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Rephotography for Documenting Social Change[1]

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INTRODUCTION

The employment of temporallyordered photographs to show change has been a common practice for many years. Sociologists have long been interested in studying change – in particular, *social change* – but have not until recently developed methods for harnessing photographs to study it. In this chapter I describe several ways in which photographs may be used in documenting social change and in fostering the development of insights about the meaning and significance of that change.

PHOTOGRAPHS AS SOCIOLOGICAL EVIDENCE

Research on a complex phenomenon such as social change almost inevitably requires the use of *indicators*. We gauge social change by examining a variety of things, such as changes in population, employment, and other statistics; in attitudes, opinions, and social practices; and in the physical size, character, layout, and condition of the built landscape.

These material and non-material variables fit together in a form that we recognize as the social structure. The interconnections between the variables mean that changes in one facet of the structure typically lead to changes in others. Many elements of social structure are literally on display. They include physical and behavioral markers accessible to the eye, and therefore to the camera. My challenge as a visual sociologist has been to find the visual indicators of change. From this standpoint a visual approach differs from other approaches only in that I am using *visual* indicators (in addition, usually, to other, more common ones) to help form a basis for analysis and interpretation (Rieger, 1996).

As I have suggested above, the usefulness of visual evidence depends on drawing information from the images that can form the basis of interpretations about what is happening socially. We have to examine every part of the image, not only the nominal subject of the photograph but also the details in the background and near the edges of the picture for clues pertinent to our analysis.

THE USE OF REPEAT PHOTOGRAPHY

Perhaps the most reliable way we can use photography to study social change is through the systematic visual measurement technique of 'repeat photography' or, simply, 'rephotography.' These terms refer to a process by which we create a temporally ordered, that is, *longitudinal*, photographic record of a particular place, social group, or other phenomenon. We then review the photographs for evidence of change. Here we confront the same issues of evaluation and interpretation that are encountered in reviewing other kinds of evidence, such as statistical data. A numerical change may reach the level of 'statistical significance,' but that does not necessarily determine its substantive significance. Likewise, photographs may reveal some change that may or may not be substantively significant. In interpreting either visual or quantitative data, we must ascertain their meaning and importance in terms of their consistency with other evidence and its bearing on the theory guiding our research.

REPEAT PHOTOGRAPHY AS A METHODOLOGY

As I have shown above, the logic of repeat photography is similar to more conventional approaches to the study of change. Measurements – in this case, photographs – are taken at successive points in time, which we designate *Time 1* and *Time 2*. We compare the content of the photographs, looking for evidence of change in a manner similar to survey data in panel studies. The change, or lack of change, that the photographs reveal we then interpret in accordance with our theoretical expectations.

Repeat photographs may be used in both quantitative and qualitative studies. We can employ photographs in quantitative measurement, for example, as William Whyte did to gauge the changing size of crowds in small urban spaces (Whyte, 1980). Whyte's procedure was to set up automatic equipment in a strategic location – say, an upper story window – to photograph in time-lapse fashion a particular location, such as a street corner, a plaza, mini-park, a market, or even a bus stop. The photographs provided an ongoing census of those locations, showing the rhythm of their use and pattern of occupancy. More frequently, though, we are likely to use repeat photographs to study change in a qualitative way. We will be looking for obvious or subtle clues about the changing character of social life.

To make meaningful comparisons possible, we have to maintain some element of *continuity*. Continuity may reside in the fact that the photographs were of the same scene, or because they trace the experience of the same or similar participants, or because they follow the development of a particular function, activity, or process over time.

While a pair of temporally ordered photographs (at Time 1 and Time 2) would generally be the minimum we would need in using this method, we can take photographs at additional points (Time 3, Time 4, and so on), producing a more extensive record of change. If we take a series of photographs that is continuous or nearly so, as in 'time-lapse' photography, we may actually record change as it takes place.

REPHOTOGRAPHING PLACES

The most basic strategy we can use in studying social change visually is to rephotograph sites or things that we (or others) have previously documented. In my study of social change in Ontonagon County, a rural area in the western part of Michigan's Upper Peninsula, my approach was to systematically document the 'built environment'. In 1970 I took a series of baseline (Time 1) photos that showed the main streets, businesses, schools, and residences in the small communities in the study area. In 1985 I completed the first set of repeat

photographs of these places, and took new pictures of some additional places in the area. Although the time gap in my pictures was just 15 years, the change that had occurred in Ontonagon County was profound. The area had visibly shifted from an expansionary mode to one of decline. The following pair of photographs (Figures 7.1 and 7.2) show change that is emblematic of the type I saw in many places around Ontonagon County. This study of social change in Ontonagon County has continued to the present with repeat visual surveys every 5 years.

REPHOTOGRAPHING PARTICIPANTS

A second strategy of rephotography exploits the continuity provided, not by a specific site of a photograph, but by the experience of the human participants in the social change process. In this approach, our objective is to track the witnesses. The participants' biographies and experiences become the linkage between temporally ordered contexts and events.

My implementation of this kind of approach came in my attempts to reconstruct the history of growth and decline of a small community named Trout Creek in a remote portion of southeastern Ontonagon County. This community had been a robust lumber milling town through the early and middle parts of the twentieth century, but had declined to a remnant of its former self by the 1970s. When I began my inquiries, I discovered that the residents had made or preserved very few records that would afford an insight into life as it had been in Trout Creek. Most of the community's facilities had decayed or disappeared entirely. By the 1980s, only a bar and a small general



Figure 7.1 Rockland, Michigan, 1970. This small community had a small business district and its own post office, township government, and school system in the late 1960s. Although Rockland had no commercial lodging facilities, it did have two grocery stores, two saloons, a restaurant, and a gas station. © 1970 Jon H. Rieger



Figure 7.2 Rockland, Michigan, 1985. By 1985, Rockland had lost four of its six businesses, its school was closing, and at least a portion of its population had left. It had really lost its 'center of gravity' and was now more nearly a residential subdivision of Ontonagon, about 12 miles to the northwest. © 1985 Jon H. Rieger

store remained of what had once been a fairly complete complement of main street businesses and services. The railroad through the town had been abandoned and even the state highway that ran through the center of town had been rerouted around its periphery. The school had been closed and the few school-age children were bussed to Ewen, about 20 miles to the west. Eventually even the bar burned down and the small store remained only intermittently in business.

It was my good fortune to acquire a copy of a photograph (Figure 7.3) of a local family made by Farm Security Administration (FSA) photographer John Vachon in 1941 as he passed through Trout Creek en route from the Keweenaw to an assignment in Minnesota. I was able to learn the identity of the family in the nearly 60-year-old picture and to connect with surviving members of that family, the Carlisles.

This family had resided in Trout Creek since around 1911, fairly early in the community's history. It had been a large family, with nine children. Some of the seven surviving children at the time of the Vachon photograph were already adults with children of their own. The Carlisles' family home shown in the Vachon photograph was located in 'Milltown', a neighborhood where the poorest workers resided.

From interviews with local residents, I learned that the Carlisles were one of the 'core' families in Trout Creek, not because of their wealth or prominent standing, but because they were a big family that gained a reputation as solid, reliable, hard-working, and respectable people. The Carlisles apparently participated in nearly every aspect of village life and were well-known by people of the town. The centrality of the Carlisle family made its members apt informants



Figure 7.3 Residents of Trout Creek, Michigan, 1941 (John Vachon). This photograph was taken in August 1941 by FSA photographer John Vachon, who drove through town on a Sunday afternoon on the unpaved Mill Road and stopped when he saw this family lounging outside their house. Source: Library of Congress

about the dynamics of the town's growth and decline (Rieger, 2004).

In addition to the Vachon photograph, I found other key historical photographs in local family picture albums: a picture of the mill work force from around 1952 (which included four men from the Carlisle family who were employees); another photograph that showed the inaugural members of the Trout Creek Volunteer Fire Department (including a Carlisle son); and a picture taken of a military honor guard at the local cemetery (not surprisingly, including a Carlisle as a participant, one of several Carlisles who had served in the military). Multiple school yearbooks also turned up. Even a recent snapshot of the community's centennial reunion organizing committee (that contained no fewer than four members of the extended Carlisle family as participants) helped form a visual documentary foundation for reconstructing the community's history.

These and other photos, including pictures I myself had made over the period since 1970, along with various artifacts, became the basis for extensive photo-elicitation interviews with the Carlisles and other members of the community. While I cannot be sure, I believe that with the collection of photographs and artifacts serving as anchor points – in effect a *de facto* community archive – I was able to reconstruct the saga of growth and decline in Trout Creek about as well as any that could be produced under the prevailing circumstances (Rieger, 2006). I took new photographs of the Carlisles and others in their present contexts: one of the Carlisles who was in the Vachon photograph was still living in the ancestral house (Figure 7.4).



Figure 7.4 Carlisle family home with Gilda and Everett, 1999. Gilda (Carlisle) Russell and Everett Carlisle pose next to the family home originally photographed by John Vachon in 1941. Everett still lives in this house, in which he grew up. The house has obviously undergone much remodeling over the years. © 1999 Jon H. Rieger

REPHOTOGRAPHING ACTIVITIES, PROCESSES, OR FUNCTIONS

Sometimes the link between successive points in time lies not in a specific site or object, nor in the lives of individuals, but in some particular *process*, *activity*, or *function*. We might want to track an institutional process, such as education, or trace people's changing levels of living, as shown, for example, in the kinds of houses they live in. Or we might follow the evolution of a group's leisure activities. Such phenomena are quite basic in social life, and photography offers a means for documenting both their persistence and their changing incarnations over time. Here the camera is an especially powerful tool of measurement.

An example of using photography in studying changes in a process came in a study I did of the pulp wood industry in Ontonagon County (Rieger, 2003). Cutting pulp wood for the local brown paper mill has been an important secondary industry in the Ontonagon area for many decades, but the technology and organization of woods work changed radically after World War II. In investigating the way woods work was done, I discovered that change came to every aspect of the process – from which trees were cut, how they were cut, gathered, hauled out of the woods, prepared for transport to the mill or, more recently, processed into chips on site. Photographic documentation of the changing procedures and equipment became an essential strategy in tracing the evolution of the woods work process in this setting. Photographs were not only essential in recording how the work was done and how it changed but also in reporting the research





Figures 7.5 and 7.6 Harvesting trees in Ontonagon County, 1986–90. At left, a logger cuts a notch on the side toward which he wants the tree to fall, after which he will slice through from the opposite side. At right, a feller-buncher moves on a large, heavy crawler base only partially visible in the deep snow, harvesting trees literally by the bunch. The machine can shear a tree off in 8 seconds and hold up to a half-a-dozen trees in the fixture before the operator deposits them in a pile for later pick-up. © 1986–90 Jon H. Rieger

findings in a comprehensible way. A pair of photographs (Figures 7.5 and 7.6) show the change in how trees were cut ('harvested') for the manufacture of pulp for paper-making.

These two photographs trace the change in just one facet of the woods industry in Northwest Michigan. Many people might at least have some idea of how a chain saw works and how a tree can be taken down with one, but very few who are not familiar with this industry have ever seen a massive feller-buncher in action or could imagine the power and speed with which such machinery can harvest trees. The transformation in this industry had big consequences for those employed in it. At the same time that it was greatly adding to the volume of material delivered to the mill, mechanization was steadily reducing the number of workers needed to produce it.

An example of tracking an activity or function comes from my study of community change in Ontonagon County. In this case I was attempting to document a 'teenage hangout' in Ontonagon Village. In 1970 I had photographed 'Cue and Cushion,' the then popular place in town for teenagers to hang around and kill time (Figure 7.7), located on the main street at the southeast end of the business district.

In the first follow-up documentation in 1985, I noticed that the building housing the



Figure 7.7 Cue and Cushion, River Street, Ontonagon, Michigan, 1970. This popular place for teenagers to 'hang out' offered pool tables and an assortment of soft drinks and some food items. © 1970 Jon H. Rieger

original hangout had been converted into an insurance office. Since I thought that the motivation among teenagers to find or cultivate some place to gather was probably pretty irrepressible, the challenge was simply to find the replacement for Cue and Cushion. What new form would it take? I eventually discovered that the new hangout was at the opposite end of the main street, at something called 'Sip and Snack' (Figure 7.8).

This location was noticeably less accommodating than Cue and Cushion had been. Furthermore, it was functional only during the summer when the ice cream shop was in operation, and certainly inconvenient when it rained. But it was all the teenagers had for the time being. Eventually the owner of the ice cream shop made some concessions to the young people and others who hung around by placing, siting benches up and down the sidewalk adjacent to the little shop.

This example traces the persistence of a community activity or function and the various incarnations of that phenomenon that arise. Sip and Snack was eventually replaced as a teenage hangout by a new sandwich shop which opened almost directly across the street from the original location of Cue and Cushion. That sandwich shop, which at least offered indoor respite from the elements, has very recently closed and been replaced by a video store in the same space. The prospect is that this location will continue to serve the need of teenagers for a place to gather.

ALTERNATIVE STRATEGIES

Studying social change visually is a challenge under even the best of conditions, where the researcher has the opportunity to



Figure 7.8 Sip and Snack, River Street, Ontonagon, Michigan, 1985. This little business had not really attracted teenagers as a place to gather until Cue and Cushion closed. Sip and Snack was open only seasonally, it offered no shelter from the weather and, at the start, no convenient seating. © 1985 Jon H. Rieger

track change as it unfolds – to observe the process, interview participants, produce images and collect other evidence essential to a sound understanding of the nature and significance of the change. The ideal way – and the strictest, methodologically – to study social change visually is *prospectively*; i.e. where we can begin our study at Time 1. Using that approach, we choose what we want to study and proceed to make our initial visual measurements (Time 1), after which we wait for some period of time and then make our Time 2 measurements. We can continue by repeating the measurements at Time 3, and so on. But sometimes the change we want to study may have already occurred, or it is presently underway and we cannot wait until it has reached a state of finality. In those situations it is sometimes possible, by making certain compromises in procedure, to study change in such a way as to approximate the results that could be gained from using a stricter regimen.

RETROSPECTIVE STUDIES

If we want to study change retrospectively, i.e. where Time 1 has already passed, it is sometimes possible to reconstruct the conditions that existed at Time 1 by finding photographs that were taken in the past and which might serve as a proxy for Time 1 measurements. We use that earlier documentation as a baseline and make the new Time 2 photos, thus approximating the procedure outlined above for prospective research. While the two approaches are not logically different, the practical difficulties of studying visual

change retrospectively can be quite daunting. This strategy depends on the quality of surviving images and other evidence which is not under our control.

Certain factors make studying social change retrospectively attractive. In the first place, nowadays there are many repositories, both public and private, that have collected vast quantities of historical photographs, many of which may appear to be amenable for use in a study like that we might want to undertake. Secondly, studying social change prospectively involves a potentially long, hard-to-predict wait for things to change, and with the typical cycle of our work in the social sciences, the prospect of such delays in getting 'results' tends to make such research unappealing.

Despite the serious potential problems of depending on salvaged photographs, it is often feasible to make retrospective studies work. I confronted this challenge in doing my study of the transformation of the pulp wood industry around Ontonagon County. By the time I noticed that the industry was undergoing a conversion to mechanization – with all the implications that this change had for the people who had long toiled in the woods – the change was already largely complete. Time 1 was long past. Photo-documenting the equipment and procedures in the woods at Time 2 (the present) took me less than a month of fieldwork, but nearly 7 years elapsed while I tried to reconstruct and understand the industry's past. And my attempts to find photographs that showed all of the details of how woods work was done in the industry in earlier times were not completely successful.

In spite of years of searching, I was never able to turn up a historical photograph of the 'peeling' process or the particular tool used to do this work. Since this was an integral part of woods procedure for more than two generations, and because the tool used, known as a 'spud,' was typically an item that was not manufactured, but homemade, it demanded documentation. Here I engaged in a methodological innovation: a semi-retired logger took me out into the woods, cut down a tree, and demonstrated peeling the bark off the log with a spud while I took photographs (Figures 7.9 and 7.10).

To what degree may such a strategy – a re-enactment of the process studied – suffice in lieu of contemporaneous documentation? In the present case, the re-enactment exhibited certain limitations. It took place in the summer rather than in the spring when the work photographed would normally have taken place. In a real-woods operation, other members of the crew besides the sawyer would have been present, providing an opportunity to capture the woods craft as the dynamic social process that it was. Notwithstanding these shortcomings, in this instance the re-enactment photographs provided useful and essential information. In some situations a re-enactment may not be possible, if there is no one still around who can authentically carry out such a demonstration.

CROSS-SECTIONAL STUDIES

Where we want to study ongoing change but are restricted to collecting data at a single time, we may employ another common methodological compromise, a cross-sectional design. In this approach we photograph many individual instances of the broader social change we are documenting, each at a different stage in that process. By collecting the examples into a group and, perhaps, putting them in an appropriate sequence, we construct a facsimile of the larger social change process, and ask the reader to accept it as an approximation of what longitudinal evidence would show. As with other applications of the cross-sectional method, this procedure is not without difficulties, prominent among which is the lack of a firm determination of what the 'final' stage of the social change process might look like and when it might be reached.

I used such a strategy in a study of the changing structure of rural residence





Figures 7.9 and 7.10 Debarking a felled pulp tree in Ontonagon County, 1990. Using a 'peeling spud', a logger demonstrates debarking a tree. With a chain saw cut along the length, he can insert the tool under the bark and pry it off, first from one side, then the other. This demonstration was done in July: peeling is easier in the spring when the sap is flowing amply – the bark will separate readily and often pop off in a single piece, like a stiff wrapper. © 1990 Jon H. Rieger

(Rieger, 1982). The growth of the rural non-farm population and the relative decline of the farm population in rural America have been very gradual, but this change has progressed to the point that the farm segment is now actually a relatively small minority of the total US rural population. Nevertheless, the popular perception of rural residents as mostly farmers continues. I wanted to document this important but little-noticed demographic and structural change in the rural Midwest.

I visited rural areas in eight states (Iowa, Missouri, Wisconsin, Illinois, Michigan, Indiana, Kentucky, and Ohio), interviewing residents to get a better understanding of the ongoing demographic transformation and to determine which residences were occupied by farm or non-farm people. I recorded key details of the histories of these sites and also photographed them. Eventually I accumulated more than 300 cases, spread throughout the eight states, and was able to get some insight into the pattern of social change.

The non-farm residents in the rural population are spread out through the landscape. They are hidden in plain sight. They live in small towns and in older houses in the open country, in new houses and rural subdivisions, in roadside businesses, converted former farmhouses, converted barns, old schoolhouses, and even former gas stations. A good number live in house trailers, either in solo locations or in mobile home parks.



Figure 7.11 ***Little Sport*** **service station, Hancock County, Kentucky, 1981. This station, built around 1969, sits next to a large farm. The owner and his family live in the mobile home behind the station. © 1981 Jon H. Rieger**

My collection of photographs is a kaleidoscope of the many forms that this change has taken, much of it still ongoing. The images are like frames in a moving picture of what is happening in rural areas of the US Midwest. Figure 7.11 is an example from this study.

PHOTOGRAPHS AS PART OF A COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH

In implementing the visual approach, our objective must be to build up a comprehensive photographic record, buttressed by interviews and field notes. Pictures alone, like other indices, are hazardous to interpret without the contextual reinforcement of other information gathered in the field situation. Furthermore, sociologists who use photographs in the presentation of their research generally combine them with written commentary, just as they do when they use statistical forms of evidence, such as tables or graphs. The photographs are not expected to stand alone, without interpretation or explanation, any more than are graphs or tables. The words and pictures reinforce each other in communicating our insights and discoveries.

In the foregoing discussion I have attempted to show how photography can be effectively brought to bear on the study of social change. I described several approaches to using photographs in illuminating the social process and revealing the direction and character of social change. When used in conjunction with other sociological investigative methods, photographs can strengthen our research. Photographs are valuable both as a tool of discovery and in the presentation of our findings. But their utility is not without limits, and even pitfalls. In the next section I will review the strengths and weaknesses of investigating social change with photographs.

THE STRENGTHS OF THE VISUAL APPROACH

In studying social change, recording the present state of things provides us with a baseline for repeat inventories in the future. These make possible the comparisons that will help us determine the extent of any changes that have occurred. Photography is well-suited to this process because of its capacity to record a scene with far greater speed and completeness than could ever be accomplished by a human observer taking notes. Visual changes can be very subtle or so complex that they are virtually impossible to document adequately without the use of a camera, which permits 'freezing' a scene in extraordinary detail. Furthermore, photography can often be used in a relatively expeditious manner compared to more conventional approaches, with little practical limitation on the number of photographs that can be made of the scene or phenomenon we are studying. Digital technology has made photography especially cheap, convenient and effective, with its capacity for 'field editing' of the pictures, and its exceptional facility in securing usable images under marginal lighting conditions. With photography we can make a more complete, reliable, and comprehensive record of the change process than we could without it.

One of the most felicitous advantages brought to social research by the use of photographs is in facilitating interviewing as a data-gathering method. My success in reconstructing the rise and fall of Trout Creek depended heavily on the effectiveness of my photo-elicitation interviews (Collier and Collier, 1986) with my informants. The photographs fostered the flow of information from my subjects in a relatively nonthreatening way. Because the scrutiny and discussion soon shifted to the images, my interviewees became guides to understanding and interpreting the pictorial record. The pictures stimulated revelations that might not otherwise have occurred and the interviews were less stressful and fatiguing for my interview subjects. The photographs I used in such interviews varied from snapshots in family albums to those that I or my subjects had themselves taken. Pictures used for photo-elicitation do not even need to be 'good' photographs in an aesthetic sense.

LIMITATIONS AND PITFALLS IN THE VISUAL APPROACH

Notwithstanding the great value of photographs in social research, and specifically in the study of social change, they also exhibit limitations and their use can involve some significant pitfalls. We know that visual change and social change are generally related, and we can often draw useful insights about what is happening within the social structure from a careful analysis of visual evidence. Likewise, we may be able to predict visual changes from prior knowledge of social structural dynamics. But the connection between visual change and social change is not simple and linear: visual and social phenomena do not co-vary in a uniform way. Visual change can actually precede social change, as when a natural catastrophe – a tornado or flood – strikes a community. Photographs of such events show the great physical impact of natural forces. The social changes triggered include not only immediate behavioral reactions but also other, longer-term social structural adaptations. Visual change can also lag behind social change. When a community has just suffered a major plant closing, the only immediate visual effect of the event may be the idleness of the plant itself and its former workers. Only with the passage of time might the full consequence of the closing become evident visually – in the general decline of the community.

The strength of the relationship between visual and social change also varies: Some visual changes seem to have little social significance, and there are social changes that may not have very obvious or prominent

visual manifestations. All of these limitations must be kept in mind when attempting to use photographic images in the study of social change.

Another limitation bearing on the use of photographs in studying social change actually pervades all of our research, and that is the serious lack of predictive power of our sociological theories. More than 100 years of sociological research has not yielded theories that can reliably predict the future. In my work in Ontonagon County, the gradual realization of this shortcoming had a practical consequence: I could not afford to concentrate my photographic documentation just on those particular aspects of community life, or those specific locations in the county, where I thought change would occur. In the early years I had thought that documenting a sampling of sites around the county would provide an adequate 'baseline' for gauging later change. With the inadequacy of that approach becoming clearer, I increased the number of sites recorded in my visual surveys from about 110 to more 500. Since I couldn't be sure where or what kind of change might occur (or even if any change would occur at all), the only feasible strategy was, essentially, to photograph *everything*. In the Ontonagon project this meant that the quintennial survey now takes me nearly 6 weeks, even with the help of an assistant. The importance of comprehensive documentation applies to many kinds of sociological research, especially where the focus is on a complex process, such as social change, in which many variables may be in play and the effects we are looking for can be quite broad.

In any series of discrete measurements separated in time there is a risk that certain changes which occur between those measurements may be missed. Consider the example of community growth and decline. Suppose we visit and photographically document a particular town at Time 1 and then return 20 years later (Time 2) and repeat the documentation. If at Time 2 things seem to be the same, we may conclude that there has been no change. What if significant growth had occurred during the interim but the community had declined again by the time chosen as Time 2? In this situation, change that was *curvilinear* would have been missed. Complex changes of many sorts can be unobserved during the period between measurements. Where we depend on such repeated measurements, visual studies are comparable in their strengths and limitations to panel studies (repeat surveys) and other similar types of longitudinal research. Additional, more frequent documentation is the obvious strategy for dealing with this contingency. We must always keep the risk of erroneous interpretation in mind. If the time between observations is long, a careful researcher will look for indications of unobserved change. In addition to possible tell-tale visual signs, one can draw upon witness reports and, perhaps, available statistical sources to confirm its occurrence. In some circumstances, researchers studying social change may be able to maintain a schedule of fairly steady surveillance and make frequent observations of the phenomenon they are studying, and will thus be in a position to avoid the pitfalls of the simple linear assumption about social change.

Visual evidence may not always be 'consistent.' In quantitative studies, exceptions of this type – often unexplained – which run counter to the overall trends in the data, are not uncommon and are dismissed as 'statistical anomalies.' Similar things can happen in studies of visual change: not everything changes at the same rate nor, necessarily, in the same direction, and sometimes there are visual flukes in the change process.

An example of this occurred in the Ontonagon study in the small community of Ewen. In 1970 I had photographed the Soo Line railroad that passed through the center of town. Ewen was a loading point for rail service in the central part of the county and the location of shift change for the railroad crews, which provided Ewen with some steady restaurant and lodging trade. But the



Figure 7.12 Former railroad station, Ewen, Michigan, 1990. This building had been abandoned, but in 1990 it looked like it was being revived. This turned out to be a good example of a 'visual anomaly'. © 1990 Jon H. Rieger

railroad had ceased operations by 1985, and by 1990 the tracks were actually being torn up and the ties retrieved (Figure 7.12).

In rephotographing the scene in 1990, I noticed that the former train station looked noticeably better than it had in the previous survey. Its window frames had been freshly painted and a large planter containing a tree had been placed nearby. I had heard rumors about its possible revival as an activity center for senior citizens. In this community, where the dominant impression was one of gradual decline, could this be a small exception? I subsequently learned that the 'improvements' were merely cosmetic and intended simply to disguise a deteriorating building during an important community event. The fix-up of the Ewen station in 1990 was clearly a 'visual anomaly.' The building was later torn down.

Problems sometimes encountered in photographing social change are that important sites can disappear or become inaccessible to visual documentation, witnesses can die, move away, or refuse to cooperate, and processes and activities can be curtailed or terminated. When this happens in panel studies or similar longitudinal research, it's called 'subject mortality.' In Ontonagon County, which has experienced a long, relentless decline, I have seen a number of cases of subject mortality: for example, the closure of the Ontonagon Valley Creamery; the abandonment of the Soo Line railroad line through the area; and the closure of half the schools. Those schools are effectively dropouts, although the buildings still exist (albeit in deteriorated condition), but the creamery has been torn down completely and the railroad bed survives only as a recreational trail. These developments are emblematic of the change taking place in the area. In evaluating subject mortality, it is important to consider the extent to which a dropout may be, in itself, significant in the analysis of the change being studied.

Sometimes a repeat photograph can't be taken because the original vantage point has

disappeared, or because trees or bushes have grown up and obscured the view from the original vantage point. Where I encounter such situations, I try to find a different, more workable vantage point, if possible, and change lenses as needed to secure the documentation. Exact repetition, while ideal, is not as absolutely essential in sociological research as it may be in some other situations. Our objective is to visually document the scene well enough to permit an analysis of social change. When I repeat pictures, or attempt to, I make notes about the cause of any adjustments that have to be made or why the photograph cannot effectively be repeated.

POTENTIAL APPLICATIONS OF THE VISUAL METHOD

The visual method outlined above should be amenable for use in studying social change in a variety of contexts. The choice may be determined by the theory guiding the research, although you may start out without any theory at all and select an object of study on the basis of its sheer interest. Sometimes you develop a study focus over a period of observation in a field setting. Community growth and decline is the kind of social change I first fixed on in developing the photographic method described here. In such studies, one is concentrating primarily on the built environment as the indicator. The built environment does not usually change very rapidly. So selecting this type of subject for research may require considerable patience and persistence.

Besides growth and decline, many other changes in a community can profoundly affect the character of social life, including alterations in patterns of community settlement, business, and industrial ecology, the establishment or disestablishment of any large enterprise, such as a military base, or the building of a reservoir or park, or devastation by pollution, flooding, or forest fires. Communities dominated by extractive industries whose vitality is sensitive to fluctuating commodity prices, weather and rainfall issues, or environmental regulation, are likely to show visible effects of those kinds of factors.

Another potentially fruitful area where a visual approach could be used is in the changes induced by technology, which can have a profound impact on social organization, as I found in the case of the woods industry in Western Upper Michigan. Technology can change the size, character and organization of the work force, eliminate some occupations, skills, or practices while creating new ones. Alternatively, our object of study might be just a neighborhood or even the activity at a particular street corner. It could be a store, a park, a school athletic program, a gang, or a family.

The potential for employing a visual approach may become evident only over time, perhaps after a research study is already underway. In such situations it may be possible to add a visual component to the research. In some situations, gathering and analyzing visual data can be an ancillary component or part of a battery of indicators that may be employed. Photography might be useful at either the macro or the micro level or both. Researchers should be alert to potential photographic applications in sociological research so that they are prepared to make good use of the strengths that such an approach can bring to it.

UTILIZING THE VISUAL METHOD

As indicated above, the visual study of social change involves a number of basic steps:

1 Selecting a subject that will become the focus of the research and developing a theoretical framework that suggests what changes might be expected.
2 Determining and identifying visual indicators to be recorded.

3 Finding existing documentation or creating such documentation for the initial (Time 1) measurement.
4 Carrying out the follow-up (Time 2) documentation when appropriate.
5 Analyzing the accumulated evidence.

In embarking on research with photography you will be using film and/or digital technology and deciding whether to do the work in black and white or color. While the traditional medium in documentary research has been black and white, contemporary practitioners often work in color. (Digital technology easily permits the documentation to be carried out in color and later converted to black and white if needed or desired.)

Some study settings are amenable to documentation with fairly simple photographic equipment such as a small film or digital camera with a zoom lens. Other projects may require a more elaborate approach using larger or more specialized equipment, including cameras with multiple lenses, filters, flash, tripod exposures, etc. In the Ontonagon project, for example, where the 500+ sites to be documented are spread around the third largest county in Michigan, my movement from site to site is necessarily by auto, which is equipped with a tray locked into the right front passenger seat (Figure 7.13) to accommodate the needed equipment and records. When documenting a study site, the careful researcher will make an accurate record of each picture taken, including the location, the time, and any other relevant circumstantial or technical information. Those records will be of vital importance in the later repetition of the photos.



Figure 7.13 Car equipment tray, 2005. This photograph, shot through the passenger window, looks down over the filters shelved in the foreground to the tray nestled in the front seat beside the armrest. It has padded pockets for the camera and lenses and separate slots for clipboards containing previous photographs and record forms, etc. Towels are kept handy for protection from the sun between sites. This device greatly speeds up the work and ensures better safety and accessibility for the equipment and records. © 2005 Dave Bishop. Reproduced with permission

NOTE

1 Some of the content of this chapter is excerpted, condensed, or elaborated from my previously published and unpublished work in the study of social change and from an unfinished monograph on the subject.

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