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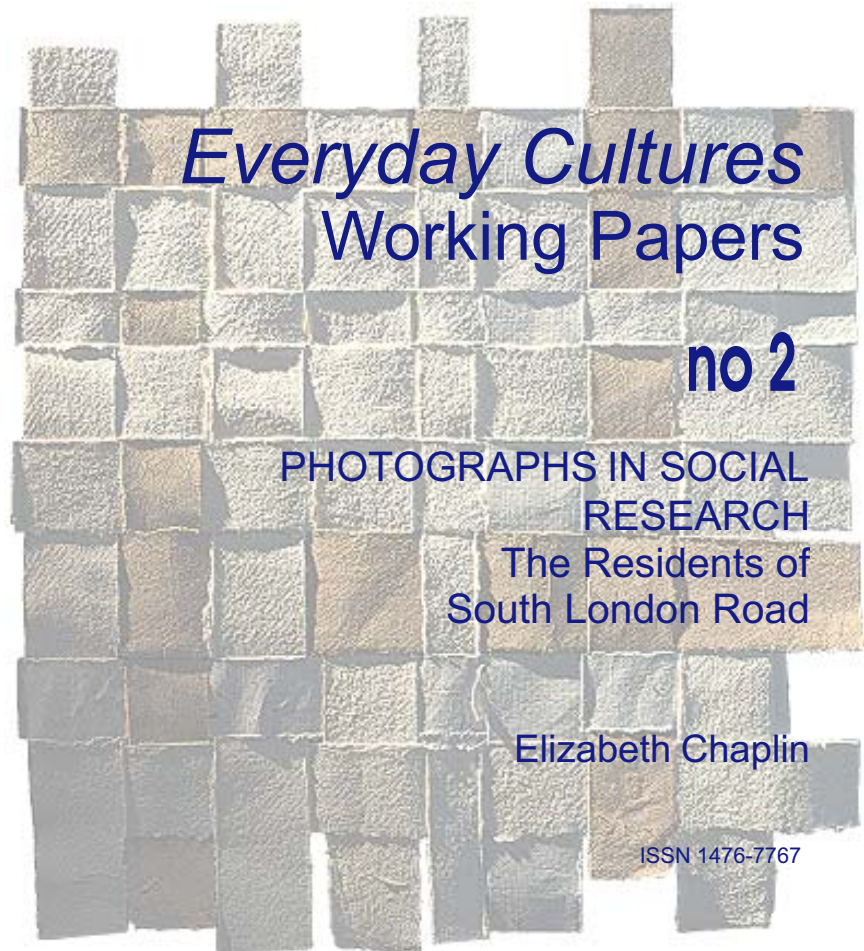
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About the author

Elizabeth Chaplin has, for 25 years, been an Associate Lecturer at the Open University where she currently teaches two Cultural and Media Studies courses in the Masters Programme. She also researches visual culture for the National Everyday Culture Programme. Her current research interests are visual culture and photography theory. Her publications include *Sociology and Visual Representation* (Routledge, 1994).

The working paper series on *Everyday Cultures* disseminates research developed within the National Everyday Cultures Programme. We welcome comments about the work published.

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Editorial Presentation

Photographs in social research: the residents of South London Road' constitutes the second issue of *Everyday Cultures*. Elizabeth Chaplin took photos of each house, and of most residents, in the South London Road where she lives. Then, she asked the persons she photographed to write a caption for their photograph, held a party where residents could discuss the project, took many fieldnotes, and shared her writing about the project with some residents. Research methods, aims and theoretical developments were interlinked in the project. While addressing a single aim, the researcher's focus shifted as new issues were revealed in the research process.

Chaplin's aim was to make a record of an aspect of ordinary everyday life and culture in London at the turn of the century. In this paper she explores the early career of these photographs' meanings. While she draws on Erving Goffman, she is more interested in how meanings change than on how meanings are made. Drawing on Stuart Hall she asserts the 'floating meaning' of visual material. She argues that the photographs' meanings are shaped by their caption and by the context in which they are viewed, indicating that meanings 'float' depending on how photos and captions are classified. The production of such photos and captions affect the process of classifying, and different socio-semiotic relations operate to reclassify photos and captions.

By taking us along South London Road, Chaplin shares aspects of the everyday life of people living in London in 2000, and notes changes through 2002. The visual and verbal material she gathers and makes available to the reader constitute a valuable aspect of sociological practice in research on the everyday. One feels tempted to analyse her analysis: why does she say 'the lady in the house', why does she refer to people as Mrs and Mr, what makes her identify her photos as she does, with those particular words? Chaplin invites these questions, and many others, as she keeps open the tensions between treating photos as 'records', as 'interpretation', as 'made', as 'found', or as conflicting interpretations that are made over those that are found.

The study is part of the National Visual Cultures project developed together with Peter Hamilton. Like Chaplin, I would like to thank him for starting us off in this exciting area of research within the NECP.

EBS

Photographs in Social Research: The Residents of South London Road

Elizabeth Chaplin

Abstract

The paper displays the tension between two current and common theoretical approaches to the analogue photographic image, by treating the same set of photographs as both 'made' and 'found'; as both record and as interpretation. This is done via a research project in which I photographed the residents of each house in my own street - South London Road - and then asked the residents to provide a caption for their photograph. The images and captions are laid out in this paper and each set is briefly analyzed with reference to my field notes and, where appropriate, to Erving Goffman's *Gender Advertisements* (1979), and to Stuart Hall's *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (1997) 'The Determination of News Photographs' in S. Cohen & J. Young (eds.) *The Manufacture of News. Social Problems, Deviance and the Mass Media* (1973/4). The paper has two foci. While I argue that analogue photographic images do record, and that the South London Road photographs provide data about everyday life in our area which words alone would be unable to achieve, I also chart the early careers of these photographs' meanings. In so doing, I explore both the power of the photographic record and the way that photographic meaning is determined by context. Goffman's work is briefly analyzed to explore the compatibility or otherwise of these two theoretical approaches.

Introduction¹

The original purpose of this project was to make a photographic record of the residents of each house in a London street; thereby contributing to the National Everyday Cultures Programme (NECP)² ethnographic data about ordinary everyday life and culture in the UK. I chose South London Road (not the real name of the road), the street where I live; and in May 2000 set out to photograph all its residents standing outside their front doors. I chose to have them standing outside their front doors because this caused the least intrusion into residents' lives. Then, with the idea of obtaining additional data, I asked each household to write a caption for their photograph. Many obliged. Most of the images and captions are laid out in this paper. I thought of the project as a pilot study which might be repeated in each of the Open University regions,³ and which would ultimately result in a structured visual cross-section of UK residents at the start of the twenty-first century. Thus outlined, my project can be located squarely within the 'empirical tradition', in which social researchers 'make' photographs as part of the research process, treat these images as records (as showing something) and regard captions as providing additional information.

However, the captions which the South London Road residents provided turned out to be so diverse in character, and made such a difference to one's grasp of the image-content, that I began to focus attention on the way that a photograph's meaning is shaped by its caption - and indeed by the context in which it is viewed. This approach is associated with cultural studies, whose researchers analyze 'found' photographs. Researchers ask about a photograph's meaning (rather than what it 'shows'), on the basis that images are polysemic - their meanings float. Now, a photograph's meaning depends on how it has been classified and how it comes to be classified in the first place is a function of the procedures through which it has been produced. Those procedures, in the case of the South London Road project, produced photographs originally classified as records. However when reinscribed in socio/semiotic relations of a different kind, the photographs were reclassified: these new relations reworked the photographs' original received meanings. In other words, a photograph's meaning has a potential career. The second focus of this paper explores the early careers of my photographs' meanings.

That second focus blurs the distinction between 'made' and 'found' photographs, since I treat my own 'made' photographs as 'found'.⁴ More significantly however, the two aspects of my South London Road project, taken together, point to the complex, possibly irresolvable, theoretical status of the photograph.⁵ One can say that the photograph is a record of reality; it is existential proof of something out there,⁶ but it is not a neutral record because it is differently interpreted in each viewing context. The meaning of the photograph, like that of all images, floats, and is never finally fixed. In this paper I have perhaps given more attention to the meanings of photographs, and in particular to some of the early careers of my photographs' meanings (focus 2), than to what they show (focus 1). This is because 'what they show', despite being the approach taken by most of the South London Road residents themselves - and one, furthermore, which correctly predicts that a photograph of a person can compromise their safety, proves to be less theoretically fertile. However, the tension between 'made' and 'found', between 'showing' and 'meaning', between 'record' and 'interpretation' is intentionally present throughout the essay and I have made little attempt to resolve it.

South London Road

South London Road is a short road in a south west London suburb which grew up round the River Wandle (Figure 1, extreme right) and has been industrial since the Middle Ages. Its 36 small terrace houses were built c. 1908 (the residents of No. 6 have seen the deeds to their house). This aerial view, downloaded by a resident of No.18, is part of a civilian project which developed out of a military surveillance programme.



Figure 1

The house exteriors are quite pretentious, with granite pillars; but the insides are modest. The image in Figure 2, believed to date from the 1930s, was donated by the residents of No. 11, but several households have the same or a similar image displayed on their walls. In 1955, the residents of no. 18 paid £1,800 for their house. Soon afterwards, the beneficial effects of the 1952 Clean Air Act began to be felt (added to which this location has good transport to Central London), the attractions of the outer suburbs started to fade and house prices on the road steadily increased. Figure 3, a press photograph donated by the residents of No. 26, shows the South London Road Queen's Silver Jubilee party in 1977. Figure 4 indicates how the road looked in 2000. By then the houses were selling for about £300,000. Media workers and a banker were among the latest arrivals. One resident told me that our area now had the highest percentage of children under five per head of the population in Europe.⁷



Figure 2

Method

In May 2000, using the names on the Electoral Roll, I wrote to each household and introduced my research project. I said I wanted to capture a 'slice of life in the year 2000' by making a photographic inventory of the residents of our road. I stressed that the project was non-commercial, but that it might be published - implying that what residents said to me was not in confidence. I assured them that the photographs would be quickly done - it was just a matter of snapping them outside their front door and I offered each household a free copy of their photograph. I said I would be calling on them within a fortnight and that I welcomed questions. Meanwhile, I talked to people I knew in the road and hoped they would put it about that I was friendly and that the project was exciting. I did this mainly via



Figure 3



Figure 4

the South London Road German class which I had previously joined.⁸ I also started a field diary which I kept up on a daily basis. Many of my remarks in this paper are based on those diary entries. After ten days I visited each house in turn and asked to photograph the residents. I used two 35mm compact cameras; one with colour film, the other with slide film. After the film had been commercially processed, I gave each household their print, but at the same time asked the residents to write a caption for their photograph, for this would allow them more control over the image's meaning and would assist me with analyzing the photographs. If people hesitated, I suggested they might say five things.

Figure 5 shows that out of 36 households there were two complete refusals. Four households said I could photograph the front door, but not themselves; while 30 households agreed to participate fully. That amounts to 89 per cent complete or partial acceptances, which - it is interesting to note - corresponds with the experience of the photographer, Jason Evans. He approaches people in the street and asks to photograph them. On average 90 per cent say yes, though they are more likely to in Newcastle or Birmingham than in London.⁹ So if I had chosen a street other than my own, especially in Newcastle or Birmingham, I might well have got the same percentage of acceptances. Two captions were provided on the spot. The rest were posted through my door later, mostly done by women - and probably out of a sense of duty, which may indicate something about gender priorities in everyday life.

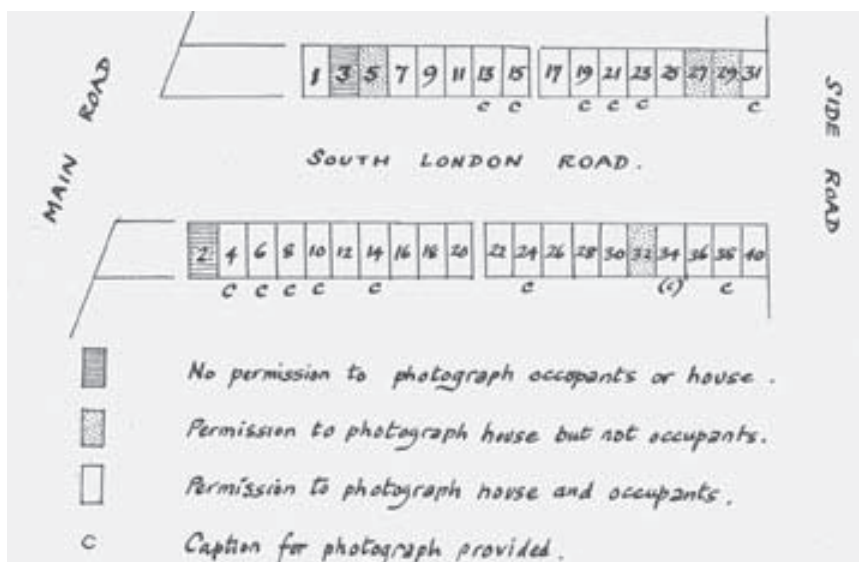


Figure 5

In February 2002, I sent another letter to the 30 households who had participated fully in the project, telling them that the material would soon be published but with the name of the road changed. I gave them the option of having their real name published alongside their photograph, or of having it changed. 27 households replied to my letter, including two who had, by now, moved away from South London Road. Of these 27, 18 wished their real name to be used, while nine said they preferred their name to be changed, with two of those nine choosing their own new name. Three residents asked for a copy of the published paper and I agreed to their requests. However, three of the households which had moved away from South London Road since May 2000 could no longer be traced in 2002, so their photographs have been withheld from publication. The four households who allowed me to photograph their front doors are represented here by my images of their doors. The two households who declined to participate in the project are not recorded photographically in this paper.

In the next section the residents' photographs and captions are listed in house order from No.1 to No. 40. They could, of course, have been classified differently, and perhaps, from a sociological viewpoint, more interestingly. For example, Goffman (1979) offers a way of grouping images according to different displays of gender inequality; but although his ideas do indeed inform my analyses in the next section, Smith (1996) has convincingly warned that Goffman's categories are 'stronger on conceptual inspiration than methodological guidance' (p.6). Alternatively, following Hall (1973/4), images might be grouped according to how different types of caption produce visual meaning. However, less than half the South London Road images are captioned. In any case, the residents were originally given to expect a house-by-house visual record of South London Road residents: that is, a sense in which the photographs and text follow the course of the road from one end to the other; and that is what I, as a member of that community, owe them to produce. This classification structure is, in itself, not without sociological interest. For example, Figure 5 shows that residents living at the ends of the road, especially those close to the main road, are least likely to partake in the project. The sense that they feel less part of a community of residents than those at the centre of the road is corroborated by Josephine Browne who made a photographic survey of her own north London street in 2001.¹⁰ She said that because it was a cul-de-sac, the sense of community was very strong and almost all its residents wanted to take part in her project.

Recording the residents: Nos. 1 - 40 South London Road

No.1 Austin Spink and friend [Fig 6]

There was too much sunlight, but I had to work quickly because they were going out. Austin, the one at the front, told me he was South African and a tenant; the one at the back was his friend. Perhaps he is at the back because he did not belong in the road. They had not seen my letter, so at first they were somewhat bemused to be involved in a photographic project, but they soon became interested in it and were happy to be photographed. They told me there were four other tenants but did not suggest I come back to photograph them.



Figure 6

No.3

The lady of the house greeted me warmly. She had often stopped to chat on previous occasions when she was fetching her son from school, but now she said her husband did not want to participate in the project and she could not be photographed without his consent. She would rather I did not photograph the front door either.

The refusals intrigued the other residents (if asked, I told them who had refused but not why). A majority of these refusals involved people of Asian origin. So I asked the local chemist, himself of Asian origin, if he knew why that might be. He said that most people of Asian origin in our road were Muslims and that Muslim women were supposed to have their heads covered; but that in this country they often did not. He thought they might have not wanted a photograph of themselves without their head covered. Indeed they might not have wanted a public photograph taken of themselves by someone perceived to be from a different cultural background.

No.4 Tara and Chris Bramwell [Fig 7]

Here we see a young man and a young woman, standing close together, and smiling. Before going into more detail, let us return for a moment to Figure 6, which was not captioned. I relied entirely on the brief entry from my field diary to make sense of the image, rather than analyzing the image *per se*.

For, as Patricia Holland (2001: 152) notes: ‘...the simple shot of a subject presenting themselves to the camera, standing perhaps in front of a famous monument or beside a car or house, but basically just *being there*. Yet this is the least readable of images, depending heavily on knowledge of the subject, on why the picture was taken and on its context’. However, Erving Goffman’s (1979) analysis of gender relations in photographs suggests how images such as this one in Figure 7 might be treated in their own right. In a chapter entitled ‘Gender Commercials’, Goffman analyses some 500 advertising and news photographs, in order to locate conventions that signal the male’s social superiority over the female, and the female’s over her children. For example, under the general heading of ‘licenced withdrawal’ Goffman identifies the convention of snuggling. ¹¹ He notes that small children snuggle into women and are thus protected from the world outside. As they grow up, this support is gradually withdrawn. ‘But women, as men’s children, have licence to snuggle men, on the assumption that the use of the man’s body is less likely to have sexual intent than if the man did it, and is thus less suspect than his of hers.’ (pp.77-8). Figure 7 does indeed suggest snuggling along the lines of Goffman’s analysis of similar images; which then forces a consideration of Tara and Chris’s relationship in terms of ‘licenced withdrawal’. We may or may not be convinced by this general principle of gender presentation which Goffman extracts from his array of photographs (I find it helpful); but at a more general level, his ‘pictorial pattern analysis’ (p. 25) certainly throws light on the problem of extracting sociological knowledge from an array of photographs when treated as data worthy of analysis *in their own right*.



Figure 7
The house before marriage ¹³

Goffman talks about what an image shows (i.e. the first focus of this project). However, his theoretical approach to photographs is complex. In one of the dense verbal essays which precedes the final chapter containing his pictorial pattern analysis, he argues that the reason why we can talk about what a photograph ‘shows’ is because people from the same culture interpret a given image similarly: our previous shared cultural experiences incline us to give it the same basic meaning. However, the way Goffman’s text and images are laid out in the final chapter of his book *Gender Advertisements* is a tacit acknowledgment that the meaning of an image can never be pinpointed with absolute certainty. Each page is organized in vertical columns. At the top of the left hand column is a category heading - a named principle of gender display, for example, ‘licenced withdrawal’. Then come one or two very dense paragraphs telling us what to look out for and then come the images. Thus Goffman makes sure we refine our basic shared interpretations of the images along his preferred lines.¹² Perhaps the main difference between his strategy and the second focus of my paper is that while Goffman is concerned with meaning and the *status quo*, I am more interested in how meanings change.

In the cases where a caption is supplied for the photograph, we tend to leave the realms of ‘what the photograph shows’, and enter those of ‘what the image means’. Goffman does not discuss how a caption affects an image’s meaning since his purpose is to derive sociological information from what an array of photographic images shows; but Goffman also transforms the information in the captions into meaning via what are in effect his own captions (the dense paragraphs preceding the images which tell us what to look out for). It would surely be against his interests to point out that he was the creator of the meaning. *This* caption was thought up on the spot by Chris, who said he wanted ‘to emphasize the difference from the situation when the house was built’. So he is reworking the photo-as-record; he is using the caption to bring in social history and thus to reclassify the image. As Stuart Hall (1973/4) says, the caption selects one particular meaning for the image and then amplifies it. It works roughly like this: We see a woman and a man close together, happy, in front of a house. Then we read the caption: it tells us these two lived in the house together but were not yet married. Now the image comes into its own again. With the help of the caption, we now view these people according to the wider ideological theme of ‘modern living’. We see two confident-looking people who were rejecting yesterday’s values in which marriage came before buying a house. Everything about these two now seemed to suggest they were promoting today’s social norms and values. This reading of the image seems like factual information obtained from the photo itself. However, photos never record neutrally. The ideological work of the caption is being absorbed into the photo and disguised as visual denotation.

Chris and Tara said they were getting married soon. They used to live nearer central London, but they love this area. They rather assumed, like a lot of other residents, that what I was interested in was the history of the area.

No.5 [Fig 8]

The lady of the house came to the door and declined to be photographed - no reason given - but was willing for me to take the front door; and she asked about the project. She was very friendly and had a reputation among other neighbours for being so. She was of Asian origin and married to a White man. They had two small children (now three). Later, when I met her in the street, she said she hoped the project was going well.



Figure 8

No.6 Mrs Nellie Horton and Dr Nigel Horton [Fig 9]

Goffman suggests that social weight is often shown by greater girth and height and that this may be emphasized by the poses taken by the man and woman in relation to each other. Figure 12 could be considered a case in point. Goffman also talks about ‘function ranking’: in a collaboration between a man and a woman, given that there is one executive role, the man takes it. Dr Horton does so: with his foot across the threshold, his role is that of protector.

**Figure 9**

The photograph shows Mrs Nellie Horton (born 31/12/1914) and her son, Dr Nigel Horton. The family purchased No.6 in 1968, and by 2000 were among the longest standing residents of South London Road. The front of the house, including the front door, is basically as built, although the railings and gate (not visible) are 1970s replacements for those removed in the scrap metal drive in the Second World War.

This caption is quite different from the previous one. Instead of reclassifying the photo, a record as a visual comment on how customs have changed, this caption reworks it as a serious, systematic, historical document. It describes in a plain manner items that can, and cannot, be seen in the photo, and backs this up with further historical facts. Back now at the photo event, it seems apparent who wrote the caption. It was the man, Dr Nigel Horton, who does now seem to have the air of a scientist-intellectual, which gave his stance, his protection of the older woman, an appropriate gravitas. Again the ideological, connotative work of the caption, in this case to do with science, men and serious information, is absorbed into the photo as fact; although Dr Horton probably intended his caption to be an addition to the image, rather than pinning down one reading of it.

He told me he was a statistician at a London educational institute and had visited the Open University at Walton Hall. I explained the project fairly fully to him. He talked about the history of the local shops, which he would like to make the focus of a project of his own.

No.7 Sallie Lilley and daughter Hannah [Fig 10]

Goffman observes that in photographs of family groups, men often show non-sexual support to women through the laying on of hands. Where the man is absent, the women may take on that role in relation to a child, as in this image. Indeed, in several of the South London Road photos, the fathers were simply not there. Most worked long hours, usually in central London, and were rarely at home. (In this case, however, Mr Lilley was upstairs, but Mrs Lilley did not suggest we wait for him). Equally, this image could be read in terms of Goffman's category of 'licenced withdrawal': as the child grows older, close contact with the mother gradually decreases. Hannah chatted to me about her school, which was just round the corner.

**Figure 10****No.8 John and Susan Coleman and son Tom** [Fig 11]

There is no laying on of hands in this image; but note the woman's protective stance towards the child, which Goffman anticipates will be withdrawn as the child grows older. (Because there *is* a child, the woman is not the man's child).

Now reading image and caption together, the image's meaning refocuses: these people read as contented, reliable, middle-class, long-standing residents.

Mrs Coleman had already discussed the project with no. 14, and was very keen on it. They agreed it was 'a millennium thing'. She wanted to know who had refused; and whether the results would be published. Later I met her in the street and she said 'do let us know if there's going to be a talk on the project'. So I decided to have one. I gave a slide show at my house for the whole road at Christmas

**Figure 11**

John and Susan Coleman with son Tom. We live at number8, South London Road. John is a Traffic Engineer. Susan is a Lecturer.

We moved here in 1978, and we like living here.

No.9 Mrs Lydia Zarnecki [Fig 12]

Goffman's analysis is not relevant because the photograph contains only one person. Perhaps being a lone woman, she stood further into the house for protection, rather than on the doorstep. Mrs Zarnecki was Polish. Her husband died about 12 years ago. At first, she was reluctant to be photographed. I reminded her that we had already met and talked about the accident she had had a few months earlier when she was hit by a car. When she realized she knew me, she agreed to participate. She told me she had a degree in economics, but now spent much time painting pictures and making ceramics. She was respected for her education, art production and independence. [No caption supplied]



Figure 12

No.10 Christopher and Rebecca Lacey and daughters Imogen and Jenny [Fig 13]

Goffman observes that an indication of 'function ranking' is that socially inferior members sometimes act cutely, and do clowning, which superior members are unlikely to do. In terms of 'licensed withdrawal', older children receive less parental protection. Both these observations seem relevant to Figure 13.

Reading image and caption together now, their 'mayhem' seems to permeate everything: the wild kids, the easy-relaxed stance of the parents; even the broom, the curtain, the ivy and the absent cats seem tinged with mayhem.

The Laceys were very interested in the project. They waited for Mr Lacey to be home from America for the photograph. Mrs Lacey did a history degree and wanted to be a writer but now worked part time as a fund-raiser for a charity. Her husband was a flautist, playing for London shows.



Figure 13

No.10 South London Road.
From front to back: Jenny, Immy, Chris and Becky. This is the entire family, minus the cats, Midnight and Rufus. The humans have been at No.10 for 8 1/2 years (since Immy and Jenny were 6 months old) and the cats for 3 1/2 years. It's a great house and copes with our mayhem pretty well.

No.11 Joanne Bacon, Robert Greenwood and daughter Georgia [Fig 14]

Poor light. I caught them just as they were going out, after several attempted visits. They showed me the picture of old South London Road in their hall and suggested I photograph it (I did) and told me where I could get the negative, but did not ask any questions about the project. Both parents worked full-time. Georgia had just started school. They were keen on cycling and often went out at the weekend with their bikes. (From now on, the Goffman and Hall-type analyses are shortened, or omitted entirely in cases similar to those already discussed). [No caption supplied]



Figure 14

No.12 Emma Spencer, Henry Norris and their dog [Fig 15]

This photograph was taken on the third visit, as previously they had not been ready for me. They agreed to be photographed out of neighbourly respect but asked no questions and offered no comments. At the Christmas party (which they were not able to attend) many old-timers talked about the previous residents of their house, an architect (see altered front door - 'a devil to paint', says the decorator) and his wife, Alison, who still helped at the first school nearby. [No caption supplied]



Figure 15

No.13 Catherine Creed-Bovill, son Sebastian and daughters Isabel and Ana [Fig 16]

This is a case where the father worked long hours and was often absent from home. The middle child had a security blanket rather than her mother to snuggle. Mrs Bovill was very friendly and encouraging. When asked for a caption for a photo, which was to be part of an academic project, she said laughingly, ‘do you want 20,000 words?’



Figure 16

The Bovill family: Sebastian 6 years Isabel 3 years, and Ana 1 year Anne-Catherine (Norwegian) John (1/2 spanish).

We moved back from Madrid last summer. Sebastian goes to the Oratory primary school in Chelsea - he speaks English, Spanish and Norwegian and is doing really well. Isabel and Ana are both still at home.

Anne-Catherine and John are both architects.

Anne-Catherine is at home with the children for the time being.

John is currently working on the Battersea Power station development.

Note that some captions refer to people and events that are not depicted.

No.14 Carole and Roger Owen [Fig 17]

Goffman (1979) observes that ‘the woman often smiles; the man doesn’t’. He suggests that the smile is the offering of an inferior; she wants to be a member of the group at hand; but he does not have to make the effort.



Figure 17

Roger and Carole Owen are our names
Train driver and legal receptionist
are our games

We’ve been here since 75
Children none - cats five!

Shops were plenty - now are few
Cars have increased considerably
too

District and Main Line trains are to
hand

And all our neighbours have
generally been grand

So we have stayed here all this
time
Simply because it has suited us
fine

(and we have liked it here).

Carole Owen

When viewed in conjunction with this remarkable offering, the image signals that Mrs Owen was an unusual and special legal receptionist - either that, or that legal receptionists are very imaginative people. Mrs Owen stressed to me that 'we are very ordinary, really', which makes the image even more complex to interpret.

She was keen on the project all the way through. She chatted about the long-time residents and how the road had changed over the years. She noted that instead of moving out when families grow larger, some people now built loft extensions. She said she loved producing these poems. Another resident told me that these poems were much admired.

No.15 Toby and Alison Cooper [Fig 18]

The man adopts a non-sexual protective stance - as does Tony Blair photographed with Cherie, outside 10 Downing Street.



Figure 18

We are Toby and Alison Cooper - plus one. By October there'll be three of us. We moved into number 15 in January. I think we're the newest additions to South London Road. We love this house.

Alison also wrote that this photo would go into one of their family albums. So it had been initially classified as record, then reclassified, via the caption, as a new South London Road happy family group, and then - perhaps minus caption - as a family album snap. At the Christmas slide show, they brought Daisy, their new daughter. Toby assured me they now have a lampshade.



Figure 19

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No.16 Claire and Pascal Guignabaudet and two of their children. [Fig 20]

There was another child - a baby - indoors (and by 2002 there were four children). The Guignabaudets were French: he came from Annecy, she from Lille. They had not been in the UK very long, and they said the children were just starting to learn English. They had organized an attempt to get road bumps installed in order to reduce the speed of cars in the road, but nothing had come of it yet.

[No caption supplied]



Figure 20

No.17 [Name unknown]

There were three tenants, but I never found them all in at once. On my third visit I photographed the only one at home at the time, so as not to have to bother them any more. [Photograph not reproduced. No caption supplied]

No.18 Iris Carter and sons Robin and Allan [Fig 21]

It is difficult to apply Goffman's analysis to this image. Three adults: one older woman, with a younger man on either side; though the one on the right stands somewhat apart.



Figure 21

The survivors

The Carters had lived longest in the road. Robin (left) was born there. They were excited about the project and immediately started thinking up captions. ‘The Survivors of the Carter family’ was the first. Then they received a letter from a genealogy firm saying that they had Carter relations in Australia. So they shortened their caption to ‘The Survivors’. After seeing the other captions at the Christmas slide show, Robin talked about altering it again. He thought theirs might be misleading. It turned out to be: some viewers took the caption to mean that the Carters were only just surviving. This shows that the caption helps shape the meaning of the image but may not succeed in finally fixing it.

Robin downloaded the aerial view (Figure 1) from the Internet. He used to run a removals business but now he and his mother invested in the stock market. John (right) was disabled. Mr Carter senior died about nine years previously. Mrs Carter asked for extra copies of the photograph to put in the family album - so it had now been reclassified again. In fact three families asked for extra copies.

No.19 Caroline and Christopher Grafham [Fig 22]

Here is another example of the man executing a ‘non-sexual protective stance’, which Goffman also refers to as ‘effecting a miniature border control’. Again, the woman smiles while the man does not.



Figure 22

We are Chris and Carie Grafham. We have lived in this, our first house since our marriage in October 1998. Captured in our bath-rob, we are not looking our best! Especially as I have had another restless night due to my 7 month pregnancy. And yes, we have cut the hedge now!

As in the case of No.14, we now read the image from the woman’s point of view. They asked: does it matter about being in dressing gowns? I said no, not at all.

No.20 Vicky Blaney-Kenny and sons Sam and Harry [Fig 23]



Figure 23

Dear Elizabeth, (20 South London)
Occupants - Vicky and Paul (New Zealander), children. Sam (7)
Harry (15 months)

Hoping to move to New Zealand in the future to enjoy a more simpler way of life, to get away from the stresses of London.

We have lived here 8 years and although we enjoy living here we feel we would like to move on. We would like our children to grow up nearer the sea and countryside.

(If possible may we have 2 further copies of the photograph you kindly took. The one with all 3 of us on)

Thanks.

The meaning of the photograph was reworked twice here. Its original meaning 'as record' was changed by the caption. The 'further copies' will acquire other meanings.

At first Vicky said she did not know if they were eligible to be in the project as they were moving to New Zealand soon. She told me she managed a building society branch for 18 years but was now at home. This is the second photograph I took, as the elder boy was away when I took the first one, and he was anxious not to be left out because he thought that if he was in the photograph, he might 'get famous'.

No.21 Mark Fogarty and sons Ignatius, Patrick and Dominic [Fig 24]

Here 'licenced withdrawal' is complete: the father (is that the father, back right?) does not protect his teenage boys.



Figure 24

Motherless boys

The caption writer (back right) knew how a caption could shape meaning, and was perhaps playing games with us by skewing the photo's meaning, and making us wonder if they were all orphans. However they had usually got a 'mother' full time at home. They came from Australia and Mark's wife had gone back there for three months because her father had died. Mark was very interested in the project, especially in the refusals. He was a financial adviser at a City bank. The boys went to the London Oratory School (by 2002, the eldest was at London University).

No.22 Jeremy Tisdall [Fig 25]

Mr Tisdall was a researcher for a Merchant Bank in the City. He told me he was Irish and studied Sociology as a second subject at University so I explained the project to him more fully. He said it sounded pretty good, but wondered about the value of generalizing from it. More recently he explained that he did not write a caption because he felt that banking sounded boring. [No caption supplied]

**Figure 25****No.23 Ursula and Malcolm Bowen** [Fig 26]

At first Mrs Bowen was doubtful about having her house photographed. Then she agreed, on condition that I showed the roses, but not the rest of the house. This suggests that she classified the photograph as evidence (a stronger version of the photograph as record?). Indeed, the reason for most hesitations, refusals and negotiations about what should be photographed revolved around a reluctance to reveal something, like a person's own identity, or the state of part of the premises; which indicates the potential photograph being treated as evidence.

**Figure 26**

I am Swiss and teach German.
My husband, a journalist,
comes from South Wales. Our
daughter was born in London
and went to school in
Wimbledon and Putney. We
have been living in this house
for 20 years.

Mrs Bowen was my German teacher. I shared lessons with Patricia Fogarty from No. 21. Both the Bowens were linguists and Mr Bowen used to work on a French-English dictionary. They had a daughter, Sarah, aged 27, who had recently left home. Mrs Bowen later asked for six more copies of their photo to send to relatives in Wales and in Switzerland - where their meaning will be reworked in quite different contexts.

No.24 Stephen and Elizabeth Chaplin and grandson Tom. [Fig 27]

Here we see the mirror image of the trio at No.11 [Fig 14] with the man's head inclined very slightly towards the little child, the adults standing on the doorstep while the child gains height by standing on the lintel and everyone holding hands - except that in *this* case, the age gap between adults and child looks somewhat larger.



Figure 27

Stephen, Tom and Elizabeth Chaplin, in the doorway of no.24 South London Road. Stephen and Elizabeth live here and Tom, their grandson, has come to tea. He lives nearby in Balham. We (Stephen and Elizabeth) have lived in this house since 1991. This photograph was taken (exceptionally) by Robin Carter who lives at No 18. He had great difficulty in taking it because it was raining hard at the time.

I wrote the caption, after my husband, who originally had the idea of producing a visual one in order to generate a different kind of analytical problem, failed to do so. He is an artist, retired from University teaching. We moved to Wimbledon Park from Leeds ten years ago. Our grandson lives nearby.

No.25 Anita and Simon Barclay and their two children [Fig 28]

Goffman (1979) observes, under the heading of 'family structure', that the woman usually holds the baby, and the man holds the larger child, as here.



Figure 28

This photograph was taken late evening, in pouring rain. They were just off on holiday, hoping the children, in pyjamas, would sleep at night in the car. [No caption supplied]

No.26 Rose and Sidney Greenway [Fig 29]

Mr and Mrs Greenway, my next-door neighbours, had lived in the road for over 40 years. Both kept the accounts for various firms until they retired. Rose was very supportive and encouraging when I started the project. She suggested that it would be a bit like when she collected in the road for the Charity, Help the Aged. She predicted that the young people, in particular, would co-operate. The Greenways showed me an old photograph of South London Road in their hall. Sidney could not see why anyone would refuse to co-operate with the scheme because 'the photos don't tell you anything so I don't see why anyone should refuse'. Here he is reinforcing Holland's (2001) observation that the simple shot of a subject presenting themselves to the camera is the least readable of images. Rose was not pleased with her appearance in this image, so the photograph is unlikely to be reclassified as family album material. However, two professional art workers, looking at the set of South London Road photographs on separate occasions, referred to this photograph, and *only* this one, as being 'good'. Neither expanded on their pronouncement, nor seemed to think it necessary to do so. Following Victor Burgin's (1986) remark that art demands judgment, I conclude that the photographs were being reclassified as art. [No caption supplied]

**Figure 29****No.27** [Fig 30]

A lady came to the door, and declined to be photographed. However she allowed me to photograph the door. The family was of Asian origin. Shortly after my visit, a 'for sale' notice appeared outside the house, but it was taken down later, apparently without the house being sold. [No caption supplied]

**Figure 30****No.28 John Richards and Isobel**

John and Isobel were partners. They had forgotten about the letter, and took the project lightly. Isobel said they were moving to North London because this area did not suit them. John said 'all the best with the project'. He was 'in advertising'; she was an aromatherapist. They moved away quite soon after the photograph was taken. [Photograph not reproduced. No caption supplied]

No.29 [Fig 31]

A lady came to the door and declined to participate on the grounds that ‘we are rarely here’, so hardly part of the street. ‘But do take the house’. [No caption supplied]



Figure 31

No.30 Frank Smith and Julia James

Julia worked in the Education department of the local Borough Council. They told me they were going to sell the house and go round the world. By the end of the year they had sold it and gone. Their neighbours said she was clever and had transformed the garden. [Photograph not reproduced. No caption supplied]

No.31 Helen [and Edward] Gaffney, sons Freddy and Jack and daughter Georgia. [Fig 32]

Under the heading of ‘family structure’, Goffman (1979) notes the protective arms of parents. However in this photograph, the father is out of the frame - he worked long hours away from home.



Figure 32

My adorable children, Freddy 7 yrs, Jack 4 yrs and Georgia, 9 months with Mummy after school.

Mrs Gaffney was encouraging about the project, and said the children would think up a caption, but in the end she did it.

No.32 Jean Byrne and John Clarkson [Fig 33]

Jean regretfully declined to be photographed. However, she was very interested in the scheme and kindly said: 'Do photograph the garden, back and front, and inside, if you like'. I photographed the front door. So it seems that this is another case where the photograph was classified as evidence. Jean came to the Christmas party at my house, where she was a lively presence, offering information about both past and present residents. She also said she would like a copy of the paper when it was published. I promised her one. [No caption supplied]

**Figure 33****No.34 Mabel Dunton** [Fig 34. Caption: Mrs Mabel Dunton, standing at the front door of her house, No. 34 South London Road, in May 2000. No photograph shown]

A lone woman stands inside in the hall, perhaps for protection. Her stance is similar to that taken by the woman at No.9 (Fig 12). Mrs. Dunton moved away from the road shortly after the photograph was taken, and I cannot trace her to obtain her permission to publish the photograph. Mrs Dunton was a long-standing resident, who used to do 'B&B' at her house. She was quite willing to co-operate, but when I asked for a caption, she said 'Oh, you do it', so I did. I aimed for a neutral-type of caption, hoping that it would meet with her approval.

No.36 Zoe Burdett and daughter [Fig 35]

Mrs Burdett said: ‘will we do?’, implying that at the moment the family was incomplete. Her baby was five months old. She asked me in, and about the project. She said she did not want the photograph if it was awful (cf. the remark by the woman at No. 26). I gave it to her and let her decide. [No caption supplied]



Figure 35

No.38 Stephen Osborne, Debbie Barnes and daughters Rebecca and Laura [Fig 36]

In terms of Goffman’s category of ‘function ranking’, this is another example of ‘children acting cutely and clowning’ and possibly of ‘men playing mock assault games’. In terms of ‘family structure’, the mother holds the baby, while the father holds the larger child.



Figure 36

Sorry I have taken so long to reply to your letter. Here is some details about us.

My partner Steve Osborne has lived at no. 38 for about 10 years.

My name is Debbie Barnes and my eldest daughter is Rebecca Osborne who is 6 years old. I had another daughter five months ago. Her name is Laura Osborne.

We like living here because it is quiet and the air is fresh and the people are friendly. There are lots of things for the children to do around here, eg. the park and the common.

Yours faithfully,

D.C. Barnes

When image and caption are read together, both the notions of children acting cutely and clowning, and men playing mock assault games, are somewhat downplayed, rather than being reinforced or heightened (as in the case of No.10).

Mr Osborne said he did not want the front wall to feature in the photo as he had been meaning to renovate it (the photograph as evidence). He had been doing the house up slowly for years. Rebecca asked if *she* could take the photograph. I said: well, no. Then she said, could she do what she liked in it? I said: by all means.

No.40 Elaine and Mark Goater and their three sons [Fig 37]

This photograph is an exception to the pattern which Goffman's category of 'family structure' leads us to expect: the man holds the baby while the woman's protective hand is on the elder boy. The Goater's offered to help with the Christmas party but in the end they couldn't.



Figure 37

Mrs Goater put off my visit until her husband was home. They said they liked their end of the road - theirs is the last house and they have a garage and side entrance. They asked me about the previous residents of their house. Later Mrs Goater offered to help with the Christmas party, but in the end they couldn't come. [No caption supplied]

The Christmas slide show

One third of the households were represented at the party. I showed the slides plus captions but omitted the refusals. Only one question was asked about the project: 'what was I going to do with all this material?' I replied that, at the very least, it would constitute a record of the residents in the year 2000, and that hopefully it would be published. I had expected more questions but, perhaps because I was giving hospitality, the residents just politely took what was offered and treated the occasion as a Christmas 'do'. Jason Evans, the fashion photographer, says that when he photographs people in the street, only about 30 per cent want to know what the photograph will be used for.

With slides that had no caption, the long-time residents commented on who had lived in the house before and whether they knew them and had visited the house in the past. The newer residents had nothing to say about pictures of people they did not know (confirming the intractability of the image of a person presented directly to camera - the picture's meaning was not sufficiently pinned down) and we moved straight on to the next slide. With slides that were captioned, everyone immediately began to comment - reading each slide in terms of its caption. Short captions like 'the survivors', 'house before marriage' and 'motherless boys', produced a sharp intake of breath, then some laughter, followed by lots of comments - which included admiration for the skill and imagination of the caption writers. Descriptive captions produced more talk about the residents in question and people's experience of them.

General Remarks

I embarked on a visual project but asking to photograph the residents turned out to be a good way of getting verbal data; for example, it produced the information that in May 2000 there were twelve different nationalities represented in this short road of 36 houses. Although a refusal yielded no photograph,¹⁴ the verbal explanation for the refusal sometimes hinted at something that was deeply important to that person. Indeed, one resident concluded: 'The refusals are more interesting than the acceptances because they give you a lot to think about, but with the acceptances you just get a photo'. This remark again confirms Holland's (2001) observation that the simple shot of a subject presenting themselves to the camera is the least readable of images. Several residents provided additional visual material. Others told me how they would have conducted the project; how I could use it to teach students; how I should continue with my research.¹⁵ However, most people were just content to be photographed and few were concerned about how their image would be used. They had their own demanding lives to cope with, especially the young professional families; and I doubt whether there will be another South London Road party. Indeed, by the time of publication (May 2002), five sets of residents had moved away from the road and a sixth house was up for sale. That is to say, one sixth of the households of South London Road had changed hands in 23 months. This movement of people in and out of the street suggests the transient connections of everyday life for some in contemporary society.¹⁶ Bearing in mind one resident's remark that we have the highest percentage of children under five in Europe, it seems likely that these relocations involved young families whose breadwinners, men and women, were making career moves.

Theorizing the project

The photographs and captions, laid out above, can be treated as factual information; as a record of the residents of South London Road during one fortnight in May 2000 (the first - and original - focus of this project). As an archive of information, the photographs and captions could be placed in the local history section of our borough library. However, because photographs contain factual information, when sociologists make photographs *as part of their research*, they almost invariably interrupt and problematize standard working practices.¹⁷ While the Electoral Roll contains real names of roads and real names of people living in those roads, it contains no photographs; and since it is freely available for public inspection, it is evidently not considered a security risk. However, in a photographic survey, the risk becomes apparent. Photographs draw readers' attention to what real individual people look like and that attention is a potential threat to those people's privacy. Even if I had cut this paper down to being, in effect, an illustrated Electoral Roll, it would have been advisable to change the name of the road because people, especially those living alone, do not want to *show* themselves to potential intruders.

Many South London Road residents were happy to have their real names published alongside their photograph, once the name of the road had been changed. Nevertheless, publishing verbal comments and analysis alongside someone's real name and photograph is a matter of more urgent ethical significance than if no photograph was involved. This is because a very particular kind of trust has been placed in the photographer; in effect, a resident has said: 'I am trusting you with a part of me.' Furthermore, the resultant 'text' consists of visual record intertwined with verbal (constructed, if not actually fabricated) discourse. Does this intertwining violate the trust that the photographee has placed in the photographer? Asking this brings into question aspects of sociological practice, which in turn may result in the researcher's 'room for manoeuvre' being curtailed. For example, many items in my field diary were omitted in the writing up because, when read against a visual record of a real person, they might be considered to have violated that trust. So

while the photograph contributes to an understanding of everyday life a more immediate and detailed account of an individual person than verbal description⁸ could achieve, it also exacts a social scientific price. Publication involves further problems. How do the laws relating to personal privacy apply to this particular photographic project? (No photograph here has been reproduced without the written consent of the photographee.¹⁸) It is very likely that no one can definitively state how personal privacy laws apply to this case.¹⁹ All these issues, originating in personal experience, arise because photographs record. However, note that social scientists, *whatever their theoretical persuasion*, routinely use photographs as recording devices. Here I have focused solely on problems associated with making photographs as part of a piece of sociological research; but, equally, those social scientists who use 'found' photographs as illustrations in articles that they write may have to face the problem that the photograph-as-illustration is not compatible with theorizing the photograph as polysemic.²⁰

So the power of the photograph as record is very real. However, as I said at the beginning of this paper, that record is not a neutral one. The photograph's very existence and original meaning are a function of the historical and socially specific procedures through which it has been produced and then classified. Let us now treat the South London Road data as an artefact of these procedures, which, in this case, had to do with my previous career as a sociologist, as an NECP researcher, as a photographer, a woman, a neighbour and a resident of ten years standing. A combination of all of these informed my initial letter to the residents, shaped the initial interaction with each set of residents and played a major part in generating the data and bringing it into meaning - classifying it - as a visual inventory, a record. Subsequently many residents followed me in classifying their photo as a record. Indeed, many of those who hesitated, negotiated or refused, treated their potential photo as hard evidence of something they did not wish to be made publicly available. When a photo is classified as a record, it is reasonable - as many residents thought - to treat the captions as additional information. So these residents' captions supplied extra verbal information about what was, and was not, in the photo. Following Hall (1973/4), the image's meaning is shaped by the caption. Without it, the meaning of the image floats (confirmed at the Christmas slide-show, where people were unsure what to say when they were presented with an uncaptioned photo of residents they did not know). One resident, at least, knew he could play tricks with the caption, using it to gently tease viewers into supposing that those boys had no mother. However, though a caption may give an image a particular meaning, it can never fix it for all future contexts in which that image is viewed. At an earlier showing of this material, audience members took 'The survivors' to mean that the Carters were only just surviving, but that was not the meaning Iris Carter used her caption to produce. Then we are also told that some photos went into family albums, or that additional copies were sent to relatives - with or without their captions - where they will acquire new meanings unknown to us. Indeed, looking at the photos (minus captions) at a later date, I used Goffman's analysis to consider gender inequalities. This gave these photos new sociological meaning for me. The careers of some of these images may be long and eventful. In this project I have charted the early stages of their careers.

Finally: through this project, I got to sense the character of the road, and even helped shape it for a while. At one point, when I was in the thick of photographing, I had a strong sense that our road was a living, breathing organism; a myriad of interlocking events and processes carrying us on towards the end of the day. I found I could envisage a little of what was happening behind almost every front door: the invisible began to swim into sight, like the hidden shapes in a child's magic painting book. My thanks are due to the residents for opening those doors and sharing something of themselves with me.²¹

Notes

¹ I am very grateful to Elizabeth Silva for her guidance, comments and encouragement during the preparation of this paper. I thank Peter Hamilton for obtaining the funding that made the research possible in the first place.

² The Programme is based in Sociology at the Open University, UK.

³ The Open University is divided into 13 geographical regions in the UK for administrative purposes.

⁴ Jo Spence (1986) also muddies this distinction, though not in the same way. She critically rereads old family snaps of herself and her family. She also makes new photographs of herself, which mimic the poses in snaps taken of her as a baby.

⁵ Erving Goffman (1979) has provided one of the most interesting treatments of this theoretical problem. Later in this paper, I draw attention to his work in this area.

⁶ Howard Becker (2001) draws a distinction between existential proof and compelling proof. He argues that photographs are existential proof of something out there; of reality.

⁷ Of course, this is a sort of statistical data that is difficult to prove, but it indicates a great prevalence of children in the area.

⁸ An informal language class consisting of one teacher and three pupils - all residents of South London Road.

⁹ Jason Evans is a fashion photographer but he also photographs people in the street. He offered this information during the course of a formal talk on the occasion of an exhibition of his photographs at the Canon Photography Gallery, Victoria and Albert Museum in London, on March 7th 2001.

¹⁰ Personal communication; and also as reported by Christopher Middleton in *The Telegraph*, 2.02.2002. However my attention was first drawn to Browne's project by a South London Road resident, Patricia Fogarty of no. 21. She showed me an article in *The Sunday Times*, 13.1.02, by Dominique Coughlin, entitled: 'Your open invitation behind closed doors'. This article explains Browne's project, which included photographing residents' front rooms. I contacted Browne, met her, and she gave me the *Telegraph* article.

¹¹ Goffman's explanation of licenced withdrawal is: 'Women more than men, it seems, are pictured engaged in involvements which remove them psychologically from the social situation at large, leaving them unoriented in it and to it, and presumably, therefore, dependent on the protectiveness and goodwill of others who are (or might come to be) present'. (1979: 57).

¹² Here I refer to Greg Smith (1996). I am indebted to the ideas in this article.

¹³ The captions lose some of their impact and individuality through being retyped in a uniform fashion. But in their original form, for example, hand-written in coloured felt pen or pencil on ornamental coloured 'notelet', some would not have been legible in reproduction.

¹⁴ That is of an actual resident, or residents.

¹⁵ For example, by concentrating on the history of the road, or by photographing resident's front rooms (see Endnote 10).

¹⁶ I am grateful to Elizabeth Silva for this observation.

¹⁷ This point was made by Professor John Wagner of the University of California at Davis, in an email correspondence, 2002.

¹⁸ Peter Lennon in *the Guardian* 'Weekend', 2.3.2002, relates how the French photographer, Willy Ronis, was recently taken to court by a person he had photographed without written permission 50 years previously.

¹⁹ A recent email correspondence between members of the International Visual Sociologists' Association suggests that the legal situation is far from clear.

²⁰ Indeed, figure 19 of Tony and Cherie Blair is a case in point.

²¹ It is worth speculating why so many residents were willing to co-operate - and indeed in two cases provided comments on this text (Patricia Fogarty at No.23 and Ursula Bowen at No.25 both read and commented on a version of this text). Clearly, the Open University (and 'education' more generally) carries a lot of goodwill, I was perhaps a trusted neighbour, and the residents gained a photo of themselves. However, Penelope Lively, in *Spiderweb*, a novel about a woman anthropologist, suggests that a woman in late middle age poses no sexual threat nor challenge.

'For young men, she is of so little interest as to be effectively invisible. For women younger than herself, she is a comforting reminder that they have not themselves got that far yet. For those around her own age, she is a reassurance: we are not alone. Accordingly all three groups are reasonably well disposed, the defences are down, an overture will be accepted with equanimity and in some quarters with enthusiasm' (Lively, 1999: p75).

*

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