

Auto-Photography

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Glossary

Ethnography The study of culture and social groups based largely on field research methods.

Photo Elicitation The use of photographs to evoke verbal discussion.

Politics of Representation The debate about who can represent whom, who has authority to speak about and for whom, and what power relations shape and influence these questions.

Visual Methodology The collection of methods used in research to understand and interpret images; the philosophy of how researchers practice and utilize these methods to create knowledge.

Introduction

Auto-photography usually entails the following steps: first, a researcher gives cameras to research subjects and asks them to photograph particular places and people that are relevant to the topic of the research project. (In some cases, cameras may be distributed with no prior information about the research given, however.) These instructions may be prefaced by an initial interview or other participatory research activities. For example, a geographer interested in children's experiences of urban parks would give youngsters disposable cameras to take to the park for an afternoon. The researcher may already have been observing children at play in parks, or perhaps the researcher interviewed children about their idealized play space. The researcher may or may not give detailed instructions to the children about taking photos; perhaps he/she just tells the children to photograph what they feel is important about their play space. After the children take their photos, the researcher would then develop the film to see what sorts of environments, places, objects, and perspectives the children captured. These photos would be considered to be data for the research, as would any follow-up interview or conversation with the children discussing why they took the particular photographs they did, the meanings the places had for the children, and their ideas about these places or even alternative imaginary play spaces. The analysis of photos

and interview or narrative data then takes a variety of forms, from counting and comparing themes to treating each photo as a lesson on what objects, places, and people represent something significant for the subject.

Auto-photography is an ethnographic field research method that attempts to 'see the world through someone else's eyes'. Of course, seeing from another person's position is a fraught process, since gaining the true perspective of someone else is impossible. Auto-photography, however, provides a tool in qualitative and ethnographic research projects that moves a step toward understanding what qualities of environments and places are important for research subjects in their daily lives. Human geographers have begun to use this tool more and more as photographic technology has become affordable and easier to use. Of course, because auto-photography relies on the technology of camera and film development, the history of its use is relatively recent. In geography, the practice of auto-photography is closely tied to the development of the inexpensive disposable camera, a one-time-use camera that operates with film and became more popular and affordable in the 1990s. The cost of disposable cameras allows scholars with research funds to gather visual data somewhat easily, although for new scholars and those without substantial funding, auto-photography may be prohibitively costly, especially when combined with film development. Perhaps the popularity of digital photography will widen the use of auto-photography, given the many numbers of photos that can be taken with digital cameras, even one-time-use digital cameras. Self-made videos will also become more popular with researchers as the cost of equipment continues to fall.

In human geography, auto-photography has largely been used by scholars studying children's geographies throughout the world. The technology is easy to use and allows a self-representation from subject groups – children and youth – who might otherwise find highly articulate and reflexive verbal explanations more difficult or intimidating in a research situation. Children might also be drawn to the 'hands-on' aspect of taking photographs. The use of auto-photography is not restricted to work on children and youth, however. Scholars are also using auto-photography to study identity, time-space geographies, and human-environment interactions.

Participatory methodologies also often utilize auto-photography methods since they seek to actively engage research participants in the production of knowledge.

Genealogy of Auto-Photography

Auto-photography is an ethnographic research method that has its historical roots in nineteenth-century anthropology. In many ways, ethnography and photographic methodologies were born together. Photos were often taken in the field and then presented to academic and popular audiences to show the 'savage' culture faraway in lands (or the 'natives' on colonized lands like in North America and Australia) and to illustrate how these strange people were alien and undeveloped in comparison to a Western audience. Today, such photography is largely seen as deeply problematic with colonial, racist, sexist, and Eurocentrist motivations. The anthropologist who photographed his native subjects sought to show the 'strangeness' of the other sociocultural group and accomplished this through poses of those studied that emphasized spectacle and racial-geographic difference. These visual presentations were markedly different from written depictions of alien cultures, although both served primarily to describe and represent societies and cultures different than the ethnographer's own. Photographs were intended by anthropologists to document cultural practices and racialized and sexualized bodies, although ironically, the vast majority of photographs from early anthropologists were staged and posed according to anthropologists' viewpoints and their Eurocentrist stereotypes of the 'savages'. Photographs were less realist reflections of life and people than highly rehearsed and constructed scenes stemming from the ethnographer's interests.

Over time, the camera has become synonymous with fieldwork in ethnographic research, and it became a staple field tool. It remains so today, even though the photographs fieldworkers take have been treated as actual data only recently in anthropology, sociology, and geography. Educating students on gathering and analyzing visual data is still rare in the social sciences, despite the ubiquity of the camera and photography in fieldwork research. Instead, photographs are seen as evidence supporting the central textual analysis, and their importance as visual data are not often mined except by a few experts of visual methodologies.

Auto-photography specifically arose as a concept in the 1960s and early 1970s when ethnographers began to question how their own subject positions fundamentally shaped the representations of those whom they studied. This new reflexivity suggested that the scholar's own gender, race, and location were central factors in the types of research methods, fieldwork practices, and

analysis that he or she conducted. One of the first uses of auto-photography took these issues to heart, although the authors suggest that such questions are often unanswerable in full. The bulk of this project was actually film work, not still photography. The two scholars were named Sol Worth (a film and communications researcher) and John Adair (an anthropologist), and in 1966 they gave 16 mm cameras to Navajo Native Americans in the state of Arizona in the United States. They taught the Navajo participants to use the cameras and edit film, and the resulting work became a benchmark in the participatory activities of research subjects in ethnography. Worth and Adair analyzed the films of their participants by characterizing them as 'Navajo' ways of seeing and experiencing the world. This emphasis placed the Navajo filmmakers' race and ethnicity as the central social categories influencing their work in creating film. While Worth and Adair's project broke boundaries of established research methodologies, its emphasis on ethnicity and racial difference above all other social identities maintained the anthropological practice of highlighting racial and ethnic difference between researcher and researched. Their ideas, however, became a fundamental moment in the development of auto-photography and its methodological emphasis on 'ways of seeing', the visual, and knowledge production. It also showed that research participants with no experience of using film technology could rapidly become competent with cameras, editing equipment, and technique.

In the 1970s and 1980s, instamatic cameras, also known by their brand name, 'Polaroids', allowed researchers to have their research subjects take photos and have instant results. These instant photos stimulated immediate discussion with research subjects, and much work revolved around questions about social identity. However, the camera equipment itself was costly, and researchers were not often able to give many participants the cameras to go off alone to photograph. Usually the researchers themselves accompanied subjects on photography excursions. Auto-photography as a field method became more widely used and practical when disposable, one-time-use cameras were marketed in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

The connection between the use of the method and the changing, more affordable, and easy-to-use technology is an important one. While use of auto-photography existed prior to the relatively inexpensive, 'disposable' camera, in the 1990s the wide availability of one-time-use cameras allowed this research technique to be more widely realizable. The disposable camera allowed researchers to give a camera to participants, rather than loan out expensive cameras at great financial risk or accompany research subjects on short photographic endeavors. Disposable cameras meant that researchers could have participants take photos over longer time

periods and on their own without direct intervention of the researcher. In tandem, publishing photos in academic journals was also more likely. As the 1990s progressed, the spread of desktop computing, the development of the World Wide Web, Internet publishing, digital photography, and digital imaging exploded the use of visual methodologies.

In human geography, auto-photography arose through this technological possibility. Probably the first geographers to advocate the use of auto-photography were Stuart Aitken and Joan Wingate. Their study of children's geographies asked how youth understand their environments, and how auto-photography could aid in helping these adult researchers comprehend children's different views of their neighborhoods. Their work inaugurated a methodological approach to children's geographies that emphasized children's local and everyday lives, the impact of social differences like race, ethnicity, and income on children's mobility and experiences of their environments, and the ways that children's places are made through social relationships (e.g., play spaces like a friend's house). One conclusion the authors derived through the auto-photography project was that children with cerebral palsy who experienced restricted mobility photographed family more often than children whose mobility was not as hampered. The children with cerebral palsy also took more 'action' shots of other children playing, and the authors concluded that watching other children at play was an important way for the disabled children to participate. Their photos and follow-up interviews indicated that they often considered themselves a part of children's playing even if they were only spectators.

Most studies to date in human geography have utilized auto-photography with children, perhaps because of its hands-on, interactive nature. With time, as visual methodologies become more theorized and prevalent in the discipline, visual field methods will be more widely taught to students and thus be more popular and understood. For instance, more recently, human geographers have drawn on the benefits of the auto-photographic method for studying urban geography, social identity, and spatial mobility.

Purposes of Auto-Photography

Photographs derived from the auto-photographic field method contribute to ethnographic research in numerous ways. First, because photos are seen, they are considered visual data. In geography the visual has always been an important dimension of scholarship and the production of knowledge, for example, through cartography and landscape analysis. Photographs taken by research subjects consist of a radically different genre of visual data

than maps or landscapes, however. Probably the most important aspect of auto-photographs as visual data is how the photographer-participant oriented him or herself to the spatial context that they photographed. While the visual images contain symbols, that is, images that can be interpreted, there are many different theoretical trajectories for how interpretation proceeds (from semiotics to psychoanalysis). The researcher would analyze the visual data of the photos by considering how social, economic, and political aspects helped to frame a scene's production. These processes are also central to how we look at photos, and how researchers are able to incorporate visual data like photographs. The objects, spaces, or people in the pictures must also be considered for how the photographer perceived them. For example, a photograph (see **Figure 1**) of a doorway with '300' above appears to be a poorly snapped picture, even complete with finger covering part of the lens. Placed in context of a research project about the social and spatial segregation of different youth groups at a high school in California, the building number takes a different meaning: the teenage girl who took this picture did so to show a particular 'territory' of one ethnic group at the school. Thus, this visual data shows the particular investment this girl has of ethnic social difference and a 'place' in the 300 building for her social-peer group at her high school. In another example (see **Figure 2**), a photograph of a police car outside of the high school could be placed within a geography of police and adult power, the political and economic aspects of policing urban public schools, and the gendered relationships between the police officers at the school (who are men) and the young woman who photographed the car. This visual data, along with her other photographs, helps a researcher understand the specific social-racial geographies of youth at the school. The police car is a visual symbol to be interpreted by the researcher.

Photos are the production of the research subject and reflect her or his intent or position when snapping the picture. Thus researchers can glean different social motivations by considering why certain scenes were captured when they were; each photo is a lesson about the subject who took that particular picture. When a person takes a picture knowing that it is for a research project, they have made a decision to represent themselves through the visual scene they frame in the camera. However, this should not be overstated, since many times people take for granted social situations, relationships, and spaces, so their decisions about photos may not be as conscious or as intended as the previous sentence implies. To continue the example above, the high school auto-photography project was framed by initial interviews about social, racial-ethnic, and peer 'cliques' at school, so the research participant photographers were influenced by these conversations with the researcher.



Figure 1 A teenage participant in a study about segregation at a California high school took a photo of this school building marked as the '300' building with a one-time-use camera. She said that the 300 building is where the Latino 'gangsters' hang out. They are her friends, thus she indicated that this building is part of her territory at school. Notice the finger in the corner. Poor image quality is a common issue with auto-photography using one-time-use cameras.



Figure 2 This police car is on the street outside of the high school. Police presence is usual at this urban school. The girl who took this photo used it to show the researcher that police are always around campus because the threat of racial fighting at the school is common. She may be indicating a resistance to police presence, or she may agree that there should be police surveillance at her school; it all depends on how she talks about the photo with the researcher. It may even depend on her mood that day.

The photos they took included a documentary-style framework to 'show' to the researcher the places they had discussed. The pictures, in other words, were considered as proof to illustrate what the girls had already indicated in the initial interview, when the camera was handed out. The photo of the schoolyard, for example (see **Figure 3**), is notated with regions for each social group that one girl

had described in the interview. Her intent was to show to the researcher, visually, what had only been described verbally at first. She might not have had the obvious intent of giving further evidence for how segregated cliques at school are by ethnicity and income, though. The 'preps' were typified in interviews with girls as having nicer clothes and cars. While the photo showed

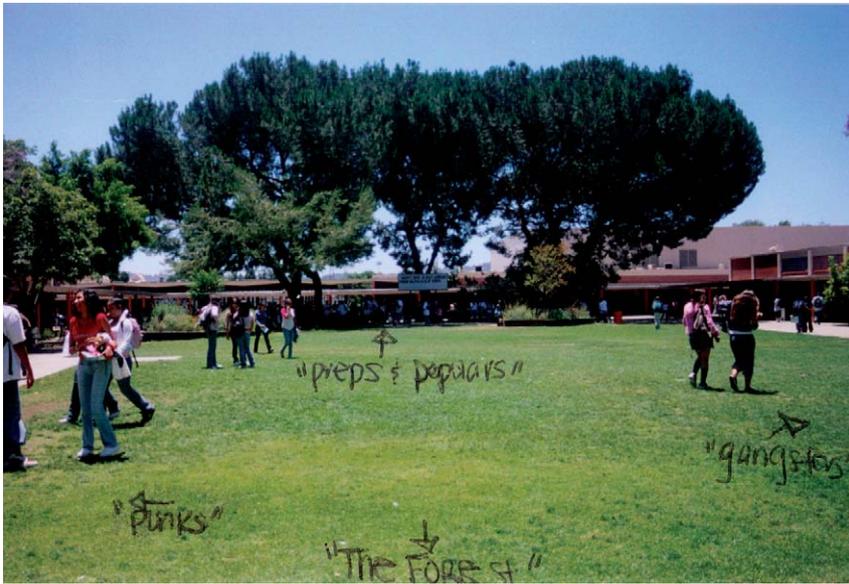


Figure 3 The campus view of the high school is annotated by the research participant's writing on the photograph itself. She noted where on campus different groups 'hang out' everyday. Thus the geography of different cliques is clearly displayed for the researcher. Interviews with the research participant indicated that these groups of friends are also largely racially segregated. The 'forest' is the property of Armenian students, for example, while 'gangsters' are Latinos.

the school's territories, the photographer had said nothing directly about income and class differences at school. The photo helps the researcher to think about the social processes of economic disparity for peer groupings and segregation at this school, however.

Thus, the process of the photography project elicits different conversations and interactions between researcher and researched than would have occurred with no auto-photography. For example, the researcher may sit with the research participant with the photos spread before them. Talking about each photo will bring new information and knowledge to their research relationship than might have been the case with no visual products. This is known as photo elicitation. This process might even highlight contradictions between what the participant might have said before the auto-photography method was used, and what they photographed or said afterwards. Auto-photography can help the researcher to understand how social identities and practices are always changing and unstable. Photo elicitation also indicates that what is spoken verbally is just as important as the visual data produced in the form of the photographs. It is rare to find auto-photography in geography or other social sciences without interviews, participant observation, or other research methods combined with it. For example, one photo (see **Figure 4**) from the high school project shows a blurred shot of a backpack in the foreground on the left, and some kids standing under a tree, to the right. This photo was taken by a girl secretly, as she walked by these boys; her friend's backpack served to hide the camera as she took the picture. She discussed

the photo with the researcher in order to talk about these men as dangerous 'thugs'. An important point is that these boys are a different ethnicity than her, and she talked about the danger of these boys in tandem with the fact that they are Latino (the girl is white). The photo then served to open up a discussion about gangs at school, and it indicated to the researcher the racism that some white youth at the school have for Latinos. While very few youth would openly admit to racist sentiments, the photographs of the youth indicated that some white girls at the school were afraid of Latino boys, even though none had been harmed by the boys in any way. They represented the boys in their photos and in the follow-up interviews about the boys, as dangerous gangsters that should be avoided, and who should be photographed stealthily. If the researcher had just looked at this photo with no follow-up interview, it may never have become clear that the backpack served as camouflage because the girl photographer considered the subjects of her photo to be dangerous. It might just look like a badly taken picture!

Photographs taken through the auto-photography method can therefore illuminate contradictions between what people say and what they represent visually. While a girl could say she is not racist, perhaps her photographs indicate that she is overwhelmingly concerned with racialized others at school. This is a contradiction that the researcher can then interpret. Photos can also indicate the desires of participants that they might not articulate in interviews. An image (see **Figure 5**) shows a group of 'rockers' at the high school in California. The



Figure 4 This blurry photo was taken by a white girl who wanted to hide the fact that she took a photo of these Latino high school students. The photo was taken after school, and her friend's backpack provided cover as she snapped the picture with a one-time-use camera. The angle of the camera was pointed up, indicating that she held the camera out of view at a low angle. The angle also makes the bright sky darken the image in the lower part of the picture, so that the boys are harder to see. The image quality is not as important as the effort she took in order to show the researcher these 'gangster' Latinos hanging out after school. The girl photographer found these boys to be dangerous, and she said she would never hang out at the corner with them.

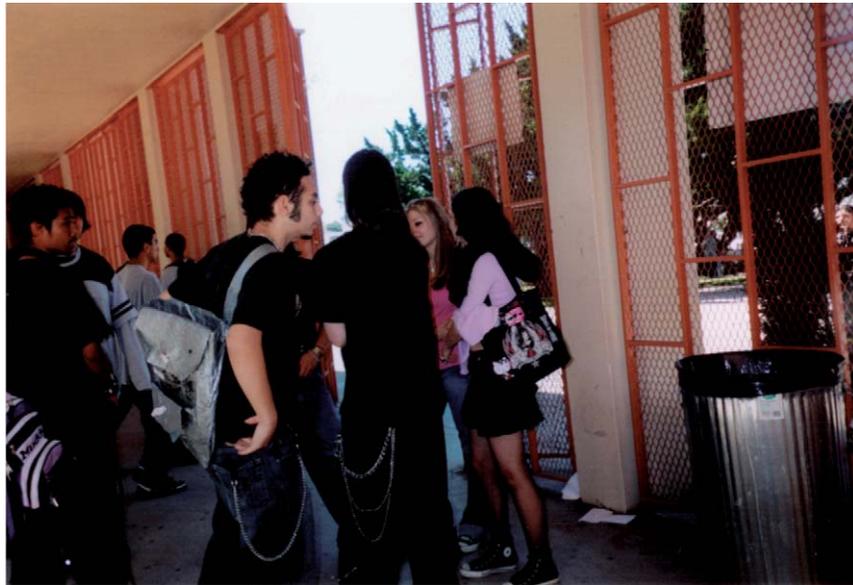


Figure 5 'Rocker' youth at school are identified by the chains on the boys' belts, the girl's fishnet stockings, and her handbag style. The girl who took this picture found typical rocker kids in order to show the researcher how youth at school form their own cliques. The photographer indicated that rocker kids are less likely to segregate by race or ethnicity because they unify around their interests in punk and rock-'n'-roll. She does not belong to this clique.

teenage girl who took this photo explained that 'rockers' (which another girl referred to as 'punks', seen in the schoolyard photo) were able to integrate racially more easily, because they shared an identity around music, rather than race or ethnicity. This may or may not be true

in actuality. What is important, instead, is that the girl expressed a longing for racial integration in her discussion of the photograph. She was not herself a 'rocker' and did not belong to this group of kids, but she took a



Figure 6 The graffiti marker is a symbol for gangs, and the photographer targeted this image to indicate the possible presence of gangs nearby her high school. She did not know who ‘tagged’ this wall, or what gang affiliation it might mark, but the symbolism of the graffiti allowed her point about danger to be represented and communicated. Visual symbols are important devices to relay themes and messages through auto-photography.

photo of them to express an approval of their supposed racial–ethnic integration.

Finally, the content of photos cannot be taken for granted by geographic researchers. In other words, the two dimensionality of the photograph must be interrogated for meaning that is not so flat and for the spatial dynamics that help to construct the image’s context as well as the perspective of the photographer. The social identities of the photographer are just as important as the objects or images that the photos indicate. This point means that any photograph is not merely a neutral reflection of what is captured in the frame of the picture. Taking a photo of a police car (see **Figure 2**) might be an easy mark of youth resistance to adult authority, but the race, age, gender, ethnicity, and life experience of the photographer can indicate an ambivalent attachment to the authority, violence, and power that the police represent in American society.

There are as many ways to interpret a photograph as there are researchers using auto-photography. However, there are general approaches that researchers use to code and analyze auto-photographs and their contents. The first is to gather the photos into different themes, to code these themes, and then to count how many themes come up across all the photos. For example, perhaps a researcher studying a high school’s social spaces would code photos for images of peer groups, particular buildings on campus, local neighborhood streets, friends, family members, and adult authority figures. If there were 100 photos from the high school project, and 75 showed images of graffiti around the school, then this

overwhelmingly would indicate that the students were concerned about gangs at school (see **Figure 6**). It might also indicate that the researcher asked every student about gangs in the neighborhood around campus, and that participants wanted to respond to this issue by proving the gangs’ existence. Counting and comparing themes or general types of landscape photographs still require an analysis of why those particular groupings occurred.

It is never enough just to indicate the numbers of themes that arose without also interpreting the processes that lead to these groupings. The auto-photographer communicates something specific by taking pictures, but the production of a photograph results from the complicated spaces of social life. It is the geographer’s job to consider not only the content of the photographs, but how the research relationship put the photograph into production in the first place, how the complex spatiality of the image was produced over time, how the research participant’s subjectivity and identities influenced what they decided to photograph, and importantly, how to represent the auto-photographs in any research product that results from the project.

Challenges

There are several practical challenges for using auto-photography in human geographic research. These include the cost of cameras and film development, the likelihood that photo quality will be poor and

inconsistent, and the possibility that participants will drop out of the research project over time. Conceptual challenges also exist. In human geography there is very little theoretical or conceptual work on auto-photography or analysis of photographs stemming from use of this method. Challenges do arise as geographers integrate this method into their research. First, although the photograph is a two-dimensional object, ways of seeing and the visual itself are never neutral or flat. The photographs are representations of complex spatialities and subjects that are imbued with social regulation and power. The photograph is a moment in time and space, but that space is unbounded, multidimensional, and even contradictorily experienced and produced. Second, although the auto-photograph is produced by a research subject, it is important to remember that the product of this method is still largely controlled by the researcher. The question of who holds the authority of the data is rarely questioned, and this is an area where further debate is needed in geography. Third, researchers should remember that not everyone has the same cultural, social, and economic background in using photography or other technologies of the visual. They must think about the social and geographic contexts of images, photography, viewing, and technological knowledge. Whatever the challenges that exist, however, visual methodologies are rapidly becoming widely utilized, studied, and debated in human geography. As the development of digital photography and video progresses, and digital technologies become more affordable, the use of auto-photography

will continue to expand the boundaries of human geographic research.

See also: Diaries (video, audio or written); Ethnography; Qualitative methods (overview); Situated knowledge, reflexivity.

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