

BLOCK 2
SOCIOLOGY AND THE PRACTICE OF
PHOTOGRAPHY

THE PEOPLE'S
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UNIT 3 IMAGE MAKING THROUGH PHOTOGRAPHY*

Structure

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- 3.1 Introduction
- 3.2 History of Ethnographic Filmmaking
 - 3.2.1 Development in Film Technology
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3.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit, you should be able to:

- Explain what is an ethnographic film
- Discuss the broad steps involved in making an ethnographic film
- Explain the ethical challenges and responsibilities in ethnographic filmmaking
- Discuss the uses of ethnographic films

3.1 INTRODUCTION

The history of ethnographic filmmaking is not an easy one. From being shunned for appearing as too subjective and thus having little academic value to being taught in some of the most reputable universities across the world, ethnographic filmmaking has often been kept at an in-between place between the two worlds of art and science. One of the reasons why ethnographic films have struggled to find a more conclusive place in academic environments is because, is because of the reliability of the recorded material and to what extent the filmmaker has been able to show human life in a comprehensive and neutral manner. It is because of this, a discussion around the *process* of ethnographic film research and filmmaking becomes important. It in fact becomes fundamental to comprehend the academic value of ethnographic films and videos.

Accordingly, in this unit, we will be looking at the use of the film medium in sociology and anthropology in a systematic manner. In section 1.2, we will briefly discuss the history of Ethnographic cinema, its major proponents and its relationship to anthropological research. Section 1.3 will address the main components of Ethnographic Film and what they have drawn from the field of anthropology. Section 3.4 will look at the process of making an ethnographic film and the important considerations to be kept in mind for the same. Section 3.5 touches upon the importance of preserving ethnographic films and their valuable contribution in teaching and research.

3.2 HISTORY OF ETHNOGRAPHIC FILM- MAKING

The history of non-fiction cinema is rooted in a combination of factors led by the then available film technology (of 1890s), the cost of film equipment and the several expeditions undertaken by biologists, anthropologists and other scientists and explorers to different parts of the nonwestern world. These Explorers knew little or nothing about ethnography and were only interested in bringing the images of other cultures to the audiences of North America and Europe. The proper history of ethnographic film therefore begins with the Balinese project undertaken by Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead in the 1930s.

3.2.1 Development in Film Technology

Early film technology itself was cumbersome and would not allow for easy movement of heavy cameras. Accordingly, much of the early ethnographic filmmaking process entailed “performances” by bringing subjects before the camera or placing the camera in a place that would be able to capture the scene in a supposedly uninterrupted manner. The camera was supposed to record the behaviour and lives of other cultures in a “scientific” manner.

As film technology attained further sophistication by becoming somewhat lightweight, the mobility of the cameras increased. By mid 1960s, synchronous sound film equipment had become available and overall film-technology had become portable and reliable enough to be carried to different parts of the world. By the 1970s, videotape equipment had also been developed which allowed not only the simultaneous recording of sound and audio material but also the added advantage of instant playback. By the 21st century, filmmaking equipment had increased in sophistication and quality of recording and editing, accompanied with a substantial drop in their cost so that now, even graduate students could use them.

3.2.2 Development in Ethnographic Research Practices

1920s was also a period which saw the establishment of the fieldwork method and many important ethnographic monographs started to be published during this time. 1922 was an important year as both A.R. Radcliffe-Brown’s *Andaman Islanders* and Bronislaw Malinowski’s *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* were published. Yet another important monographs was written by Margaret Mead *Coming of Age in Samoa* (1928), which will become the basis of one of the first accepted ethnographic films subsequently.

3.2.3 The Coming Together of Film and Ethnography

Mead herself was familiar with the work of Robert Flaherty who through his film *Nanook of the North* (1922) portrayed the lives of the Inuit people in a manner never seen before. Although accused of rampant staging, Flaherty had successfully showed what it meant to immerse oneself as a filmmaker, into the lives of the respondents. This became a very significant direction for future ethnographic filmmakers. Flaherty had also presented the respondents in a wholistic manner, focusing on the specific acts of the individual rather than making generalised comments about the entire community. Very importantly, Flaherty had also taken feedback from his respondents, building real collaboration with the members of the community. It was almost a decade after Flaherty's films first released for public viewing, that ethnography and film were finally brought together by Bateson and Mead. Films of Bateson and Mead were considered to be ethnographic in the true sense because they were descriptive of human behaviour, they presented interactions, patterns and results of ethnographic study. Despite criticisms and limitations, their films presented a major advance in the practice of ethnographic filmmaking as they triggered a discussion around objectivity and subjectivity in academic filmmaking. Subsequently, filmmakers such as Jean Rouch, John Marshall, Robert Gardner, Timothy Asch, David and Judith MacDougall carried forward the collaboration between ethnography and filmmaking through decades of experimentation, contributing to the field through their respective styles and perspectives

Box 1: Cinema Verite

Jean Rouch's is considered the pioneer French Cinema Verite or what is also called, "direct cinema", which is a style of filmmaking characterized by crude realism. Rouch was strongly opposed to the idea of embellishing films with staging and effects and instead urged to use the cinema medium to bring out the truth of life. This style often involved the presence of the filmmaker on the screen and the respondent both aware and acknowledging the presence of the camera. For Rouch, this was an important way of bringing out the real, as objectively as possible.

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Complete the following Sentences
 - a) Films of Bateson and Mead were considered to be ethnographic in the true sense because.....
 - b) 1922 was an important year because.....
 - c) As film technology attained further sophistication by becoming somewhat lightweight, the mobility of the cameras.....
- 2) What was the contribution of Robert Flaherty's films in Ethnographic Filmmaking?

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3.3 ANTHROPOLOGICAL CONTRIBUTIONS IN ETHNOGRAPHIC FILMMAKING

3.3.1 What is an Ethnographic Film?

Ethnographic filmmaking broadly entails collecting information about the lives of specific people through the means of film technology. There is however a substantial disagreement on what the term ethnographic film means. Simply put, it caters to the demands of ethnography on one hand and competencies in filmmaking on the other. Very often, these demands are in conflict with each other, primarily because ethnographic films and videos are meant to be scientific and artistic at the same time. Furthermore, the fundamental distinction between the two also rests from the fact that while film is an audio-visual representation, ethnography is primarily a textual one. David MacDougall, rather than seeing one as being better than the other argues that the two simply present different modes of knowledges. When combined, it is argued that an Ethnographic Film:

- Undertakes detailed analysis and description of human behaviour after engaging in a long-term field-based study.
- It draws a connection between observed behaviour and cultural norms rather than portraying people's actions as bizarre and exotic.
- It presents people in a holistic manner, representing whole acts and whole interactions thereby enabling pattern recognition and analysis.
- It discourages staging, and is governed by ethical guidelines with respect to portrayal or the respondents and interaction between the filmmaker and the filmed.

3.3.2 Components of an Ethnographic Film

Technical: One of the most essential though not talked about enough aspects of ethnographic film is focused and well exposed visuals along with clear audio. Today most films are shot on digital devices and stored in digital media. This digitisation has greatly enhanced the quality of audio-visuals however, it is important to note that some of the earlier challenges of filmmaking continue with respect to filming sound. This is especially true for the various kinds of sounds encountered during the filming process, apart from language. These are ambient sounds and in fact crucial to comprehend a location in a holistic manner. Furthermore human language itself carries several kinds of sounds which have no immediate possibility of translation or subtitling such as “umms and ohs”. Malinowski called them “Phatic Communion” and these are essential in maintaining the flow of a conversation. Additionally, subtitling and translations continue to pose a significant challenge in filmmaking because translations are only time-bound approximations and the original meaning maybe lost through the medium.

The other kind of sound is narrations which is often used by documentary filmmakers. Narration, although, may enhance the understanding of context and the lives of the community being filmed has also been criticised for guiding the viewer into a one-dimensional argument of how the audience should see the film. Many ethnographic filmmakers therefore refrain from using narration in their films. Another kind of sound usually found in films is music. Any music

which is not from the location is seen as a distraction from the film and the only acceptable music in ethnographic films is considered to be the one which is taken from the location.

Relation to text: It is important for ethnographic films to draw insights from Sociological research and writing, especially in terms of concepts and theories. The relationship to printed materials allow the film to be more than a set of visuals and rather exist in a dialogue with sociological generalisations.

Point of view: The question regarding whose story the film is representing is an important one. Is it the filmmaker's point of view or is it the respondent's voice? When a film becomes a filmmaker's sole voice, it is usually labelled as propaganda film. It is thus acknowledged that a film may carry more than one perspectives or view-points. According to MacDougall, an ethnographic film must strive at a balance between the filmmaker's and the respondent's perspectives. In fact, in ethnographic filmmaking, the respondent's explanation/ feedback/ interpretation is an important data for the researcher as it allows her to enrich the ethnographic basis of the analysis.

Contextualisation: Representing the respondents in a holistic manner entails both behavioral and physical contextualisation. The emphasis of holism is in order to show the compatibility between things, events and behaviours rather than portraying them in isolation, thereby making the film both unexplainably intrusive, simplistic and at the risk of stereotyping. Scholars have argued that depicting "whole acts" also enables the viewer to see events unfold from beginning, middle to the end thus enabling a closure and at the same time accessing adequate density of information. Therefore, filming whole bodies, whole interactions, whole people etc. lessen the scope of distortions in the filmmaking process.

Distortion in filmmaking: Distortion is an inescapable aspect of any filmmaking process. This is because, the filmmaker, on the editing table, selects and omits visuals and audio in order to construct a story. Ethnographic films therefore necessarily remain adequate representations of reality rather than insignia of complete truth. Apart from editing, there are other ways in which the filming process may get distorted. This can happen with the mere presence of the filmmaker on the location. Therefore, contemporary ethnographic films critique the traditional fly on the wall/observational filmmaking method that would believe that it was possible to make films in an unobtrusive/objective manner by a trained anthropologist. Films are seen necessarily as products of negotiation and encounter between the filmmaker and the filmed and therefore the idea that films attempt to capture some kind of an objective reality "out there" is rejected. It is also rejected that the filmmaker, the filmed and the field remain unaffected with the filming process, and rather it is argued that the culmination of filmmaking marks a permanent alteration of all three categories.

Check Your Progress 2

- 2) Complete the following Sentences
 - a) When a film becomes a filmmaker's sole voice, it is usually labelled as
 - b) Representing the respondents in a holistic manner entails

c) Any music which is not from the location is seen as a

3) What is an Ethnographic Film?

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Activity1

Record, through your camera, any process from beginning to end. Eg. Making tea.

3.4 MAKING ETHNOGRAPHIC FILMS

In this section we will discuss the research requirement and the context for which an ethnographic film needs to be made. An understanding of the society in which the subjects are located is as important as the logistics involved and costs etc. We shall take detailed look at these issues in the sub sections below.

3.4.1 Are Visual Methods Always Appropriate?

In developing an understanding about visual research methods, it is important to remember that they are neither appropriate nor ethical in every research context. Accordingly, the very first step of practicing visual research is to identify whether visual research is required or appropriate in the specific research context. Before attempting visual research, it is therefore important to read up other ethnographies on similar topics or read up on the visual methods used by other ethnographers. The assessment regarding the decision to use films for research also rests on how the people respond to the presence of the camera around them. Accordingly, prior knowledge about the culture may be exceptionally useful and sufficient time must be spent on rekeying locations and speaking to prospective respondents about the use of camera in the field.

Furthermore, researchers should not have fixed ideas about what they can access from the field. Many a times inflexibility on part of the filmmaker may be detrimental to the larger film project and the filmmaker may end up with material ill-focused, uninteresting material which cannot be finally used in the film at all. Besides, using visual research methods in inappropriate environments can put both the filmmaker and the filmed in political danger or become subject to moral criticism. Accordingly, the decision to use visual research method for a topic depends upon the evaluation by the researcher about the cultural norms and ideas regarding the sensitivity towards the presence of cameras.

3.4.2 Planning Visual Research

The key to a well-made ethnographic film is an understanding of the context where filming will take place. This is done through pre-filed surveys of literature

and of the location in order to decide the larger methodology to be undertaken. This also gives the filmmaker an idea about the cost to be incurred and people to be contacted.

3.4.3 Choosing the right equipment

Like research topics, equipment too is of a variety of kinds and are not necessarily appropriate in a uniform manner. The decision to choose a certain kind of film equipment rests on available funds, camera portability, available filmmaking professionals, to battery life etc. Furthermore, different kinds of equipment may also impact the relationship between the filmmaker and the friend in different ways. It has been observed that professional cameras that are accompanied with professionally light and sound equipment create an environment where the filmmaker cannot necessarily not work alone. This kind of an environment is going to have more distancing effect between the filmmaker and filmed as opposed to the small handheld camera which allow a filmmaker to work single-handedly and thereby create a rapport that maybe much richer and more meaningful.

3.4.4 Ethics in Filmmaking

If there is one aspect of filmmaking that creates a distinctive identity for ethnographic films, it is the question of ethics. The 1960s saw a general reflexive turn in Sociology and Anthropology and its effect was seen in the world of ethnographic filmmaking as well. Before this, filmmakers did not worry too much about ethnical questions involved in their relationship and portrayal of their respondents. The primary issues that got attention post 1960s, were around the question of informed consent, covert research, confidentiality, harm to informants, exploitation, bribery/paying money/giving something back, ownership of data, protection of informants from potential harm.

Accordingly, it becomes obvious that the issue of ethics in ethnographic filmmaking goes beyond the matter of ethical conduct of the researcher. Rather, it requires an understanding of the ethical context in which the filmmakers or the researcher is working. It is therefore a matter of acquiring a reflexive approach towards one's own belief system and of those who are under study. The question of ethics is thus tied with the moral and philosophical beliefs of the researcher and how they can potentially impact her views on the culture she is trying to study.

Furthermore, scholars have argued that an ethnical approach in filmmaking should be driven by a belief in maintaining the integrity of the individual respondent such that no threat either physical or moral may be inflicted on him/her. This includes the researcher herself making moral judgements about the respondents as that can compromise the quality of the research. Additionally, ethical research also entails protecting the informants from being represented in a problematic way, especially if it can put them in danger or harm their reputation.

Yet another ethical issue raised by scholars has been the practice of covert research where the behaviour of the respondent is filmed in a secretive manner or where the researcher has not revealed her true identity to the respondent. This entails a serious rupture of trust invested by the respondent in the researcher and goes against the very idea of collaborative filmmaking, which is seen as an important

way of incorporating multiple voices within a film. To counter this, sociologists propose the tool of ‘informed consent’ which entails clarifying the intentions and capacities of the researcher. Although it is understood that the respondent may not be bombarded with every nitty gritty detail of the research project, however, keeping the broad agenda of the researcher must be revealed.

Additionally, yet another ethical requirement to keep in mind is to ask for permission before filming a respondent in both public and private environments. It may also be that official permissions are required in some cases. It must be noted that simply by asking for permissions to film, one does not necessarily have the ownership over the filmed materials. Permission to publish involves the question of ownership of research materials and it may be so that the materials may be owned by research sponsoring agencies or by joint research team.

A final point ethical concerns entails an aspect of securing permissions for filming on the promise of giving something back to the respondents. This practice of giving something back not only throws up the question of power difference between the filmmaker and the filmed but leaves the filmmaker searching for respondents who would be willing to talk more than what they have been paid for. Researchers usually work with limited resources and payments for interviews might drain the pocket of the researcher, leaving her both without funds and respondents.

Box 1: Do ethnographic films require a trained audience?

Although most ethnographic films are not made keeping in mind a specific audience, scholars have noted that such films do make some demands from the viewers. These films are not edited as per the popular conventions of fictional films and therefore may seem to be overloaded with information, slow-paced and complex. Much of the audience for ethnographic films are therefore students and the films are often made for instruction rather than entertainment.

Check Your Progress 3

- 1) Complete the following Sentences
 - a) The decision to choose a certain kind of film equipment rests on
 - b) The key to a well-made ethnographic film is an understanding
 - c) Using visual research methods in inappropriate environments can
- 2) Write an essay on filmmaking ethics.

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Activity 2

Draft out a plan for visual research, outlining the appropriateness of using visual method for the topic.

3.5 PRESERVING ETHNOGRAPHIC FILMS

Anthropologists usually are able to preserve their findings in the form of books and publications. Films on the other hand require archival preservation since this material for a large part of history is available only in the form of reel stocks. For films available in analog format, preservation involves finding a suitable location with favourable environmental conditions so that the chemical in the reel does not get damaged. For digital films however, preserving data in storage drives or the cloud computing environment has proven to be extremely beneficial. This not only allows for endless storage capacity but also preserves the quality of the film in an excellent manner. Preservation of ethnographic films also allows for further research on the topic and creation of more filmmaking opportunities. For this purpose, the anthropologist in fact can also borrow from other categories of films including documentaries, fictions, amateur and ethnographic footage.

Yet another reason for preserving ethnographic films is to use them in classroom teaching. It must be noted however that rather than watching these films without any context, the experience can be enriched by preparing the students with the help of additional reading material. Since usually films are encountered as entertainment objects, ethnographic films need to be presented as academic research pieces thus encouraging background reading and prior engagement with printed materials. As noted by Karl Heider, these texts play the role of ethnographic companions that increase the accessibility of information provided in the film.

Box 3: Handy tips to make an ethnographic film:

- Familiarise yourself with the community. Longer the time spent on the field, better is the footage.
- Filming should start after adequate fieldwork.
- It helps to learn the local language
- Adopt an “inquiring” style of interaction, which can smoothly be adapted during filmmaking. Changing one’s behaviour while filming may make the respondent uneasy.
- Make use of environmental objects for giving support to hand-held cameras, eg pillars, books etc.
- The film crew should learn to coordinate their communication and action to film continuously without interruptions.
- Move camera only when necessary. Camera movements can cause distraction and loss of good quality footage.
- It is important to safely backup recorded footage daily. Cloud sources are a good option.
- Detailed coverage of events is going to be helpful during the editing stage.
- Feedback from the respondents is a great way to enrich the filming experience for both the filmmaker and the filmed. Jean Rouch called this “audio-visual reciprocity”.

Check Your Progress 4

1) What is contextualisation in filmmaking?

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2) Why is covert research problematic?

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3) How can ethnographic films be preserved?

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3.10 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we began with going through a brief history of Ethnographic filmmaking and its relationship to anthropological research. We then moved on to discuss the main attributes and components of an Ethnographic Film that allowed us to understand what an Ethnographic film is and what are the things to be kept in mind while creating them. In the subsequent section, we looked at the main steps involved in making an ethnographic films, delving closely at the question of filmmaking ethics. We concluded this unit by mentioning the process of preserving ethnographic films and their valuable role in classroom teaching.

3.11 REFERENCES

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3.11 SPECIMEN ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Films of Bateson and Mead were considered to be ethnographic in the true sense because they were descriptive of human behaviour, they presented interactions, patterns and results of ethnographic study.
- 2) 1922 was an important year as both A.R. Radcliffe-Brown's *Andaman Islanders* and Bronislaw Malinowski's *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* were published.
- 3) As film technology attained further sophistication by becoming somewhat lightweight, the mobility of the cameras increased.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) When a film becomes a filmmaker's sole voice, it is usually labelled as propaganda film.
- 2) Representing the respondents in a holistic manner entails both behavioral and physical contextualisation.

Any music which is not from the location is seen as a distraction from the film and the only acceptable music in ethnographic films is considered to be the one which is taken from the location.

Check Your Progress 3

- 1) The decision to choose a certain kind of film equipment rests on available funds, camera portability, available filmmaking professionals, to battery life etc.
- 2) The key to a well-made ethnographic film is an understanding of the context where filming will take place.
- 3) Using visual research methods in inappropriate environments can put both the filmmaker and the filmed in political danger or become subject to moral criticism.

Check Your Progress 4

- 1) Representing the respondents in a holistic manner entails both behavioral and physical contextualisation. The emphasis of holism is in order to show the compatibility between things, events and behaviours rather than portraying them in isolation, thereby making the film both unexplainably intrusive, simplistic and at the risk of stereotyping. Scholars have argued that depicting "whole acts" also enables the viewer to see events unfold from beginning, middle to the end thus enabling a closure and at the same time accessing adequate density of information. Therefore, filming whole bodies, whole interactions, whole people etc. lessen the scope of distortions in the filmmaking process.
- 2) Yet another ethical issue raised by scholars has been the practice of covert research where the behaviour of the respondent is filmed in a secretive manner or where the researcher has not revealed her true identity to the

respondent. This entails a serious rupture of trust invested by the respondent in the researcher and goes against the very idea of collaborative filmmaking, which is seen as an important way of incorporating multiple voices within a film. To counter this, sociologists propose the tool of ‘informed consent’ which entails clarifying the intentions and capacities of the researcher. Although it is understood that the respondent may not be bombarded with every nitty gritty detail of the research project, however, keeping the broad agenda of the researcher must be revealed.

- 3) Anthropologists usually are able to preserve their findings in the form of books and publications. Films on the other hand require archival preservation since this material for a large part of history is available only in the form of reel stocks. For films available in analog format, preservation involves finding a suitable location with favourable environmental conditions so that the chemical in the reel does not get damaged. For digital films however, preserving data in storage drives or the cloud computing environment has proven to be extremely beneficial. This not only allows for endless storage capacity but also preserves the quality of the film in an excellent manner. Preservation of ethnographic films also allows for further research on the topic and creation of more filmmaking opportunities. For this purpose, the anthropologist in fact can also borrow from other categories of films including documentaries, fictions, amateur and ethnographic footage.

UNIT 4 PHOTOGRAPHY, SELF AND SOCIETY•

Structure

- 4.0 Objectives
- 4.1 Introduction
- 4.2 Understanding Society through Photography
- 4.3 Photography and Subjectivity
 - 4.3.1 Understanding Self
 - 4.3.2 Relationship Between Self and Society
- 4.4 Photography and Non-Verbal Research
 - 4.4.1 Photography and Signs
 - 4.4.2 Tactics of Visual Data Collection
- 4.5 Social Interaction and Process
- 4.6 Risks to Rapport
- 4.7 Let Us Sum Up
- 4.8 References
- 4.9 Specimen Answers to Check Your Progress

4.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit you will be able to:

- Explain the notion of self and society
- Get a detailed knowledge on how photography can act as a vital research tool in understanding various social phenomena.
- Explain how photography can be an essential part of non verbal research.
- Discuss the challenges faced while using a camera in qualitative research.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

This unit looks at the relationship between photography as visual medium and the self in the larger context of the society. We begin the unit by having a brief overview of the entry of photography as way to understand society. The subsequent section looks at the sociological understanding of self and the complex relationship of self-society. Photography offers visual clues, which might have been overlooked during field work, hence photography is increasingly seen as valuable input in the understanding of society. The complex interplays of the social structure, cultural aspects, interpersonal relationships and many other insights can be captured effectively by a camera. Pictures of people mingling offer a researcher with opportunities for measuring, qualifying and comparing, which can help define the very patterns of people's lives and culture

4.2 UNDERSTANDING SOCIETY THROUGH PHOTOGRAPHY

Photography as a whole is a large area of study. From its invention in the 1840s, photography has undergone a complex and major transformation in the course of its history. Its birth coincides with the emergence of Sociology, with Auguste Comte's work, in 1839 when Louis Daguerre made public his method for fixing an image on a metal plate. Both Comte and Daguerre worked on varied aspects of society. However, though photographs were used in early sociological journals, visual Sociology did not emerge as a substantive sub discipline until the late 1960s. The basic visual approach has been more central in Anthropology from the 1900 to the present day than in Sociology. In 1920s, with the emergence of fieldwork in anthropology, there was an emergence of photographs but these were accompanied with written text. Photographs as visuals data were not considered as the primary source of data in sociological studies. In both Sociology and Anthropology photographs on a stand-alone basis were not considered a meaningful part of research. Traces of visual records as part of anthropological field diaries were more in evidence when compared to serious academic ethnographic texts.

Over the past few decades there has been a growing interest in visual research. A more substantive emerging trend among both Visual Sociologists and Anthropologists has been the need to take into account how images are contextually mediated by socio-cultural settings. Howard Becker signalled a paradigm shift in visual sociological research by accepting photography and other visual means as legitimate aids in the investigation of social phenomena. The shift in theory from a positivist to a reflexive approach has also been visible in visual studies. There has been a move by critical and interpretative visual anthropologists, visual ethnographers and visual sociologists to reflexively engage with those they study (Prosser and Schwartz, 1998: 90). In this unit we will focus on the use of photography as a research method in understanding of the self in the context of social phenomena in society.

4.3 PHOTOGRAPHY AND SUBJECTIVITY

The photographic image is subjective in nature. The general belief that photographs represent the objective reality did not last for long as it was evident that what a photograph captures depends on the one capturing it. In other words, it is the photographer's choice of what to include and not include in a picture, the choice of angle, lighting techniques and so on. Mainstream sociology thus found it difficult to accept photography as a legitimate method of data collection owing to its subjective nature.

These debates regarding the subjective vs. objective bias led to two different viewpoints. On the one hand, for sociologists, who maintained that research and enquiry should remain scientific and empirical in nature, photography as a method was rendered redundant. On the other hand, there were sociologists who were of the view that social life could be better understood by adopting photography as a research method. According to them photography led to multidimensional social

reflections and insights. The use of photographs can help discover and demonstrate relationships that may be subtle or easily overlooked (Prosser and Schwartz, 1998: 102). The emotions and feelings imparted by activities, interactions and so on can be efficiently communicated.

4.3.1 Understanding Self

Before diving into the relationship between the subjective nature of photography, self and society, let us briefly discuss the idea of self from a sociological parlance. A sociological approach of understanding self is always linked to the society. That is, the self influences society through the actions of individuals thus creating groups, organisations, networks and institutions. At the same time the society also influences the self through its shared language and meanings. This enables a person to take on the role of the other, engage in social interactions and reflect upon oneself as an object (Stets and Burke, 2003: 1). The idea of oneself is complex process, not only is it based on your perception of yourself but this perception is also reflection other's perception of you. You may consider yourself and this perception of yourself may also be reflected back to you from the compliments you get on your appearance from others. This location of the self in the human interactive process was well capture by the Symbolic Interactionist School of sociology. Charles Cooley in fact was known for his theory of the self called "looking glass theory". To put it in other words, you look at yourself as though someone is looking at you, so in a way your idea of self is a reflection of other's gaze on you. The social interactions we have with people in our surroundings have role to play in your assessment of ourself.

Box 1: Looking-Glass Theory

Charles Cooley, one of the symbolic interactionist theorists has come up with a theory or perspective that explains our sense of self. According to Cooley, our view of ourselves not only comes from our conception of ourselves but also from the reactions interactions we have with our family and friends and others who are close to us but also from people who may not be very close to us. According to Cooley our view of our self comes from what we think others think of us. He outlined three steps to this sense of self that one develops. First we imagine how we appear to others. Second: we imagine how others evaluate us based on their observation of us. We revise ourselves based on their evaluation of ourselves. For instance you may think you are intelligent but if people's evaluation of you is that you are not intelligent you may revise your sense of yourself as an intelligent person.

To sum up, self thus becomes both individual and social in character. According to symbolic interactionists, it works to control meanings to sustain itself, that are formed from the interactions with the others in the social structure.

Activity1



(image source: <http://s.wsj.net/public/resources/images>)

The above photograph is of a British lady walking down a street in Delhi in 1911.

What do you observe about Delhi society at that period of history? Share your observations with other learners.

4.3.2 Relationship between Self and Society

As mentioned in the previous subsection, the self cannot exist in isolation. Both self and society influence one another. The key to understand the link between the two are the various patterns of behaviour within and between individuals at different levels of analysis. At one level, we can look at the patterns of behavior of one individual over time and come to know that individual. By pooling several such patterns across similar individuals, we can come to know individuals of a certain type. At still another level, we can look at the patterns of behavior across individuals to see how these patterns fit with the patterns of others to create larger patterns of behavior. It is these larger, inter-individual patterns that constitute social structure (Stets and Burke, 2003:2).

The social structures do emerge from individual actions, as those actions are patterned across individuals and over time, but individual actions also occur in the context of the social structure within which the individuals exist. In this way, social structure is a very abstract idea. It is not something that can be studied directly, as it might exist in different patterns as they occur across person and over time which we might not be directly tuned into. Nevertheless, we can become aware of the patterns and study them.

In a qualitative research, image-based data can bring great depth to the study in different phases. For instance, data collected from interviews or observation can be enhanced by photographs in the form of visual quotes. These can be used in conjunction with other evidence to support a particular theory or working hypothesis. Researchers using photographs can be found in various disciplines; they share common understanding about what constitutes a qualitative study and that the overall motive is to contribute to a body of knowledge by marshalling

evidence to answer research questions. To study these various patterns in intricate details is where photography as a method comes in. The next section will put light on how photography becomes an interesting and efficient tool in understanding the nuances of the society.

Box 2: Visual Sociology

Sociology came into existence during the 1960s. Only a few sociologists interested in the visual have been aware of, or involved with the parallel movement in anthropology. Rather, the first visual sociologists tended to be inspired by documentary photographers working on many of the issues which sociologists felt were missing from the sociological agenda of the times. These included the photographic studies of drugs and drug culture (Clark, 1971); black ghetto life (Davidson, 1970); small-town southern poverty and racism (Adelman, 1972); the southern Civil Rights Movement (Hansberry, 1964), institutionalisation (Lyon, 1971; Jackson, 1977); social class (Owens, 1973; Estrin, 1979); the unionisation of migrant farm workers (Fusco and Horowitz, 1970); the counter-cultural life (Simon and Mungo, 1972); the anti-war movement (Kerry, 1971), the free-speech movement (Copeland, 1969) and the social irresponsibility of corporate capitalism (Smith and Smith, 1975).

4.4 PHOTOGRAPHY AND NON-VERBAL RESEARCH

The photography of social actions between different individuals in the society leads us into a rich area of non-verbal research (Colliner and Collier, 1986: 77). As mentioned in the previous sections, detailed information about any social phenomenon and variety of reliable evidence can be analysed from the photographs taken in the field. The complex interplays of the social structure, cultural identity, interpersonal relationships and many other insights which normally go unnoticed during fieldwork can be captured effectively by a camera. Pictures of people mingling offer a researcher with opportunities for measuring, qualifying and comparing, which can help define the very patterns of people's lives and culture (ibid).

Research with the help of photographic recording requires detailed attention to a number of factors-

- i) The record must contain proxemic information, that captures the spatial relationships among people being observed.
- ii) The record must also contain a temporal flow that tracks change in continuity of behavior recorded over time. This can help a researcher in defining and understanding the progressions of social actions, thereby understanding the interrelationships of the actors involved in it.
- iii) The researcher must also pay attention to the kinesics, the postures, gestures and other non-verbal character of individuals and groups.
- iv) Finally, in any given situation, the researcher must also keep an eye to the intricate details that provide culture definition. These include factors such as costumes, hair styles, accessories and any other material content that is associated with social identity and behavior.

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) The year is marked as the birth date of both Sociology and Photography.
- 2) In the field of Sociology, signalled a paradigm shift in visual sociological research by accepting photography and other means as legitimate aids in the investigation of social phenomena
- 3) Mainstream sociology thus found it difficult to accept photography as a legitimate method of data collection owing to its nature.

4.4.1 Understanding Signs

While talking about detailed understanding of a social phenomenon or a particular culture, the concept of signs also must be brought into account. Signs are not inherently understood, but can be learned through living in a particular culture. Photographs are referred to as iconic signs- those signs that closely resemble the things they represent (Mullen, 1998: 19). According to John Tagg, the meaning of a photographic image is built up by an interaction of codes and it can be seen as a composite of signs. Its meanings are multiple, concrete and most importantly constructed.

Further, it can also be stated that photographs can both be an object in itself (a cultural sign) and also a transmitter of messages through the use of signs. Ronald Barthes states that on one hand, a press photograph is an object worked up, selected, composed, constructed, treated according to various professional, aesthetic, or ideological norms and, on the other hand, this same photograph is not only perceived, received, it is read, attached – more or less consciously by the public which consumes it – to a traditional stock of signs (cited in Mullen, 1998: 20).

A photograph allows the researcher to study a scene for more detail than one would be able to just by observing with naked eye. Unlike the human eye, the vision of the lens is fixed. It is this static state of the image that allows one to see the intricate details which may not be given importance during the actual scene. Adding to this, photography as a research tool can also help in connecting the researcher with their subjects. The informational character of photographic imagery can be communication bridges between strangers can become pathways into unfamiliar, unforeseen environments and subjects.

4.4.2 Tactics of Visual Data Collection

Before qualitative researchers begins to gather data in their field site , they need to consider how to present themselves to their subjects. According to Bogdan and Taylor (1984); Lincon and Guba (1985), any qualitative methods texts examine the relative advantages and disadvantages of assuming an overt or covert role, of participant observation or observation alone (cited in Prosser and Schwartz, 1998: 104). Compared to other fieldworkers, visual researchers with a camera in hand need to employ certain methods that enable them to produce image capable of generating useful data. There is also the question of ownership of data (especially photographs) and recognising the complexities issues relating

to the empowerment of subjects. At the same time they also have to make the assumption that the appearances of naturally occurring objects, events and behaviours provide a gateway to the taken-for-granted and therefore unquestioned aspects of culture which are critical to studies of society. There are also challenges regarding the outsider status of the researcher while conducting research in the personal domain.

However, there are a few steps that can be taken by the researchers using camera as a tool to capture social relationships and phenomena. The initial stage or the first day into the research field can be started with by applying what Prosser(1992) calls the ‘softly softly’ approach. This approach entails walking around the sample site with a camera in its ‘out of the case over the shoulder like a piece of jewellery’ mode followed by ‘safe’ photography of buildings (Prosser and Schwartz, 1998: 105). After this step the researcher can attempt ‘serious photography’ once the subjects get accustomed to the researcher with the camera. This accomplishes several tasks for the researcher simultaneously: it allows him/her to ease into the new setting and role; it makes the photographer visible to community members, opening opportunities for interaction; and it provides a visual catalogue of the physical setting in which the fieldwork take place. Through this a vital link between the self and the society is created, which ultimately ends up in making the research more worthwhile.

4.5 SOCIAL INTERACTIONS AND PROCESS

Photographic records of events and social processes can provide insights into the structure and form of social interactions and relationships. Such studies with photographic imagery leads one into the examination of “microculture” and the understanding of ‘self’ in the society. Observing and paying attention to the minute details of how people mingle and regroup themselves is basic to understanding of social structure in motion. In the dynamics of microculture, the details of person-to-person relationships can be analysed through the use of still images and film/video. As it has been mentioned earlier, photographs allow one to observe the personal physical bearing, facial expressions, gestures and so on. A wide range of theorists have used these still photographs to understand spatial relationships and behavior pattern of their subjects and other social phenomena. Some of the contributions are listed in the box below

Box.3: Photographs and Study of Social Phenomena

Hall (1966) has studied the significance of what he calls “proxemics/” such things as the spacing between people and body orientation, which vary from culture to culture and according to circumstances.

Frederick Erickson (1979) has examined the subtle miscommunications of cross-cultural counseling and job interviews, basing his analysis on proxemic shifts, kinesic details, variations in communication pacing, and the tempo and stresses of the accompanying verbal communications.

Still photography was used by Malcolm Collier to record a day in a bilingual preschool, carefully tracking spatial relationships and associated behavior through different activities

Any culture and social situation has its definite established modes for handling space and diverse aspects of behavior and social interaction, which can be captured well with the help of a camera.

In the preceding sections we have discussed how photographic records can be an efficient method for data analysis. Photographs can also be used as tools which can help obtain knowledge beyond that provided through a direct analysis of the visual captured. When the subjects interpret and enlarge upon these photographic contents, through interviewing with photographs, the potential data enlarges beyond the information found in photographs. It leads to some interesting and insightful interaction and conversation between the researchers and their subjects. The involvement of the participants photographed, in interpreting the image captured is an important way of going beyond the obvious. The camera does not necessarily portray 'reality'. The image captured and its interpretation by the researcher is only one aspect of the reality portrayed. Participation of the researched subjects helps us understand reality in amore holistic multidimensional perspective.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Photographs can both be an object in itself (a cultural sign) and also a transmitter of messages through the use of signs. True/False.
- 2) What do you mean by the 'Softly Softly' approach in image based research?
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.....
- 3) can help in understanding spatial relationships and behavior pattern of their subjects and other social phenomena.

4.6 RISKS TO RAPPORT

Photography makes it easier to gain foothold in a community. At the same time, it must be noted that photography can result in rejection if the researcher is guilty of insensitive intrusion with the camera. While conducting image-based research it must be clear that once the researcher starts photographing the inner workings of the social structure, and peek into the subjects' life with the camera, the public domain is left behind. Cultural and social practices of communities are both public and private. The activities in the public domain, the ones which take place in the outer rings of public gatherings can be freely photographed. However, once the researcher over a period of time develops a rapport with the community and gets accepted, he/she may be privy to activities and rituals that are personal and secretly guarded. The question of ethics comes into play here where the researcher may unwittingly photograph secret rites and rituals and put them up for public display.

For instance, in many cultures religious worship is one of the delicate functions of a community. The church, the temple or any other religious institution are places where the deepest values are experienced. These sites are hypersensitive to stranger's intrusion and to lack of respect. Personal spaces like home or any spaces which belongs to the private domain can be difficult for a researcher along with a camera to get proper access to. The degree to which the use of a

camera is perceived as a threat and thereby unwelcome can also be affected by the behavior of the researcher using it. This situation can happen when working in the public domain as well, when it is not possible to introduce oneself as a researcher to the people who may come before the lens. Such hurried and secretive shots can arouse suspicion among the subjects. In those situations, the researcher must take utmost care to not offend the individuals and their private space. In most situations it is best to take time and move slowly while making shots, thereby giving the individuals time to know about his/her presence and object if they wish. Interactions with the subjects be it verbal/non-verbal, and one's behavior while taking these shots must convey a sense of respect and confidence so as to make them feel comfortable. Unhurried recordings also allow them to make contact with the researcher. If through such contact individuals become accepting of the researcher's presence, that acceptance can further conveyed to others in the scene through their behavior and the job of the researcher gets much easier and smooth.

Along with these measures, what is public, what is personal and what is threatening becomes very important on the privacy of the photographs taken. In general, to avoid hostility, photographs should be handled with utmost confidence just like other field notes. Material given in confidence should be held in confidence. Unlike pictures made in the public domain, pictures made in private circumstances should only be showed to the people involved in those circumstances and not to the rest of the members in the community in order to maintain harmony between the studied selves or the trusted key informants with the others. The researcher has to steer an uneasy course between the academic disciplinary demands of the discipline and the trust placed by the community in the researcher.

Activity 2

Conduct a fieldwork based study of any topic of your interest using visual data and note down your experience.

Check Your Progress 3

- 1) It is easier for a researcher to capture the personal domain with a camera.
True/ False.
- 2) What are some of the challenges of using a camera to collect qualitative data?

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4.7 LET US SUM UP

In the initial sections of this unit, we traced the history of image-based research both in the fields of Sociology and Anthropology. Research based on photographs and other visual media is gaining prominence in the present scenario, as compared to a few decades earlier. The unit also covered the subjective nature of photography and its relation to the self and society. It has a vital relation with how social phenomena can be understood has been explained in detail throughout the unit.

The complex interplays of the social structure, cultural identity, interpersonal relationships and many other insights which normally go unnoticed during fieldwork can be captured effectively by a camera. Here we can also see the importance of non-verbal research in analysing intricate social situations. Further, the importance of understanding signs and gestures was also taken into account. Photographic imagery leads one into the examination of these gestures between individuals, the “microculture” and the understanding of ‘self’ in the society. Observing and paying attention to the minute details of how people mingle and regroup themselves is basic to understanding of social structure in motion. The last section of the unit tries to delve into the difficulties and challenges one might face while conducting image based research.

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4.9 SPECIMEN ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) 1939
- 2) Berger
- 3) Subjective

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) True.
- 2) The Softly-softly approach entails walking around the sample site with a camera in its ‘out of the case over the shoulder like a piece of jewellery’ mode followed by ‘safe’ photography of buildings in the site before moving onto serious photography of human interactions and other social phenomena.

3) Still photographs

Check Your Progress 3

- 1) False
- 2) Some of the challenges are-
 - i) Photography can result in rejection if the researcher is guilty of insensitive intrusion with the camera.
 - ii) Personal spaces like home or any spaces which belongs to the private domain can be difficult for a researcher along with a camera to get proper access to.
 - iii) Subjects can get uncomfortable and suspicious in the presence of a stranger.



UNIT 5 PHOTOGRAPHY AS A RESEARCH TOOL*

Structure

- 5.0 Objectives
- 5.1 Introduction
- 5.2 Tracing the Origins
 - 5.2.1 Photography and Modernity
 - 5.2.2 Camera and its Role in Research
 - 5.2.3 Ethnographic Study and Photography
- 5.3 Camera and the Field
- 5.4 Benefits of Using Photography as a Research Tool
- 5.5 Challenges and Limitations of Photography
- 5.6 Let Us Sum Up
- 5.7 References
- 5.8 Specimen Answers to Check Your Progress

5.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit you will be able to:

- Explain the origins and development of camera and its uses.
- Discuss the importance of photographs in the sociological research process.
- Narrate how the camera can act as a vital tool in collecting information from the field.
- Examine the limitations of using visual research.

5.1 INTRODUCTION

The camera acts as an essential equipment in gathering accurate visual information. Its sharp focus and ability to capture meticulous details help us in holistic and accurate observation. Photography thus becomes a valuable research tool, with associated methodologies that extends our perceptions if we make skilled and appropriate use of it. (Collier and Collier, 1986: 5). However, photography on its own can't perceive what it captures, for it requires human response for meaningful use in research. Thereby, it is necessary to understand at the very outset, the phenomenon of observation. We will start our lesson with a discussion on the origins of photography. In our subsequent section we will focus on the importance of photography as tool to understand society.

Though photography as a research tool proves to be very constructive, one must also know how to see with visual accuracy, to observe culture in its complexities

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which at times can be a challenge for the fieldworker. As John Berger says, “The way we see things is affected by what we know, or what we believe.” (Berger, 1972:8). The photographer’s way of seeing is reflected in his choice of the subject. Similarly, a painter’s way of seeing can be understood by the marks made in his/her canvas (ibid). Individuals tend to see only what they pragmatically need to see. That is, an observer’s capacity for rounded vision is certainly related to the degree of involvement with the environment. Thus, in our everyday life, we tend to observe only a fraction of our surroundings. Whenever critical engagements and observations do happen, it often requires the aid of technology. Many shrewd observations are made with instruments. For instance, observing a drop of water with a microscope, looking into celestial space with telescopes and so on. Radarscopes, light meters, computers, cameras inter-alia has specialised our vision.

Coming back to photography or specifically the tool used for it; the camera, by its optical character has whole vision. It faithfully records the specialised subject along with the other associated elements within focus and scope of the lens (Collier & Collier, 1986:7). The adaptability of camera has made photography a standard of accurate perception in diverse fields. However, like our field notes or any other form of empirical data, photographs too may not provide us with data which is unbiased and objective documentation of the social and material world (Prosser and Shwartz, 1998: 102), but they can show definite characteristic and attributes of people objects or events which often elude the naked eye. In this unit we trace the origins of photography and its use as research tool. We all also discuss the limit actions of this onedium.

5.2 TRACING THE ORIGINS

Camera, as a tool for observation has had a long history. Leonardo da Vinci, during the Renaissance, described its principles. He was very curious about how sunlight entering through a tiny hole on the opposite wall creates an inverted image of whatever was outside. The *camera obscura*, which means the darkened room, was the first camera where artists could study projected reality, the character of light and delineation of perspectives (Collier and Collier, 1986:7). By the eighteenth century it went through a lot of development which made it into a portable two-foot box from a room sized version. It was later in 1839, when Louis Jacques Mende Daguerre developed and perfected a photographic technique. The **daguerreotype**, introduced to the world a relatively cheap, effective and rapid imagery that brought a lot of change in the realm of visual communication.

The excitement that greeted the invention of photography was the sense that individuals could for the first time, see the world as it was. Before, it was images which gave form to the reality. Visuals which earlier could only be recorded as an art process got transformed into an optical process, thanks to photography. The effect of photography and as an aspect of reality began to be felt in almost all facets of modern life. Soon camera as an object began to gain much prominence in individuals’ lives and also its importance was widely realised in anthropological communication and analysis. In the following sub sections we will specifically try to elaborate on photography and the role of camera in research.

Box 1: Daguerrotype Photography

Daguerre type photography is the invention of a French man Louis Jacques Mande Daguerre who was born in France in 1787. “Louis Daguerre called his invention “daguerreotype.” His method, which he disclosed to the public late in the summer of 1839, consisted of treating silver-plated copper sheets with iodine to make them sensitive to light, then exposing them in a camera and “developing” the images with warm mercury vapor. The fumes from the mercury vapor combined with the silver to produce an image. The plate was washed with a saline solution to prevent further exposure” (<https://www.fi.edu/history-resources/daguerreotype-photography>)



(Pic by Jean-Baptiste Sabatier-Blot (1801-1881) - [1], Public Domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=3112794>)

Activity-1

Trace the evolution of camera throughout different periods in history.
Compare your list with other students from your centre.

5.2.1 Photography and Modernity

Photography was born in a critical age; it was both a carrier and shaper of modernism. Walter Benjamin during 1920s and 1930s wrote extensively on the power of photography and its status as the most important modern form of communication. The ‘photo-eye’ was seen as revelatory, dragging facts into the light of the day (cited in Wells, 1996:21). Along with this, photography also offered new perceptions of viewing from different angles of vision. This helped in seeing the world as it was never seen before through modern technology. Moreover, photography validated one’s experience of ‘being there’, which is not merely one of visiting an unfamiliar place but of capturing the authentic experience of a strange place (ibid: 22).

Photographs are records and documents which meticulously detail the changing world. In this respect, both photography and film were implicated in the act of seeing as revelation. In addition, during the early years of the twentieth century, photography was greatly impacted in the flourishing of print media. This led Walter Benjamin to conceptualise photography as a democratic medium. Arguably, what was happening in the printed page excited imagination in the beginning of the twentieth century. Posters, photomontage and photographic magazines offered opportunities for experimentation with combination of images and modes of visual story telling (Wells, 1996: 22).

One of the important elements in the photographic records is that because of the impartial process of the camera's vision, even if edited it contains sufficient amount of non-verbal truths. This allows its audience to reconstruct schematic reality and also to form concepts that have changed social thinking dramatically. For instance, the documentary records of Mathew Brady, commissioned by Abraham Lincoln, were among the first photographic images of war. Brady recorded the effects of war including the records of fallen bodies, the burnt wreckage of buildings and so on which gave a realistic picture of war instead of just the dramatic actions. Likewise, sociologist Lewis Hine recorded the entry of the original look of Europeans before acculturation into American life. His other images of children at the same time were influential in passing the first child labour laws (cited in Collier and Collier 1986: 9).

Box 2: Sociology and Photography: The Parallels

Photography and Sociology have approximately the same date of birth, if you count sociology's birth as the publication of Comte's work which gave its name, and photography's birth-date and Sociology have approximately the same date of birth. Photography's birth-date as the date in 1839, when Daguerre made public his method for fixing an image on a metal plate. From the beginning, both worked on a variety of projects. Among these, for both, was the exploration of society.

From its beginnings, photography has been used as a tool for the exploration of society, and photographers have taken that as one of their tasks. At first, some photographers used the camera to record far-off societies that their contemporaries would otherwise never see and later aspects of their own society. Sometimes they even conceived of what they were doing as sociology, especially around the turn of the century when both sociologists and photographers agreed on the necessity of exposing the evils of society through words and pictures.

5.2.2 Camera and its Role in Research

As it has been mentioned in the previous section, a camera's ability to capture something depends largely on the attitudes of its operator. However, this machinery proves to be a great tool in research. Using a camera for recording has several perks-

- The instrument or machine allows one to see without fatigue; the last exposure is just as detailed as the first.

- The memory of film replaces the notebook and ensures complete quotation under the most trying circumstance.
- The reliably repetitive operation of the camera allows for comparable observations of any event and as many times as required.
- The mechanical field observation extends the possibilities of critical analysis as the camera record contributes a control factor to visual observation.
- It also allows for an absolute check of position and identification in congested and changing cultural events.

Photography though can be compared to a fieldworker's inscribed notebook can at the same time also have contrasting features from the same. Unlike a fieldworker who notes down information from the field in *literate* code, the information photography gathers are *specific*. They are precise records of material reality. Moreover, photographs are documents that can be filed and cross-filed, enlarged, reduced and fitted into many diagrams and statistical designs. The notion of photographs as visual diary reintroduces the researcher and the qualities of the medium into the research process. That is, a diary is a self-reflexive and media-literate chronicle of the researcher's entry, participation in, and departure from, the field. The images generated within this paradigm are acknowledged to be the unique result of the interaction of a certain researcher with a specific population using a particular medium at a precise moment in space and time (Prosser & Schwartz, 1998: 109).

5.2.3 Ethnographic Study and Photography

The various perks of a camera made it a favourite among the early ethnographers. It helped a great deal in gathering descriptive details in the material inventory phase of Anthropology. However, there is also a huge challenge associated with this- the issue of whole and accurate human observation. This challenge is faced even more by anthropologists as well as sociologists. Seeing the stranger as he/she *really* is, comes along with the scrutiny of personal values, bias and incomplete observation. Social scientists do acknowledge that there is nothing much one can do about this bias in photographic records, like the bias in observation of societies or any phenomenon researched. Thus, modern anthropologists unlike early ethnographers use photographs strictly as *illustrations*, because they fear that an overload of photographic detail would interfere with more controlled analysis. Thus, there is little research in Anthropology which is based on photographic data. To add to it, anthropologists also have not trusted the mechanics of camera to trump value manipulation of vision. It thereby remains as an important tool in the domain of physical anthropology and archaeology to make fine research records.

According to anthropologists, until fieldworkers know what to photograph, when and how many times to photograph- and why – anthropologists will see no functional way to use the camera. Along with informational complexity, there already exists in Anthropology an established belief system about non-white indigenous people. Photographic imagery can reveal sensitivity of native people which challenge classical ethnographic texts, methods and conceptualisation (Collier and Collier, 1986:13). However, there are some cases in which some anthropologists and fieldworkers have carried out organised interventions with cameras, film and video (see box 2). But in anthropology as a whole, still photography remains a less used and unusual research method.

Check Your Progress- 1

1) What do you understand by a daguerreotype?

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2) What are some of the perks of using camera as a research tool in the field?

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3) Photographs gather specific information unlike field-notes which mainly gather information in literate codes. True/ False?

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Box 3: Ethnographic Research and Photography

Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead made the first saturated photographic research in another culture, the results of which were published in *Balinese Character* (1942). After this work, both continued to use photography, Mead in her continuing concerns with child development (for example, Mead and Macgregor 1951) and with ethnographic and research film, and Bateson in the study of nonverbal communication (1963; and Ruesch and Kees 1956). Richard Sorenson, the founding anthropologist of the National Film Research Archives, is one of the few anthropologists who followed the footsteps of Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson. Thirty years after the publication of *Balinese Character*, Sorenson published *On the Edge of the Forest* (1976), a photographically researched text on child development in New Guinea

5.3 CAMERA AND THE FIELD

As it has been discussed in the earlier section about the challenges of using photographic data in research, there are still ways in which the camera can act as a valuable tool to explore and analyse. In this way one can use photography can be used not only to show what has been already found out by other means, but

also to extend ones visual process and help in finding out more about the nature of humanity and its multifaceted cultures.

The practical place of photography or use of the camera in fieldwork can be demonstrated by relating its functions to the development of a field study.

Initial Phase:

During the initial phases of research, photography can be of great importance as it has the ability to record large areas authentically, rapidly and also with great detail. It thus becomes a means of storing complex descriptions for future use. In other words, photography can accelerate the entry process of research. With the mechanical memory of the camera, it is possible to rapidly gather valuable data. There are various challenges which are faced in an unfamiliar environment. Writing down notes can be difficult in a complex environment and overtime in the long field visits the responses may deaden through monotony. Photography proves as an aid in these situations. It can vividly preserve these first impressions in a responsible and usable form. These records can be decoded and analysed later by any native collaborator or read significantly by the investigator as the research progresses and makes more sense. Such photographic overview can yield vital and detailed information which otherwise might take months for fieldworkers to gather via traditional means.

Box 4: Efficient Orientation to a Field via Photography

We can speed up orientation with the aid of photography by making an overview journey through our research territory, recording geographical and cultural phenomena met in this introductory survey. Local assistants in many cultures have proven ability to read photographic records accurately, identifying landscape, interpreting cultural processes, and even defining ethnicity and personalities. In a few interview sessions, photographs can provide accurate geographic names and identification of towns and technologies. We can begin assembling a file of demographic, social, and economic information immediately.

Second phase:

During the second phase, fieldwork narrows its focus in search of particular evidence according to the set goals of the research. At this point the initial ethnography done via notes and photography can prove to be a viable asset and also guides and provide a setting for further research. As a result, the research methods become specialised and structured.

Final Phase:

In the final phase the research gets developed into conclusions. In this phase photographic evidence like all other data are abstracted, translated into statistics in order to become a genuine part of the research process.

Activity 3

Make a list of some difficulties that the researcher might face while using a camera in the field?

5.4 BENEFITS OF USING PHOTOGRAPHY AS A RESEARCH TOOL

In the previous section we have seen how the camera as a tool can be used efficiently in different phases of the research process. Now, let us try to understand in detail on how photographic images can further enhance various studies done in social science research. It is quite familiar by now that qualitative researchers prefer to use camera to capture images of social processes, social interactions and relationships. Most of these social relationships which are discussed are normally in verbal communications assuming that the social positions of the participants in the interaction is self-understood (Collier and Collier, 1986) but there are also a lot of facets during these social interactions which goes unnoticed or which the researcher might not be aware of. Visual imageries are very essential to understand such non-verbal communications which goes on during a research process. For instance, Collier and Collier (1986) notes that photographs of clothing provide evidence for the comparison of ethnic groups and social organisations (cited in Pandey, 2016: 83).

The camera at times also becomes an important means of entering into the social life of a particular community. As Swartz (1989) points out from her own ethnographic study, making the residents aware of photographing the area makes them curious and makes them ask questions about the doings of the researcher. It acts as a good measure to start up a conversation with the residents which might give viable data for the research. This process can make them comfortable with the researcher and make them help the researcher with understanding community/family activities as well. (Shwartz, 1989). Even while interviewing with photographs (i.e. photo elicitation) differs from conventional verbal interviews. Use of photographs during interviews brings the participants closer to the interviewer as the very process of viewing photographs becomes an interactive process. Schwartz (1989) feels it becomes more instrumental while tapping sensitive information from difficult situations in the field by creating a reflexive environment based on trust and mutuality.

In a similar vein, it can be pointed out that the practicality of using photos also rest on the nature of meanings they impart. As it has been already mentioned interpreting photographs is an interactive process. This leads to the construction of meanings through the interaction of the image, the viewer and the photographer, which is one of the most important element in constructivist understanding in Sociology. (see box 4).

Box 5: Constructivist Understanding in Sociology

Social constructivism is a sociological theory of knowledge given by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann in 1966. According to this theory human development is socially situated and knowledge is constructed through interaction with others. In other words, a constructivist view of Berger and Luckmann believe substantively that the reality is the result of individual construction collectively through gestures (verbal and non-verbal) etc in certain social communities. The continuous action and interactions in which an individual is a part of, creates a reality that is owned and experienced together subjectively

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Photography can speedup the research process and make it more efficient. True/False.
- 2) Use of photographs during interviews brings participants to the interviewer.
- 3) Interpretation of photographs is an interactive process which leads to the construction of meanings through the interaction of the

5.5 CHALLENGES AND LIMITATIONS OF PHOTOGRAPHY

After going through the previous sections, one might be familiar with the limitations of using a camera in the research process. As it has already been mentioned, photography is not free from bias or personal projection. There is a general claim that photographs mirror reality due to the mechanism of photo development process. However, with the countless advancements in the field of technology, photographs can also be altered (e.g by the use of graphic editing software). To overcome this, Becker suggests including anthropological texts in description of photographs such as persons may be ‘posed’, artefacts ‘arranged’ and so on. (Kobayashi, Fisher and Gapp, 2008:9). Secondly, the presence of a researcher as a photographer may influence the reactions of the research participants. Along with this the ethical and privacy considerations must also be taken into account. Similar to participant observation the role of the researcher with a photo taking activity must be clearly explained with informed consent.

Check Your Progress 3

- 1) Photography becomes instrumental while tapping sensitive information from difficult situations in the field by creating a reflexive environment based on and
- 2) What are some of the main challenges of using photography as a research tool? Explain in a few sentences.

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5.6 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we tried to understand the role of photography as a research tool. We first started off with the unit by understanding the phenomenon of observation as one must know how to see with visual accuracy while using a camera. We then went on to explicate the history of the development and use of camera in Social Science research. Next, we took a glance into the critical age of photography and how it became a carrier and shaper of modernism. Both photography and film during this period meticulously detailed the changing world.

After detailing on modernity and the development in the visual industry we tried to explicate the efficacy of using camera in the field. Using a camera for recording has several perks like detailing every aspect without fatigue, it can also be a very reliable source for data collection. At times it also gives a boost to the traditional way of doing research using field-notes. We then went on to detail about photography and its evolution in ethnographic research. Though photography as a method is at times viewed sceptically there are ways in which it can provide effective results in the field. Further we moved on to the different phases in research where camera as a tool plays a vital part. It can also play a very beneficial role in delicate and complex social situations and creating bonds with the respondents which have been detailed in the next section. Finally, we went on to understand some of the challenges which can be faced while using this method in the field to gather information.

5.7 REFERENCES

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5.8 SPECIMEN ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- i) The Daguerreotype was the first publicly available and successful photographic process which was largely used during the 1840s and 1850s. It is named after the inventor Louis Jacques Mande Daguerre.
- 2) the machinery used in camera allows one to see without fatigue; the last exposure is just as detailed as the first. The memory of film efficiently replaces the notebook under trying circumstances. It also allows comparable observations of any event and can help in critical analysis. Finally it also allows for an absolute check of position and identification in congested and changing cultural events

3) True.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) True
- 2) Closer
- 3) image, the viewer and the photographer.

Check Your Progress 3

- 1) trust and mutuality
- 2) Some of the challenges of using photographic images in research are-
 - a) With the countless advancement in the field of technology, photographs can also be altered (e.g by the use of graphic editing software).
 - b) The presence of a researcher as a photographer may influence the reactions of the research participants.
 - c) Along with this the ethical and privacy considerations must also be taken into account. Similar to participant observation the role of the researcher with a photo taking activity must be clearly explained with informed consent.