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**"WHO AM I?":  
AUTOPHOTOGRAPHY AS A TEACHING AND LEARNING TOOL<sup>1</sup>**

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**Abstract**

*This paper describes a low cost, high student appeal technique for teaching and learning about the self concept via student produced photographs. Autophotography (AP) is a photographic approach to understanding the social world from the perspective of the respondent with reference to one's self concept. The technique's use is described relative to social psychology, the self, and the traditional symbolic interactionist measure--the Twenty Statements Test (TST). The AP course assignment, evaluation, assessment, and limitations are presented. Learnings for both the undergraduate student and sociology instructor are discussed.*

**Introduction**

Audiovisual Aids (AVAs) of many types and diverse uses are used in the presentation of sociology to students (Goldsmid & Wilson, 1980). Sociologists are quick to share charts, films, and other AVAs with students to convey ideas, yet we are sometimes less open to having students interpret meanings of their life via pictures. Some early researchers acquiesced and placed cameras in the hands of their respondents and allowed them to photograph their social world (see Ball & Smith, 1992). The researchers then took those data back to the "lab" for analyses. However, few social researchers have actually shared their findings with respondents: making

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In memory of Morris Rosenberg, an excellent teacher.

The photographic approach to understanding the social world was pioneered by anthropological studies in the early 1970s and has a long tradition as a subfield of qualitative methods in sociological inquiry (Ball & Smith, 1992; Harper, 1994). Sociology has become a discipline dominated by words and numbers. Images rarely mediate ideas in the discipline. A handful of researchers have continued to place cameras in the hands of their subjects for both research (Clancy & Dollinger, 1993; D'amico, 1985; Fryrear, Nuell, & White, 1977; Wuggening, 1990-91; Ziller 1990) and teaching purposes (Cohen, 1990; Psathas 1991; Reiger, 1991). In this paper, I discuss the uses of student produced AVAs--*still photographs*--as a means to teaching and learning about the self concept.

Photographs, like AVAs in general, can serve multiple purposes in the teaching of sociology including stimulating interest and creative thinking, introducing a topic, raising questions and forming hypotheses, illustrating a social process, providing a focus for discussion, and serving as the raw data for analyses (Cheatwood, 1978; Goldsmid & Wilson, 1980). Unfortunately, the dominant use of photographs for purposes of the teaching of sociology can be found in introductory textbooks where they are used to represent a topical phenomenon (Ball & Smith, 1992), but where meanings cannot be fully controlled by the instructor (see Schaefer, 1988; Tiemann, Johnson, & Cook, 1996). A few novel but inspirational exceptions of using photography for teaching and learning are found mostly outside of sociology and involved providing disadvantaged people with cameras to make their life situations better (Dewdney, Grey, & Minnion, 1992; Guran & Becker, 1990; Morano-Ender & Ender, 1996; Washington Project for the Arts, 1991; 1994). In the spirit of giving voice to subjects, I have adopted the use of photographs by students in social psychology courses to assist them in reflecting on, learning about, and understanding their self-concept from a sociological perspective. While the method has been used primarily in social psychology, I believe the assignment has application in other social science courses as well.

### **The Self, the Twenty Statements Test, & Autophotography**

The *self* is perhaps the most intuitively rich concept to be mined by instructors for students: we all have one and we often question it. In addition, the study of the self is popular. A survey of the premier social psychology textbooks, especially the sociologically oriented, revealed that "self/identity/personality" is the most common theme (Schellenberg, Hammonds, Smith, & Timmerman, 1991). Similarly, twelve of the eighteen syllabi sets in Chin's (1990) edited volume contain a section emphasizing the self concept. The popularity of self related issues is related to the intuitive and natural relationship between one's biography and history: to use Mills' conception of the sociological imagination.

The Twenty Statements Test (TST) is the traditional symbolic interactionist research technique for uncovering dimensions of the self. The TST is a naturalistic, nonquantitative methodological, and subjectivist instrument. Originally developed by Kuhn and McPartland (1954), the TST queries respondents to provide 20, single line responses, in 12 minutes to the question "Who am I?" or "I am . . ." While the open

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endedness of the TST has led many researchers to criticize it methodologically for validity and reliability (see Hormuth, 1990), the TST is used widely by instructors for pedagogical purposes and generates some great student interest in both graduate and undergraduate courses. Similar to others who have used the TST in the classroom, I recommend suspending judgement on its adequacy as a research tool and to focus on its teaching potential (Stinson & Stinson, 1978). Some might consider using the shortcomings of the TST for further discussion on sociological methods in general. One criticism is that the traditional methods for accessing the self do not account for the individual's relationship to his or her social or spatial environment (Hormuth, 1990). Indeed, the methodological limitation of the TST is the inability to survey individuals in situ. Autophotography (AP) overcomes this limitation.<sup>2</sup> AP is an ecological approach to understanding the self-concept that can imitate the TST (Ziller, 1990). AP involves giving a camera to subjects to take pictures in response to the question: *Who am I?* It usually includes taking photographs of people, things, and environments which they consider to be expressive or a part of their self-concept. Methodologically, AP shares a qualitative orientation with visual sociology.

Visual sociology, "the recording, analysis, and communication of social life through photographs, film, and video" (Harper, 1994:403), is a well founded area of inquiry. Some researchers have placed cameras in the hands of subjects to assess and reflect on their own experience. No one has made the subject both respondent as well as researcher and used AP as a pedagogical tool. Bourdieu and associates (1965) made an indirect case for this approach some 30 years ago in their analysis of the art of photography. They argued that the practice and symbolic meanings attached to photographs are inextricably linked to the photographer's person. A photographer's photographs are influenced by their social background and cultural assumptions. Moreover, the objective nature of the presentation of photographs as "science" are not value free and are determined by the social background of the photographer, particularly their social class origins. Their analysis is applied to professional photographers; yet, the critique also applies to amateur photographers. From this perspective, students become both researcher and subject of research as they obtain cameras and take photographs of people, things, and environments, in essence, a visual sociological essay, which they consider to be images representative of their self concepts.

### **Autophotography: The Assignment**

Students are introduced to the AP assignment via the syllabus during the first class session. They are informed that AP is a requirement in the course, that no

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<sup>2</sup>Another difference between AP and the TST is orientation. The TST is intended to involve the respondent in directing the communication of self to him or herself. AP in a learning context may be a form of self-presentation, communicating a self to the instructor. The latter can be overcome by the naturalistic, in situ, focus and instructing students not to present themselves to the instructor through their photographs.

special photography skills are required, the grade weight of the project, and the estimated maximum financial costs of film and processing. During the second or third week in the semester the students are provided with a hand-out describing the AP assignment (see Appendix 1). The assignment has been offered later in the course, but students appear to be more socially desirable in the project once a significant portion of the course material has been covered. The assignment sheet is distributed and the instructions are read aloud. The instructor should give only a few instructions: "20 new pictures and the question is *Who am I?*." A few additional points are stressed. First, I strongly recommend that they not procrastinate on the assignment. Although the assignment has a three to four week due date, taking pictures, developing film, and portfolio construction take time. Second, new pictures are required. Previously developed photographs are not acceptable. A number of students will ask about old photographs of family members and friends from home or family photo album snapshots. In response to these and any specifics about the project, I adopt a researcher role and respond: "20 new pictures. The question is *Who Am I?*." This strategy places the burden of meaning, creativity, and self communication on the student with a limited amount of structure. Third, personal costs are underscored. Other instructors note that high costs have been a concern of students where teaching photographic skills are necessary (Psathas, 1989). For the AP project, no student has paid over \$20.00 for the project and a typical cost is about \$10.00 including film and developing. Almost all students have access to a camera. Disposable cameras are an additional option. No student has complained of the costs. Indeed, a local photo processing company has provided free 35mm film to students. Fourth, it is stressed that grading is not based on the quality of the pictures. Rather, grading is based on completing the assignment as instructed and doing so in a mature way. Points are subtracted for any number of new pictures less than 20 and for late assignments. Again, grading is administration-based rather than aesthetically-based. Maturity is emphasized in the hand-out to encourage the students to treat the assignment as an engaging, self-reflective, and intellectual endeavor. Fifth, a caption for each photograph is considered an essential feature of the completed portfolio. Captions can be single words or brief statements. Captions are important as no amateur or professional photographer's visual representation can be understood without some text.

Finally, and most importantly, students are insured of confidentiality. They are guaranteed that no one other than the instructor and a teaching assistant would view their portfolio. The portfolio is their creation and not for public consumption. This approach has two purposes. First, it assures students that they can be forthright in the creation of the portfolio. Second, it encourages a self reflexive orientation with the objective being the most naturalistic way of tapping into their personal orientations and encouraging self communication through an open-ended assignment rather than a self-presentation. The portfolios become not only a personal data source for the student to analyze and reflect on during lectures and discussion, but

Ender: 'Who am I?': Autophotography as a Teaching and Learning Tool a very personal project, perhaps even a keepsake.<sup>3</sup> An "excellent" student portfolio has a number of features. The format is unique. Most students create bound portfolios. Poster and accordion type presentations are acceptable. Portfolio covers are outstanding. Examples include handmade or purchased portfolios with elaborate personal identifications and a unique title. Each photograph would have either its own page or be set-off from others on the same page and framed independently. Captions are uncomplicated and easily connected with each photograph. Most portfolios include color photographs but occasionally students take black and white or a combination of black/white and color photos. The contents of the portfolio are bound well with no loose features.

During my assessment of the portfolios, I offer supportive written comments on a separate sheet of departmental letter head and attach it to each portfolio. Negative personal judgements are suspended. Some students might be displeased with the lack of "psychological feedback." However, I inform students that the sociologist is interested primarily in group patterns. Moreover, students are invited to place any personal troubles they might have into the context of public issues. For example, I might openly discuss the common concerns of students in coping with stress and/or financial burdens without identifying individual students. In some cases, I take the opportunity to criticize, openly, but not specifically, how some projects are poor reflections of personal initiative and motivation. A poor quality portfolio becomes representative of a student's work. For example, a photograph glued shoddily on perforated notebook paper and stapled shows little effort, originality, or initiative. I encourage the creators of such portfolios to take such open-ended projects as opportunities. For example, in the world of work, employers often give their workers ambiguous assignments and expect initiative, quality, and stellar products. Sloppy and short-cutted work are grounds for being fired. Most students, however, design thoughtfully organized portfolios. In terms of grading, in general, portfolios take less time to grade than two typed pages of essay and are obviously more interesting to "read."

### **Further Reflections**

During the portfolio grading period, the class begins discussions of the self. Readings from William James, Charles Horton Cooley, George Herbert Mead, Morris Rosenberg, Louis Zurcher, and Kenneth Gergen are covered. About midway through these thinkers, the portfolios are returned to students. Again, some general comments are made about group patterns. The focus is primarily on similarity and dissimilarity within the class and between some groups, e.g., women compared to men. Returning the portfolios becomes an excellent warm-up to beginning a discussion of the traditional TST as a methodological tool and discussing the history of research findings using the TST (see Gordon, 1982; Zurcher, 1977). The important similarity

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I am prepared to view and act upon photographs by students that reveal "disturbing" or "troubled" information. I would first speak with the student. The next step would be a referral to campus support services.

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to the TST is the prioritizing of photographs in the portfolio. This creates an opportunity to compare the results of their TST and AP portfolio and begin a dialogue about methods.

A consistency of patterns emerges between the TST and the AP responses. Roles and memberships appear in the early statements of the TST and the first few photographs in the portfolio. After noting patterns, I draw specific attention to the dominance of work and family, such as the saliency of the student status, as priorities for students and Americans in general. At this point, the relationships between institutional orientations and self are fairly easy to articulate since most students will define themselves visually in terms of 1) roles relative to other people, e.g., daughter, husband, or grandson; 2) social institutions, e.g., student or sorority sister; and 3) social structures, e.g., American. Discussions progress to relationships between individualism and society.

### **Conclusions & Applications**

The AP project has been used in five different social psychology courses at two universities with participation from 450 students. I do not believe there to be an optimal size for the project. The project is student-centered where students are both researcher and subject of the research, and involves little logistical exertion for the instructor. Similarly, the instructions are straightforward and simple. Both large and small classes would provide different types of instructional options and both can be managed fairly well. The minimal grading time provides opportunities to grade upwards of 500 portfolios in a short time (although they could become too bulky and heavy). Smaller class sizes might provide more opportunity for in-depth discussion and a trusting atmosphere to share portfolios in a more controlled and intimate environment.

Overall, student evaluations of the AP project are highly positive. A pre-test evaluation is administered to the class prior to the AP assignment. A number of questions about the course are posited. One question is: *Which feature of the course do you like best?* Students overwhelmingly anticipate the AP project as the most interesting and novel. After completing the project, I asked students collectively if AP should continue to be used in future courses to assist students in understanding the self. Students overwhelmingly respond "Yes" and some offer logistical recommendations such as "more time" or "allow for more or fewer pictures." They also comment that initially, the project appears simplistic, however its difficulty manifests as they struggled individually to visually represent the self through pictures and captions. On exit evaluations, written words such as "enjoyable" and "challenging" are used by students to express their opinions of the project. Other benefits noted by students is the flexibility of the assignment and a feeling of empowerment. Some students appreciate the open-endedness of the project.

The AP project has possibly (dis)attracted students (from)to the course via word-of-mouth. Students at our university sometimes "window-shop" courses where they register and attend the first few class sessions to assess the course and the instructor. Some students might be distracted by the non-traditional feature of the

Ender: 'Who am I?': Autophotography as a Teaching and Learning Tool assignment and other aspects of the course in general. However, while the syllabus has alerted students to the content of the assignment, I believe the personal nature of the assignment does not detract from the overall integrity and teaching objective of the project.<sup>4</sup>

The AP project provides the sociology instructor with a cross-sectional view of the life of their students outside the classroom. It provides a rich and in-depth look at their students. While one's college or university might provide basic demographic information about students such as age, gender, and ethnic distribution, AP illustrates a quality of knowledge about students that perhaps only sociologists can fully appreciate. For example, I have learned that many of my students work one or two part and full-time jobs, are highly religious, and many are married or cohabitating and have children. In addition, hunting and fishing are popular recreation activities in the Upper Midwest, among women and men. This qualitative information can be especially important for a new faculty member teaching on the Great Plains or to a seasoned faculty member seeking insights to work with their students more as unique, localized individuals.

In addition, it may be important for the instructor to notice what students do not take photographs of. AP reveals people, things, and environments that are not important to students' sense of self. For example, the most recent use of AP occurred during the 1996 presidential election. There were 1800 photographs taken in my course (90 students x 20 photographs). Only one photograph depicted a political orientation. This can be interpreted as political apathy among students in the Upper Midwest or, perhaps, that politics are a feature of self that is either highly personal or too ephemeral to make the list of 20 photographs.

AP has been used exclusively in a social psychology course, although we have had success using it in a high school English class (Morano-Ender & Ender, 1996). With some slight modification, it has application potential for such courses as Introductory Sociology with a focus on social psychological concepts, family courses to illustrate the importance of kinship networks and self-conceptions, work and occupation courses to emphasize institutional affiliations, cultural studies courses to depict popular culture among students, or inequality courses for social comparisons. Modifications might include five or ten photographs rather than 20 or include more elaborate writing assignments in addition to their photographs. The research can also be modified. For example, for a gender course, instructors can ask students to take 20 pictures of their feminine and/or masculine side. Student generated photographs also can serve as visual data for analysis. While more labor intensive, some instructors might consider studying the photographs more systemically. One option is to collaborate with the students and code the photographs into categories and enter the codes into a statistical package for in-class analysis. Finally, instructors should be prepared to be photographed and on at least one occasion, be encouraged, to

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A note on curriculum development. The AP project and the overall symbolic interactionist perspective taught in the sociology department's social psychology course contrasts well with psychology's social psychology course and many students are able take both courses without much redundancy.

participate in the project as well. Indeed, I recommend the faculty member complete the assignment before students, at least once, in order to have a participation sense of the challenges our students face during the project.

In sum, Autophotography is an ecological approach to understanding the self-concept. It allows students to become both subject of research and researcher. This more experiential exploration of the self concept provides an opportunity to reflect on the self and bring the "data" into the classroom for comparative purposes. In addition, students feel a sense of control with the project. Moreover, the nontraditional nature of the project is novel and attractive to students. AP also has a high tech appeal with a low tech and low cost application. Contrary to being an added burden for instructors in terms of grading, the AP project provides instructors with tremendous insight to the people they normally only encounter in their classroom. Thus, student produced photographs can generate a number of in and out of class activities and should be a useful pedagogical tool for understanding the self.

**APPENDIX I: Course Hand-out**

**AUTOPHOTOGRAPHY PROJECT: *Who am I?***

DUE DATE:	On or Before Tuesday, September 30, 1997
TOTAL POINTS:	100 (16.7% of your grade)
LATE PROJECTS:	-5 points following each class after the due date (including due date).
TOOLS:	Camera, Film, \$ for film processing, & portfolio

**Introduction:**

Each of us is a unique individual, quite distinct from other people. Yet we all have much in common. You probably have your own theory about what makes you such a person, what characteristics, behaviors, goals, accomplishments, and so on add up to 'you.' The following exercise is designed to stimulate your thinking about the multiple roles or identities or masks that you may possess.

**Assignment**

Take, develop, and present in a portfolio, 20 NEW photographs (black/white or color), answering the question: *Who am I?*

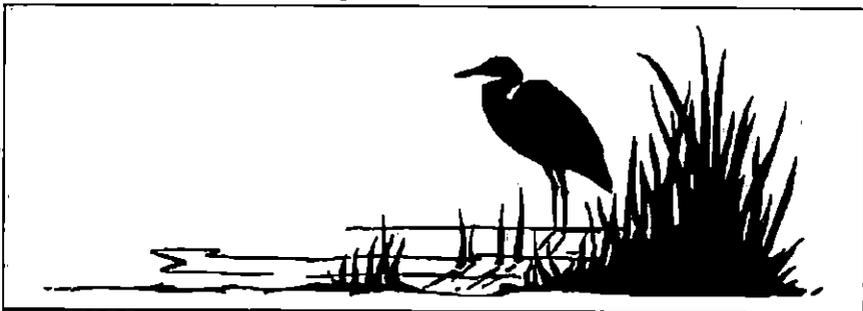
**Grading**

Grading is based on completing all the requirements of the assignment in a timely manner and the degree to which the project is taken seriously. A 100 point project not only fulfills the assignment but does so in a fresh and mature way.

**Requirements**

Turn in: A set of 20 NEW photographs in a portfolio format with a very brief caption (see figure #1) and I strongly encourage you to make a photocopy of the entire portfolio for your personal records.

Figure #1



**Bird Watcher**

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