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Talking about pictures: a case for photo elicitation

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This paper is a definition of photo elicitation and a history of its development in anthropology and sociology. The view of photo elicitation in these disciplines, where the greatest number of photo elicitation studies have taken place, organizes photo elicitation studies by topic and by form. The paper also presents practical considerations from a frequent photo elicitation researcher and concludes that photo elicitation enlarges the possibilities of conventional empirical research. In addition, the paper argues that photo elicitation also produces a different kind of information. Photo elicitation evokes information, feelings, and memories that are due to the photograph's particular form of representation.

INTRODUCTION

On the connection of photographs to memory, John Berger wrote:

> The thrill found in a photograph comes from the onrush of memory. This is obvious when it's a picture of something we once knew. That house we lived in. Mother when young.
>
> But in another sense, we once knew everything we recognize in any photo. That's grass growing. Tiles on a roof get wet like that, don't they. Here is one of the seven ways in which bosses smile. This is a woman's shoulder, not a man's. Just the way snow melts.
>
> Memory is a strange faculty. The sharper and more isolated the stimulus memory receives, the more it remembers; the more comprehensive the stimulus, the less it remembers. This is perhaps why black-and-white photography is paradoxically more evocative than colour photography. It stimulates a faster onrush of memories because less has been given, more has been left out… (1992:192–193).

This paper is an overview of photo elicitation: a history and an assessment of its use and potential. I make the case for photo elicitation based on my experience with the method, and my sense that its potential usefulness is huge and now largely unrecognized.

DEFINITIONS

Photo elicitation is based on the simple idea of inserting a photograph into a research interview. The difference between interviews using images and text, and interviews using words alone lies in the ways we respond to these two forms of symbolic representation. This has a physical basis: the parts of the brain that process visual information are evolutionarily older than the parts that process verbal information. Thus images evoke deeper elements of human consciousness that do words; exchanges based on words alone utilize less of the brain's capacity than do exchanges in which the brain is processing images as well as words. These may be some of the reasons the photo elicitation interview seems like not simply an interview process that elicits more information, but rather one that evokes a different kind of information.

Most elicitation studies use photographs, but there is no reason studies cannot be done with paintings, cartoons, public displays such as graffiti or advertising billboards or virtually any visual image.[1] But at this point nearly all elicitation research has been based on photographs and that shall be the focus of my paper.

The photographs used in photo elicitation research extend along a continuum. At one extreme are what might be considered the most scientific, that is, visual inventories of objects, people and artifacts. Like all photographs these represent the subjectivities embodied in framing, exposure and other technical considerations. Photographs of this type are typical of anthropological field studies.

In the middle of the continuum are images that depict events that were part of collective or institutional pasts. These might be photos of work, schools, or other institutional experiences, or images depicting events that occurred earlier in the lifetimes of the subjects. These images may connect an individual to experiences or eras even if the images do not reflect the research subject's actual lives.

At the other extreme of our continuum photographs portray the intimate dimensions of the social – family or other intimate social group, or one's own body. Elicitation interviews connect "core definitions of the self" to society, culture and history. This work corresponds to postmodern sociology's decentered

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narrative; of the sociology of the body, and of social studies of emotion.

Other Forms of Image Elicitation

Before looking in more depth at photo elicitation research, I briefly note the existence of elicitation research done with film or video. Edgar Morin, a French sociologist, and Jean Rouch, a French visual anthropologist, produced the film *Chronique d'un été* (*Chronicle of a Summer*)[2] which measured the cultural pulse of Paris at the end of the 1950s by interviewing several randomly chosen Parisians on the matter of happiness and truth. In the final sequences, the amateur actors watch the rushes and reflect on their filmed portraits. Thus the film consisted of both subject and analysis – people observed, and people commenting on their natural performances. The film was the first to use this technique, which was made possible with newly developed portable sound sync movie cameras. Many documentaries in the meantime have included reflexive, or elicitive devises (see Nichols 1991:44–56).

Within visual anthropology there have been a small number of film elicitation studies. For example, Linda Connor, Patsy and Tim Asch filmed the Balinese healer Jero Tapakan in a conventional ethnographic film, and then recorded her reaction to seeing these films in a second separate film. Film one presents itself as a conventional anthropological film; film two shows the savvy Jero Tapakan asserting her own self-definition against that provided by the first film.

These and a few additional experiments[3] are most of the film elicitations found in anthropology. The reasons may have to do with the difficulties encountered in constructing films-about-films, as Marcus Banks recently noted: "…even more so than still photography, the moving image – film, video or television broadcast – is a wayward medium, difficult for the researcher to control" (2001:99). This waywardness is partly film's grounding in time and the spoken word, and the resulting fact that a film can contain very few words relative to an essay or book. The organization of film based on elicitation presents the difficult problem of having people speak about images which must be presented to the film viewer; yet a film seldom works well if it is rooted in static images.[4]

ORIGINS AND DEVELOPMENT

Photo elicitation was first named in a paper published by the photographer and researcher John Collier (1957), who was, in the mid-1950s, a member of Cornell University's multi-disciplinary research team examining mental health in changing communities in the Maritime Provinces in Canada. Collier proposed photo interviewing as the solution to a practical problem: research teams were having difficulty agreeing on categories of the quality of housing in the research area. Collier's photographic survey made it possible for researchers to agree on their previously taken-for-granted categories.

The technique was put to use in research when the Cornell team used photo elicitation to examine how families adapted to residence among ethnically different people, and to new forms of work in urban factories. The overriding question was the environmental basis of psychological stress. The researchers had found these themes difficult to explore in surveys or in-depth interviews and decided to try a new interview technique using photographic images of old and new worlds inhabited by the subjects. What was particularly useful about this was that the researchers did photo elicitation interviews as well as non-photographic interviews with the same families to see how each method worked. The researchers felt that the photos sharpened the informants' memory and reduced the areas of misunderstanding. Collier concluded:

> The characteristics of the two methods of interviewing can be simply stated. The material obtained with photographs was precise and at times even encyclopedic; the control interviews were less structured, rambling, and freer in association. Statements in the photo-interviews were in direct response to the graphic probes and different in character as the content of the pictures differed, whereas the character of the control interviews seemed to be governed by the mood of the informants. (1957:856)

Further, Collier noted: "The pictures elicited longer and more comprehensive interviews but at the same time helped subjects overcome the fatigue and repetition of conventional interviews" (1957:858). Collier noted that photo interviewing involved: "…a more subtle function of graphic imagery. This was its compelling effect upon the informant, its ability to prod latent memory, to stimulate and release emotional statements about the informant's life…" (1957:858).

The report of this experiment was published in 1957 in the *American Anthropologist*. Collier's text on visual anthropology, which described this and further experiments with photo interviewing, was published ten years later (Collier 1967) and became the standard introduction to visual anthropology and sociology, published in expanded form two decades later (Collier and Collier 1986). In later years Collier continued to make the case for photo elicitation, for example in his contribution to the inaugural issue of the journal *Visual Anthropology* (Collier 1987).

Announced with such fanfare one would expect the method to have attracted an energetic following in anthropology, but only a small number of published studies have relied on photo elicitation. It may be photo elicitation takes place informally in routine field work and that its impact is not formally realized. For example, in the course of research on a rural community in Italy, Paolo Chiozzi recalls talking to a subject whose house had been bombed during World War II. He showed his informant a catalogue of a photo book documenting the town during the early part of the century: "Suddenly I was overwhelmed with information which, until that moment, had been given fragmentarily or with some reluctance not because of any distrust, but from a lack of real involvement of the informant" (1989:45). These interviews were folded into an ethnography but not presented as a photo elicitation study.

Fadwa el Guindi tells a similar story about field work in Latin America:

> Following a regular, in-depth interview … I showed [the informant] … slides I had taken of ritual events and recorded his comments and reactions to them. I had no fixed notion as to what to expect nor what specific questions to ask him … In one instance … the informant pointed to two stones placed on the shrine and volunteered valuable information about the[ir] "sacredness" … (which as I had observed frequently, were regularly used by the village caretakers to pound dirt on the grave after burial). The other instance concerned a slide of the church altar decorated elaborately for the Christmas ceremonies. In an enthusiastic burst, Martin pointed to the altar saying: "Ha, there is the little house already raised." This comment led to an extended discussion revealing rich data on various aspects of Christmas and Easter-related rituals and myths. (1998:477)

Thus it may be the case that anthropologists often use photographs in interviews but that few of these are written up as photo elicitation studies. Anthropological studies that rely primarily on photo elicitation, however, are few and far between. For example, in the entire publication run of *Studies in the Anthropology of Visual Communication* (1974–1979; renamed *Studies in Visual Communication* 1980–1985) there appeared only three articles relying primarily on photo elicitation: Ximena Bunster B.'s (1978) study of the culture of proletarian mothers in Peru (expanded to a book in 1989), Paul Messaris and Larry Gross' (1977) analysis of how different age groups interpreted a fictional photo story about a medical doctor's indifference to an automobile accident, and Victor Calderola's (1985) study of duck egg

harvesting in Indonesia. In Hockings' encyclopedic *Principles of Visual Anthropology* (1975), photo interviewing is only mentioned in passing in a small number of studies, and does not warrant a separate discussion. Examining the journal *Visual Anthropology* (1986 to the present) and the *Visual Anthropology Review* (approximately the same run) finds almost no photo elicitation-based research, except for a study by Keith Kenney of self-portraiture and identity (1993).

Photo elicitation has played a greater role in recent developments in visual sociology. In the seminal visual sociology text, Jon Wagner (1978) lists "photographs as interview stimuli" as one of four visual research strategies. His own contribution to that volume was a photo elicitation study of "perceiving a planned community" (1978:83–100). In papers offering definitions and research strategies for visual sociology (Harper 1987a, 1988, 2000) photo elicitation was defined as one of four ways researchers might use photographs in standard research techniques. In other papers (Harper 1993, 1998) I suggested that photo elicitation be regarded as a postmodern dialogue based on the authority of the subject rather than the researcher. Even Emmison and Smith, openly hostile to photography in a recent book on visual methods, include photo elicitation exercises designed for students (2001:36–38).

The greatest concentration of photo elicitation studies have been published in the journal *Visual Sociology.* Photo elicitation demonstrated the polysemic quality of the image; it thrust *images* into the center of a research agenda; it demonstrated the usefulness of images ranging from fine-arts quality documentary to family snapshots. Due to its decentering of the authority of the author, photo elicitation addresses some of the postmodernism of ethnography itself. For these reasons it seems to be a particularly sociological version of visual research.

Photo elicitation has also crept into the disciplines of psychology (Sustik 1999), education (Dempsey *et al.* 1994; Smith *et al.* 1999) and organizational studies (Buchanan 1998), but to this point is treated as a waif on the margins rather than as a robust actor in a developing research traditions.

MAPPING THE TERRAIN

In the following I refer to the Appendix, which lists photo elicitation studies organized chronologically and by topic. I have attempted to locate all examples of photo elicitation but I may have inadvertently omitted important examples. Some will undoubtedly disagree with my typology. Still, it will provide a starting point which should help researchers locate their own research projects, either planned or in progress. I have excluded documentary studies, that

Table 1.   Photo elicitation: forms and topics

	Dissertations	Books	Articles, reflections on larger studies	Articles, research fully described
Social class/social organization/family	2 (Guschker 2000; Sustik 1999)	3 (Barndt 1980, 1990; Bunster B. 1989)	2 (Collier 1957; Guindi 1998)	2 (Calderola 1985; Steiger 1995)
Community/historical ethnography	1 (Sampson-Cordle 2001)	2 (Harper 2001; Schwartz 1992)	2 (Chiozzi 1989; Rusted 1995)	6 (Orellana 1999; Suchar 1988, 1992; Suchar and Rotenberg 1994; van der Does et al. 1992; Wagner 1978)
Identity/biography/ autobiography		3 (Harper 1987b, 1994; Spence 1986)		7 (Blinn and Harrist 1991; Clark 1999; Gold 1991; Hethorn and Kaiser 1999; Jansen 1991; Kenney 1993; Smith 1999)
Culture/cultural studies			1 (Faccioli and Zuccheri 1998)	8 (Craig et al. 1997; Curry and Strauss 1986; Harper 2000; Kretsedemas 1993; Messaris and Gross 1977; Snyder 1990; Snyder and Ammons 1993; Stiebling 1999)

is, those done apart from sociological or other academic theoretical and methodological considerations from this consideration.

Photo elicitation studies have been concentrated in four areas, social organization/social class, community, identity and culture (in the case of culture we make the strange bedfellows of cultural studies and studies of culture). If we present this information in a slightly different form (Table 1), we see how studies done in different depths have taken place in different subject areas. This table excludes those entries that fall outside the four topics listed.

The following discussion highlights how photo elicitation has operated in some of these subject areas and forms of inquiry. The discussion does not cover all cells of the table.

Social Class/Social Organization/Family

These studies include empirical study of family photographs (Guschker 2000), books that document popular education movements (Barndt 1980, 1990), reports of larger projects in which photo elicitation studies played a part, and studies in which researchers completed projects on the impact of children on family dynamics (Steiger 1995), and the social organization of an Indonesian village (Calderola 1985). Many of the photographs used in these studies catalogue social life; other photographs are produced by the people being researched.

Steiger's study demonstrates how technical aspects of photographs contribute to the communication of sociological ideas. Steiger uses techniques such as double flash, varying shutter speeds and the child's perspective (Figure 1) to suggest the phenomenological frame of the child. Her subjects come from several social classes in Switzerland, which allows

the viewer to easily compare the material circumstances of families with first children, and the meanings of these family changes.

Steiger has in the meantime rephotographed couples as they age, move, and add children to their families. The elicitation interviews now include the themes of family change and development, and the photographs comprise a kind of family album.

Community and Historical Ethnography

Suchar's studies of gentrification (1988, 1992; Suchar and Rotenberg 1994) use photographs to show how urban residents transform urban neighborhoods based on strategies which derive from their own social locations and identities. Suchar's photographs record refurbishing, redecorating, and ways of occupying space. Suchar approaches his project as a documentary photographer and his photographic skill and sociological acuity lead to visual essays that could grace museum walls as well as sociological articles. The portfolios of fine-arts quality images presented to research subjects encourage serious engagement (Figure 2).

Suchar's environmentally contexted portraits portray new residents, who represent the gentrification process, and long-term residents whose worlds are threatened by gentrification. Subjects are posed in their apartments and houses, surrounded by the objects through which they define their spaces. The work recalls the portraits and environmental studies of suburbia completed by Bill Owens in 1972. Owens, a photojournalist who was then a student of John Collier, included brief statements from the people he photographed, a rudimentary form of photo elicitation. Suchar's work more fully develops this method by including lengthy and analytically driven

Figure 1. This photograph shows a mother who integrates her child into her work-world.
Subject: "This picture was taken before Caspar could walk. It was easier to bring him along to work then. Now he can walk and reach much more to tear things up!"
"When I take him to work, I always hope that the telephone won't ring. When I work together with somebody else, I often take him along, so that I don't have to answer the telephone. Or I take him during vacation time in July and August because there are fewer consultations. Today I had a consultation that was not too difficult and during that half hour Caspar was totally quiet. I was glad about that. Otherwise I would have explained that I am here alone with Caspar and that when everybody else is on vacation I have to work much more." [continues]

interviews. Both Owens and Suchar used medium format photography and produced images consistent with that photographic technology.

It is not, however, necessary to base elicitation research on professional documentary or art photographs. Sampson-Cordle's recent dissertation (2001) studies the relationship between a rural school and its community by having study subjects (teachers, community members and students) photograph their worlds with inexpensive automatic cameras. Her methods include what she calls "photofeedback" (where photographers analyze their photographs with written comments, what might be called photo-self-elicitation), "photointerviewing" (a more conventional form of photo elicitation) and "photoessays," where subjects integrate several elements of analytical thinking, images and reflection.

She first performed several pilot studies, working as a photographer, to uncover "the biases that might come out of years of being a rural educator." In these pilot studies she photographed the social world under consideration and assembled the text and images to make a photo essay. In the analysis sections of the pilot studies she considered her changing role in the community as a researcher and politically committed individual.

These essays were integrated into the lengthy and many-dimensioned community study. Sampson-Cordle shows how people who are not skilled photographers, working with extremely modest equipment, can be taught to record their social worlds and to process those visual statements in self-interviewing and conventional elicitation methods (Figure 3).

Historical ethnography can be considered the memory of community. For photo elicitation to create historical ethnography, photographs must represent the earlier experience of people interviewed. In practical terms, this means that the photos cannot be more than sixty or perhaps seventy years old.

One book-length historical ethnography relies on photo elicitation (Harper 2001). Here the photos show the collective organization of agricultural labor, farming technology sixty years in the past, and portraits that evoke an era in which rural identities were etched

Figure 2. Suchar: "…could you tell me a little about the things in the photograph … are there significant things there?"
Subject: "The big thing is David and Daniel … and Max the cat … our other cat Missy would be jealous … I should have dusted the trays."
Suchar: "What about the trays and ice cream collection? That's obviously a major part of the house."
Subject: "They're a major part of this room, but we try to keep it somewhat balanced. We have it balanced so that the collection doesn't take over the house … We've been to some people's houses where the collections take over the house; where they're everywhere and become oppressive … I've been to a friend's house in Atlanta, where you can't sit down; you've got to move things to sit down … When you live with it [the collection] you don't think about it." [continues]

in the facial expressions, the gestures, the clothes and the interactional mannerisms of the people photographed. The farmers in the historical photographs were different than the subjects who were interviewed, but their farming was the same as experienced by the research subjects. The historical photographs became a kind of memory bookend, a starting point from which to evaluate changes in farming which had occurred in the meantime. In this instance the historical photographs operated simultaneously on the empirical dimension (the farmers' saw in the photographs details of work they had not specifically imagined for decades) and subjective dimension as the research subjects saw themselves implicitly in images from earlier decades of their lives.

Identity

Researchers using photo elicitation have examined the social identity of kids, drug addicts, ethnically different immigrants, work worlds and visual autobi-ography. As in the case of community, photographic studies of identity rely heavily on what is seen, raising the question of what parts of identity are not visible! Jo Spence's (1986) autobiography employs her body as a text to confront the social definitions of physical attractiveness and the experience of her own debilitating illness. One other study (Harper 1987b) is a book-length portrait of a single individual: here Willie, a rural artisan, reflects on photographs of his fixing, building, deconstructing and in creating and recreating himself through his work.

Several studies of identity focus on ways people mark themselves through clothes, or how they are marked by illness or ethnic differences. The importance of clothes for adolescents made it a natural study using photo elicitation (Hethorn and Kaiser 1999). In the matter of ethnicity, the *in*visibility of ethnic difference to outsiders make a photo elicitation a natural method, as demonstrated in Gold's research on Asian immigrants' definition of Asian ethnicity (1991).

Figure 3.   The photograph informs narrative passages such as the following excerpt from the dissertation:
"It's over. The evening's awards, essays, words of encouragement and inspiration, anecdotes, acknowledgements, songs, and tears give way to applause. The new graduates stand and turn to leave the stage. In honor of the new graduates, the school's juniors follow tradition and hold lit candles, standing along the aisle to send their former classmates off into the world and to take their place as the new legion at the top of the class. With much fanfare, the audience cheers and applauds the six young adults who are whisking by, holding their caps to their heads and clutching their diplomas in hand … As the applause subsides, the house lights are brought up. Audience members and distinguished guests stand and stretch in the auditorium made cooler by the night breezes. They turn and shake hands, hug, or call out to acquaintances, former teachers, neighbors, customers, coworkers, and family members. Some of these individuals are parents who have just completed an official association with the school that began thirteen years ago. Many of the ceremony's attendees are Woody Gap graduates with children, grandchildren or great-grandchildren enrolled at Woody Gap School. There are some children racing down the aisle who are attending the school their great great-grandparents attended sixty years ago."

The key element is not the form of the visual representation, but its relationship with the culture under study. Images may be made by the researcher or the subject during the research, or they may have been made prior to the study, as in the case of where subjects interpret their pasts through the analysis of photo archives (Chiozzi 1989; Harper 2001).

Culture/Cultural Studies

At the core of cultural studies is the interpretation of signs. A common criticism of cultural studies is that researchers often assume how audiences or a public define hegemonic or other ideological messages. Photo elicitation offers a means for grounding cultural studies in the mundane interpretations of culture users. Three studies of advertising texts (Craig *et al.* 1997; Harper and Faccioli 2000; Kretsedemas 1993) may offer a model of how this could be done. In these

studies researchers interviewed subjects such as African Americans, Italian and American women and others about meanings of advertisements to show how the groups that advertisements are aimed at interpret (accept, contest, or reject) their messages. These insights must then be understood theoretically, that is, as indicators of cultural processing of sociologically meaningful messages.

Several elicitation studies focused on the meaning of local cultures. In these studies a researcher takes photographs of a group doing its normal round of activity. Interviews inspire subjects to define how they interpret the events depicted. Several athletic subcultures have been investigated in this manner (Curry and Strauss 1986; Snyder 1990; Snyder and Ammons 1993). This is a straight-forward procedure which sometimes produces studies that beg for greater theoretical and substan-tive significance. In other words, the micro study

Figure 4. Farmers used aerial photos to describe technologies of farming that were hardly visible at ground level, such as the manure pit shown in this image. Having several aerial photographs of farms available in an interview encouraged farmers to discuss how and why they and their neighbors had chosen one strategy over another.

culture that can be visualized may become an end in itself. With this muted criticism in mind, it is most remarkable how few investigations of local culture have used photo elicitation, an obvious choice for circumstances in which the local cultures have a distinctive visual character.

METHODOLOGICAL INSIGHTS FROM A FREQUENT FLYER

In-depth interviewing in all its forms faces the challenge of establishing communication between two people who rarely share taken-for-granted cultural backgrounds. Sociological questions are often not meaningful to non-sociologists. There is the need, described in all qualitative methods books, of bridging gaps between the worlds of the researcher and the researched. Photo elicitation may overcome the difficulties posed by in-depth interviewing because it is anchored in an image that is understood, at least in part, by both parties. If the interview has been successful, the understanding has increased through the interview process. In the following I discuss two ways in which photo elicitation may lead researchers and subjects toward that common understanding.

Breaking Frames

Photos do not automatically elicit useful interviews. For example, I photographed farmers in my neighborhood to guide interviews that I hoped would explore the phenomenology of farming. I was interested in how farmers defined the land, animals they raised, milked and decided the fate of; the changing role of agricultural technology; their relationships with neighbors and their identity as farmers. The photographs I made of their work did not evoke deep reflections on the issues I was interested in. I came to think that it was perhaps because my photographs looked essentially like the illustrations in the many farm magazines found in the house and shop. They did not *break the frame* of farmers' normal views; they did not lead to a reflective stance vis-à-vis the taken-for-granted aspects of work and community.

I was eventually able to gain this perspective (Harper 2001) by using aerial photographs (Figure 4) and historical photographs (Figure 5). The aerial photos led farmers to reflect upon farm strategies, structural differences between farms and the patterns of change. The historical photos evoked aspects of the past that have a great deal of significance in the

Figure 5.   This photograph, of a neighborhood threshing crew, circa 1945, was shown to several farmers who had worked together in similar crews during their youth. Several messages were conveyed: farmers remembered the social connections they experienced as part of such work crews, and they remembered details of events, people, and circumstances that gave meaning to the memory of farming. The farm wives who had prepared the feast the men were eating often contested these idyllic perspectives: the labor exchange required intense preparation and little of the sociability experienced by the men.

context of farming's continuing evolution. Suddenly previously taciturn farmers had a great deal to say.

I faced a similar problem studying the skill and social existence of an individual working in a mechanical shop (Harper 1987b). At first I photographed from what one would take as the normal view, that is, with a 35-mm lens held at eye level. I was reproducing the perspective through which any person in the environment would gaze, and these photographs did not lead to any deep commentary from Willie, the shop owner. When I photographed from unusual angles, or from very close (Figure 6), it led Willie to see his activities from a new and interesting perspective.

As Willie saw his world from a new perspective, he came to realize how little of it I understood. Willie then welcomed a role in which he used the photos to teach me about his normal routines and knowledge. He also began to make suggestions for what and how

I should photograph for the next stages of our research.

These few examples demonstrate how photographs can jolt subjects into a new awareness of their social existence. As someone considers this new framing of taken-for-granted experiences they are able to deconstruct[5] their own phenomenological assumptions.

Crossing Cultural Boundaries

The idea behind breaking the frame is that photographs may lead an individual to a new view of their social existence. It is also possible to use images as bridges between worlds that are more culturally distinct. In ongoing research, two colleagues, one American (the author) and the other Italian (Faccioli) are using photo elicitation in research on Italian culture. In these studies (Harper 2000; Harper and

Figure 6.   "What I find hard about sharpening a chain saw," I say, "is transferring the pressure from one hand to the other so you…"
Willie: "…so you're keeping an even pressure going across – so you aren't rocking your file."
"I've watched you cut a slot in a log – [the saw] doesn't have to be in your vice – it doesn't have to be in a perfect situation – and no matter what position you're in you're still able to re-create the even pressure, the straight movement of the file across the teeth…"
Willie: "You've got to have the steady movement, the steady flow…" [continues]

Faccioli 2000), the American researcher has photographed topics such as the social life of a piazza; the negotiation of traffic from a bicycle and an auto in urban traffic, and family dinners in private homes. These photographs are then used in interviews with Italian subjects completed by the second author. In addition to deconstructing the portrayed events and scenes, normal questions include: "what has been left out" of this photo sequence?

Van der Does and her four Dutch co-authors (1992) used photo elicitation to explore the cultural definitions of five ethnically distinct Dutch neighbors. The five researchers completed interviews in which each subject outlined their history in the neighborhood. The researchers and subjects toured the neighborhood and photographed important topics. The researchers then completed photo elicitation interviews with the photos. Finally, the photo sequences were exchanged so, for example, an elderly white Dutch resident could see how her neighborhood is defined by a Moroccan youth, with whom she has never communicated and for whom she feels some degree of apprehension.

In these examples the photographs become something like a Rorschach ink blot in which people of different cultures spin out their respective worlds of meaning. This procedure is fueled by the radical but simple idea that two people standing side by side, looking at identical objects, see different things.[6] When a photo is made of that shared view, the differences in perception can be defined, compared and eventually understood to be socially constructed by both parties.

SUMMARY

Unlike many research methods, photo elicitation works (or does not) for rather mysterious reasons. I consider photo elicitation useful in studies that are empirical and rather conventional: photo elicitation may add validity and reliability to a word-based survey (recall, this was Collier's first project). But at the other extreme I believe photo elicitation mines

deeper shafts into a different part of human consciousness than do words-alone interviews. It is partly due to how remembering is enlarged by photographs and partly due to the particular quality of the photograph itself. Photographs appear to capture the impossible: a person gone; an event past. That extraordinary sense of seeming to retrieve something that has disappeared belongs alone to the photograph, and it leads to deep and interesting talk.

Throughout this paper I have maintained an impartial stance. The truth is that in photo elicitation I have found a method in which I have taken a deep pleasure. I think this is partly due to my interest in photographs. I want to enter the time machine promised by the image, knowing, of course, that I cannot. Because I feel this way about photographs, it is natural that I want to share them with others.

My enthusiasm for photo elicitation also comes from the collaboration it inspires. When two or more people discuss the meaning of photographs they try to figure out something together. This is, I believe, an ideal model for research.

APPENDIX
Elicitation Studies by Type; Presented Chronologically

A. Social Organization/Social Class/Family

1. Sustik, Anne. 1999. "An auto-photographic, naturalistic investigation of the adjustment of refugees from the former Soviet Union to Life in the United States" (dissertation).
2. Guindi, Fadwa El. 1998. "From pictorializing to visual anthropology" (report of completed research).
3. Steiger, Ricabeth. 1995. "First children and family dynamics" (article, first step of longitudinal study).
4. Calderola, Victor. 1985. "Visual contexts: a photographic research method in anthropology" (article; report of larger study).
5. Barndt, Deborah. 1980. *Education and Social Change: A Photographic Study of Peru* (book).
6. Bunster, Ximena. 1978. "Talking pictures: a study of proletarian mothers in Lima, Peru" (article; expanded and published as: Bunster, Ximena, E. Chaney and E. Young. 1989. *Sellers and Servants: Working Women in Lima, Peru*, book).
7. Collier, John Jr, 1957. "Photography in anthropology: a report on two experiments" (reports on completed research).

B. Community

1. Sampson-Cordle, Alice Vera. 2001. "Exploring the relationship between a small rural school in Northeast Georgia and its community: an image-based study using participant-produced photographs" (dissertation).
2. Orellana, Marjorie Faulstich. 1999. "Space and place in an urban landscape: learning from children's views of their social worlds" (article).
3. Rusted, Brian. 1995. "Framing a house: photography and the performance of heritage" (article).
4. Suchar, Charles S. and Robert Rotenberg. 1994. "Judging the adequacy of shelter: a case from Lincoln Park" (article).
5. van der Does, Patricia, Sonja Edelaar, Imke Gooskens, Margreet Liefting and Marije van Mierlo. 1992. "Reading images: a study of a Dutch neighborhood" (article).
6. Suchar, Charles S. 1992. "Icons and images of gentrification: the changed material culture of an urban community" (article).
7. Schwartz, Dona. 1992. *Waucoma Twilight: Generations of the Farm* (book).
8. Suchar, Charles S. 1988. "Photographing the changing material culture of a gentrified community" (article).
9. Wagner, Jon. 1978. "Perceiving a planned community" (chapter).

C. Historical Ethnography

1. Harper, Douglas. 2001. *Changing Works: Visions of a Lost Agriculture* (book).
2. Chiozzi, Paolo. 1989. "Photography and anthropological research: three case studies" (article).

D. Identity/Biography

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NOTES

[1] I identified only one elicitation study that was based on visual texts other than photographs. Peter Cowan (1999) studied the art Latino adolescents painted on low-rider autos with elicitation interviews. His study examined the intersections of age, ethnicity, power and artistic practice. The paintings are semiotic collages that draw on various and conflicting meanings of Latino past, and they are well painted. For the study, however, the subjects commented on photographs of their art texts rather than the texts themselves.

[2] "Chronicle of a Summer" was the subject of *Studies in Visual Communication* 11(1), 1985. The journal edition included articles by the filmmakers, some of the participants and the complete filmscript, providing a model for a sociological study of film.

[3] For an overview of these related projects, see the text by Connor et al. (1986).

[4] See Krebs (1975) for an overview and procedural suggestions. Banks (2001:96–99) describes challenges and difficulties of using film elicitation. Recent film elicitation studies include Bissell (2000).

[5] For a useful description of deconstruction based on non-elicitation interviewing see Gubrium et al. (1994:47, 182–203). The natural methodological connection between phenomenologically inspired researchers and photo elicitation has yet to be developed.

[6] For an yet another interesting connection yet to be made, see Zerubavel (1997:23–34). Zerubavel calls the visual construction of reality "social optics" but does not associate his cognitive sociology to its natural parallels in visual sociology or photo elicitation.

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