

DE-CENTERING THE TEXT: EXPLORING THE POTENTIAL FOR VISUAL METHODS IN THE SOCIOLOGY OF FOOD

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In our culture, the image has become more powerful than the word, and perhaps more than ever, both social agents and social researchers "know more than we can say" in words. Yet sociological knowledge production and representation remain firmly rooted in text. In this paper, I argue that visual methods, such as film, photography and video, can expand knowledge production in the study of food and society, and represent that knowledge more richly and forcefully. In their capacities to evoke the sensual, non-rational, and material aspects of life, visual methods are well suited to the study of a subject such as food, which encompasses social processes from the embodied and tacit experiences of preparing and consuming food, to complex global configurations of power. I begin with the limitations of logo-centric sociology. Concentrating on photography, I move to a brief history of this method in sociology and discuss epistemological issues related to the contemporary post-foundationalist practice of visual sociology. Finally, I turn to a discussion of three main types of visual research activities: producing visual images; collaborating with research participants to produce visual images; and examining pre-existing images.

Ours is a visual culture in which the image has become more powerful than the word as a form of communication². In a world of television, video surveillance, camcorders, cameras, computers, Digital Video Disks, sophisticated medical imaging techniques, satellite imagery, and virtual reality, "seeing is much more than believing. It is not just a part of everyday life, it is everyday life" (Mirzoeff, 1999, p. 1). Perhaps more than ever, both social agents and social researchers "know more than we can say" in words. Yet sociology in general, and the sociology of food more specifically, remain firmly rooted in methods of knowledge production and knowledge representation that are centered almost exclusively on words or text. In this paper, I consider an alternative methodology—visual methods—that can expand and deepen knowledge production, strengthen knowledge representation, and promote reflexivity in the study of food and society. While visual methods in the social sciences encompass photography, film, and video, I will concentrate on photography in this paper because it is the visual method most closely associated with sociology³. It is also the visual method most readily

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¹An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 2002 Joint Annual Meetings of the Association for the Study of Food and Society, and the Agriculture, Food, & Human Values Society, Chicago, IL.

²Indeed, a whole body of literature has arisen in the field of cultural studies explaining how to "read," decode and deconstruct this visual culture. I will not be exploring this literature in this paper, but for examples, see Hall, 1997; Mirzoeff, 1999; Rose, 2001.

³I focus on sociology in this paper because I know its history, practices, and epistemological bases better than other disciplines; however, I expect my comments are applicable to other social sciences. Indeed, one of the appealing aspects of contemporary visual methods—like food studies—is its "cross-disciplinary" nature and the apparent willingness of visual studies scholars based in sociology, anthropology, and cultural studies to learn from each other's bodies of literature and methods. Such cross-disciplinary—or non-disciplinary—knowledge construction is characteristic of contemporary, post-foundational social theory (Scidman & Alexander, 2001).

Journal for the Study of Food and Society, Vol. 6, No. 2, Winter 2003, Pp. 9-20

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incorporated into research results and papers.

I begin with the limitations of the dominant logocentered sociological approach, grounding it in my own experience as a researcher doing in-depth interviews with research participants, which was mediated by the writings of sociologists Pierre Bourdieu and Marjorie DeVault. I then move to a brief history of visual methods in sociology, to set the scene for the epistemological debates that have influenced their use in late twentieth century post-foundationalist social science⁴. Finally, I turn to a discussion of the three main types of visual research activities: producing visual images; collaborating with research participants to produce visual images; and examining pre-existing images⁵.

LIMITATIONS OF TEXT-CENTERED APPROACHES IN THE SOCIOLOGY OF FOOD

This paper has its origins in the lost opportunities I experienced during my fieldwork. While conducting qualitative, open-ended interviews with single mothers about their struggles to “feed their families” (DeVault, 1991) while living on welfare, I had the distinct impression that the participants knew more than they were able to put into words and tell me about their food-related practices. DeVault (1990) describes a similar experience in her landmark research on feeding the family, and suggests that this is due to a problem of “linguistic incongruence”—that language doesn’t exist to express our experiences. Since we can’t find the words to match our experience, we “translate” into the closest available words, losing parts of that experience. This can result in what seems to be

“Post-foundationalism is a view about social knowledge that states that we always theorize or do research from a socially situated point of view, that social interests and values shape our ideas, that our social understandings are also part of the shaping of social life” (Seidman & Alexander, 2001, p. 2).

⁵Emmison and Smith (2000) make the useful distinction of *two-dimensional* vs. *three-dimensional* visual data. They critique visual researchers for focussing on two-dimensional visual data while ignoring the diverse and counterintuitive ways in which social life is visual, including objects, buildings, clothing, body language, eye contact, and our use of space. They see visual inquiry as “no longer the study of the image, but rather the study of the seen and observable” (p. ix). While I take their point that the visual includes much more than the image, in this paper, I restrict myself to a consideration of images, notably still images, with an emphasis on the ways in which photography, as a visual *methodology*, can enhance the sociology of food.

inarticulateness, expressed in phrases such as “you know” or “you know what I mean.” DeVault interprets such phrases as signaling a request for the listener to make an intuitive leap to understand those inarticulable, but possibly shared parts of experience. She argues that linguistic incongruence is a particular problem for women in expressing the usually invisible, taken-for-granted, and unacknowledged work they do, such as feeding the family, housework, and maintaining the emotional life of the family.

While I struggled to take DeVault’s (1990) advice to heart in my research project, to listen carefully “around and beyond” the words for unarticulated aspects of experience, it seemed that there were some aspects of “feeding the family” on a severely restricted income that they just couldn’t call to consciousness or put into words. Perhaps the Bourdieusian theoretical framework I was using called my attention to this. From this perspective, it is not surprising that the women who participated in my study, and others like them, might have difficulty calling to consciousness and explaining in words some aspects of their food-related practices. For Bourdieu, practice is the outcome of a complex interplay of *habitus*⁶, different forms of *capitals*⁷ and various *fields*⁸, located within a temporal space (see Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Power, 1999a; or Swartz, 1997 for a more detailed description of Bourdieu’s key theoretical concepts). Practice has its own logic, which is not the rational, calculated logic of the logician. It is an embodied *practical logic*, without conscious or logical control, by which an actor draws upon the conditioning of his or her habitus, the various kinds of capitals at his or her disposal, and the necessities of the situation at hand to make an instantaneous assessment of what needs to be done

⁶*Habitus* is a set of dispositions, internal to the individual, that both reflects external social structures, such as gender and class, and shapes how the individual perceives the world and acts in it. It is Bourdieu’s way of explaining the regularities of behaviour that are associated with social structures without making them deterministic of behaviour, or losing sight of the individual’s own agency.

⁷Bourdieu identifies four main types of *capital*—resources that are valued and function as objects of struggle in social relations of power. These are economic, cultural, social, and symbolic forms of capital.

⁸*Fields* are structured spaces organized around particular types of capital, and consist of dominant and subordinate positions.

and then to do it. Bourdieu (1990) compares the practical logic of everyday life to the “feel for the game” exhibited by the experienced football player who “passes the ball not to the spot where his teammate is but to the spot he will reach—before his opponent—a moment later” (p. 80-81). Skillful practice shows a level of mastery and gracefulness that suggests the habitus and available capital are well suited for the situation. Like the football player, practitioners of everyday life draw upon dispositions and taken-for-granted knowledge embedded in their habitus which allow them to anticipate, *without conscious thought*, the appropriate actions, activities, gestures, and words for the situations of their everyday lives.

Bourdieu (1990) emphasizes that it is often difficult, if not impossible, for actors to put into words what it is they do, because the whole point of practice is *doing* or acting, rather than thinking and putting into words. Sometimes there simply aren't words to describe a practical act that unfolds its logic in a time and tempo of doing, rather than in logical explanation. Consider the physical, embodied acts of learning to ride a bicycle or to ice skate. While those who are “initiated” (i.e., who have mastered the skill) may find it relatively easy to describe the steps involved in the performance (and other initiates will be able to fill in the gaps of the unsaid bits that “go without saying”), the newcomer will find that the essential component (in this case, of how to maintain balance and go forward) is missing from the description. Like DeVault (1990), Bourdieu (1990) suggests that the difficulties of bringing to consciousness and putting into words the details of practical acts are signified in responses to questioning by silences, stuttering, and “ellipses of self-evidence” (p. 91). DeVault's point is that listeners or researchers who have shared the experience of the speakers or research participants can fill in the gaps of the unsaid bits if they listen well. This, however, leaves open the troublesome question of how the researcher is to make the analytical leap to fill in the unarticulated bits if she or he has not shared (or fully shared) the experience of those she is interviewing (see Power, 1999b for further reflections on this issue). It also assumes that somehow words can be found to “translate” and describe in the linear, logical form that words necessarily take. (But, for example, how can one describe how to maintain balance on a bicycle or on ice skates??) Furthermore, even if the words are available to describe the experience, or at least the researcher and participant are able to understand each other, Bourdieu (1990) points out that the participant may not know the reason *why* she does something. Often,

there is no particular reason or *raison d'être* for the practice in question; i.e., “that's just the way things are done.”

Thinking about my own experience in fieldwork against the backdrop of Bourdieu's theoretical reflections about the difficulty of explicating practice in words led me to wonder if there might be ways other than word-based interviews of getting at issues related to feeding the family. I had also begun to read about using visual methods, particularly in research with young children, with whom it is difficult to conduct traditional types of interviews. This led me to a rapidly expanding body of literature, on visual research methods, which may hold great promise in expanding and deepening knowledge production in the sociology of food. As Harper (2002) explains, we respond differently to visual images than words because words and images are processed in different parts of the brain. Thus visual research methods can elicit different types of information than interviews involving only words.

It was the inability of words to communicate that led two of the most important practitioners of visual methods, Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead, to take up photography. After studying Balinese culture for a decade, they turned to photographs in order “to communicate those intangible aspects of culture which had been vaguely referred to as its ethos” (Bateson & Mead, 1942, p. xi). In *Balinese Character*, they organized 759 photographs (out of 25,000 taken over two years) into various analytical categories, and provided detailed explanations of each on pages that faced the photos. There has been nothing since in visual ethnography to equal it (Emmison & Smith, 2000; Harper, 1998).

In our own times, it may not be surprising that industry, which has long known the power of the visual in advertising, is particularly interested in harnessing the power of the visual in new ways. Gerald Zaltman, of Harvard Business School, uses pictures

“to plumb the depths of the unconscious for hidden meanings and emotions . . . to help companies learn what customers really want [sic]. When words fail, the images consumers choose can serve as a window into their thoughts. These images can be used to tap nonverbal reactions, and to probe below the surface for deeper feelings. The insights gleaned can then be incorporated into marketing campaigns that resonate with consumers on an emotional level” (Yin, 2001, p. 32).

One of the companies Yin (2001) cites as recently turning to image-based research is Kraft Foods Inc., which used photos in developing a new food product, slated to appear on the market in late 2002. A spokesperson for Kraft states that “insights gleaned from the pictures and explanations people gave of their relationship to food, helped Kraft define the core benefit of the product and tailor it to meet consumer needs” (Yin, 2001, p. 33). I think sociologists of food could put those sorts of insights to work for purposes other than marketing.

In the next section, I turn to the history of visual methods to set the context for its contemporary social science uses.

HISTORY OF VISUAL METHODS IN SOCIOLOGY

Sociology and photography were both born in 1839, the year in which Auguste Comte published *Cours de Philosophie Positive* and Louis Jacques Mandé Daguerre announced his technique for fixing an image on a metal plate (Emmison, 2000). By the end of the 19th century, many of their practitioners shared a common passion for understanding the world and for social reform, and they collaborated with each other to those ends (Becker, 1986a). For example, the famous social documentary photographer Lewis Hine⁹ collaborated closely with sociologists in early surveys of urban life, and though a photographer first, he considered himself a sociologist. And during the first fifteen years of its existence, the *American Journal of Sociology* regularly published photographs in connection with articles oriented towards reforming social ills (Becker, 1986a).

But as sociology became more preoccupied with becoming an objective, neutral science, it dropped its association with photography. The early reform-minded sociologists used photographs to convey their zeal, producing “crassly manipulated photographs, iconographic poses, inconsistent before-and-after pictures, portraits out of context and images based on clumsy techniques” (Stasz, 1979, p. 128). For example, England’s Dr. Barnardo produced “before and after” photographs purportedly showing the beneficial effects of his orphanage on a street urchin, but eventually it was revealed that the photographs were taken on the same day (Winston, 1998). These sorts of manipulated images were inconsistent with sociology’s

⁹Hine’s photographs of child labour is credited with helping the passage of legislation banning child labour in the United States.

self-image as a science. Becker (1998) notes that in the social sciences, those disciplines considered the “least scientific” disciplines, history and anthropology, have made ample use of visual materials, while those considered the “most scientific,” political science and economics, have not. He considers this ironic because the natural sciences, including biology, physics and astronomy, rely heavily on visual, especially photographic, evidence (Becker, 1998).

In accordance with its positivist tradition, sociologists throughout much of the 20th century were concerned with the “truth” or validity of photographs—did they truly and accurately portray reality and could they therefore be trusted as evidence (see, for example, Becker, 1986b; Winston, 1998)? Sociologists decided that as a data collection method, photography (and film) was “too subjective, unrepresentative and unsystematic” (Pink, 2001a, p. 7). Verbal statements and verbal understanding were accorded privileged status (Chaplin, 1994). A few social scientists, such as anthropologist John Collier, suggested that photography could be an objective recording method and thus contribute to a positivist sociology if it were subject to the right scientific controls (Harper, 1998). In this positivist tradition, photography, as a recording method, was seen to support and enhance textual evidence, “showing” the reader “the truth” through the use of images. However, given the limited usage of visual methods throughout most of the 20th century, it seems safe to assume that few sociologists believed that photography enhanced the scientific status of their discipline.

Interest in visual sociology increased in the 1960s. Much as the early nineteenth century sociologists who employed visual methods, these visual sociologists were inspired by documentary photographers who were concerned with pressing social issues such as poverty, racism, ghettos, social class, drug cultures, the Civil Rights movement, the unionization of migrant farm workers, and the social irresponsibility of corporate capitalism (Harper, 1998 & 2003). These documentary photographers and the sociologists they inspired still mostly worked within a positivist, foundationalist, realist tradition, unaware of issues that would later come to preoccupy post-foundationalist visual researchers. These issues include the social construction of knowledge; recognition of the centrality of the researcher’s subjectivity in the creation of knowledge; identification of issues of power in the research relationship; and “the crisis of representation”¹⁰

VISUAL METHODS IN POST- FOUNDATIONALIST QUALITATIVE SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH

Sociological interest in visual methods re-emerged in the 1960's, but it is only in the past decade that it has grown beyond a handful of scholars (Banks, 2001; Pink, 2001a, 2001b). This stems in part from the "postmodernist turn" in the social sciences, and the emphasis on analyzing material culture, including its images, in the new interdisciplinary, and increasingly popular, field of cultural studies (Pink, 2001a). In moving towards post-foundationalist social science, visual researchers are disinterested in supporting and enhancing social science that uses photography to record data and illustrate text; rather, as MacDougall (1997) has suggested for anthropology, and Chaplin (1994) for sociology, they are attempting to rethink their disciplines through visual means. This means that visual methods "may offer different ways of understanding, but also different things to understand" (MacDougall, 1997, p. 287). Using visual methods to understand new things implies a radical transformation from "word-and-sentence-based . . . to image-and-sequence based" thinking (MacDougall, 1997, p. 292). According to these visual researchers, there is little point trying to substitute for or copy the written discipline; rather, visual methodologists "must develop alternative objectives and methodologies that will benefit [the discipline] as a whole" (MacDougall, 1997, p. 292-3).

Post-foundationalist social scientists reject the positivist orientation to discovering "the objective truth"—an orientation which presupposes that there is only one truth which exists somewhere "out there" in the world, waiting to be discovered or uncovered through the proper, unbiased application of scientific methods and techniques. Instead, post-foundationalists espouse a reflexive approach to research that acknowledges the centrality of the researcher's subjectivity in the production and representation of knowledge (Pink, 2001). From this perspective, qualitative research (including visual research) is not a method of data collection, but rather

"a process of creating and representing knowledge (about society, culture and individuals) that is based on [researchers'] own experiences. It does not claim to produce an objective or 'truthful' account of reality, but should aim to offer versions of [researchers'] experiences of reality that are as loyal as possible to the context, negotiations and intersubjectivities through which the knowledge was produced . . . It should account not only for the observable, recordable realities that may be translated into written notes and texts, but also for objects, visual images, the immaterial, and the sensory nature of human experience and knowledge" (Pink, 2001, p. 18).

For post-foundationalist researchers, the photograph, like other forms of qualitative research, is not a "true mirror of reality", but rather a socially, politically, and technically constructed *representation* which does not and cannot escape social relations. Such researchers are concerned about the relationship between the researcher and the research participants, and the ways in which the social, political, temporal, and cultural positions of the researcher and the research participants impact the production of knowledge in that relationship.

Similarly, the post-foundationalist researcher understands that the photo itself does not stand alone as an objective reality, with only one interpretation, but has its meaning *created in the interaction between the photograph and its viewer*. Thus the attempts of earlier visual sociologists to categorize photographs according to their type¹¹ or use¹² are beside the point. As Pink (2001), Becker (1998), and Banks (2001) argue, the definition of the type of a photograph depends more on the context in which it is *viewed*, rather than who took it (sociologist, journalist or amateur) or for what purpose. This means that the same photograph can be put to a variety of different uses (personal, artistic, commercial, or sociological, for instance) and may

¹¹"Types" of photographs include documentary, journalistic, sociological, artistic, commercial, medical, portrait, and amateur.

¹²Both Wagner (Wagner, 1979) and Harper (Harper, 1988) developed typologies for the uses of photographs, with the assumption that some uses of photographs were more "scientific" and therefore more suitable for the purposes of sociology than others.

¹⁰A continual questioning of the right of the researcher to represent "other" people, associated with an awareness that it is impossible to know the minds of others, and a recognition that "the sense we make of informants' words and actions is 'an expression of our own consciousness'" (Pink, 2001, p. 18, quoting Cohen & Rapport, 1995).

carry “seemingly contradictory meanings” (Pink, 2001, p. 51), depending on the stage of the research, and on the various viewers, who may be located in different social, cultural, political, and historical positions. For example, Pink (2001) highlights the case of a photograph she took of a Spanish friend and informant, in which her friend was dressed in a traditional regional costume. The photograph became the subject of other (Spanish) informants’ discussions about “the traditional woman” in the region (a conception of herself the friend did not share); part of the friend’s personal photographic collection, and her family’s; and a focal point in the researcher’s academic work, as well as part of her own personal collection of photographs. Banks (2001) discusses the case of the nineteenth century anthropometric photography which

“was intended to be read for its informational content, but would now be read as an insight into the social, intellectual and perhaps even sexual background and interests of its unknown photographer and those like him” (p. 11).

And as Harper (1998) describes, anthropological photographers at the end of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth were preoccupied with providing visual evidence of categories of human races, and documentation of theories of social evolution. These photographs are now read in quite a different way than originally intended, as representations of “the subjectivity of a particular theoretical ‘scientific’ perspective on reality” (Pink, 2001a, p. 52), and as contributions to the colonial project of affirming the self-professed superiority of white Europeans, while categorizing, degrading, exploiting, and oppressing those who were depicted as “Other” in the photographs.

TYPES OF VISUAL RESEARCH ACTIVITIES

Pink (2001) references Marcus Banks (n.d.) in a useful differentiation of visual research methods into three types of activities: producing visual images; collaborating with research participants to produce visual images; and examining pre-existing visual images. I will follow this typology to provide an overview of how visual methods are being used in social science research.

Producing Visual Images

Traditionally, the production of visual images has been the most common activity of visual researchers: the researcher photographs people, places, objects, or activities related to her or his topic of study. In the positivist tradition, researchers “record the visual aspects of reality as part of conventional research activities” (Harper, 1998, p. 24). Quoting from John Collier’s classic text on visual anthropology, Harper (1998) describes how the camera was used in the positivist tradition “not as a research technique, but as a highly selective confirmation that certain things are so, or as a very selective sample of ‘reality’ ” (p. 27). This theory of the use of the camera has been thoroughly critiqued and is now discredited; however, its shadow haunts the method of researcher-produced images, with the result that there are still only a few examples of post-positivist visual sociology projects that makes use of them (Harper, 1998).

One promising technique for post-foundationalist visual researchers, “photo-elicitation,” was first described by John Collier (Harper, 2000 & 2002). In its original usage, the researcher takes photographs of objects of interest to the researcher and also meaningful to the research participants, or of the research participants as they engage in some type of activity (for example, preparing a food for consumption, or producing some object). Once the photographs are developed, the researcher takes them back to the participants, and in a variation on open-ended interviewing, the researcher uses the photos to stimulate and guide discussion. Similarly, historical photographs are sometimes used in open-ended interviews (Harper, 2002). Schwartz (1989) notes that using photographs cuts away much of the awkwardness in interview situations, perhaps by setting up a situation (viewing photographs) that simulates a typical family-type interaction. Participants respond “without hesitation” to photographs of familiar subjects, and pay more attention to them than to the interviewer and the demands of being interviewed. Harper (1998) reflects on the surprises of using this method:

“A shocking thing happens in this interview format; the photographer who knows his or her photograph as its maker (often having slaved over its creation in the darkroom) suddenly confronts the realization that she or he knows little or nothing about the cultural information contained in the image. As the

individual pictured (or the individual from the pictured world) interprets the image, a dialogue is created in which the typical research roles are reversed. The researcher becomes a listener and one who encourages the dialogue to continue. The individual who describes the images must be convinced that their taken-for-granted understanding of the images is not shared by the researcher, often a startling realization for the subject as well!" (p. 35).

Photo elicitation, then, de-centers the authority of the researcher, and explicitly recognizes that photographs are subjective representations that hold a multitude of meanings (Harper, 1998, 2002 & 2003). Pink (2001) cites the example of the work of Schwartz, who deliberately structured the organization of her project around this notion. Her 1992 project, *Waucoma Twilight: Generalizations of the Farm*, involved taking survey photographs of the Waucoma physical environment. Schwartz took these, along with old photographs of the same places, to interviews with local people. She started from the assumption that the photographs would elicit multiple responses and a range of meanings for different community members, and this was indeed the case (Pink, 2001).

Post-foundationalist visual researchers look to the humanities for inspiration, as they have in the past, for instance to feminist photographers such as Cindy Sherman and Jo Spence. Sherman (see, for example, Sherman, 1987) and Spence (see, for example, Spence, 1988 & 1995) photographed themselves, with make-up, costumes (or no clothing at all) and props, to comment on issues germane to sociologists. Spence, for instance, was interested in using photography to explore "power relations between classes, women and men, patients and doctors (Bell, 2002, p. 11) and she contested "the power of western science and physicians to fragment living experience, to reduce people to bodies, and to create passive patients" (p. 12). Bell (2002) contends that Spence's photographic narratives of living with cancer "complicate social science understandings of the experiences of illness . . . they raise questions and problematics that are not raised by verbal narratives . . . bring[ing] the body into social science research in an immediate and perhaps shocking way" (p. 23).

Visual researchers might also move in directions implied by Emmison and Smith (2000), and consider other three-dimensional visual formats to create and represent their knowledge. For example, Gray, Sinding and Fitch (2001) describe the process of turning the

findings from a qualitative interview study with women who have metastatic breast cancer into a theatre production. In their article, a photograph of a scene from the play, entitled *Handle with Care?*, suggests a creative way in which the invisible can be made visible, while highlighting the constructed nature of the representation¹³. In the foreground of the photograph is a man with a stethoscope around his neck, seated behind a desk. He is looking at a woman seated on the side of the desk. She is looking away from the man. Behind the woman stand three other women in a cluster. The caption beneath the photograph reads:

"In this scene from *Handle with Care?* a doctor tells a patient that she has metastatic disease. While she seems to listen in silence, the anguished voices reverberating in her head are spoken out loud by the women standing behind her."

Like Spence's dramatic photographic representations of herself as a cancer patient, *Handle with Care?* provoked profound emotional responses from lay and health professional audiences¹⁴, drawing audiences into different and deeper understandings of the material than those available via textual sources¹⁵. Creative works such as these suggest additional ways in which researchers can produce visual images.

¹³Reflexively calling attention the constructed nature of representations is an important feature of post-positivist social science research. Chaplin (1994) argues that since sociological analysis is itself a social activity and therefore reflexive in character, the structure and textual form of the sociological account "must openly display the reflexive character of sociological analysis" (p. 245). Developing "new literary forms" by bringing sociology closer to the arts and representing knowledge in forms such as poetry, fiction, dialogue, drama, or dance is one way of doing so. However, researchers who chose the more conventional format of text also have a responsibility to disrupt the idea that the "scientific manuscript" is a "transparent vehicle" to convey knowledge. Writers can employ a variety of strategies involving page layout and typeface to highlight the constructed nature of their representations of knowledge. Unfortunately, a consideration of this important topic is beyond the scope of this paper, but see Chaplin (1994) for a thoughtful discussion.

¹⁴See also Gray and Sinding's forthcoming book, *Standing Ovation: Performing Social Science Research about Cancer*, (Gray & Sinding, 2002).

Collaborating with Research Participants to Produce Visual Images

Collaborating with research participants to produce visual images has become a popular response to the critique of positivism, especially in anthropology, where collaborative and participatory ethnographic video productions have become common¹⁶. Collaborative and participatory models of visual research are especially favoured when working with marginalized groups, who often find it easier to represent themselves and their world view through visual rather than textual means (Barnes, Taylor-Brown, & Wiener, 1997; Chaplin, 1994; Wang & Burris, 1997). Producing visual images together makes the research participants more active in the research process, and explicitly acknowledges that the research participants know more about the worlds they inhabit than the researcher—and also that they may know more than they can say in words. By taking control of the means of representation, rather than being subjected to someone else's notions of who they are, participants in such projects often develop an enhanced sense of themselves (Chaplin, 1994; Powers, 1997; Wang & Burris, 1997), adding another layer to the power of the visual¹⁷.

In a twist on the standard photo-elicitation method, collaborative photographic methods involve giving research participants cameras to photograph subjects or themes that are usually specified by the researcher. Then, as in the traditional form of this method, the researcher

has the participants discuss the photographs. This method makes the research participants more active in research process. For example, as part of a project examining young people's perspectives on their neighbourhoods and social networks, Morrow (1999, 2001a, & 2001b) gave disposable cameras to 14 and 15 year olds, asking them to take photos of places important to them. She notes that "research (with children and young people at any rate) is often a matter of 'finding the right question' and having a visual image to hang this around either as an elicitation technique or as data in itself was useful" (Morrow, 2001a, p. 266). Having photos of neighbourhoods helped her go into much greater depth with her respondents. And perhaps most importantly, the young people who participated in the project found it to be fun (Morrow, 2001a).

In a more explicitly activist tradition of research, Caroline Wang and colleagues have used this photographic method to develop a participatory action research method they call *photovoice*. Drawing on feminist theory, the theoretical literature on education for critical consciousness and the tradition of documentary photography, photovoice encourages participants "to create and discuss photographs as a means of catalyzing personal and community change" (Wang, Yi, Tao, & Carovano, 1998, p. 75). Wang and colleagues have used photovoice for participatory needs assessment, participatory evaluation, accessing policy makers, (Wang & Burris, 1997) and health promotion (Wang et al., 1998). Like popular educators Paulo Freire and Deborah Barndt (see Uras, 1996), Wang and colleagues have found that the visual images are a powerful way to enable "people to think critically about their community, and . . . begin discussing the everyday social and political forces that influence their lives (Wang & Burris, 1997, p. 370).

Moving slightly farther afield, a variation on this method has been successfully used with young children, by having them draw pictures, rather than create photographs (see, for example, Christensen & James, 2000; Johnson & Nurick, 1999). Like the standard photo-elicitation method, children are given a topic, asked to draw a picture, and then to tell a story about it. Such techniques are most effectively used in combination with other techniques such as participant observation, interviews, or focus groups, providing a type of methodological triangulation (Christensen & James, 2000).

¹⁵The potential to create understanding through emotion is a characteristic of visual methods (Holliday, 2000; Pink, 2001).

¹⁶Indeed, indigenous groups, once the subjects of ethnographic film and video, are increasingly its producers, sometimes using the visual images in their political struggles to maintain control over their lands and their ways of life (Banks, 2000). For the Brazilian indigenous group, the Kayapo, becoming a camera operator or video editor gives one cultural capital that has become an essential prerequisite for political leadership (Banks, 2001), a new way in which the visual has become political and powerful.

¹⁷For example, in discussing photography workshops for homeless men and women, Powers (1997) described the transformation of the homeless people from those who usually spent their day trying *not* to be noticed, to people who were pleased to be seen and spoken to while photographing their community. One participant commented "A camera is like power, people look at you differently when you're holding one."

Examining Pre-Existing Visual Images

Examining pre-existing visual images is a particular interest for theorists in cultural studies. One of the aims of cultural theorists is to explore, describe, analyze and interpret a variety of forms of visual culture, including television, movies, and advertising. However, sociologists have a history of scholarly activity in this area, including Irving Goffman's (1979) use of commercial advertisements in *Gender Advertisements* to study the ways in which gender is invoked in face-to-face contact, and Williamson's (1978) study of advertising, *Decoding Advertising* (Emmison & Smith, 2000). One of feminist sociologists' long-standing interests is the ways in which women are portrayed in the media. Generally, these types of studies don't usually involve field work with research participants, though some researchers have begun exploring how the consumers of images read, interpret and take them up (see, for example, Holliday, 2000).

Sociologists could use pre-existing images in empirical research with participants to get at taken-for-granted or implicit meanings. In another twist on the photo-elicitation method, Faccioli and Zuccheri (1998) used pre-existing images to "collect 'taken-not-for-granted' [sic] information about [participants'] concepts of normality and abnormality related to consumption of alcohol" (p. 76). The results of the research were used in the development of a health promotion campaign in Bologna to educate the public about the health-risks of alcohol consumption.

Another way is suggested by a marketing campaign to raise the profile of the arts in Pittsburgh (Yin, 2001). Selected participants were asked the following question: "When you think of the arts and how they impact your life, what thoughts and feelings come to mind?" They were asked to bring in ten visual images that reflected some aspect of their thoughts and feelings about the arts. Each participant spent approximately two hours discussing the images with a researcher. The results of the interviews became the basis for the marketing campaign. Marketers are beginning to understand that such image-based research can be preferable to focus groups because it allows for more thoughtful answers. It is also more inclusive than focus groups where more verbal people tend to dominate (Yin, 2001).

Moving from the corporate use of pre-existing images to the deconstruction of corporate images themselves, Barndt (1997) discovered that accessing pre-existing visual images is often the only way to obtain images from multi-national food corporations, intent on defending their shiny corporate images and patented

"secret recipes". She deconstructed and (subversively) reconstructed a grocery store billboard, superimposing its slogan on her photos of agricultural workers, so that what the global agri-food corporations keep hidden (the workers who grow and process the food) becomes visible.

Combining Different Types of Visual Methods

The first and long-serving former editor of the journal *Visual Sociology*, Douglas Harper (1997) considers Deborah Barndt's (1997) article, *Zooming out/zooming in: Visualizing Globalization*, to be "one of the first to successfully visualize the micro/macro dimensions of a social issue . . . [and] one of the first to meld field work, documentary photography and critical theory" (p. 3). Barndt's success at visualizing "one of the most challenging issues for visual sociology" (Harper, 1997, p. 3) (i.e., linking micro and macro processes) is in part a result of using a combination of visual methods. Drawing on political economic, ecofeminist and cultural studies theoretical orientations, Barndt "zooms out" to examine "globalization from above" (the corporate perspective) by deconstructing and reconstructing corporate advertising images. She then "zooms in" to explore "globalization from below" (the workers' perspective) with photo-stories of Mexican women agricultural workers, created using researcher-produced photographs and interview data.

"The juxtaposition of two classic forms of image production—social documentary and corporate advertising photography—raises questions about the social construction of reality and creates new kinds of visual dialogues offering multi-layered interpretations of the local-global nexus" (Barndt, 1997, p. 5).

The creation of a visual dialogue is also made explicit in the presentation and layout of the article itself with the juxtaposition of photographs and the use of different font styles, calling attention to the fact that all text is visual at some level. A significant segment of the article features photos of a 67-year old Mexican field worker, Teresa, at work in her home during the off-season, and some of her family members, many of whom also work in the tomato fields. The accompanying text (in italicized font) is taken from interview transcripts, featuring the translated words of Teresa and her husband Pedro. Barndt links Teresa with Susan, a cashier in a Canadian grocery store who punches

the produce number of the Mexican tomatoes into her cash register, by sharing Teresa's photo-story with her. Susan compares and relates Teresa's experiences as an agricultural worker in a globalized food system with her own as a cashier in the same system. She reflects: "We live in different cultures, with different climates and different life experiences, and yet we're going through the same things" (Barndt, 1997, p. 27). In linking and overlaying the representative stories of these two women, who work at either end of the *NAFTA*¹⁸ food chain, with her photos, analysis, and theoretical framework, Barndt displaces herself as the single, authoritative and integrative narrative voice, and disrupts the conventional linearity of academic text. As Pink (2001) declares, "Barndt's essay takes a step towards multivocality" (p. 130).

CONCLUSION

Sociologists of food might not be surprised that one of the first articles in visual sociology to successfully portray the links between micro and macro realms is about their favorite topic. Food, "the intimate commodity" (Winson, 1993), moves us readily from the realm of the personal and emotional to the political and global. As visual artist Barbara Fischer (1999a) puts it, food is

"a matrix in which innumerable aspects of life and lived reality come to intersect . . . The production and preparation of food itself is a site where all essentials seem to cross: morality and symbolic meaning; the ingestive and digestive body (taste and revulsion, likes and objections); knowledge and science concerning preparation and consumption; the politics of modern agriculture, distribution and technology; the articulation of local, regional and national [and global] to personal identities" (p. 26).

These characteristics have made food a subject rich in possibilities for contemporary visual artists (see, for example, the collection by Fischer, 1999b). I think it also provides sociologists with a wealth of visual opportunities.

I do not mean to imply that the visual should *displace* text in the sociology of food. I argue that words and

text—particularly the scientific forms of text that have been privileged for so long in sociology—are only one way to produce and represent knowledge, and that it is useful to consider the contributions that other forms could make. I have explored one type of visual methodology, photography (producing visual images; collaborating with research participants to produce visual images; and examining pre-existing visual images), to this end. Such methods hold the potential to help us "listen" more carefully to research participants' experiences, "see" those experiences more clearly and fully, and recover unarticulated aspects.

However, the still images produced by researcher-photographers are likely to move only part way in addressing the concerns that prompted this exploration. Photographs provide a silent image, frozen in time, and lose the dynamic quality of social interaction and the "feel for the game" of practical logic and skillful practice. With the advent of readily available and relatively inexpensive hand-held camcorders, video, the heir of film, holds perhaps even greater potential than photography to help make visible some of the more dynamic issues sociologists of food might want to explore.

Even if images are able to capture some of the unarticulated aspects of practice and experience, and can help prompt research participants to explain more, and more fully, there will remain the problems of translating practical acts into the rational logic of words, and translating into words aspects of experience for which there is no language. With respect to the experience of food, the visual is only one component of sensory perception. It is ironic that while sociologists of food are discovering the visual, artists are using the "visceral immediacy of food and its sensory eruptions via taste, smell and consumption" to challenge "the ocularcentric bias" of "high" art and art history (Fischer, 1999a, p. 23). Visual methods will not solve all of our methodological dilemmas; however, they do promise to assist us in making our research participants' experiences visible and in situating those experiences in the larger social, political and economic contexts of our visual culture.

¹⁸The *North American Free Trade Agreement* links Canada, the United States and Mexico in a free trade zone. See also Barndt, 1999.

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