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Author(s): Judith Freidenberg

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THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION AND RECONSTRUCTION OF THE OTHER: FIELDWORK IN EL BARRIO

JUDITH FREIDENBERG
University of Maryland

Anthropologists speak of ethnography as both product and process of fieldwork, yet have tended to be overly concerned about the product. In this article I argue that by making the process of fieldwork more participatory, we make the product more policy oriented. The case presented here suggests that visual methods can be valuable in the process of validating anthropological interpretations with study populations and of submitting ethnographic renditions to general publics. Visual methods help study populations to project their views and engage them in dialogue that validates fieldwork while helping them to construct their own and joint visions of "self" and "other." I suggest use of visual instruments at three different stages of fieldwork (conversations around photos, artifacts, and opinion books) involving informants and general publics. Using dialogues on, with, and about the study population produced a multifaceted, richer, and more reflective construction of "the other." Interview instruments that engage the other in their own constructions of otherness are particularly useful in ethnographic research on multicultural and socially stratified contemporary urban societies. [ethnographic research, visual interview instruments, participatory fieldwork, elderly, Hispanic]

The Social Construction of Poverty

The urban poor have received a great deal of attention, whether defined as marginal, a reserve labor force, suffering from a culture of poverty or, most recently, as an underclass. Focusing on the differences between "us" and "them," academic analysts have made basic assumptions about society which are then passed on to policy makers. Looking at "them," analysts and policy makers continue to debate whether poverty is caused by deficient integration within the stratification system or by intrinsic characteristics that can be measured to add up to dysfunctional units (such as in culture of poverty traits or in underclass indicators). We agonize over establishing differences, in identifying borders, in isolating brokers in academic circles, and providing information on differences to program planners. This article focuses on similarities to discover the common features, the other within the other within the other, in order to view New York as urban space containing stratified enclaves. To do that, we need to include in academic assumptions about society the assumptions that the "other" hold about themselves and us.

Rather than using poverty as an explanatory construct or as a worldview, which are unidirectional analysts' constructions, I suggest problematizing the social construction of poverty to understand articulation between and within social classes. Instead of using poverty as an epithet or as a view of the poor from the mainstream (which, whether we use this

term or not, we continue to think about), I am focusing on the poor's view of their own life circumstances in the context of structural inequity.

The people I studied — the "other" — embodied various representations: on a first representation they were Hispanics, as defined on the basis of census categorizations by the National Institute on Aging, which funded my project. On a second representation, they were located in a real place and had a story to tell, that of migration. On a third representation, they were depicted in photos of a space-place constructed by me. A fourth representation was their feedback on my representation of them through our conversations; and a fifth was the exhibit that I curated in collaboration with museum staff. This exhibit in turn elicited a variety of representations in the responses of the audience. What follows is a critical reflection on the process that uncovered these representations.

Ethnographic Fieldwork: Product and Process

A central concern of contemporary ethnography of the "other" in the United States (Clifford and Marcus 1986; Van Maanen 1988) has been the product. Reflection on process has focused on understanding the interviewer's role in the production of social knowledge of the other, and on distinguishing between the anthropological self and the anthropologized other (Cohen 1992) both in the product and in the conduct of a fieldwork study (for recent examples, see Anderson 1995; Raybeck 1996). But

although anthropologists speak of ethnography as both the product and the process of fieldwork, they have tended to be overly concerned with the product rather than with the process. As Dumont argues, however, only an artificial distinction can be made:

In my opinion, the point is to reintroduce the process of anthropologizing into the results of anthropology Instead of focusing either on objects of study or on the perceiving subjects, and in so doing blurring both, it seems to me that we should focus on the happening of anthropology itself (1978: 12).

Anthropologists' knowledge is gained by close and repeated interaction with specific individuals who provide information about different cultures and different ways of being or of conceptualizing one's place in the world (Agar 1996; Wolcott 1995). The main technique for constructing knowledge about a putative "other" is participant observation, blending oneself in the lives of others by sharing time with them in their own space. As a participant, the anthropologist uses fieldwork to gain information about the other but in so doing also learns about the self and bases interpretations of the other on knowledge gained by comparison and contrast. Thus, fieldwork affects both the method of data collection (participant observation) as well as the interpretation (the construction of the other): data are not merely out there but, rather, process and product are intimately interrelated in ethnographic research.¹ Process and product might be separated in time yet exist in dialectical relationship to each other throughout time.

As Dumont elegantly puts it:

What exists, however, is a concrete situation in which "I," the anthropologist, and "they," the studied people, came together in a series of interactions which deeply affected our mutual perception. By definition, the situation is dialectic, so that "I" and "they" transformed each other (1978: 11-12).

Awareness of the limits to objectivity in anthropological fieldwork is not new. The dilemma of ensuring reliability of anthropological data while accepting the fieldwork situation as part of its social context has been addressed in different ways in social anthropology — long-term field-research (Foster *et al.* 1978; Hamid 1996a, 1996b); re-studies of the same research site by different investigators (Mead 1928; Freeman 1983); and attempts to separate the "self" from interpretations of the "other." Some investigators have kept diaries (Malinowski 1967), or written accounts of being simultaneously stranger and friend (Powdermaker 1966). A recent way to confront this intriguing dilemma — of the fieldworker being simultaneously outside and inside

observer of self as object of inquiry — has been for fieldworkers to reflect on their own condition while eliciting that of the other so that the reader can assess fieldwork as an interactive process. For example, Behar's (1994) disclosure of herself as a white middle-class professional "crossing the border with Esperanza's story" helps us understand how Behar thinks of Esperanza. She dispels the myth that there is a "real" Esperanza out there, while allowing us to learn about life conditions for a poor woman living in Mexico.

Behar also points out that, "The last decade of meditation of the meaning of native anthropology, in which scholars claim a personal connection to the places in which they work, has opened up an important debate on what it means to be an insider in a culture." (1994: 28) While native anthropology may provide the ultimate "insider view," studies of social situations in one's own culture are not necessarily objective when individual characteristics such as class, gender, and age are considered (Jones 1995; Limón 1991).

Like any human communication, fieldwork is a cultural process made up of myriad interactional events (Suchman and Jordan 1990; Mascia-Lees and Cohen 1991). But we still insist on complying with the contradictory role of both an empathetic participant observer and a detached interviewer, rather than on understanding the context of the interaction within a larger social order that includes "us" and "them." Because we have been so concerned with our role in structuring the interaction with the informant, the informants' expectations of the interaction with the anthropologist (Picci 1989) have been minimized. We thus investigate informants with a somewhat lesser humanity and reflective capacity than the anthropologist. We forget that we are others to them. We have an opportunity to use the fieldwork situation to understand how they construct themselves and how they construct their place in a larger social order that includes us. As long as we insist on the polarity between self and other, we need to place more emphasis on the other side of the equation — the "other."

While anthropology has a long tradition of constructing the "other" as an object, recently the role the anthropologist's social *personae* plays in such construction has been examined (Behar 1996). This article explores fieldwork as a dialectical process in the construction of otherness when subject and object of research switch places while "anthropologizing":

What is at issue here is the recognition of a dialogue es-

tablished, despite all odds, between an "I" and a "they"; in fact, it is the whole process of anthropologizing which takes place there, throughout the entire time "I" and "they" are associated. Although every single fieldworker must eventually face such a process, it comes as a surprise to me that few of my colleagues have paid more than lip service to it (Dumont 1978: 3).

One way an insider's view of our interpretations may be obtained is to solicit feedback on our constructions from the study populations using techniques that minimize the researcher's control of the interview situation and enhance intercultural dialogue. For example, there are methodological alternatives to the face-to-face interview to study the social construction of poverty. Ways to incorporate informants in project design include eliciting testimonies (Torruellas 1995); involving them in literacy programs as student participants in popular education programs (Benmayor *et al.* 1992); empowering them to claim cultural citizenship (Benmayor 1997); and eliciting strengths rather than deficits in poor communities through other strategies (Flores 1990; Stack 1974).

Working with informants helps define people's reactions to poverty in their own terms rather than as responses to our primarily middle-class defined concepts and queries. Fieldwork should also involve the other in constructing and validating knowledge about her/himself as it is constructed by the fieldworker. Further, knowledge can be submitted to the scrutiny of yet other "others" who might reflect on their own condition while reacting to that of our informants, thus interpreting that condition within yet other contexts. In particular, I explore fieldwork methods that shift the focus from face-to-face interactions to situations that elicit informants' projections about the larger social order and vice-versa. I intend to encourage movement into "the step beyond" advocated by Benmayor *et al.* (1992): "A *step beyond* would be a process where people themselves engage in analysis of their own reality as part of defining solutions that work for them" (p. 92, emphasis added).

While by definition any inquisitive stance biases the respondent's stream of thought and emergent verbal utterance, I argue that one need not ask questions to engage informants in conversations. In fact, I argue that asking itself might pose communication problems since informants' answers are responses to the researcher's view of things and not self-constructions.

Urcioui (1993) asked about poverty and was asked, in turn, about her understandings of class. That is because "utterances — what people say and

how, when, why, and to whom they say it — are instrumental in shaping lived social reality" (p. 207). If questioning, or framing the question, has to do with power, and power disjunctions adjudicate reality to the analyst's representation, can we question the informant about somebody else or, in other terms, can we objectify the question? What does it take to give "them" an active voice, rather than a passive response to our questions? Urcioui warns us that anthropological fieldwork becomes "hegemonic when its format generically precludes any discursive space for the people who made the project possible" (p. 209).

I offer one response to Brigg's exhortation that we problematize method as much as theory because the

close relationship between methodology and theory is paralleled by an equally intimate connection between methodology and politics. Just as interview techniques contain hidden theoretical and ideological assumptions, they are tied to relationships of power and control. . . . That the political dimension of methodological issues are seldom examined or discussed should come as no surprise. We gather our data in encounters that focus on the topics under discussion rather than on the research encounter itself (1986: 123-124).

Briggs believes theorizing methodology is itself a political act and concludes:

Only by considering methodology in the light of theory and pondering the theoretical baggage hidden on the methodological plane will we finally be able to chart a new course. But where are we to begin? What we need is a specific, concrete focus for our initial efforts. I submit, by way of conclusion, that the most fruitful point of departure is *learning how to ask* (p. 125, emphasis added).

Learning How to Ask in El Barrio

During long-term anthropological fieldwork in New York City, I kept trying to make sense of the border between the world of the Medical Center where I then worked and that of the streets of East Harlem in my office's backyard. As part of the first "culture," I structured my fieldwork around figuring out who the people were behind the patients in the medical facility. In trying to understand the construction of borders that separate urban neighborhoods, I found it important to add to my construction of the other in East Harlem my learning how the other constructed her/himself and me/people from outside East Harlem. To reach this understanding, I needed to move away from the traditional central position of the anthropologist as observer, and from the control

she/he has over the flow of information when relying solely on straightforward interviewing. I learned that it is not only the presence of the fieldworker that structures the data but that the medium and data-collection techniques employed to elicit data also affect the construction of knowledge.

In the following discussion I will report on three stages of fieldwork on the social construction of poverty. The first was my view *of* El Barrio — that is, my construction of the context for informants' behavior, based on participant observation and interviewing. The second was the informants' construction of the context, elicited through visual methods that helped the informants project their views, engage in dialogue, and construct their own visions of "self" and "other" — what I call the view *from* El Barrio. The third was the general public's construction of the informants' context — what I call the view *about* El Barrio.

Fieldwork Stage One: View of El Barrio

Long-term research with aging Latinos in East Harlem, New York,² on community health and public policy issues, provided the first stage of fieldwork: the serendipitous emergence of informants' reflections on public space and social place. These lay interpretations provided fertile ground to explore meanings attributed by residents to the public space where most of their daily lives took place. When I learned that they rarely left the area and that they thought of other spaces in the city as unconnected social arenas, almost as different cultures, I started using photographs to document the ethnographic space.

My view of El Barrio, a low-income enclave, was constructed from population documents, participant observation, and photo documentation of the private space.³ When I showed the informants the photos I had taken of them in their homes, I often sensed feelings of hopelessness and helplessness in dealing with several areas of need, namely housing, health, loneliness, public services, personal safety, and lack of control over their own lives. I began taking photographs of physical features of the neighborhood that they told me adversely affected their lives — deteriorated housing, threatening groups of

youngsters, shanty towns of homeless — and features that made them feel secure — home (where they kept religious objects, family photographs, objects from their native Puerto Rico), Latin music, sidewalks with domino players, and friendly neighbors in courtyards. (See photographs A and B.)

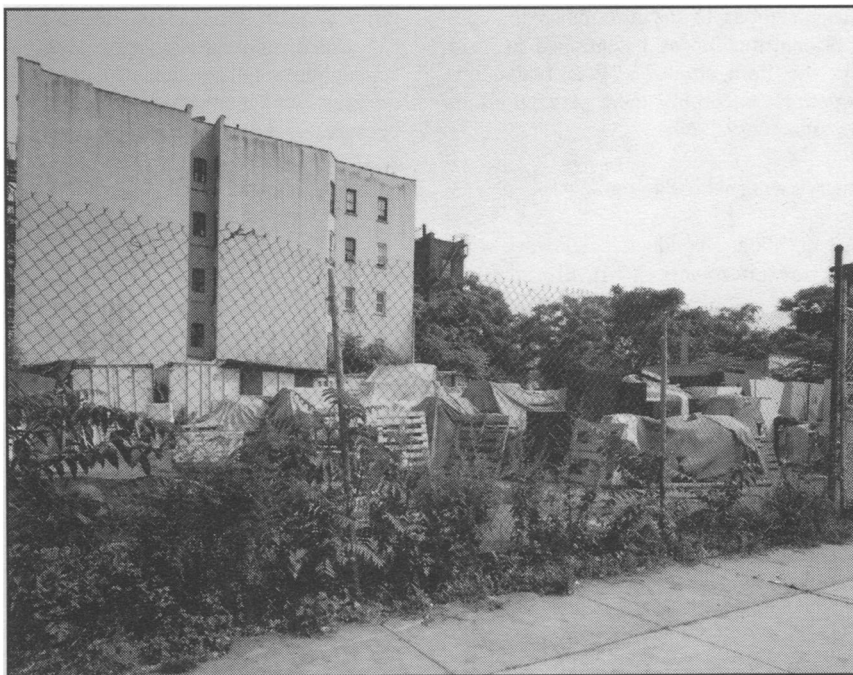
As I showed these photos to them, I noticed that people in the community were aware of different life conditions faced by other people and that they used this awareness as a way of defining the larger context of their own life circumstances and as a social commentary on national society. By defining who was excluded, outside, left out, the informants also defined who was included; that is, they defined the context of the larger society. Finally, I tried to photograph their view of the outside by taking pictures of the Upper East Side, the upper middle-class neighborhood contiguous to East Harlem.

Still, I was having difficulty obtaining data on informants' perceptions of themselves and others as well as on their self-placement within a larger social order. What kind of fieldwork techniques could encourage the informants to reflect on their life circumstances and on their response to exclusionary processes that affected them? How can one elicit information on the relationship of poverty to identity construction, more specifically, to social placement of self and others within the larger society?

Fieldwork Stage Two: Informants' View from El Barrio

A second stage of fieldwork generated data on space and place for self and others. I elicited informants' perceptions of their place in a physical and social space by means of documentary techniques and projective interviewing. Using a comparative perspective, I was able to learn how people construe poverty by contrasting lifestyles in spatially different parts of the city and in structurally similar spaces outside of the city. This stage allowed me to rethink "views of El Barrio" in contrast to "views from El Barrio." A model of social articulation was constructed on the basis of informants' perceptions of the interrelationships between social and spatial variables: "them," "us," "here," and "there."

In the previous stage, photography had proved



A. "Public Space." Photo by E. Morales.



B. "Private Space." Photo by E. Morales.

to be an effective second eye to document what I was learning through observation, participant observation, and interviewing. I often presented my insights and interpretations to the informants for confirmation or disconfirmation as I continued to learn from them in the field situation. Was I also obtaining information concerning their perceptions of their own life situations?

Interviewing with Photographs

To answer that question, I conducted fieldwork *with*, rather than *on*, the informants. To involve them, I used photography as a tool with three specific aims: first, as a means of validating the ethnographic information derived during the initial fieldwork — internal validity of stage one. Photography helps the observer to listen more than ask:

Photography can be a catalyst to tap important events and emotions which straightforward interviewing may inhibit or actually miss In anthropology, the dynamic role for the camera is not to “confer” importance but to *recognize* it. In my study in Southall, it is this *listening* role of the camera that has been its most valuable asset to my research (Larson 1988 : 431-432).

Interviewees often responded directly to the photographs, paying less heed to my presence and the perceived demands of the task than in more traditional formal interview settings (Schwartz 1989: 151-152).

Second, photography can serve as a projective interviewing technique: that is, presenting the subjects with photographs of themselves and their social environment to motivate them to verbalize issues and problems, and to prompt them to analyze their situations within the limits of their perspectives and experiences. Another important role of ethnographic photography is that the medium itself leads to multiple interpretations of reality, since

[i]nstead of responding to an encoded message, most viewers’ responses reflect their own social realities. Thus, the social interactions surrounding the activity of looking at photographs provide an arena for studying the meaning viewers attribute to aspects of their everyday lives (Schwartz 1989: 122).

“Photo-interviewing, used in conjunction with traditional ethnographic methods of data collection, enhances our ability to understand the meaning of everyday life for community members” (p. 152).

Because photo-elicitation brings forth the person’s own social reality, it is an especially useful medium to understand the anthropologist’s photographic interpretation of social class (Brandes 1997: 6).

Third, photography may be a vehicle to elicit serendipitous information that ethnography based on oral fieldwork might have failed to uncover. That is because, as Lutz and Collins put it, the photograph is an intersection of gazes which collectively reveal its social context:

All photographs tell stories about looking By examining the “lines of sight” evident in the *Geographic* photograph of the non-Westerner, we become aware that it is not simply a captured view of the *other*, but rather a dynamic site at which many gazes or viewpoints intersect . . . seven kinds of gazes (that) can be found in the photograph and its social context: the photographer’s gaze . . . , the institutional magazine gaze . . . , the reader’s gaze, the non-Western subject’s gaze, the explicit looking done by Westerners who may be framed with locals in the picture; the gaze returned or refracted by the mirrors or cameras that are shown in local hands; and our own academic gaze (1993: 187-188).

Following Collier and Collier (1986), I have used photographs as stimuli for interviewing but, in collaboration with sociologist Edmundo Morales, have also designed a visual instrument to use systematically with a sample of informants. The visual instrument consisted of photographs from a middle-class neighborhood in New York (see photograph C), from El Barrio (see photograph D), and from a shanty town (*villa miseria*) in Buenos Aires, Argentina (see photographs E).

I re-interviewed some of my informants, asking them to look at the photographs, and listened to their reactions. I reasoned that presenting the informants with a visual representation of their social surrounding as a projective instrument might diminish the intrusiveness of my presence as outsider and enable the informants in looking at the photos to “see the issues,” and thus become analysts, interpreters, and social critics themselves. Presented with photographs documenting the physical and social ecology of El Barrio, informants identified several social issues related to growing old within that setting. Presented with photographs of middle-class New York and of a low-income neighborhood in Latin America, they reflected upon “self” by comparison to “other.”



**C. "Upper Middle-Class Apartment in the Upper East Side."
Photo by E. Morales.**



D. "El Barrio." Photo by E. Morales.



E. "Villa Miseria, Argentina." Photos by F. Naiflesh.

Interviewing with Artifacts

The informants spoke about being old Latino in East Harlem as an integration of two dimensions. One reflected isolation, powerlessness, and marginalization; the other conveyed their spirituality as a way of connecting to a hostile world through faith in themselves, in organized religion, and in objects that encapsulated their homeland, their ancestors, and their beliefs. Issues of spirituality came up in most of the conversations that I had in informants' homes. As I became an expected visitor and could go beyond "looking" around me, I started "seeing" them: objects that reflected the hope and faith that elderly Latinos consider central to coping with daily life in El Barrio.

Artifacts were used, like photos, as visual prompts to elicit stories about people's experiences in their natural environments. Such artifacts included home altars, statues of saints, Bibles, family photographs, mementos from Puerto Rico, and miscellaneous items of hope and faith (including a New York lottery ticket). While conversing about artifacts, informants elaborated on the meaning of the objects, connecting them to growing old and being elderly Latino in El Barrio.

Fieldwork Stage Three: Public View about El Barrio

In a third stage of fieldwork, data consisting of the photographs and excerpts from my discussions with the study population were presented in a museum exhibit where audience reactions to the informants' perspectives on poverty were solicited. I curated the exhibit for the Museum of the City of New York as the backbone of a third projective interviewing technique. (See photograph F.) The project functioned as a reflexive community-based institution for representing a culturally meaningful view of aging. Audiences were asked to leave reactions to the words of informants that were depicted on the walls of the exhibit. For the actors — the study population — the exhibit was a resource reflecting cultural perceptions. For the audiences, the exhibit became a locus of transformation of cultural perceptions.

Two issues, the process of aging and the condition of being aged in a particular sociocultural environment, were explored with the study population and the public. The exhibit functioned as text, and audiences were asked about their "reading" of the text as a means of making them reflect upon the informants' and their own aging in sociocultural

context.

By the time the public was reached, messages about the experience of growing old Latino in Harlem had at least three component interpretations: one was mine and reflected my visual summary of what the informants had told me orally; the second was what informants had seen in the photos about themselves and others; and the third was the selection I had made with museum staff while curating the exhibit. An additional interpretation was added by the experience of viewing the exhibit.

Learning How to Listen: Study Findings

While visual documentation entails a way of seeing the "other," it does not involve dialogue about that vision. Yet, if fieldwork is communication, communication need not be restricted to oral prompts generated by the researcher. The significance of visual ethnography as a stimulus in interviewing is that, rather than providing answers to direct questions, it generates questions and elicits a dialogue. This process helps the informant, rather than the anthropologist, define the social context of the interview and thus reinforce to what extent "knowledge and power are intertwined because the observer's point of view always influences the observations she makes" (Rosaldo 1993: xviii).

The elderly's responses to the various photographs focused around two clusters: relations with the non-elderly and poor housing. The same results would not have emerged from direct interviewing, for the following reasons: (1) Class-based problematization of need: direct questioning about people's problems was interpreted as requests for personal information about the individual having a problem. The concept of "problem" was even problematized by me as researcher: for example, if I asked whether there were problems with housing, the answer would be negative since most people had shelter. Yet when viewing photos, people mentioned a lot of problems they experienced with housing: their problematization of housing had to do with safety while my problematization of housing related more to shelter. (2) Power disparity between interviewer (outsider) and interviewee (insider) is obvious in face-to-face questioning: the disparity, though not obliterated, is not the focus of the interaction when conversations are elicited by having both look at an object. (3) Disjunction occur between language and thought: in answering interview questions, respondents share



**ENVEJECIENDO GROWING OLD
EN EL IN
HARLEM HISPANO SPANISH HARLEM**

una exhibición antropológica con textos e imágenes sobre los latinos envejecientes en la ciudad de Nueva York

an anthropological exhibition of text and imagery from the elderly latinos in New York City

organizada por
Judith Freidenberg

curated by
Judith Freidenberg

fotografías de
Edmundo Morales
Federico Naifleisch
Judith Freidenberg

photographs by
Edmundo Morales
Federico Naifleisch
Judith Freidenberg

recepción de apertura,
10 de mayo de 1994,
5:30 - 7:00

Opening reception,
May 10, 1994
5:30 - 7:00 p.m.

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viernes, 10-5
sabado, 9-5
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**F. "Growing Old in Spanish Harlem."
Exhibit Announcement.**

language but not necessarily ideas. The language of response is altered by the role assigned to the interviewer. For example, despite my self-description as an anthropologist at a nearby medical school attempting to understand health seeking processes, informants could not figure out what I really wanted from them (except for the few I befriended and then friendship became the stated object of my interest). Was I a social worker? A housing supervisor? A hospital (rather than medical school) welfare case worker?

Constructing the Other: The Informants' Perception of Poverty in a Wider Context

The Others in El Barrio: Same Social Class, Different Life Circumstances

Reflecting on El Barrio place as social space, the informants contributed their view of a heterogeneous and stratified enclave. There are *tecatos* (drug addicts and other outcasts) who live in yards, *casitas*, basements, building entrances; there are *people like us* — *Blacks and Hispanics* — who live in projects and tenements; there are people who are *high* (class), who live in mansions.

Informants identified two vulnerable population groups (the elderly and the poor) by using comparison and contrast.⁴ They reflected on East Harlem, where they felt that the elderly were at risk from the increase in youth violence and from restricted access to housing and health services:

Sometimes they [the elderly] are sad because they have housing problems, because they cannot pay their expenses, sometimes the mothers suffer from the vices of the children, the children are given money to start peddling drugs. The worse problems are family problems (Augustina).

You do not dare, you have to lock yourself up, youth is different nowadays, there is drug outside (Josefa).

I came in 1936. I say the situation now is worse, there is corruption, the youth is lost, the kids drop out of school, there are crimes, the elderly are afraid with the situation here in El Barrio. There is much housing for the elderly yet there is not one politician who defends us from rent raises even if our check stays the same, after we have spent our lives suffering for the community and the American government, after we have paid our taxes and still continue paying taxes. I think we should vote more, the vote helps us to speak from the heart. There is so much injustice going on with the elderly. Now we have the situation with drugs, with hospitals, what is going to happen to the poor Latin-American population in the U.S.? Especially in the state of New York, which is corrupt on the four corners (Dora).

Loneliness makes them have bad thoughts because they have nobody to talk to — they think they will have to go to the hospital, that nobody is going to take care of them and they start thinking that maybe the best for them is to stop living. Many

older people kill themselves, sometimes youth also kill themselves. In all of these photos you see loneliness, problems with children, with marriage, with drugs, with aging. We ask: what will happen to us tomorrow, to us who are alone, old, and sick? (Telesforo).

They also discussed inefficient public services that adversely affected their community:

There is too much garbage. People are careless and the city does not pick up often. That creates a fly haven (Josefa).

Inappropriate housing policies were also a concern, an issue that created a population even worse off than the elderly poor: that is, the homeless, whose presence added to the fear of crime that the elderly felt when in public spaces such as streets or housing projects:

The hotels are full of people who have nowhere to go. There are people who sleep in the yards . . . The police comes to evacuate them (Carmen).

A lot of housing has been built but the people with no housing continue to be without housing. There are so many old buildings in the city that they could renovate and yet they are given to people who destroy them and there is no law that can stop them (Telesforo).

Housing is terrible, the old buildings are not taken care of (*desbaratados*). In the projects you have drug addicts (*tecatos*) who try to get your money . . . If you say anything, they attack you . . . I do not like it from 105th to the river, also on 109th the *tecatos* try to get your money. On 103rd it is full of elderly, the *tecatos* get their money when they go to cash their checks. They wait until they [the elderly] cash their checks to attack them (Monchito).

The Others Outside El Barrio: Different Social Class, Different Neighborhood, Same City

This is beautiful, it could not be New York. In New York there is nothing that is worth it. We come to live here to feel better, but we end up feeling worse. I left my house in Puerto Rico with a large plot of land, with all the animals and where I planted everything (Josefa).

You see a young person, they live a pleasurable life. It is a condominium, each family has a whole floor. It is downtown, where people live well. Yet they have debts or the building is mortgaged so I say they do not live well (Telesforo).

This has to be a hotel . . . It is not from around here . . . all the hotels are downtown . . . here there are some but they are falling down . . . this is elegant, it has to be a hotel because nobody around here lives that elegant . . . around here everybody is on welfare . . . you cannot live well today (Carmen).

This is an enormous dining room. It is not in *El Barrio*. These people live better, you can see it in the outside of the house. They can afford things, maybe they are doctors who earn good money (Monchito).

This is not from El Barrio because I have never seen it (Juan).

Same Social Class, Different Life Circumstances, Different Country

There was consensus among informants that the middle-class setting was not in El Barrio, and that middle-class people lived better. However, there was no agreement concerning the life-style of poor neighborhoods outside the United States. Some informants thought that the poor did better elsewhere; some thought they were worse off; and others thought poverty had no clear geographical boundaries.

These two ladies look like people in Casabe [a housing project for the elderly in El Barrio] (Telesforo).

They cover their noses because there is a lot of garbage around them . . . It is on 117th, the streets are infested with garbage, dogs eat this garbage. No, no, it is not from here, it is too dirty. Or maybe it is Hunts Point in the Bronx (Luz Maria).

This is the Bronx Boulevard, you see old houses, the streets are dirty, it could be Hunts Point. But there is no difference, when people live badly, they live badly everywhere. Here we also had garbage and the dogs open the bags up. Many people think that because you live in New York, you have money and live like a king, but I say this is not true: we live in misery because with a check that I get once a month it is not enough to cover expenses (*no me alcanza para nada*). If I want to go someplace, I have to save every day (Dora).

This looks like El Barrio (Juan).

This has to be Puerto Rico . . . There they also have houses with bars (*trancadas*). You cannot live well, it is worse than here. Yet I sometimes think it is the same everywhere, it is the same pig-sty (*porqueria*) (Carmen).

Constructing the Self: Communicating Through Artifacts

When I went to homes to videotape artifacts, people talked about the meaning of objects I had seen around us while conversing. They spoke of the artifacts as extensions of their selves, of their way of being in the world. One informant, who lent me a Bible, said,

The Bible is the greatest treasure there is. The Bible has taught me to love God, to get to know God's love and His sacrifice in making his son Jesus Christ pay for our sins so that man could receive the glory lost in the Garden of Eden. I thank the Lord. I have learned to love my fellow beings and to lead a life of obedience to God. The Bible is a mirror where I can see my shortcomings and correct them with God's help. This has brought me much happiness and peace to my heart. I help others learn about God's word. I know that faith in Jesus has saved me since

I have accepted Jesus as my Savior. Because there is no other name given to mankind that can save you. Christ says: "Look at me and be saved throughout the world. Because I was given all power in Heaven and earth and no one goes to the Father except through me." Christ is the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in him, though dead, will live (Elsie).

Other objects related to the past (for example, a coconut shell used to drink coffee in Puerto Rico) or to family supports (such as a picture of a three-generation family). In spite of their different contexts, what the objects had in common was that they provided a sense of place and security. One informant's comments exposed the idea that for many elders in Spanish Harlem, the ultimate spirituality is "to seek God within you." She told me:

Amid all the objects I have in my house, I have a small altar. This altar is made up of small statuettes of religious saints, such as San Martin de Porres, the Virgen de la Milagrosa [the Virgin of Miracles], San Miguel Arcangel [Saint Michael the Archangel] and other saints. I keep these saints with much devotion and respect. For me they are invaluable. I keep them because they belonged to my mother, who died over 25 years ago. Many times I found my mother at this altar, praying. She would pray on behalf of humanity first, then for her own family, and lastly for herself. I was pleased to find that often her prayers were answered. This increased my respect for her and nourished the faith in my heart, the faith that has helped me through the years. I have also asked with fervor and I have also been awarded my requests. Faith fulfills me through the saints, since it is through the saints that I see and hear my mother. If a person broke into my house, I would hope that my saints would be spared. I would hurt if they took my saints. If someone destroyed these images, they would be destroying a part of me since they are already a part of my mother. Since the absence of my mother, my saints are my spiritual keepers (Susana).

Reconstructing the Other

The Audience Evaluation of a Conversation on Walls: Processes of Validation and Disconfirmation

Museums, instruments of public socialization since the nineteenth century, contribute to promotions of national identity and national agendas (Kaplan 1994) and thus provide a fertile context to research issues of representation and power (Karp and Levine 1991). The museum offered me a public forum in which to amplify voices that are not usually heard by the wider society. People from different groups visit a museum and react in various ways to what is presented. They are, in a sense, a captive audience for validating conceptions of aging, both of others and of themselves, which can be compared and contrasted to policies for the elderly.

The elicitation of written reactions was one of several strategies employed to engage the public's

participation by using the exhibit as a projective technique. Although this strategy is more passive and static than oral interaction in public forums where diverse audiences were invited to address issues brought up by the exhibit, people tend to be less self-conscious when recording impressions without being in the presence of others, particularly others with whom they have not established rapport. Public reactions were elicited by a panel entitled "Growing Old in Spanish Harlem: Your Opinions," that read:

In photographs, words, artifacts, and a video, this exhibition brings the voices of the elderly of Spanish Harlem to a public forum. Their sense of hope and despair; their vision of the past and of the future; the role of the environment, both physical and social, in their daily lives; their understanding of "what is" and their belief in "what needs to be done" — this is what they have to share with you, the viewer. We would like you to share your opinions with us. Below you will find a notebook in which to record your opinions of both the exhibition and the issues and concerns it presents.

A notebook placed below the panel contained facing sheets, one in Spanish and the other in English, reading: "Please take a moment to record your opinions of both the exhibition and the issues and concerns it presents." On the same sheet, respondents were asked to identify their age, gender, country of birth, and present neighborhood or city of residence. Responses were representative of the visitors that chose to participate so they do not necessarily reflect that of the general museum public.

There were 410 responses, 93 written in Spanish and 317 written in English. Forty responses (approximately ten percent of the total) were analyzed. Most respondents were between the ages of 24 and 64 and half were born outside the continental United States. Given the museum's location, it was not surprising to find that most respondents lived in New York City, although a few lived elsewhere in the United States or abroad. Content analysis of "the issues and concerns the exhibit presents" provided information on the respondents' own aging process, on their culture, on living in a culturally diverse society such as the United States. Respondents expressed thoughts about how Blacks and Latinos should relate, how Latino culture should be used to remind children of their ancestry, and how all children should be encouraged to respect the aged. For example, respondents wrote,

Keep on work like this. Our community need to be exposed to our values and culture (a 40-year old woman from the Dominican Republic, resident of Manhattan — written in Spanish).

Incredibly moving — all of us have wanted to tell an older

person to hurry up or get out of the way — this puts it all in a completely different perspective (a 26-year old man, born in the United States, resident of the upper East Side of Manhattan — written in English).

The exhibit is very nice. I think you learn something about it (a 12-year old boy, born in the United States, a resident of Brooklyn, New York — written in English).

What a wonderful way to honor our aged. They are our teachers. They are our history. We need to see more of this (a 30-year old female born in Puerto Rico, resident of Washington, DC — written in English).

I think all Black and White should have the right to live together and be of right mind (an 11-year old girl, born in New York, resident of Brooklyn — written in English).

In addition, a great number of people reflected on social issues from a comparative and policy perspective. One respondent wrote:

Exhibits like this open up questions in peoples' minds (as it happened to me). Nothing better than this to activate the mind and start work in changes that are needed in barrios like this, one of many in this country (a 28-year old Argentine man, resident in New York — written in Spanish).

Respondents identified concerns that need to be addressed by aging societies such as the United States. Referring to the sociocultural context of aging, some respondents believed that the experience of aging is an individual affair while others thought that aging in a large city such as New York increased isolation:

I am helping to care for my elderly, ill mother at this time. I was struck by the similarities of concerns/fears/issues — health, loneliness, loss of control in all possible areas — despite the differences in ethnicity and socio-economic level. Very poignant, indeed (a 55-year old woman from out-of-state — written in English).

Some respondents believed that the aged were a marginalized group in the United States:

This exhibit has touched on issues of the heart. These people are REAL, in every sense of the word, and reflect a REAL lack of understanding of the aging process in general. Our society abandons folks who are above a certain age, below a certain economic level, and outside of a certain ethnic, sexual or social persuasion. We need to STOP, reassess and change ourselves to be able to give to our children a picture of beauty and love toward elders (a 58-year old woman from New York, residing in New Jersey — written in English, capitals in the original).

Old age/sad, alone/in New York/to be alone in spite of the crowd/desiring to be young/to share, laugh, belong/to be taken notice of regardless of who you are (a 62-year old woman born in the Dominican Republic, resident of Washington Heights, New York — written in Spanish).

It is very interesting to see that in a so-called first world country people live under these life conditions. Unfortunately, there is no money but these people lack the education to have a

better life. I think in this country there is a lot to do for young people but old people are worth nothing. That is why us Latinos have to return to our countries after having worked here to be treated with dignity! (a 29-year old woman born in Mexico, resident of midtown Manhattan — written in Spanish).

Some respondents raised questions about how to address social inequality:

A good topic and nice exhibit. Would have liked more information on how people responded to the photos — what they saw in them — as was the plan. Also, there is not a strong vision of alternatives to loneliness apart from spiritual objects and beliefs (a 67-year old woman born in the United States, resident of Washington Heights, New York — written in English).

These photos make me very sad because I think my old age will perhaps be as lonely and sad as in some of the photos shown here. One can see that the rich are the ones who live better. The poor always live badly and lonely. The government should think that we gave all our lives to the country and that now that we cannot work we should at least have company and should not live so alone (A 59-year old woman born in Colombia, resident of Brooklyn, New York — written in Spanish).

Thus, for those viewers who wrote their reactions to the exhibit in the display book, responses indicated that visitors to the museum reflect as much on the life circumstances of the population portrayed as on their own, and that social class and national origin affected their views. Reactions to the photos and the artifacts provided information on how the elderly perceive growing old and living in East Harlem that I could not have obtained by interviewing alone. And people's responses to the exhibit became a possible mechanism for changing the elderly's situation by generating discussions about the fears and realities of an aging population and the social action necessary to address them. More importantly, the responses show that discourses about "self" include "other," that one can only reflect upon one's own condition by comparing and contrasting cultural expressions and social experiences.

Policy Implications and Significance of Visual Ethnography

Fieldwork as Method

The programmatic needs of the inner city elderly are assessed by questions framed by researchers on the basis of her/his model of the "other." By using projective techniques to interview, I was able to get impressions about the human condition of aging in El Barrio: conversing with the study population as "other," and eliciting comments from other populations who reacted to the museum walls that presented these conversations. Each successive stage

served as validation of previous fieldwork and as a new fieldwork stage. Using dialogues *on, with, and about* the study population produced a multi-faceted, richer and more reflective construction of the "other." This experience leads me to conclude that instruments that engage the other in their own constructions of otherness are particularly useful in social research in multicultural and socially stratified contemporary urban societies, and that participatory fieldwork methods ensure a more policy-oriented fieldwork product.

While the oral elicitation was effective in obtaining systematic data on individual indicators (for example, income, service utilization patterns, structural characteristics of networks), the visual elicitation provided raw data on the perception of problem areas. During interviews informants had discussed these problem areas within the context of their own life histories but the photos enabled them to transcend the personal level of experience and move to a collective level, from "I" to "we"; from "El Barrio" to "not in El Barrio"; from "here" to "not here." The visual elicitation allowed me to obtain information on areas that were either unknown to me or poorly understood through traditional ethnographic interviews. For example, the impact of housing disrepair, homelessness, and drug addiction in the neighborhood on this elderly group's perception and definition of the quality of life.

By eliciting informants' responses with visual prompts, I found that they all perceive themselves having problems with housing, health, loneliness, public services, and safety. Their usual response is to feel hopeless and helpless because they perceive a lack of control over their lives. All those interviewed and photographed expressed feelings of powerlessness. But beyond their perception of self, they are aware that other people face similar problems. Theoretically, acknowledging the generalizability of their position could become a springboard for explaining their position within the larger society. However, documenting and analyzing are two different things. This becomes clear when informants were presented with photographs showing conditions of life that contrast with their own. When they view a middle-class milieu, they acknowledge the existence of better conditions of life in the city. These photographs bring forth their migration histories, particularly their motivations to migrate to seek better conditions of life. They indicate their uncertainty about whether they did better or worse in reference to the country of origin or of destination. Finally, presented with photographs of a typical poor neighborhood in a Latin American country, they acknowledged the per-

vasiveness of social inequity.

In sum, photo-interviewing has proved useful for documenting and analyzing the perception of poverty among Latino elderly residing in the inner city. I believe that photography can be a valuable instrument for use in the systematic collection of data on perceptions of social construction. This technique is a valid and reliable instrument. Although responses varied, all of the participants expressed similar domains of experience. By looking at a photo rather than at the face of the interviewer, experience is less structured and coded. People can then reflect on questions such as: Who am I? Who are the others? What is the connection between me and a world peopled with others?

An important role for the practitioner is to translate social issues to the general public and policy maker. This article illustrates the participation of the study population and the wider public audience in engaging in interpretative dialogue on the social issues related to being elderly Latino in East Harlem from a comparative and policy perspective. Many policies are derived from interpretations about knowledge acquired by researchers who study a given population. The interpretations made by the study population and by other populations who reflect on them are rarely acknowledged and yet it is these interpretations that feed the ideologies that form the basis of our interactions in everyday life as members of a national society. By reflecting on different reactions to the situation of the "other," we can reflect on the process of consensus-building around policy formulation. By doing fieldwork at each project stage, I demonstrate that fieldwork should be a circular, rather than a linear, epistemological activity. When fieldwork becomes a circular method of inquiry, spiraling into wider and wider audiences, where learning is not of "a culture" but about validating different versions of the same culture, then more systematic data on social issues are obtained.

Fieldwork as Practice

The experience of fieldwork as practice also raises issues of policy. What are the implications of diversity in cultural versions for a public policy that over relies on homogeneity in populations at the expense of context? Policy formulation is based on evaluation of information for planning purposes. It follows that the kind of data researchers produce greatly affects the policy process. The approach presented in this article generates data that represent the informants' perspective, attempts to understand aging in

context, and incorporates the interpretations and opinions of populations other than the one studied to approximate the vision of what is normative in society. The policy maker needs to take all of this information into account to plan change.

In the variety of ideologies constructed about aging Latino in Harlem, a reconstruction occurs — there are areas of consensus and areas of dissension about issues of concern to the national society. Yet policy formulation is usually built only around statistical data about populations and not on process based on dialogue among populations. This article situates theoretical and methodological issues in anthropological praxis within a more participatory and reflective policy discourse in that (1) it provides a means to address process and product in the field and in the ethnographic work; (2) it shows how the study of elderly Latinos in a low-income urban enclave contributes to our understanding of an important population in New York; and (3) it contends that it is necessary to work both on our informants and to work with them.

On the one hand, the potential for ethnographic method requires "radical expansion of ethnography's ranks and the promotion of assistants to 'ethnographer,' as well as the recognition that ethnographers also may be 'assistants' to their informants" (Sanjek 1990: 412). On the other, a more historically situated anthropology contests the idea of culture as a bounded whole, and space and place in social life are awarded more critical attention in studies of relations rather than locations. The classic monograph documenting unique and self-contained cultures must then give way to a new genre, taking its point of departure in those nodes of interrelations where there is a mutual construction of identities through cultural encounters (Olwig and Hastrup 1997: 5). Rather than peeping inside imagined self-contained cultures or exploring networks of interrelations among cultural parts, it might be more profitable to explore the spaces and places of mutual construction of identities through cultural encounters, whether these are real or imagined. The new literature on border cultures (Martínez 1994; Vélez-Ibáñez 1996) as a paradigm of cultural complexity in the United States, explicitly constructed to contest the mere idea of borders, should be applied to smaller units, such as cities, or even neighborhoods.

Theorizing about the poor contributes to portrayals that are publicly consumed, but it rarely informs method, and yet how we elicit information is based on our conceptual frameworks of society. There is a substantive body of work on low-income urban enclaves in New York (Freidenberg 1995;

Sharff 1998; Sanjek 1990; Bourgois 1995; De Havenon 1995) but little reflection on the policy and political implications of how we collect data in those settings.

NOTES

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¹This interrelationship becomes very obvious in urban fieldwork conducted in cities where the researcher resides (Foster

and Kemper 1996; Cerroni-Long 1995; Jones 1995; Guillemín 1975).

²The study population consisted of 46 Puerto Rican elderly living in a few contiguous census tracts containing Hispanics with 50% or more of residents aged 65 or older, as categorized in the 1980 Population Census data. The sample is not quantitatively representative of the total population, but care was taken to reflect the demographic characteristics of the East Harlem elderly by relative age (65 to 74 vs. 75 and over) and gender. Median income was about \$500-550 per month. All 46 informants were born in Puerto Rico, but had lived continuously in East Harlem since migrating to the continental United States in the 1950s.

³Prior ethnographic fieldwork included unstructured and structured interviews and non-participant and participant observations over two years.

⁴The informants, native speakers of Spanish like myself, chose to hold conversations only in that language. All of the citations are my translations of the interviews.

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