'I'm gonna show you what it's really like out here': the power and limitation of participatory visual methods

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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 adequate exploration of the limitations of these practices. In this article the author draw upon his 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 while at the same time offering insights into the nature of identity construction in marginalized populations.

INTRODUCTION

Sociologists have long been concerned with issues of power in the research process (Stanley and Wise 1983; Clifford and Marcus 1986; DeVault 1996; Veroff and DiStefano 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; Prosser 1998; Pink 2001; Hurworth 2003; Parker 2005). 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. 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 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). 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 as to what degree such methods help researchers to form a more equitable partnership with research participants. While it is important to establish empirically 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 delivered. Furthermore, examining the limitations reveals the work which must still be done.

In this article, I draw upon my experiences employing a participatory visual research design with chronic homeless participants in downtown Nashville, Tennessee in order to explore the boundaries of visual methods as potential 'power-leveling' methodologies. Situating this research with the chronic homeless is purposeful insofar as the power discrepancy between the chronically homeless and the rest of society is one of the more extreme. Although my findings generally support the notion that participatory techniques are effective, I find these methods to be far from perfect, with much theoretical and empirical work still to be done. In the course of this analysis, I build on the strain of identity

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theory initiated by Snow and Anderson (1987) which is grounded primarily in symbolic interactionism and Geertzian anthropology. As Snow and Anderson point out, these particular perspectives are especially appropriate lenses through which to investigate issues surrounding identity construction in marginalized populations because they both require an investigation into the meanings that individuals attribute to everyday objects and routines. Participatory visual methods are perfectly situated to help extend and refine the conclusions that traditional ethnographic methods have already uncovered.

HISTORY OF VISUAL METHODS IN SOCIAL SCIENCES

Photographs 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 *American Journal of Sociology*, 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 (Henny 1986). As Stasz points out, 'visual data are much less amenable than other forms of data to positivistic schema' (Stasz 1979, 136). That photographs themselves have largely disappeared from the pages of sociology journals is not to imply that they have left the social research landscape entirely. Images have always been a suitable subject for content analyses of art or advertising, but they are not typically accepted as empirical evidence in their own right (cf. van Leeuwen and Jewitt 2001).[1]

This trend toward empiricism in sociology has recently come under fire from post-structuralists, feminist sociologists and queer theorists, among others, promoting 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 they can do to completely eliminate subjectivity, they should focus instead on what reflexive approaches have to offer while making sure to identify and account for biases wherever they arise. 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 endeavours in this area have been developed by researchers using visual methods.

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 and Burris 1994; Wang 1999). 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. I will discuss in detail below how the falling cost and greater availability of cameras and film processing not only makes native image-making techniques more financially feasible, but 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 a way of both explaining the images and generating information that would not have been captured without the photographs 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 photographs stand in conjunction with traditional interviewing techniques as a way to uncover as much information as possible, 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* reduces 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 typically 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 the 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).

Specifically, visual methods employed with an eye toward power diminution can drastically alter the research process and the data gathered. Pink (2001) reminds researchers that they must enter the field with as few preconceived ideas as possible in order to truly be co-collaborators with people in the field. Wang, Cash, and Powers (2000) found in their work with homeless individuals using participatory visual methods that

participants define the research agenda through the discussion of the photographs. They discovered that the practical benefits of having participants drive the research process were undeniable and generated information that the researchers might never have considered. As they so aptly point out, nobody knows the situation of the research participants better than the research participants themselves. Rather than asking direct, narrow, predefined questions geared toward examining an existing academic question, the points of research inquiry were generated by the issues brought up in the photographs and the open-ended interviews that followed. Warren (2005) advocates a similar methodology on theoretical grounds rooted in a non-positivist approach to research. Research decisions are inherently political (Babbie 2001; Reason and Bradbury 2006), and employing participatory visual methods democratizes the research relationship through the process of mutual discovery and refinement of the research agenda.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND SETTING

The data for this research were gathered over a 10-week period in the autumn of 2006. However, my relationships with the homeless community and several of the people in this study were developed over the course of several years of both formal and informal observation. I had been a regular presence in the homeless community for three years prior to my official data collection, working at a local church's weekly free meal. This project was conceived in large part out of conversations with people at this location, and formal observations began in the summer of 2006 in order to prepare for this project. In other words, I was not a stranger when I formally entered the field for this research. My time in the field prior to handing out cameras and conducting interviews consisted of observations with the objective of identifying different gathering places in order to assess the best places to hand out cameras to ensure a broad sampling frame.

Nashville is a rapidly expanding city located in the southern United States (US), a region commonly referred to as the Sun Belt. With a current population of 1.4 million, the city grew by 32% from 1990 to 2006 (US Census 2007). The attraction of no state income tax, a low cost of living, and mild weather attracted people and corporations to relocate to Nashville. The booming population meant the loss of much of Nashville's affordable and low-income housing. Additionally, in recent years a substantial urban renewal programme has made life even more difficult for transitional,

Participant	Race	Gender	Years homeless	Interview length (minutes)	Stated reason for homelessness	Other notes
Red	White	Male	5	23 and 15	Alcoholism	Substantial physical disability resulting from being hit by a car. He suffered a broken neck which kept him out of work and in hospital for several months.
Maurice	Hispanic	Male	2	35	Seasonal labor	Maurice is an illegal alien.
Terry	Black	Male	10	22	Lack of work	Military veteran
Mitchell	Black	Male	8	8	Lack of work	Military veteran
Larry	White	Male	1.5	18	Declined to answer	
Karl	Black	Male	1	12	Health (mental and physical)	Karl had a noticeable limp.
Mark	Black	Male	3	26	Bad luck	
Ralph	White	Male	4	10	Divorce	He said child support and alimony were too much.
Rick	White	Male	2.5	20	Addiction and disability	
Dan	White	Male	5	12	Personal choice	Dan appeared to be suffering from a mental disability of some sort. He spends most of his days talking to himself and sitting on the same bench in a downtown park. Several other homeless individuals indicated to me that they watch out for him because he cannot take care of himself.
Jared	Hispanic	Male	Unknown	N/A	Unknown	Jared returned a camera but declined the interview.

TABLE 1.

underhoused and homeless individuals as affordable land has disappeared and homelessness has been increasingly criminalized. In addition to several smaller shelters, there is one major overnight shelter in the urban core of Nashville which provides just under 600 beds. City officials estimate that there are at least 1800 homeless in Nashville, while advocacy groups put the number substantially higher, at around 3500 (MSS 2005; Homeless Power 2007).

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 institutional 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 relationships with homeless individuals who had been identified through previous experiences, and using 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 11 back with a total of over 250 usable images (see Table 1 for demographic details). Of the 24 cameras I handed out, 20 went to men, and none of the four women returned a camera to me. It is not possible to accurately discern why no women returned cameras, and this certainly limits the findings of this study to some extent, but it could have to do with my male gender. Fifteen of the 24 initial participants

were white, and five of those who returned cameras were white, four were black, and two were Hispanic. I attempted to avoid redundancy by only carrying three cameras at a time into the field, but I made a point of passing these cameras out to the first three people who agreed to do the project. Additionally, I made an effort to talk to the first three people I saw after getting out of my car or hopping off the bus. This is not to suggest that I had no control over the selection process. As I was initially interested in doing work about general identity construction among extremely marginalized populations, I traveled to those parts of Nashville that I knew from earlier field work to attract a high proportion of chronically homeless individuals. As such, all but two among the 11 who returned cameras defined themselves as homeless for at least two years. In general, I was pleased with this demographic breakdown as it mirrored the basic characteristics of the homeless population in this city that I had encountered in both volunteer work and casual observation.

Of the 11 participants who returned the cameras, I was able to do follow-up interviews with 10 of them. The interviews ranged in duration from six 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 Nashville 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. Partially for this reason, most studies involving homeless participants are tied into a particular resource or physical need such as a shelter or advocacy group (Roll, Toro, and Ortola 1999; Boydell, Goering, and Morrell-Bellai 2000; Wang, Cash, and Powers 2000). The advantage is an increase in the response rate. However, this is accompanied by the limitations of skewing the data. Additionally, as this was the first project in a larger study, I did not want to risk being perceived as allied with any particular institution before I had a better understanding of how this might affect the data. Thus, I opted for the research design presented here with full knowledge that it would affect response rates simply because of the nature of homelessness. Upon reflection, however, the response rate could also be attributed to an entrenched power differential that is unable to be overcome by the methodology. Although I attempted to mediate this with a system of tangible and intangible incentives, it may not be possible to completely alter this dynamic.

These interviews relayed a wide variety of reasons for being homeless, from personal choice to poor decisions to mental illness to bad luck. Perhaps the one thing all the respondents had in common in this respect was that they did not expect to be homeless for very much longer (with the exception of two older gentlemen). They did not view their 'homeless' status as a permanent part of their identity, but rather as a temporary situation. For some, this reflected a reality of being temporarily 'housed' for a period of days, weeks or months in an extra bedroom or couch at the house of a friend or relative. For others who did not have these moments of respite from the streets or shelters this belief in homelessness as a temporary condition requires a substantial amount of identity work (Snow and Anderson 1987). However, it should be noted that homelessness self-report data regarding personal histories can be highly unreliable (see Gelberg and Siecke 1997). I include this information here to provide a more comprehensive picture of the respondents, but I have no way of determining the validity of their histories. For a variety of reasons including personal safety, homeless individuals are notoriously private. Indeed, none of the participants in this study even knew each other's real first names.

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. Wang, Cash, and Powers (2000) found that employing visual methods with homeless men and women proved to be a productive and fruitful method for generating first-hand accounts of what life is like on the streets. Stasz writes about Bateson and Mead (1942) that 'their historic monograph, *Balinese Character*, has never been matched for its subtle blend of photographs within a tightly organized conceptual framework' (Stasz 1979, 119). While my research does not match in scope or importance that of Bateson and Mead, I would suggest that the inextricable link they establish between research

FIGURE 1.

question and method is what all researchers should strive for in their 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. One's first priority as a researcher should be to figure out the best way to answer a particular question. However, 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. Miller and Keys (2001) found that the invalidation of dignity that is inherent to being homeless can often result in feelings of inadequacy, seriously affecting a person's self-efficacy. Participatory visual methods offer a way of transferring power and authority from the 'researcher' to the 'participant'. In this way, I hoped that the project could restore feelings of

self-worth to my participants, both in order that they might have the self-confidence necessary to participate fully in the research process, and as a way to increase their overall self-esteem. Photo-elicitation, then, appears to be an ideal method to employ in the course of this research. 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 (2000) and Wang, Cash, and Powers (2000) 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 US flag, which the participant photographed as a testament to

his patriotism. This opened up an entire conversation about patriotism and living on the streets.

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 (Warren 2005). 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 this project I was explicit about following in Stummer's (1986) 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 scepticism I had expected. 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; 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 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.

INVESTIGATIONS OF POWER

Power and knowledge have a mutually reinforcing relationship which is highlighted in this research (Foucault 1980). The participants 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 Nashville 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 business people who travel downtown and the city council and local government attempt 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 business people 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 (William), who declined the invitation to take pictures for this project, 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 Nashville 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

FIGURES 2-5   (clockwise).

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 means that when I approach them and ask if they understand how to use the disposable camera, 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 needed instructions on 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. Many of the participants simply did not feel comfortable indicating a need for operating instructions. I am convinced that this is, 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 incompetence or ignorance renders one powerless.

Taking the Pictures

If there is an inextricable link between knowledge and power then it was most apparent with Ralph, who took an entire roll of film with his finger in the way of the lens (Figures 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 photographs as he had requested, he was quite

KEVIN.

MARK.

TERRY.

MITCHELL.

FIGURES 6-9 (clockwise).

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 got to know him over the previous few weeks, and the last thing I wanted was for 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 incompetence had an immediate effect as Ralph became suddenly and noticeably less communicative as we looked at his pictures together.

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 that many people use on a daily basis, greatly affected his ability to tell his own story. Not only did his technical incompetence directly obscure the information in the image, but his feelings of shame and embarrassment inhibited him from communicating his perspective.

Image Making

Apart from the process of analysing 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 about the

FIGURE 10.

photographer as the subject, if not more. 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 artefact in which the past, present (at the time of the photograph) and future power relationships can be discerned (Chaplin 1994, 82). Thus, through exploring the content of the photographs taken by these men one 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 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 photographs and family snapshots (Musello 1979). They claim that it is no accident that one family's photographs 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, snapshots as well as art images are constrained by popular notions of what these artefacts 'should' contain. Of course, most people 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 people. 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 people, 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 is '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 reveal 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 or distracting 'noise' (Figures 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 buildings and parking lots, as well as more 'typical' shots of people or landscapes. Additionally, these were not mistake or random photographs. In the interviews, I discovered that each of them displayed, or at least was intended to display, a particular subject.

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 photograph 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 photograph 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.

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. 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 that 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.

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 more than absolutely necessary. This came 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 participant 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 enquire 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 familiar pattern of speech returned. 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 endeavour no matter how much or in what way I explained it to them. Expecting to have one's voice heard and opinion count is a learned skill, and years of suppression cannot be overcome easily, if at all. Even a research design, method and implementation that seeks to cede as much power as possible to the subject cannot erase or undo a lack in this skill set.

Symbolic interactionism points out that construction of identity happens in relationship with other people; it is through these interactions that individuals not only construct their own identities, but also learn about and participate in the conventions that structure society (Goffman 1959; Blumer 1980). If one violates these norms and conventions it can only be the result of deliberate intent, lack of sufficient socialization, or a process of desocialization where an individual gradually loses grasp on the norms of a dominant culture due to lack of participation (Boydell, Goering, and Morrell-Bellai 2000). After establishing that these men had no intent to produce anything other than documentary photographs, I was left to conclude that they lacked familiarity with the basic conventions of photography. While this is only mildly interesting in itself, it has profound methodological and substantive consequences which are joined together in the act of photographing. Methodologically, lacking knowledge of how to produce accurate or descriptive photographs impaired their ability to communicate their stories. This fact, coupled with my inability to act as instructor without implicitly contributing to loss of dignity and self-esteem, left the project in a precarious situation. Almost immediately, the main strength of my method – giving voice to the voiceless – was undermined because of the extreme marginality of my participants and the inherent power discrepancy between a housed researchers and the homeless participant.

Substantively, this lack of familiarity with standard photographic techniques speaks to their position of marginality in society. It begs the question that if they are not familiar with something that most people in society take for granted, what other patterns of socialization are missing? While this study cannot begin to determine if this lack of socialization is a cause or an effect of homelessness, the fact that my participants attempted to 'pass' as knowing how to work the cameras says something very important about their process of identity construction. In their description of homelessness as a process rather than a state, Boydell, Goering, and Morrell-Bellai point out that if one thinks of identity as constructed through meaningful work, relationships and a place of one's own, then '[h]omelessness poses a threat to identity' (Boydell, Goering, and Morrell-Bellai 2000, 35). Viewed through this lens, the research presented here suggests that chronic, long-term homelessness erodes a sense of identity by detaching homeless individuals from the dominant norms and conventions of society, and by dramatically circumscribing their ability to create and maintain social ties with 'legitimate' members of mainstream society.

SHIFTING THE ETHICAL AGENDA

In this project I combined a photo-elicitation technique with Stummer's explicit concern for giving voice to the powerless through 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: '[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. In my interview with him, he indicated that the rest of the pictures were 'just to show you where I go during the day, that's all'. When I pointed out to him that this, in itself, could be a way of

showing how things are not good out on the streets he looked up at me and said 'Man, this ain't bad. A lot of people got it worse than this.' Then he returned focus to the set of 12 that depicted long meal lines and people sleeping under bridges and on sidewalks.

The research presented here demonstrates that bridging the power divide between researcher and researched necessitates more than current methods have to offer. Wang, Cash, and Powers (2000) report strikingly different results than those described here, but they were achieved under very different circumstances. They differed significantly from my approach in that they did extensive training with their participants. Not only did they teach them how to use the cameras, but they also taught them how to 'see' and produce images. No doubt the ultimate decision of form and content was left up to the photographer, but this approach accomplishes different things than this project. While they are able to offer compelling evidence about what life is like on the streets, the data presented here focus more on the nature of homelessness as a status in American society. Although none of the accounts I encountered explicitly suggest 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. While I found this method is better than most, if not all, others for the particular task at hand, it is by no means perfect, and those who suggest that such methods *inherently* create co-collaborators are off the mark. It is quite possible, of course, that there is something about me as a researcher and person that constructs relationships in such a way as to inhibit equitable interactions from occurring, but I have attempted to mitigate this possibility through research design, and other researchers have had results similar to these in the same setting (Miller and Keys 2001). This study supports the insights of these researchers that there are real, structural barriers which severely proscribe the possibility of acting as true co-collaborators in this setting.

In their study of the effect of social ties on the self-efficacy of 150 homeless persons, LaGory, Ritchey, and Fitzpatrick (1991) found that the consequences of being homeless (especially for a long period of time) are so severe as to override the normal paths to developing a positive outlook on life, a sense of personal worth and control over one's life. In other words, the state of being homeless inevitably, though not irreversibly, alters one's

relationship with the rest of society in a way that cannot be overcome in the research experience by methodology alone. The data presented here suggest that, when engaging in research with marginalized populations, social researchers should perhaps rethink their approach. At least in this project, asking chronically homeless men to play the role of co-collaborator in the research process was highly problematic, as they had neither the knowledge nor the power to fulfil this role. Although important insights into identity were still made, it was done in a way that ultimately reinforced traditional power relationships. That is to say, it was done by me, the researcher, making sense of the data generated by my participants, alone, out of the field. It is important to note here that this research is exploratory. There is still much work to be done to accurately map the limits of current participatory visual methods as well as to suggest more specific strategies for employing them in an equitable way with highly disenfranchised populations.

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 boundaries 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 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 to consistently produce new and useful information.

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NOTE

[1] Editor's note: see also Grady 2007.

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