This article is an overview of the contributions of photography to sociology and a discussion of potential uses of photography in sociological research. Visual sociology, after contributing to several studies in the early decades of American sociology, disappeared to reemerge during the 1960s. In the meantime, the use of visual methods in ethnographic description, the study of social processes in the laboratory, in studies of social change, as a key to interviewing grounded in the perspective of the subject and as a means through which phenomenological sociology may be constructed and communicated. Visual sociology, with increasing organizational success and emerging electronic aids, appears to be on the verge of greater recognition and use within mainstream sociology.

Introduction

This article is a clarification of the state of "visual sociology." Although photography and sociology have existed for about the same period of time, visual sociology—the use of photographs, film, and video to study society and the study of visual artifacts of a society—is underdeveloped and largely peripheral to the discipline as a whole. There have been, however, many sociologists who have used visual data, and their work has added unique knowledge to sociology. I begin by analyzing the relationship between visual sociology and related movements in anthropology and documentary photography, tracing visual sociology to traditions in documentary photography that began over a hundred years ago in Europe. I then suggest several approaches to visual sociology in field research, noting the unique contributions and potentials of visual methods. I conclude by projecting a
future of visual sociology that will take advantage of new visual and electronic technologies and an increasing willingness of the discipline of sociology to apply visual methods to the study of both conventional and new research problems.

Visual sociology is a collection of approaches in which researchers use photographs to portray, describe, or analyze social phenomena. Visual sociology can be, however, broken down into two major areas. The first area involves using photographs in the conventional sense of data gathering. The "visual-methods" people are usually working on a specific research problem and a middle-range theory. Visual sociologists also study photographs produced by the culture, for example, in advertising, newspapers or magazines, or family photo albums. Using this approach, sociologists typically explore the semiotics, or sign systems, of different visual communication systems. These two areas of visual sociology remain fairly distinct from each other. Put simply, the distinction between these approaches is that some sociologists take photographs to study the social world, whereas others analyze photographs others have taken in institutionalized occupational settings or in their family lives. The distinctions between these approaches are not hard and fast, and many visual sociologists work in both areas with equal energy. My purpose in this paper is primarily to discuss photographic methods. My overview will be both historical and theoretical.

History

It is often noted that sociology and photography were born during the same decades in Europe, and, as products of the same social events, one would expect cross-fertilization between what was, in fact, a new way of seeing (photography) and a new lens of interpretation (sociology). Sociology came about as the result of industrialization and bourgeois revolutions in Europe; photography, too, was a child of the industrial revolution and had the effect of democratizing a new kind of knowledge. Although in the past only the powerful could appropriate the world visually (through painting and other arts), the photographic image was mass-produced and soon mass-distributed, making knowledge based on visual images available to all.

The great figures of early sociology, however, did not use photographs. From the beginning, sociologists produced abstract images of society rather than literal renderings of particular social processes. It would have been just as reasonable, however, to use photographs to pursue certain research questions as it was to use descriptive surveys or statistics to pursue others. Karl Marx, for example, used Engles's descriptions of the English working class to provide detail and descriptive substance to his analyses of capitalism. Photographs such as were produced by Lewis Hine and Jacob Riis a few decades later would show the conditions of the working class (as well as the capitalist class), the urban squalor of the industrial city, the working conditions of children, and many other subjects that play a predominant role in Marx's analyses. Durkheim's use of suicide statistics to measure social and moral integration was based on a highly abstract inference, yet it