

Constructing credible images: Documentary studies, social research and visual studies

Jon Wagner
University of California, Davis

*D R A F T January 26 2004
(To appear in "Visual Studies," a special issue of the American Behavioral Scientist, 2004.
Gregory Stanczak, Guest Editor.)*

1. Introduction

Scholars interested in culture and social life have puzzled for some time over how to draw the line between social research and documentary studies, documentary photography and film making in particular. Some social scientists clearly embrace documentary studies as a vital complement to their own work, but others dismiss them for a lack of rigor and depth, or for neglecting social theory in favor of anecdotes, evocations and pretty pictures. Similarly, while some image makers regard the social sciences as a valued foundation for documentary photography and film making, others find them overly abstract and impersonal, insensitive to a fault, pedantic, or beside the point.

For the past thirty years or so, the terms defining this divide have been shaped for many social scientists by two seminal and complementary statements: John Collier Jr.'s 1967 book, Visual Anthropology: Photography as a Research Method, provided a thoughtful and encouraging account of how photographs could be used to make durable, visual records of culture and social life and to interview research subjects through a process of "photo elicitation." Though he had worked previously

as a documentary photographer in the Farm Security Administration, Collier's 1967 monograph argued that the kind of image-making most appropriate to the social sciences was systematic, deliberate and well-articulated with a traditional research design. Howard Becker's 1974 essay on "Photography and Sociology" (Becker 1986b) explicitly set aside the kind of systematic recording Collier recommended and made a somewhat different argument: that social documentary photography itself shared important elements of inquiry and representation with sociological work.



Figure 1

A photograph made by John Collier Jr. when he worked for the Farm Security Administration. The original caption reads: "Red Cross distributing knitting material. San Francisco, California, 1941." Photo by John Collier Jr., courtesy of the Library of Congress.

In this essay I'll propose a framework that take the two kinds of image-making that Becker and Collier teased apart and brings them together within a shared rubric of empirical social inquiry. Within this framework, documentary photography and visual social research are distinguished not so much by different logics of inquiry as by contrasting social conventions for addressing three key challenges: creating empirically credible images of culture and social life, framing empirical observations to highlight new knowledge, and challenging existing social theory.

In presenting this case, I'll first describe what I mean by empirical inquiry, visual social inquiry in particular, and where that fits within documentary studies and social scientific practice. I'll then review three recent documentary projects, paying particular attention to how they address the inquiry challenges noted above. A close look at these projects reveals several taken-for-granted features of social research that warrant further inquiry. These include the preeminence of research designs over personal accounts of observation and recording, a reliance on academic communities in defining new knowledge, and an overweening attraction to explicit, rather than implicit, statements of social theory.

Treating these features as working conventions of professional social researchers, rather than as determinants of systematic, empirical inquiry per se, could encourage more back and forth between social research and documentary studies. Taking that prospect seriously could stimulate new kinds of visual studies and enhance the value of empirical, visual inquiry in education, community development and public discourse.

2. Charting the empirical divide

For purposes of this essay I'll define empirical social inquiry as an effort to generate new knowledge of culture and social life through the systematic collection and analysis of sensory evidence and other forms of real world data. This definition falls across and somewhat outside the conventions of both academic social science and professional documentary work. It contrasts, for example, with the narrow view held by some social researchers that empirical studies are necessarily quantitative. It also contrasts with the convictions of some image-makers that social advocacy, artistic vision and technical skill are, by themselves, enough to construct empirically sound images.

Both social researchers and lay readers typically find images of culture and social life to be more credible when they're based on extensive and detailed observation in an appropriate array of natural settings, backed up by other data, and presented in ways that invite analysis, including commentary from the people they depict. But photographs can support empirical inquiry in ways that don't always square with popular notions of what makes them "true" or "false," and there's a danger in trying to turn these notions into categorical prohibitions or ideals.

For example, we are understandably suspicious of photographs that reflect contrived poses or processing distortions or that come with captions that misrepresent an image's origins or typicality. But posed photographs provide valuable evidence of how people want to be seen by others (Pinney 1997; Ruby 1995) and photographed re-enactments can generate credible visual records not otherwise available (Kroeber 2002; Rieger 2003). Similarly, while page layouts featuring

severely cropped and juxtaposed images can create false impressions, they can also highlight theoretically significant details and comparisons.



Figure 2 & 3

Using a “peeling spud” made from an old car spring, semi-retired logger Ernie Toivonen demonstrates in 1990 the hand craft of debarking a tree in Ontonagon County, Michigan. In the course of an interview with the sociologist Jon Rieger, Toivonen offered to “show him how it was done” prior to mechanization of the pulp wood industry in the 1970’s and 80’s. Following up on Toivonen’s invitation to re-enact this technique, Rieger photographed aspects of a logger’s craft that were no longer practiced and for which no historical images were to be found. Both photographs by Jon Rieger.

These ambiguities are complicated by the routine fabrications of social life, including the social life it takes to conduct empirical inquiry. For example, while evidence can be collected systematically within specific data categories – time lapse photographs of people crossing a street; census reports of race, income and ethnicity; or sociometric charts of child friendships – the categories and data collection tools that guide work of this sort are themselves socially constructed.

Some people have taken this to mean that we should forget about empirical inquiry altogether, but it leads me to recommend doing somewhat more of it rather than less. It seems a bit foolish, for example, to dismiss a number, chunk of text or photograph just because it's been "socially constructed." It's difficult to imagine anything that's not! A better bet would be to examine the construction process itself for what we can learn, not only about the number, text chunk or image, but about the social contexts in which they are shaped and distributed.

Which leads me back to Collier and Becker, each of whom affirmed, in complementary fashions, the value of photographs as durable and useful records of what was visible in a particular time and place. It's not always easy make those records in the way we will later find most useful, nor is it a simple matter to understand what images made by others fairly depict or neglect. Indeed, the idea that photographs and other machine-recorded data can be generated without human agency and choice of any sort is both naive and misguided, but so is the idea that a photographer's selectivity in one dimension makes an image wholly suspect in all others (Schwartz 1999). With this in mind, the credibility and utility of photographs within empirical social inquiry rests not so much on whether they accurately reflect or arbitrarily invent the real world, but on how those aspects of the real world they invent or reflect are related to questions we care about (Becker 1986a). To understand that we need something more than the photograph itself.

Research designs and personal accounts

One tool for helping researchers and their audiences judge what a set of photographs might contribute to a project of empirical inquiry is the research design, an explicit description of how a study is organized and how the right kind of

evidence can be brought bear in answering pre-determined questions. By and large, that's where social scientists place their own trust and hope. Regardless of the kinds of data they choose to examine, a good research design advances the claim that the researcher has conducted (or is about to conduct) an empirically sound investigation.

Relying on research designs to advance these claims suggests that the main threats to empirical inquiry are those that a research design can guard against. Towards that end, statements by social scientists frequently do a good job of accounting for sample size, for example, and for site selection, the wording of survey questions, or the preparation of appropriate observation schedules and coding strategies. But social science research designs are typically silent about other potential pitfalls. They rarely note the full range of an investigator's interest in a topic or a study site, or preview indeterminate features of the research process, or describe the researcher's honesty, interpersonal skills, or an ability to elicit cooperation and useful information from research subjects. Leaving these potentially problematic elements out of a research design affirms a world in which the researcher's role dominates the researcher, in which research designs transcend observation and inquiry crafts.

Personal accounts represent another tool for establishing the credibility of empirical social inquiry. They're used rarely by professional social researchers (though efforts to clarify a researcher's "positionality" are of a kindred sort) but frequently by documentary image-makers. Some such accounts are infused within the body of a documentary project itself, the way James Agee spoke for himself and Walker Evans in Let us Now Praise Famous Men (Agee and Evans 1960 [1939]). In other instances, they appear as forewords, afterwards, and in interviews that documentary image makers give about their work (Light 2000; Loengard 1998; Lyons

1966; Morris 1999). In the aggregate, these narrative accounts by documentary image makers affirm a world in which persons shape inquiry, in which and the craft of inquiry transcends the research design.

When considered together, research designs and personal accounts reveal multiple and complementary dimensions along which empirical inquiries can be more or less well-grounded and well- executed. These dimensions apply to issues of data collection and analysis and to many other choices investigators make as they go about their work – deciding when data are complete enough to warrant analysis, selecting details to report as illustrations and examples, choosing a starting point for introducing or framing a study, pitching descriptions to a particular level of abstraction or generality, identifying or cultivating audiences for which a study might be of interest, and so on.

By paying attention to how these choices affect the truthfulness of their work, social researchers and documentary image makers stand on the same side of the empirical divide. This separates their work from other ways of approaching the world – divine revelation, for example, or fantasy making, psychological projection, speculation, and demagoguery. Individual social researchers and documentary image makers are never completely free from these contrary inclinations. However, within idealized forms of the work in which they are engaged, the latter appear as liabilities, shortcomings, and failures. The logic of empirical inquiry requires that they be addressed, at times by avoiding inventions of the investigator, at other times by bringing them into play.

Inventions and reflections

Social researchers, photographers and artists can be more or less self-conscious about what their accounts and reports have added to what they've seen. Walker Evans, for example, referred to his work not as documentary photography, but as "art done in a documentary style" (Hambourg et al. 2000). Other documentary image makers have been less careful or held contrary beliefs. In his prejudicial framing, selection and printing of supposedly realistic images, W. Eugene Smith may be more the rule than the exception among well known documentary photographers (de Miguel 2002). Even realist landscape photographers such as Ansel Adams (who railed against the subjectivities of "pictorialism") have adjusted the tone, contrast and framing of their photographs to better express their own strongly held ideas about how the places they photographed "should look" (Brower 1998). Other documentary photographers have done much the same in depicting culture and social life.



Figure 4

Photo by Walker Evans, courtesy of the Library of Congress. The original caption reads, "Movie theatre on Saint Charles Street. Liberty Theater, New Orleans, Louisiana. 1935-36." Evans described his work not as documentary photography but as "art done in a documentary style."

In thinking through where the inventions of documentary image makers fit along what I've called the "empirical divide," there's much to learn from the work of social researchers themselves. Stimulated in part by the seminal work of Becker and Collier, scholarly writing in this area has increased substantially in recent years through monographs (Banks 2001; Biella 1988; Emmison and Smith 2000; Harper 1982; Harper 1987; Harper 2002; Pink 2001; Ruby 2000), edited collections (Prosser 1998) and an expanded array of journals (Visual Studies, The Journal of Visual Studies, The Journal of Visual Culture, Visual Anthropology, Visual Anthropology Review, etc.). However, methodological treatments of image work within the social science literature are dominated by issues of research design to the neglect of personal vision and craft.

Personal accounts by documentary photographers can alert us to other ways of thinking about empirical, visual inquiry. Dorothea Lange (Lyons 1966), for example, displayed prominently over her desk the following quotation from Sir Francis Bacon, an early statesman for empirical inquiry: "The contemplation of things as they are, without substitution of imposture, without error or confusion, is in itself a nobler thing than a whole harvest of invention." Lange arranged, cropped, sequenced, and edited her photographs to make documents that went beyond, in meaning and social impact, her camera's capacity to record the visible details she aimed it at (Coles 1997). However, she also appears to have taken Bacon's statement seriously, at the very least as an alternative to the commercial work that occupied her attention prior to explicitly documentary projects and assignment.



Figure 5 & 6

These two images were both made from the same Dorothea Lange photograph. Lange printed the image on the left “full frame,” but cropped it to create the image on the right and focus on the man and his expression of despair. Both photographs by Dorothea Lange, courtesy of the Library of Congress.

An empirical ideal for photographic purpose was also championed by Wright Morris, a documentary photographer, fiction writer and essayist. Morris (Morris 1999) argued that, “We should make the distinction, while it is still clear, between photographs that mirror the subject, and images that reveal the photographer. One is intrinsically photographic, the other is not.” However, in what looks at first like a contradiction to the “mirror” ideal, Morris also noted: “Only fiction will accommodate the facts of life,” adding that, “ Our choice, in so far as we have one, is not between fact and fiction, but between good and bad fiction.”

Considered in light of his other writing, Morris’s statment reveals what I’ve come to regard as a radical or root appreciation of empirical inquiry that is hard to find within the social science literature per se. At the heart of this perspective are two

key ideas Morris developed more fully in both his photography and writing: First, that every account of "the facts of life" will reflect some forms of inventiveness by investigators and reporters, not just in making photographs, or putting words on a page, or quantifying variables, but in linking observations of any sort to concepts, theories, or narratives – what Charles Ragin (Ragin 1992) refers to as "casing". Second, depending on the intention, skill and integrity of the investigator, these inventions can move an account closer to or farther away from "things as they are."

Morris did not examine this provocative link between empirical inquiry and fiction in social scientific terms, but James Clifford (Clifford and Marcus 1986) did just that, a few decades later in characterizing "ethnography as fiction," but a kind of fiction that's not necessarily false or untrue (1986: 6). In Clifford's perspective, rhetorical "inventions" fall squarely within the tool kit of empirical social inquiry, not as a substitute for detailed observation and systematic analysis, but as their handmaiden. As Sara Pink (Pink 2001), Doug Harper (Harper 1998) and others have noted, this argument can apply as well to the "rhetoric" of photographic representation.

The necessity of invention and rhetoric to productive empirical inquiry does not mean that "anything goes." However, it might be necessary to use artificial lighting to make a photograph that looks like what we can see in the field under "natural light," or to re-sequence raw film footage so that events and settings are more comprehensible and clear. To get comparable, empirically sound information, experienced field researchers recognize that they may need to alter a line of questioning from one informant to another. Along the same lines, it might be necessary to use different lenses, vantage points, or image making strategies in one setting than in another. In some cases, a researcher might have to move objects

around so that they can be better seen and recorded. There's also much to be learned about culture and social life from how participants respond to outsiders, including outsiders who come with cameras, video tape recorders and questions that might otherwise never be asked (Biella 1988).

As Morris intimated, the choice is not between truth and invention, but between inventions that lead towards truths and those that lead away from them. This ties the soundness of empirical inquiry not only to techniques and methods, but the ethics and integrity of the investigator. Though reflection and invention are not quite the same as objectivity and subjectivity, Robert Coles (Coles 1997) speaks for both sets of terms in noting that, "To take stock of others is to call upon oneself – as a journalist, a writer, a photographer, or a doctor or a teacher. This mix of the objective and the subjective is a constant presence and, for many of us, a constant challenge – what blend of the two is proper, and at what point shall we begin to cry 'foul'?"

3. Three exemplary projects

A radical or root appreciation of empirical inquiry is hard to define beyond statements of principles such as those provided by Wright Morris or Francis Bacon, or critiques of scientism such as those offered by Marcus, Pink, and others, or a call to honesty and thoughtfulness such as that provided by Coles. It certainly doesn't turn neatly into a checklist of methodological do's and don'ts. And it falls far short of (or extends beyond, depending on your point of view) explicit guidelines for collecting or analyzing specific kinds of data – photographs or video tapes, interview transcripts, survey responses, or census tract figures. In the simplest terms, it calls for nothing more and nothing less than trying to ground ideas about the world as much

as possible in observations of the world, to notice what's visible and account for it in ways that "get it right."

Many social scientists spend their working lives trying to come as close as they reasonably can to this ideal. As illustrated by the three projects described below, so too do some documentary photographers. While none of these projects has been embraced as bona fide "social research" by professional sociologists or anthropologists, each reflects a systematic approach to empirical inquiry, the intent to create new knowledge and an effort to extend and refine social theory. After briefly describing these projects, I'll turn to two related questions: First, how does the kind of empirical inquiry we find in these three projects differ from what we've come to expect from social scientists? Second, what implications do these differences have for empirical, visual studies of culture and social life?

Material World

Few documents provide a more provocative depiction of social and economic inequality than the book, Material World: A Global Family Portrait (Menzel 1994), a survey in photographs, text and statistics of the household possessions and routines of a single family from each of 30 countries. In the 6-8 pages allotted to each of these families, the authors present a wide range of data: a demographic profile and a paragraph or two about each country; an array of captioned photographs showing the "daily life" of family members; a summary of each family's possessions and living space, including the "most valued possession" identified by different family members; and a brief account by the photographer. For each family we also are provided with what Menzel calls the "Big Picture," a single large photograph of

family members standing or seated among all their possessions, outside their home. These provocative images are interesting in their own right. They are rendered more informative by a legend that identifies objects and people and a list in the Appendix of additional objects not included in the photo (p. 253).



Figure 7
The Namgay family, Shinka, Bhutan, 1993. Photo by Peter Menzel

Both photographs and text of Material World are clearly designed for impact, but pains were taken to make the impact empirically credible. The book provides a list of references and data sources and a table comparing all 30 countries on 22 different demographic variables. The selection of families is also described in enough detail, individually and in the aggregate, to alert readers to important qualifications and sampling questions and to provide some sense of the immediate circumstances in which photographers worked. In his own account photographing the family portrayed in Figure 7, for example, Menzel writes:

For six days I lived with the Namgay family in a twelve-house village an hour's walk from a 7-mile dirt road off a small paved road four hours from Thumphy, the capital. The Namgays had never seen a TV, an airplane, or for that matter a live American before and were as curious about me as I was about them. I had dinner with a different family every night, the same basic good food that I ate gladly with one hand as my legs ached from sitting cross-legged on the floor (My other hand fanned the flies from my food). . . Wild marijuana grows everywhere, but villagers feed it to their pigs after boiling it. The sounds were incredible: women singing in the fields as they harvested wheat, the murmur of monks chanting, the squeal of children playing, all without the haze of electronic noise I have unfortunately come to take for granted. On the other hand, all was not paradisiacal. Animals and people excreted just outside the house and the family cooked inside on an open fire. (p. 78).



Figure 8

An English lesson in the school attended by 12 year old Bangum Namgay, an hour's trek from her home in Shinka, Bhutan, 1993. Photo by Peter Menzel.

We don't know from this comment alone exactly how Menzel decided what to photograph, but we do get some insight into the cultural contrasts and personal dispositions that shaped his image-making in the field.

A sympathetic reading of Material World requires that we ignore, at least for the moment, the cultural and economic diversity within each country. However,

Menzel presents the book not to challenge or discourage that kind of complexity, but to resist another kind of simplification. As he notes: “Newspaper, magazine and television stories almost always deal with the extremes: famine, flood, mass killing, and, of course, the life-styles of the rich and famous. . . I wanted to give some insight into the rest of the world.” (p. 255).



Figure 9

The Skeen Family, Pearland, Texas, 1993. Photo by Peter Menzel.

The empirical value of Material World rests in part upon the study design, in part upon an ability to elicit cooperation from the families themselves. This cooperation was inextricably tied to both data collection and reporting. Indeed, the power of the Material World accounts, family by family, and country by country, hangs on making the visual comparisons and contrasts somewhat systematic. This

applies with special force to the "Big Picture." Inventories of household possessions have been described by anthropologists such as Collier (1967), Oscar Lewis (Lewis 1965), and Janet Hoskins (Hoskins 1998). But they are given added punch by the technical virtuosity and documentary skill of the Material World photographers. As anyone who has tried it can attest, it is no small matter to arrange diverse materials so that they can all be seen at the same time, let alone to light and focus the array in ways that will produce a well-exposed and legible image.



Figure 10

The Qampie Family, Soweto, South Africa, 1993. Photo by Peter Menzel.

The same technical and representational skills that Material World photographers used to create empirically sound images could also be used to

misrepresent culture and social life. We don't know for a fact that they weren't used in just that way, though we have many indications that this was not their intent. It's also clear that families willing to sit for such extended and intrusive "portraits" might differ somewhat from those who were not so inclined. And the idea of finding one family from each country flies in the face of more comprehensive and differentiated surveys. Though the imperfections of this research design are acknowledged rather than concealed, some readers might take them seriously enough to wholly dismiss what Material World has to offer. However, a more appropriate test of empirical merit is framed by the following two questions: Do we know more about social and economic inequality between different countries as a result of this book, or less? And is what we know well grounded enough in empirical evidence to challenge speculation and ignorance? For some kinds of speculation and ignorance, I certainly think it is.

Girl Culture

Figure 11

Two 15-year old girls try on clothes in a dressing room. San Jose, California. Photo by Lauren Greenfield.

The questions noted above are also worth considering in connection with Lauren Greenfield's documentary study *Girl Culture* (Greenfield 2002). Like the creators of *Material World*, Greenfield seems intent on "getting it right" empirically – recording what she sees and what her subjects have to say in ways that both document and raise questions about culture and social life. Indeed, the artful juxtaposition of comments and images from different but related scenes is, in her hands, a tool of both personal and collective inquiry. In one cluster of photographs, for example, she records a range of women and girls working on their appearances in mirrors. Through another set of photographs, she shows a diverse array of girls and women in different forms of "dressing up" (Figures 12, 13 and 14).



Figure 12

Augusta, 22, the newly crowned Queen of the Cotton Ball, Chattanooga, Tennessee. Photo by Lauren Greenfield.



Figure 13

Exotic dancer Tammy Boom backstage at Little Darlings, Las Vegas, Nevada. Photo by Lauren Greenfield.



Figure 14

Elita, 6, at a birthday party where girls have their hair and makeup done, play dress-up, model in a fashion show, and have a tea party, Hollywood, California. Photo by Lauren Greenfield.

In putting together images of this sort, Greenfield suggests the fundamentally "exhibitionist" dimension of feminine identity, a theme that plays back and forth between mass market icons and personal appearance. As Greenfield puts it, "The body is the primary canvas on which girls express their identities, insecurities, ambitions and struggles. I have documented this phenomenon and at the same time explore how this canvas is marked by the values and semiotics of the surrounding culture." As an important variation on this theme, she also reminds us that the exhibitionist equation works well only for a few women whose physiognomy matches well-advertised icons, and not even that well for those. This encourages, as Greenfield sees it, the constant scrutiny and disaffection that women express towards

their own bodies and heightens the temptations of plastic surgery or physical self-abuse.



Figure 15

Erin, 24, is blind-weighed at an eating-disorder clinic, Coconut Creek, Florida. She has asked to mount the scale backward so as not to see her weight gain. Photo by Lauren Greenfield.

In much the same way that Erving Goffman (Goffman 1963) called attention to the "total institution" as an ideal type that could characterize quite diverse organizations (prisons, monasteries, mental hospitals, boarding schools, and so on), Greenfield's work calls attention to "girl culture" as an ideal typical configuration of values, practices and ideas through which women define and display their sexual identity. As she puts it, "Understanding the dialectic between the extreme and the mainstream – the anorectic and the dieter, the stripper and the teenager who bares

her midriff or wears a thong – is essential to understanding contemporary feminine identity."

Like the authors of Material World, Greenfield combines powerful photographs with other data, including extended interview comments by the subjects of her study. In keeping with her intentions, these commentaries give her treatment of "girl culture" empirical depth and complexity. "As the photographs are my voice," she notes, "the interviews give voice to the girls." The credibility of Greenfield's work is also enhanced by the candor and caution she expresses in describing her own "inventiveness" and vision. She acknowledges that while the photographs "are about the girls I photographed . . . They're also about me." At another point, she reminds us that, "Infinite choices were made in the subject matter, the point of view, in the moment I depressed the shutter, in the editing. Ultimately, Girl Culture looks at a wide spectrum of girls through a very narrow prism."

In another parallel to Material Culture, it's not just the photographs and interviews that create the "new knowledge" of Girl Culture, but the comparative framework within which Greenfield has placed them – in this case comparing women across age groups and social status instead of countries. Thoughtfully framed and sequenced, her photographs create a credible, multi-dimensional account, a kind of meta-image that both references and questions other images of women with which we are already familiar.

The Great Central Valley



Figure 16

Wind gap pumping station, California Aqueduct, Kern County, 1985. Photo by Stephen Johnson.

The Great Central Valley: California's Heartland, is a collaborative social history prepared by photographers Steven Johnson and Robert Dawson and the essayist and novelist Gerald Haslam (Johnson, Dawson and Haslam 1993). The book combines an extraordinary array of visual materials and a lengthy text that includes personal accounts, observations and reviews scholarship from a wide range of disciplines-economics, agronomy, anthropology, and so on. These varied materials are organized as convincing empirical evidence of the changing life and culture of the Central Valley of California. In the same chapter, we can find Farm Security Administration (FSA) photographs from the 1930's, contemporary black and white photos from made in the same geographical area (that look as if they could have been

taken by FSA photographers), contemporary color photographs of both old and new icons, other old photographs (some of which have been re-photographed), satellite photographs, maps, and the reproduction of a landscape painting.



Figure 17

Johnnie, Merced, California, 1975. Photo by Stephen Johnson.

Like the creators of Material World and Girl Culture, the authors of California Heartland describe the process of their own creation, in this case through another book by Johnson called Making the Digital Book (Johnson 1993). This companion volume provides additional details about how California Heartland was designed and put together, both technically and conceptually. We learn that a pre-release version of Adobe Photoshop allowed Johnson to improve the legibility of old photographs by removing "cracks, serious scratches, and other artifacts of age," and that he also altered "contrast and brightness" to make some images more legible, but

that the digital photo editing only went so far: "I was careful to respect the integrity of the original, however, and did not remove or add any real objects." Johnson's account of how ideas within the book came forth is equally explicit.

Once I had settled on a basic grid [for the design], my primary task was to find a relationship between the text and photographs that was integrated, but not directly illustrative. That really was the largest single design challenge, and the most time consuming. I had to know the photographs, read every word of the text, and imagine relationships."

We might like to know more about the process by which Johnson "imagined" relationships between words and images in preparing California Heartland, but the detail he has provided – including how he chose to present this study to others – goes well beyond what we'd expect from a social science research design



Figure 18
Used cans, crop-dusting airstrip, Newman, California, 1984. Photo by Stephen Johnson.



Figure 19

Discovery Bay, San Joaquin Delta, 1985. Photo by Stephen Johnson

4. Documentary and Scientific Conventions

I've tried to make the case, in an abbreviated way, that these three visual studies all provide credible, empirical accounts of culture and social life without necessarily respecting the conventions of contemporary social research. That's especially true for how the documentary image makers conducting these studies addressed the three challenges I noted earlier: creating empirically sound images of culture and social life, framing observations to highlight new knowledge, and challenging existing theory. Let's look at each of these in more detail.

Creating empirically sound images

All three documentary studies make extensive use of recorded images to represent how culture and social life looks in particular times and places, and the

images themselves provide a kind of information that's hard to represent in text alone. This is true not only for the sheer wealth of visual detail, but for the precise imaging of physical and social environments from particular viewpoints, the juxtaposition of contrasting images, and the sequences and formats in which we encounter images as readers. Indeed, the photographs in these three studies go well beyond the common social science trope of "illustrating" ideas that are otherwise well accounted for in text. They provide instead a kind of content that is analytically interesting in its own right.

In arguing for the credibility of this content, these documentary image makers give more attention to challenges of "recording" good evidence than do most social researchers. In Material World, for example, we find not only a description of how the photographs were made in general, but individual accounts from photographers about each family they photographed. The two photographers working on California's Heartland each offer accounts of what they were doing, photographically, in studying the Great Central Valley, as does Greenfield for her work with Girl Culture.

The origins of these documentary studies are also described in terms that are more personal and situational than is typical for social science study designs. Greenfield notes that she was "enmeshed in girl culture before I was a photographer, and I was photographing girl culture before I realized I was working on Girl Culture." Johnson reports that he "embarked on the Central Valley project to better understand the place that made me a landscape photographer." Menzel's account of what led him to the kind of data reported in Material World refers not only to the United Nation's International Year of the Family (1994) and his previous work as a photo journalist, but to a program he heard on the radio about marketing a sex-

fantasy book by the pop star Madonna: “The book and the singer seemed to hold more interest for people than the pressing issues of our day. I thought the world needed a reality check” (p. 255).

Evidence about how individual images were made and the personal interests of the researcher does not in itself make investigations more empirically sound – but see Biella (Biella 1988) and Ruby (Ruby 1976) for contrasting views on this. However, it can help us determine how close a study comes to hitting its empirical marks. A research design can help in that regard as well, of course, and that suggests the value of providing both, along with some sense of where the author thinks the findings of a study might or might not apply. For example, Greenfield contends that “Girl Culture is my photographic examination of an aspect of our culture that leaves few women untouched,” but she also cautions that the book “does not attempt to represent the experience of all girls in American, or even the full and rich experience of any girl I photographed.”

Highlighting new knowledge

Lots of information is available to people that they don't care about, or think they already have, or reject, but new information can sometimes adds a new dimension to how we think about things. The uncertainties of this process present a real challenge for people who want to undertake empirical social inquiry. Who will care about the particular inquiry they have in mind? And what forms are available for presenting new knowledge to those particular people?

The answers social researchers develop to these questions almost always involve publishing articles and books for specialized academic communities and markets. As they see it, for knowledge to be really “new,” it has to new for colleagues

already hard at work studying related questions and phenomena. Documentary image makers approach this challenge somewhat differently. They're not particularly interested in creating knowledge that appears to be "new" only to small groups of social scientists. Like social researchers, they would like their work recognized and well-regarded by professional peers. But documentary image makers also pitch their inquiries to other audiences, including the subjects of their study and other people like them, and to members of the public who may harbor ideas about the visual evidence they've put together.

As one step towards reaching this broader audience, some documentarians (including those I've described here) present their work as the result of a personal journey that led to new insights and understanding. Johnson notes that while making photographs for California Heartland began on familiar footing it "grew into the discovery of a place I didn't know very well. It became an exploration of land use, water use, agricultural practices, racism and poverty." In establishing points of personal connection with both professional and public audiences, Greenfield reports that, "Girl Culture has been my journey as a photographer, as an observer of culture, as part of the media, as a media critic, as a woman, as a girl." This personal and public rhetoric contrasts with how social researchers index their own reports to specific research publications and communities (Richardson 1991).

The documentary image-makers reviewed here also give much more attention than social researchers usually do to issues of editing, layout and visual representation. Not only do they make explicit the aesthetic dimensions of this work, they link design issues directly to both analysis and audience. I've already noted Johnson's extended account of what it took to prepare California Heartland in book form, but Menzel and Greenfield also offer explicit commentary about designing

their books. As another illustration of this emphasis, Greenfield distinguishes her contributions to Girl Culture from other instances in which the same photographs appeared for other purposes: "While I often can't control the picture editing, writing and design in my work for magazines, the selection and presentation of photographs in this book are my own."

For all three documentary image makers and authors, the boundary between research subjects and public communities is also blurred, all the more so because each has encouraged distribution of this work in other forms. California Heartland was at first a documentary project, then an exhibit in the Central Valley itself and a symposium, then a book, and later a book about the book. Girl Culture also began as a documentary project, elements of which appeared in mass market publications, and the book is now complemented by a traveling photo exhibit and a web site that includes an on-line photo gallery, transcripts of all 20 interviews reported on in the book, a teaching guide, links to organizations working on related issues, video interviews with Greenfield, and an opportunity to participate in related on-line forums. The work brought together in Material Culture has also appeared in other publications, and a CD Rom is now available that both replicates and extends the content of the book. Taken together, these diverse activities and media provide a larger and more variegated public presence than we would expect from a publication alone, let alone a publication addressed primarily to social scientists.

The "new knowledge" available to research subjects and the public through these documentary materials is available to sociologists and anthropologists as well, but it's not inscribed in mainstream social science journals. Because these documentary image makers have not framed their work in terms of social research per se, it's not clear where it would fit to best advantage in those venues. But the

rhetorical conventions of published social research – the emphasis on words and numbers, accompanied at times by figures and charts, organized around arguments and summarized "findings" – is also problematic in its own terms for documentary image makers.

These problems become apparent when we try to imagine converting any of these three studies into standard social science reports. An abstract or synopsis of each might be noteworthy, but would also fall far short of the new knowledge we're likely to acquire from reading each work as a whole, some of which occurs as a process of elicited meaning and inquiry. As Paul Kennedy notes in his introduction to Material Culture (p. 7), "The real benefit to learning that the reader can extract from this project depends on going into the details, especially on a comparative basis. New kinds of valuable inquiry can be generated by such detailed observation," (i.e. "observing" the book itself.)

As a related point of contrast, the balance between evidence and interpretation in the documentary projects reviewed here is weighted more towards evidence than is customary for social science research reports. That may make documentary studies somewhat more ambiguous than social scientific reports, but it does not make them any less empirical.

Challenging social theory

Girl Culture includes an introduction by Joan Jacobs Brumberg, a professor of human development and women's studies at Cornell, and in her own commentary, Greenfield refers to a few scholarly studies that helped shape her thoughts.

California Heartland is heavily referenced to the work of historians, geographers, and policy analysts. And Material World lists numerous sources that someone could

consult to learn more about the countries and issues it examines. However, just as none of these projects take social researchers per se as their primary audience, neither do they frame insights to readers as a contribution to academic scholarship. Johnson is quite explicit about his interest in avoiding both romantic and academic genres: "None of us wanted this project to become another photography book idealizing a landscape," he notes, "Nor did we want the book to become an historical dissertation."

This apparent neglect of disciplinary scholars goes hand in hand with the interest of documentary image makers in attracting other audiences. However, it also reflects alternative ideas about where social theories are most likely to be found, acquired and contested. The "theories" that social scientists pay the most attention to are inscribed explicitly in published social science texts. Documentarians might acknowledge this kind of theory as well. But they also attend to a wide range of cultural materials in which social theories are more embedded than explicated – texts, of course, but also news accounts, folklore and mass media imagery. Instead of contested theories and hypotheses, the documentary projects I've described here are designed to highlight contrasting ideas and imagery.

These image-based challenges to social theory can mirror exchanges among academics about different theoretical perspectives, interpretations, and data sets, but they can take other forms as well. For example, Johnson and his associates reproduce in California Heartland some policy documents and photographs that they then call into question through juxtapositions with other documents, their own photographs or through the testimony of local participants. Greenfield both photographs and critiques some of the images that the people she studied respond to in constructing their identities. With admirable candor, she notes also that as a journalist, she helped

make some of those images herself. Menzel saw Material World not only as a way to illustrate "the great differences in material goods and circumstances that make rich and poor societies," but to challenge less credible ideas, some of them supported by images he had helped create through previous photographic assignments. In each case the documentary photographs presented by these authors are framed to challenge other images that reflect existing, largely implicit and widely held ideas about culture and social life – elements of social theory, by any other name.

5. Empirical Inquiry and Public Discourse

In terms of empirical social inquiry, the documentary studies I've described above are exemplary. Other studies that are called "documentary" simply because they include "realistic" photographs of people and places may actually fall more appropriately on the other side of the empirical divide, where speculation, projection, fantasy and introspection hold sway. We can approach work on either side of that divide without prejudice, and projects that straddle it can be stimulating and provocative. However, in looking to documentary image-making for empirically sound accounts of culture and social life, I suggest we seek works – such as those I've reviewed here – that not only "look interesting" but reflect a clear commitment to empirical inquiry.

Having said that, if we think of Girl Culture, California Heartland, and Material World only as "documentary" work, we isolate what we can learn about empirical inquiry through projects of this sort from how we think about social research. A more productive strategy is to consider each project as an instance of

empirical social inquiry, analytically defined. Instead of asking, "What's the difference between documentary photography, narrative accounts and sociology or anthropology?" we might ask, "How does empirical social inquiry look when practiced by skilled sociologists or anthropologists, and how does it look when practiced by skilled documentary photographers, journalists and essayists?"

As a partial answer to these questions, I've summarized in Table 1 some of the contrasts noted above between social science and documentary studies. These contrasts suggest that in some circumstances one approach to empirical social inquiry might work better than the other. For example: If we want to build a written literature around a distinctive set of concepts and questions – a disciplinary tradition, so to speak – the conventions of social science have the most to offer. Why? Because they require that new work be tightly indexed to the work of other scholars who have wrestled in writing with similar questions and concepts, a kind of intertextuality that both reflects and stimulates the evolution of a literate community. But if we care less about literature building than about communicating with diverse constituents, documentary work with images has real advantages of its own.

These advantages certainly apply to the challenge of informing public discourse, but they also have special relevance for human service professionals working in diverse communities. Teachers, for example, as well as social workers, community organizers, and health care professionals, may find documentary conventions more agreeable and productive than social scientific approaches in studying local clients and communities. They don't need to know if new ground is being broken for the disciplines of psychology, sociology or anthropology to learn something valuable from looking at video tapes of student small group discussions;

Table 1

Two Modes of Empirical Social Inquiry

	Social Science	Documentary Study
Purpose	Develop new knowledge and understanding of culture and social life through empirical investigation and scholarly “works.”	Develop new knowledge and understanding of culture and social life through empirical investigation and public “works.”
Research design	Dedication to explicit research design, including a priori rationale for linking questions with appropriate data sources, scope of data desired, identification of analysis strategies, etc.; emphasizes testing ideas through narrowly bounded inquiry; separation of personal interest from logic of inquiry	Casual attention to research design; implicit and diffuse statement of research questions, data sources, etc.; emergent rather than a priori focus and questions; emphasizes exploring, investigating and examining phenomenon, place, people or idea through broadly bounded inquiry; integration of personal interest and logic of inquiry
Data sources	Direct observation, field recording of images and interviews, found artifacts, etc. plus surveys, analysis of aggregate data sets, etc.	Direct observation, field recording of images and interviews, found artifacts, etc.
Data collection	Emphasis on getting enough data points to meet requirements spelled out in research design; larger sample size preferred to more detailed observation of particulars.	Explicit attention to recording challenges and media; interest in presentation quality documents and data sources. More detailed observations preferred to larger sample size.
Data analysis	Precursor to reporting and representation; systematic use of discrete analysis strategies; analysis restricted to bounded data sets	Closely integrated with issue of representation; push towards coherence and clarity through multiple analysis strategies; unrestricted data sources.
Reports & Representations	Representation as afterthought to data analysis; focus on matching reports to publication options; primacy of summary, report and argument	Great attention to issues of representation, aesthetic ideals/principles; reports designed for power and effect; primacy of narrative, example and collage
Audiences	Specialized research community as primary audience, but passing interest in public and popular constituencies, including policy-makers.	Public and popular constituencies as primary audience, but passing interest in specialized communities (policy makers, researchers, research subjects, etc.)
Framing new knowledge	New knowledge as extension, complement, or alternative to existing and explicit social theory	New knowledge as images, concepts, perspectives that are new to public or to targeted communities
Theory building	Emphasis on propositions inscribed in the social science research literature: “competing propositions” as primary content drama.	Emphasis on ideas and principles embedded in public media and discourse; “contrasting images” as primary content drama.

or from making and examining photographs of institutional events and routines; or from working with young and old community members to mount an exhibition of photographs and stories that document their neighborhoods and family traditions.

Reading something thoughtful can help teachers and other human service professionals think about this kind of documentary inquiry. But community members can conduct thoughtful, empirically sound and useful studies of local culture and social life without having first reviewed the relevant social science literature. The corollary also holds true: empirical studies of culture and social life can generate valuable insights for local practitioners and clients without breaking new ground for professional social scientists. (As a related matter: if we want practitioner and community perspectives to become more visible within a research literature, we'll have to do something more than support individuals in studying the culture and social life of their own classrooms, schools, workplaces and local communities –_however valuable that might be to the people involved).

The contrasting merits of documentary study and social research as resources for field-based professions extend as well to undergraduate curricula and students. While social scientific knowledge is essential to an informed citizenry, so too are documentary studies and the ability to think clearly about credible images of culture and social life. And it's naive to think that students can learn to assess these matter thoughtfully without trying to construct credible images of their own. Whether opportunities for that kind of experience fall under the rubric of visual studies, documentary studies, field research, liberal arts, cultural studies, media studies or social science may matter little. But engaging students in producing and questioning the kinds of documentary studies I've examined here – and struggling with related questions about evidence, representation, audience, imagery and ethics – represent a

good investment in young people and civic culture, a better investment, perhaps, than the kind of disciplinary specialization that stands in currently for a liberal arts education.

Some sociologists and anthropologists have put recorded images to extremely good use within their own research and teaching, and they have a lot to say about how to approach these issues ethically and with good sense. However, and understandably so, their work is directed typically towards advancing the field, educating colleagues and orienting new members to their own discipline or profession. It's quite another matter to educate citizens about the complexities of visual representation and the promise of visual studies, or to acquaint them with what it takes for photographs, films and video tapes to provide empirically sound accounts of culture and social life. Being smart about that requires that we learn what we can not only from social scientists, but from documentary photographers and film makers, at least some of whom celebrate both art and empiricism and who aim for both telling images and telling truths.

References

- Agee, James, and Walker Evans. 1960 [1939]. *Let us now praise famous men*. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin.
- Banks, Marcus. 2001. *Visual Methods in Social Research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Becker, Howard. 1986a. "Do photographs tell the truth?" in *Doing things together*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.
- . 1986b. "Photography and sociology." Pp. 221-272 in *Doing things together: Selected papers*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.
- Biella, Peter. 1988. "Against reductionism and idealist self-reflexivity: The Ilparakuyo Maasai Film Project." Pp. pp. 47-72 in *Anthropological Filmmaking*, edited by Jack R. Rollwagen. New York: Harwood.
- Brower, Kenneth. 1998. "Photography in the age of falsification." *Atlantic Monthly*:92-111.
- Clifford, James, and George Marcus. 1986. *Writing Culture: The poetics and politics of ethnography*. Berkeley, CA: University of California.
- Coles, Robert. 1997. *Doing Documentary Work*. New York: Oxford University.
- de Miguel, Jesus. 2002. "Re-constructing social reality: Community, power and social control in the Spanish Village photographic project by W. Eugene Smith." in *International Visual Sociology Association (IVSA)*. Santorini, Greece.
- Emmison, Michael, and Philip Smith. 2000. *Researching the visual: Images, objects, contexts and interactions in social and cultural inquiry*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Goffman, Erving. 1963. *Asylums: Essays on the social situation of mental patients and other inmates*. Garden City, NJ: Anchor.
- Greenfield, Lauren. 2002. *Girl Culture*. San Francisco: Chronicle Books.
- Hambourg, Maria Morris, Jeff L. Rosenheim, Douglas Eklund, and Mia Fineman. 2000. *Walker Evans*. New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art / Princeton University Press.
- Harper, Doug. 1982. *Good company*. Chicago: University of Chicago.
- . 1987. *Working knowledge: Skill and community in a small shop*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- . 1998. "An argument for visual sociology." Pp. 24-41 in *Image-based Research*, edited by Jon Prosser. London: Taylor and Francis.
- . 2002. *Changing Works: Visions of a lost agriculture*. Chicago: University of Chicago.
- Hoskins, Janet. 1998. *Biographical objects*: Routledge.
- Johnson, Stephen. 1993. *Making a Digital Book: Art, computers, design and the production of The Great Central Valley: California's Heartland*. Pacifica, CA: Stephen Johnson Photography.
- Johnson, Stephen, Robert Dawson, and Gerald Haslam. 1993. *The Great Central Valley: California's heartland*. Berkeley, CA: University of California.
- Kroeber, Theodora. 2002. *Ishi in two worlds: A biography of the last wild Indian in North America*. Berkeley, CA: University of California.
- Lewis, Oscar. 1965. *Five families: Mexican case studies in the culture of poverty*. New York: New American Library.

- Light, Ken. 2000. *Witness in our time: Working lives of documentary photographers*. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian.
- Loengard, John. 1998. *Life photographers: What they saw*. Boston: Little, Brown / Bullfinch Press.
- Lyons, Nathan (Ed.). 1966. *Photographers on photography*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall.
- Menzel, Peter. 1994. *Material World: A global family portrait*. San Francisco, CA: Sierra Club.
- Morris, Wright. 1999. *Time pieces: Photographs, writing and memory*. New York: Aperture.
- Pink, Sarah. 2001. *Doing Visual Ethnography*. London: SAGE.
- Pinney, Christopher. 1997. *Camera Indica: The social life of Indian photographs*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago.
- Prosser, Jon (Ed.). 1998. *Image-based research: A sourcebook for qualitative researchers*. Bristol, PA: Falmer Press.
- Ragin, Charles C. 1992. "'Casing" and the process of social inquiry." in *What is a case? Exploring the foundations of social inquiry*, edited by Charles C. Ragin and Howard S. Becker. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Richardson, Laurel. 1991. *Writing for diverse audiences*. Newbury Park, CA: SAGE.
- Rieger, Jon. 2003. "A retrospective study of social change: The pulp-logging industry in an Upper Peninsula Michigan county." *Visual Studies* 18:156-177.
- Ruby, Jay. 1976. "In a pic's eye: Interpretive strategies for deriving significance and meaning from photographs." *Afterimage*.
- . 1995. *Secure the shadow: Death and photography in America*. Cambridge, MA: MIT.
- . 2000. *Picturing culture: Explorations of film and anthropology*. Chicago: University of Chicago.
- Schwartz, Dona. 1999. "Pictorial Journalism: Photographs as Facts." in *Pictures in the Public Sphere: Studies in Photography, History and the Press*, edited by Bonnie Brennen and Hanno Hardt. Champaign, IL: University of Illinois.