Managing anonymity and confidentiality in social research: the case of visual data in Community research

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Abstract

Anonymity and confidentiality of participants are central to ethical research practice in social research. Where possible, researchers aim to assure participants that every effort will be made to ensure that the data they provide can not be traced back to them in reports, presentations and other forms of dissemination. The primary method researchers use to preserve anonymity and confidentiality is the use of pseudonyms for participants and also for the location of the research. In addition, other practices, such as changing the reported characteristics of participants (such as gender or occupation) are also used by some researchers to conceal identities and thereby maintain the confidentiality of the data provided by participants. There are several issues that such practices raise. One is that it is difficult for researchers to know how far to take anonymisation of individuals in order for them not to be identifiable, given that research findings may be presented to a variety of audiences, including members of participants' communities. A second issue is that research participants hold differing views about the desirability of anonymisation, presenting researchers with difficult choices between respecting the preferences of those participants who wish to be identifiable and those who prefer to remain anonymous. A third issue is that of whether or not to attempt the anonymisation of the location of the research, which may be adjudged more or less practical or impractical (depending on its distinctiveness) and more or less desirable (depending on its importance in providing the social context of the analysis that is being developed). This paper explores these issues by looking at how they have been handled by researchers in the field of community sociology (broadly defined) who have used visual data in their reports. This analysis allows the argument to be developed that although the issues themselves are not new, the ways in which they are handled by researchers are necessarily evolving in the context of technological change, the growth of research regulation, and shifts in the expectations of research that participants hold.

Introduction

A recent PhD thesis (Boyce 2006) which reports on research conducted in a UK community where high-profile anti-paedophile demonstrations had taken place not long previously provides an instructive case to begin consideration of the issues with which this paper is concerned. Although the demonstrations had been national (and even international) news, the community is referred throughout the thesis as 'Stanley', a pseudonym. The thesis includes a number of photographs, although nearly all of these are of places but not of people. The only pictures that do include people are two of the local carnival (in which people's costumes prevent identification), and one from a long time ago, of two children playing on the estate in the 1940's when it was first built. The community is anonymised and yet knowable by anyone who remembers recent news stories, and the views of its residents who took part in the study are afforded confidentiality but without completely allaying concerns about the possibility of their being identifiable by knowledgeable community insiders.

Community studies have a long record of photographs being included to help to convey the sense of place of the community being studied (Crow 2000). This is one of their strengths given that, as Geoff Payne points out, 'humans *see* as well as hear and think. If the locality is relevant, then it is even more important than in other walks of sociology to see what it looks like' (1996: 19, emphasis in original). Visual methods do raise a number of methodological challenges, however. According to Caroline

Knowles and Paul Sweetman, 'the problem of ascribing anonymity or confidentiality to research subjects who have been photographed' is among the 'more mundane considerations' (2004: 12) that this approach requires researchers to address, but the fact that these are routine matters should not lead to their being treated as unimportant. As Victoria Alexander points out, the confidentiality of the subjects of photographs requires more of the researcher than that they 'just change the names…. It is legal to photograph structures, objects and people in public settings, but people can object, sometimes violently' (2001: 353). This discussion is an expression of the fundamental issue addressed by Pierre Bourdieu at the beginning of *The Weight of the World* where he reflects on the anxiety that researchers necessarily feel about the process of putting something that is private into the public domain. In that particular study, Bourdieu and his colleagues sought to protect their participants 'by changing the names of places and individuals to prevent identification…. [and] to protect them, from the dangers of misinterpretation' (1999: 1). Arguably the vividness of the descriptions provided by Bourdieu and his co-authors provides an alternative means by which readers can 'visualise' the nature of place and people being discussed, but other studies continue the tradition of including photographs, and the ways in which their authors deal with these issues are worth considering in more detail.

Anonymisation: how far to take it?
The risk of the anonymisation process in research being compromised can be reduced by the exclusion of visual material from research reports, or by the inclusion of visual material in which no research participants figure. The study of four residential areas in and around Manchester (UK) by Mike Savage and his colleagues identifies the areas but gives pseudonyms to the 182 research participants drawn from those four areas. The main report on this research, *Globalization and Belonging* (Savage et al 2005), contains no photographs, although Savage does include photographs of the four areas in a separate discussion of the research (Savage 2002: 63). Interestingly for our discussion here, these photographs contain houses and gardens, roads and vehicles but no people. This is one response to the important ethical consideration relating to photographs of communities, that agreement for visual images to be used for research purposes is hard to secure from all members of a crowd. As Geoff and Judy Payne put it, 'Complete informed consent is…. virtually impossible in a busy street or other public place' (2004: 239).

A rather different line is followed by Janet Foster in her study of change in the east end of London (UK), *Docklands*. This monograph contains 60 photographs, many by the author. She starts the book with an account of how she had been prompted to undertake the research by the visual impact that the redevelopment of the area had had on her when interviewing (for a previous project) 'a woman whose flat had panoramic views of the locality' (1999: 1). What is striking about the photographs in *Docklands* is that those dating back to the early 20th century that were drawn from archives portray streets and other public places full of people, in contrast to those taken during the fieldwork period which very rarely feature anyone. One exception to this shows people on a march, but this is taken from an angle that does more to conceal than to reveal their identities (1999: 147). This ties in with her research practice of 'anonymising those whom I observed and interviewed', although she notes that the process of anonymisation was 'fraught with difficulties as it became apparent that some individuals were so key that they were identifiable anyway' (1999: 4).

At about the same time that Foster was conducting her fieldwork, a separate project was underway in the same vicinity. Geoff Dench and his colleagues' *The New East End* adopts a similar commitment to anonymisation of research participants: 'The names of all informants have been changed throughout and any resemblance to other individuals outside the survey pool is entirely accidental' (2006: ix). This book also contains contemporary photographs (including some by the authors), and although some of these are also of unpopulated streets, others do contain potentially identifiable individuals (e.g. 2006: 72, 120). The extent to which consent was gained for these photographs to be taken and used as research materials is not made clear. Another recent research report on community life in East London (UK) that contains photographs is Katharine Mumford and Anne Power's *East Enders*. The unpopulated character of these photographs may be a reflection of the decision by these researchers to take 'photographs of blocks, streets and open spaces' rather than people, although this does not obviously fit with the stated rationale of using this and other ethnographic research methods, to provide 'crucial additional information and a strong sense of how the neighbourhoods "ticked"' (2003: 15).

A fourth project researching East London, that by Chris Phillipson and his colleagues, offers a further variant, including photographs of people as well as places drawn from archives and other sources already in the public domain. Phillipson *et al* describe one image as depicting 'a group of four women and two children. At the edge of the scene, uninvolved and ignored by the women, is an elderly man. He seems to be playing the role of court jester to the group, his own dependency matching that of the children' (2001: 9-10). This unflattering description might in other circumstances have raised questions about this man's consent to its use, but this picture is not only 50 years old, it is the classic street scene which provided the cover for Michael Young and Peter Willmott's best-selling *Family and Kinship in East London*, the influential original study of 1950's Bethnal Green which has provided a key point of comparison for subsequent research in this area and beyond (Crow and Allan 1994).

The question of how far the anonymisation process can and should be taken in social research is an interesting one in general (Wiles *et al.* 2006). The use of visual data in community studies may lead to researchers using photographs in which people do not figure, as this still gives a sense of place, but not necessarily of local social life. Alternatively, photographs may include people, but in such a way as to avoid their being identifiable, as for example Boyce's carnival photographs, or Foster's march photographed from behind. A third possibility is to use historical photographs where those pictured are untraceable, and possibly deceased. And a fourth option is to include contemporary pictures of places and people who are identifiable (if not necessarily identified). Where this latter course is taken, it is not always made clear what consent processes (if any) have been followed. Nor is it self-evident what would be adequate consent procedures, because the history of community research contains several examples of people who have agreed to be researched subsequently expressing their dissatisfaction with how they have been portrayed by the research report.

The desire for identification
The case for seeking to preserve the anonymity of people whose lives are the subject of community studies is well-known and easily understood: sociologists do not have an automatic entitlement to reveal things to a wider public that the people themselves

may regard as private. Arthur Vidich and Joseph Bensman's (1971) *Small Town in Mass Society* provides the classic example of what happens when the desire of community members to remain anonymous is not met. Although the authors were aware that several townspeople were greatly concerned 'with how they personally would be portrayed in the "book"', and that there was an understanding on the part of many participants that anonymisation meant 'doing an entirely statistical report' (1971: 328), nevertheless they used pseudonyms for individuals who were 'clearly recognisable by their structural positions' (Bell and Newby 1971: 120) such as school principal. Vidich and Bensman's description of the townspeople as 'sensitive' is one judgement on these people's hostile reaction to the study's publication, but the reaction would have been likely to be stronger still had the study included photographs. As it was, the authors merely found themselves 'hanged… in effigy, [and] portrayed… as manure spreaders' (2000: xxxii) by the people of 'Springdale'.

There is a parallel between this and the local person's response to the publication of Nancy Scheper-Hughes's study of 'Ballybran' that 'She should be shot' (2001: xviii). What is particularly interesting for our purposes here is the author's response to local people's hostility to her account of their lives being put in the public domain, which was to *add* photographs to the edition that came out nearly a quarter century on from the original. These photographs include ones of places and of people that are identifiable and identified. The rationale for this is worth quoting extensively: 'Were I to be writing this book for the first time and with hindsight…. I would be inclined to avoid the cute and conventional use of pseudonyms. I would not attempt to scramble certain identifying features of the individuals portrayed on the naïve assumption that such masks and disguises could not be easily decoded by villagers themselves. I have come to see that the time-honored practice of bestowing anonymity on our communities and informants fools few and protects none…. Anonymity makes us forget that we owe our anthropological subjects the same degree of courtesy, empathy, and friendship in writing that we generally extend to them face to face in the field…. Sacrificing anonymity means we may have to write less poignant, more circumspect ethnographies, a high price for any writer to pay. But our version of the Hippocratic oath – to do no harm, insofar as possible, to our informants – would seem to demand this…. In keeping with this I now identify the village by its true Irish name and I have restored a few personal names in the new material where it seems appropriate and not invasive' (2001: 12-13). The absence of photographs is no guarantee of anonymity, and their presence, sensitively handled, may contribute to more rather than less acceptable representation of research participants.

Ken Dempsey's Australian community study of 'Smalltown' does not contain photographs, but his discussion in the acknowledgements of his indebtedness conveys a similar sense to Scheper-Hughes's view that something is lost by anonymisation. As he says, 'Since I have disguised the identity of Smalltown and given fictitious names to all participants I cannot acknowledge directly my great debt to literally hundreds of Smalltownites'. There is more than a passing sense in what Dempsey goes on to say about his informants' 'friendship', 'good grace', and 'good-humoured' (1990: ix) participation that they may have shared his frustration with the constraints of anonymisation. Dempsey's comment that 'Any empirical study that lasts for seventeen years is the product of many people other than the author' (1990: vii) is undoubtedly correct, and it may seem odd to those others who do not get named why they are presumed to have ticked the 'no publicity' box. Suzanne Keller's fieldwork

in Twin Rivers, New Jersey, spanned approximately twice the period of Dempsey's, but most of her respondents are equally anonymous as his are, even though the place is identified and photographs of place and people are included as introductions to each chapter. Her rationale for the use of photographs is not revealed beyond the general comment that they 'contributed to the portrait of a community in the making', and her remark about the usefulness of data generated by 'unobtrusive measures' that involve 'obtaining information without asking the participants directly' (2003: 300, 73).

There is somewhat more discussion of the ethical issues of using photography in research in David Kideckel's *The Solitude of Collectivism* based on fieldwork in Rumania both before and after 1989. In relation to interview data he collected he states that his research participants were understandably uncomfortable with their position: 'until my last bit of fieldwork after the revolution, I recorded none of my interviews after my first informant demanded that I destroy the tape. (I was also asked to destroy the first genealogy I wrote down.) My informants' obvious concern about the ultimate use to which a tape might be put compelled me to stop the practice'. He then observes that 'Photography presented a different sort of problem. All of my informants were so eager to have their pictures taken – they gladly stopped any activity to pose and competed with each other for copies of photographs – that I finally limited my use of this technique, too' (1993: 20). It is left unclear what conclusions we are supposed to draw from this account about the consent of the people whose photographs are included in the book.

The recent report on *The Other Side of Middletown*, produced by Luke Lassiter and his team of researchers provides a good example of collaborative research that involves participants in the various stages of the publication process, including a commitment that something is published of which participants approve. Because Middletown has been made famous by the original studies by Robert and Helen Lynd and by extensive research interest subsequently, Muncie, Indiana has not been able to maintain its anonymity. Indeed, reference has even been made to 'Muncieological investigations' (Vidich 2000: ix), so extensive has research focused on the town become. What is different about the exploration of Muncie's African American community is the involvement of members of that community working together with researchers 'collaboratively to author and shape the text as they envisioned it to represent the life experiences of the community members who participated in the project' (Johnson 2003: 277). In such a project, it would have been odd for the photographs to do anything else than to identify their subjects. Anonymisation would have been at odds with the ownership of the project that the research participants had.

The issue of the desire for identification is thus a second interesting question. For people who do not wish to be identified, photographs are an added intrusion into their privacy. That said, refraining from including photographs is no guarantee of anonymity. It is also possible to regard photographs as fairly innocuous in ethical terms, or at least to make the judgement that there is no particular reason why anyone would object to certain sorts of photographic material being reproduced. It is hard to see any of the photographs in Keller's study being seen as objectionable. Further, some research participants positively welcome being photographed, as was the case with Kideckel's research. Taking this position further, the team working on *The Other Side of Middletown* study secured the approval of their participants by making them

full collaborators in the study, and it is the stronger for its inclusion of 50 photographs.

Identification of the place of research
Ethical dimensions of research extend, as Johnson notes, 'to considering the ramifications of the published work' (2003: 278). Anticipating what these ramifications might turn out to be is, of course, tricky. One concern is that publication of research findings may have the opposite effect of empowerment; as Lois Bryson and Ian Winter observe, 'providing insight into people's lives can facilitate their social control' (1999: 68). This observation is made in the re-study of the working-class Melbourne suburb of 'Newtown', which was undertaken three decades on from the original study *An Australian Newtown* by Lois Bryson and Faith Thompson (1972). In the intervening period it had become apparent that this and other concerns had turned out not to be relevant in this case. Not only did local residents seem to have been 'supremely unaffected by the work' in terms of being made vulnerable to greater social control, they also were not exposed to 'the "fish bowl" effect' (Bryson and Thompson 1978: 117, 114) that might have been expected from publication of the research findings. We can note that the re-study included a number of photographs (whereas the original contained none) although these are generally of buildings and places empty of people. These photographs make 'Newtown' more identifiable for those who wish to learn its true identity, but the lesson of the original study was that only one person was known to have sought to do so, and that for benign purposes (Bryson and Thompson 1978: 114).

The tradition of giving communities pseudonyms is well-established (Crow and Maclean 2000: 226) but while some of these disguises have worked, others have not. 'Smalltown' and 'Newtown' may have had their location kept secret, but 'Middletown' and 'Ballybran' have been identified. Some places are so readily identifiable that no attempt is worth making. Ray Pahl's (1984) study of the Isle of Sheppey in Kent (UK) is a good example of this, such is the distinctiveness of the place and the significance of this distinctiveness for the argument that is developed in *Divisions of Labour*. Islands do present a particular challenge in this respect; it is difficult to imagine attempts to disguise Tory Island (Fox 1978) or Whalsay (Cohen 1987) being successful, for example. But the issue that they raise is the more general one of whether it matters if the location of a community study is identified and, if so, why.

Pahl's study of Sheppey is dedicated to the people of the island, in recognition of the fact that 'My claim that I was writing a book about the Island was sufficient justification for countless people to give unstintingly of their time and attention'. People's preparedness to help extended to some of them being photographed digging for lug worms or undertaking mechanical repairs in the street, but it is less clear that those to whom he spoke who 'were unemployed but were working illegally or were petty criminals' (1984: viii, 182-3, 9) would have tolerated this publicity. In this context we might mention the inclusion in research reports on named places of photographs of unemployed people in Gregory Pappas's study of Barberton, Ohio (1989: 41, 63) or street beggars in Ian Taylor and his colleagues' comparison of Manchester and Sheffield (1996: 263). These images provide stark reminders that community life can be about poverty and social exclusion just as much as it can be about 'safer' subjects. If there is a place for Ruth Finnegan's (1989) study of informal

music-makers in Milton Keynes (UK), *The Hidden Musicians*, complete with its extensive photographic record, then why should this approach not also be extended to aspects of life that are reflections of social problems?

This brings us back to the questions of the ramifications of publication. It would be difficult to argue that publication of John Rex and Robert Moore's (1967) *Race, Community and Conflict* did much to make the area of Sparkbrook, Birmingham (UK) sound attractive, and it may have reinforced negative impressions of the place and its people held by outsiders. The photographic record of poor housing in Herbert Gans's (1962) study of Boston (USA) also highlighted the difficult conditions in which people lived, although in this case these are photographs of slum housing now demolished. Included among these photographs is one of Gans himself at a gathering of relatives and friends that he described as 'the peer group society' (1962: 176-7). The broad smiles on the faces of those present arguably constitute some sort of evidence of consent by the West Enders to being researched. Of course, sociologists of community need to beware taking such smiles at face value. It is a theme of Dempsey's that the people of 'Smalltown' subscribe to the ideology of the community being 'One Big Happy Family' (1990: 54), but that closer inspection of everyday social life reveals discrepancies between ideology and practice (for example in relation to the stigmatisation of marginal groups). A community study which resembled a family album of photographs would risk providing a very partial account if only formal, posed pictures and associated text were included.

There is, however, nothing to stop community sociologists drawing on a broader range of photographs than those in the restricted range of ones that find their way into family albums. Bill Williamson provides a good example of this in the way he goes about telling the story of the mining village of Throckley, Northumberland (UK) through the life of his grandfather, James Brown. Williamson notes that his grandfather would have considered the enterprise 'a monumental waste of time' because of his life's ordinariness, but goes on to argue that sociologists are right to take issue with this because of the academic value of documenting what counts as ordinary in different contexts. It follows that studies of people's experiences of social life 'must locate that experience in time', and that photographs (in this case historical) have the potential to contribute to that contextualisation. The photographs include striking miners scavenging for coal from spoil heaps during the 1926 strike and the harsh conditions of pit work as well as happier family events such as a wedding anniversary. Together they convey the book's message that although life was hard it was possible for community members to achieve 'dignity and respectability as people' (1982: 10, 11, 144-5, 9). The authors of the earlier community study *Coal Is Our Life* opted for anonymisation of the place ('Ashton') and non-inclusion of photographs, even though their inclusion may have helped to correct the impressions readers got from the demeaning description of Ashton by an outsider as 'that dirty hole' (Dennis *et al.* 1969: 12). It is noteworthy that Ashton's identity as the town of Featherstone in Yorkshire (UK) had become known by the time of the re-study, but that of the few photographs included in the re-study only one is contemporary, the others being historical records of the gravestones of miners killed during a strike and of the families of miners evicted from their houses (Warwick and Littlejohn 1992: 207, 64-71)

The main rationale for including photographs in community studies is to give a stronger sense of the sort of place being described, and several studies have been produced with photographs of places that are given pseudonyms. If the purpose of the study is to portray ordinary or typical social life then the actual location does not particularly matter; pseudonyms such as 'Middletown', 'Smalltown' and 'Newtown' could be anywhere, and photographs of anonymous streets and buildings may help to convey this without revealing where they actually are, except to those readers who make it their mission to find out. Even where the identity of places is discovered, or where it is revealed from the outset (as, for example, in Pahl's study of Sheppey), the view can be taken that what matters is the anonymisation of individual people, and that as long as research participants' anonymity can be safeguarded, the identification of the location of a community study poses no great ethical problems. This was not the view taken by Bill Williams in following his first study (Williams 1956) in which he identified its location (Gosforth, UK) with a subsequent study of a different place to which he gave the pseudonym 'Ashworthy'. His rationale for this change was that 'Sociologists working in Britain have learnt the somewhat painful lesson that some of their studies bring unwelcome and often "sensational" publicity from certain national newspapers, which offends the many people who have helped them' (Williams 1963: xiii). It is likely that the reception of Margaret Stacey's (1960) first study of Banbury (UK) was in his mind when he wrote this, because the people of the town were understandably displeased to see themselves portrayed as the inhabitants of 'a place pulsating with snobbery and riddled with class distinction' (Allsop, quoted in Bell 1977: 58). In other words, people may feel wronged if they are maligned as a collectivity, even if as individuals their identities have been protected. What the Banbury case suggests is that how research findings are re-worked in the mass media is one of the ramifications of research over which researchers have relatively little control.

Concluding remarks
It was noted in the introduction that the use of photographs in community sociology is not new, and we have drawn on studies from previous decades that have used visual images to help to convey a sense of place. This tradition continues, but it is worth reflecting in the conclusion what the key issues are that are raised by the use of photographs in community studies. As we have explored in the paper, there are questions about how far anonymisation is taken. If people and places are identifiable through the inclusion of photographs then we might ask whether consent for their use has been gained and, if so, how and from whom. There is remarkably little discussion of these issues in the monographs that we have discussed in this paper, even the most recent ones. One conclusion we draw is, therefore, that fuller accounts of this aspect of methodology would be welcome, in order to feed into the on-going debate about research ethics.

A second set of questions relates to the assumption that people prefer anonymisation rather than being potentially identifiable. Of course, what this issue raises is whether it is appropriate to infer from people's willingness to be photographed that they will be agreeable to the use to which the photographs are put. Community research generally (with or without photographs) provides some of the best illustrations available of the point that research participants may have very different understandings of the nature and purpose of research from those held by researchers. Developments such as that used by *The Other Side of Middletown* team, who worked

with their research participants as collaborators, are instructive in this respect. It would be interesting to know from such methodological experiments in participatory research whether certain topics were more acceptable than others, and how much discussion was involved in the decision-making process about what to include. In this context, it would also be interesting to know how far the opportunities for manipulation of images that technological developments have made possible are being taken up, for example in relation to inclusion or exclusion of particular individuals in specific photographs.

A third set of questions relates to the ramifications of research. Photographs can bring increased attention to a place where research has been undertaken, and some of this attention may be unwelcome. Precisely how research reports will be received by readers is difficult to predict because 'audiences do not always share sociologists' agendas' (Crow 2005: 187). The issue of which photographs to include is part of the bigger question of which research topics to tackle; if unemployment and street begging are part of the agenda of sociological research then a monograph about these topics that included only 'safe' photographs loses something of the discipline's edge. But once sociological data are put into the public domain, the lesson of community research is that their impact becomes very difficult to control.

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