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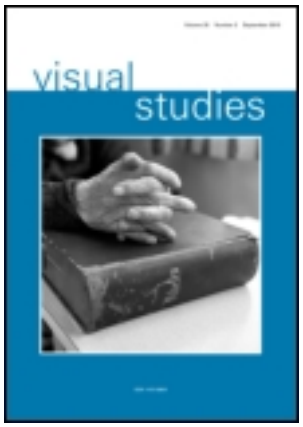

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Sociology in the blogosphere? Exploring Sociological images

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Sociology in the blogosphere? Exploring Sociological images

Sociological images: Inspiring sociological imaginations everywhere by Lisa Wade and Gwen Sharp, Washington, DC: Contexts.org. Available online at: http://thesocietypages.org/socimages/

Reviewed by Karen McCormack, Wheaton College (MA)

In the past five years, sociology blogs, as well as those with sociological content, have grown quickly, both in number and readership. A quick Google search now yields lists of the 'Best Sociology Blogs' and listings too numerous to count on related topics. Whether for professional sociologists, students or interested readers, these blogs seemingly offer something for every sociological interest in the blogosphere. With nearly half of all teenagers reading blogs, and 95% of Millenials (18–33-year-olds in 2010) online, blogs are an important new source for the dissemination of sociological thinking and a potentially important tool for classroom use (Pew Research Generations 2010 surveys).

Lisa Wade (Occidental College) and Gwen Sharp (Nevada State) have created a blog focused primarily on images and visual data dedicated to 'encourage all kinds of people to exercise and develop their sociological imagination'. Through daily posts, frequently 2–4 per day, by Sharp, Wade and guest contributors, the blog explores topics ranging from gender inequality to data mapping. With over 500,000 visits per month and over 15,000 subscribers via RSS feed, *Sociological images* reaches a wide audience. Compare this with the recent finding that only one sociology title, Barry Glassner's *The culture of fear*, sold more than 50,000 copies in the 2004–2008 period (Longhofer, Golden, and Baiocchi 2010), and the importance of alternative media for doing sociology becomes readily apparent. While the blog was initially conceived as a way of sharing ideas and examples among faculty, Sharp and Wade report that interest soon grew among non-academics, and the posts are read and re-posted by a large, non-sociologist audience. The availability of the posts through Facebook and Twitter further expands readership.

The blog is hosted by The Society Pages, an online social science site headquartered in the Sociology Department at the University of Minnesota that hosts a number of blogs of interest to social scientists. *Sociological images* can be read and explored via the website or via the daily email digest. The content ranges quite widely and a given day's feed can encompass postings on the homeless, lesbian political visibility and the environment (19 January 2011) to fashion, Barbie and Anthony Giddens (19 January 2011). There is a little something for everyone here, but the topics covered most frequently are: gender, race/ethnicity, marketing and bodies/body images. The blog devotes roughly 50% of its space to visual data, ranging from graphic representations of data to photographs, advertisements to music videos. Entering through the website, *Sociological images* has a number of features to direct the reader to posts of particular interest. The search function allows readers to type in search terms, for example, Great Depression yields a post on colour photographs from the Depression era along with other related posts. Even more helpful is a feature that filters posts by tag, where you will find tags ranging from consumption to discourse/language to dating. This function on the website allows quick identification of posts that might be relevant to a particular class or area of interest. While it is exciting to see sociology available through these media, a question that has yet to be addressed clearly is this: is sociological analysis really happening in the cyber world, or are we simply seeing a watered-down account of interesting stories? Can short posts, oftentimes devoted to images and YouTube videos with brief commentary, deliver on sociological analysis?

Mills writes of the sociological imagination that its most 'fruitful distinction' is 'between the "personal troubles of milieu" and "the public issues of social structure"' (Mills 1959, 8). *Sociological images* includes many different types of posts, and these work surprisingly well, if somewhat unevenly, to evoke questions about this distinction. My reading of the last three months of posts from the blog suggests that there are (at least) four types of posts, each type with different strengths. In some posts, the images tell most of the story and the text simply serves to draw attention to elements of the images that are significant; I will refer to this type as *visual plus*. In a second type, which I will call *text plus*, the analysis uses visuals to highlight or complement the primarily textual analysis. A third type, referred to here as *open post*, treats the images and videos as polysemic – open to multiple and contradictory interpretations from the audience. While the first two types quite often make the public issues clear, the final type does not and instead leaves much of the analytic work to the reader. I will explore a fourth type, *data display*, after the initial three since the goals for these posts appear to be more specific

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and distinct. These types, and what they seem to offer in the way of analysis, are explored below.

The posts that primarily use images to tell a story often have a clear, linear argument. In these posts, the images are displayed in a way that conveys the analysis clearly. For example, in the post entitled 'Glamorizing Brutality toward Women' (14 January 2011), a series of videos and images are used to expose the acceptability of violence against women. The first advertisement in the series is from 'The Glades', an Arts & Entertainment crime drama in which a pair of attractive female legs appear behind the speaking actor. The advertisement ends, however, with the camera panning up from the attractive legs to the bloodied face and we realise that we are seeing a dead body. A later image in the post is from a promotional website for a Bret Easton Ellis novel, *Imperial bedrooms*. The website includes a game where, as a casting director, the viewer is given choices which require exploiting the director's position to force a young woman to drink, strip, dance and otherwise abuse the presumably male director's power. Following the website excerpts, images from Kanye West's video for the song 'Monster' are presented. These show West arranging women's lifeless bodies on a bed, posing with dead women in the background, and, in one scene, holding a decapitated woman's head by the hair. The sequencing of the images, from the (more) familiar to the increasingly extreme depictions develops an argument about the normalisation of violence against women. The text is minimal, but does draw the reader from one image to the next, providing additional information and some analysis, but the point is made through the sequencing of images. In this case the sociological significance is clear: the more mundane images of violence are consistent with the more grotesque and disturbing.

The visual plus posts quite frequently use historical images to highlight continuity or change over time in very effective ways. A 28 January 2011 post entitled 'Irish Apes: Tactics of Dehumanization' displays cartoon drawings of Irish immigrants to the United States (US) depicted with simian features, drawings which are very similar to ape-like depictions of African Americans. Emblematic is a Thomas Nast cartoon from the late nineteenth century, which depicts a drunk Irishman with a torch sitting on a keg of gunpowder and is captioned as 'The Usual Irish Way of Doing Things'. Techniques of dehumanisation that appear particular to one group, in this case US Blacks, are shown to be recurring processes that we might understand as racist practice or tactic when viewed comparatively. The post itself contains only a one-paragraph introduction, followed by 10 images with some explanation and a brief conclusion. The authors of the post make the point explicit, but it is the images that tell the story. For those unfamiliar with racist imagery, the text would be of primary importance to situate the image; for sociologists, the images are valuable as examples of processes that we may study or teach. The short format of the blog creates one drawback to this type of post: a lack of discussion about the context in which the image originally appeared. The diligent reader can follow the links provided to find the original source material, but this material is rarely explored in the post itself.

The *text plus* type of post, a smaller set than the primarily visual, re-presents sociological analysis that has appeared in a variety of forms – presenting summaries of the argument but also alerting the reader to the existence of the longer versions of the work. A 22 January 2011 post, for example, links to a TED talk by Van Jones entitled 'The Economic Injustice of Plastic', along with a transcript of the 13-minute talk. Jones's argument, about the use of plastics and its devastating effects on poor people, and on the planet generally, presents an argument, a clear perspective on the issue, along with a call to action. Jones cites high cancer rate in the Gulf of Mexico resulting from the making of plastics from petrochemicals, rates that disproportionately affect the poor, as evidence of this devastating effect.

A similar type of post appears on 10 January 2011 highlighting a *New York Times* editorial by Viviana Zelizer (Sociology, Princeton) on gift-giving and capitalist culture. This summary of the argument provides an historical and analytic perspective on the acceptability of giving money as a present. The history of disguising money in a gift basket, for example, or a gift card or even as origami made the transaction appear to be more personal and less commercial. The appearance of this article near the December holidays again brings a sociological and historical perspective to everyday life. Both of these posts are examples of accessible analysis that would be of interest to a wide audience. In these posts, the analysis is again embedded in the material and there is little room for alternate interpretations. In these first two types of post, visual plus and text plus, the sociological significance and meaning is laid out for the reader, explicit in the body of the post. While instructors using the blog for classroom activities might wish for greater naming of sociological concepts, the everyday language makes even the most analytic of posts accessible to most.

The *open* posts are less analytic and more provocative, not embedding an interpretation in the post itself. A post dated 22 September 2010, for example, entitled 'Gender,

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Public Activism: Magnusson's I-75 Project' includes six images of road signs that have a political rather than historical message. One sign reads 'On This Site Stood Jane King, whose white male co-workers earn 39% more than she does for doing the same job'. Another sign declares: 'On this site stood Matt Lucash, a Christian for whom preventing gay marriage is more important than feeding the poor'. While the signs provide analysis, the post itself is primarily provocative. Many other provocative posts draw our attention to the existence of material goods, advertising campaigns or trends we might not otherwise notice and that offer a good example of many of the sociological concepts which we try to teach our students.

Some of these provocative posts consist almost entirely of photographs. A recent (11 January 2011) post includes colour photographs from the Great Depression, pictures of workers, of children at a potato farm and of daily life in general. There is little commentary or analysis attached, but Sharp ends the post with a question: are we more able to relate to the people in the photographs because they are in colour? Do we experience less distance between their lives and our own because the medium is both more familiar and closer to what we see? These questions prompt sociological questioning and would make good fodder for classroom discussion.

A fourth type of post, *data display*, presents and explores data visualisation. This small but highly valuable set of posts not only displays the data, but also often links the reader to sites with interactive mapping tools or data displays. These can be useful for both research and teaching. A map of homelessness that gives information for selected communities, for example, would allow students to explore and compare rates in neighbouring areas or hometown to campus community. A very valuable example of this type of post appears on 29 November 2010 and includes a YouTube video of global health scholar Hans Rosling. In the video, Rosling displays a comparison of wealth and life expectancy throughout the world over the past 200 years. In just under 5 minutes, Rosling explains the major demographic transitions that have occurred as he 'animates the data in real space' – akin to the visuals used so poorly by major television networks in reporting election results. In this case, however, the visual presentation is used to tremendous effect as the viewer watches life expectancy increase across the globe, with the transitions effectively explained by Rosling. Many of these posts offer both important information and wonderful examples of the strategies and practices of visualising data in meaningful ways.

THE BLOG AS A TEACHING TOOL

The blog offers a great deal to instructors teaching both lower- and upper-level undergraduates. The varied posts provide a useful resource to connect classroom work with popular culture and media imagery. Wade and Sharp, along with other contributors, have identified a host of images and issues that expand content in introductory sociology, methods, visual sociology, media studies, gender studies, race/ethnicity and stratification courses. The search function on the website allows for quick searching if an instructor wishes to assign a specific subset of images, or a single image, to the class. For introductory, media or gender studies classes, nearly every day will bring images and commentary that could stimulate important discussions, and instructors might simply have students reading the posts daily. Students arriving in class having explored the website beforehand would be primed to think through the examples that might then be used to help explain more complicated concepts and theories. One humorous post, for example, links to Australian advertisements for Selleys sealants and depicts an attractive man sealing leaks in a home. The young, attractive female homeowner watches, impressed, as she recounts her efforts to encourage her own husband to fix the leak. With the problem resolved, she offers him lunch and walks off camera, at which point he looks into the camera and says: 'Do you really want me hanging out at your house while you're at work?' Students watching these commercials would likely find them funny and interesting, but in a class exploring the concept of hegemonic masculinity, the advertisements become a cultural text that will illustrate this concept clearly. The advertisement suggests that men who do not participate in this DIY, rugged individual brand of masculinity risk infidelity and ridicule. The concept, then, becomes one that helps explain a phenomenon that they have seen and can name.

Wade and Sharp also provide sample assignments that can be used with a variety of posts and thus are adaptable for most courses. The simplest of these assignments is for students to create their own post and submit this to *Sociological images*. Another assignment asks students to select an advertisement from *Sociological images* that 'uses sex, race, gender, family roles, nationality, or class . . .'. Students are directed to think about how those characteristics are used, and then to find four additional advertisements from their own sources. Finally, considering all of the advertisements together, students explore the kinds of messages about social groups that are 'being sold to us alongside products'. In assignments like this one, instructors could

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narrow or expand the range of characteristics that students might explore based on the topic of the class.

In addition to their work on the blog, Sharp and Wade have a number of short pieces that complement the blog posts and appear in *Contexts*, an accessible magazine published by the American Sociological Association. *Contexts* offers relatively short, well-written articles, often with visuals that 'makes sociology interesting and relevant to anyone interested in how society operates'. Sharp and Wade have written a number of companion essays in *Contexts* that focus on visual imagery and provide a slightly longer analysis than is available on the blog. These could be used to orient students to the visual approach as they move from the standard reading assignments to a wider list of assigned material.

As students spend more of their time online saturated by media imagery, drawing their attention to an analysis of this imagery can supplement the analytic work happening in the classroom. Perhaps this will be most useful in generating conversation, and disagreement, among students in the classroom. While some posts provide a fairly clear reading, many others could provoke real disagreement among students. A post from 26 January 2011, for example, portrays images of 16-year-old Justin Bieber displayed in a *Vanity Fair* photo shoot covered in lipstick kisses and in another photograph with 10, presumably female, hands grabbing his arms and chest. The post asks why there is no outcry about the sexualisation of Bieber while Miley Cyrus's photo shoot, at age 15, led to public outrage. While students may disagree about differences in male and female vulnerability and sexuality, a class exploring gender could be enhanced by referring to the images as a way of focusing discussion on the larger issue of how different groups are represented differently and unequally.

Students and faculty are not the only audience for these images, and perhaps the most exciting thing about *Sociological images* is that it can truly bring sociology to everyone. I have forwarded images not only to colleagues, but also to friends and family and even to my son's flag football coach (a clip of a middle-school football team deviating from the expected practice and walking slowly through the defending line as everyone looks on, confused, to score a touchdown). To my tall niece concerned about her height, I forwarded a post demonstrating through images that while Prince Charles appears taller than Princess Diana (by several inches) in all of their posed, formal photographs, candid photographs reveal that she was in fact taller than Charles. These posts represent not only interesting

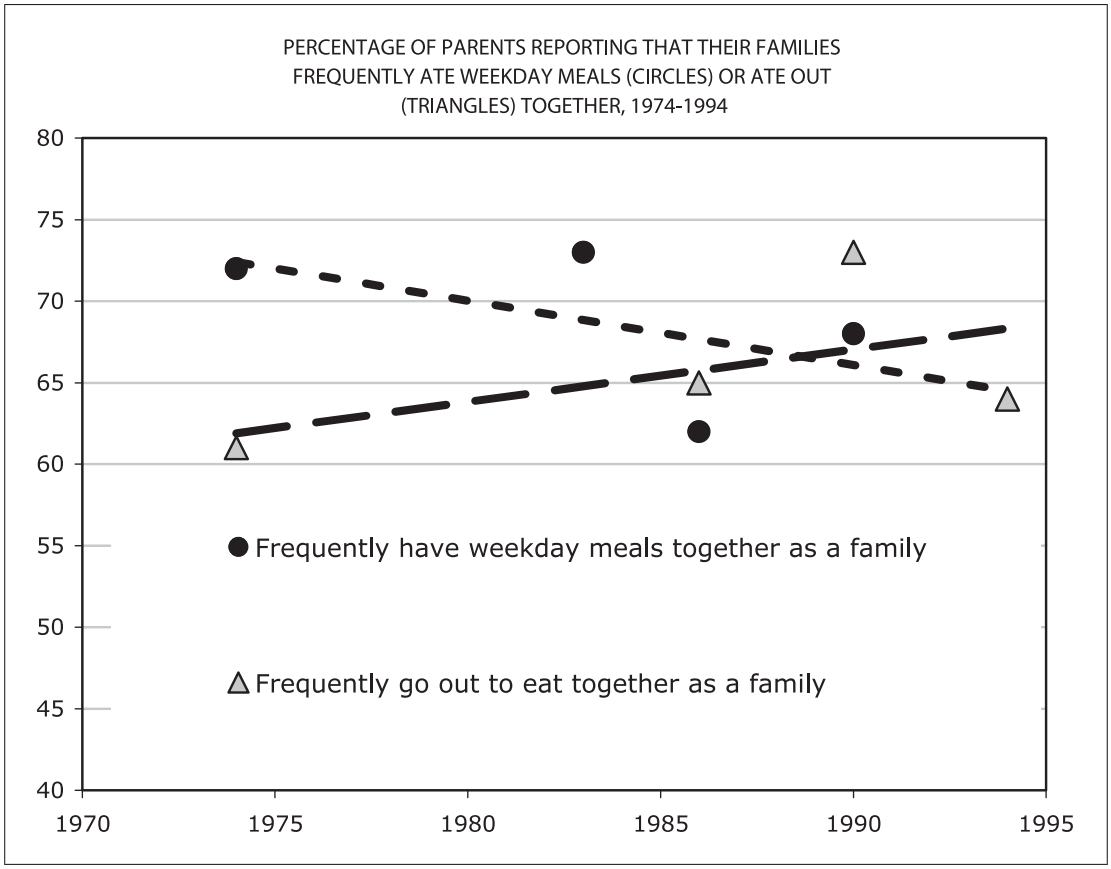

FIGURE 1. Families eating in or out together. Source Roper Polls, analysed by Claude Fischer (2011).

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tidbits about the social world, but reveal the construction of taken-for-granted assumptions about the way that that world works. These posts can open sociological analysis to everyone since each clip and image is accompanied by some analysis, generally in very accessible language with no jargon.

Dialogue sparked by the posts happens over the dinner table and in the classroom, but also online as the blog format allows for comments and conversation. It is easy to miss this feature of the blog, particularly if you receive the posts as a daily email digest; to read comments you need to click on the comments button to access the ensuing conversation. I have been impressed by the seriousness of the comments to the blog (although occasional rants can occur). For example, a post entitled 'The Commodification of Dinner' (9 February 2011) displays a line graph from 1970 to 2000 comparing survey responses that families 'frequently have weekday meals together as a family' with those who 'frequently go out to eat together as a family' (Figure 1).

Comments quickly draw attention to the fact that only four data points are used for each line, that the lines are a crude approximation of an unclear trend, and that the questions are too general to be very helpful (what does it mean to frequently go out to eat?). These weaknesses suggest that the conclusions drawn in the post, that '[s]ometime around 1988, the family dinner as a commodity became more common than family dinners at home' is not clearly supported by the data. This debate around the appropriateness of visual representations and analysis is robust and healthy and would provide a strong model for students learning to read and analyse critically. As an exercise in analysis, we might encourage students to read and respond to these comments, adding their voice to debate.

The blog attempts to bring sociological analysis to a wide audience. For faculty, the posts may provide examples for class discussion, or useful connections between our work and the world of popular culture. For students, the value may lie in beginning with what they know best and introducing analysis to these taken-for-granted images. And for the general public, the blog introduces sociological questions and, at its best, analysis. Wade describes the challenge this way:

> When we write to other academics, the substantive material isn't just interesting in itself; we have to position it as offering a new perspective on theory. But for the public, it's what the theory can actually tell us about the substantive issue. So it's almost the entire reverse: what's useful in public sociology is the reverse of what's useful in academic sociology. (*Contexts* 2010, 47)

As the success of this blog and other social science media projects expands, most instructors will be able to find materials to supplement their traditional reading and writing assignments. A common complaint about today's student is that they look for entertainment rather than substance, but *Sociological images* weaves the pop culture world together with sociological analysis – sometimes embedded in the posts, sometimes open to class interpretation – that allow students and faculty alike to make connections that will complement and supplement, rather than replace, traditional content. Mills (1959, 5) says of the sociological imagination that: 'In many ways, it is a terrible lesson; in many ways a magnificent one'. Students will undoubtedly have moments of recognition while exploring the blog, connecting their personal experience to the wider world of social trends, practices and beliefs. While the blog alone will likely not foster a sociological imagination, if it provokes discussion, extends classroom learning and raises sociological questions – all of which it seems to do well – it is a wonderful resource.

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