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Article

Reflections on Visual Field Research

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Abstract

This article describes ongoing visual field research by focusing on its self-reflective and auto-ethnographic components. Photographs and field notes are presented and personal encounters from the field are described. Recognizing the symbiotic order of the personal and political, the author details confrontations and emotions from ongoing efforts at recording visually.

Keywords: visual, field research, emotions, community, photography

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Described in these pages are disparate, even disjointed, accounts or vignettes. Yet, contained herein are the lessons learned—and they are hard ones—from engaging in visual sociology. As I discovered and report in this article, when doing research even on inanimate objects potential troubles abound. The simple act of photographing a still life—a seed and feed store, a mom and pop diner, a statue, or a once vibrant and now defunct country store—can, at the very least, raise suspicions and, at worst, provoke rage.

I had given little thought to the potential range of such human responses until I came face-to-face with people who clearly could care less about my or anyone's research. The one thing they evidently wanted was that I disappear. In some situations I had the distinct feeling that if I didn't accommodate them, they might make me disappear.

Yet, this is not my first encounter with hostility while conducting field research. During a lengthy case study, my colleague and I were subject to suspicion, hostility, and unlawful interrogation. At one point a stable of attorneys threatened us with everything from seeking an injunction ordering us to cease our research to a court ruling demanding our raw data. Essential data sources for the case study were court documents—trial transcripts, pre-trial motions, records of property sales and transfers—all public record. Like the visual research reported here, the data for that case study were inanimate but defined by some as threatening (Tunnell & Cox, 1995, 2003).

Field research takes us where the data are and oftentimes to the unexpected—to places of risk and sometimes to more benign, inanimate places. Try as we may to prepare ourselves for the unexpected, we nonetheless can be surprised, alarmed, and flat-out scared by people, things, and places—including a still life or landscape.

The Beloved Woman of Justice

During the 1980s, media entrepreneur Chris Whittle established Whittle Communications in downtown Knoxville, Tennessee, United States and built a four-story brick building covering one square block of prime real estate. There he conducted his business and became nationally famous from his attempts at placing free televisions in public school classrooms in return for their broadcasting his Channel One (complete with televised commercials) and for initiating the national Edison Project (for-profit public schools). Knoxville's Whittle Communications soon went belly up. The building was sold to the United States government and converted into a Federal Courthouse and federal offices. The building and grounds have an open courtyard complete with trees and flowers that passersby, traveling from one street to another, enjoy. There, in the middle of the gardens, stands a statue—the beloved woman of justice.

Figure 1. The Beloved Woman of Justice, US Federal Courthouse, Knoxville, Tennessee



Experimenting with black and white photography (and using film), I stopped before the statue and raised my camera to my eye. As I squeezed the shutter, from the corner of my other eye I could see a man, dressed in navy blue pants and over-polished black shoes, rapidly approaching. As I lowered the camera, I came face to face with a cop. The following are from my field notes:

Q. What are you up to?

A. Nothing, just walking around the downtown area taking pictures.

Q. Well, you can't do it here.

A. Why not?

Q. This is a Federal Courthouse and property. You can't do it here.

A. Sir, this is public property. This is the people's property and you're saying I can't take a photograph of a statue?

Q. Let's see some ID. You know, I could arrest you for this.

A. When did this happen that you can't take a picture on public property.

Q. You have heard of September 11th haven't you?

Sociologists of late have written about the increasing privatization and private control of public property (Ferrell, 2001; Hayward, 2004). I was, and not in a subtle way, reminded of it that day.

The Country Store and the Hostile Stare

During the past few years, I have been researching and writing about rural communities and their rapid change. I have written about the vast decline in family farming and in locally owned businesses that were at one time vital to farming communities (Tunnell, 2006, 2008). My research has used photography as a means to preserve images of country stores, seed and feed stores, mom and pop diners, and post offices that no longer operate and are part of a bygone era.

Figure 2: Defunct Country Store, US Highway 58, Southwestern Virginia, United States



The above photograph is among the first composed for this rural research and was taken with a throw-away camera. Just as I raised the camera to my eye, I heard and saw two 4-wheelers (i.e., all terrain vehicles) followed by a pickup truck, with a total of six or seven men dressed in their rural winter wardrobe—camouflage. The following is from my field notes:

One obese, pasty, white young man sitting on his 4-wheeler looking at me. Head turned down, mouth drooping open, eyes slightly rolled up—incapable of blinking. That look. It seems hostile. It feels hostile. It may be simple curiosity as much as anything but the definition, the definition of those on the receiving end, my definition—is one of hostility.

“But wait,” I want to say. “I know you. I grew up just across that mountain.” But, I catch myself and realize that my pathetic attempts of feigning belonging would likely result in greater hostility or rage or, perhaps, just knee slapping laughter—each painfully aimed at me—not some generalized me or other, but specifically me, me standing here in the middle of god knows where, me among a pack of hostile strangers, too far from my car to make a run for it, and damn it, goddamn it, me here with no gun, no knife, no pepper spray, no macho posturing enough to even make them blink. No nothing. I’ve got nothing. Now, what do I do? What can I say?

Feed Store Confrontation

Figure 3. Former Feed & Seed Store, Grainger County, Tennessee, United States



I park my car, facing the highway on a very wide shoulder, get out, walk a few steps, raise the camera, and take one photograph. I immediately hear tires screeching and see a car, at the adjacent business, pull out at a high speed, careen the wrong way down the highway’s shoulder,

and come to a violent stop right in front of my car, blocking it in. A man jumps out of his car and steps toward me. The following is from my field notes:

Q. Give me the film.

A. Ah man, I can't do that. It's a brand new roll and I've only shot one picture. Is this your place of business?

Q. What are you up to?

[I tell him I'm a writer and the nature of my research.]

Q. I'm going to get your tag number.

He proceeds to write down my license plate number. I'm tempted to reciprocate but think better of it. Then, rather suddenly, the conversation becomes friendlier as we talk about farming, feed stores like this one, mom and pop diners, and country stores and their demise. We talk of community change with what appears as mutual regret. He walks to his car, gets in, fires it up, and eases out. I get in my car and speed off. Given his alarmed reaction and his determination to protect himself and intimidate me, I'm convinced that something is going on here.

Not long afterwards, on two occasions, I drove by this defunct feed store and saw about two dozen cars parked out front. My suspicions are heightened.

The Diner and the Frightened Restaurateur

Figure 4: Family Diner, Toronto, Ontario, Canada



There was something about the light and the way it fell on the table, menu, and table items and the truck's reflection in the window. A "Closed" sign hung on the diner's door. From the sidewalk, I quickly raised my camera and fired. Not a good photograph, I later discover, for I, too, am reflected in the window. Almost before moving the camera from my face, a man of about 70 years old silently appeared and stood by me. Dressed in white—shirt, pants, and apron—he initiated the conversation in a way that I've come to expect. The following is from my field notes:

Q. What are you doing?

A. Do you own this restaurant?

Q. Yes, what are you doing?

A. I'm just walking around town taking photographs.

Q. Don't you think you should ask first?

A. Well, the sign says closed, so it wasn't open and there was no one to ask.

Q. Don't you think you should ask first?

A. The restaurant is closed. I thought no one was here.

Q. You could have knocked. Given how things are today, you know, you could have thought about that.

I wanted to say that because this is a public sidewalk the diner is considered part of the public, just as you are, pal. But, looking just beyond the stranger and seeing a police officer, I decided against this response. I also saw something that had not appeared during any other confrontation. Fear. He was afraid of ME. I realized then that with fear raging through the land, near-constant talk of terror and terrorism, his ethnicity, and me—some stranger photographing his small business—that I had alarmed him. I had inadvertently terrorized him. That's not what I wanted. In a second, these things raced through my mind and before I could further explain myself, he was gone, leaving as quickly and quietly as he had arrived.

Remembering Elizabeth Barret's (2000) provocative documentary, *Stranger with a Camera*, I realize that I am the stranger with a camera. From that film and from writings in the area of visual sociology, a camera is often compared to a gun (see, e.g., Collier, 1967). It's invasive, threatening, indiscriminate, and exploitative. Its aim and mark are not always true. It's pointed and shot, and among some people in some locations, that induces fear. Among other people in other locations, that alone may be reason enough for them to stomp someone.

Susan Sontag's (1973) classic work makes clear that there is an aggressiveness involved in using the camera. Referring to it as a weapon, she asserts that

there is something predatory in the act of taking a picture. To photograph people is to violate them, by seeing them as they never see themselves, by having knowledge of them they can never have; it turns people into objects that can be symbolically possessed. Just as the camera is a sublimation of the gun, to photograph someone is a sublimated murder—a soft murder, appropriate to a sad, frightened time. (p. 14)

Perhaps, too, and by extension, photographing someone's property is a sublimated theft.

Representing One's Community

Figure 5: Roadside Litter, Garrard County, Kentucky, United States



As a part of my ongoing research into rural communities, a recent photo essay documents large and small scale littering (Tunnell, 2008). But, a component that has not been made known is that a number of those photographs were taken in my own community. My rural community and neighbors are working class or poor within a poor state. Although an occasional farmer may be “land rich,” in the main, my neighbors’ incomes and housing are below the national average. This littering research, in part, has focused on my neighbors and the passersby on our poor, rural roads.

Figure 6: Handmade Sign, Garrard County, Kentucky, United States



My neighbors and I have asked our county officials for help with the litter problem. We've asked that NO LITTERING signs be posted. But, our public officials have dismissed our concerns, claiming that there's no point in posting signs because "the people out there are just ignorant." My neighbors and I have posted our own signs, most of which have been torn down by road crews contracted with the county.

Figure 7: County Road Sign, Garrard County, Kentucky, United States



We, likewise, have advised our public officials that the county has posted a misspelled road sign. Their response has been that no one will notice. “But, we thought we just did,” I want to say. Our efforts and the public officials’ responses place my neighbors and me in the lived realities of having absolutely no collective efficacy. As much as we may write and theorize about social disorganization and lack of community collective efficacy among disorganized neighborhoods, there’s no comparison to living within its midst.

As I continue researching rural community social problems, I am confronted with emotion and critical questions about my role—as both researcher and neighbour—that are pertinent to anyone researching their community (see, e.g., Anderson, 1940). How do we document our own place without shaming our neighbors? How do we accurately detail local problems without criticizing local people? Is it possible to give attention to a place without drawing the people into the discussion? Many factors influence how people see the place they live and how others see it. But, what is the difference in how people see their own place and how others represent it? Can we describe or photograph rural poverty or indications of poverty (e.g., littering) without shaming the people? I have many questions, confrontations, and emotions that remain unresolved. As respectfully as is possible, I believe our responsibility is to see one’s community for what it is. These confrontations and emotional issues are those that I struggle with and attempt to understand as I continue with rural visual research.

Related to these ongoing issues are those more central to qualitative research. The literature reminds us that field researchers should always be mindful of risks to human subjects. But, the literature is less abundant on potential risks to researchers themselves. Activities that strike researchers as innocent or absent of any threat to anyone, as I am learning, can set off unexpected reactions. As I have witnessed, the simple act of requesting a public document from a court clerk can arouse suspicions and initiate inappropriate (and probably illegal) questions. I have been asked if I am with the FBI by a person from whom I had simply asked directions. I have been told that questions raised about events that occurred nearly three decades earlier could incite lethal violence. And, as is detailed in this article, the simple act of photographing a still life sets off a range of human reactions and emotions.

As I am learning, qualitative researchers should not go blindly into the field no matter the research strategy or instrument. From observation to participant observation, from interviewing to photographing, the research setting seems littered with one potential risk after another. Despite my assumption that photographing a statue or a defunct business was absent of any risk, I learned otherwise and now realize that visual research, like any qualitative research, has both its rewards and its risks. Just as we try and consider the potential risks of raising questions to our participants, we should likewise consider the same when raising a camera to the eye. These are some hard lessons learned as I reflect on my experiences in the field.

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