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Observing Culture and Social Life

Documentary Photography, Fieldwork, and Social Research

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Issues of methodology and epistemology are lodged at the heart of many forms of inquiry, but they are rarely examined as such outside philosophy or the natural and social sciences. This is both understandable and somewhat unfortunate. It's understandable because the language of science and philosophy of science is the language in which these and other *ology* words semantically reside. But anyone trying to support a claim about the world will inevitably take an epistemological position, if only by championing one kind of evidence over another—stories, for example, or spreadsheets; government or news media reports; surveys or personal experience; photographs or hearsay. In much the same way, selecting one strategy over another for collecting, organizing, or analyzing these different kinds of evidence is a methodological choice, even when made by people who never use that term.

Social scientists preoccupied by their own epistemology and methodology may not think to examine these terms as they apply to other forms of inquiry. There are lessons to be learned when they do, however, not only for

people who conduct other forms of inquiry but also for social scientists themselves. As I hope to illustrate in the following pages, this is very much the case for the kind of inquiry involved with social documentary photography. From one side of the equation, this examination can reveal some of the implicit epistemological and methodological choices that shape the work of photographers interested in documenting culture and social life. From the other side, it raises questions about related choices that social researchers make, only some of which are routinely acknowledged.

My interest in social research and documentary photography was catalyzed by reading what Howard Becker and John Collier Jr. wrote about the subject several decades ago. Collier'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. Although he had worked previously as a documentary photographer in the federal 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 conventional research designs. Becker's 1974 essay on "Photography and Sociology" (published as a chapter in Becker, 1986) set aside the kind of systematic recording Collier recommended to make the somewhat different claim that, on its own terms, social documentary photography shared important elements of inquiry and representation with sociological work.

Both Becker and Collier commented on photographic practices that implicate the relationship between epistemology and methodology. One way of thinking about this relationship in general is that each research method is linked through the logic of inquiry to a distinctive set of epistemological principles. Within this perspective, methodological strategies, such as Likert scales, double-blind experimental designs, openness with field informants, confidence-building sample sizes, randomized or thematic photographic inventories; see, for example, Mead & Bateson, 1976), have a one-to-one relationship with epistemological principles.

A second way of thinking about this relationship is that it's arbitrary. Instead of a one-to-one relationship, epistemological principles and particular methodologies are aligned as one-to-many. Countless and varied approaches are equally viable, and conventions of research practice are just that, conventions, owing more to social circumstance than to epistemological rigor (Feyerabend, 1975).

Yet a third way of conceptualizing this relationship is that epistemology and methodology are "loosely coupled" (a phrase used by Weick, 1976, to describe links between levels of school hierarchies). Epistemology sets

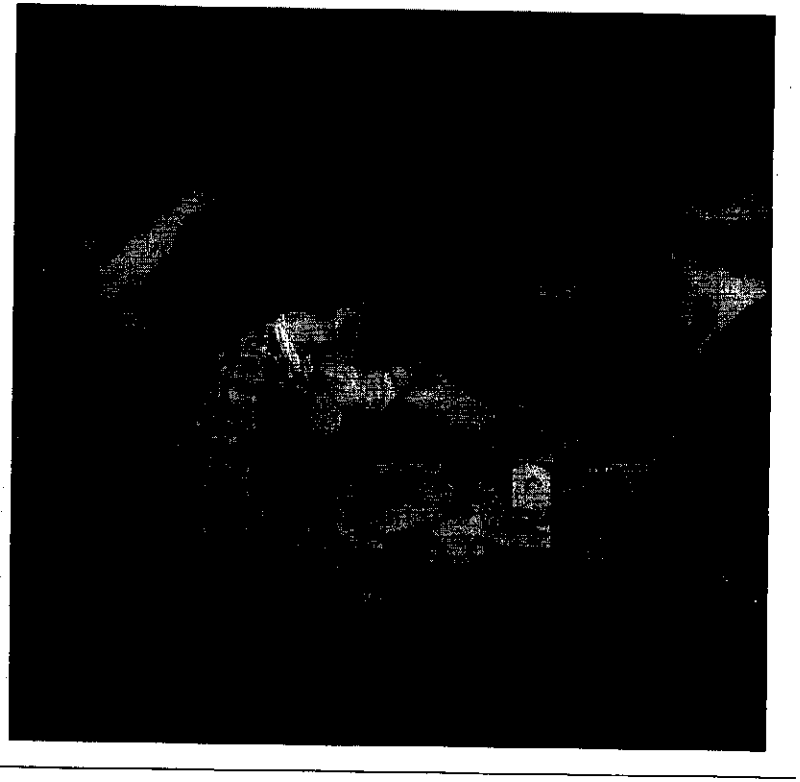

Photo 2.1 A photograph made by John Collier, Jr., when he worked for the Farm Security Administration. The original caption reads, "Red Cross distributing knitting material. San Francisco, California, 1941."

SOURCE: Photo by John Collier Jr., courtesy of the Library of Congress.

parameters within which various (but not all) methodological approaches can be useful and methods of inquiry can support varied (but not all) logics of inquiry. Within this perspective, the conventional practices of different research communities rest on both social and epistemological foundations. Some departures from convention might be epistemologically indefensible whereas others are not only defensible but more appropriate and productive than conventional practice and, as a result, equally or more consistent with scientific inquiry.

Drawing on this notion of a loose coupling between methodology and epistemology, I will argue that social documentary photography and social science fieldwork are distinguished less by different epistemologies than by contrasting social practices. As a companion argument, I will propose that documentary photography and social science fieldwork—as complementary

modes of observation-based inquiry—may have more in common with each other epistemologically than fieldwork has in common with other forms of social research.

In presenting these arguments, I'll first describe what I mean by empirical social inquiry and where that fits within documentary studies and social scientific practice. I'll then examine how ideals of empirical inquiry were articulated within three thoughtful documentary projects. Taken together as a point of both correspondence and contrast, these projects reveal three taken-for-granted practices of social researchers that warrant further consideration. These include preparing research designs that exclude personal accounts of observation and data collection, relying on academic communities to define new knowledge, and attending to explicit rather than implicit statements of social theory.

Treating these practices as social conventions of professional social researchers, rather than as derivatives of an empirical epistemology per se, could bring increased attention to their alternatives, including the practice of social documentary photography. That attention could stimulate new forms of observational study and enrich visual inquiries within the social sciences themselves. To take full advantage of these opportunities, however, will require dispositions and skills that are rarely taught in graduate research methods courses and that few social researchers have acquired on their own.

Field Methods, Documentary Studies, and Empirical Inquiry

For purposes of this chapter, 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 photography. 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 personal vision and field photography skills are all that's required to document culture and social life—a kind of "photographic faux-realism" that is more likely to undermine than affirm empirically sound inquiry.

The idea of tying inquiry to sensory evidence and other real-world data is at first blush a relatively simple matter, but it bears only an indirect relationship to how researchers tend to think about empirical social research for several reasons. First, sense data may be "real," but they can also reflect

distortions of perception and memory. Eyewitness accounts and photo or video recordings may provide evidence not available in any other form, but they can also introduce judgments that depart from the facts of a matter. Material artifacts are similarly useful and problematic, not because artifacts make judgments but because the variations, arrangements, and modifications that make artifacts meaningful to researchers can reflect both naive and manipulative human agency.

The vagaries of sense perceptions and material artifacts in natural settings have led more than a few social researchers to search for more reliable indicators of culture and social life. Among the most prominent candidates are texts and numbers generated by institutions or by researchers themselves. Census data, survey responses, financial accounts, tabulations of experimental trials, health records, employment policies, achievement test scores, and so on have special attractions in this regard. Although these data rest on varied forms of self-reporting, conversation, and note taking, the uncertainties of their origins are routinely excised through standardized reporting formats. Large data sets that reflect this kind of redaction, aggregation, and reduction are an essential feature of the "hard data" romance—that is, the notion that, removed far enough from the social circumstances in which they were created, numbers and words are unambiguously objective. For many researchers, the "reliability" of these data appears as a firmer foundation for conducting empirical social inquiry than artifacts and behavior observed in natural settings.

Taken together, these considerations reflect an abiding irony of social scientific work: Investigations based on data that have been pared away from their real-world origins are regarded by many researchers as more empirically sound than investigations (including the work of documentary photographers) based on direct observations in natural settings. This inversion rests on confounding empirical value with how easily different kinds of data can be analyzed systematically. As a related instance of reliability trumping validity, direct observations of natural settings are valued less than the kinds of text and numbers that are relatively easy to reduce, aggregate, compare, and manage.

A second irony emerges, however, when we resist this kind of reification so forcefully as to reject data management of any sort. Both social researchers and documentary photographers are understandably suspicious, for example, of photographs that reflect contrived poses or processing distortions or that come with captions that misrepresent an image's origins or typicality. Posed photographs, however, 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, although page layouts featuring severely cropped and juxtaposed images can create false impressions, they can also highlight theoretically significant details and comparisons. The irony is that keeping data as "raw" as possible can also reduce their usefulness in answering empirical questions we care about.

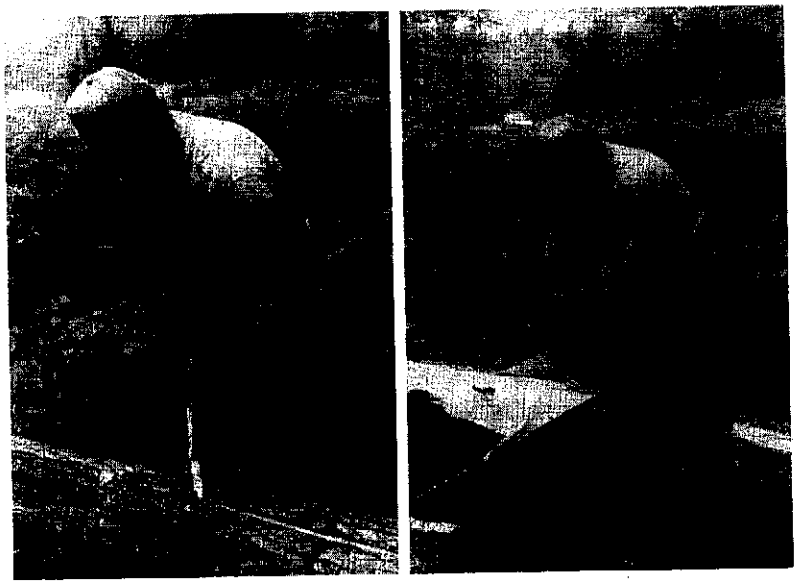

Photo 2.2 Using a "peeling spud" made from an old car spring, semi-retired logger Ernie Toivonen demonstrates in 1990 the handcraft of debarking a tree in Ontonagon County, Michigan. In the course of an interview with the sociologist Jon Rieger, Toivonen offered to "show him how it was done" prior to mechanization of the pulp wood industry in the 1970s and 1980s. 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.

SOURCE: © Jon Rieger; used with permission.

These ambiguities complicate the challenge of determining whether projects of social scientific and documentary work are empirically sound. However, they also suggest how social science fieldwork and documentary photography are joined at the epistemological hip in ways that also distinguish them from nonobservational forms of social research. Documentary

photographers and social science fieldworkers—ethnographers and participant observers, in particular—both regard direct observation as an essential step toward understanding culture and social life. This is not to say that nothing valuable can be learned through other methods of inquiry—surveys or laboratory experiments, for example, or the analysis of institutional data. However, as Tope, Chamberlain, Crowley, and Hodson (2005) concluded from their extensive review of the research literature about work, some things learned through direct observation in natural settings are difficult or impossible to learn in any other way.

As a correlative to this shared epistemological principle, most field researchers and documentary photographers are willing to regard photographs as durable and useful records of what was visible in a cultural or social setting at a particular time and from a particular point of view. They recognize that it's not always easy to make those records in the way we will later find most useful, nor is it a simple matter to understand what's depicted fairly in images made by others. But these uncertainties fall inside, not outside, the scope of their epistemology and point to questions that field researchers and documentary photographers are comfortable working with and around. That's not necessarily the case for social researchers who work at greater remove and who consider photographs to be more credible if they are "untouched by human hands" or dismiss the evidentiary value of images for which that's clearly not the case.

Social documentary photographers, and many social science field researchers, will argue that the idea that photographs and other machine-recorded data can be generated without human agency is both naive and misguided. They regard in similar terms the idea that a photographer's selectivity in one dimension makes an image wholly suspect in all others (Schwartz, 1999). In contrast to more extremist views, field researchers and thoughtful documentary photographers are less interested in the absolute truth of an individual image than in the partial and multiple truths of image collections related to a particular project or study. As a counterpoint to this common epistemological ground, however, the practices by which they describe and contextualize field inquiries are not at all the same.

Research Designs and Personal Accounts

One tool for helping researchers and others determine what a set of photographs might contribute to a project of empirical inquiry is a written proposal or *research design,* an explicit description of how a study is organized and how the right kind of evidence can be brought to bear in answering predetermined 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, a study for which methods and epistemology are in harmony.

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. For example, statements by social scientists frequently do a good job of accounting for sample size, site selection, the wording of survey or interview 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, preview indeterminate features of the research process, or describe the researcher's honesty, interpersonal skills, or ability to elicit cooperation and useful information from research subjects. Leaving these potentially problematic elements out of a research design affirms an epistemology in which the researcher's role dominates the researcher, in which an investigator's formal plan transcends the crafts of observation and inquiry.

Personal accounts are another tool for establishing the credibility of empirical social inquiry. They're used rarely by professional social researchers (although 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* (1939/1960). In other instances, they appear as forewords, afterwords, and 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 an epistemology in which people shape inquiry and in which the crafts of observation and inquiry transcend research designs.

In making connections between methodology and epistemology, research designs and personal accounts refer to complementary dimensions of empirical quality. Taken together, these dimensions circumscribe familiar issues of data collection and analysis. However, they also point to myriad other choices that investigators make as they go about their work—deciding when data are complete enough to warrant analysis, for example, or 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 distinguishes their work from other ways of approaching the world—divine revelation, for example, or fantasy making, psychological projection, speculation, or demagoguery. Alternatives to empirical inquiry also include forms of photographic work in which documentary appearances are pursued with great skill and thoughtfulness. Photographic faux-realism of this sort, for example, appears routinely in advertising and political campaigns (Bumiller, 2003; Heffernan, 2003) and in training manuals (for an exceptional example, see Pepin, 1976). A similar emphasis on projective imagery characterizes many (but by no means all) forms of journalism (Hagaman, 1993, 1996) and family photography (Chalfen, 1987, 1991). Scholars have examined the assumptions, fabrications, and projections that shape such imagery as intriguing evidence about culture and social life (Lesy, 1973, 1976, 1980; Ruby, 1995), but the most telling images for studies of this sort are made for completely different purposes.

Against the backdrop of these alternative perspectives, social researchers rest their case for the soundness of empirical inquiry on research designs, relative to which personal accounts play a minor role. The emphasis among documentary photographers is just the opposite. A related contrast appears in how inventions of the investigator are regarded within these two different forms of inquiry.

Inventions and Reflections

In explicating their method and epistemology, social researchers, photographers, and artists can be more or less self-conscious about what their accounts and reports add 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, Rosenheim, Eklund, & Fineman, 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.

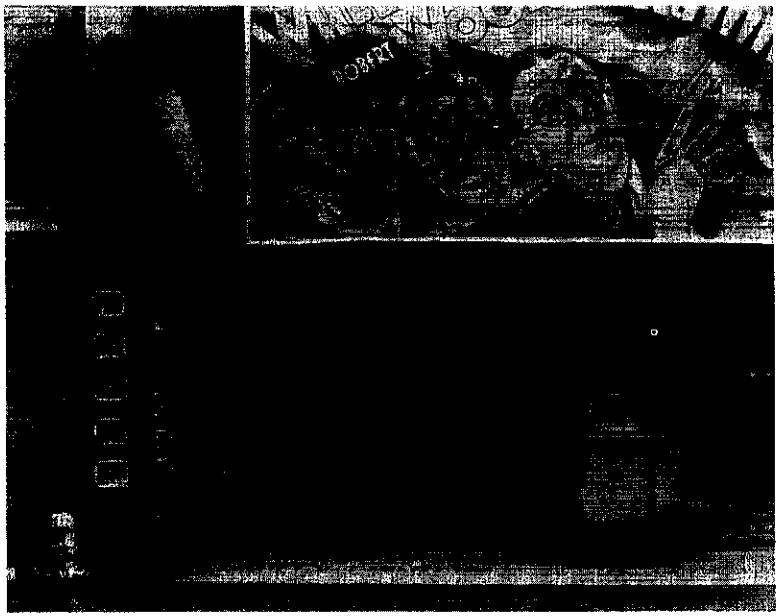

Photo 2.3 The original caption reads, "Movie theatre on Saint Charles Street. Liberty Theater, New Orleans, Louisiana. 1935–36." Walker Evans described his work not as documentary photography but as "art done in a documentary style."

SOURCE: Photo by Walker Evans, courtesy of the Library of Congress.

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 Becker (1986) and Collier (1967), scholarly writing in this area has increased substantially in recent years through monographs (Banks, 2001; Emmison & Smith, 2000; Harper, 1982, 1987, 2001; 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. This can push the latter outside the epistemological purview of social inquiry, but there's much to gain from keeping them in.

Personal accounts by documentary photographers can alert us to somewhat different ways of thinking about empirical visual inquiry. Dorothea

Lange, for example, displayed prominently over her desk the following quotation from Sir Francis Bacon, an early proponent of empirical inquiry: "The contemplation of things as they are, without substitution or imposture, without error or confusion, is in itself a nobler thing than a whole harvest of invention" (in Lyons, 1966, p. 67). 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 photographic work she produced prior to her better known and explicitly documentary projects.

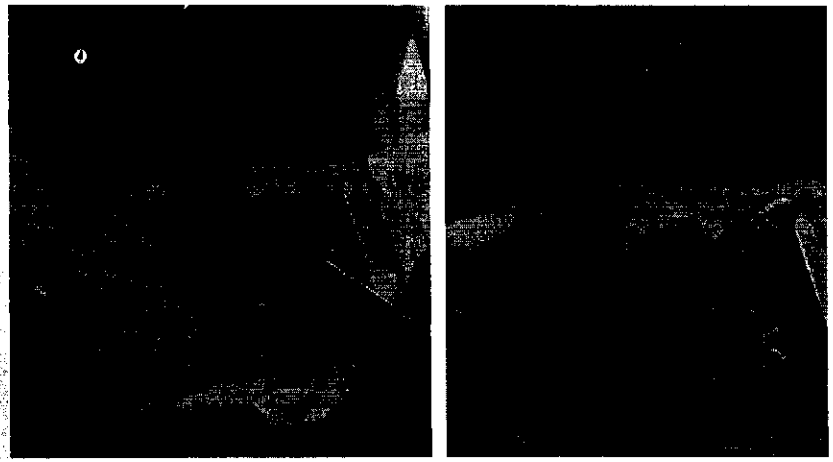

Photo 2.4 These two images were both made from the same Dorothea Lange photograph. Lange printed the image on the left "full frame" but cropped it to create the image on the right and focus on the man and his expression of despair.

SOURCE: Both photographs by Dorothea Lange, courtesy of the Library of Congress.

An empirical ideal for photographic work has also been championed by Wright Morris, a documentary photographer, fiction writer, and essayist. 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" (p. 8). However, in what looks at first like a contradiction to the mirror ideal, Morris also noted that "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" (p. 103).

Considered in light of his other writing, Morris's statement 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 epistemology are two key ideas that Morris developed more fully in both his photography and writing: First, that every account of "the facts of life" will reflect some form 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 (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 (1986) did just that a few decades later, in characterizing "ethnography as fiction" (p. 6), but a kind of fiction that's not necessarily false or untrue. In Clifford's perspective, rhetorical inventions fall within both the fieldworker's tool kit and the epistemology of science, not as a substitute for detailed observation and systematic analysis but as their handmaiden. As Sarah Pink (2001), Doug Harper (1998), and others have noted, this argument applies as well to the rhetoric of photographic reports, within which the personal vision of social researchers—as an instrument of investigation—can contribute substantively to empirically sound accounts. Within this orientation, issues of representation are integral to the process of social inquiry, not just a dimension of inquiry products (e.g., articles, books, photographs, films).

Within the notion of loosely coupled epistemology and methods, incorporating invention as a necessary element of empirical inquiry does not mean "anything goes." However, 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. It also 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 resequence raw film footage so that events and settings are more comprehensible and clear. There's also much to be learned about culture and social life from how participants respond to outsiders, including outsiders who come with cameras, videotape 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 toward truths and those that lead away from them. This ties the soundness of empirical inquiry not only to techniques and methods but to the ethics and integrity of the investigator. Although reflection and invention are not quite the same as objectivity and subjectivity, Robert Coles (1997) speaks to the epistemological dimensions of each in noting

> 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"? (p. 8)

Three Exemplary Projects

An epistemology that includes both reflection and invention as essential elements of empirical inquiry is hard to define beyond statements of principle such as those provided by Morris or 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 videotapes, 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 can to this ideal. As illustrated by the three projects described below, so too do some documentary photographers. Although 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. In these respects, the epistemology behind these projects overlaps considerably with the perspective of social research, and with fieldwork in particular. After briefly describing each project, I'll turn to two related questions: First, how do the practices that generated these three projects of empirical inquiry differ from what we've come to expect from social scientists? Second, what implications do these differences have for how social researchers are prepared to study 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 six to eight 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 (p. 253) of additional objects not included in the photo.

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.

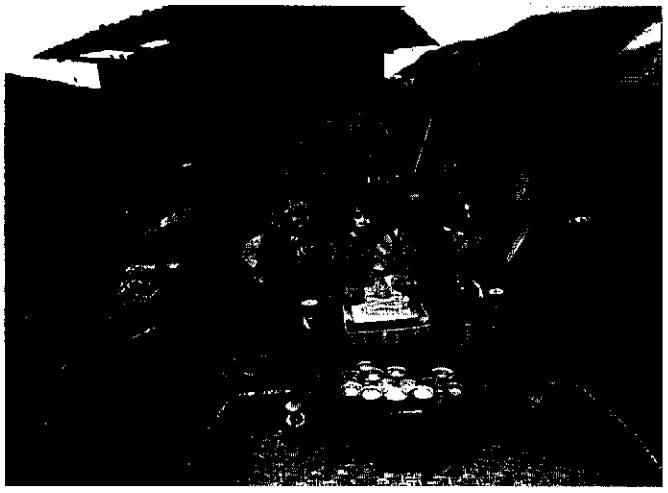

Photo 2.5 The Namgay family, Shinka, Bhutan, 1993.

SOURCE: © 2006 Peter Menzel/menzelphoto.com.

In his own account of photographing the family portrayed in Photo 2.5, for example, Menzel (1994) 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)

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.

Photo 2.6 An English lesson in the school attended by 12-year-old Bangum Namgay, an hour's trek from her home in Shinka, Bhutan, 1993.

SOURCE: © 2006 Peter Menzel/menzelphoto.com.

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).

The empirical value of *Material World* rests in part on the study design, in part on 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 (1965), and Janet Hoskins (1998). They are given added punch, however, 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 are all visible at the same time, let alone to light and focus the array in ways that will produce a well-exposed and legible image.

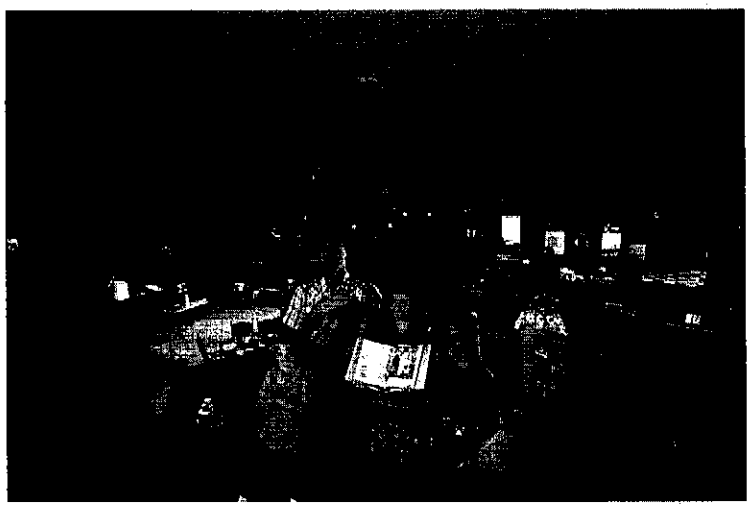

Photo 2.7 The Skeen Family, Pearland, Texas, 1993.

SOURCE: © 2006 Peter Menzel/menzelphoto.com.

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, although we have many indications that this was not the photographers' 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. Although 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.

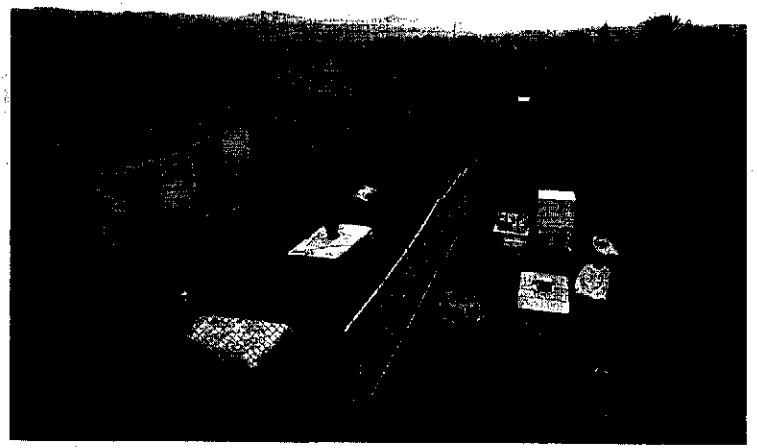

Photo 2.8 The Qampie Family, Soweto, South Africa.

SOURCE: © 2006 Peter Menzel/menzelphoto.com.

Girl Culture

The questions noted above are also worth considering in connection with Lauren Greenfield's documentary study, *Girl Culture* (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

Photo 2.9 Two 15-year-old girls try on clothes in a dressing room, San Jose, California.

SOURCE: Photo © Lauren Greenfield/VII.

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 appearance in mirrors. Through another set of photographs, she shows a diverse array of girls and women in different forms of "dressing up" (Photos 2.10, 2.11, and 2.12).

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 (2002) puts it,

> The body has become 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. (p. 150)

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

Photo 2.10 Augusta, 22, the newly crowned Queen of the Cotton Ball, Chattanooga, Tennessee.

SOURCE: Photo © Lauren Greenfield/VII.

In much the same way that Erving Goffman (1963) called attention to the "total institution" as an ideal type that could characterize quite diverse organizations (prisons, monasteries, mental hospitals, boarding schools,

Photo 2.11 Exotic dancer Tammy Boom backstage at Little Darlings, Las Vegas, Nevada.

SOURCE: Photo © Lauren Greenfield/VII.

Photo 2.12 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.

SOURCE: Photo © Lauren Greenfield/VII.

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 (Greenfield, 2002), "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" (p. 150).

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

Photo 2.13 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.

SOURCE: Photo © Lauren Greenfield/VII.

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" (all quotes on page 152).

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 multidimensional 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

The *Great Central Valley: California's Heartland* is a collaborative social history prepared by photographers Stephen Johnson and Robert Dawson

Photo 2.14 Wind gap pumping station, California Aqueduct, Kern County, 1985.

SOURCE: Photo by Stephen Johnson.

and the essayist and novelist Gerald Haslam (Johnson, Dawson, & Haslam, 1993). The book combines an extraordinary array of visual materials and a lengthy text that includes personal accounts, observations and reviews of 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 FSA photographs from the 1930s, contemporary black and white photos 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 rephotographed), satellite photographs, maps, and the reproduction of a landscape painting.

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 a Digital Book* (1993). This companion volume provides additional details about how *California Heartland* was designed and put together, both technically and conceptually. We learn that a prerelease version of Adobe Photoshop allowed Johnson to improve the clarity of old photographs by removing "cracks, serious scratches,

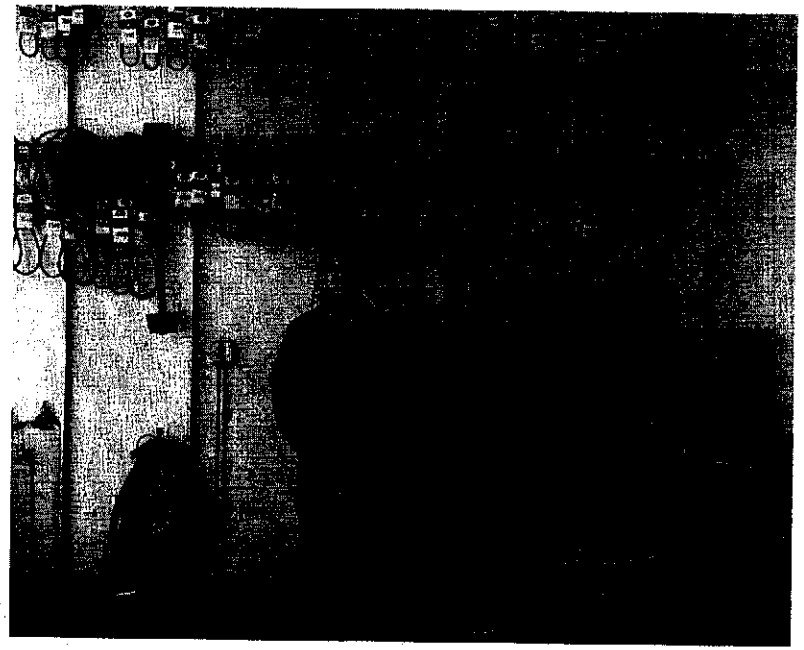

Photo 2.15 Johnnie, Merced, California, 1975.

SOURCE: Photo by Stephen Johnson.

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" (p. 9). 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. (p. 15)

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.

Photo 2.16 Used cans, crop-dusting airstrip, Newman, California, 1984.

SOURCE: Photo by Stephen Johnson.

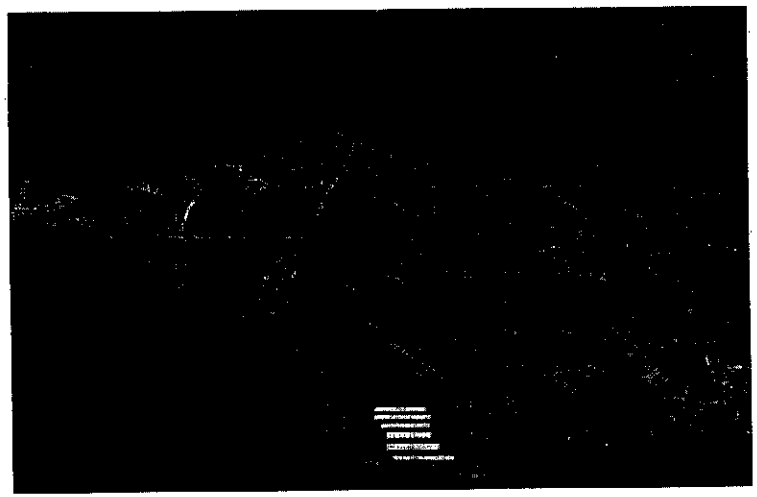

Photo 2.17 Discovery Bay, San Joaquin Delta, California, 1985.

SOURCE: Photo by Stephen Johnson.

Documentary and Social Scientific Practices

How did the photographers and writers who created these three projects approach the ideal of sound empirical inquiry? And where do the documentary practices they relied on depart from the conventions of social research?

In trying to answer these two questions, let me begin by noting that all three documentary studies make extensive use of recorded images to represent how culture and social life looks in particular times and places and that the images themselves provide a kind of information that's difficult 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 form of content that is analytically interesting in its own right.

In arguing for the empirical 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 photographed. The two photographers working on *California's Heartland* offer individual 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 (1993) that he "embarked on the Central Valley project to better understand the place that made me a landscape photographer" (p. 43). Menzel's (1994) 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 photojournalist, but also 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 about the personal interests of investigators does not necessarily make studies more empirically

sound—see Biella (1988) and Ruby (1976) for contrasting views on this. However, it can help us determine how close a study comes to hitting its empirical marks. In mainstream social science reporting, an explicit research design is called on to help make that determination. The documentary studies reviewed here don't provide that, but they do offer some sense of where the data come from and where the authors think the findings of their studies might or might not apply. For example, Greenfield (2002) contends that "*Girl Culture* is my photographic examination of an aspect of our culture that leaves few women untouched." However, 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" (both quotes from p. 150). Similar efforts to focus and delimit empirical significance appear within the other two studies.

Many realistic-looking photo studies have been created by reducing a large collection of photographs to a carefully edited display of just a few. In contrast to less thoughtful efforts, however, the imagery of the three studies reviewed here seems well selected, sequenced, and spaced to represent analytical themes. Individual images and image sets provide the core content of each study. However, they also are articulated with data from other sources—including interviews, direct field observation, historical records, and demographic statistics. The authors and photographers of these studies also have taken some pains to describe their work processes and to characterize the empirical warrant of their work.

Although they depart from conventional social science reporting practices, these features help create a kind of harmony between data, methodology, and epistemology that we have come to associate with sound empirical work. Somewhat similar patterns appear in how these studies address two other challenges I noted earlier: framing empirical observations to highlight new knowledge and challenging existing social theory.

Highlighting New Knowledge

Social researchers define and present new knowledge by publishing articles and books for specialized academic communities and markets. For them to regard knowledge as "new," it has to be 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 want their work to be recognized and well regarded by professional peers. However, documentary image makers also pitch their inquiries to other audiences, including

the subjects of their study and members of the public who may already harbor ideas about the visual evidence the image makers have put together.

As one step toward reaching this broader audience, some documentarians (including those I've described here) frame their work as the result of a personal journey that led to new insights and understanding. Johnson (1993) notes that while making photographs for *California Heartland* began in territory familiar to him, 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" (p. 43). In establishing points of personal connection with both professional and public audiences, Greenfield (2002) 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" (p. 149). 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; Menzel and Greenfield also offer explicit commentary about designing their books. As another illustration of this emphasis, Greenfield (2002) 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" (p. 152).

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 website that includes an online 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 online 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

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. Indeed, the rhetorical conventions of that literature—the emphasis on words and numbers, accompanied at times by figures and charts, organized around arguments and summarized "findings"—are problematic 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 it would also fall far short of the new knowledge we're likely to acquire from reading each work as a whole. Some of this new knowledge is acquired in a process of elicited meaning and inquiry. As Paul Kennedy notes in his introduction to *Material World* (Menzel, 1994), "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" (p. 7; 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 toward evidence than is customary for social science research reports. In all three cases, materials are presented, for example, without being fully interpreted or analyzed, with the expectation that some dimensions of analysis are appropriately left to the reader or viewer. 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 University, 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 (1993) 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" (p. 15).

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. Social scientists pay the most attention to theories 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 contesting theories and hypotheses, the documentary projects I've described here are designed to challenge 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 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 that as a journalist, she even helped make some of the images that fall within her critiques. Menzel (1994) saw *Material World* as a way not only to illustrate "the great differences in material goods and circumstances that make rich and poor societies" (p. 7) but also 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.

Observational Methods, Evidence, and Meaning

In terms of empirical social inquiry, the three documentary studies I've described are exemplary. Other studies might be called *documentary* because they include realistic photographs of people and places. In looking to documentary image making for empirically sound accounts of culture and social life, however, I suggest we seek out works similar to those I've reviewed here, studies that not only offer interesting imagery but also reflect a concerted effort, in Morris's (1999) words, to "mirror the subject" that they purport to depict.

Having said that, if we think of *Girl Culture, California Heartland,* and *Material World* as merely 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? Given an epistemology of empirical social inquiry, where can we go and what can we see through these varied forms of practice?"

As a partial answer to these questions, I've summarized in Table 2.1 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. This kind of intertextuality both reflects and stimulates the evolution of a literate community. But if we care less about literature building in academia than community building in the field, 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. In studying local clients and communities, for example, teachers, social workers, community organizers, and health care professionals may find documentary conventions more agreeable and productive than social scientific approaches. They don't need to know if new ground is being broken for the disciplines of psychology, sociology, or anthropology to learn something of value and relevant to their work. Without referring to the literature of social research per se, "new" knowledge and insights can come their way by looking at videotapes of student small-group discussions, by making and examining photographs of institutional events and routines, or by working with young and old community members to document neighborhood and family traditions.

The contrasting merits of documentary study and social research as resources for field-based professionals extend as well to undergraduate curricula and students. Social scientific knowledge is essential to an informed citizenry, but so too are documentary studies and the ability to think clearly

Table 2.1 Two Modes of Empirical Social Inquiry

	Social Science	*Documentary Study*
Purpose	Develops new knowledge and understanding of culture and social life through empirical investigation and scholarly works	Develops 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, and so on; 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, and so on; emergent rather than a priori focus and questions; emphasizes exploring, investigating, and examining phenomena, places, people, or ideas through broadly bounded inquiry; integration of personal interest and logic of inquiry
Data collection	Emphasis on getting enough data points to meet requirements spelled out in research design; larger sample size frequently preferred to more detailed observation of particulars	Explicit attention to recording challenges and media; interest in presentation of 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 toward coherence and clarity through multiple analysis strategies; unrestricted data sources
Reports and 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 policymakers	Public and popular constituencies as primary audience, but passing interest in specialized communities (policymakers, 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, and perspectives that are new to the 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

about credible images of culture and social life. 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—represents a good investment in young people and civic culture, a better investment, perhaps, than the kind of disciplinary specialization that is currently typical for a liberal arts education.

These implications follow closely from the contrasting dimensions of practice displayed in Table 2.1, but a somewhat different picture emerges from several epistemological principles to which these practices are loosely coupled. Table 2.2 provides a complementary comparison of social research that does not involve fieldwork, observation-based fieldwork, or documentary studies and a fourth perspective that I referred to earlier as photographic faux-realism—an approach to making photographs that presents images of the world as if they are realist accounts but does so without worrying much about "getting it right." This comparison makes visible some parallels between documentary photography and social science fieldwork that Table 2.1 conceals. It might also help distinguish documentary photography that is empirically sound from photographic studies in which empiricism is more trope than substance.

The parallels between observational field studies and documentary photography displayed in Table 2.2 could be explored further in thinking about how social researchers are trained and how they report their work. This exploration might begin by explicating key features of observation-based fieldwork, on the one hand, and other forms of social research on the other. These features transect the familiar split between quantitative/qualitative and empirical/interpretive and point to alternative configurations of methods and epistemology.

What might it look like, for example, if social researchers were to spend as much time working on observational skills, methods, and theorizing as they do on nonobservational data (quantities in particular, but also some forms of text)? What kinds of guided opportunities could help students to learn about field-recording technologies, the relative merits of open and code-based observation strategies, the design of photographic inventories and surveys, photo elicitation interviews, and other forms of observational data collection? What kinds of training might follow these to address issues of data analysis and reporting? Does it indeed make sense to provide students with advanced coursework about transcribing, coding, and aggregating visual records; or articulating images and text; or using multimedia software to generate and test hypotheses? Stated far too baldly to sway departmental curriculum committees, does training graduate students to observe culture and social life require that they spend lots of time and attention looking at it? Does it require concerted, incremental, and

Table 2.2 Epistemological Correspondence Among Four Kinds of Inquiry

		<< *Observational Studies* >>		
	Nonobservational social research	Observation-based social research	Documentary photography	Photographic faux-realism
Direct observation	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Participant role in field setting	None	Participant or nonparticipant observer	Participant or nonparticipant observer	Participant or nonparticipant observer
Data collection role	Data collector and manager	Investigator as instrument of observation, data collector, data manager, and analyst	Investigator as instrument of observation, data collector, data manager, analyst, and editor	Photographer as instrument of observation and editor
Commitment to "getting it right"	Strong	Strong	Strong	Weak
Multiple data sources	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Study explication	Research design	Research design	Personal account	Personal account or no account at all
Inquiry purposes	Scientific inquiry and representation	Scientific inquiry and representation	Documentary inquiry and representation	Photo illustration
	<< *Analytical Studies* >>			

long-term attention to recording what they can observe and examining what that portends for the next time they look—as well as for refining knowledge in their chosen field?

Acknowledging a core distinction between observational and nonobservational studies also has implications for research reporting. There's little in existing curricula to prepare students for making reports of any kind: few courses on writing, fewer still on designing tables and charts, and even fewer on articulating text and images or multimedia editing. As writing is, in its rhetorical aspects, the medium of analysis, helping students develop their writing skills makes sense for both observational and nonobservational studies. That said, even accomplished report writers can find a lot to learn when they try to give a good account of observational detail, either in writing alone or through a combination of text and still images.

Of particular interest in this regard are opportunities for research reporting that extend beyond the printed page. It's difficult to convey fully the richness of many observational studies within the limitations of traditional print media. For social researchers who have the interest, alternatives can be found in a wide range of formats, from illustrated talks at conferences or class sessions to stand-alone DVDs, different forms of Internet hosting, webcasts, and public performances.

One format for reporting observational field studies that seems particularly appropriate is that of a multimedia archive or database (Pink, 2001). Both the *Girl Culture* and *Material World* projects have associated online archives of this sort, as do many other projects of social documentary photography (David Bacon's website provides one of many notable examples: http://dbacon.igc.org/). Social researchers receive little or no training and support for developing complex, multimedia reports of this sort. Most scholars probably see that only as a matter of limited time and attention. However, it might also represent an instance where conventions of social science reporting hold at bay alternative ways of representing knowledge that are epistemologically more sound.

Some sociologists and anthropologists have found ways of putting photographs and videotape recordings to extremely good use within their own research and teaching. However, their accomplishments reflect little institutional support and great individual initiative. Few if any social science programs take a deliberate approach to observational studies and the attendant challenges of educating students about what it takes to "see" culture and social life. Their graduates are left to discover on their own the complexities of visual representation and the promise of visual studies or to become acquainted with what it takes for photographs, films, and videotapes to provide empirically sound accounts of culture and social life.

The lack of formal social science training in observational studies is not a fatal flaw, and other skills are well worth acquiring in graduate school. However, continuing neglect of observational methods and epistemology within the social sciences makes it all the more important that social researchers learn what they can from documentary photographers and filmmakers, at least some of whom celebrate both art and empiricism and who aim for both telling images and telling truths.

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