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Through the lens: Street photography and social research

Abstract: This paper tells a story about my experience on the Live Sociology project, a year-long programme of five workshops offering training in the use of new media in ethnographic social research. The first workshop, 'Redesigning the observer' was held at Goldsmiths College in South London. The main focus of the workshop was on using digital cameras and the afternoon session was a practice-based exercise in street photography. Working with Katherine Davies, I photographed the hairdressers and barbershops in New Cross. Our aim had been to capture the gender differences, social interactions and community functions of the salons, but instead I found myself captured within the image as the object of my own study. The photographs we took are pictures of a research process, wherein the relations between the researcher and the researched were challenged, the role of observation undermined, and a new social situation created by the presence of the camera. Here, I look back at the images and question what happens when we look through the lens.

The Live Sociology project is a year-long programme of five workshops offering training in the use of new media in ethnographic social research. I was one of the participants in the first group of the programme, which started in 2006. The first workshop, 'Redesigning the observer' was held at Goldsmiths College in South London. The main focus of the workshop was on using digital cameras and the afternoon session was a practice-based exercise in street photography. We formed groups of two or three people and were given a brief and a digital camera (a Panasonic FZ30). Briefs included producing portraits of people in Deptford, images of the 'micro' world of New Cross, movement through urban space or a visual narrative of historic Greenwich. We were then given two hours in which we took to the streets – with some anxiety about being able to work the camera (much larger and more sophisticated than your standard point and shoot), the likelihood of producing

something worthwhile and, not being familiar with the area, the possibility of getting lost.

I teamed up with Katherine Davies and we decided to look for inspiration on the streets. After spending some time wandering through Greenwich and discussing the brief, we decided that what we needed was some kind of sociological investigative purpose. Neither of us was comfortable with passing ourselves off as photography students, and we felt that we needed a justification for our activity, an explanation which assured both ourselves and the people who's pictures we wanted to take that we had a good reason to be doing what we were doing. Immediately feeling better after we had asserted our identity as sociologists and excused our inability to handle the camera, as well as having alleviated our anxieties about approaching people in the street, we headed off to take some photos.

We decided to focus on the contrast between the hairdressers and barbershops in New Cross. Thinking about our subject matter as a sociological project we discussed the possibility of taking photographs that would capture the gender differences, social interaction and community function of the salons. Even if we couldn't take a good photo, at least there would be some meaning behind the pictures. We started by photographing the window front of a women's salon on the market corner. Pasted with idealised images of perfectly coiffed models, we were just able to catch glimpses of the real women inside and, beginning to feel conspicuous in our activity, we decided to go in, explain ourselves, and ask permission to photograph. The salon was bustling with women and children and was obviously a significant space for socialising. However once inside we had difficulty obtaining permission to photograph from all the customers as well as the

owner of the salon. By the time we took the first photograph a number of people had moved away and the lens of the camera had steamed up by the time the second photograph was taken.

The second establishment we chose to photograph was a barbershop that we had seen at the very beginning of our time out with the camera. We had both been struck by the starkness of the window front, which stood out in contrast with the adorned exterior of the hairdressers. Using the powerful zoom on the camera we were able to photograph the interior of the barbershop from across the busy street. Unnoticed on the far side of the high street, we were able to capture the interaction between the two men who were laughing and chatting as they went about their business. While we were pleased with the results, we soon began to feel like covert observers of a private moment. Uncomfortable with our furtive voyeurism and wanting to gain further access we again decided to try our luck and go inside. When we ventured in to take some close up shots we were surprised to find that the shop was full of men waiting for a hair cut, laughing and joking together. From the outside the shop had appeared empty apart from the barber and his one client in the window, and the discovery challenged the assumptions we had been forming through our observation about the gender differences and social function of male and female salons. We worked hard to negotiate consent and agreed with the barber that we could take a few close-up shots through the window. Although we now had permission, the barber purposefully turned his back when the photographs were taken, obscuring his own face along with that of his customer. This left us feeling conspicuous and even more voyeuristic than we had from across the street. It was obvious that the men did not want to have their picture taken, and our intrusion resulted in their decision to change their behaviour. The subterfuge of asking to photograph through the window had

been sensed and in the last image we took the photographer is reflected in the window, capturing my presence and the situation we had produced.



Captured within the image as the object of my own study

The photograph is, I think, an exemplar of one way in which "methods not only represent but also shape social realities, have implications for the processes and politics through which our research is crafted, as well as our own situated subjectivities as researchers." (Exploding Method: A New Scholars Symposium 2007). The image of the barbershop (above) reflects the social and ethical drama on each side of the lens. The men continue with their performance of a private ritual in a public space, allowing me to observe through the window but turning their backs to the lens. Meanwhile, I am captured within the image as the object of my own study, frozen in the alternative world of the barbershop that I am

not a part of. The presence of the camera, the process through which my research is crafted, has produced a different social reality. This doesn't necessarily mean it is a bad image or a failed image. As my supervisor Les Back has described it, "It shows that our respondents can always choose to disengage or not to look back. It's a lesson in humility for researchers that I think is a useful one. Yet they are there and we might interpret this in a number of ways. Equally, photography can't claim to recover or capture 'the real' unproblematically and maybe this is another lesson that the image itself teaches us. I think that the other thing that is alive in the photograph is that the encounters produced by our curiosity are productive rather than simply reflective. This is in the image itself (your reflection in the window) and the changed nature of the scene as you photographed it. The photograph itself represents the complexities at the heart of any kind of research dialogue." (Personal correspondence with Les Back, 2007).

The photographs which had the hairdressers and barbershops in New Cross as their focus incidentally became photographs of a research process, wherein the relations between the researcher and the researched were challenged, the role of observation undermined, and a new social situation created by the presence of the camera. It could be stated that questioning what happens when we look through the lens is an exercise in reflexivity; "the ways that the researcher's position shapes interaction in the field and subsequent interpretation." (Holliday, 2004 p.55). But as Holliday describes (ibid. p.56), the camera lens reflects the self back from an external location (literally in the above photograph), in distinction to the practice of reflexivity that is an internal process. Bourdieu, who took hundreds of photographs while conducting his sociological investigation during the war of Liberation in Algeria, could be described as practicing sociology 'in camera'. His photographs

served as field notes and were frequently taken from behind, showing the backs of his subjects of study. Whether the people in the photographs chose to turn their backs or Bourdieu purposefully sought this perspective, the positioning is indicative of an unobtrusive but voyeuristic sociologist who did not see himself as a part of the social reality he was observing. His photographs show passive subjects, in stark contrast with the more common genre of anthropological front-on pose in which the subject presents himself to the camera and the researcher looks back with a classifying gaze. Yet Bourdieu's photographs from behind seem to ask a question that images of performative and direct poses do not. The camera lens reflects the self back from the external location; photographers may take photographs in private, hidden by the lens and apart from the social situation, but they are always present in the field. As Back states, "It is a mistake, I think, to see the lens as only looking one way." (Back 2004, p.137). Photography, like research, is a two way process and the question of who is being observed hovers overhead. Bourdieu, with his camera slung around his neck and scribbling in his notebook must have been a curious sight to the men, women and children in Algeria at that time.

Whether photographs are given or taken (Back 2004, p.132), photography, as Bourdieu recognised, is an embodied practice of sociology which combines constructivist and phenomenological frameworks both in the field and in the captured image. It is a misnomer that photographs are an objective method of recording; instead observation undermines itself. However rather than leading to a crisis of representation, this leaves a space for response, interpretation, incompleteness and undecidability. As Alvarado (2001, p.8) writes, photographs do not authoritatively state how it was, but ask a more interesting question, how could it have been? Whether the photograph is taken seriously as evidence relies not on

how accurate or definitive a record it is, but on the criteria we apply to it, the discourses and frameworks around it, and what is done with the image itself. Like photographs, sociology is deceptive and multi-layered, not transparent or descriptive of a stable reality but an engagement with social reality, and the craft of practicing it is what makes it 'good' or 'bad'. Like most people, I am comfortable taking photographs of friends, family and holidays. But going beyond these prescribed social conventions, for photography is a socially regulated practice, took me out of my comfort zone and I found it hard to justify my presence with a camera on the street. I was aware that I did not have the technical expertise or confidence of a photographer that people would expect of someone walking around with a professional camera asking to take portraits, although I overcame this to an extent by thinking about my activities as those of a sociologist in the field. As a good sociologist, I had been concerned with the ethics of the situations I found myself in. While photographers too have an ethical code of conduct, my discomfort with the camera fuelled the sensation of voyeurism that led me to question whether it was all right to take almost every picture. In fact, the issues created by the presence of the camera were themselves productive of a visual sociology of the 'complexities at the heart of any kind of research dialogue.'

References

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