

Enacting Public Sociology: Promoting Mutual Education through Arts-based Research

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Abstract

Visual scholarship can be of great importance to public sociology. Cameras construct communities, and can be tools for facilitating productive and complex interactions. Arts-based research, a relatively newer approach, emerges through this discussion as an excellent way to further the goals of a public sociology through visual methods. Allowing space for collaboration and expression that potentially resist academic norms, arts-based research creates interesting avenues for critiquing the production of visual knowledge, making academic research a matter of public interest, and offering an interrogation of the researcher, the researched, and the broader context of cultural production.

Keywords

Visual Sociology; Arts-Based Research; Mutual Education.

1. Introduction

As visual sociology gains wider recognition within the discipline generally, questions arise as to what visual methods can be most useful when practicing public sociology. Visual methods of sociological representation can be remarkably powerful, as they “not only give way to the depicted subject or object, but also tend to embody very revealing aspects about the producer and culture of production” (Pauwels, 2015, p. 310). This inherent dialogue within representations opens up fascinating avenues for public sociology, as visuals can provide a narrative and engagement with both the represented subject and the creator. As such a powerful tool, public sociology must carefully incorporate visual methods.

Academic visual sociology, preoccupied with finding its place within traditional sociological scholarship, often falls short in its commitment to reach the general public and academic audiences. Documentary photography and photojournalism also present some challenges in the pursuit of the co-creation of knowledge among various publics. Arts-based research, a relatively newer approach, emerges through this discussion as an excellent way to further the goals of a public sociology through visual methods. Allowing space for collaboration and expression that potentially resist academic norms, arts-based research creates interesting avenues for critiquing the production of visual knowledge, making academic research a matter of public interest, and offering an interrogation of the researcher, the researched, and the broader context of cultural production.

2. Public Sociology and Sociology's Use of Visual Forms

Public sociology, as Burawoy (2005) describes, is a method of doing sociology that brings the discipline “into a conversation with publics, understood as people who are themselves involved in conversations” (p. 7). Public sociologists can take a more traditional path of writing opinion pieces in newspapers or books that appeal to broader audiences, or they can work to create an “organic public sociology,” which entails dialogue and mutual education (Burawoy, 2005, p. 8). This “organic” public sociology is necessarily deeply involved within various communities such

as labor movements or human rights organizations (Burawoy, 2005, p. 8). Public sociology takes sociological knowledge and transmits it to communities, and collaborates with different publics to create knowledge that is productive, useful, and accessible to the communities that helped produced it. Practices of public sociology can also create sociologists as a public, and provide new avenues for approaching students of sociology as a public that is involved in the co-creation of knowledge as opposed to being just a receptor. Visuals can provide an appealing and accessible way to create sociological knowledge for public consumption. It is of key importance to consider how public sociology should best incorporate visual methods.

As Becker (2007) argues, it is impossible to concretely define documentary photography and photojournalism. These visual practices “are whatever they have come to mean, or been made to mean, in their daily use in the worlds of photographic work, social constructions pure and simple” (Becker, 2007, p. 187). However, it is useful to present a discussion of the differences in practice between these methods for the purposes of this paper. In terms of commonalities, visual sociology, documentary photography, and photojournalism all normally give background information on the subject matter portrayed (Becker, 2007, p. 193).

The definition and practice of “visual sociology” has been the center of debate for quite some time. Visual sociology, or sociological stories told through images, has been relegated to the margins of sociology, but it can bring extremely beneficial insights to the discipline. Grady (1991) argues that making an effort to do visual sociology that is aesthetically compelling with a strong theoretical basis can encourage sociologists to incorporate visual scholarship more broadly and further enrich the discipline (p. 24). Sociology, broadly speaking, has oftentimes viewed visuals as “unscientific,” despite the widespread assumption of photography as an objective representation of reality (Becker, 2007, p. 191). Scholars of visual sociology runs the risk of being preoccupied with justifying their endeavors to other sociologists, rather than primarily focusing on facilitating public dialogue and collaboration.

Documentary photography was highly influential for early visual sociology (Harper, 2016, p. 239). According to Becker (2007), early documentary photography and visual sociology were conducted in much the same way, just with different publication outlets (p. 187-188). Although there is nothing in the absolute essence of an image that makes it documentary (Harper, 2012, p. 18), documentary photography as a contextual practice of visual knowledge production can provide a useful tool. For example, in the United States at the turn of the twentieth century, documentary photography as a category of visual production was utilized to expose social ills during a period of widespread social reform (Becker, 2007, p. 187). It is also a term applied to the photographic work done in the exploration of natural landscapes, different communities, architecture, and travel. Harper (2012) argues for the usefulness of documentary photography in sociology in that it can represent how different places looked in particular times, and can remind sociologists that “sociology begins with the observation of social life” (p. 37). It can also provide a valuable reminder of sociology’s ethical role in illustrating social problems and applying scholarly knowledge in service of social good.

As shown through this discussion, documentary photography can be highly valuable for sociological research. However, questions remain as to whether documentary photography effectively enables mutual education and the deepening of public conversations. Documentary photography has been intended as a force of social change, attempting to shed light on contemporary issues. This aspect is highly compatible with the practice of public sociology. However, documentary photography as practiced does not necessarily establish communication between the producer of images and the documented communities or allow for different publics to co-create the knowledge. As Becker (1998) describes, documentary photographers look at the images they have produced and “let what’s there be there” (p. 4). What is lacking is an interrogation of what social formations are being created through the relationship of the camera, the photographer, the community, the space, and the context. What

is there is there, but what relationships led to it being there, within the image? How would the people within the images express or create what is there?

Photojournalism is the production of images for journalistic purposes, “constrained by available space and by the prejudices, blind spots, and preconceived story lines of photographers’ editorial superiors” (Becker, 2007, p. 188). Much like documentary photography, photojournalism entails the observation of social life and has evolved into a distinct “conception of photography as a coordinate semi-independent way of conveying information” (Becker, 2007, p. 188). Photojournalism is readable and expresses a story about a specific event, place, or person. As a practice, photojournalism is necessarily oriented towards the public, as it provides visual narratives about events that have affected the public. However, the knowledge produced by photojournalism does not occur in a collaborative context where communities are exchanging knowledge with the photographer.

3. Interrogating the Image

Within each of these practices, room for further interrogation on the power of photographic representation is evident. Since its inception, photography has claimed the power to provide “evidence of the external world” (Winston, 1998, p. 53). Bourdieu (1996) describes photography as a “conventional system which expresses space in terms of the laws of perspective (or rather of one perspective)” (p. 73-74). Photography has been “assigned *social uses* that are held to be ‘realistic’ and ‘objective’” (Bourdieu, 1996, p. 74). However, images do not have an essential, automatic, and objective quality. Photography has the potential to disconcert, to grasp the imperceptible, and do dissolve the “solid and compact reality of everyday perception into an infinity of fleeting profiles” (Bourdieu, 1996, p. 76). But this potential is downplayed by the assumption that photographs serve as a method of scientifically recording the world.

There has been widespread recognition of the issues in photography’s assigned social functions. However, it cannot be assumed that images are simply “false”. Winston (1998) argues that only the “illusion that photographs are somehow *automatic* – scientific – reflections of the world should be abandoned” (p. 59). Rather, photographs should be considered reflections of the world in the way that writing and other visual arts are. Photography is not an objective representation of social reality; rather it is part of a conversation defining social reality. Cameras create community with fluidity and multiplicity, revealing the seen and the unseen (Lozowy et al., 2013, p. 207).

4. Arts-based Research: A Creative Approach to Representation and Engagement

Emerging between the 1970s and 1990s, arts-based research “adapts the tenets of the creative arts in social research in order to make that research publicly accessible, evocative, and engaged” (Chilton & Leavy, 2014, p. 403). Arts-based research furthers reflexivity, allowing not only collaborative research processes between sociologists, but also an opening up of space for collaboration between researchers and the public. It incorporates not just the visual, but also sound, performance, and other artistic modalities. An arts-based approach can also be highly valuable to an ethically committed sociology, as it lends itself well to the study of injustice and exploitation. Arts-based research also furthers the interrogation of documentary photography and photojournalism, highlighting how different conceptions of truth, representation, and subjectivities are formulated across social landscapes (Chilton & Leavy, 2014, p. 404). As Becker (2007) writes, representations lack fixed meaning and depend upon the social context and viewers perception (p. 203). An arts-based sociological approach can creatively destabilize the assigned meanings and social values of photography that Bourdieu discusses.

Throughout this discussion the idea of a changing and multifaceted nature of defining visual sociological work and how to incorporate an understanding of the photograph has emerged. When working amongst morphing definitions according to practice and social context, arts-based research appears to be the method most equipped to bring visual sociological practices into a public dialogue and question the function of the image. Considering Becker's (2007) discussion of defining the different visual realms of documentary photography, photojournalism, and visual sociology, arts-based research emerges as a method that can fruitfully incorporate differing methods and definitions in different contexts.

Arts-based research can creatively push the limits of representation within different photographic practices. Furthermore, arts-based research not only can interrogate sociological research, but also the broader art-world. As Batchen (2008) writes, traditional art history is unsettled by the rise of photography, and "generic snapshots" unsettle the study of photography. Arts-based research can disrupt sociological research by bringing in a wide variety of creative methods and also disrupt art history's conceptions of innovation and individuality by highlighting the sociological and communal significance of "boring images."

Burawoy (2005) inquires as to how the academic and the extra-academic are brought into dialogue (p. 8). Arts-based research can provide an answer to this inquiry. The project described by Lozowy et al. (2013) is an intriguing example of the incorporation of photography into sociology and how to bring academic and public spheres into dialogue. This project was based on youth's photographic explorations of Fort McMurray, Canada, a large resource extraction complex. The authors emphasize that this project was not visual sociology, where the concern with the camera lies in its role as "a methodological tool for representing or capturing community life" (Lozowy et al., 2013, p. 193). The collaboration between researchers, youth, camera technology, and the assemblage of resource extraction infrastructures articulated many levels of engagement and interaction. It is an excellent example of Chilton and Leavy's (2014) argument that arts-based research recognizes that "artistic, intersubjective realities are emergent and shifting, dialectical, hard to pin down, and difficult to convey in standard modes" (p. 403). This project was not documentary photography, nor was it photojournalism or visual sociology. It was a creative, educational, critical endeavor that interrogated the construction of a community rather than seeking to represent an already presupposed existing community.

5. Conclusion

Visual scholarship can be of great importance to public sociology. Cameras construct communities, and can be tools for facilitating productive and complex interactions. As Lozowy et al. (2013) write, "cameras as an apparatus of community thus take us to the frontiers of the sociological questions that can be asked and that are amenable to research" (p. 208). Public sociology must take this role of cameras very seriously and develop careful attention to fostering mutual education through visual representations. An arts-based approach can resist the limits of representation in scholarly visual sociology and make new creative ways of utilizing the art of photography for mutual education between sociologists and the various publics with which they are intertwined.

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