

# The Photo Diary as an Autoethnographic Method

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## INTRODUCTION

In the past, visual diaries were mostly personal – collections of drawings or watercolors, or snapshots combined with text – and were often the province of artists, such as those by Ian Breakwell, Stephen Chaplin, Wendy Ewald, and Jamie Livingston.<sup>1</sup> But the Internet has made visual diary-keeping much simpler, opening it up to a wider range of participants. For the social scientist, keeping a visual diary is a good way of collecting and amassing field notes. But this poses the problem of how to work this raw material up into ‘proper social science’.<sup>2</sup> Autoethnography, which has also been gaining recognition in recent years, can go a step further, by adding the personal experiences of the author to the fieldwork.

In common with the diary, the autoethnographic text tells the author’s story in the author’s own voice (*JCE*, 2006). Visual ‘field notes’ and autoethnography have become closely linked; the method of observing and writing through personal observations is well established in a variety of disciplines such as human communications, ethnography, anthropology and narrative

research (Ellis and Bochner, 2006; Goodall, 2000, 2008; Barone, 2001; Bochner, 2001).

My aim in this chapter is to explore this closeness, and to see how visual sociology, and especially the visual diary, can contribute to autoethnography. Accordingly, I will turn to my own daily photographic diary, which I came to see was akin to autoethnography and fueled my interest in the practice as a way of knowing. But first, I offer a short general account of autoethnography, starting with an examination of its roots. For it seems to me worth asking how, during my 30 years as a sociologist, the social scientific text has managed to move so far away from positivism and the third-person passive.

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## PART 1. AUTOETHNOGRAPHY EXPLAINED

### *Some historical roots of autoethnography*

#### *Relativism*

Karl Marx’s (1844) *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* relativized economics, and

contextualized politics. The first English translation from the German did not appear until 1959. Three years later, Thomas Kuhn's (1962) *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* began the process of relativizing natural science knowledge. And, following either the Marxist 'critical' tradition or the Kuhnian 'empirical' approach, many branches of social science eventually adopted relativist methodologies to some degree (this is discussed further below). That is to say, positivism, with its essentialist claims to objectivity and neutrality, was increasingly rejected. In *Search for a Method*, Sartre (1963) summarized the relativist position:

We are not only knowers, in the triumph of intellectual self consciousness, we appear as the known (9). The only theory of knowledge which can be valid today is one which is founded on that truth of microphysics: the experimenter is a part of the experimental system (32n). [Thus] research is a living relation between men [sic.] (72).

Yet post-positivism lingers on in various guises; for example, in the status given to picture captions, and in the scholarly article format. Guba and Lincoln (1998) posed important arguments intended to challenge the primacy of this approach to analysis and reporting of social research.

### *Feminism*

In the early 1960s, a new generation of feminists began to percolate through university student life and study. The first UK Open University social science courses, such as *Understanding Society*, were studied by thousands of students in the late 1960s, yet they made no mention of gender. But by 1975, feminists were arguing that then-current theories of inequality did not account satisfactorily for women's position in society (see Steedman, 1986: 7, for an interesting discussion; also Bowles and Klein, 1983: Ch. 11; also Smith, 1977). As female grad students in the sociology department at York University, we were women in a man's world. We were just beginning to regard formal social science texts as lacking neutrality and objectivity; they seemed to reflect

heavily the male tendencies to separate 'work' from 'home'. We maintained that home was work, and that the personal was political.

To encourage new social research, the British government, via its Social Science Research Council (SSRC), provided what they termed 'New Blood' money at some point during my second year as a postgraduate. As a 'mature' student, however, I was too old to qualify for it. I remembered thinking that the expression 'New Blood' was unfortunate – it smacked of horse racing and aggressive young men jostling for pole position. Carolyn Ellis, in her work discussing feminist ways of knowing, explored ways that women's experiences such as these, and women's interest in introspection, could be integrated with social science field work (Ellis, 1991; Bochner and Ellis, 1992).

### *Postmodernism and visual representation*

Friedrich Nietzsche prefigured postmodernism. He wrote in 1888 that '*die "wahre Welt" endlich zür Fabel wurde*' ('The "true world" finally became a fable'). Nearly 100 years later, J. F. Lyotard (1979) echoed these words in *The Postmodern Condition*, when he argued that there is no objective truth, only narratives about truth. Lyotard used the term 'figural' to refer to the visual in the narrative: images, typography and page layout each exert a degree of autonomy.

Many others at that time explored taking the photograph itself into postmodern theory, as they were beginning to take more interest in the relationship between images and words (Berger, Barthes, Mitchell, Danto). Cindy Sherman, in her photographic self-portraits, *Untitled Film Stills (1977–1980)*, blurred distinctions between author, sitter and stereotype. She explored ways that the image that meets the eye was clearly not a record of some 'found' reality, showing instead how its subject matter had been meticulously contrived. Sherman figurally expounded postmodern theory – each created scene is itself an art version of reality.

Thus, by 1980, the photograph had been theoretically and visually released from its

conventional roles, whether in science as documentary record, or in art as substitute painting. And, with the arrival of the digital age came *technological* release: photographic images became cheaper to make, and easier to adjust, store and send. Photography now touched everyone. The postmodern theorist faced a situation in which images fairly jostled for attention with words.

### **Autoethnography**

Each of these historical roots helped dislodge positivist and other assumptions about the status and character of social science. Each strand, interwoven with the others, helped bring the personal into the social scientific. Autoethnography is arguably – from a theoretical point of view – another stage in this process, for now the researcher leaves her shadowy position in or ‘behind’ the narrative, and steps out to become the principal *subject* of the research project. (And, as the first-time autoethnographer discovers for herself, she is now really exposed – see Part 2 of this chapter). Thus, in autoethnography two different meanings of the term *subject* come together: the researcher is the *subject* of the research, and also the *subjective voice* in the narration. So the narrative starts with the self, and proceeds in the first-person singular; the author takes the reader on a journey – mental and physical, real and metaphorical – into and through her own social world. The journey, and the telling of it, constitute the research project. Embedded in the narrative, and clearly an integral part of it, are the author’s reflections on the project, since it is centered on herself. This means that the important topic of reflexivity – and as some of the aforementioned authors have argued, social science is not a special case, since the researcher *is* an integral part of the research project and *does* influence its outcome – now seems curiously hard to keep in focus as a topic in its own right. It has, in effect, folded right into, and become part and parcel of, the autoethnographic approach.

Underlying this distinctive methodological approach is the conviction that a narrative that closely documents the researcher’s personal thoughts, feelings and actions and relates them to the wider social world will give the reader a richer and more intimate experience of that world than they would get from the generalized results of a conventional social scientific research project. It’s hardly surprising, then, that abstract explanations are treated with suspicion by autoethnographers and, in turn, are not made lightly. For if the self is the focus, and all selves differ, then generalizing might seem to be a strategy for concealing a lack of evidence or blurring pieces of evidence that don’t quite fit together. Ellis and Bochner (2006: 429) went further, when they championed the position of Tim O’Brien, a novelist<sup>3</sup> and veteran of the Vietnam War. O’Brien maintained that the author’s story, with its close-up sights, smells and ‘rawness’, can convey a ‘story truth’ to the reader which is more present than even a ‘happening truth’ (429).

An autoethnographic project – in its early stages at least – often hopes to bring aspects of the research process into the open that, in a more conventional project, would remain hidden: for example, personal opinion, informal asides, doubts and worries, or confessions. When I photographed everyone in my street outside their front doors as a way of marking the millennium, I used a conventional qualitative approach. I found myself rejecting some of the most interesting material because it seemed too personal (Chaplin, 2002). In fact, I felt obliged to delete so much from the file that I sometimes felt as though the whole project was slipping away. An autoethnographical approach (had I known about it at the time) would have helped ‘solve’ this kind of problem. In its later stages, however, an autoethnography sometimes shifts direction. Because of its unusual character compared with most social science projects, researchers are likely to become involved in discussions with peer reviewers about publication. The reviewers’ comments, and the author’s responses, become part of the research product (Holt, 2003).

So how can this personal research journey, this narrative, be effectively communicated? Autoethnography takes on the textual form that best conveys the author's story to the reader. Using the third-person passive within a conventionally laid-out academic article is a relic of positivism and a habit that seems to die hard. But now that positivism and its special relationship to science have been relativized, the field is open – in theory at least – and an autoethnographic account might take many forms: for example, a play, a descriptive report, a photographic display, even a performance.

I vividly remember a book from my student days called *The Private Worlds of Dying Children* (Bluebond-Langner, 1978), because one of the chapters is written in the form of a play. The children, the author, their parents, nurses and other participants speak to one another, as they presumably did during the period of research; and we learn, 'as though at first-hand', how a dying child, in a hospital environment, makes sense of what is happening around her or him. This creative approach, sandwiched between chapters of conventional textual form, raised the question: 'How far can an author push the boundaries of academic convention?'. A social science text that takes the form of a play, for example, will evoke comparisons with dramatic reading as a literary experience, and perhaps also with the social experience of visiting the theater. Indeed, in autoethnography, the boundary between social science and art can become blurred (Wall, 2006: 10). As the practice of autoethnography has matured, however, these concerns about boundaries and roles have been hashed out and autoethnography firmly established as a qualitative approach (Barone, 2001; Denzin, 2006; Goodall, 2008).

Visual sociologists have also found themselves up against this boundary. First, from a purely practical point of view, they need to know how many photographs they can include in an academic article, what size the images will be, whether color reproduction (or 'just black and white') is available, and how each page will be laid out.<sup>4</sup> Some thought will be given to the relationships between image and words. Images

may appeal to the reader's emotions and judgments, text may leave readers pondering meaning and relevance of a sequence of words.<sup>5</sup>

*National Geographic*, for example, is a magazine that prides itself on its balanced presentation of arguments as well as on its high-quality photographs, but may not always achieve the desired balance. In Mark Jacobson's 'Dharavi – India's Shadow City' (2008), the arguments for and against slum clearance in a district of Mumbai are indeed carefully balanced. The written text was overshadowed by the aesthetic force of the photographs, leaving readers with the impression that Dharavi was an extraordinary and colorful place. Dharavi is in fact Asia's largest slum.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, consider the writings and images of W. G. Sebald (1993, 1995, 1997, 2001). The black-and-white photographs were not captioned, but were placed on the page between passages of written text that refer to the scene depicted in the photograph. The images did not illustrate the words; the words did not caption/capture the image. The balance of image to text was deliberately kept fluid, each remaining semi-autonomous, yet clearly accessible to the reader to be interpreted 'in itself' and in the light of its relationship to the others.

### Visual autoethnography

Narrowing the focus now to 'visual autoethnography', the relationship between image and words, between aesthetic force and written argument, becomes even more important. This is because the author wants the reader 'to feel what I felt' (O'Brian, 1990: in Ellis and Bochner, 2006: 429) and what better way to achieve this than with images that can make an immediate aesthetic impact on the viewer's feelings? Images can be a formidable tool of the autoethnographer; yet because we are operating within the discourse of social science rather than art, that aesthetic force cannot be allowed to overwhelm the social argument.

So, as many others in this volume have pointed out, visual sociology brings an

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awareness of how images can be made to work with written text, to research, and autoethnography benefits in much the same ways. In addition, autoethnography helps reinforce visual sociology's case for unconventional textual formats. In Part 2, I'll refer again to the balance between words and image, in relation to my own visual diary. Next, though, I turn to critiques of autoethnography.

### **What the critics say**

In the past, critics questioned whether autoethnography was 'proper research'. Holt (2003), whose own autoethnographic account was finally published after being examined by seven different reviewers and four journal editors, noted that the emphasis on the personal might be seen as narcissistic; the showing of emotion was considered shocking. Certainly, a first-person account is a violation of positivist ideology, and autoethnography was, for some, a travesty of social science methodology.<sup>7</sup> But the situation is changing: postmodern culture has loosened boundaries between disciplines such as social science, documentary filmmaking, and creative writing. Autoethnography is now discussed and taught in some university departments, where student assignments include writing first-person narratives.<sup>8</sup>

Some critics also wonder how such an approach can produce *theory* – long assumed to be a basic aim of science, whether natural or social.<sup>9</sup> Autoethnographers may be divided on the degree to which they support certain goals in theory development. 'Analytic' autoethnographers (Anderson, 2006a) see autoethnography as rooted in ethnography itself, and want it to be 'committed to developing theoretical understandings of broader social phenomena' (373). But 'evocative' autoethnographers (Ellis and Bochner, 2006) completely reject the idea of producing theory, even in the long term. A special issue of *The Journal of Contemporary Ethnography (JCE)* (2006) was largely devoted to a debate between these two camps. Analytic autoethnographers argued that autoethnography

is quite compatible with more traditional ethnographic practices, as indeed its name would seem to imply; and these traditional practices provide a base from which theory can be developed and into which it can be linked. The more experimental and evocative autoethnographers said that linking autoethnography into mainstream social science in this way would be to 'tear its heart out': an autoethnographic account tells a 'unique' story (to a unique reader), whereas social science theory has had generalization as its end goal.

The point is that the systematic approach an autoethnographer takes toward developing an evocative account reflects the 'signature' features of social science. Source referencing, the crafting and character of arguments, and the general sense of carefulness and accuracy are characteristics that all good researchers attend to. Add to this a narrative that, in many cases, pursues reflexive awareness and a sense of spontaneity and freshness.

Context is also a key factor in defining what counts as autoethnography, and what doesn't. In the case of an academic journal article, the journal itself provides authentication for an autoethnographic account – hence, the importance of earlier discussions with peer reviewers, editors, publishers. So, although the autoethnographic text speaks in its author's voice, this professed openness should not blind us to the fact that there are yet more voices lurking behind the autoethnographic text. The voices of editors and publishers, and – further behind still – the 'voices' of those with the power (for example, 'class' power) to uphold unacknowledged conventions, ultimately form the boundaries between what counts as social science and what doesn't.

## **PART 2. IN WHICH I TURN 18 DAYS OF MY VISUAL DIARY INTO AUTOETHNOGRAPHY**

### **Introduction**

When I was first asked to write this chapter I was reminded of Molière's *Bourgeois*

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*Gentilhomme* who was tremendously bucked to be told he was speaking prose – and had been all along. I'd been keeping a visual diary for 20 years without knowing that autoethnography could be an approach to making sense of what I'd collected. Most accounts are developed with an awareness of the arguments, values and approaches of autoethnography, and researchers consciously engage in its practice. I began to read all about the struggles authors had gone through in order to publish their work and to gain acceptance by colleagues. My situation has been the other way round, attempting to produce an autoethnography from 'data' I'd collected without an awareness of those arguments, values and approaches, and I've struggled to do so.

To start with, I should explain how I came to keep a visual diary at all. I am married to an artist, who has always kept a diary/sketchbook in which he draws on a daily basis, and, as he says, 'writes round each drawing'. As a mature graduate student of sociology in the 1970s I was intrigued by the idea of building a bridge between our two worlds. Then, while researching some constructivist artists in the 1980s, and wanting the experience of producing visual work like they did, I thought of keeping a daily image-plus-words diary because it would also be field notes, *and* it connected up with the earlier idea of bridge-building. My first daily entry was on 7 February 1988. It showed my mother and my husband in the Lake District of Northern England, and was accompanied by a short piece of writing. Eighteen years later, the diary went online and became a blog, an ideal forum for my visual diary. The verbal comments, added sometime later in the day, were meant to lightly contextualize the image, yet leaving it semi-autonomous (in the manner of W. G. Sebald). By presenting readers with a particular 'image and words' combination, readers can construct a connection between what they see and other stuff in my mind that they don't see. That's the idea. It doesn't always happen, like if I'm pressed for time, which is quite often.

My diary has the following elements: It is *longitudinal*. It is *visual*, though, importantly, each image has a short accompanying written comment – not necessarily a description of what's in the photograph. My diary records incidents in *my day-to-day life*. In the short term it is *non-theoretical*. Lurking somewhere behind all this is *feminism*. These elements all link up. But – and this is now the point – how can these links form up into autoethnography? What, if anything, do the diary and autoethnography have in common – apart from the intriguing coincidence (Anderson, 2006a: 378–380, Charmaz, 2006: 398) that, round about the time of my first diary entry, autoethnography was emerging as a distinct academic field?

I wanted to use my photographs to make theory, but I found them unyielding, intractable, resistant, in a way that Goffman might have described (1979: 20), for each one recorded an utterly unique instance. And this failure to wring theory out of my images meant that the visual diary just ticked over in the background of my life as a sociologist for at least 15 years. It was field notes (Anderson 2006a: 384).<sup>10</sup> It was an ideas bank and a leaping-off point to other projects. I felt vaguely apologetic about it – and when I'm with conventional sociologists, I still do (Burnier, 2006: 412). But when I read evocative autoethnographers Carolyn Ellis and Arthur Bochner's pronouncement that 'the narrative text refuses to abstract and explain' (Ellis and Bochner, 2000: 744), I got a kind of mental electric shock, a sense of relief, of something I could connect to. Furthermore, a text dominated by images cannot ignore aesthetic considerations.<sup>11</sup> Aesthetics is an important concept in its own right for autoethnographers, because it's about conveying feeling. Here again, I found myself close to autoethnography, in contrast to conventional sociology, which is inclined to dismantle the concept of aesthetics, or to treat it as synonymous with 'art'.

Diaries give a longitudinal view. Meanings *emerge* from diaries, which establishes another link to autoethnography. Ellis and Bochner (2006) quoted Hannah Arendt's

conception of storytelling as an activity that 'reveals meaning without committing the error of defining it' (438). This is very much what my visual diary hopes to do in the long term. For example, *Nella Last's War: The Second World War Diaries of Housewife*, 49 (Last, 2006) does this, yet her diary doesn't just reveal meaning. By the time you've read two-thirds of her book, generalizations begin to hover in your mind, and eventually they just won't go away.<sup>12</sup> Isn't this a step towards theorizing? While Ellis and Bochner (2006) have taken issue with the systematic search for generalizable theory, I (in common with analytical and some evocative autoethnographers) do not reject the idea of theory *per se*. What I'm uneasy about is forcing the theoretical pace: 'generating' theory from data, and privileging theory over knowledge.

My visual diary clearly exhibits certain 'autoethnographic features'. It has also shown that it is adaptable: technologically, it has moved from chemical photography to cameraphones and blogging, and theoretically it has been influenced by trends over the past 20 years in sociology, anthropology and art practice. Even at low points, when I thought I was 'just keeping going for the sake of it', my words and images have been showing the patterns, and changes in patterns, of my daily life. But now the diary is about to embark on *another* change: it and the concept of autoethnography come up side by side, like railway lines that run in parallel before merging at a point.<sup>13</sup>

What follows next is my diary itself: the daily entries of image and text as they were created then. I start with March 10, 2008 as the time when my first awareness of the autoethnographic nature of this work was being explored.

### ***My visual diary goes autoethnographic***

In my quest to turn the diary into autoethnography, I certainly made changes to it. But it was already approaching the form of autoethnography,

if not the substance. You'll have seen that the diary mode itself gets me 'speaking' personally, naturally, and 'familiarily', as on March 21 (Figure 13.16): 'Shink Poos' is what the children call my pink shoes. That little literary nugget wouldn't see the light of day in many writing situations. I'm also making quick pictures, adopting a fairly casual approach to photography because I'm doing it every day. And with the diary now a blog, I'm at the center of a project which throws out links to other Internet users. It does this on a daily basis. And the *dailyness* of the diary allows detail to be recorded and preserved.

By the same token, those Easter eggs on March 22 (Figure 13.18) aren't quite in focus and the image doesn't give off much information; nor does 'Shink Poos' from the day before. You wouldn't see them in a more selective show of images like an art exhibition, yet sequentially, and in conjunction with the words, a daily structure is provided for the

**March 10, 2008**



**Figure 13.1** We have been warned that a big storm is on its way. This picture shows one of S's two barometers, both of which show that today's barometric pressure is the lowest ever recorded

March 11, 2008



**Figure 13.2** We changed round the drawings in the long frame at the top this morning. I don't know how S got it down by himself. I helped him get it back, and we nearly didn't manage it. The frame is appallingly heavy

autoethnographic project. A rather thin description of a routine event may acquire more meaning – even potential theoretical significance – as part of a sequence or cluster of entries. And some aspects of my story, with a relation to the wider world, are better expressed in images than by words, particularly those concerning location, atmosphere or emotion: for example those of March 14(b), 15 and 27 (Figures 13.7, 13.8 and 13.23).

So, now, what 'changes' did I make to the visual diary in order to turn it into autoethnography? There is more to say about the images and their contribution to the autoethnographic project. I have often felt as though I am photographing something just slightly out of the ordinary: see, for example, the entries on March 10, 11 and 20 (Figures 13.1, 13.2 and 13.15). But this is complicated by the fact that, online, my blog images are in color, whereas here they are reproduced in black and white: March 21 (Figure 13.16) now makes no sense; March 26 (Figure 13.22) doesn't make a lot of sense either.

It worries me that in my own experience of images, contextualizing words very often

threaten to dominate them. The entry for March 14 works because the words are subsumed into the image. But some daily entries are turning into a discussion about how to proceed (March 13, 14, 26, 27). By March 25, I am resigned to showing only a short run of small black-and-white images plus written comment. So has autoethnography really 'kicked in'? I think so, since almost all the other features discussed earlier are also recognizable. These are – in list form: *author is subject*, *narrative documents author's thoughts and actions* (these two items become far more noticeable after the first 3 days); *aspects of research usually hidden are brought out* (March 13, 15, 17, 19, 25, etc.); *referencing* (March 14, 23, 27); *systematic approach* (wasn't that already built in?); *insertion into 'the field'* (March 14, 27); *crafting* (I certainly tried); *aesthetics not paramount but important* (March 20 and 22 veer towards aesthetic dominance, perhaps).

So now that it looks like we've got a stretch of autoethnography, what use is it to the reader/viewer? Well, in the email pictured on March 14 (and with a social science training evidently

March 12, 2008



**Figures 13.3 and 13.4** After the Goethe lesson, I turned right up Exhibition Road, into Hyde Park. Saw a Derek Jarman exhibition at the Serpentine, and took these two pictures. This is water disturbed where a heron has just taken off, frightened by a dog

weighing heavily on my shoulders!) I see I said that I hoped respondents would learn ‘something about the everyday life of a middle-class English woman, living in London and semi-retired from being a social scientist’<sup>14</sup>. So how much would they get from this short stretch of images-and-words? There are lots of clues to my *middle-classness*: friends (March 15); class distinctions (March 19); taste in music (March 25). But is it clear that I am *female*? There are

no photos of me. I hardly ever photograph myself, and the daily photo is rarely taken by someone else<sup>15</sup> – but maybe March 10, 11 and 18c give enough information. March 20 and 27 give clues to the *locality*. March 17 actually gives the name of our road. March 23 shows local suburban architecture. *Englishness*? (I see I’ve written ‘English’ rather than ‘British’). The written text is in English, though that doesn’t clinch it. March 24 is a nice

March 13, 2008



**Figure 13.5** I went to see the film 'No Country For Old Men' – really because I have reached a stumbling block in how to actually proceed with my autoethnography project. The film has affected much that I see at the moment. I took this picture as soon as I got home, and I took it and look at it through the film's eyes. The drops of water hanging from the seat seem to portend disaster. (Is this the first day my diary becomes autoethnography? Not sure)

example of a conventional stereotype! The play-on-words in March 21 might be regarded as a British trait. March 23 talks about 'our English grandchildren' and 'our German ones'. *Semi-retired*? March 17 talks about relying on commercial help with computer technology, which suggests that I am not regularly 'on-site' at work. March 13 and 14 show that I have time for 'hobbies', and that I get up to central London for German lessons. The size of the grandchildren may suggest my age. And what am I doing in Wimbledon Village on a week-day afternoon, discovering horses? *Social scientist*? Well, that is probably clear every time I refer to the autoethnography project; it's also mentioned on March 17 and 19.

March 14, 2008 (a)

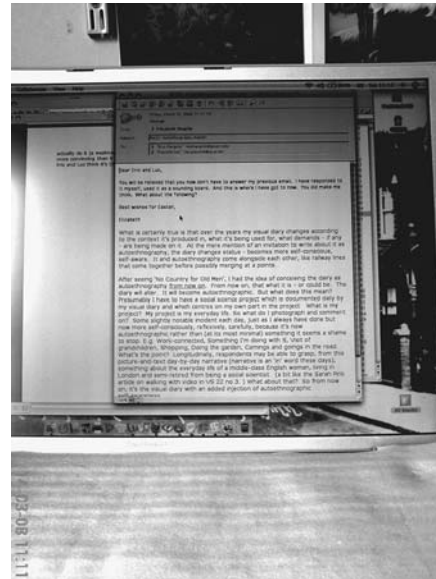


**Figure 13.6** Here's the email I sent Eric and Luc continuing the discussion about the project, and making some suggestions. From now on, the diary will become autoethnographic. But what does this mean? I have to have a social science project which is documented daily by my visual diary and which centres on my own part in the project. What is my project? As the email says, my project is my everyday life. So what do I photograph and comment on? Some slightly notable incident each day, just as I always have done but now more self-consciously, carefully, in relation to other ethnographic projects, because it's now autoethnographic rather than (at its most minimal) something it seems a shame to stop. Slightly notable incidents could be work-connected, something I'm doing with S, visit of grandchildren, shopping, doing the garden, comings and goings in the road. What's the point? Longitudinally, respondents may be able to grasp, from this picture-and-text narrative something about the everyday life of a middle-class English woman, living in London and semi-retired from being a social scientist: cf. Pink on 'Walking with video' (Pink, 2007). So from now on, it's the visual diary injected with autoethnographic awareness and self-awareness

March 14, 2008 (b)



**Figure 13.7** Patricia is over from New York. She used to live in our street and we have remained really good friends. Forgot to photograph her when she came to tea, so chased after her in the street (wouldn't have bothered before the diary went autoethnographic)

So the entries of the 10–27 March don't exactly lack information about me, and I hope that information is conveyed to the reader more fully and vividly by words *and* images than it would have been by words alone. For my part, there are occasions when words do not represent my feelings – for example, on March 27, as I gaze at Chester, and he gazes at me from his stable behind Wimbledon High Street. Yet what strikes me on returning to these entries is how wordy they are compared with entries made before and after the 'turn'; and how self-consciously self-centered they seem. But isn't that what we might have expected, given the sense of occasion attaching to this stretch of the diary, the additional 'layer' of social science? Yes. But theater critic Michael Billington's review of Alan Bennett's play *Enjoy* – published

March 15, 2008



**Figure 13.8** Nicky and her mother at the Farmers' Market. Nicky runs it. She's become a good friend. I told them it was for an article on autoethnography. 'What on earth's that?' said Mrs Hartopp. I tried to explain. Nicky said 'You've given me a reason for living'. This is becoming very self-conscious. I thought about photographing Jeremy's car, which won't go, and Xionane has had to get the train to take her class, but thought it would be intruding

while I was writing this piece – spells out a methodological concern, which is actually hinted at in both my entries for March 14:

Alan Bennett's rich and wondrous play is, among many other things, about the way we assume a false identity when under observation [by a sociologist].... Bennett is clearly attacking the self-consciousness of closely scrutinized behaviour (Billington, 2008).

False identity? Would that apply to me too? Even when I'm being scrutinized by (admittedly) another version of myself? (March 26) (So which is the 'real' me, autoethnography or the visual diary as 'itself' (as I think of it

March 16, 2008



**Figure 13.9** Sidney's bed is all made up in my work room. They arrive tomorrow, and getting ready in this small house has been like a military exercise

March 17, 2008



**Figure 13.10** 'Olympia Computers' at the end of our road. I couldn't carry on as a visual sociologist without the technological expertise and help which Jeff gives me – less than a minute from our house. I never planned to live near a Mac shop, but it's turned out to be a providential coincidence. This morning he gave me a second-hand Toshiba laptop on approval. There are a few things my Mac won't do... Visual sociologists tend to underplay the technological aspect of their texts

March 18, 2008 (a)



**Figure 13.11** S said: 'take this'. They arrived in the night. Here is the evidence. But we haven't seen them yet

March 18, 2008 (b)



**Figure 13.12** Now they're up. Sidney is very proud of his new tracksuit. He said: 'It cost 60 euros. Take it'

(March 27)? You could say there are two versions of the 'real me'. Autoethnography is the 'working me', and the diary as itself is the 'off-duty me'. It's strange: autoethnography – particularly the evocative sort – distinguishes itself sharply from 'conventional social science', as we saw in Part 1. Yet when I attempted to turn my visual diary autoethnographic, it was *the social science* element still present in autoethnography that made the difference, that presented me with a different identity – not exactly a false one, but one which was changed by the autoethnographic project itself.

When I started, I thought autoethnography was so honest (you can still perhaps see traces of this in parts of the article). And in the sense that it exposes conventional sociology's suppression of the author's feelings, it is. But in comparison with run-of-the-mill blogging or diary-keeping, the autoethnographic text requires considerable crafting – I would say more than your average piece of social science (it's taken me a year to write this). And that is partly because in professing and apparently displaying more authorial honesty than

March 14, 2008 (c)



**Figure 13.13** Miranda said: 'take this. It'll be one in a million'. S playing tennis. It's notable how often other people suggest what I take. It's not so much because they know about the autoethnography project, but because they have known for ages that I take a photo each day

conventional social scientific texts display, autoethnography inevitably amplifies the significance of what it does conceal: underlying structural elements such as academic craft-work, methodological 'distortions', editing demands, personal secrets; all of which lurk in the shadows.

Shouldn't these too be brought out in the open – rather as my old Amstrad computer used to offer to 'reveal codes' – in line with the reflexive character of autoethnography itself? It would of course be impossible to bring them all out; human society doesn't much resemble the workings of a computer. Nevertheless, it seems to me that autoethnography has struggled with a meta-problem: how to explain concealing what you do conceal. This nagged at me a lot of the time while working on this piece.

March 19, 2008



**Figure 13.14** The builders next door have almost finished doing stuff on our side of the fence. This morning they rendered the bottom part of the wall. It is still wet. It's sad I have to be careful about photographing while they still are around, because they could see this as criticism of their work (and in the back of my mind looms the nightmare spectre of a court case...). In fact, we're not critical of their work at all. And we like them a lot. I just want to record that the rendering was done today. And it's been done well. But try telling them what's behind taking the photo, and there you come abruptly up against the difference between working- and middle-class cultures. I've been that way before. The look of incredulity. The struggle to bridge the gap

A more positive preoccupation has been the place of *images* in autoethnography. The analysis of the autoethnographic diary excerpt indicated that images can say things that words can't, and that a combination of images and words can suggest a great deal of 'information'. I also noted in Part 1 that the novels of W.G. Sebald contain photographs,

March 20, 2008



**Figure 13.15** Christopher on the new climbing frame in Wimbledon Park. Not a lot of children can get up there

March 21, 2008 (a)



**Figure 13.16** Shink Pies – only the point is lost in black and white

March 21, 2008 (b)



Figure 13.17 A photo-opportunity with 'John McEnroe' at the Tennis Museum

March 22, 2008



Figure 13.18 The spoils from the Easter eggs hunt

March 23, 2008



**Figure 13.19** Easter Sunday morning, and it's snowing. There's been discussion in the press about the disadvantages of keeping Easter as a movable feast. This year it's very early, and some schools don't break up for another fortnight – including our English grandchildren. Our German ones have already been on holiday 5 days here (went back yesterday)

March 24, 2008



**Figure 13.20** A tea party for S's cousin Louise: cucumber sandwiches and a cake from the market. They are upstairs looking at photos of the family. The china is from my side of the family, and I made the tablecloth

March 25, 2008



**Figure 13.21** This evening we went to a concert at the Cadogan Hall (converted from a Christian Science church in 2004), off Sloane Square. Joanna MacGregor played Messiaen's 'Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant-Jesus'. An absolute tour de force. I've now done March 10–25 (21 images in all), and I'm beginning to wonder how long I should keep this up, what with my allowance of only 8500 words in all, and subtracting 210 words for each half-page image. These daily images aren't even quarter-page at present – perhaps an eighth. So one image = 26 words; 21 images = 546 words. If the images were half-page or better still whole page, they would change the meaning of this chapter a lot, because they would show detail which is hidden at present, and also have a bigger impact, possibly even dominate over the words, which I would like to push to the edge (When does sociology stop being sociology and start being a sequence of captioned images?) Another problem. Eric said: 'Continuing your research while paying attention to the growing field of autoethnography should yield interesting insights'. That's fine, except that the field of autoethnography grows more slowly than my daily visual diary. I shall keep this up for long enough to be able to pay attention to the growing field of autoethnography, but the number of pages of diary I shall have ready even by the date fixed for handing in the final draft will be colossal – way over my word limit – whereas by that time autoethnography might perhaps have yielded half-a-dozen new articles at most(?). So, 4416 words up to here + 546 = 4962. I suppose I might just get a month's diary within the word limit if I cut down on the commentary. Richardson (1995) remarked that how researchers are expected to write influences what they can write about.

Nevertheless, I must carry on with words just for a moment to record here how much my visual diary has been influenced, not by other autoethnographies (though these do give me the confidence to feel that what I am doing bears formal scrutiny), but by the novels of W. G. Sebald, who intersperses uncaptioned photographs with text in a seemingly simple manner which is helpful to the reader. The implications of this simple, original move are anything but simple (Chaplin, 2006). Sebald removed the conventions concerning the relationship of image to text

**March 26, 2008**



**Figure 13.22** Today I went to Moorfields Eye Hospital Outpatients, at St. George's, for my regular checkup. This pair of paintings is in the waiting room and is surely a bit of a teaser for those with severe eye problems

**March 27, 2008**



**Figure 13.23** Chester in the Wimbledon Village stables. We only discovered these extensive stables running behind the High Street this afternoon, after 15 years of living in the area

but none is captioned: each image's meaning is only loosely tied down by the verbal text surrounding it. The work of fine-tuning the interpretation is left to the respondent who, in turn, wants to resolve the uncertainty. (And, as I write alongside my daily image, I do remind myself periodically that captioning – so easy to slip into – is a cultural convention). Now to have the reader/viewer working emotionally alongside the author is surely just what the autoethnographer wants. Yet this has to be weighed against the fact that in social science, verbal text (argument, description) still takes precedence over images. So the *balance* in autoethnography between image and writing would seem to be more acutely in focus, more delicately at issue, than in many other discursive formations.

## NOTES

1 Much of this discussion is built on my 30 years as a sociologist. The underlying theoretical positions about social scientific research are covered in detail by many of the authors in this volume and will not be cited extensively here. In addition, readers may want to consult my book *Sociology and Visual Representation* (Chaplin, 1994), which:

provides a selective historical survey of tests whose authors have contributed to the development of the social analysis of visual representation. It focuses, especially, on those recent texts which have changed the relationship of analysis to topic by incorporating visual representation "into the analysis itself (at [http://books.google.com/books?id=ax7AvdJPOIIC&source=gbs\\_navlinks\\_s](http://books.google.com/books?id=ax7AvdJPOIIC&source=gbs_navlinks_s). [Accessed 5 October 2010]).

2 In 'Visual Studies and Empirical Social Enquiry' (Chapter 3 of this handbook), Wagner does an excellent job explaining how raw visual images can be converted into data sets for analysis.

3 O'Brien, T. (1990) *The Things they Carried*. New York: Broadway Books, Random. See also Barone (2001) and Polkinghorne (1995).

4 See 'Making Arguments with Images: Visual Scholarship and Academic Publishing', by Darren Newbury (Chapter 34, this volume).

5 The Rupert Bear comic strip, e.g. *Rupert, Daily Express Annual* (1960), provides a fascinating

example of written text, picture sequence, and rhyming sequence all proceeding together, telling the same story. See also discussion on IVSA listserv emails, December 2008 to January 2009.

6 From reports of the terrorist attacks on Mumbai of 27 November 2008 we learn that Dharvari was an illegal settlement, without clean water, sewage or schools, where undernourished children work without pause scrubbing clothes or cutting rubber from the inner tubes of bicycle tyres.

7 Holt (2003) laid out and dissected various objections by social scientists.

8 For example, at Indiana University of Pennsylvania, USA <<http://kaytingeorgia.wordpress.com/final-autoethnography-the-end/>>. Also in the Communication Department at Arizona State University.

9 However, Eric Margolis notes that ethnography can be happy with 'accurate' description of social life and cultural productions' (personal communication).

10 Cf. 'salvage ethnography', as described in Chau (2008): 204.

11 The term 'aesthetic', as I use it in a social science context, refers to cathectic as opposed to cognitive communication, and therefore tends to be used in relation to the visual (images, layout) rather than the verbal (description, argument).

12 For example, pertaining to the attitude to homosexuality in the 1940s in Britain.

13 Diary entries before March 10 and after March 27 can be viewed online at <http://www.wimbledonpark.blogspot.com>. The first few entries show how wobbly I become when I actually embark on the project rather than just talk about it.

14 I feel almost ashamed to say – Why? – the project sometimes seems to smack of comfort, privilege – but then most of what counts as knowledge is middle-class knowledge: come to think of it, neither upper nor lower class folks – in my experience – tend to see the point of all this knowledge-making.

15 Though, see April 9 and 14 on the website.

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