

7

Inner-City Children in Sharper Focus

Sociology of Childhood and Photo Elicitation Interviews

Marisol Clark-Ibáñez



Ten-year old Nanci sat on a stack of tightly packed clothing wrapped in opaque plastic near the front of a small, dimly lit warehouse. Her father worked in the back, ironing and assembling clothing. The darkness seemed to cool down the place on this hot summer Saturday in downtown Los Angeles. He came out occasionally to check on us, offering a tired smile and a nod of his head.

Nanci's thick chestnut-colored braids fell around her round face; this is the style she wore everyday for school. She excitedly looked over the photographs I had developed for her, exclaiming "oh no!" "cool!" and "hmmm" as she surveyed her own handiwork.

We were about to begin our photo elicitation interview. I settled onto my own bench of clothing to begin the session. I asked her to tell me which were her favorite images.

Nanci explained to me, "This isn't my favorite outfit, but it's the best photograph, like, in terms of the lights." She handed over the 3 by 5 picture.

I nodded my head in agreement, "Yeah, you're right. The lighting is good." I added slyly, "Nanci, you never told me about this!"

She giggled proudly, "Yeah, I do this a couple times a month. I'm pretty good!"

I knew Nanci as a fourth grade student at a charter school that emphasized high academic standards. Only after coordinating the time and place for her interview did I realize she was the daughter of a garment worker and that she sometimes worked with her dad in a warehouse. Now, after seeing the photos that Nanci took, I realized she was also a mariachi singer.



In her favorite picture, Nanci is dressed in a black suede *traje* or suit with silver *greca* (stylized floral embroidery) sewn up and down the outside of her pants legs and on the front opening of her jacket. Her black and silver *moño* (tie) puffed onto her chest complemented her large silver hoop earrings and framed her brightly painted red lips and black-lined eyes. Except for her makeup and her *banda* (sash) made of sparkly silver cloth, she wore the masculine costume, foregoing the fitted long skirt and cinched-waist jacket women typically wear.

Nanci's story illustrates the benefits and insights that I was hoping to discover in my photo elicitation study. First, the photo elicitation methodology allowed students to show me aspects of their lives that might have otherwise been hidden from an adult researcher like myself. I will spend much of this chapter elaborating on these aspects of photo elicitation. Second, photo elicitation helped me to uncover some of the institutional practices that might have served to perpetuate educational inequalities that might have otherwise not been revealed by just examining the school setting. I will briefly explain this here, as it will also illuminate the genesis of my study.

Nanci was an average student at a charter school in South Central Los Angeles. She had a sweet disposition and did her work but did not garner any special attention from the teacher or school officials. When I learned that she was an accomplished mariachi singer, I could not help but wonder why this extracurricular skill did not translate into valuable cultural capital and a better social ranking at school. I asked her teacher about it. Her teacher knew about Nanci's performances but thought her parents used Nanci for additional income. Rather than encouraging these performances, her parents should concentrate on her academic progress, Nanci's teacher felt. The teacher's judgment potentially cost Nanci any rewards, such as kudos given to students who play institutionally valued instruments, such as the violin or piano. For the study of schooling I was conducting at the time, the teacher's perspective on Nanci's extracurricular activities provided me with valuable insight to understand how the school's achievement ideology functioned (Clark-Ibáñez, 2004). However, I thought there was more to Nanci's story: It reflected a new and rich perspective about the complexity

of inner-city children's lives. Without reviewing those photographs with Nanci on that hot summer day, I might never have seen this other world, segregated (and devalued) in her inner-city classroom.

How do we understand children sociologically? Previous research has discussed kids as *tabula rasa*, negating their agency (Jenks, 1996). However, I approach the study of inner-city children and their social worlds with the new sociology of childhood, a perspective that tries to understand children as active, creative, and important actors in their own right (Corsaro, 1997; Mayhall, 2002). This chapter explains how the use of photo elicitation interviews became critical to my understanding of kids in poverty and the way they viewed their own lives.

The Study

My current study of inner-city children emerged from my previous ethnographic study on inner-city schools (Clark-Ibáñez, 2004). When I began soliciting volunteers to participate in my study, I had already fostered relationships with the children through intensive participant observation in their classrooms for almost a full academic year. Through that year, I had established relationships with the kids and their families outside of the school setting as well. With parental permission, I took some students on weekend outings—we went to the beach or movies, drove through exclusive neighborhoods in Los Angeles (girls wanted to find actor Leo DiCaprio's house), and went to eat at fast-food restaurants. I also chatted with parents about school, life, diet, and work. I helped Spanish speakers fill out forms in English and accompanied teachers on student home visits. In short, I became immersed in the students' school and social lives for almost an academic year before I began the photography project.

Through my ethnographic fieldwork, I realized that many children had richly complex home lives, and I wanted to understand how this impacted their school lives. Nanci's case is just one example. Yet, once I began reading about the topics of children and poverty, I noticed gaps in the literature that did not capture the realities of the kids' social world outside of school—realities such as familial responsibilities, play, or peers.

Shortcomings in the Sociology of Childhood

Studies of children have several crucial shortcomings. They mainly tell about white, middle-class childhood because many times, these are the children to

whom researchers have access (Adler & Adler, 1998). They study children in the aggregate and consider the effects of independent variables to understand children's experiences and likely outcomes. They study children in relation to other entities—motherhood, schooling, immigration, welfare system, racial segregation, and so on. They typically do not examine children's own lived experiences.

With the above factors at play, the literature does not address the subjective questions of what it is like to be poor, a minority, and a kid. A small group of publications, such as those that emerged from the California Childhoods project (directed by Catherine Cooper and Barrie Thorne) and Annette Lareau's (2003) *Unequal Childhoods*, provide insightful analysis into the lives of poor, working class, and minority children. Yet, in most of the current literature, multidimensional answers are largely missing because they tend only to highlight alarming (and real) issues such as the effects of violence, experiences related to schooling, or descriptions of abject poverty. Is this all there is to being poor and a kid?

Admittedly, several of my young participants recognized the local drug dealer's car; this curtailed their ability to play outside when the car stopped for a long period of time near their homes. I am not suggesting that researchers should downplay the stark realities of these kids' lives. Yet, my study revealed that tree houses, Barbies, and Tupac Shakur (hip hop artist) posters were just as relevant to children and their daily lives. Researchers have not been able to capture the quotidian aspect of their lives. By missing how kids negotiate mainstream media and material culture, studies create a static and staid frame of inner-city childhoods. Inner-city childhoods are framed as unidirectionally shaped by outside forces, disregarding the ways in which kids are shaping, creating, and negotiating aspects of their childhood experiences in an inner-city community.

In response to this gap, a growing number of researchers, such as Barrie Thorne, William Corsaro, and Jans Qvtrup, conceptualize children as collectively participating in society. To further elaborate this theoretical and analytical framework, it is useful to incorporate a methodology, such as photo elicitation, that allows researchers to explore and better understand the texture and complexity of inner-city kids' lives.

The Method: Choices and Children in Photo Elicitation

As I read the literature in search of this textured approach to children's lives, I also read more about photo elicitation as a methodology, and I thought this would be an ideal way to capture the tangible and intangible aspects of children's lives. In photo elicitation, the researcher introduces

photographs to the interview context as a way to generate responses beyond the language-based conventional interview protocols. This approach is based on assumptions about the role and utility of photographs in prompting reflections that words alone cannot. Photo elicitation interviews, for example, can “mine deeper shafts into a different part of human consciousness than do words-alone interviews” (Harper, 2002, p. 23). Photographs can generate data illuminating a subject that otherwise may be invisible to the researcher but blatantly apparent to the interviewee (Schwartz, 1989).

There are a variety of approaches to conducting photo elicitation interviews. One of the first decisions that researchers must make is who will take the photographs.¹ Some researchers opt to take photographs themselves and present the images they captured to the research participants. This option allows the researcher to frame, select, develop, organize, and present the images to the interviewees based on their own research questions. For example, Harper (2001) used aerial views of farmland and historical photographs to interview farmers about their identity and community. (See Harper, 1987, and Schwartz, 1992, as additional examples.)

Using researcher-produced photographs is an excellent way to conduct theory-driven research. Toting a camera can help researchers better interact with the people they are studying (Collier, 1967; Schwartz, 1989), although it can take time (Shanklin, 1979). Once granted access, researcher-photographers may capture taken-for-granted aspects of the subjects' community or life that prompt discussion. In some cases, the interviewees alert the researcher to omissions and questions that later can be included in the interview protocol. Yet, photo elicitation in which the researcher makes the images may be limited by the researchers' interests and miss an essential aspect of the research setting that is meaningful to the participants.

In addition to the intrinsic biases of research questions, researchers must also be cautious of the tendency to capture the “visually arresting” images (e.g., homeless person asleep near a school entrance) rather than what might be meaningful for the interview subjects (Orellana, 1999). In documenting visual descriptions of South Central Los Angeles for my study, I noted my tendency to include images that, as an outsider, I found unique or beautiful (e.g., see Photos 7.1 and 7.2). However, for the children in my study, these images were unnoticed and “natural” elements of their environment; they lacked the significant meanings I may have imputed to them. For these reasons, I would not recommend the researcher-photographer approach for researching with children.

Given my framework conceptualizing children as active agents in their own right, I used a more inductive research approach where the researcher asks interview subjects to take their own photos to be used later as interview



Photo 7.1 Pizza delivery man on bicycle.

SOURCE: Used with permission.



Photo 7.2 Virgen de Guadalupe mural on meat store wall.

SOURCE: Used with permission.

stimuli. This is called an *autodrive*n photo elicitation (Clark, 1999). Cindy Dell Clark reports that photographs taken by children captured and introduced content area that from an adult viewpoint might have been poorly understood (or even overlooked). I have found that, when adapted for the purpose of interviewing children, the autodrive)n photo elicitation becomes an ideal methodology to engage young people.

Previous researchers have outlined the limitations and problems of research with children (Adler & Adler, 1998; Thorne, 1993). Clark (1999) observes that researchers must have patience or sensitivity to work with children's pace, style, and playfulness. Conventional interviews are especially problematic for children. Clark (1999, p. 38) summarizes the following four challenges associated with interviewing children: children's level of linguistic communication, their cognitive development, the question and answer setting, and the accentuated power dynamics of the adult interviewing a child. Photos lessen some of the awkwardness of interviews because there is something to focus on, especially if the interviewee takes the photographs: They are familiar with the material.

Photo elicitation nicely intervenes along each of these challenges of conventional interviewing. First, in terms of linguistics, photo elicitation lets the children set the linguistic level in accord with their ability. The children decide what they want to say and how to do so. The researcher typically does not have a structured or complex interview schedule but rather lets the photographs and child's insights lead the way for conversation and sharing.

Second, in photo elicitation, children's cognitive development is matched with the type of information that may be elicited. Photography stimulates kids' memories in ways that are different from verbal-based interviews—ways that are potentially unknown to the researcher. Using photos can improve the interview experience with children by providing them with a clear, tangible, yet nonlinguistic prompt.

Third, because children lead the interview, the potentially awkward social setting created in the question and answer context all but vanishes. In particular, children may believe that if someone poses a question (especially an adult), there is a "correct" answer. I found that children were a bit confused when I asked them to tell me about their photographs, as if they had expected a more conventional interview. As illustrated in Nanci's interview, I usually found that asking an open-ended question—for example, Which one was your favorite?—was a good way to begin the photo elicitation session. Yet, once I made it clear that I wanted to know what they thought of their own photographs, they barely needed any probing at all.

Finally, photo elicitation disrupts some of the power dynamics involved with regular interviews. This is especially relevant in the cases where there

are acute status, age, class, gender, or racial power differences (see Clark, 1999, and Harper, 1987, as examples). In my study, for example, when one of my participants, Silvia, went to Oregon for the summer to work in the fields with her relatives, she brought along her camera. For our interview that fall, I met Silvia at her home. She lived on a busy intersection in South Central Los Angeles and in front of an enormous electrical energy plant. Her mother hung back in the kitchen, and her little sister and brother sat in the living room with us, curious but quiet, during the interview. Image after image, Silvia became the expert. She explained how various kinds of farm machinery work, how tomatoes are grown and harvested, and how her relatives live (see Photo 7.3)—all topics, despite growing up in an agricultural area, that I knew nothing about and would not have been able to ask about in our interview had it not been for the visual data that Silvia provided. Photo elicitation can be a powerful tool to simultaneously gather data and empower the interviewee.



Photo 7.3 Silvia's aunt and farm machinery.

SOURCE: Used with permission.

While it resolves the methodological challenges of working with children that Clark (1999) points out, photo elicitation has its own complications, which must be taken into consideration when working with children. For example, when the interviewees produce the images, researchers should be aware of differing definitions of what belongs in a photograph.

In my study, Victoria and her mother clashed over the concept of photographic content: Her mother thought what Victoria *should* use the camera to produce “important” images of her family and *not* the images she did produce of her friends and their clubhouse. In another example, Carla took photographs of her mother in front of the washer and dryer; during our interview, she revealed that her mother wanted her to take these. If children are producing images, researchers must understand that family dynamics of power and authority may affect their ability to take the photographs of their own choosing or to finish the project. In addition, these family interactions become another source of data. I learned about the household dynamics of the children’s families and their effects on school assignments or homework.

The literature does not discuss children’s inappropriate use of the camera. For example, in my study, Stanford’s mother informed me that she caught him taking photographs of his naked sister, and so she destroyed the camera.² Photo elicitation allows the researcher into the interviewee’s home and life through photographs in different ways and with different results than when the researcher is physically present. Because of this, photo elicitation practitioners grapple with issues of confidentiality and ethics on a case-by-case basis.

Photo elicitation is a powerful method, yet researchers must be cautious and thoughtful of their specific population’s needs and capacities, especially in research with children. The choices and strategies that play to the strengths of children and the strengths of the method should be considered. With this in mind, the autodrivn approach to photo elicitation can be an appropriate and successful methodology for studies of childhood or projects involving children.

Logistics of Photo Elicitation Interviews

Selecting photo elicitation for its methodological benefits within the interview process raises a new set of logistical considerations. Researchers must consider the overall financial cost, coordination of camera dissemination and retrieval, and time spent developing the photographs and conducting the interview. In terms of access, institutional support or insider connections are common prerequisites for conducting photo elicitation interviews (e.g., hospital in Clark, 1999; school in Clark-Ibáñez, 2004; community center in Orellana, 1999; kin in Schwartz, 1992). For interviewees, the addition of photographs may mean an additional layer of intimacy compared with regular face-to-face interviews; as a result, the researcher may find it harder to obtain permission from institutions or to recruit interviewees. However, unlike the researcher-photographer model, the potential for the interviewees

to own a camera and the novelty of taking photographs for an outsider can help researchers overcome barriers to soliciting interviewees.

In my study, it took the last 2 months of the school year to obtain permission from parents, the school, and children.³ Several parents helped me craft a permission form that would be clearly understood by other parents and that addressed issues such as costs, care of equipment, time commitment, reciprocation, and intended follow-up. I gave the following written instructions to the children who participated in the project:

What you'll do: Take pictures of the people and the things that are the most important to you (e.g., family members, favorite places, toys—it's up to you!). This is a FREE project—it will not cost you or your parents anything.

- This camera belongs to you! Remember to keep it out of the sun.
- I will pick up the camera when you are done taking the pictures. I think a week should be enough time, but let me know if you need more time.
- After the photos are developed, I will bring you the photos.
- We will take some time to talk about the photos you took.
- Call me with any questions: [my phone number]
- Have fun!!

Reflecting on my study, I would now inform the children that they have the right to withdraw any photographs that they do not want to discuss. I learned this going through the photo elicitation process. When interviewees see the images, they may regret having taken some of them; if the researcher has already viewed them, this cannot be remedied. Therefore, the researcher should not view the photographs until the interviewee has had time to look them over and remove unwanted ones. Of course, the interviewees should be told in advance that this is the process.

Parents talked with me after school or called me at home to discuss the “camera project.” Some wanted to be clear about the monetary costs to them (none), and others expressed anxiety about giving their children a camera for fear they would lose it. I explained to them that the children would be given “disposable” or single-use cameras, and I would have a few extras in case some children lost theirs. (I bought the cameras wholesale for \$5 each.)

I gave the kids their cameras as soon as I received their signed permission slips. Although most children had never taken a photograph, they understood the basic principles of operating a camera and required little instruction. Most children completed the project within a week of receiving their camera. I developed double copies of their film at the local drugstore (about \$8 per camera). Once the film was developed, I arranged an interview time and day with the child.

Viewing photographs gave other family members an incentive to be present; frequently, parents and siblings took part in the interview. Initially, I thought the participants might be shy about sharing their photographs in front of others, but most had arranged the interviews to include their families. This was no small feat because most parents worked two or three jobs each: many times, they alternated shifts so that someone could be home with the children. As I will discuss later, photographs elicited extended personal narratives that illuminate the viewers' lives and experiences, especially when viewed in a group setting (Schwartz, 1989).

The interviews lasted from a half-hour to 2 hours. Fifty-five children participated in the project, and 47 completed interviews. I spent three summer months exclusively conducting photo elicitation and then returned to Los Angeles for the rest of the interviews in the subsequent year. Most interviews took place in participants' living rooms, at the kitchen table, or on the front porch and in the backyard when it was too hot inside. I also conducted several interviews on Saturdays inside warehouses in the Los Angeles garment district, where kids helped their parents.

Making Sense of Image and Text

I am in the midst of coding the 959 images by using a semigrounded theory approach to see what categories emerge. I will also transcribe and code the kids' interviews to hear how they talk about their photographs. In my view, there is nothing inherently interesting about photographs; rather, photographs act as a medium of communication between researcher and subject. The photographs do not necessarily represent empirical truths or reality. In this sense, photographs used in photo elicitation have a dual purpose. Researchers can use photographs as a tool to expand on questions, and simultaneously, subjects can use photographs to provide a unique way to communicate dimensions of their lives.

The photo elicitation method can present a challenge of coding words *and* images.⁴ Analysis may be difficult if the researcher must sift through the data from a lively group who viewed and referred to multiple photographs. People may talk over each other, it may be hard to identify which individuals are talking, or conversation may significantly shift themes. Careful and patient listening to the data, as required in other qualitative methods, is key in photo elicitation. The same attention to detail is required of the photographs. I numbered each photograph before the interview so that I could refer to the number throughout the taped conversation. This allowed me to identify the photographs by my cues on the audiotaping during the data analysis stage.

For initially understanding the visual data, I found it useful to draw on Doug Harper's (2002) three uses of photographs in photo elicitation. First, I used photographs as visual inventories of objects, people, and artifacts. Second, photographs depict events that were a part of collective or institutional paths (e.g., photographs of schools or images of events that occurred earlier in the lifetime of the subjects). Third, photos are intimate dimensions of the social. For example, photos of family or other intimate social groups, images of one's own body, and photos that connect oneself to society, culture, or history. It is important to add that a single roll of film may display multiple uses. For example, a child in my study took photos of her refrigerator and Barbies (inventory), her afterschool program building (institution), and portraits of herself and her sisters (social). After categorizing the images, I then could begin coding based on substantive issues, such as gender. I found that the significance of these images reflecting the textured lives of the children in this project arose at the intersection of these various levels of meanings and utility. While I favor the interpretive meanings of images throughout this chapter and the way that children can speak to and through them, I am not disregarding the empirical potential of photography as documentation discussed here. In fact, in this project, the two processes work hand in hand.

Visualizing the Texture of Inner-City Childhood

The kids' photographs and interviews revealed the day-to-day experiences of low-income urban children. The preliminary data presented in this chapter show the myriad experiences that shape these children's lives. My research gives priority to the voices and images of inner-city children and, thus, captures a complex social world that is deeper than images that are frequently used to characterize the inner city in popular media, such as gang activity, drive-bys, run-down schools, and cramped living conditions. Using photo elicitation was crucial to accessing the children's perspective about specific issues and experiences and uncovering their worldview in general. Photo elicitation, as a method, is good at giving children agency because the images and explanations mainly come from the kids themselves; this responds to the call from sociologists to allow for agency when studying children (Mayhall, 2002).

First, contrary to popular media, the children's photographs reveal more intimate and reflexive aspects of what we consider trappings of middle-class childhood. Students showed me their photos of the artifacts meaningful to them, such as soccer trophies, pop star fan books, and doll collection (see Photos 7.4, 7.5, and 7.6). While these artifacts could be found in middle-class homes, if you look more closely, they reflect indicators of poverty. The

Barbie dolls shown here were bought at garage sales and the “99 Cent Store,” and the fan books were checked out of the library. Look more closely at twins Lucia and Mariana’s backdrop (Photo 7.7). Because there are so many people living in their home, they prop up mattresses against the wall during the day and lay them out on the floor as bedding by night.

Second, autodriveren photographs showed me students’ interpretation of material reality. For example, they inventoried any “big ticket items” they owned, such as a computer, Nintendo, or a television. The most common reason they gave for photographing these items was so that they would have a memory of it in case it was stolen or taken away. Indeed, within one year, several children did experience robberies of the very things they captured on film. However, most students did not own expensive items. After I developed the film and saw the items, I presumed the kids would discuss them with pride of ownership. Their tone as they described the items, however, was a melancholy pride: happy they owned it but anticipating its loss. This shows the importance of photo elicitation because the method allowed for the children to express *their* understanding of what constituted a potential everyday threat. For me, the images of everyday threat were the boarded-up illegally occupied homes, the bars on the windows and doors, and the constant police helicopter activity. For the kids, threat was symbolized in a more personal, intimate way.



Photo 7.4 James’s trophies.

SOURCE: Used with permission.

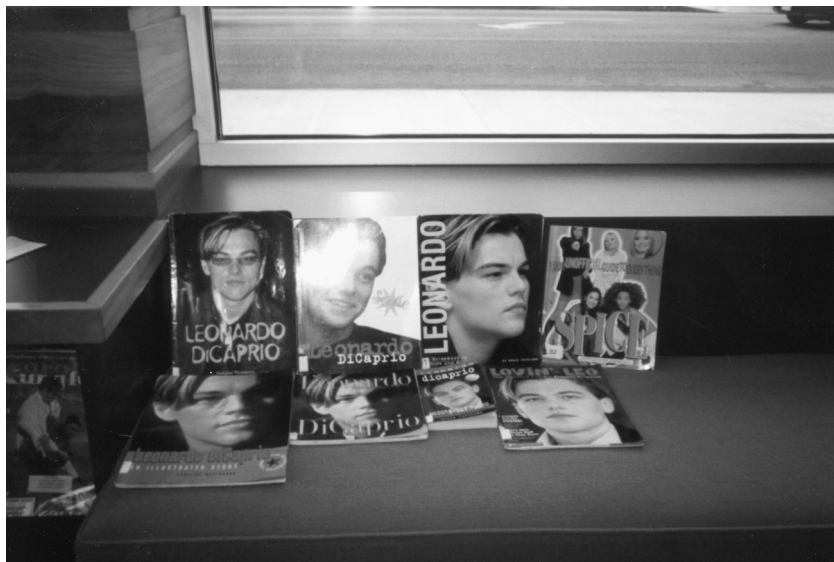


Photo 7.5 Natalia's fan books.

SOURCE: Used with permission.



Photo 7.6 Maria Sonia's Barbies.

SOURCE: Used with permission.

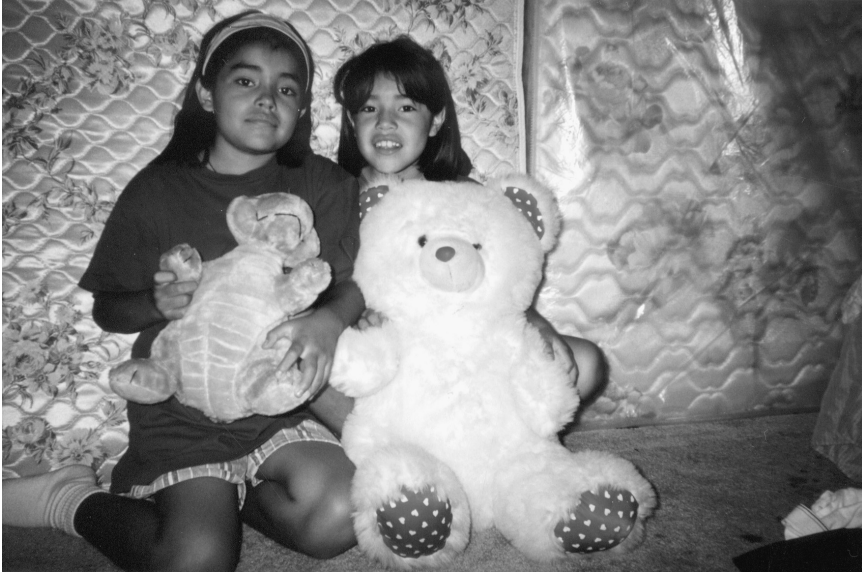


Photo 7.7 Twins Lucia and Mariana's stuffed animals.

SOURCE: Used with permission.

Third, the kids took the most photographs of aspects of their social lives such as their friends, pets, and family parties (see Photos 7.10 through 7.15). To me, the images of the social contrasted with the image of the inner city in the popular media, as well as the academic perceptions of depression, fear, and fatalism in this environment. When listening to the kids explain these social photographs, I realized the power of the photographs to reveal much more about their lives. For example, one of my first interviews was with Janice, who took 38 photos of her new kitten (for an example, see Photo 7.16). I admit I dreaded this interview. What would we discuss besides her *gatito*? Janice still attended the school in my first study but had moved mid-year to a slightly better-off community. For Janice, moving to a new community and not yet knowing anyone were factors in her strong attachment to her kitten. What became more important (and interesting) was the conversation about how her parents let her have the kitten after moving from Watts to Oak Park. For example, Janice explained that her family's slightly improved economic situation made it possible for her to have a kitten. Also, the images of the kitten sparked Janice's memory of the pets she had in México, eliciting a detailed discussion about her immigrant journey from Mexico to Los Angeles.

182 Visual Research Methods



Photo 7.8 Ricky's computer.

SOURCE: Used with permission.



Photo 7.9 Antwon's television.

SOURCE: Used with permission.



Photo 7.10 Tommy's dog.

SOURCE: Used with permission.

Fourth, I am finding a gender difference in the position from which the photos were taken. Compared to boys, more girls take photos of the outdoors from inside. Boys as subjects of photographs and as photographers are more likely to be outside the home. Note how David has taken his photograph from the street (see Photo 7.17). Contrast this to the images from Jasmine, Julia, and Mercedes (see Photos 7.18 through 7.20)—all taken from within their homes. In the fourth girl's photograph (Photo 7.21), Pati's perspective is from within the home's second story. I could have simply coded the images themselves—without the kids' explanations—to come to this conclusion. Yet, the interviews offered deeper insight about how girls and boys experience the special environment.

For example, Melissa showed me the photograph of a gigantic tree across the street, which she had taken from her front door (see Photo 7.22). She commented that it was her favorite tree. I asked her why. She explained,



Photo 7.11 Sergio's siblings.

SOURCE: Used with permission.



Photo 7.12 Lorena's family cookout.

SOURCE: Used with permission.



Photo 7.13 Melodie's friends.

SOURCE: Used with permission.



Photo 7.14 Fernanda's birds.

SOURCE: Used with permission.

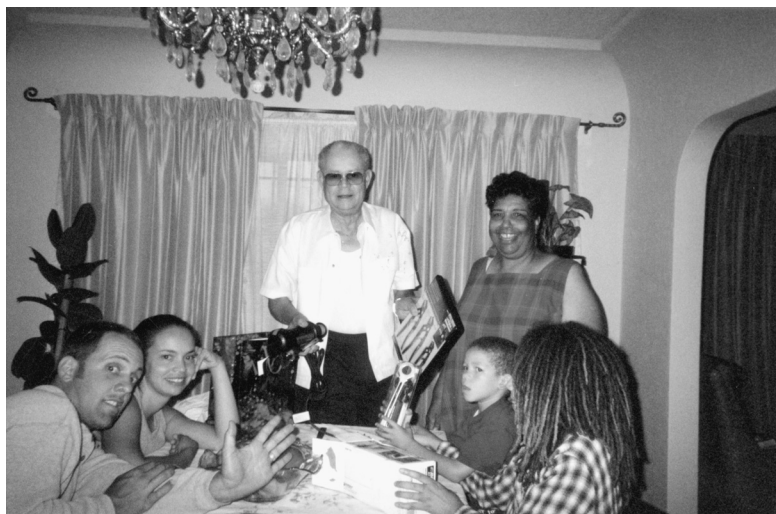


Photo 7.15 Phillip's family party.

SOURCE: Used with permission.



Photo 7.16 Janice's *gatito*.

SOURCE: Used with permission.



Photo 7.17 David's photograph from the street.

SOURCE: Used with permission.

with tears filling her eyes, that she can only look at it and never really be near it. I probed, wanting to know why she couldn't cross the street. She told me that her dad makes her stay in the house and told her she would be deported to México if she is caught by *la migra* (Spanish slang for the Immigration and Naturalization Service [INS]). Indeed, INS vans did troll the community. With a rush of words, Melissa revealed that she was not documented, and neither was her mom, 20-year-old brother, or 16-year old sister. They all had to work so they needed to risk leaving the house. Melissa stayed at home alone until 8 or 9 P.M. each night. Thus, the tree was not just a tree (just as the kitten wasn't just a kitten) but rather a symbol of Melissa's immigration status, which restricted her movement. As in Melissa's case, immigration status may make a difference, but the trend to photograph from indoors held true for documented Latinas *and* African American girls, neither of whom have immigration issues.

In contrast, my photo elicitation interview with Toño confirmed that boys were "out and about" more than girls; he and his family provided insight about their experiences in the neighborhood. Toño took photos of his family in portrait and in action (e.g., his brother on a skateboard), his neighborhood, his afterschool care, and his favorite games in his room. As the family and I sat around the dining room table, the content of the photos spurred



Photo 7.18 Jasmine's friends getting relief from the summer heat in the backyard.

SOURCE: Used with permission.



Photo 7.19 Julia's little sisters in the front yard.

SOURCE: Used with permission.



Photo 7.20 Mercedes has her friends pose in her backyard.

SOURCE: Used with permission.



Photo 7.21 Pati's view from the second story of her home.

SOURCE: Used with permission.



Photo 7.22 Melissa's tree.

SOURCE: Used with permission.

much conversation about the meaning of each artifact or action. What also occurred, especially when his father sat down at the table, was discussion of the graffiti (and the gangs it belonged to) that showed up in the background of the photos taken outside of the house and the day workers who also appeared in the photos taken outside (for an example, see Photo 7.23). Each family member who joined the conversation had a particular perspective and reality concerning these details that were inadvertently included in Toño's photos.

After viewing the photos, the family began to discuss the hardship of being *sin documentos* (undocumented or illegally in the United States) and finding work, as well as the trouble of having the gang members use their front driveway as a hangout. Relational and contextualized meanings emerged from the interview that may not have without the photographs. In this same interview, I was so focused on the "boys outside" photographs, that I missed the significance of the graffiti "tagging" of gang names and symbols (e.g., Grape Street High Rollers) in the background on which the other family members immediately focused. This early interview alerted me to other details that I might have otherwise considered background.



Photo 7.23 Toño's outside.

SOURCE: Used with permission.

Finally, the collaborative aspect of the photo elicitation interviews revealed dynamics in familial relationships. Many of my interviews with the children included their families and sometimes even their neighbors and friends. Sometimes, as in Toño's case, the family sessions were characterized by stories and insights building on one another. However, in other collaborative sessions, family tensions became apparent. Mostly, the kids and parents clashed over what the kids are doing when the parents are at work. For example, Melodie's mother laughed yet expressed dismay at hearing her daughter characterize the front yard tree as her "tree house" (no actual house is there, but she and her friends hung out in the tree limbs). She seemed somewhat embarrassed that she did not know the range of her daughter's play area because she was always working.

A clear conflict emerged with Victoria, a light-skinned, bright Latina and her mother. Victoria took her assignment very seriously and documented her social world in detail. She took photos of a secret club house, friends who dressed up for the "photo shoot," her little sister's chalk artwork, and the "blue line" train (taken by daylight) in front of her house that wakes her up at night (see Photo 7.24). In her lively interview, Victoria explained her photos and their meaning with passion. Her mother, who occasionally passed through the living room where Victoria and I sat for the interview, told her

daughter that she was upset and “embarrassed” that Victoria did not take pictures of her own mother and father and “wasted” photos on her friends. Victoria countered that her mom goes to school and works two jobs; because she does not see her mother except at night and she could not figure out how to do the flash on her camera, she couldn’t take her mother’s photo. Her mother asked me for another camera so that Victoria could take photos on their next family trip to Water World (see Photo 7.25). I agreed and gave them another disposable camera, and later, I conducted a second interview. In this case, the content of Victoria’s first set of photos painted the creative and rich social life that Victoria, her sister, and their friends created when not in school. In addition, the conversation around the content also yielded data about Victoria’s family dynamics.

In conclusion, while the categorical substantive findings are the stuff of sociological research, the process by which these emerge is where I found some of the most nuanced and intimate insights about inner-city childhoods. As I conducted interviews with children in South Central, I found that the data generated from photo elicitation interviews went beyond the normal scope of regular words-alone interviews. Photographs seem to allow the interviewees to reflect on related but indirect associations with the photographs themselves. In group settings, photographs serve to illustrate multiple meanings for the participants and sometimes reveal tensions among them. The most common experience conducting photo elicitation was that photographs spurred meaning that otherwise might have remained dormant in a face-to-face interview. The images may not contain new information but can trigger meaning for the interviewee (Collier, 1967; Schwartz, 1989). Although I have just begun to code the photographs and interviews to examine inner-city childhood, the data provide a rich perspective of “growing up poor” from the kids’ own visual and verbal expressions, which go beyond solely pessimistic visions of urban blight yet are simultaneously shaped by urban poverty.

Rethinking Childhood

Theories on children currently examine the death (and for some the post mortem) of childhood. Researchers of this ilk examine (1) the effect of consumerism and electronic media, along with the corporations that produce these products and (2) the lack of “play” due to parental overscheduling of kids (Buckingham, 2000; Steinberg & Kincheloe, 1997). The kids in my study did take photos of consumer artifacts (e.g., Nintendo), yet when discussing their significance, it was clear that these products did not take an



Photo 7.24 Victoria with best friends on first attempt at project.

SOURCE: Used with permission.



Photo 7.25 Mother-approved photograph of Victoria and friends at Water World.

SOURCE: Used with permission.

overwhelming role in or have a brain-numbing affect on their lives. Also, my participants showed through their photos that they have plenty of time to play. This gap (where empirical reality does not support theory) points to possible class or racial bias in the current theories that try to understand the nature of childhood. Whose childhood died? Researchers first must be able to understand the diversity of childhoods before declaring their death.

Using photo elicitation was crucial to accessing the children's perspective about specific issues and experiences and uncovering their worldview in general. Photo elicitation, used with other qualitative methodologies such as interviews or participant observations, can illuminate dynamics and insights not otherwise found through other methodological approaches. In addition, photo elicitation empowers the interviewees to teach the researcher about aspects of their social world otherwise ignored or taken for granted. When he introduced the methodology, John Collier (1967) wrote, "no type of fieldwork requires better rapport" (p. 51). I would argue that no type of fieldwork yields richer data.

Sociology of childhood scholars urge researchers not to view children as passive recipients of larger cultural processes and constraints. Photo elicitation can help address this concern. Jon Wagner (1979) writes that such methodology can benefit "social scientists interested in examining the connection between people's lives and the social and economic structures of the larger world" (p. 18). Indeed, the photographs of inner-city children reflected institutional, structural, and community understandings of their every day life. But more than that, photographs reveal the highly textured ways in which children negotiate these spaces and somehow once again become kids before our eyes.

When my interview with Nanci was finished, she kept her copy of the photographs and returned to work with her father. That day, I had another interview with one of her classmates, whom I was meeting in a nearby laundromat. As I drove away from downtown, I wondered about Nanci's life and future. Through looking at the corpus of photographs these children took, a part of me understands the kids' creativity and resiliency. Nanci embodies what is fascinating about children in the inner city. Through her images, she captured the intersection of play, work, culture, and dreams for a better future. The sociologist in me cannot ignore the structural inequalities and institutional processes that will shape their lives. However, at least in Nanci's case, I can report today, several years after the completion of my study, that she is still doing OK in school, still lives in South Central Los Angeles, and is still singing (see Photo 7.26).



Photo 7.26 Nanci the mariachi singer.

SOURCE: Used with permission.

Notes

1. Researchers also use historical photographs or the interviewees' family photo albums as interview stimuli.

2. This is the only time such an incident occurred in my study. However, students revealed that they took surprise photographs of their mothers, siblings, or friends. Thus, sometimes the cameras were being used for pranks and not for their intended use.

3. I obtained permission from the institutional review board at my home university to include the use of videos in the classroom and photography with the children. The review process took 6 months to complete. I wrote the board-required letter to the children and parents in my study in Spanish and English. Once in the field, I realized that parents did not understand the content of the official letter so with the help of several parents, I rewrote the letter maintaining its spirit but simplifying its language. I believed I would have done more of a disservice to the

parents and violated the true goal of institutional review by giving them a letter they did not completely understand.

4. See Wagner (1979, chapter 10) for a terrific discussion of avoiding production and analysis errors using photo elicitation.

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