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A Case against Giving Informants Cameras and Coming Back Weeks Later

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Giving informants cameras and asking them to take photographs of their environment is a growing trend in anthropology. The resulting photos are later displayed, analyzed or exhibited as examples of a particularly internal, private or emic view of the world. Students love this technique, which is inexpensive and initially appears to be risk free, with all of the hallmarks of reflexive anthropology. If not done carefully, however, it can be problematic both ethically and methodologically.

The basic method itself is over four decades old. One of the earliest examples was the Navajo Film Project, begun in 1966 by anthropologists Sol Worth and John Adair, in which Native American informants were given film cameras, trained in their use, and asked to film their environment. Conducted at one of the heights of reflexivity in anthropology, the goal was to see if the images created would be somehow different from those of Western filmmaking and thus reveal how Navajo tribe members see the world.

Inexpensive single-use film cameras have made this technique widely accessible. Because the cameras are so cheap (about \$5 each), there is no financial risk in giving them to informants who might not keep or return them. Because the cameras are so simple—just point and “click”—there is no need to train informants in their use. With this current technology, all that an aspiring anthropologist needs to do is to drop off the cameras and stop by a few weeks later to retrieve them and process the film.

Photographs taken this way are perceived to be revealing in content and form. They produce images of the home and other private areas that would have otherwise taken months of ethnographic participant-observation and trust building to create. They also often include unique photographic styles—camera angles, close-ups and macro views that defy the anthropologists’ sense of visual conventions and thus appear particularly illuminating. In this situation, the anthropologist appears to benefit by receiving the reward of seemingly interior images without putting in the time and effort to complete fieldwork. However, serious questions must be raised about the validity of this visual data. When

informant-generated content is used as a proxy for long-term participant-observation or fieldwork, the anthropologist loses the ability to evaluate the material. There are also significant ethical problems to consider, such as the implications of giving children cameras and asking them to take photographs of their siblings or parents with the intent of acquiring otherwise inaccessible images of home life.



The author filming in Hokkaido, Japan (photo taken by informant). Photo courtesy Akira Asako

Recently, while doing fieldwork in a small fishing village in northern Japan, a team of student anthropologists from another university gave some of my informants single-use cameras and asked them to take photographs of things they did and did not like. They were asked to write down the name of the object, their preference, and the frame number in a notebook provisioned by the students and then hand off the materials when the students returned two weeks later. At first, my informants were excited by the project and were busy snapping away pictures of foods, animals and other objects in their environment. By around frame 12, they began to tire and take rather random photographs to simply fill the quota of 37 frames. Although the project initially sounded entertaining, it quickly became another chore in their busy lives. After all, how did the participants benefit? They did not receive any training in photography, photo processing or using computer technology. The anthropologists were to maintain ownership or possession of the photographs. I could only wonder what

meaning those student anthropologists would later ascribe to the photographs, especially those in the second half of the rolls!

One example of informant-generated content done thoughtfully and productively is the Chiapas Media Project. This is an effort by anthropologists, activists and filmmakers to give indigenous and native people in the Chiapas area of Mexico video equipment and training so that they can produce their own films documenting issues that are important to them and that would benefit from broader global awareness. Films created so far have involved the battle over water rights, the need for land conservation, and political resistance against the national government.

For those who choose to do photoethnographic work that involves providing informants with cameras or video equipment, it is essential to first critically examine the ethical and methodological implications of a project. The anthropologist must consider both the potential harms and benefits that a project might pose for an informant. Possible ways to address these concerns include giving informants high quality photographic equipment (to keep) as well as technical training, so that in the future they can use their new tools and skills for their own purposes, to address their own needs. Informants working for anthropologists (ie, completing assigned tasks) should be paid as field assistants. Prior to using an image an anthropologist should receive permission to do so from both the photographer and any people that appear in the photograph. Finally, photography should supplement, not replace, long-term fieldwork—it is time and labor intensive, but ultimately necessary for interpreting and contextualizing visual images from the field. ■

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