

Lens: An Ethnographic Insight in Fieldwork

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Abstract

Why do we choose to see what we believe or believe what we see without questioning its authenticity? How do we derive to a conclusion by just looking at an image? Does an image always represent an objective truth? As compared to statements or words, photographs have helped to comprehend meanings in all mediums of life just through a glance. In the realm of our socialization process, in contrast to the verbal lessons, a child learns faster when he/she sees the role model and imitates the action. Our teaching-learning model also functions primarily on representation value through pictures, signs and symbols. Pictures, signs and symbols are manifestations of our knowledge that adds meaning to our life. Knowledge constructed through the art of photographs is based on an activity which mostly takes place in the past and now acts as a representation value for the same activity. In the field of research, apart from taking notes while on a field trip which can be modified based on the situation, a photograph acts more of a face value even though it is quite often disregarded. This article deals with the importance of photography in the realm of social science particularly Anthropology and Sociology which deals with the study of social relationships in its natural order. It also deals with photography as an art that has gone through tremendous modification giving an essence to the different walks of life.

Keywords: Photography, Objectivity, Ethnography, Reflexivity

Introduction

You don't take a photograph, you make one.

The development of photography as a research method in social science is not a new phenomenon. An ethnographic study requires the researcher to be as discreet as possible without influencing the behaviour and acting of the subjects. With the advent of photography, the researcher faced the challenge of getting the significant

data which held scientific importance. This helped the researcher to conduct the fieldwork at one's own discretion with less fear of losing valuable information in the process of collection of data. Once the data was collected, it would be used as a representation framework for a biographic interview or a historical study. The use of camera for mapping social interactions and capturing the reflections of reality continues to hold valuable importance as compared to

verbal explanation of the study. The art of photography is nevertheless the direction of the mind at focusing and capturing the traditional realm and transforming it into a substantive study.

Anthropology, as a social science deals with people in their natural or social setting. Evidence gathered in the earlier time by anthropologists was based on the perspective drawn by the ethnographer on the subjects. Documentation of evidence requires concrete facts to support the problem undertaken by an ethnographer. The method to understand or study the 'other' required practice and getting accustomed to the local language of the group. It created an imbalance as a backhand study of the local place and the language was needed in order to record the views of the subject. Books compiled with the collected data adored a painting of the 'other' based on the view of the ethnographer. The information gathered depicted the working frame from an observer's point observing the subject. The whole book of knowledge that would be created would than further move to be seen as the universalistic book of truth bearing the image of a white person next to a clan of half-naked black people. Manipulation of facts seemed to be an ongoing process as ethnographers who never studied the place, accepted the facts by other

anthropologist as the truth. Apart from field notes and paintings, other means such as photography and photo voice came to be recognized as important means to collect information.

Photographs hold meaning that can be understood through a mere glance. In the field of Anthropology, we study this as Visual Anthropology. Visual Anthropology is derived from the idea of visually understanding the theme of study in order or drawn variations and conclusions. The various sub fields of Visual Anthropology include newspaper, radio, film, television, arts and crafts, built and environment, performance and photography (Ruby). Photography of any subject is based on the relationship between the observer, the observed or the subject on whom the lens is focused and the characteristic that the subject holds for which it needs to be shot. The use of photographs for the purpose of study in ethnographic research gathered momentum as the photographer could capture actual highlight values and emotional aspect of social relationships in a real setting as compared to field notes. Though the prominence of the latter tools were less as compared to the earlier recognized mediums, photography came to be accepted as an important medium to gather multiple information in one frame.

Keepsake and reflection

Anthropology studies culture from a historical perspective. History itself is regarded as stories of elite class and their victorious annexation and domination over other class or community (Tucker, 2006). Therefore, records that are historically documented bring out the essence of power and dominance in them. The result of the fieldwork depends solely on the interpretation by the individual who has conducted the research and not on the subject.

An early anxiety about native speech was part of the background against which the anthropological potentiality of photography was defined. Anthropology's engagement with factual questions such as causation, evidence and personhood demand evidence from a technical practice rather than the earlier part of handwritten records (Pinney, 2011). From Edward Taylor's work on field which he describes as object lesson to Sir James Frazer's work, written notes were shadows that preserved the external degraded copies of the truth of mind. (Pinney, *Photography as a kind of writing*, 2011). Glancing at the works of Malinowski, Frazer describes the work as 'an author that lives as a native and studied the local, conversing with them and acquiring the surest result through personal observation and statements made to

directly by the natives in their local language without the help of an interpreter. (Sampson, 1999)

There was a twofold problem with 'native testimony' anthropologists were quite likely not to understand it because most lacked the necessary linguistic competence as studying a different culture required the knowledge of language of that particular culture, but they were also skeptical of the transparency of 'natives', assuming that irrelevance, deviation and untruth were likely to predominate for which Anthropologists were suspicious of verbal data and personal observation as it lacked the methodological rigor that it would later acquire. Moreover, anthropology, in the nineteenth century proved to be a discipline that played an important role in the rationalization of colonialism as it was during this period that the power of knowledge was transformed into an observable truth. Anthropology drifted towards racial typology, and therefore constructed the notion of non-westerners as inferiors based on the study and findings that relied on their crude technology, size of the skull etc. The facts were than assumed by the western power as mean for colonial domination. As a result, the colonial representation of non-western Cultures and peoples were widely accepted as 'Truth' and consequently appropriated to 'underwrite existing colonial power structure' (Bourdieu,

1991). Up until the nineteenth century, photography as a medium to collect classified data was unknown. Photography as a collective tool came to be recognized in the works of Bateson and Mead (Bateson, 1942). Though in her work, Mead describes Anthropology as the 'discipline of words' (Ryan, 2011) they employed the idea of photography as a tool for observing and recording everyday Balinese life through the art of visual ethnography. Many anthropologists approved of the idea of photography as it helped in creating an image of the 'other' and therefore associated the use of camera to project non-western culture in an exotic and normal way.

The purpose of photography can be seen as representing reality for which it took over in later years the method of field notes and conversation. In retrospect, the idea of photography is closely associated with the idea of painting. The painter on one hand uses his/her mental capacity to draw an image on a canvas that he/she has obtained by observing a particular setting of people at a particular time. The painting holds meaning which is appropriated by the painter itself. On the other hand, the photographer obtains an image through a still camera focusing on the subject and the various other elements that give meaning to that particular frame (Becker, 1974). Both the idea of representations favored the powerful

white class as it was seen by the white folks as an apparatus of social control and domination of the non western people. Photography, as an invention created, defined and classified the subjects for the colonizers and also justified and rationalized the economic, political and cultural domination over the non western people by the white skinned community (Lasker, 1943).

Photographs, in particular, have passed through stages bearing various meanings in consecutive historical stages. For example, colonial administrators took photographs of their colonial subjects for the purpose of asserting their hegemony over them. Conversely, it can also be argued that subjugated people may appropriate the same photographs to re-assert their identity and power in the post-colonial context. In this case, the photograph is transformed into "a metaphor of power, having the ability to appropriate and decontextualize time and space and those who exist within it. In this context, photographs are not passive, but dynamic representations of reality that are constituted in the lived experience and milieu of the photographer and the viewer (Tucker, *The Historian, the Picture, and the Archive*, 2006). Photographs, unlike paintings, bring out the representations of culture in its true form. Culture is seen as an integrated series of symbolic systems

generated by the state of rules by its members and is believed that human being's trend to create and share symbolic behaviour which permits them to organise their experiences and their world into meaningful categories. It is in this aspect that the researchers have given meanings to the photographs of their work. Though the power of photography lies in its timelessness, it perpetuates the past while it survives in the present. Photographs can be seen as a paradox wherein photographs captured in the past are neither past nor present but is in fact a representation of both, a form of a hybrid constitution of the past represented in the present. (Edwards, 2012)

The Critical 'Representation'

The crisis of postmodern turnout in anthropology brought about a shift in the idea of photography as an evidence of the research which was negated based on the representation of the subjects. Perspectives such as postmodern, feminist, Marxist, post-colonial and structural have developed critical looks towards photography looking it not only as a social artefact but as a product of the complex power relations between the subject, the image and the photographer (Ma. L. Canete, 2008). In the domain of power, the question of authenticity is never raised as the elitist ideology is a universal ideology.

Under the courtesy of the western school of thought, the universal claims are justified therefore; it is a one-way theory of acceptance. Books that bear the images of the white researchers studying the native group creating a bar of division depicting the transformation of darkness to light. Legitimacy is questioned based on the claims of the subject, as the studies or research on them show the light directed from the observer's point of view.

A single frame that includes various elements such as two locals interacting, women doing their normal chores, children playing, can be perceived as a normal routine of the locality. The same frame can be associated with a different meaning jeopardising the very subject of the frame. Meanings are never static and keep on changing in accordance with time. History as documented and understood itself has different versions of its kind based on the knowledge claims of those in power and it's through their knowledge, that the plight of the powerless are seen and fought for. A particular image of a group can be interpreted by various scholars each holding their claims as superior over others. In the work of Bateson and Mead in the Balinese character, the conversation between the subject and the photographer is documented through the images

obtained under the courtesy of the research. Contrast is the expression of the subjects as well as the objects. The theory of 'The looking glass self'(Cooley, 1902) is relevant in this context in the relationship between the observer and subject, wherein the observer tends to blend in with the 'other' in order to be felt accepted by the other groups. The motive as well as the movement is based on how the subject will perceive the observer and therefore the subject acts accordingly. Also, the observer is perceived as the "Generalised other"(Mead G. H., 1934)in order not to be perceived as a threat to the community on whom the research is being conducted.

Visual media represents a wide arrangement of representation as compared to written or oral form of media, although they too come under the same banner. Art and photography constitute certain meanings within them which at times remain static but are subject to modifications. In terms of modification, it is pure in the sense as long as it does not hamper with the background of the subject. However, political and power run motive are constantly negotiating in the field of ascribing meanings to people as well as to facts. It cannot be ignored that the earlier forms of records of research were delivered in its purest form neither does photographic evidence is always manipulated, the art of

manipulation runs from a long time and this serves the interest of the majority who tend to occupy the righteous positions. The art of photography on the field can also be connected to the idea of 'Surveillance' (Foucault, 1975) where in the subject tend to act in a way as being perceived by a threat or in a constant vigilance by the observer. Media in the contemporary time is fed by those who have the power and ability to universalise the claims and facts from an individual's point of view. Signs and symbols that hold historical meanings have changed in favour of those who wish to acquire certain privileges in the society. Photographs are seen as a privileged mode of expressing reality that is not only a powerful instrument of surveillance and display but also a medium through which the powerless subjects are fixed, essentialised and normalised as inferior. News channel telecast media distribute news to the common people based on the knowledge claims of those who own the enterprise. The knowledge therefore claimed by us does not really belong to us, but of those who have the power to manipulate it.

Visual Anthropology however, has reduced human effort in the field of research. The working model of writing notes while observing number of people at one point may lead to

overlapping or missing an important aspect of the research. On the other hand, photographs collect all the elements in a single frame along with the research methodology of photography such as detailed analysis of internal evidence and comparison with other images in order to understand cultural change or reconstruct historical events and therefore can be seen as more reliable tool for a research. In order for the research to be complete and authentic, the researcher needs to have a reflexive relation with the photographs, as photography is a site in which the photographer/researcher engages with his/her own self critique, subjectivity and reflections on his/her encounter with the subjects. Lastly, the ethnographic pressure emerging in visual anthropology with respect to photography presents an opportunity to rethink the theoretical tools through which photographs and photography

might be recognised and accepted more broadly.

Conclusion

Over the years, the trend in photography has changed along with its importance. Critical examinations have questioned its authenticity. Power and politics are also associated with the interpretation of the photographs jeopardizing the use of photography as a device tool to gather information. The art of photography remains an important aspect as it brings out in its truest form the desired goal of a research or a problem. There can be no medium which has no relation with photography as each and every written fact is supported by an image which in turn corresponds with the facts. Representations of photographs derive meanings which eventually will yield new modern perspectives on scientific practises, visual culture and rewriting and understanding history.

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