Visual Sociology: A Methodological Review

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ABSTRACT

Visual sociology, a methodology that focuses on the use of visual materials in the creation of sociological knowledge, has been a subject of debate within the discipline because of how visual data challenges and expands the perspectives within Western science, particularly those that have been suppressed by the highly technical nature of written language. In this essay, I will discuss the history of visual sociology and detail how sociologists have used visual materials in their research, primarily that of photographs. I also review some common approaches in using visual materials as research artifacts while highlighting some analytical strategies. I then provide an overview of the limitations inherent in visual research before I conclude with why visual methods are a justifiable qualitative research approach. The essay argues that visual methods promise a way to bridge the divide between written and visual records and can potentially enrich innovation and public engagement in sociology and other social science fields.

KEYWORDS: Visual research, visual methods, qualitative research, sociology, photography

INTRODUCTION

Visual sociology's relationship with the larger discipline is nicely described in Emmanuel David's (2004) study of street art in post-Katrina New Orleans. Graffiti, which David empoweringly terms *visual resistance*, is often destroyed by authorities shortly after it debuts in public. But why? David (2004) says, "visual resistance on public streets sidesteps certain cultural gatekeepers, such as curators or gallery owners, who often regulate the distribution of other artistic expressions" (p. 233). In other words, artistic and political authorities deem street art illegitimate because it exists outside of their control. A similar phenomenon has occurred within the social sciences concerning the use of visual materials as scientific knowledge. Science has long privileged written language as the primary way to communicate rational thought (Prosser 2013; Gold 2007; Schwartz 2007; David 2004; Rogoff 2002; Collier 1967), often casting all other forms of communicative knowledges as lesser or illegitimate. Traditionally, authorities within the social sciences attempted to maintain the divide between "science" and "non-science" by excluding forms of knowing that were not a written language. This discrimination pertains not only to images but also to spoken words, bodily performance, and other non-written forms of communication. Furthermore, when it comes to electronic media such as video, scholars have traditionally distanced themselves from the medium since it is strongly associated with pop cultural entertainment (Appadurai 1996).

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This is to say that visual sociology can be understood as a form of resistance to the hegemony of detached traditional methods: “Instead of making the discipline’s boundaries clearer, visual research is a resistance to the milieu of social researchers who choose not to look at the world” (David 2004:251). Just as graffiti can be interpreted as an art of resistance whereby marginalized groups attempt to reclaim public space, I will argue that visual sociology challenges and expands the number of perspectives within Western science, particularly those that have been suppressed by the highly technical nature of written language.

In this essay, I will discuss the history of visual sociology and detail how sociologists have used visual materials in their research, highlighting some of the analytical strategies. I then discuss some of the issues regarding dissemination and move on to a discussion of the limitations of visual research. I conclude with justifications for visual sociology. Visual sociology primarily concerns itself with photomechanical reproductions (i.e., photographs and videos) as opposed to paintings, drawings, sculpture, and other artistic mediums. Though the latter are not entirely absent from sociological investigations, researchers tend to gravitate towards the more objective lens of the camera. With that said, in my ensuing discussion, the terms “images” and “pictures” should be taken to mean photographs unless otherwise noted.

HISTORY OF VISUAL SOCIOLOGY

Photography and sociology were formalized at the same time (roughly 1839), when Louis Daguerre publicly debuted his Daguerreotype image and Auguste Comte began publishing a series of texts on positivism (Martiniello 2017; Banks 2007; Stanczak 2007; Harper 1988; Becker 1974). In addition to a shared birthday, Douglas Harper argues both were children of the Industrial Revolution, with photography being “a new way of seeing” and sociology being “a new lens of interpretation” (1988:55). But photographs themselves are not so much a modern invention as are photomechanical methods (Banks 2007; Collier 1967). Johannes Vermeer perfected the camera obscura technique in the mid-1600s, arguably making some of the world’s first photographs long before the invention of the mechanical camera (Jillette and Teller 2013; Collier 1967). The mass production of photographs began in the later part of the nineteenth century and this would make photography accessible for research purposes, much of which can be found in the early practices of documentary photography.

Yet the founders of sociology did not embrace photographic imagery in their works, preferring to produce abstract images of society through other methodological practices (Harper 1988). While sociology was cold to photomechanical methods at first, photography was used by anthropologists and criminologists in the later part of the 1800s. Some notable examples include Cesare Lombroso’s photographs of criminal typologies and Charles Darwin’s ethological research using photographs of human emotion (Banks 2007). Some sociologists in the early 1900s used photography primarily in studying communities of immigrants and the plight of the urban poor. In fact, American sociological journals used photographs as illustrations until 1920 (for a total of 31 articles), but after this time, for reasons still not completely understood aside from printing and copyright costs, photography largely vanished from sociological research (Martiniello 2017; Harper 1988).

Becker (1974) discusses the split between photography and sociology during the early twentieth century, noting that to maintain its scientific credibility, sociology could not be too openly political. Meanwhile, photography had become strongly connected to political debates and divisive public issues, which served as fodder for the early practices of documentary

photography (Becker 1974). For example, while (as stated above) early photography was often concerned with communicating the impoverished conditions of the working classes, as evidenced in Jacob Riis' *How the Other Half Lives* (1890), the sensationalized images of dirty poor people also reflected the traditions of "muckraking" journalism that relied on emotion to sell papers. Put simply by Rea Meadows, "sociologists feared photography was too emotionally loaded to be scientific" (2015:68). Additionally, the emotional proclivity of images would also become routinely utilized by government bodies for propagandistic purposes (Duganne 2007). In sum, for many decades, the scientific community thought visual data was too unrepresentative, unsystematic, and subjective to warrant scholarly attention (Berg 2009). This started to change in the later part of the twentieth century.

The 1960s was an exciting era of social unrest that reconnected photography with the social sciences. With a renewed focus on conflict theory, dominant research paradigms were being challenged in academia at the same time that the counterculture was challenging the larger collective consciousness. Striking images of hippies pitted against authorities compelled young people to think about what was wrong in society and made them ponder ways to fix it (Harper 1988). Naturally, this led them to take sociology classes, and a new generation of sociologists picked up the camera to use in their research (Martiniello 2017; Harper 1988; Becker 1974). This era of mass movements and social change facilitated the *social problems approach* to doing research, and photography was well suited as a method. The spirit of this style of research is to illuminate issues impacting groups in hopes of facilitating positive social change. In fact, as political tensions are again on the rise in Western democracies, Martiniello (2017) questions if such turmoil will have a similar effect, especially considering the provocative images of refugees and immigrants. However, the rediscovery of photomechanical research methods in the 1960s was also strongly influenced by a seminal publication—John Collier's *Visual Anthropology: Photography as Research* (1967). This book, as well as the later expanded second edition (Collier and Collier 1986), will be discussed in more detail throughout the essay. What is important to know here is that Collier popularized photography among social scientists by placing research methodology above technical or artistic skill.

John Collier (1967) cautions researchers about becoming bogged down in technical judgments, as is often the case when we stress about photographic equipment and image quality. These tendencies come from the *formalist approach* to photography, which emphasizes the technical details of an image over its content (Duganne 2007). Jon Wagner terms this "photographic faux-realism" (2007:26), the belief that keen photographic skills are all that is needed to accurately document social life. Photographic researchers regularly become entrapped in the pushes between an image's formal aesthetic properties and an image's communicative potential. While it is certainly possible to have both (or neither), Collier (1967) says that we too often obsess over technical decisions that inhibit us from going out into the field and capturing images. However, *the best photograph is the one that is useful in your research* (Collier 1967). More simply put, a mediocre photograph is better than no photograph at all. The message for researchers is to spend more time in the field photographing than one spends thinking about equipment and professional image qualities (Collier and Collier 1986; Collier 1967).

Howard Becker (1974) takes this idea a step further, saying the way to improve one's photographs is not through technical skill or mechanical innovations, but through enriching

one's understanding of the people they are photographing. From this view, less-skilled photographers capture isolated scenes while superior photographers capture sequences of action embedded in communities, institutions, and cultures (Becker 1974). Marcus Banks (2007) also agrees with these sentiments, simply advising researchers to ignore all the features on a camera that alter an image. Any fine-tuning is better done later when processing the images rather than in the field. In sum, Collier (and later Becker) inspired social scientists to pick up the camera without worrying whether or not the ensuing images would be of professional quality. For the scientist, there are more important things to worry about.

PHOTOGRAPHERS & SOCIOLOGISTS: SAME TOOLS, DIFFERENT PURPOSES

What distinguishes a visual sociologist from a documentary photographer? Jon Wagner (2007) says that, on the side of the researcher, the emphasis is on scientific rigor, empirical inquiry, and a quest for new knowledge. For example, photographers aim to capture "representative types" of people, but these representations often reflect the photographer's personal understanding of a situation or setting, not a theoretically informed understanding (Becker 1974). Another divide between the two fields, though there is much overlap, is that sociologists are primarily concerned with ethical problems in their work, while photographers are primarily concerned with legal problems in their work (Becker 1974). Furthermore, a researcher's photographic skill is often delayed due to their obligation to communicate a project's scientific utility and findings, requiring them to be adequately skilled in both visual and written communication (Wagner 2007). The artistic or journalistic photographer, on the other hand, gets to specialize in the craft of producing outstanding images. Meanwhile, the visual researcher's challenge is "to observe with significance" (Collier and Collier 1986:208).

Unfortunately, capitalism and the mass media favor photographs that reiterate simple statements, making most documentary photography analytically and intellectually thin (Becker 1974). The kinds of images that are mass-produced for popular consumption tend to devalue complexity in favor of repeating a model of "what sells." Goffman (1976) elaborates on this deficit, noting that advertisers often limit themselves to scenes of limited sensory experience, avoiding scenes that contain movement, sounds, and smells. In other words, advertisers produce images that are quickly understandable, not compounded with a depth of intertextual information. Relatedly, in the era of social media, algorithms may favor certain styles of images above others.

Most visual scholars agree that deep insights are gained from systematic, organized photographic projects. Rigorously conceptualized projects tend to yield richer data, though even scattered, unsystematic photographs still tell us something (Collier and Collier 1986). One way to ensure one's photographs remain grounded in research is to use *shooting scripts*, lists of questions or topics of interest that can be photographed in the field (Schuar 1997). Shooting scripts are like semi-structured interview protocols in that both are designed to narrow, yet deepen, the researcher's focus while collecting data.

There is also much discussion on the use of video film in scientific projects. Writing in 1986, the Colliers indicated that *editorialization* was the key distinction between research videos and commercialized videos such as documentaries. While no information is ever entirely clean of bias, they argue the informational integrity of scientific film can only be weakened by narration. Selective editing is also a threat to the informational integrity of film, more so than the problem of selective recording. As a general rule, the larger a project's scope, the more

selective video recording should be (Collier and Collier 1986). The work of documentarian Frederick Wiseman (1930--) is a notable example of a balance between scientific and popular filmmaking. With films lasting upwards of 6 hours, his portfolio of over 40 documentaries has a strong focus on social and cultural institutions, including military training, hospitals, libraries, and most recently, Le Bois sans Feuilles, a famous French restaurant with three Michelin stars (Wiseman 2023). Yet even highly editorialized films are meaningful cultural artifacts that capture a certain truth about the society in which they are produced. Despite being highly edited, we can systematically analyze the content of films as well as the people who produce and consume them (Bulman 2015). In contemporary society, "The commercial film industry is a socializing institution. Films *teach* us who we are as much as they *reflect* who we are" (Bulman 2015:3). In this way, films are essentially modern-day folktales or myths, revealing a great deal about the past, present, and future aspirations of a society (Bulman 2015).

The discussion above reveals that not all social scientists view visual research in the same way. Epistemologically speaking, visual researchers tend to fall along a continuum between *objective-realism* and *subjectivism* when considering images. The first assumes that images, especially photographs, can capture pure reality, while the latter assumes all images capture interpretations of reality (Stanczak 2007). A more nuanced view of this simplistic divide encourages a researcher to be epistemologically flexible when considering the use of images in research. According to Gregory Stanczak (2007), researchers should adopt a "pragmatic epistemology" and consider how the use of images fits research questions and topics. If we hole ourselves into a firm epistemological camp, we limit our possibilities for growth and innovation. As I have just detailed the divide between research images and images used for popular consumption, I will now further discuss divisions among the scientific community regarding the use of visual products in research.

IMAGES AS DATA

Visual research is not purely visual but rather emphasizes visual materials within a scientific project (Berg 2009). Steven Gold (2007) outlines two opposing views on how to integrate visual materials into research. The first view is that a visual focus is only appropriate if it is the primary source of data within a research project. In other words, a researcher needs to commit fully to and focus mainly on visual materials (Gold 2007). Examples of this perspective on visual research can be found in unedited video ethnographies, exclusive uses of photo analysis, and exclusive uses of photo elicitation, among others. The alternative to this view is that visual materials can be used as components of or supplements to traditional research, a view espoused by most visual sociologists. Steven Gold (2007) describes four ways in which he has successfully used visual materials within his past research projects: to gain orientation within a new field; to develop rapport; to gain more connections in a community; and to raise additional questions that can guide our analysis or send us back into the field with a more refined focus (Gold 2007). Photographs as tools are particularly useful when there is a large gap between the researcher and the culture(s) they study (Banks 2007). Furthermore, such secondary incorporations of visual media make visual approaches less intimidating to the researcher, perhaps advancing the proliferation of visual research within sociology (Gold 2007).

Douglas Harper (1988) specifies four general ways sociologists use photographs, though these typologies often overlap. The *scientific mode* treats images as empirical data, where the researcher either analyzes existing images or captures their own images. This approach to

photographs allows a researcher to freeze the often-overwhelming simultaneous details of a scene so that they can later perform more precise analyses (Collier 1967). Furthermore, cameras can catch processes and facts that are too fast or nuanced for the human eye (Flick 1998). A method that has embraced this approach to using images is that of the *rephotographic survey*. Here, a researcher tracks social change by comparing archival images of a scene against modern images of the same scene, often using an identical angle. Such an approach allows one to evaluate "before and after" shots of a particular place. The image taken by the researcher should be nearly identical to an image that was captured years or decades ago, allowing one to appreciate how the built environment changes over time (Harper 1988). For example, J. Aaron Hipp (2018) analyzed images of physical activity before and after the redevelopment of some city blocks in Washington, D.C., generally finding that such redevelopment increased the use of public space. Yet even a single static photograph can contain a multitude of markers of social change, such as signs of new construction or permits in windows (Collier and Collier 1986).

Another example of the scientific mode of visual research is the *cultural inventory* described by the Colliers. Photographic inventories of homes or rooms can reveal the relationships among objects, individuals, histories, and aspirations. The premise "is based upon the assumption that the 'look' of a home reflects who people are and the way they cope with the problems of life" (Collier and Collier 1986:45). A promising application of the cultural inventory would be to analyze objects found in John Thackwray's "My Room Project" (2016), which photographs young men and women in their bedroom through a fish-eye lens affixed to their ceiling. Thackwray (2016) has so far managed to photograph over a thousand individuals from 55 countries, producing images that are uniform in perspective and setting, fitting the requirement for clearly defined, comparable units that content analysis requires (Krippendorff 1980; Holsti 1968). A final example of the scientific mode is enhanced observation research such as that used in conversational analysis and ethnography. Video recordings permit researchers to slow down and replay conversations, giving them more insight and accuracy in their analyses. The same principle applies to analyzing reactions. For example, Tobin, Wu, and Davidson (1989) videotaped preschool education in three different cultural environments, and they later showed the tapes to preschool staff in other cultures while capturing the staff reactions and discussions.

The *narrative mode* of visual sociology is when a researcher uses a series of photographs as either the main component of or supplement to a research project. Narratives tell a story, showing "social life as a process made up of social interaction" (Harper 1988:63), often emphasizing action. Photo essays and films are the most typical forms of narrative visual research. Philip Cohen (2017) made a photo essay to explicitly document the emotion of protestors in the recent March for Racial Justice in Washington, D.C. His photographs capture facial expressions and bodily gestures, conveying the collective effervescence associated with public demonstrations. This analysis of feeling is certainly better conveyed through images as opposed to descriptive text (Cohen 2017). Another exceptional example of the narrative mode is Dhruv Dhawan's "Mumbai Sleeping" (2015). Since sleep is a universal human experience, Dhawan's images of people sleeping on the streets of Mumbai juxtapose the comfort of sleep with the insensitivity of the urban landscape. To some, these images could be interpreted as "poverty porn," but it is also arguable that the resulting photo essay demonstrates the extraordinary resilience of humanity, and Dhawan's perspective is granted authority by him

being a cultural insider (Banks 2007). Relatedly, Ronald Weitzer (2023) has used photographs to supplement his research on red light districts across the globe, documenting the vibrant diversity among these often stereotyped urban areas.

The *reflexive mode*, as differentiated from the scientific and narrative modes, moves the authority of definition away from the researcher and onto the subject. Photographs can be used in the manner of *photo elicitation*, where images are shown to subjects as a means of facilitating self-disclosure (Gold 2007; Collier and Collier 1986). A more common approach is to have subjects take photographs of their everyday worlds, a method known as *photovoice* (Prosser 2013). Harper (1988) believes the reflexive mode is the most promising avenue for visual sociology as it most closely resembles Weber's concept of *verstehen*, allowing us to see from our subject's point of view. This view is shared by Bruce Berg (2009), who links the reemergent interest in photographic methods during the 1990s to the popularity of feminist and postmodern perspectives. Reflexive uses of photography allowed researchers to become more collaborative and more considerate of multiple perspectives, interpretations, and meanings (Berg 2009; Harper 1988). Ruth Holliday (2007) embodies the reflexive approach in her use of *video diaries* for researching sexual minorities. Allowing subjects to record themselves and even to edit their own recordings allows them to participate in the larger project. It also ensures their products will not be appropriated or taken out of context by the researcher. Perhaps best of all, though, is that video diaries and similar visual approaches do not need to be published in order to be life-affirming for the subjects (Prosser 2013; Holliday 2007). A final example of the reflexive mode to visual sociology is Bendiner-Viani's (2016) *guided tours methodology*, where the researcher asks participants to give them a tour of their neighborhood. The researcher takes stylized photographs while on this tour, and later revisits the participant to show them the images. In this way, the participant is presented with an outsider's view of familiar scenes, and they are asked to comment on what the researcher missed. This allows the participant a rare opportunity "to both look more closely, and from a distance, at their familiar places" (Bendiner-Viani 2016:5).

Finally, the *phenomenological mode* attempts to capture and communicate experience from the primary source. One way to do this, according to Harper (1988), is when a researcher expresses their own knowledge through personal photographs. By capturing or analyzing images that personally move the researcher's own feelings, we can examine the meanings we attach to experience. Harper (1988) sees this as a largely experimental approach, though he also believes this is where research photography comes closest to art. One project that could be said to embody a phenomenological mode is Sullivan and Ledesma's (2015) photo essay on a trailer park community forced to relocate. The captions accompanying each image are either direct quotes from subject interviews or direct quotes from the researchers' field notes. This gives their project an unsettling degree of authenticity, as such snippets of raw data masterfully ground a viewer's interpretation in the direct experiences of subjects (Sullivan and Ledesma 2015). The reader (or viewer) not only feels as if they are at the scene of an eviction, but they are also provided with something akin to backstage access to the research process.

ANALYSIS

Photographs make a "total statement," in the words of Howard Becker (1974), as they simultaneously communicate to us factual/empirical information, aesthetical feelings, moral implications, and causal connections. The style of a photographer is also evident in a

photograph, but this should not be of major concern since scientific papers also contain a researcher's preferred style of writing. Remember, "the style of scientific impersonality is also a style" (Becker 1974:23), not a natural default. Yet the totality of photographs may intimidate sociologists because even a single photo contains more information than could ever be articulated in writing (Collier and Collier 1986). Duganne (2007) encourages us to "slow down habits of observation" (p. 137), taking the time to work through visual complexity while remaining open to emergent characteristics of an image. Not only may we see something to which we were previously blind, but we may also open ourselves up to new aesthetic tastes, preferences, and ways of seeing (Duganne 2007).

Though many scholars suggest ways of dissecting photographic data, Marcus Banks has perhaps suggested the most useful approach. When analyzing photographs, Banks (2001) suggests we differentiate the *internal narrative*, the content within an image, from the *external narrative*, the context in which the image was made. The internal narrative is the story within an image, while the external narrative considers why the image exists, who made it, and how we see it. These narratives are intrinsically intertwined, but analyzing them separately, as well as together, can lead us in the direction of deeper understanding (Banks 2001).[1] The strength of this binary is that even images of non-social content can be sociologically analyzed. While the internal narrative of an image of a distant galaxy may not capture a social dynamic, the external narrative that produced such an image is based in the social world. The same is true for abstract and modernist works of art (Banks 2001). Much of modern-day drone photography can be analyzed in this way, especially since most drone footage is highly identifiable by its unique aesthetic.

DISSEMINATION

It has been suggested that images are rare in the scientific community because we associate imagery with children's books. In fact, the common transition from picture books to text-only books is taken as a sign of intellectual maturity (Banks 2001). This also appears to be the case in how we view preliterate societies, with our own society being more sophisticated than "cave painters" (Collier and Collier 1986). Yet, if this is true, we should not forget about comic books and graphic novels among adult audiences, whose popularity seems to defy this norm.

John Prosser (2013) says that visual methodologies have become normalized among social scientists, but their mainstream adoption is hampered by the larger system of scholarship (not the individual scholars). For example, dissemination outlets largely require us to reduce visual materials into textual descriptions, though some publishers may allow for a few photographs or select edited scenes (Jungnickel and Hjorth 2014; Prosser 2013; Holliday 2007). Furthermore, ethical regulations and copyright issues may inhibit sociologists from going visual in their research (Prosser 2013). Ultimately, there is no good universal approach to ethics in visual research, though Wiles et al. (2008) found problems rarely arise when a visual researcher has a strong relationship with the people they photograph. Trust between the researcher and their participants allows for the effective use of situational ethics and non-exploitative

[1] Banks (2007) later rewords the internal and external narratives as the "content" and "form" of an image.

representations (Wiles et al. 2008). Wolcott's (2009) advice is also pertinent here: Try to avoid having to apologize for something in your work.

Marshall and Rossman (2011) see a trend where qualitative research is being judged more and more on its presentational or performance value. As such, images and videos may become increasingly used by researchers to shore up the aesthetic appeal of their research. Hopefully, this will be done in a manner that meaningfully integrates the visual products into the research rather than using images as mere illustrations. When done properly, photographs "add value" to sociological research as well as the teaching of sociology (Martiniello 2017).

LIMITATIONS

Photographs are like statistics in that both are commonly mistaken as totally objective depictions of reality. Just as a statistic reflects a complex series of decisions made by the researcher (Best 2012), photographs are the product of a process that is vulnerable to biases, distortions, and misrepresentations (Banks 2001; Becker 1974). Moreover, just as the wider American public is under-equipped to critically consume statistical information (Best 2012), most people are also uncritical of what (and how) they see (Berger 1972; Collier 1967). Even most sociologists believe in photographic autonomy, accepting "the folk notion that the camera records objectively what is there for it to record, no matter what the ideas of the person who pushes the button" (Becker 1974:11). Interestingly, Banks (2001) connects our belief in photographic objectivity to the use of photographs and video as evidence in legal settings. Furthermore, most Americans evaluate an image in light of their own tastes, social position, and history, perhaps reflecting the individualistic nature of our society. This is all to say that vision is learned and cultivated, making it a cultural construction (Mitchell 2002).

Much of the limitations in visual sociology deal with the issues of objectivity and subjectivity, and most criteria for establishing qualitative validity are applicable to visual sociology. Reliability is not as frequently discussed as a limitation in visual research, perhaps reflecting the interpretive epistemologies of most visual researchers. The Colliers (1986) note, though, that seasonality poses a challenge for photographic methods because communities change along with the seasons. Another threat is *reactivity*, which is how people may alter their behavior when being watched by a researcher, leading the researcher to collect data that is not representative of subjects' everyday lives (Flick 1998; Becker 1974).

In terms of objectivity and informational integrity, let's start with the worst-case scenario: photographs that are staged, edited, or otherwise deliberately altered. Is a staged photograph necessarily inauthentic and, therefore, useless? Whitty and Joinson (2009) argue that crafted images are more like ideal types rather than deceptions. For example, images in dating profiles may be exaggerated, touched up, or altered by a filter, but these images are typically more truthful than they are deceptive. The image still contains the person and their essential features, though perhaps in an idealized way. Goffman (1976) makes a similar case in his study of advertisements, noting that publicity images must be grounded in some perceivable reality or they risk being irrelevant to their audiences. Barry Goldstein suggests the best approach to fabricated images is to ask, "Is the degree of error acceptable based on what I require from the image?" (2007:79). As such, we should not immediately dismiss photos we believe are staged. Such images are useful in understanding what a person values and what they aspire to (Whitty and Joinson 2009; Goldstein 2007; Wagner 2007; Goffman 1976).

Another approach to the problem of subjectivity is to recognize that while images can contain a multiplicity of meanings, only the researcher has the analytic responsibility to establish the credibility of a visual project (Drew and Guillemin 2014). The researcher needs to be accountable for the images and findings within their research (Denzin and Lincoln 2013). Though the researcher's interpretation of an image shouldn't be privileged over the interpretation of others, the researcher must nonetheless be systematic and transparent in how they analyze an image. This can be accomplished by co-examining an image with a participant, by having strong research questions, and by rigorously documenting our analytical procedures. We especially need to focus on what knowledges are being deployed and what knowledges are excluded from the interpretation of the image. While there are many analytical approaches a researcher can take, Drew and Guillemin (2014) suggest we consider the original intended audience of an image, how the image reflects and departs from dominant cultural values, and what contradictory readings could be made of an image. This requires a sustained critical awareness of our own cultural conditioning, an exhausting practice in that our own conditioning is more complex than the visual information our eyes receive (Rogoff 2002).

How an image or video is presented to an audience also creates new possibilities for accidental influence or deliberate manipulation. Retouching and cropping of images are obvious examples (Flick 1998), but so is the accompanying use of sound as well as the contextual effects from the preceding and following images or scenes (Berger 1972). Even today, the perspective of the onlooker (viewer) is underexamined in visual methodologies, though Axel Philipps and colleagues (2017) suggest social media may be changing this. Not only do such interactive platforms allow for the mass publication of images, but comments and hashtags now allow us to easily analyze audience perceptions. For example, while the art world has a very broad understanding of graffiti, hashtag analysis reveals the public has a very distinct understanding of graffiti (Philipps et al. 2017). If it's not painted on a wall, most ordinary people would not tag an image of visual resistance with #graffiti.

More so than issues of validity and reliability, the major limitation of visual research is that it lacks robustness. There are no off-the-shelf procedures a researcher can neatly apply to a project. Instead, each deployment and analysis of visual materials is unique (Banks 2007). Marcus Banks eloquently states:

> Robustness of social research can only be a quality of research methodologies when the messiness of everyday life is smoothed over, decisions made about which features are significant and which can be ignored, and those selected each smoothed out into data items, each resembling one another… Visual methods relentlessly particularize, highlight the unique, go beyond the standardization of statistics and language (2007:119).

There is no cookbook of visual research methods, and visual researchers devote considerable energy towards establishing the credibility of their findings. While visual methodologies are not conveniently robust, images as data contain a great deal of robustness if they are properly preserved, making it possible for other researchers to validate or challenge claims (Flick 1998). But photographs, perhaps more so than any other form of data, do not belong to a specific social science. Therefore, when it comes to interdisciplinary studies, such as the merger of sociological and art-based inquiry, methodological confusion often dominates the

discussion (Jungnickel and Hjorth 2014). The sheer breadth of visual studies often results in a lack of a shared language between disciplines as well as conceptual unease (Drew and Guillemin 2014).

Sometimes visual research may impede data collection, and Gold (2007) cites two examples of how special occasions trouble photographic strategies. One problem emerges when communities only want the researcher to observe and photograph special gatherings, holidays, or other atypical events. The other problem emerges when communities ban the researcher from photographing religious or cultural holidays. Jewish communities are an example of this as they often forbid photography on the Sabbath (Gold 2007). Relatedly, some cultures believe photography can take away part of a person's spirit, and cultural taboos exist related to images of the deceased.

It has also been said that while photographic methods of social research may reveal something to us not accessible by other methods, we can't entirely be certain of this assumption (Banks 2007). Additionally, Flick (1998) notes that the inherent biases of visual methods make them questionable as a stand-alone strategy. As such, visual research in sociology is best done within a mixed methods paradigm, as one part of a larger sociological enterprise (Banks 2007, 2001). After all, "seeing and knowing are mutually constitutive" (Banks 2007:40).

JUSTIFYING VISUAL METHODS

Visual methods promise "great potential for supplementing other forms of social knowledge that will strengthen, challenge, and contradict the ways we understand the social worlds of ourselves and others" (Stanczak 2007:20). Since written communication has been masterfully used by oppressive power structures for so long, Rogoff (2002) argues that visual culture provides social minority groups a promising avenue to rewrite existing understandings of the world. In other words, since the Anglo-hetero-patriarchy has firmly established dominance in language and text, visual mediums have a liberatory potential for historically marginalized voices (Rogoff 2002). An example of this is individuals who suffer from communication and/or learning disabilities such as autism. These individuals are often excluded from research processes, as when a researcher obtains information from a caregiver or parent rather than the individual under study (Prosser 2013). Another major strength of visual methods is that they help us to avoid reification, where we turn abstract categories into a fatalistic reality. Reification can entrap our thinking and constrain our vision to what we already see (Banks 2007).

Marcus Banks (2007, 2001) believes the strength of visual research is the inherent collaboration between the researcher and the subjects and/or communities they study. There are humanistic reasons behind his philosophy, as the co-production of images creates empathetic bonds, but there is also an epistemological reason. Sociologists today recognize that knowledge is not a static thing waiting to be discovered. Rather, reality is created through interaction and knowledge is produced through human social relations (Banks 2001). Marcus Banks concisely says that "the introduction of photographs to interviews and conversations sets off a kind of chain reaction" (2007:70), fueling a more dynamic exchange between the research and their subjects. The same is true when a camera is introduced in the field.

There is also the technological dimension to consider. The proliferation of digital recording devices has been so thorough that Mirzoeff (2002) says "people are teaching themselves to be media" (p. 11), treating cameras as if they were some type of body part.

Furthermore, faster Internet speeds have made the mass (re)production of visual media easier than ever before. YouTube videos, for example, provide a publicly accessible medium in which to convey visual research (Berg 2009). An interesting and engaging example of how this can be done is the YouTube series *100 Years of Beauty*, a channel that makes "beauty time-lapses" of models according to dominant styles throughout history. While the videos are not strictly research products, and while they are not total representations of each era or style, the creators borrow heavily from visual anthropology to produce cinematic montages in a uniformly structured manner (Chan 2017). Sociologists have long been concerned about the gap between their abstract concepts and tangible indicators (Becker 1976). Digital photography and streaming videos can help bridge that gap and increase sociology's perceived relevance. There is even a website trying to do this called *PopularSociology.net*. Finally, visual methods can also serve as a bridge to interdisciplinary research, as visual culture is relevant to nearly every conceivable topic in the social sciences (Banks 2007).

CONCLUSION

This essay has provided a comprehensive review of visual sociology, a methodology that focuses on the use of visual materials in the creation and dissemination of sociological knowledge. I provided a brief history of visual sociology, detailing how sociologists have used visual materials such as photographs and videos in their research over time. I have also addressed the limitations and challenges of visual research, such as issues of objectivity, subjectivity, and the lack of established analytical procedures. However, I have argued that visual methods hold great potential, allowing researchers to bridge the divide between written and visual forms of knowledge, and potentially enriching innovation and public engagement in sociology. As the Internet has made visual research less costly to conduct and disseminate, the future of visual approaches appears bright. Relatedly, artificial intelligence is getting better at analyzing and producing photorealistic images, creating a need for more visual literacy while promising new, exciting directions for visual research.

Visual methods should be understood as a legitimate and valuable qualitative research approach. Such an approach can capture aspects of social life that may be difficult to convey through text alone, and incorporating visual methods into a research project can lead to richer, more multifaceted understandings of the social world. I would also argue that the visual makes social science more interesting, enjoyable, accessible, and imaginative.

Science and art are often constructed as different forms of intelligence, each contributing new knowledge through specialized processes. In this essay, I have explicated how visual methods promise a way to bridge the divide between these two forms of knowing. Visual sociology challenges our cultural separation between written and visual records and can potentially enrich innovation and creativity in both fields. I want to conclude with a quote from the Colliers, who powerfully say:

> No amount of well-organized information assures the production of a sound research conclusion. The discovery necessary for the conclusion often lies beyond the last outpost of data, forming a gulf between the researcher and conclusions. The challenge is now to cross this gulf! We suggest the chasm can be spanned only by *creativity;* we need to *fly* over undocumented space in order to command scientific discovery (1986:198).

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BIOGRAPHY

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