to recognize the subdiscipline.

Computers, which many consider an antagonistic technology to the camera, may make it easier to use visual data in sociological research. Microcomputers can now digitalize images (transforming them into a half tones), and they can be stored in conventional electronic files and easily integrated into text, graph, or other files. With laser printers, the digitalized images can be included in papers without the expensive, cumbersome, and inefficient half-tone process. These technologies, which are quite recent, are already breaking down the borders between visual and other forms of data, and, as they develop and become more readily available, their impact will increase.

This is not to suggest that the mere availability of technology will bring visual sociology into the mainstream, for, indeed, visual technology has existed (as mentioned earlier) since the beginning of sociology and has had only sporadic use by researchers. The processes that bring a research method into use are social: groups with a common interest gradually form, communication (both informally and through publication) takes place within and then outside of the group, recruits are drawn to what becomes an academic social movement and eventually the new approach (after gaining certain kinds of legitimacy, which in the case of visual sociology will probably mean being published in the top journals in the discipline) may become part of the mainstream. Many social movements fail, of course, but in the case of visual sociology I think the indicators are positive.

While modern visual sociology began as part of the rejection of dominant paradigms during the 1960s, new experiments are evolving in nearly all areas of sociology. On one hand, sociologists are studying the sign systems and ideological content of photographic systems ranging from family albums to newspaper journalism. These areas of inquiry integrate into other movements within the sociology of culture and the sociology of the arts, themselves increasing in their importance within the discipline. On the other hand, there is growing recognition of the potential of visual methodology for studies of interaction in the lab as

well as in natural settings. The rephotographic survey, now used primarily by cultural historians, is being integrated into studies of community change. The capacity of the photographic image to pack information into an economic and reliable form makes possible a more efficient cataloguing of information for ethnographic studies. Photo elicitation confronts a perennial problem of grounding interviews in the definitions of the subject better than any existing method, and the capacity of photographs to communicate in the manner of art opens up possibilities for phenomenological sociology that had not existed before. Sociology, it is clear, needs visual tools.

Notes

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1. See Goffman (1976) for an important early statement on the presentation of gender roles in advertising. Papson's (1985) analysis of the fantasy of the stranger extends Goffman's analysis to specific media messages. Goldman and Lester (1985) deconstruct newsphotos to show their implicit ideological messages, and Mukerji (1986) considers how the photographs of Allan Sekula debunk institutions such as the military.

   The "home mode"—that is, photography done as part of family life—has been extensively studied. Chaflen's recent monograph (1987) includes a comprehensive overview.
2. See, for example Trachtenberg's (1975) analysis of Dr. Barnardo's photographs of orphans in late nineteenth-century industrial England.
3. Hine's photographs appear in several collections. Trachtenberg's (1977) monograph includes photographs from Hine's child labor studies done in the early twentieth century, as well as later photographic projects on men and women's work dating to 1940. Hine's photographs of child labor are published in two recent collections (Hine 1980, 1986).
4. These comments apply more the the work of some FSA photographers than they do to others. Dixon's (1983) bibliography is a good guide to the numerous publications of and on the FSA photographers and photographs, and a good place to begin a systematic analysis.
5. Although the still photographs have not been published, at least to my knowledge, the films of the Film and Photo League (newsreels and short documentaries) have been rereleased by the Museum of Modern Art.
6. These images were distributed in an alternative photo syndicate network described by Raymond Mungo (1970). The Vietnam Veterans against the War (Kerry 1971) published their photographs of returned vets' famous Washington protest.
7. The principal organizational base of visual sociology has been the International Visual Sociology Association, established at the 1981 American Sociological Association meetings (Curry 1986a). Prior to that, visual sociologists had irregular sessions at the ASA national and regional meetings for five to eight years. In the early 1980s the visual sociology group fell short by a few members of the required 200 dues-paying members and thus did not incorporate as a section of the ASA. In the meantime, the IVSA has had yearly meetings in the United States, Canada, and Europe, where strong ties have been established to other visual sociologists. Several small publications have resulted from the efforts of the visual sociology group, including two early newsletters, the *International Journal of Visual Sociology*, which is published in Europe and has now become a monograph series, and most recently, the *Visual Sociology Review*, a semiannual publication of short articles, reviews, photographic studies, teaching strategies, and announcements. Even without official section status in the ASA, in addition, there have been paper sessions and roundtable discussions of visual sociology at most national and several regional meetings. This activity has centered, although not exclusively, around the methods approach to visual sociology.

   Those who view visual sociology as the analysis of photographic signs and sign systems work in partially different organizational settings. A new section in the ASA on the Sociology of Culture and an independent scholarly group in Social Theory and the Arts, for example, provide organizational settings for this research activity. The lines between these subdisciplines, is not hard and fast; most of these groups work to break down the borders between their areas and participate in meetings and publications sponsored by each others' organizations.
8. Visual sociology is taught on the undergraduate level on an increasing number of campuses. For several years, Howard Becker has taught a workshop on photography as a research method at the Visual Studies Workshop in Rochester, New York, and the American Sociological Association is sponsoring, for the first time, a workshop on teaching visual sociology during the summer of 1988. Although dissertations in sociology rarely use visual data, there have been several that did over the past fifteen years.
9. This is made more complicated, I believe, by the fact that most sociologists encounter photographs primarily in their introductory textbooks. These books, with rare exception (see Kornblum, 1987, and Stark, 1987, for

examples of introductory books that use photographs in a more self-conscious and sociologically sophisticated manner) use photographs only to dress up text. The photos are chosen by picture editors and typically have an uninformed and sometimes incorrect relationship to textual material. In one text, for example, a photograph of a moose standing in the middle of a bog supposedly illustrated social functionalism! At best, the photographs are simplistic repetitions of written material. I personally think that the careless use of photographs in introductory texts has done more to discredit visual sociology than has any other single factor.

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