THE VALUE OF PHOTOGRAPHY AS A METHODOLOGY WITHIN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

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Abstract

Photography is becoming an increasingly valuable tool for researchers who wish to explore social issues. It can provide valuable data for a researcher and insights that are not possible through more traditional qualitative research methodologies. The development of 'visual sociology' as a recognised branch of sociological research shows that photography is becoming an increasingly important methodological tool within the social sciences. This study sets out the main theoretical developments, including around the role of the researcher within the research process, that have allowed photography to become such a valuable aspect of social science research. It explores also the different methodologies that can be adopted by photographers within a social science research project. By providing examples of research conducted by the author around migration and gentrification, this study aims to demonstrate the value of photography within a research context. It discusses the main issues that arise when photographers work on social science projects, particularly around authenticity and ethics.

Keywords: photography, visual methodologies, qualitative research, ethics.

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SOSYAL BİLİMLERDE BİR YÖNTEM OLARAK FOTOĞRAFIN DEĞERİ

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Özet

Fotoğraf, sosyal konuları araştırmak isteyen araştırmacılar için giderek daha değerli bir araç haline gelmektedir. Fotograf geleneksel niteliksel araştırma yöntemleri ile mümkün olmayan bir araştırma ve anlayış için değerli veriler sağlayabilir. Sosyolojinin bir disiplini olan "görsel sosyoloji"nin gelişimi, fotoğrafın sosyal bilimler içinde giderek daha önemli bir yöntem aracı haline geldiğini göstermektedir. Bu çalışma, araştırmacının araştırma sürecindeki rolü de dahil olmak üzere, fotoğrafçılığın sosyal bilim araştırmasının değerli bir yöntemi haline gelmesine olanak tanıyan temel teorik gelişmeleri ortaya koymaktadır. Çalışma, aynı zamanda sosyal bilim araştırma projesi kapsamında fotoğrafçılar tarafından benimsenebilecek farklı yöntemleri de araştırmaktadır. Arastırmacının göç ve kentsel dönüşüm ile ilgili yürüttüğü araştırma örneklerini sunarak, fotoğrafın bir araştırma bağlamında önemini göstermeyi amaçlamaktadır. Fotoğrafçıların, özellikle de sosyal bilimler kapsamındaki projeler üzerinde çalışırken ortaya çıkan öncelikle de özgünlük ve etik etrafındaki temel sorunları tartışmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: fotoğraf, görsel yöntemler, nitel araştırma, etik.

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Introduction

Photography has explored and explained society since the camera was invented. The work of Lewis Hine and Jacob Riis[1] in the early 20th century and the photographers of the Farm Security Administration[2] in the 1930s helped form the 'documentary' tradition of photography, which had a major influence on photographers for decades. There was however a postmodern critique and backlash against documentary photography which raised ethical concerns about the practice of documentary photographers and also questioned whether photographs were an authentic reflection of society. In a discussion on this postmodern critique, Harper (2012: 20) refers to the ethical concerns expressed by leading theorists such as Susan Sontag: "This critique further suggests that documentarians advance their own privileged positions as they document misery and suffering, even to the point of turning the people and objects in their photos into beautiful canvases". Theorists also raised fundamental questions about the relationship between photograph and object and around the essential truthfulness of the image. Sontag (1979: 6) compared photography to other art forms and said that like other art forms photography was a subjective interpretation of the world. John Tagg (1988: 2) highlights the fact that photographs are subject to deliberate distortions such as montage but also points out the problematic nature of all photographs. He explains that each photograph is the result of significant distortions that make its relation to any prior reality deeply problematic. More recently, Pink (2007: 123) also acknowledges the impossibility of capturing a complete authentic record.

As sociologists operate within very high ethical standards and use rigorous methodologies based on scientific principles, one might think that photography would have no place within the social sciences. That is not however the case. Photography is becoming increasingly prevalent within social science research, especially through the development of 'visual sociology'. Visual sociology has become an established branch of social science which uses visual techniques such as film or photography within the research process. Visual methodologies are integral to the research rather than being simply illustrative. The development of 'visual sociology' owes much to the work of John

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[1] Lewis Hine (1874-1940) was a sociologist and photographer who focused particularly on issues around child labour and migration. Jacob Riis (1849-1914) was a journalist and photographer and is generally seen as one of the earliest proponents of the documentary tradition in photography.

[2] The Farm Security Administration photographic project in the 1930s was designed to highlight the plight of farm workers.

Collier[3], an eminent anthropologist and academic and Howard Becker[4], a leading figure within the second Chicago school of sociology. The most influential figure currently is Douglas Harper[5], who is an authority on both the origins and practice of visual sociology. This study sets out the theoretical and methodological developments that have supported this resurgence in the use of photography within the social sciences and provides examples from the researcher's own work to illustrate how valuable photography can be in providing insights into social issues.

A Theoretical Justification

Despite the reservations outlined above concerning subjectivity and the relationship of the photograph to the object, it has been recognised that photography can be integrated within the social sciences. Photography is no longer seen as problematic within a social science context but instead is valued as a tool that can provide additional insights and information that more traditional methodologies are unable to offer. This has become possible through the thinking of leading sociologists such as Howard Becker, who addressed directly issues around authenticity and truth. It is not good enough, from a sociological perspective, to refer to photographs as just expressing the photographer's own personal vision. They have to provide some insight into a reality that is external to the photographer. Becker's theories on truth in photography (Becker, 1978) have provided a helpful framework to consider these issues. Becker argues that it is not reasonable to ask whether a photograph is true or not. Instead he suggests that we consider what the photograph is telling the truth about, what questions the photograph might be answering. The rigorous approach he suggests around identifying questions and answers are a useful test for photographers working within a social science project. Furthermore, the threats to validity highlighted by Becker provide a useful analytical tool for photographers, researchers and viewers in assessing the

[3] John Collier initially worked as a photographer, most notably for the Farm Security Administration, and later became an academic, teaching at San Francisco State University and the San Francisco Art Institute. He published in 1967, together with his son Malcolm Collier, a landmark book entitled: 'Visual Anthropology: Photography as a Research Method', which was revised and updated in 1986. Although the book is associated with a separate academic discipline, that of social anthropology, it is nevertheless crucial in the development of visual sociology because of its focus on the methodologies of using film or photography within a research environment.

[4] Howard Becker was professor of sociology at Northwestern University between 1965 and 1991. He wrote extensively on the use of photography within sociological research, including a seminal article in 1974 called 'Photography and Sociology'.

[5] Douglas Harper is professor of sociology at Duquesne University. He has written four books on visual sociology and was the founding editor of 'Visual Studies'.

sociological value of the photographs. The kind of issues he raises as threats to validity are around access, artistic intent, manipulation of photographs and staging, photographer's theory, censorship and editing. These need to be considered by all photographers engaged in sociological studies.

Another crucial development is that social scientists have begun to take a different view on the issue of subjectivity. It is now understood and accepted that the social science researcher, however rigorous his or her approach, will influence the outcome of the research, particularly in any form of qualitative research. As Pink points out (2013: 3), the idea that researchers could identify through textual analysis an objective external truth has been challenged. Photographs are therefore no more objective or subjective than other forms of data used by social scientists, ethnographers or anthropologists. Sociologists, such as Mitchell Duneier[6] for example who drew extensively on photographs within his research, openly analyse their own role within the research process. They explore their relationship with the subjects of the research and their own impact on the research findings. Sociologists embrace the idea that meanings can be generated by the researcher and subject working together. As Mason indicates in relation to semi-structured interviews: "…meanings and understandings are created in interaction, which is effectively a co-production, involving researcher and interviewees" (2002: 63). A photographer will have an impact on the photograph taken in the same way that an interviewer will have an impact on the data generated from an interview.

It has long been recognised that photographs are often as much a reflection of the photographer as the subject photographed. However, there has been a coming together of photographic, social science and documentary theory in recent decades that has enabled photographers and social scientists to work together. The inherent subjectivity of photography is no longer a problem within a social science context or within the documentary genre. The work of theorists such as Stella Bruzzi addresses concepts of truth and representation within documentary work. Bruzzi (2000) seeks to demonstrate that documentary work does not lose its value because of its inherent distortions and the fact that it is a representation of reality. She points out (2000: 4) that the spectator will understand that a documentary is a negotiation between reality and interpretation. This is helpful as it means that the photographer who is trying to convey something that is 'true' need not consider the subjective elements that inevitably occur as problematic. The work is not invalidated or any less truthful because it is a representation of reality. Photographers also sometimes aspire to take photographs of people as they really are, rather than as they would like to be seen. Bruzzi indicates however (2000: 123) that posing or performance is inevitable, that people are always aware of the camera to some extent. This is not seen as fundamentally problematic and she

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[6] Mitchell Duneier is professor of sociology at Princeton University. His most influential work is *Sidewalk* (1999).

suggests that performance can also possess authenticity and reveal a truth which is just as significant as when the camera is absent.

Methodological Developments

The theoretical developments outlined above have validated the use of photography within the social sciences and supported the rise of visual sociology. They have also influenced the methodologies used by photographers working within a social science context. Visual sociology is an area of sociology where there is a lot of experimentation in terms of methodology. Practitioners build on and adapt the approaches used in previous research projects and so the methodologies are continually evolving. One example of this is photo-elicitation which has been described as: "…the simple idea of inserting a photograph into a research interview" (Harper, 2002: 13). Harper (2002: 13) explains that photo-elicitation research can be used in entirely different research contexts. It can be used in anthropological field studies to help create visual inventories. It can also be used within social science studies that focus on individuals, families or other social groups.

The origins of photo-elicitation lie in the work of John Collier. Collier was part of a team examining mental health issues amongst people living in changing communities[7]. He recommended using photographs in the interview process to find out what impact the changing environment might have had on their psychological state. He was also interested in extending traditional interviewing methodologies. Collier (1986) found that normal interviewing techniques were not working, partly because the farmers and fishermen he was interviewing had difficulties in remembering and talking about past events. He started taking photographs of individuals at their place of work and later also in their home environment. He discovered that he achieved the best results when he actively involved the subjects of the research in the photographic process. This process of building rapport was essential as it helped them to feel more comfortable when discussing difficult issues. Collier discovered that using photographs helped to develop a more collaborative approach to the research project. He also found that photographs helped to open up areas of conversation within certain parameters established by the interviewer. He found that it was particularly useful in stimulating memories.

The benefits of doing photo-elicitation interviews within social science research projects have now been clearly established. Harper (1998: 35) emphasises two particular advantages. First of all, he argues that photographs stimulate a different part of the brain to words and that images evoke deeper elements of human consciousness. Photo-elicitation can therefore be particu-

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[7] This project was presented initially in a publication called 'American Anthropologist' in 1957. Collier also summarised the project in his book 'Visual Anthropology', originally published in 1967.

larly useful in stimulating feelings and memories in the interviewee. Secondly, research usually involves a one-way flow of information from subject to researcher. Photo-elicitation provides an opportunity for the researcher and the subject to work together in a collaborative way: "The technique of photo-elicitation promises a particularly apt alternative; a model for collaboration in research" (1998: 35). He describes what can happen when the researcher and subject discuss these photographs. As the subject talks about the image, the researcher would realize that he or she knew little about the cultural information contained within the image. A dialogue would then develop around the meaning of the images. Rose (2012: 306) emphasises also the value of photo-elicitation in enabling the researcher to uncover aspects of everyday life and how it can empower the research participants, putting them at the centre of the research process.

Researchers and photographers do need to understand however that photo-elicitation is a complex process, especially if the project involves the research participant taking the photographs. Rose (2012: 308) points out that doing interviews based on participant generated images is a much more time-consuming process than normal interviews. The process involves identifying the participants, briefing them, waiting for them to take the photographs, developing the prints, interviewing them about the photographs, transcribing the interviews and then analysing both photographs and transcripts. It is quite likely that the researcher will need to go through the process several times to obtain the quality of material that is required. Careful consideration needs to be given to the type of camera used. The participant may not have used a camera before and so it needs to be easy to use. If participants are given a digital camera for example they might edit the photographs themselves which would be damaging for the research project.

It is worth noting that there is a related methodology which is referred to as 'photovoice'. Harper (2012: 155) suggests that in cases where the researcher gives the camera to the subject and encourages them to photograph their own world, the term 'photovoice' is more appropriate than photo-elicitation. An important element of 'photovoice' is empowerment: 'a research process that is designed to empower those who traditionally were the focus of academic attention' (Harper, 2012: 155). Harper acknowledges that the terms photo-elicitation and photovoice are sometimes interchangeable. What is clear is that the central feature of both photo-elicitation and photovoice is the concept of collaboration and that the photographic image is at the centre of the process.

The methodologies employed within visual sociology address directly the ethical concerns expressed by the postmodern theorists in relation to documentary photography. People in difficult conditions are often exploited for the sake of beautiful or sensational images.   At times the relationship between photographer and subject is at risk of becoming exploitative. There

is likely to be a big gap between photographer/researcher and the subject in terms of social position, economic standing and possibly education. This issue can be made worse by a photographer or researcher who dictates the terms of the interaction. When drawing on the principles and methodologies of visual sociology however, the research project becomes a joint exercise between researcher and participant. The ethical approach is based on principles of respect and collaboration. Pink indicates (2001: 42), that a collaborative approach helps to ensure that no harm comes to the subject of the research and that they benefit in some way from being involved in the project. A collaborative approach changes the whole ethical picture. When both researcher/photographer and participant create something together and both gain from the project there can be no question of exploitation.

Another important methodology within visual sociology is photo-documentation. Rose (2012: 298) refers to photo-documentation as a carefully planned series of photographs that document and analyse a particular social phenomenon. For the photographs to be of value within a social science context it is important that the photographer/researcher operates within a given framework and in a systematic way. Roy Striker, the Director of the Farm Security Administration (FSA) project in the 1930s, provided guidance to his photographers so they knew what kind of images were required. Building on the approach of Roy Stryker and the FSA project, and acknowledging the influence of Becker's theories around truth in photography (1978), Charles Suchar (1997) developed the concept of the 'shooting script'. This methodology involved designing a series of questions that acted as a guide for the photographer so that the images taken related to the overall research question. He explains the value of this approach as follows: "I believe that the photography's documentary potential is not inherent in photographs, but rather lies in an interactive process whereby photographs are used as a way of answering or expanding on questions about a particular subject." (Suchar, 1997: 34). Suchar applied a rigorous approach to the analysis of the images that he took, including attaching codes to the images so they could be grouped in different ways. This allows the researcher to compare and contrast sets of images which can then provide insights into a social issue.

Examples

I have drawn on the methodologies and principles of visual sociology within my own research. I have explored for example through photography the condition of Turkish migrants in the UK and the process of gentrification in Istanbul.

As a Turkish woman who has lived in the UK, I have seen the social and emotional isolation experienced by many Turkish migrants, particularly asylum seekers, and wanted to understand, document and communicate their lives through photography. In one previous study (Fairclough, 2013) I chose to

photograph one particular individual, an Alevi Kurdish asylum seeker, who was living with her son in a town near Manchester. Photographers often lack the ability to communicate directly with their subjects because of the language barrier and as a result appear like outsiders looking in. I wanted to explore whether I, as an insider, could produce photographs that communicate something different about the migrant experience. Rather than focusing on the dramatic moments, I wanted to understand and document ordinary everyday situations and communicate something that was true about a migrant's experience. In order to achieve this, I decided to adopt the research methodologies of social science, and visual sociology in particular, rather than follow the practices of contemporary documentary photographers. As the research evolved I recognised the potential value of photo-elicitation and so conducted a series of photo-elicitation exercises with the subject of the research. I have outlined in this study aspects of that methodology and some of the findings from that part of the project.

Whilst working in Istanbul as a lecturer I recognised that the community I was living in was in a state of transition, undergoing huge social change. As a photographer, I was inspired to document the rapidly changing landscape and the destruction of a neighbourhood and to find out whether photography might help to provide some insights into the process of gentrification and its social consequences. Inspired by the work of Charles Suchar (1997), I drew on the practices of visual sociology and especially the idea of a shooting script. The framework that this methodology provided enabled me to develop a much deeper understanding of the process of gentrification in Istanbul. I have summarised here the core elements of the methodology used and some of the findings from that research (Fairclough, 2017).

For both areas of research, I spent a lot of time within the community that I was studying. This approach is strongly endorsed by Becker who, in referring to the work of some photographers writes "By spending long periods of time among the people in the societies they studied, these photographers learned what was worth photographing, where the underlying rather than superficial drama was" (Becker, 1981: 11). In both cases it was this underlying drama that I was looking to uncover through photography. I spent over two years taking photographs of the Turkish migrant in the UK before conducting with her the photo-elicitation exercises and I spent three years taking photographs within the community in transition in Istanbul. An essential part of my methodology was to adopt the role of 'participant as observer' during the fieldwork. There are several different roles that a researcher can adopt in relation to the subject of their research. Hammersley and Atkinson (1995: 104) describe the participant as observer role as one of comparative involvement, subjectivity and sympathy. For both areas of research, I was actively involved in the lives of the individuals or communities that I was photographing. This approach enriched my understanding of the issues and consequently enabled me to focus my photographic efforts on what was important. Goffman (1989: 130) also high-

light the importance of spending a long period of time with the subject of research. He suggests that this enables the researcher to witness unanticipated events and develop deep familiarity with the subject.

For both areas of research, the most critical success factor was around building trust. In working with the asylum seeker in Manchester, it was important to establish some rapport and also be clear about the terms of our relationship. She was giving me privileged access to her life and it was clear that she would want something in return for this access. For the most part, this involved help with interpretation and negotiating bureaucracy. I was also very careful in the early stages about the way I introduced the camera into the project. I introduced the camera gradually and was particularly sensitive around family members. This sensitive approach is endorsed by Prosser and Schwartz (1998: 122):

> Not only must visual sociologists feel comfortable with themselves as photographers, they must also be attuned to the comfort levels displayed by subjects. Insensitive photographers…will damage the quality of their data and compromise their ability to maintain rapport, a necessity if the researcher hopes to remain in the field.

For the research on gentrification, I was working within an extremely conservative and closed community who originated from the Black Sea region of Turkey. The whole process of gaining access, establishing trust and building rapport was critical to the success of this project. I decided early in the project not to use a digital recorder in my interviews with the research participants. Such an approach would have aroused suspicion. Participants were happy to be the subject of academic research but would not have spoken to journalists. The use of a digital recorder would have aroused suspicions about motives. My initial point of entry into this community was through one woman, a respected figure in the community, who had arrived in Istanbul from the Black Sea region in the 1980s. She acted as a gatekeeper for this research project and I built on this connection to develop further relationships with the women. I built these relationships before taking any photographs. When I did introduce the camera, I explained clearly that my purpose in taking photographs was for an academic project.

Photo-elicitation became, as indicated, an important feature of the research conducted with the asylum seeker from Turkey. A central aim of the research was to learn how to express through photography the everyday experience of migrants and challenge stereotypical representations. My whole approach therefore was geared towards gaining a deeper understanding of the subject, to get under the surface and develop a nuanced appreciation of the everyday life of a migrant in the UK. I realised that I needed to find out more directly how the individual migrant I was working with viewed her own situation. It was not possible for me to gain access to every area of her life and so an objective in giving her the camera was to obtain additional visual data

and gain insights into those areas of her life that were closed to me. I also felt that I needed a challenge to my own sensibility. I anticipated that her photographs would make me think about what I was focusing on in my own photography. My photographs had addressed questions around how a migrant was adapting to life in UK and retained contact with her country of origin. I had focused particularly on domestic life. I wanted to test out whether the subject's own photographs would also help provide answers to these questions and have a similar focus.

As indicated by Rose (2012: 308), the photo-elicitation exercise was a time-consuming process and consisted of several stages, including the generation of the images, the initial analysis, the interview, transcription of the interview and further analysis. I provided the participant with a disposable camera and developed the film myself as I did not want her to select or alter the images which could have happened with a digital camera. I also advised her that I did not have any interest in the quality of the image, simply the information it contained. I produced prints as we needed to discuss the images together. The interview was of course a crucial aspect of the process and I used open and general prompts when focusing attention on particular images. The principle of informed consent underpinned the whole process, with the participant understanding fully the purpose of the exercise and providing consent for use of images and transcript.

Figure 1

The photo-elicitation exercise that I conducted worked in the way Harper (1998) had suggested. The photographs prompted the subject to open up about her experience and evoked memories and feelings. It not only prompted feelings about her current situation or situation at the time of taking the photographs, it took her back in some cases to her origins in rural Turkey or her adult life in Istanbul. The images she had taken of her current everyday life

were images that evoked for her a previous life before she migrated to UK. The photograph she took in the park (*Figure 1*) prompted a discussion about loneliness. This is a place where you would expect to see people but there is nobody there. It became clear during the interview how isolated she had felt whilst she had been in the UK.

Many of the photographs she took in the streets around where she lived prompted discussions around her previous life in Turkey. Ayşe took the photograph of the shop (*Figure 2*) as it reminded her of home and the open market in her village. The photo-elicitation exercise opened up these memories and feelings of homesickness.

Figure 2

The photo-elicitation exercise also provided some new insights. It became clear for example during the interview around the photographs how important the local church was for her. The church had provided her with a community she could relate to, fellow asylum seekers. She felt at home with people who were outsiders like herself, asylum seekers from all over the world. The church was clearly playing a very significant role in her attempts to adapt to life in UK. The photo-elicitation exercise provided me therefore with a different and broader perspective on her life and how she was adapting to the UK. Up to that point, I had focused primarily on life within the home. After the photo-elicitation exercise, I started to take more photographs outside the home and adapted my focus to provide a more balanced and contextual narrative.

An important aspect of the methodology for my work on gentrification in Istanbul was the shooting script. I established guiding questions at the start of the project to help focus attention and adapted these as the project evolved. Initial questions included:

- Where do members of this community live, work, shop, eat and socialise?

- To what extent do members of this community mix with the other communities in the neighbourhood?

My initial photographs addressed questions around where people lived and shopped. The Black Sea community in this part of Istanbul had grown steadily since the 1960s. Families built shacks on common land and then laid claim to that land and as the community grew settlers also built basic apartment blocks as well. The migrants also built their own shops for the local community. The dry cleaners shop in *figure 3* for example is run by members of the Black Sea community as is the grocery in *figure 4*.

Figure 3

Figure 4

The new apartment blocks designed for middle class Turks, built in very close proximity to the shacks of the Black Sea residents, include their own dry cleaners and grocery (see *figure 5* and *6*). What is striking here is the sharp division between the communities. Also, the building of new dry cleaners and groceries sends a signal that a new infrastructure for the new community is being developed; it anticipates the likelihood of the existing infrastructure disappearing as more and more land is taken over by the developers.

Figure 5

Figure 6

As recommended by Sucher (1997), the codification of images helps analysis, enabling the researcher to compare and contrast different images. In the images above there are striking contrasts between *figures 3* and *5* and *figures 4* and *6.*

The use of photography in this research context helps to explain the specific type of gentrification that is taking place. In major modern cities such as New York or London developers would tend to purchase and renovate existing property. There would usually be an attempt to retain the character in some way of the existing community. In Istanbul there is no consideration for the existing culture and way of life. It is a process of clearing areas and building new properties. There is no expectation that the new residents will even shop in the same places as the resident community. Instead new shops and restaurants are built.

Photography also gives an indication of how residents might feel about the gentrification process taking place and therefore opens up possible avenues of further research and enquiry. It is impossible in this community to escape the sense of rapid and large-scale change. Towering over the locality are the cranes and the new apartment blocks (see *figure 7*). The viewer can understand from this image how residents might feel a sense of encroachment, of being squeezed.

Figure 7

Conclusion

There has been a resurgence in recent decades in the use of photography within a social science context. This has been made possible by theoretical developments, including the recognition that qualitative research is necessarily a collaborative process between researcher and participant. Consequently, the use of photographs within a research context is just as valid as other forms of data. Whilst acknowledging the problematic nature of the relationship between photograph and object, it is nevertheless possible for images to help answer questions of sociological interest. By applying rigorous methodologies and being aware of the obstacles to validity highlighted by Becker (1978), a researcher can use photographs to provide insights that would otherwise not be possible. Furthermore, by adopting a collaborative approach with the participants of the research, the researcher can operate in an ethical way that does not exploit the more vulnerable in our society.

In my own research on migration and gentrification, I have found that social science methodologies, and visual sociology in particular, offer exciting opportunities for photographers who wish to challenge themselves. It is clear for instance that photographers do benefit from spending relatively long periods of time within particular communities as they can understand what is going on beneath the surface. Visual sociology provides an ethical and methodological framework for photographers that enable them to reflect upon their work. Researchers can gain new insights and different perspectives by using photographic methodologies such as photo-elicitation and the shooting script and can produce images that help to document and explain important social issues.

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