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VISUAL TOOLS FOR VISUAL TIMES – INNOVATION AND OPPORTUNITY IN THE VISUAL SOCIOLOGY OF RELIGION

Roman R. Williams, Ph.D.

Assistant Professor of Sociology at Calvin College (United States).
E-mail: roman.williams@calvin.edu

ABSTRACT

Originally presented as a plenary address at the First International Congress of Religious Studies – Religion: Art and Voices at Mackenzie University (9 November 2016), this article explores the opportunities presented by the prevalence of camera-equipped mobile phones and the resulting visual culture. It is an invitation to scholars of religion to use the tools of visual sociology. The article provides a working definition of visual sociology and situates that definition in its historical context. Three case studies are presented as examples of how visual techniques are being used to research and engage religious organizations and individuals: 1. photo elicitation, 2. photovoice, and 3. a mobile app called SpeakingPhoto. The article closes with a consideration of the benefits of studying religion visually.

KEYWORDS

Visual sociology. Engaged scholarship. Photo elicitation. Photovoice. Innovation.

1. VISUAL TIMES

Images are everywhere and everyone seems to be making them with their mobile phones. According to a recent study (POUSHTNER, 2016), 88-percent of adults worldwide own a cellphone of some kind and 43-percent own smartphones;

in the United States, 91-percent of adults have cell phones and 72-percent own smartphones. In Brazil, smartphone ownership has surged from 15-percent in 2013 to 41-percent in 2015. Today, 61-percent of Brazilian adults aged 18–35 own smartphones compared to 26-percent among those above 35. Many of those who own cell phones use them as their primary cameras (HORN, 2011).

These mobile devices record countless photographs and videos, which are uploaded, shared, liked, and forwarded across the many media sharing platforms available today. In 2014 Photoworld, an online photo printing company based in the United Kingdom, estimated the number of photos uploaded every day (FRANCIS, 2014). The numbers are staggering: 1.8 billion photos pass through Flickr (1 million), Instagram (70 million), Facebook (400 million), WhatsApp (700 million) and Snapchat (760 million) on a daily basis – this amounts to 22,350 photos per second. While I cannot vouch for the veracity of these data, even if they are off by a wide margin, this is an incomprehensible number of digital photos, one which has surely grown in the two years since the estimate was completed.

The volume of photographs produced on a daily basis and the prevalence of the camera-equipped cell phones represent an opportunity for visual research. These circumstances affirm what Cipriani and Del Re (2015, p. 129) refer to as "global technological competence," the widespread availability of user-friendly, media-making technologies to everyday citizens. If one's field of study is religion, then it is time to embrace the possibility that more people carry camera-equipped mobile phones with them to worship every week than scripture. Simply put, we need to use visual tools to study religion because we live in visual times.

This article explores the potential of visual research at the intersection of religion, art, and voice. It is an invitation to scholars of religion to consider the opportunity presented by our contemporary visual culture and to innovate using the tools of visual sociology. I begin by situating a definition of visual sociology in its historical context. Next I describe my own efforts to use visual techniques to study and engage religious organizations and individuals through a focus on three case studies featuring photo elicitation, photovoice, and

a mobile app called SpeakingPhoto. I close by considering the benefits and implications of studying religion visually.

2. WHAT IS VISUAL SOCIOLOGY?

In 2007, I gave a paper at the annual meeting of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion in which I presented preliminary results from the "Spiritual Narratives in Everyday Life" (AMMERMAN, 2014) project and announced my enthusiasm for visual sociology. While waiting in the airport for my flight home after the conference, I bumped into a senior scholar who happened to attend my talk. He asked me a pointed question, "What is *visual* sociology?" To be honest, I do not think either of us were satisfied with my clumsy answer. This question was perfectly reasonable: most social scientists are not aware of the existence or potential of visual social scientific research (PAUWELS, 2011). Likewise, "the literature has very few examples of studies of religion in which researchers have employed visual methods" (VASSENDEN; ANDERSSON, 2010, p. 149). Allow me, then, to introduce you to this field of study, by offering a short history and definition of visual sociology. This will situate my work in the broader context.

2.1 BRIEF HISTORY OF VISUAL SOCIOLOGY

While no definitive history of visual sociology exists, it is possible to piece together the narrative arch of this field of study. The coincidence of Comte's publication of *Course de Pilosophie Positive* (*Course in Positive Philosophy*) in which he coined the term "sociology" and Daguerre's announcement of his technique for producing an image on a metal plate in 1839 were two innovations that set the stage for the possibility of visual sociology (BECKER, 1974). Durkheim, however, seems to be the first sociologist to use visual data in his analysis. According to anthropologist Jens Kreinath (2012, p. 368),

> (1) Durkheim systematically used photos of the Central Australian Aborigines produced by Spencer and Gillen; and (2) as a consequence this use of photography not only shaped Durkheim's ethnographic depiction of the Arrernte, but also his selection of theoretical concepts and methodological procedures.

In other words, Durkheim's emphasis on ritual was directly influenced by Spencer and Gillen's photographs. Even though his argument in *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* may have been shaped by his interaction with anthropologists' photographs from the field, few scholars are aware of this influence. Early issues of the *American Journal of Sociology* contain thirty-one articles that include photograph, but as Stasz (1979, p. 128) points out, this work uses images in ways that "contemporary visual sociologists" would question.

In the United States, visual sociology did not take a recognizable form until the 1970s. It coalesced around a nucleus of young and enthusiastic scholars who were "photographers as well as sociologists, and predisposed to field work research" (HARPER, 1996, p. 71). Important contributions came from big names in sociology such as Howard Becker (1974) and Erving Goffman (1976). Timothy Curry and Alfred Clarke's textbook in 1978 laid clam to visual sociology as a field of study. As seen in the words of some early practitioners, visual methods represented something of a Copernican Revolution in sociology, a true innovation. "Just as the telescope and the microscope provided new kinds of visual information", Curry and Clark (1978, p. 28) wrote, "[…] the still camera […] provides a new order of seeing, which in turn, requires a special way of analyzing information".

2.2 DEFINING VISUAL SOCIOLOGY

In the years since its renaissance in the 1970s, visual sociology continues to combine the discipline of sociology and the tools of visual research to investigate human behavior, society, and culture. Visual sociology may be defined as *a toolkit of image-based techniques used to collect, analyze, and present data*. Allow me to consider this definition more closely.

Perhaps the most obvious component of visual sociology is its emphasis on images. While most visual work in sociology employs photography and videography, it would be a mistake to limit the term *image-based* to these media alone. Instead, the term "image-based" should be understood as shorthand for a long list of visual materials including (but not limited to) photographs, video, print media such as magazine advertisements, digital media, maps, drawings, graffiti, artwork, even visualizations of numeric data. This emphasis on the visual is based on a conviction that

> [...] the world that is seen, photographed, drawn or otherwise represented visually is different than the world that is represented [solely] through words or numbers. As a result, visual sociology leads to understandings and insights because it connects to different realities than do conventional empirical research methods (HARPER, 2012, p. 4).

Image-based research opens up new opportunities across the research process, which involves the next part of my definition of visual sociology: collecting, analyzing, and presenting data. Sometimes a researcher will *collect* visual data on their own by carrying a camera into the field while conducting ethnographic research. Visual data are valuable because they offer a record of work in the field and tools such as videography add layers of movement, sequence, time, sound, and emotion to the data. On other occasions, a visual sociologist may gather images by enlisting research participants to create their own visual materials or by involving a professional photographer, videographer, or other art/media professional in the research process. Other visual sociologists rely on representations, images, and artwork they find as a result of their investigation. Sometimes images are used in a technique called elicitation interviews as a way to "invoke comments, memory and discussion" (BANKS, 2007, p. 65).

Visual data are integral to the *analysis* stage of research (ROSE, 2007; VAN LEEUWEN; JEWITT, 2001). As a complement to fieldnotes, photographs or video footage preserve details that may be overlooked (or forgotten) in the field. Even though visual sociology is a different way of doing

social science, an emphasis on the visual does not neglect textual and numeric techniques traditional to sociological inquiry. Typically, images are coded along with any verbal data such as fieldnotes for salient themes relevant to the research. Depending on a researcher's goals, a content analysis of the same photographs may be undertaken in which the researcher codes and counts recurring material objects, symbolic representations, and/or themes present in the images (e.g., GOFFMAN, 1976; NARDELLA, 2012). These numbers, in turn, may be represented as visualizations through which the data are further explored by the researcher (GRADY, 2006; TUFTE, 2001, 2006). Maps are a common type of visualization researchers use to investigate relationships, behavior, and patterns in the data (MCKINNON, 2011).

Visual data enrich the *presentation* of research findings by offering an additional form of evidence. Images are central to constructing one's argument. Visual information, in turn, helps an audience understand and experience a researcher's findings about religion and spirituality. The presence of visual data in a book or journal article, for example, make it possible to explore and evaluate an author's work. Likewise, visual information may be used in a persuasive or corrective way that nudges interlocutors toward change.

A final point needs to be made about images as *data*. Visual sociologists agree that our craft involves something more than using a photograph as an illustration to enhance the visual appeal or drama of a manuscript. Instead, visual materials must be regarded as data, a kind of information essential to explaining human behavior, social structure, and culture. Images of all kinds are useful in constructing an argument, in helping a reader (or an audience) examine unfamiliar aspects of material culture or society, and in evaluating evidence on their own.

3. CASE STUDIES IN VISUAL ENGAGEMENT

My work on *Seeing Religion* (WILLIAMS, 2015) revealed an important gap in the visual sociology of religion, one that I suspect may also exist among other disciplines that study religion. Very few researchers are involved in engaged scholarship, visual or otherwise. Engaged scholarship helps people identify the problems they face in everyday life, communicate a community's needs to those with the resources to help, and instigates change. Instead of producing work narrowly targeted at academic audiences, engaged scholars disseminate their work to the general public.

3.1 ENGAGED SCHOLARSHIP

Allow me to distinguish engaged scholarship from two other approaches to research using the prepositions *of*, *for*, and *with.* To do so, I will employ the example of studying congregations, since religious organizations are the focus of my current work. Some research may be characterized as the study *of* congregations. In this first mode researchers

> [...] figuratively parachute into a community, and upon completion of their "mission" they are retrieved back to their organizations, such as universities, to complete their data analysis and the writing of scholarly articles and books (DELGADO, 2015, p. 86).

Research *of* congregations focuses on the production of new knowledge, which is mainly consumed by an academic audience. It is good and necessary work, but it is limited in its direct impact on local communities of faith.

A second approach may be described as research *for* congregations. This type of scholarship involves an academic who employs their expertise to assist a congregation in understanding itself or its community. While the virtue of this approach may be found in the satisfaction of using one's

academic tools to strengthen individual congregations, the results of research-for scholarship are idiosyncratic and isolated: reports are focused on unique cases and tend not to circulate beyond those who commission the study. Again, this work is good and necessary, but limited by its focus on individual congregations.

In contrast to research-of and research-for approaches, engaged scholarship involves research *with* congregations. A research-with approach repositions the scholar as a bridge between the academy and community. It is a form of action research, "an approach […] in which the external researchers and internal organizational members work together in partnership" (CAMERON et al., 2005, p. 27). This approach to research is deliberate and emerges out of a commitment to authentic and reciprocal partnerships between scholars and community partners (KORZUN et al., 2014).

> Unlike conventional social science, its purpose is not primarily or solely to understand social arrangements, but also to effect desired change as a path to generating knowledge and empowering stakeholders (BRADBURY HUANG, 2010, p. 93).

Commitments to partnership and change shift a scholar's focus to the practical needs and encourage scholars to disseminate their work to a broader set of audiences, ranging from a local religious group to the public more generally, and to the academy.

I would like to share with you ways I pursue a research-with approach using the tools of visual sociology. To do so, I draw examples from my work, which involves the use of visual research and engagement strategies in religious organizations. Over the last two years, I worked with three congregations and five Christian non-profit organizations that work with youth including an urban farm, a denomination's mission agency, and a Christian college. In these contexts, participants used their personal mobile devices (e.g., cell phones, iPods, tablet computers) or digital cameras to generate photographs. These images, in turn, were used in one-on-one interviews and conversations, small group discussions, and displayed publicly to engage participants in the process of self-evaluation,

learning, dialogue, and change. Three examples from my work will highlight innovations and opportunities available to religion scholars through visual sociology.

3.2 PHOTO ELICITATION: FROM INTERVIEWS TO ENGAGEMENT

In the spring of 2015, I used a technique called photo elicitation to evaluate a program designed to strengthen families and outcomes for minority youth (African American and Latino teenagers) in Grand Rapids, Michigan (USA). A substantial gap in educational outcomes separates children of color from white kids and low-income students from wealthy ones in the United States. The Douglas and Maria DeVos Foundation attempts to close the achievement gap in Grand Rapids through a church-based program called the Family Leadership Initiative (FLI). Each week families gather at participating churches for a meal in the evening. After dinner, leaders mentor adults in parenting strategies and volunteers tutor youth using the web-based Khan Academy curriculum on iPads provided by the program. The foundation hopes that the lessons learned at FLI meetings will be put into practice in everyday life and thereby strengthen families and improve outcomes for children.

Figuring out whether or not a program like this is effective poses an interesting challenge. Asking participants too directly might encourage polite answers, neatly packaged to emphasize positive experiences. Likewise, it would be impractical to follow people around as they go about their day, watching for the effects of the curriculum in everyday life. Instead, we used photo elicitation (WILLIAMS; WHITEHOUSE, 2015): seven families used digital cameras to photograph examples of "what's working, what's not working, and what difference FLI is making". Likewise, they were encouraged to photograph needs they thought FLI could help to address, but currently does not. And we used their digital photographs as the basis for interviews about the effectiveness of the program.

Collectively, these families snapped 190 photographs, which were used as prompts in interviews. I met with each

family in their home, loaded their photos onto my laptop computer, and asked them to discuss each photograph. As they told me the story behind each photo, I followed up with questions that nudged the conversation toward topics of interest to the study. By asking participants to make and discuss photos, they became partners in the process of evaluation: *they* decided what was important, *they* presented ways the program was strengthening their family (or not), and *they* suggested ways the program could be improved. As I sat shoulder-to-shoulder listening to participants' descriptions of their everyday lives, the photos became answers to questions I may never have known to ask (BECKER, 1979). My conversations with interviewees were recorded using a digital audio recorder and transcribed. And together with the photographs, participants' verbal descriptions of their images became a set of data I analyzed.

The Family Leadership Initiative emphasizes practices such as children doing household chores, family activities such as playing together, and family meals as ways to strengthen household bonds. Academic excellence is also a focus of the program and is supported through tutoring. The initiative also teaches participants to imagine a personal future and to establish goals that progress toward one's aspirations. Ultimately, the program strengthens relationships between children and parents, equips youth with social and academic skills, and creates household conditions in which families can thrive. Participants' photographs and stories provided feedback about these and other program outcomes. As I considered their images and comments, I was able to see evidence of the program's goals in participants' everyday lives. They told me about doing chores (Photo 1). I saw evidence of families having fun and playing together (Photo 2). I learned about the kinds of food they ate (Photo 3). They described their aspirations (Photo 4). And they discussed the role of faith in their everyday lives (Photo 5). These photos also told me other things about their families. For example, I saw the condition of their homes, kind and quality of their food, the role of media and technology in the household, and how they practiced their faith.

Photo 1: "They always had chores just, I just got them more on doing it. It works that way. As they get older, and everything, they can do a little bit more. It was a little hard. She had to wipe off the table" (Bernice).

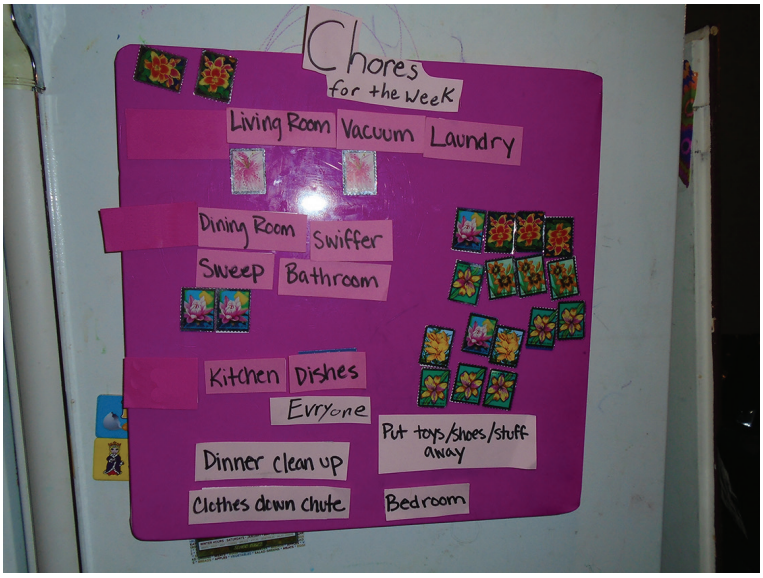


Photo 2: "I play with him every day" (Hector).

Photo 3: "That just represents the three of us eating together at dinner time" (Janis).

Photo 4: "I can do stuff like that when I become a pediatrician... I'm going to set my mind to it and I am going to do it" (Roshanda).

Photo 5: "Oh, this is my Bible study and [at FLI] ... we talked about how basically you have your own personal time that you are spending with God and feeding yourself... . I am more consistent some days than others" (Samantha).

In February 2016, the Family Leadership Initiative held its annual event "The Art of Family Living," which is held at the Grand Rapids Art Museum. This weekend-long event includes tours of the museum, arts and crafts for families, and the opportunity to have a family portrait taken by a professional photographer free of charge. Several months prior to the event, I was contacted by the Foundation's staff about creating a photo exhibition using the materials generated by the photo elicitation interviews. I used photo elicitation on numerous occasions, but I never imagined participants' images would be included in an art gallery exhibit. The main goal of PE is to generate new knowledge. While some photos from a project may be included in a report, article, or book, images generated during photo elicitation are not typically part of a public display, so this was new territory for me.

Photo 6: Presenting Findings through an Art Display

For the exhibit, I selected 6-8 photographs for each of the themes central to the effectiveness of the program. To create captions for each photograph, I used verbatim quotations from interviews. By putting participants' work on display, we were able to extend the insights of seven families to over 900 other program participants who visited to the Grand Rapids Art Museum exhibit over the course of a weekend in February (Photo 6). I wish I could take credit for the idea of using materials generated through photo elicitation. Credit is due here to my research partnership with the DeVos Foundation and the insights of program officer Khary Bridgwater. Without his prompting, I may never have innovated in this way.

Participant-produced photographs like the ones generated through photo elicitation are an effective way to collect data about congregations and communities. In analyzing this information, one looks for patterns and themes around which to organize the story being told. Typically, selected images are included in reports to congregations and academic products such as journal articles and books. Congregational leaders and academics may benefit from research findings, but the rest of the congregation may never personally interact with these insights and ideas of interviewees. By presenting photos and captions in a congregational venue (e.g., fellowship hall, lobby, narthex) or a more public setting for all to see, the benefits of research may be extended to a broader audience.

3.3 PHOTOVOICE

While my effort to use photo elicitation to evaluate programs helped participants to voice their concerns, a technique known as photovoice is specifically designed to engage communities around issues that may otherwise be unheard. Photovoice is a participatory-action research technique that

> [...] uses a combination of photography and critical group discussions as a way to engage participants in identifying their own views on the research topic, and as a tool for social change (POWERS; FREEDMAN; PITNER, 2012, p. 5).

Practitioners use photographs and critical conversations to pursue three main goals with participants:

> (1) to enable people to record and reflect their community's strengths and weaknesses, (2) to promote critical dialogue and knowledge about important community issues through large and small group discussion of photographs, and (3) to reach policymakers (WANG; BURRIS, 1997, p. 370).

A photovoice project will typically unfold over several weeks with a relatively stable and committed group of participants who work together to identify, photograph, and discuss their overlapping concerns. Some photovoice facilitators employ what is known as the SHOWeD framework (WANG, 1999, p. 188) to guide participants' conversations about their photographs:

S - What do you **S**ee?
H - What is really **H**appening here?
O - How does this relate to **O**ur lives?
W - **W**hy does this situation, concern, or strength exist?
[e - How could this photo be used to **e**ducate others?]
D - What can we **D**o about it?

This sequence of questions leads participants through a process of discovery that not only identifies issues, but also involves them in developing solutions.

After a series of meetings, participants create titles and captions for their most compelling photograph(s), and their materials are printed and prepared for public viewing. A gallery-like opening night event gives participant-photographers an opportunity to interact with community members and leaders who are invited to the event. More than just an opportunity to share their thoughts, a photo exhibit at the end of a project provides "a venue for participants to take action and speak out against social injustices" (GRAZIANO, 2004, p. 213).

My first application of photovoice took place at Rivertown Church[1], a predominantly white and middle class Christian Reformed congregation located in a suburb of Grand Rapids, Michigan. The congregation consists of a healthy mix of single adults, families with children of all ages, and older adults. Approximately 500 (total) attend one of Rivertown's two worship services on a weekly basis. The worship service liturgy is contemporary and attire is casual. A staff of 12 coordinates ministries in an attractive and well-equipped facility with age-specific meeting spaces. On a monthly basis, the church's discipleship ministry brings together adults and youth during the Sunday school hour between their 8:00 and 10:00 worship services in an effort to cultivate intergenerational relationships, a growing concern of many congregations (CSINOS; BECKWITH, 2015). The church's director of discipleship, Pastor Peter, contacted me about presenting social science insights on youth-adult relationships during a combined youth-adult Sunday school class, which developed into an opportunity for a photovoice workshop over a three week period in February 2015.

During the first week, I introduced the idea of using photographs as a way to have conversations about the church to the 60 or so people in attendance, a third of whom were youth. Upon entering the multipurpose room, participants were assigned to tables in an effort to encourage the intermingling of adults and youth. After a brief introduction in which I made participants aware they were involved in a study (i.e., informed consent), they were then given 5 minutes to walk around the church using their cell phones or digital cameras to take 5-10

[1] Rivertown Church and all personal names are pseudonyms.

photos that describe their congregation. Prior to the session, attendees were alerted to bring a camera-equipped mobile device or digital camera, and anyone without a camera was paired with someone who had one. I asked participants to think of each photo as capturing a characteristic or attribute of the congregation that is important or meaningful to them.

When participants returned from their photo walk, I instructed them to form groups of 2-3 people with a minimum of one adult and one youth per group. Their assignment was to show one another their photos and to share what their images revealed about their congregation. These interactions took place shoulder-to-shoulder as youth and adults leaned over their digital devices to discuss their congregation. Next, participants shared their photos and ideas with the other groups at their table. I asked them to pay attention to any similarities, differences, or surprises they noticed in their conversations and photographs. During the last 10 minutes, I facilitated a large group conversation with people from each table sharing an observation or insight about their photographs and/or conversations.

As the first week ended, I described what we would do the following week and provided a handout with a homework assignment. Participants were asked to take 10-15 photos (total) in three categories: wheat, weeds, and seeds. Wheat described a congregational strength, where people are growing and flourishing, where people feel welcome and accepted. Weeds were defined as weaknesses of the congregation, areas of concern, or ways people may feel excluded or unwelcome. And seeds were to be thought of as opportunities that should be nurtured. Participant-photographers were instructed to bring the photos to our next meeting digitally (e.g., on their cell phone, camera, iPad, laptop) or as prints.

The second week saw a one-third decline in attendance, which probably had as much to do with bad weather (a snowstorm) as it did with people who forgot to do their homework preferring not to show up unprepared. The goal of the second meeting was to encourage youth and adults to have conversations about areas of interest or concern they shared. These discussions were also a way to build capacity in intergenerational understanding, communication, and

relationships. Like the first week, participants were encouraged to sit at tables with a mix of youth and adults. Each participant selected three photos – ideally, one wheat (strength), one weed (weakness, dislike), and one seed (opportunity, hope) – and discussed their photos (Photo 7). The session concluded with a 10-minute roundup of the topics people discussed by asking for volunteers to share about their photos and conversations.

Photo 7: Wheat, weeds, and seeds conversation (Week 2)

At the conclusion of week two, I invited participants to identify a topic that they wanted to explore more deeply. These topics, I told them, should intersect with a congregational strength (wheat), weakness (weed), or opportunity (seed). They could use an existing photo or take a new one. Whatever their approach, it was important for participants to select photographs that help to tell a story about what they see happening in this congregation. In some cases, I suggested, a photo might capture the tensions between wheat (strengths) and weeds (weaknesses), and/or what the congregation is currently like (wheat/weeds) and what it might do or become in the future (seeds of opportunity). Finally, they were told to bring a 4 x 6-inch print of their

selected photographs to the following week's meeting, which would be displayed on the walls of the multipurpose room.

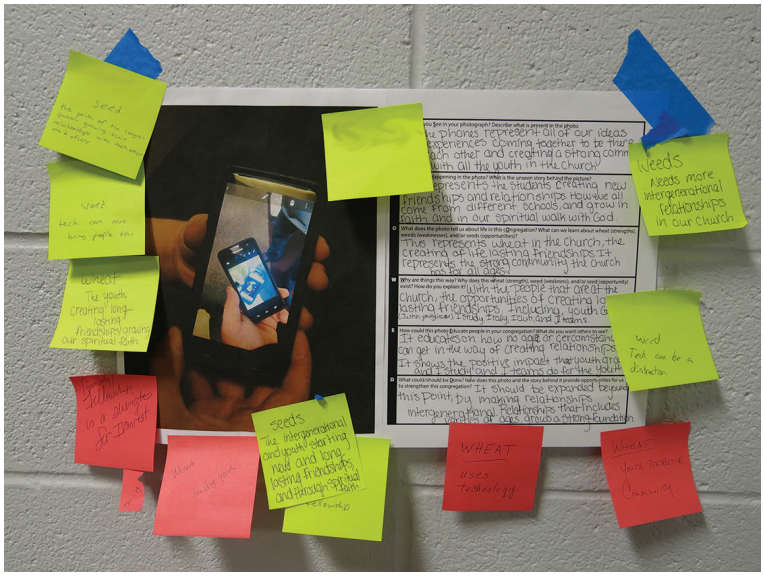
Turnout for week 3 was similar to week 2 (approximately 40 people). After a brief explanation, participants spent 10-15 minutes working individually to complete a worksheet to describe their photo, which included questions (i.e., SHOWeD) adapted from the photovoice literature. Once complete, participants attached their photographs to their worksheets and used painter's tape to hang their work on the wall. As these displays began to go up on the walls, attendees spent time browsing one another's work (Photo 8).

Photo 8: Participants exploring each other's work (Photovoice Week 3)

Next, adults and youth used different colored Post-It notes (green for youth, red for adults) to help identify topics unique to their age cohort as well as those shared across generations by attaching them to other participants' work. The group went through 3 rounds of voting (5 minutes each), one for each category (wheat, weed, and seed), with participants labeling their post-it notes accordingly (Photo 9). Where is the most vibrant wheat? What is the worst weed? What is the most important seed? During the last 15 minutes, participants

were asked to share their observations, questions, concerns, and insights with the group that had gathered.

Photo 9: Views of Technology (Photovoice Week 3)



I returned to the church three weeks after concluding the Sunday School classes in order to interview the pastors. I was eager to hear their views on the photovoice workshop. On the way to the conference room where our conversation would take place, one of the pastors led me to a main corridor of the church where participants' images and descriptions were on display (Photo 10). Naturally, I was curious about how participants and the rest of the congregation responded. The pastors reported observing people who stopped to look at the photos and read the captions. An interviewee also described stopping to look at the pictures.

> There were a couple of times that I walked by, and I just took the time and I had time then just to stand and to stop and look at the pictures and I could read what people wrote, and so, I was glad that they put them up.

I am not sure, however, of the extent to which others in the congregation did the same.

Photo 10: Work on display at Rivertown Church

It was striking to me that the staff put all participants' work on display, even photos that were critical of the church. For example, one participant's photos satire the church's outdated website and a second identifies concern about the lack of attendance at the early service with a staged photo of five people worshipping in an otherwise empty sanctuary. Another was concerned about the unconscious barriers people create, for example, when they form circles of conversation in the church lobby after a service, which may make it hard for people to feel included or make new friends. According to one pastor, by including work that ranged from flattering to critical, there seemed to be a feeling of ownership among participants, that the leaders were listening to the concerns of church members. When I asked if there was any hesitation about including work that included negative comments, the senior pastor said that the ministerial staff was not afraid of anything people want to bring up, "We have conversations about this stuff as staff, so why not let people speak their mind, get the conversation 'out there?'" Another pastor noted that one person who posted critical comments expressed gratitude that the church allowed him to voice his concerns by including his work in the hallway exhibit.

Reflecting on interviews with pastors and several participants after the three-week workshop was complete, three benefits became evident. First, when participants described their experiences, they talked about the ways the workshop gave them permission to have conversations across generations about topics of personal importance. Simply put, the photographs and workshop gave people an opportunity to talk about their experiences and concerns. As one youth put it, taking and discussing photos created "a great way to not be afraid to interact" with adults. The workshop also gave people permission to be thoughtful, observant, and even critical about their congregation. A middle-aged participant suggested that

> […] one of the real values of [the workshop] was to be able to stop and pause and consider and say, "I'm not just going to walk by this" [instead] I'm going to say things like "what message is this sending to someone who is brand new ... or what message is this sending as it relates to our church purpose […]?".

Second, as participants discussed topics of personal importance, photographs and the stories behind them helped to build relational bridges between participants. What Harper observed about photo elicitation was also true of this application of photovoice: "The photo becomes a bridge between people who may not even understand the extent to which they see the world differently" (HARPER, 2012, p. 157). Some participants described walking through the church building with another person, which was necessary because someone at their table did not have a camera.

> The [young] man I was sitting next to didn't have a camera […] we got to know each other better, I think, [and] I have a different perspective of him now than I did when I didn't really know him.

A third benefit of photovoice is realized when participants see their congregation from different perspectives, ones that may even challenge their own way of seeing it. The literature refers to this as "breaking frames" (HARPER, 2002; SAMUELS, 2004) or the ability of conversations about

photographs to help participants and researchers see the familiar from a perspective that challenges their assumptions. Participants who were interviewed weeks after the photovoice workshop spoke positively about having to consider multiple perspectives on the same photo. Seeing the church from the vantage point of other people, in the words of an interviewee, was instructive:

> I think that when you look at [the church] through a different set of lenses, versus what is just functional for the church, you can come up with some provocative, thought provoking stuff.

3.4. USING A MOBILE APP TO ENGAGE COLLEGE STUDENTS

Helping college students to think deeply and critically is a challenging task. In the classroom, students are often distracted by their mobile phones. They think their professors do not notice them as they tap away on their keyboards under their desks to send text or WhatsApp messages to their friends. What would happen if we invited students to use their smartphones for learning? What if we could harness these ubiquitous devices for pedagogical purposes?

In collaboration with my colleague, political scientist Kevin den Dulk, we are experimenting with protocol that uses the smartphone app to engage students. The project is part of Calvin College's Faith and Citizenship Initiative, which intends to develop a bold and distinctive understanding of the role of the citizen, and the exchange of ideas about citizen formation and education. We pursue these goals through the SpeakingPhoto app, by asking students: 1. to record visual and verbal information about faith and citizenship and 2. to share their work with classmates via an online course gallery. By prompting students to be mindful of faith and citizenship while studying off-campus, we aim to cultivate students' ability to recognize, compare, critically engage, and discuss religion and public life.

Through partnerships with instructors teaching off-campus courses and programs at Calvin College, undergraduate

students use the SpeakingPhoto app on their own mobile digital devices (e.g., smartphones, tablet computers) to take photographs and provide commentary on ways in which they encounter and experience faith and citizenship. The app is available free of charge for devices running on Android and Apple operating systems; researchers will need to purchase a gallery for use with a class or group at a cost of $1000. SpeakingPhoto allows users to create a photo and record up to 30 seconds of audio. Photos are uploaded to an online gallery and made available to members of their learning community (Photo 11). Participants are encouraged to make use of their photographs and comments to discuss their experiences and observations of faith and citizenship.

Photo 11: "This is a picture of a rally I attended this morning about ending chronic homelessness where I was able to get a glimpse of what citizenship means to residents of Washington, D.C."

Last academic year (2015-2016), professors and students traveling to Hungary, Ghana, Washington D.C., Hollywood, and Indonesia used the app in a variety of ways. Instead of requiring students to write a journal entry to reflect on the events of the day, some professors allowed students to use SpeakingPhoto to process their experiences. Other professors sent their students on scavenger hunts around the city they were visiting to look for examples of topics they were learning about in their classes. Some used SpeakingPhoto to document field trips during which students were prompted to

be on the lookout for examples of citizenship and faith, in their own lives or in the host culture. As students accumulated and uploaded materials, course instructors used examples to stimulate and enhance in-class discussions.

At the completion of off-campus coursework, the visual and verbal information on SpeakingPhoto galleries is archived, participants' comments are transcribed, and these materials are analyzed by our research team. Also, a few students from each course are recruited for interviews in which their photographs and statements are used as prompts (i.e., photo elicitation) to sustain a conversation about faith/citizenship and their likes/dislikes about the our technique (i.e., using SpeakingPhoto). The purpose of these interviews is to gather data on attitudes toward and perceptions of citizenship, and to improve the visual engagement technique for subsequent applications.

Because 2015-2016 was a pilot year for the project, we are not ready to draw any conclusions from the data. At this early stage, however, we are comfortable making a few general observations. First, and not surprisingly, the local learning context plays an important role in what participants photograph and describe. For example, students traveling in Indonesia were much more likely to reference Islam, mosques, religions, and other context-specific characteristics than students in other courses. Students in a sociology of Hollywood course had much to say about celebrities. For students in Washington D.C., faith and citizenship conversations revolved around the 2016 US election. And in Hungary, students visiting old and relatively empty cathedrals on a Sunday morning wondered about the future of Christianity in Europe.

Second, we observed that citizenship is an abstract idea, one that is difficult for many college-aged participants to characterize verbally and visually. While a handful of participants were quite articulate about faith and citizenship, a majority struggled to formulate coherent thoughts. Even in face-to-face interviews, several participants were hard-pressed to tell us what citizenship is or what they may have learned about it during their off-campus learning experiences. At a place like Calvin College, a Christian liberal arts college with strong ties to the Reformed Christian denomination, students

receive ample preparation from formal coursework, co-curricular activities, and their personal experience with Christian faith. Just for the record, not all Calvin students are Christian and they are not homogeneous in their denominational affiliation, personal spiritual practices, or degree of participation in religious organizations. But they are socialized to have the intellectual equipment necessary to discuss and read the markers of religion in culture. However, the opposite seems to be the case regarding citizenship.

Third, some photos/comments have the feel of someone doing an assignment, at the last minute, just to get it done. This trend was also observed in interviews conducted with individuals after they returned from their time abroad. When asked about the difficulties experienced with SpeakingPhoto, individuals expressed observing other students rushing to complete the assignment and not putting much thought into the comments they made about their photographs.

Fourth, because many off-campus courses are compacted into a two-week trip in which the group perambulates together from one location to another, redundancy abounds. In other words, because the group travels and studies together, in some cases we received quite a few photos similar in composition. On one hand this creates an opportunity for comparing different students' views on the same location, object, or topic. On the other hand, if students are asked to take 10-15 photos during their off-campus experience and many of those photos are similar, once participants reach their quota, the likelihood for variety and diversity in photographs diminishes sharply. This challenge is exacerbated by the curricular expectations of the course: the content of the course itself primes students to frame their experience in certain ways, which can constrict their imagination and lead to similar photographic compositions and verbal commentaries across student participants.

Finally, in the best cases, the assignment to record and reflect on examples of faith and citizenship can have a positive effect. It forces the participant to begin orienting their smartphone's camera away from themselves (selfies) and toward abstractions such as faith and citizenship. While participants and interviewees may not have been as articulate or creative as we hoped – to be fair, one can only say so much

in 30 seconds – the exercise prompted a heightened awareness about faith, citizenship, and their intersection. As such, this visual engagement technique may operate as what Freeman (2005) might call a "portable professor", an activity that both diagnoses culture and socializes one into it. Or in the words of photographer Dorothy Lange, "The camera is an instrument that teaches people how to see without a camera" (MELTZER, 1978, p. xv). At least, this is our hope. Further work is underway in pursuit of these aspirations.

4. CONCLUSION

The visual sociology of religion stands at the intersection of religion, art, and voice. Over the years I have learned that good things happen when people have conversations about their photographs and share their stories, ideas, needs, concerns, and criticisms with others. The process of making and discussing photographs helps participants and researchers to see social life through the lens of other people and to talk about topics that may not be discussed under normal circumstances. The benefits of these techniques (photo elicitation, photovoice, or speaking photo) do not accrue automatically, but involvement in these exercises gives people *permission* to discuss matters of personal importance and builds *bridges* between people from different age cohorts and backgrounds. These techniques help participants to see congregations, programs, coursework, and themselves through a new set of lenses. Sometimes this act of seeing challenges taken-for-granted understandings and *breaks their frames*.

Participant-driven visual projects that utilize techniques like the ones discussed above shift the researcher-participant power dynamic by allowing participants to make decisions about what is important and meaningful, and what is not. Photographs provide people who are sometimes not listened to (youth) or have a hard time expressing themselves (e.g., introverts or immigrants). The visual is a medium through which they can voice their thoughts, ideas, and concerns. Images also anchor conversations in concrete examples, experiences, and evidence, which allow facilitators and

participants to envision ideas, concepts, and themes that may otherwise be difficult to represent or measure. Exercises that ask people to photograph a certain topic, theme, or experience promote mindfulness by asking participants to pay attention to these features of social life beyond/after the exercise. As such, a cell phone camera can become a portable professor that helps people learn and think critically about their faith, their practices, and world in which they live.

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FERRAMENTAS VISUAIS PARA TEMPOS VISUAIS – INOVAÇÃO E OPORTUNIDADE NA SOCIOLOGIA VISUAL DE RELIGIÃO

RESUMO

Originalmente apresentado como uma palestra no Primeiro Congresso Internacional de Estudos Religiosos - Religião: Arte e Vozes na Universidade Presbiteriana Mackenzie (9 de novembro de 2016), este artigo explora as oportunidades apresentadas pela prevalência de telefones celulares equipa-

dos com câmeras e seu resultado na cultura visual. É um convite para os estudiosos da religião a usar as ferramentas da sociologia visual. O artigo fornece uma definição de trabalho da sociologia visual e situa essa definição em seu contexto histórico. Três estudos de caso são apresentados como exemplos de como as técnicas visuais são usadas para pesquisar e envolver organizações religiosas e indivíduos: 1. foto evocação, 2. fotovoz, e 3. um aplicativo móvel chamado "SpeakingPhoto". O artigo encerra com a consideração dos benefícios de estudar a religião visualmente.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Sociologia visual. Bolsa de estudos. Evocação de fotos. Fotovoz. Inovação.

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