contexts

sociology for the public

gender & sexuality

me too and masculinity

russia and aspen

churches and think tanks

drugs and plantations

featuring: camille busette   becky sandefur
jenny stuber   robert vargas

0 74470 56670 0

0 1

p

ethnographic uncovering: hidden communities

by jeff t. sheng

Social scientists, such as Douglas Heckathorn, have often looked at the complicated question of how to study so-called "hidden populations" where the size and boundaries of a group are difficult to identify, and membership often involves stigmatized or illegal behavior. This has been an issue for both qualitative and quantitative researchers who have employed a variety of techniques. From Goodman's "snowball sampling", to Salganik and Heckathorn's "respondent-drive sampling", even to Desmond and Hoang's rich ethnographic practices of living with and becoming embedded in the communities they are trying to learn from.

This essay asks the question, how can social scientists use visually driven humanistic methods such as photography and documentary film or video to better see and understand hidden communities? It may seem counterintuitive that a "visually-driven" methodology would work with those that may wish to stay hidden due to stigma or sanction. Here, however, I share from my experiences working with one such group: transgender service members in the United States military.

Since 2013, I have been photographing and interviewing this hard to reach population, as part of a larger research project about LGBT inclusion and underground social movements in the U.S. military. This work relies on both traditional qualitative methods such as in-depth interviewing and ethnographic observations, but also includes methodologies that Cotton and Rieger note as being derived from art photography and visual sociology through staged photographic portraiture and repeat photography.

From 2009-2019, I visited and photographed over 130 LGBT service members while also conducting in-depth qualitative interviews and collecting ethnographic observational data about their lives in over 30 U.S. states. Roughly 25 percent of my sample includes transgender service members, the group whose inclusion is most currently threatened by President Trump and his policies. This paradox—that the group at highest risk would also wish to participate the most in this work—speaks of a few important themes that I have learned from doing this project: visibility, collaborative representation, and trust.

First, photographers and filmmakers are able to make things visible. Groups that have felt ignored by traditional forms of research can understand visual media as a way to feel included in sociological inquiry—they can literally see themselves in the research. Moreover, the usage of pseudonyms, theoretical framing, and generalizations of survey data, practices common in reporting qualitative research findings, can actually have the effect of covering up individual characteristics in our work. While often this is done to protect the privacy of our respondents, a counter argument is that a measured degree of visibility could be beneficial, and that keeping people hidden and obscured might create additional harm for a group that already suffers from marginalization. (The cover photograph of this issue is an example of a balance in which the individual respondent's identity is protected while also showing the service member and giving them visibility.)

A second important lesson I have learned from this work is something I call "collaborative representation," where unlike traditional photojournalism, I allow my respondents control of the ways in which they are represented in the image. Prior to a photo shoot, I ask them for suggestions as to how they wish to be seen: what uniform would you like

to wear? How much of your face do you want showing? Are there important parts of your home that you would like in the image? Conversely, are there things that you don't want visible for privacy reasons? During the photoshoot, I show them images from the LCD screen of my digital camera, soliciting input about the way their body is positioned. Prior to releasing the images publicly, I show them the work and check to make sure my representation of them is accurate, effectively collaborating with them on the final image.

Finally, this speaks to the most important learning from this project: that of trust and special care that visual practitioners need to take with their subjects. Certainly, accidentally releasing a photograph online and "outing someone" or losing a memory card with data can have far more consequential effects because of the immediacy of visual imagery. Yet this trust can also be a strong currency to garner more participants for research through word of mouth within the underground networks found in such hidden communities. I noticed how others vouching for me became a crucial aspect in publicizing my project and finding others to participate. That trust was created through others seeing the care in which I treated the photographic process.

In retrospection, I've realized that the photographic component of the work was paramount in finding so many respondents as willing participants. This was aided by leveraging visibility, collaborative representation, and trust through a visual methodology. I believe that such "visual uncovering" can be utilized by other social science researchers wishing to study other hidden populations.

Jeff Sheng is a PhD candidate in Sociology and an MS candidate in Computer Science at Stanford University. His research examines the ways online technologies have changed the formation and processes of social movements, focusing on gender, sexualities, and the LGBT rights movement. He is also an artist and photographer, whose photography has been published in the *New York Times Magazine, Time, Newsweek*, and the *Smithsonian. Magazine.*

The following photographs were taken in 2018 and 2019 in various locations throughout the United States, including Texas, California, Colorado, Georgia, Arizona, Louisiana, and Alaska. All images are of U.S. military service members who also identify as transgender.