

Photographica, Issue 15: Photography as Inquiry

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Photographica

Photography as Inquiry

Perspectives from the Social Sciences and Humanities

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Introduction

This thematic issue explores the role of photography in social science research methods from the late 19th century to the present, with an ethnographic focus on the processes of production and co-production of fieldwork data. Whilst the intertwining of the medium with the renewal of modes of scientific observation and gaze in the 19th and 20th centuries is now well established (Edwards, 1992; Daston and Galison, 2010; Wilder, 2009), the past and current development of visual practices at the intersection of the social sciences and photography has, for its part, been explored more recently (Figini and Jehel, 2025; Joseph and Mauuarin, 2018). Building on these works, this issue aims to follow the long-term evolution of ethnographic research methods involving and/or using photography, as well as the gradual development of its contemporary forms. What constitutes a (photographic) inquiry, and for whom? What roles do fieldworkers, ethnographer-photographers, and the institutions that oversee and commission inquiries play in it?

In the social sciences, photography now occupies a well-established place alongside ethnographic film, in both sociology and visual anthropology. These two approaches are rooted in disciplinary traditions: anthropology, historically focused on the study of the “distant”, has relied on photography since its inception, and made it a research tool since the rise of participant observation in the 1910s, driven in particular by John Layard and Bronislaw Malinowski. Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson’s photographic book (1942) is often cited as a canonical example, before the diversification of methods in the 1960s led some researchers to go so far as to propose using photographs as material for interviews (Collier, 1986). A critical and reflective reassessment of these practices has revitalised visual anthropology since the 1980s, both in the English-speaking world (Pink, 2007, 2008) and in France (Piette, 1992). In visual sociology, other fields and subjects, such as urban space, have been prioritised, for instance in the work of Howard Becker where the use of photography brings a reflective dimension to his practice (1978), or of Kevin Lynch (1996) who follows the tradition of the Chicago School, to name only a few pioneering works.

However, the overlap between fields encourages us to move beyond these disciplinary boundaries. Photographers have, in fact, played a key role in this intertwined history, either by collaborating on scientific research or by doing sociology, geography or anthropology themselves. This was the case with Lewis Hine, a sociologist-photographer of the early 20th century, known for his images of labour, particularly child labour (Aubert, 2005). But also, in the second half of the 20th century, with Pierre Verger, who, through his research and photographs, highlighted the presence in Brazil of religious traditions of African origin (Maillard 2009; Souty 2007).

By addressing ethnographic inquiry as a process aimed at shedding light on a situation and organising the information that constitutes it, we view photography not merely as a means of depicting, supporting or communicating about the research, but rather as one participating fully in the formulation of a problem and its study. We therefore encourage contributions that revisit the history of photographic research in the social sciences, as well as contributions that explore research conducted through photographic practice, or the adoptions of research methods by social actors to carry out their own visual inquiries. From a pragmatist perspective, since everyday experience constantly involves processes of inquiry and experimentation akin to those of the social sciences (Cefaï, 2025), we might even argue that inquiry is, first and foremost, the concern of those it affects (Hennion, 2015; Dewey, 1993). How, then, are these inquiries produced by social actors in the field processed by researchers? This issue thus aims to explore the co-construction of visual knowledge, for instance by examining situations where interlocutors produce their own images and document their social worlds. This is notably what Camilo Leon-Quijano does in his analysis of the “visual community” in Sarcelles, where he engages citizens in his investigative practice in order to understand, alongside them, how images of their city are constructed (2020). This approach acknowledges the agency of the communities involved in the use of photography in the field.

The focus of this issue therefore lies in examining ways of conducting and contributing to social science research through photography. We welcome articles focusing on the following main topics. The list is not exhaustive, and contributions that address several of them are encouraged.

Topic 1 · Investigating from a situated position

The researcher’s situated position, far from impossible neutrality, has a decisive influence on the research, which is conducted from a position at the intersection of several defining spaces. This is the core of “situated knowledges” (Haraway, 2007), the production of which depends on specific historical, geographical, professional, disciplinary and methodological positions. The researcher’s positionality in terms of gender, race, class and age must also be taken into account (Clair, 2016; Monjaret and Cicchelli-Pugeault, 2014). Photography, itself shaped by these positions, constitutes a particularly rich element of analysis in this context. While it is often perceived as neutral or transparent, as capable of capturing what “has been” (Barthes, 1980), its production, uses and interpretations are in fact determined by the position of whoever produces, views and/or publishes it.

These issues necessitate a reflective approach to photographs and their use in ethnographic inquiry. Analysing one’s position within an inquiry offers a first avenue of investigation: how does this position influence the production and interpretation of photographs? How does photography help highlight the effect of situated positions? What constraints does it reveal? This analysis can be applied to an ongoing study, but it may also focus on studies conducted several years ago dur-

ing the career, from which the researcher may have since gained some distance, thereby offering a fresh perspective (Monjaret, 2019). Such productive temporal distance resonates with the work of historians such as Bertrand Tillier, who, during a residency at the Mucem, worked on photographer Pierre Soulier and the challenges of collecting popular culture in the 1940s–1960s. Indeed, the re-examinations of surveys and images appear to be particularly fruitful. For instance, dual analyses of images, which have been carried out with other researchers, have revealed elements that had previously gone unnoticed. This was exemplified by the sociologist Florent Schepens, who, drawing on his knowledge of logging techniques, identified an innovative adaptation implemented by a logger in photographs taken by the anthropologist Alicia Plesse-Colucci, which she herself had not noticed (Plesse-Colucci and Schepens, 2023). Finally, these reinterpretations may also focus on studies that are more distant, geographically or historically, thus offering a fresh perspective on photographs taken by others, as Vincent Debaene did with regard to the photographs in Claude Lévi-Strauss's *Tristes Tropiques* (1955), highlighting the choices and construction of a reality that is fantasised, or at least truncated, by photography (Debaene, 2018).

Topic 2 · Conducting research for an institution or a social actor in the field

Ethnographic research conducted for institutions – museums, heritage departments, archive centres or local authorities – constitutes a distinct framework for research and scholarly output, within which photography occupies a specific place. This is evident in heritage inventories and ecomuseums, and particularly exemplified by the collection-based research projects of the Mucem, officially established in 2005 as an extension of the Museum of Popular Arts and Traditions and heir to its practices (Viatte and Calafat, 2018). There, photography is often both a research tool and an expected deliverable produced to join documentary or heritage collections, but sometimes without being exhibited. In this regard, one might, for example, consider the reflections proposed by Raphaële Bertho on the constitution of a photographic heritage, which show how images produced within inventory systems become themselves heritage objects (Bertho, 2013). This topic also ties in with the anthropologic attention paid to researchers' archives, particularly in relation to the Laboratoire d'Anthropologie Sociale and the Éric-de-Dampierre library, as an extension of a "paradigm of collection" (Mouton, 2008; Abélès and Mouton, 2008; Debaene, 2006). In this context, photography both contributes to the construction of archives, documents, works, objects and sites, and structures their institutional preservation.

These practices raise questions about the status of ethnographic research and of the researcher in the field, whilst also challenging the conditions under which knowledge is produced. What role is assigned to a photograph taken in this context: is it field data, an aesthetic object, a scientific document or an archival record? And, regarding commissions, how do research sponsors shape the expectations on the material to be preserved? Do institutions fund research practices and/or photographic prints, and does this funding designate them as the owners of these images? How is photography prescribed, framed and evaluated in these contexts? What effects do these commissioning mechanisms have on fieldwork practices, on the way subjects and locations are viewed, and on the subsequent uses of the images? This topic invites the exploration of ethnographic inquiries conducted for museums or heritage institutions, as well as reflections on contract research, on photographic archive projects, and on the relationship between researchers and commissioners.

Topic 3 · Investigating with interlocutors in the field

The relationship with interlocutors within social science research – and more specifically in visual socio-anthropology – can be examined through the mechanisms designed to encourage their participation, as well as the approaches that involve conducting research alongside them. Two broad categories could be discussed in this section: working with interlocutors and working with the visual inquiries they conduct. We therefore propose to examine the relational positionality of researchers and their connection to the field. Questioning these research stances does not limit the reflection to methodological, ethical or epistemic frameworks; it also extends the reflection to the purpose of the images (Buob, 2017). The distance between the subject capturing the image and the subject captured by the image is fundamental to methodological reflection. As shown for the case of sociological films, by Cristina Oddone and Lorenzo Navone and their film “Écriture sensible” (2022), that highlights the collective process of making a documentary within the prison and social care sectors. There, both authors analysed the image – in this case, the video image – not as a simple writing tool but also as an instrument of exploration.

By conceiving of photography as a conversational object, this research strand then addresses issues of publication: what should be published (or not)? How can collaborative photographs be produced, and more broadly, how can we address the challenges of co-creation in the social sciences? Finally, how can we align the timeline of research and its reflective processes with that of fieldwork (Broqua, 2009)? Questions leading us to consider proximity and distance to the field, as the commitment to co-construction is not solely based on spatiality but incorporates a reflection on the temporality between all research stages. We welcome all contributions reflecting on works investigating social movements, using photo-elicitation, conducting participatory research, working with surveys produced by organisations or social groups, etc.

Articles

This call encourages the crossing of disciplinary boundaries and invites three main types of contributions. Articles tracing the history of photography-based visual research in the social sciences, or that reflect on what defines photographic study in the social sciences as an inherently empirical practice;

Articles examining on contemporary social science research that draws on photography as a tool for ethnographic inquiry or analysis and shows a strong reflective dimension;

Articles drawing on historical photographic collections (Durr, 2024) to examine the heuristic value of these visual materials.

We welcome contributions based primarily on empirical research using ethnographic approaches, on archival or historical research, and on multimodal methods, though this list is by no means exhaustive. They may draw on a variety of fields within the social sciences and humanities (anthropology, sociology, history, geography, etc.) and either make use of photography or question its past and present role in visual research. The focus is therefore not on documentary or artistic photography produced by photography practitioners, but on examining how researchers in the social sciences and humanities incorporate or interrogate photography as both an object and a tool of inquiry.

Submission guidelines and timeline

The call for paper is open until 1 September 2026.

Proposals (in French or English) in the form of abstracts of 3,000 to 4,000 characters, accompanied by a bibliography, should include your name and affiliation, as well as a short bio-bibliographical note. They should be sent to the following address: redaction@photographica-revue.fr by september 1st 2026.

Authors whose proposals are selected will be notified on 30 September 2026.

Articles, of between 30,000 and 35,000 characters (including spaces and footnotes), must be submitted by 1 December 2026.

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You will find all practical information and norms to follow at the following link :

<https://journals.openedition.org/photographica/1377>

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