“I’m Gonna Show You What It’s Really Like Out Here”: The Power and Limitation of Participatory Visual Methods[1]

Josh Packard, Vanderbilt University

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[1] Josh Packard: Sociology Department, Vanderbilt University, VU Station B351811, Nashville, TN 37203, Email: Joshua.R.Packard@Vanderbilt.edu, phone: 615.322.7626, fax: 615.322.7505

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Abstract

Participatory visual research methods have been developed as part of an explicit attempt to decrease the power differential between the researcher and the researched. Methods designed to bring these relationships more in line with one another, ceding power to research participants, have served not only to create a more ethical research situation, but also to generate new forms of knowledge which cannot be developed any other way. While the development of such methods has received significant attention in recent years, there has still not been an exploration of the limitations of these practices. In this article I draw upon my research experiences with homeless men in order to examine the relationship between power and knowledge creation within participatory visual methodologies. The results presented here help to demarcate the boundaries of effectiveness for these methods and show where future work is needed.

“I’m Gonna Show You What It’s Really Like Out Here”: The Power and Limitation of Participatory Visual Methods

1. Introduction

Sociologists have long been concerned with issues of power in the research process (Clifford and Marcus 1986; DeVault 1996; Stanley and Wise 1983; Veroff and Distano 2002). Visual sociologists in particular have been at the forefront of a movement intent on designing new data gathering techniques meant to aid in erasing the traditional power imbalance between researcher and participant (Chaplin 1994; Hurworth 2003; Parker 2005; Pink 2001; Prosser 1998). In the last 30 years several methodological breakthroughs have successfully resulted in shifting the ethical agenda from one defined solely by the researcher to a more collaborative model (Pink 2001:44). Beyond the obvious ethical reasons for engaging in such practice there are “practical” implications as well. Chaplin (1994) notes that using visual methods is not simply a way to record or display data, but rather is a way to generate new knowledge, to tap into existing resources which would otherwise lie dormant, unexplored, and unutilized. However, this potential only exists to the extent that visual methodologies are able to shift or transfer power in the research process. As a field, visual sociology is inextricably linked with conversations about power and offers an ideal setting within which to explore power dynamics because, as Holliday points out,“[i]ssues of representation are important to anyone interested in the notion of power in the research process” (Holliday 2000:504).

Researchers have long extolled the virtues of participatory visual methodologies in everything from management and accounting research (Parker 2005; Warren 2005) to studies on national identity (Ziller 1990). For example, in a

technique known as photo-interviewing, Warren combined her photographs with participant interviews and came away "convinced that [photo-interviewing] reduces the authority of the researcher at least to some degree and raises the voices of the research participants through the process of conducting photo-based research" (Warren 2005:8). While few would argue with Warren's assertion, it begs the question, To *what* degree do such methods help us to form a more equitable partnership with research participants? While it is important to empirically establish the effectiveness of such methods, it is equally important to examine the limitations of these methods so that future researchers will not expect more than can realistically be expected. Furthermore, examining the limitations reveals the work which must still be done. In this paper, I draw upon my experiences employing a participatory visual research design with homeless participants in downtown Southern City in order to explore the boundaries of visual methods as potential "power-leveling" methodologies. Although my findings generally support the notion that participatory techniques are effective, I also find these methods to be far from perfect with much work, both theoretical and empirical, still to be done. In the conclusion, I will suggest some strategies for refining these techniques even further.

2. History of Visual Methods in Social Sciences

Photos were used early in the history of sociology in order to make a social issue or problem more compelling, thus building the case for some sort of public reaction or response. Stasz (1979) points out that in the first issues of AJS, photographs appeared regularly with varying quality as both illustration and evidence. However, as sociology took a positivist turn and moved toward being more of a "science" characterized by impartiality of researchers and generating knowledge for

knowledge's sake, the photograph was generally done away with. As Stasz point out, "visual data are much less amenable than other forms of data to positivistic schema" (Stasz 1979:136). That photographs themselves have disappeared from the pages of sociology journals is not to imply that they have left our landscape entirely. Images have always been a suitable subject for content analyses of art or advertisement, but they are not typically accepted as empirical evidence in their own right.

This trend toward empiricism in sociology has recently come under fire with the rise of feminist sociology, queer theory, and a renewed emphasis on public sociology. Scholars working in this tradition have highlighted the inherently subjective nature of all research, both quantitative and qualitative. Chaplin puts it succinctly when she remarks that "any account whether it involves photographs or not is *constructed*" (Chaplin 1994:206 emphasis in original). Rather than using these arguments to push for the creation of an even more "objective" set of methodologies, researchers have argued just the opposite, that since there is nothing we can do to completely eliminate subjectivity, we should focus instead on what reflexive approaches have to offer while making sure to identify and account for our biases wherever they arise in our research. These arguments created room for methods which had been written off as too subjective to produce generalizable or useful knowledge.

The past 30 years have thus been characterized by a general resurgence in methods aimed at local, small scale projects. Specifically, visual sociologists have made great inroads by developing new collaborative or participatory approaches.

This focus on designing equitable research methods allowed access to previously unattainable information, perspectives and knowledge. Explicit attempts to bridge the power divide between researcher and participant have never been solely the domain of visual sociologists, but some of the more innovative endeavors in this area have been developed by researchers using the visual.

The most dedicated efforts to bring participants into the research process as co-collaborators have been by those who turn over the cameras to the participants themselves. Although "native image-making" techniques had already been around for a number of years by the time Wagner (1979) gave the method a name, they struggled to gain widespread acceptance. In recent years multiple methods have arisen which draw upon native-image making techniques. They go variously by the name of "autodriving," (Heisley and Levy 1991) "reflexive photography," (Ziller 1990)," and perhaps most commonly "photo-novella" or "photo-voice" (Wang 1999; Wang and Burris 1994). While there are some differences between the methods both in intent and focus the goal remains the same, to provide a "tool of empowerment enabling those with little money, power or status to communicate" (Hurworth 2003:3). Warren (2005) points out that this is for practical as well as theoretical reasons as the cost of conducting such research has fallen dramatically in the past decade. Warren's point can be extended, however. As is often the case, the divide between the theoretical and the practical is not so wide. As I will discuss in more detail below, the falling cost and greater availability of cameras and film processing not only makes native image-making techniques more financially feasible, but it also works to further the goals of methods designed to share power. The ubiquity of low

cost cameras is important because it increases the probability that participants will be familiar with the technology. It is problematic for a researcher to have to play the role of "teacher" in the field (Munro et al. 2004). In order to equalize power relationships in a project, technical competencies must be similar. An unequal power dynamic is immediately and irrevocably established the moment the researcher must instruct a participant on how to operate a piece of equipment. The ubiquity of inexpensive cameras in modern society makes it possible to eliminate one more potential area for the coalescence of power in the hands of the researcher.

As Hurworth (2003) and Warren (2005) point out, these methods are almost always followed up with a photo-interviewing technique of some sort where the participants and the researcher examine the photographs together as both a way of explaining the images and as a way of generating information which would not have been captured without the photos as a prompt. These interviewing techniques, which fall broadly under the realm of "photo-elicitation" were developed by John Collier (1967) and made popular by Collier and Collier's (1986) influential text and Douglas Harper's (1986) essay *Meaning and Work: A Study in Photo-Elicitation.* Harper used photographs he had taken as a prompt to get his participant to discuss the details of what otherwise might have gone unspoken as mundane or irrelevant. Harper's decision to employ the photographs was a practical one as it allowed him to better understand a world composed of technical skill and work which was foreign to him. Used in this way, the photos stand in conjunction with traditional interviewing techniques as a way to uncover as much information as possible by opening up

avenues and uncovering local knowledge which might have been previously unknown to the researcher.

The important thing to note about both native image making and photo-elicitation is that neither of them *inherently* reduce the power imbalance between researcher and participant. Either method could be utilized in a "traditional" way with no concern about power dynamics whatsoever. However, in practice these techniques have been mobilized with concerns about power explicitly in mind, and it is true that while these methods do not necessarily produce equitable power relationships or transfer power to powerless, they do possess the potential for this to happen to a much greater extent than most traditional methodologies arising out of a positivist framework (Collier and Collier 1986; Parker 2005).

3. Research Design

I recently spent 10 weeks working with some members of the homeless community in Southern City. One of my goals when beginning this project was to develop as equitable a relationship as possible between the researcher and the participants. As such I proposed a project to my internal review board that would be exploratory in nature so as not to be confined by preconceived ideas upon entering the field. Of course, it is impossible to enter any research project as 'tabula rasa," but I could at least avoid beginning with an overly rigid structure. The idea was to enter into relationship with homeless individuals who had been identified through previous studies, snowball sampling and word of mouth in several parts of the city in order to bring them into the research project. I then provided a disposable camera to each person and offered to explain how to use it if they wanted. The only other instructions I provided were to "take pictures of things, people and places that are

important to you in your daily life." In exchange for meeting me with the exposed camera (usually 24 hours later) I promised them $5.00 and a set of their prints.

In the 10 weeks I was in the field I handed out 24 cameras and was able to get 13 back with a total of over 250 usable images. Of the 13 participants who returned the cameras, I was able to do follow-up interviews with 8 of them. The interviews ranged in duration from 6 minutes to 35 minutes. This number of interviews is somewhat misleading, however, as participants were frequent no-shows for follow-up interviews, and I often had to track them down in order to talk with them. I do not mean for this to suggest that they were at all reluctant to participate in the interviews or unappreciative of the set of prints that I had for them. Rather, the nature of living on the streets in this city means that several conventions which are institutionalized for people of my class and socioeconomic standing (e.g., attention to time, keeping appointments, planning for the future) are inherently more difficult for my participants to follow (Snow and Anderson 1993). The itinerant nature of employment, lack of public facilities for shelter, and general difficulties of living on the streets make keeping such commitments much more complicated.

But why photography? Is it necessary or even beneficial to employ visual methods here? Could the same information not be obtained by simply walking around with the participant while observing and talking with them? I argue that there is no better way to bridge the gap between researcher and participant in this case due to the inherent power imbalance between the housed researcher and the homeless research participant. Stasz writes about Baetson and Mead that "their historic monograph, Balinease Character, has never been matched for its subtle blend

of photographs within a tightly organized conceptual framework" (Chaplin 1994:210). While my research does not match in scope or importance that of Baetson and Mead, I would suggest that the inextricable link between their research question and method are what we should all be striving for in our research design. This is what I have attempted to do with this project.

Pink remarks that "methodologies are developed for/with particular projects, they are interwoven with theory and as most good researchers know, it is not unusual to make up the methods as you go along" (Pink 2001:3). Although I would not advocate going into the field without any methodological principles as a guide, I do agree with the spirit of Pink's statement. Sociologists often fail to put the research question first-to give it top priority. Our first priority as researchers should be in trying to figure out the best way to answer a particular question. However, our journals and scholarly publications are dominated by relatively few methodological techniques. Pink suggests that the method utilized should be guided by the question asked, and both should be linked to existing theory. Emmison and Smith note that this particular issue has not been especially well resolved by visual sociologists who have often had difficulty connecting theory, method and application (Emmison and Smith 2000).

I was explicitly concerned with generating new knowledge about the way homeless people construct their identity when I entered the field, and native image-making is particularly well suited to provide this information. As Parker points out, "[photographs] present multiple ways of knowing-through perception, signs and symbols…Thus, it does not offer some single lens authority, but affords multiple

perspectives and interpretations" (Parker 2005:4). It was my hope that my perspective would be just one of the interpretations generated by this research process. However, hope and intent are often not enough to sustain such a difficult balance.

Emmison and Smith have made the point that photo-elicitation has its limitations if researchers are still going to be the ones driving the interview by selecting the photographs from a personal collection or from among those taken by the participants. I have tried to mediate this in my research design by going through all of a participant's photographs in an interview and asking the participant to explain why he took each picture, when it was taken and what he thinks it reveals. Keeping a relatively open and standard set of questions allowed information to come out that I would have otherwise missed. For example, one of the images produced toward the end of my time in the field by Mitchell seemed to be of a store front (Figure 1). The picture held little interest for me initially. However, following the research design I asked questions about it and discovered that the subject of the picture is a U.S. flag, which the participant took a picture of as a testament to his patriotism. This opened up an entire conversation about patriotism and living on the streets.

Figure 1

This underscores the political nature of what it means to “see” something especially as it is revealed in a photograph. Photographing is an act which renders some things visible, and therefore important, and other things invisible and less important. Furthermore, the act of seeing is inherently subjective. Combining native image-making techniques and photo-elicitation with an expressed intent to give power to the powerless also suggests an analytical strategy where photographs are used *as data*, not as illustrations or even as *only* a site for analysis. Rather in this project the act of photographing and the photograph are each a significant source of data in their own right. The strength of this method is not simply combinatory. While I am able to examine both the content of the photographs and the motivations behind making a particular image, the result is a sum greater than its constituent parts. Drawing out the potential for power transference in both of these techniques produces information which could not be gained any other way. However, as I will

show below these methods are not cure-alls for power-imbalances. There are distinct and generalizable limitations to such a method that I will describe in this article.

Finally, I want to point out that throughout the process of engaging in this research I was explicit about following in Stummer's (1985) footsteps by gathering information and generating knowledge which could improve the living conditions of the research participants. I found, as she did, that once my intentions were made known, people were very agreeable to participating in the project and/or allowing me access. I was not greeted with the skepticism I suspected I would be. Only one person turned me down, and every participant took "legitimate" photographs. It would have been entirely possible for them to wait until I left, snap 25 pictures of the sidewalk or sky and meet me the next day for their five dollars. However, this never happened. Judging by the content of the photographs, the interviews, and my fieldnotes, I can say that every participant took the project seriously. Of course, self-selection does play a role as I did not have a 100% return rate, so it could be the case that the people who did not think it was worth doing or who thought I was not acting in their best interests simply opted out rather than return random pictures in exchange for the money. However, I think this option is unlikely considering the high rate of return I obtained, the prospect of financial remuneration for relatively little work, and the fact that I was explicit that my goal with the project was to try and help make conditions better for people on the street. I think it at least equally as plausible that my subjects simply forgot or found themselves unable to meet me at the designated time and place for reasons I have addressed above.

4. Investigations of Power

Power and knowledge have a mutually reinforcing relationship which is highlighted in this research (Foucault 1980). The participants in this project are situated at precisely the juncture where the relationship between knowledge and power can be highlighted and the ability of visual techniques to mediate this boundary can be pushed to its limitations. This is not because the researcher and the subject exist at opposite ends of these extremes with a power holding researcher and a powerless subject. Such a relationship is fixed, leaving little if any room for exploration. Rather the nature of being homeless in the United States means that the powerful and powerless come into contact on a regular basis. This is especially so for the downtown homeless in urban areas. In Southern City in particular there is an ongoing effort to deal with the issue of visibility as many homeless seek to make themselves more visible to the tourists and businesspeople who travel downtown and the city council and local government attempting to reduce their presence through efforts such as anti-panhandling legislation, a lack of public facilities, and an increase of arrests for loitering.

This frequent contact means my participants are acutely aware of many of the common cultural objects businesspeople and tourists use. Indeed they frequently capitalize on this knowledge so they can pass as a "regular" person and gain access to shelter or food that they would not otherwise be able to obtain. For example, one self-identified homeless man who was not included in this study, William, relayed to me that he learned how to use a computer so he could use the restroom at the public library or spend time there in cold weather. The downtown branch of the Southern City public library system attracts a significant number of homeless individuals, and

has a history of enforcing regulations prohibiting loitering and sleeping. William claimed not to know how to read very well and said it put him to sleep anyway so he learned enough to know how to log onto the computers and use the internet to watch video with the headphones on. This knowledge is often one of the only forms of capital available to my participants and serves not only to ensure survival but also as the basis for self-worth for many of them. On several occasions I had participants describe the importance of "street smarts." Red in particular took great pride in knowing his way around the city at one point during an interview pointing to his head and saying "I got all I need right here." This self-reliance and means that when I approach them and ask if they understand how to use the disposable camera I am asking them to operate, they are ill-situated to ask for clarification or help.

The disposable camera is a deliberately simple device if one is even basically familiar with cameras, and it was clear from interactions with my participants that they understood that they should be able to operate them without any trouble. I only had two people ask me for instructions, and most of the men were quick to offer me some sort of proof, usually in the form of a testimonial, that they were comfortable with cameras. For example, when I asked Rick if he knew how to work the camera he replied "No, man. I use these all the time to take pictures for people on the weekends. I can make a few bucks that way." Similarly, Red remarked that he did not require instruction because "[he] used to use one of these all the time before he came out here." However, there were some indications that many of these men were not at all comfortable seeing through the lens of a camera or operating such a device. For instance, of all the photographs I got back, not one of them is taken vertically.

Every picture was made with the camera in the "standard" or horizontal position. Additionally, even though I pointed out the flash and discussed it with many of them, it was used in fewer than 10 of the images, despite over 40 pictures which were made at night or were not able to be developed due to underexposure[2]. Many of the participants simply did not feel comfortable indicating a need for operating instructions. I'm convinced that this is due, at least in part, because they encounter all kinds of people utilizing these objects on a daily basis. When knowledge is a person's *primary* form of capital admitting to incompetency or ignorance renders one powerless.

4.1 Taking the Pictures

If there is an inextricable link between knowledge and power then it is most apparent with Ralph, who took an entire roll of film with his finger in the way of the lens (Figure 2-5). When we met, he said he had used one of these cameras before, but he stuck around as I demonstrated to someone else how to operate the click wheel, push the button, and use the flash.

The presence of that finger in every photograph had two consequences. The first and most obvious consequence was that when I met him to give him a copy of his photos as he had requested, he was quite embarrassed about his lack of technical proficiency. My fieldnotes remind me of how apprehensive I was prior to that meeting, hoping that he would not feel that way, but knowing that he would. I had gotten to know him over the previous few weeks, and the last thing I wanted was for

[2] Certainly it could be the case that some of these images were made as the camera jostled around in pockets or backpacks, but an examination of the sequence of photos suggests that this is not the case for most of them as the "blanks" are often embedded in a series of, usually nighttime, images that otherwise contained enough light to be developed.

him to feel inadequate around me. This ended up being a constant struggle in the field. I was continually trying to convince my participants that their opinions mattered and that I wanted to hear what they had to say and see what they would photograph. Additionally, as I did with all the participants, I had offered Ralph money in exchange for taking the pictures and he apologized that he “didn’t get [me] any good ones.” These feelings of inadequacy had an immediate effect as Ralph became suddenly and noticeably less communicative as we looked at his pictures together.

Figure 2-5 (clockwise)

The second, and equally important issue brought up by the stray digit is that it greatly limited Ralph’s ability to communicate the conditions of his existence to me. Not only was he disappointed that the copies he was keeping for himself were obscured, but he was also concerned that I would not understand exactly what he was

trying to get across to me. For example, the explanation Ralph gave for the image in Figure 4 was that "[he] was trying to take a picture of these two people who sleep in the same spot every day and never take care of themselves so we look after 'em." But this information is not apparent from the image itself partially because of the distance and partially because of how much of the image is obscured. The explanation from Ralph is not enough to overcome the lack of visual data. It is impossible to know the extent or details of the situation. The link here between knowledge and power could not be made clearer. His lack of knowledge about how to use an item which he understood was clearly intended to be an uncomplicated version of a more sophisticated object which many people use on a daily basis greatly affected his ability to tell his own story. Not only did his technical incompetency directly obscure the information in the image, but his feelings of shame and embarrassment prohibited him from communicating his perspective.

4.2 Image Making

Apart from the process of analyzing the act of taking pictures, it is also useful to examine power relationships as they are revealed in the objects the participants chose to photograph. It is axiomatic among photographers to claim that a photograph says just as much, if not more, about the photographer as the subject. Warren echoes these statements and suggests that this relationship between photographer and subject is imbued with cultural competencies when she writes that

> the process of making a photograph probably tells us more about the photographer than what he/she has chosen to photograph given that the particular visual cultures they are bound up with will shape their choice of subject, how they locate the subject within the frame and what they choose to leave out. (Warren 2005:864)

In this way, power dynamics enter the photographic process in much the same way that they appear in the research process. Chaplin (1994), writing about the art critic John Tagg, notes that "certain forms and relations of power are brought to bear on issues of representation" and that this power relationship is displayed and recreated through the practice of photography, creating an artifact in which the past, present (at the time of the photograph) and future power relationships can be discerned (Chaplin 1994:82). Thus, as we turn to exploring the content of the photographs taken by these men we can begin to gather more information about the way power works in their own lives.

Taking that stance as a starting point, one can find important bits of information about the homeless men in this study by examining individual photographs. Information about their relationships with each other, their familiarity with the area around them and the extent of their daily travels can easily be ascertained. However, examining the pictures as an entire group reveals something about the participant's relationship with dominant culture. Scholars examining the content and careers of artists have shown that the styles and techniques which find their way into cultural objects are not randomly selected, but rather are socially constructed (Becker 1982; Bourdieu 1990; Warren 2005). This notion has been extended by researchers examining vacation photos and family snapshots (Musello 1979). They claim that it is no accident that one family's photos look so similar to another person's even though they might be separated by a great amount of time and space (Bourdieu 1990; Chalfen 1979, 1987). In other words, our snapshots as well as our art images are constrained by popular notions of what these artifacts "should"

contain. Of course, most of us never question why vacationers are consistently placed squarely in the middle of the photograph or why they are always wearing a smile which may have existed for only that brief moment. This lack of thought indicates precisely how institutionalized this style of photography is for most of us. These common principles are not just the residue of culture, however, they actually serve a purpose. They are both subtle and overt mechanisms of communicating to the viewer what to look at and therefore what is important. The use of photographic tropes helps to ensure the likelihood that a viewer will understand the image without any help or guidance from the photographer at the moment of viewing. However, what the men in this study demonstrated time and time again is that they are not aware of these common institutions which guide most of us, and this greatly inhibited their ability to communicate their knowledge.

Bourdieu points out that even "the most trivial photograph expresses…the system of schemes of perception, thought and appreciation common to a whole group" and are "indissociable from the implicit system of values maintained by class, profession or artistic coterie" (Bourdieu 1990:6). If the conventions one uses in photography give some indication of what sort of style and technique is "common to a whole group" then what my photographic data reveals is evidence that my participants are not a part of the dominant group. Their pictures lack the standard conventions. There are multiple images of "empty" landscapes, images devoid of anything other than a building, a parking lot, and a bunch of distracting "noise" (Figure 6-9). Furthermore, these images are taken at an "awkward" distance, neither close enough to provide detail nor far enough away to provide much context.

Although this is due partially to the documentary nature of the project, this does not explain these images completely. As I discussed above, the promise of a set of photographs was important for many of the participants, and they seemed genuinely pleased to have images of the buildings and parking lots as well as more "typical" shots of people, or broad landscapes. Additionally, these were not mistake or random photos. In the interviews, I discovered that each of them either displayed a particular subject or was at least intended to.

Figure 6-Kevin

Figure 7-Mark

Figure 8-Terry

Figure 9-Mitchell

There is also a noticeable lack of close-ups. Most of the images, even of people, appear to have been taken from at least 15 feet away or more (Figure 10). This physical distance is experienced by members of the dominant culture as evidence of relational distance. However, the follow-up interviews indicated that

this was not always or even frequently the case. Figure 10 is emblematic of this set of images in this respect. When I asked Len why he took it and who was in the picture he told me that it was a picture "of my good friend, Marcus. He looked like Jimi Hendrix and I wanted a picture of him." Len and Marcus are friends and yet the photo is taken from a distance that would imply a casual relationship at best. When I pressed Len to explain why he took the picture at that distance he explained that "that's just where he was when I took the picture." There was no attempt made to pose Marcus, and yet the image is clearly not a candid photo either. The only conventional set of explanations which could be mobilized to explain this picture is that Len was purposefully trying to create a visually appealing image. However, he assured me that it was not the case though he recognized the aesthetic appeal of the picture without any prompting.

Figure 10

Finally, there is the constant horizontal camera position I discussed above. All of this suggests that these men do not have much experience expressing themselves, because if they did then the dominant norms and conventions of photography would have already begun to take hold[3]. This piece of information by itself might be interesting but demonstrating that homeless individuals are so far outside of the mainstream of society as to not be cognizant of institutionalized photographic practice is hardly earth shattering. However, these images demonstrate the old axiom "knowledge is power" is only partially correct. In order for knowledge to be truly powerful, it must be mobilized. Knowledge is power only to the extent to which it can be communicated.

4.3 Image Discussion

My work with homeless people showed consistently that many of them did not have the confidence or capital needed to communicate their knowledge. They appeared uneasy about having to talk about and explain their images or even to listen and take compliments about them. As a group they were apprehensive about participating any

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[3] I did entertain the notion that perhaps these men were just concerned with expressing themselves artistically, making decisions based on what appealed to them aesthetically and that the lack of conventions was an intentional way of transforming a mundane assignment into something more interesting. However, the interview data simply does not sustain such an explanation. While many of the photographs are indeed aesthetically pleasing in a conventional way and several of the men indicated, both in their pictures and in the interviews that they like art, nobody suggested that aesthetics were even a remote consideration in the photographic process. When pressed to explain why a certain style or subject placement was used, the participant often indicated that it was unintentional or happenstance.

more than they absolutely had to. This would come across most in the interviewing process where I asked them to explain to me what was in the pictures and why they took them. Many of these interviews proceeded very rapidly with the participants providing as short an answer as possible. However, it is not my impression that they were trying to get rid of me. Before I pulled out the pictures and after we put them away they would act as their "normal" selves even if the recorder was still on. They were also generally pleased to see me days later when I would happen to come upon them while walking or driving around. They would engage me in conversation or smile and wave. Several times I even had participants inquire about whether I had gotten cameras back and if not, they would volunteer information about a person's whereabouts. However, when it came to me asking them to explain their thoughts as shown on film, they were noticeably restrained and hesitant, speaking in a manner which indicated a lack of confidence.

For example, when I interviewed Terry about his images, he physically took hold of the pictures so he could control the pace of the interview, flipping through pictures much more quickly than I would have liked and providing less detail than I had hoped. Several times during the interview we had to back up so I could ask a specific question about an image. Sometimes, however, my requests and questions were simply ignored as Terry continued to flip through the images at his own pace. His speech through this entire process was noticeably more rapid and direct than with any of my other encounters with him. In my previous experiences with Terry I had found him to be a listener first, waiting patiently to provide his own comments, and his diction was measured if repetitive. As soon as the interview stopped and I

gave him his set of the pictures, his pattern of speech returned to what I was familiar with. I never got the feeling that Terry or any of the other participants did not care about the project or their lives but rather that they just had no way of making sense of the whole endeavor no matter how much or in what way I explained it to them. Expecting to have ones voice heard and opinion count is a learned skill, and years of suppression cannot be overcome easily if at all. Even a well-thought out research design, method and implementation which seeks to cede as much power as possible to the subject cannot erase or undue a lack in this skill set.

5. Shifting the Ethical Agenda

In this project I combine a photo-elicitation technique and Stummer's explicit concern for giving voice to the powerless with native image-making in order to explore the nature of power dynamics in participatory research. The emancipatory power of participatory visual methods is identified concisely by Pink who notes that "[when] ethnography is seen as a process of negotiation and collaboration with informants, through which they too stand to achieve their own objectives, rather than as an act of taking information away from them, the ethical agenda also shifts." (Pink 2001:44). This shifting of the ethical agenda is precisely what I was after with this research, and I was frequently successful. Participants did occasionally bring their own ethical agendas to the research. I had several participants express sentiments similar to Red who told me, "I'm gonna show you what it's really like out here, because it ain't good." However, this was not the norm in sentiment and occurred even less frequently in practice. For example, I found out in the interview that of

Red's set of 26 images, only 12 of them were an attempt to communicate how bad things are on the streets.

The research presented here demonstrates that bridging the power divide between researcher and researched necessitates more than what current methods have to offer. While none of the accounts that I have encountered have explicitly suggested that participatory visual methods might serve as a cure-all for power imbalances, there is a danger that this implicit assumption exists. Additionally, and more importantly, without knowing the boundaries or limitation of such methods it is impossible to say with any certainty when these methods are appropriate. In some cases, they might be unnecessary and in others there is the real danger of generating neither new, generalizable knowledge or theory, nor an equitable research relationship. While I think this method is better than most, if not all, others for the particular task at hand, namely getting a first hand account of what homeless individuals deem important for their daily lives, it is by no means perfect, and those who suggest that such methods *inherently* creates co-collaborators are off the mark. I have shown above that there are structural barriers which prevent this from happening.

Writing about the field of visual sociology in 1979, Howard Becker remarked that it was "a field for people who could tolerate disorder" (Becker 1979:7). The field has undergone some changes in the ensuing decades, but his statement remains as true today as then. Changes in technology alone have created new opportunities for researchers to extend the limits of visual methods in order to discover the extent of their utility and uncover the holes remaining to be filled. This article is intended

to carry on that tradition and to spur continued innovation in the field of visual sociology in particular and among researchers concerned with power dynamics in the research process in general. The ethical implications of transferring power to the powerless are obvious and the practical implications of such practice are too great to be ignored as more equitable research relationships have proven consistently to produce new and surprising information.

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