

Spring 2016

# Using Photographs To Surface Prejudices and Increase Cultural Sensitivity via Documentary Photography of Tamil Nadu India

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**Using Photographs To Surface Prejudices and Increase Cultural Sensitivity via  
Documentary Photography of Tamil Nadu India**

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Senior Honors Thesis  
Carnegie Mellon University  
Class of 2016

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## **Abstract**

This Senior Honors Thesis, from the departments of Psychology, Photography, and Design, is an examination of the role of prejudices in the subjective interpretation of photographs. The misunderstanding of individuals, groups, and cultures is crucial to address in today's increasingly interconnected world. Grounded in the social cognitive theory, the categorization of stimuli is an important cognitive process that enables human functioning but becomes problematic when applied to the categorizations of humans, resulting in stereotyping that are overgeneralizations and often inaccurate understanding of ingroup and outgroup members. By examining images to firstly recognize stereotype-grounded interpretations, secondly probe to learn more about what is occurring in the photographs, and lastly compare these outcomes with actual occurrences of images, people can become more cognizant of the discrepancies between judgments and reality. This work draws from social psychology principles and is strengthened by photo research method tools like photovoice, as well as observations in the work of photographers, archival studies, and media outlets. Additionally, this thesis draws further support through the analysis of interpretations of novel documentary photographs of Tamil Nadu, India. Overall, this work argues that the ability for photographs to serve as portals to diverse people and places presents as a unique tool to address the necessary shortages in cultural sensitivity and competency.

## Project Motivation

My family tells me how the languages I first learned were that of my Indian heritage – Tamil and Telugu – and not English. Apparently, I was pretty good at it too. Although I was born and raised in Michigan throughout my upbringing, I mostly integrated into the English language and culture when I began school. As I went to my first days of daycare, I pleaded for my family to no longer call me Buji, an endearing Indian nickname, and to instead to call me Rubini, which is what I learned in school was “normal” in American culture.

My life has continued to border both my south Indian nativity and my American upbringing. I actively sought out a diverse group of friends in my primary and secondary school, with whom I would joke, talk about the latest American trends with, and overall, try to be an American. Meanwhile, my experiences always maintained an Indian backbone. I participated in Indian classical art forms lessons – Bharatanatyam, a form of ancient Indian dance form, and Carnatic music, a type of South-Asian music that is just as ageless. I performed in Indian cultural shows with my sister and friends of our Tamil community in Novi, Michigan, and I went to a weekly Hindu youth group conducted by Chinmaya Mission every week of my childhood, which debunked myths about what it meant to be Hindu and how I could apply the Sanskrit teachings to my life. The lines between America and India constantly blurred into each other. Simple actions like deciding which type of food I wanted to take with me to school for lunch or which type of music and movies to immerse myself in were complicated by my Indian core and integration into a Western system.

It was undeniable: I was living the life of a first-generation Indian-American. It was confusing at times, sometimes feeling like a tug-of-war of cultural values and conduct, but I owe it to my parents for actively integrating me into both cultures as opposed to siding with either one.

As I entered college at Carnegie Mellon University and took courses that studied people and behavior in different ways, I came to see more clearly that my cross-cultural background helped me think about people and groups of people more dynamically. In social psychology courses, I learned that stereotyping is a real phenomenon fueled by many underlying psychological principles. And in my photography courses, I detected how artists sometimes educated the public on social groups through the use of photographs and text.

A lot of my early photography work gravitated towards examining my heritage. From exploring the symbolic representation of different hand forms used in Indian dance to experimenting with the intersection of clothing and mannerisms of Indian and American cultures, I recognized that a part of me quenched to examine my roots. During the end of my fall sophomore semester at Carnegie Mellon, I got the idea that conducting a project *in* India, as opposed to *about* India from the United States would deepen my study. I let the idea sit with me for quite some time,

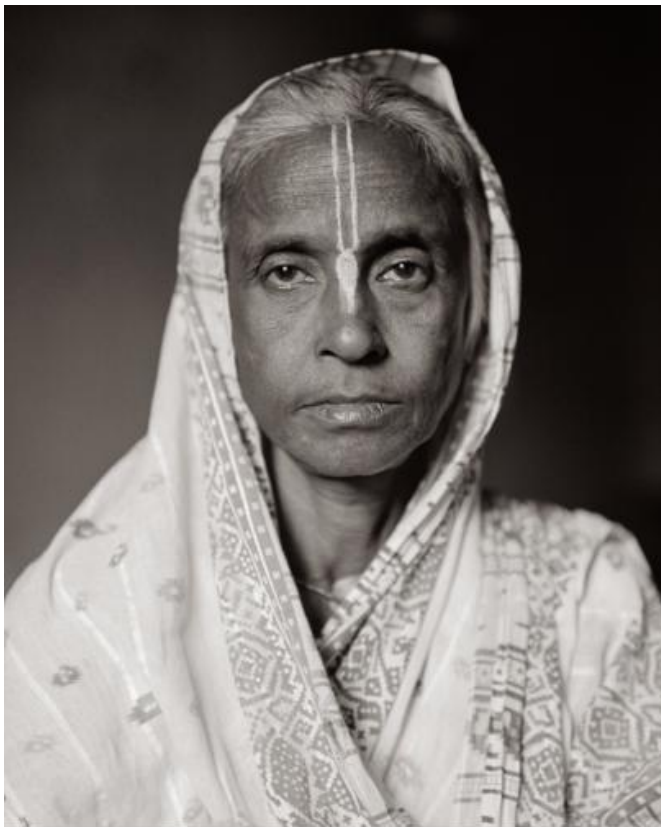
eventually writing it off that it would require too many subcomponents and be too lofty of a goal. One year later, my mother was speaking of how she was thinking of going to India to tend to my grandmother's health. My dream of conducting a project in India resurfaced.

Prior to leaving for my month long stay in India, I did research about how other photographers have documented the country so that I could better develop my own vision. I looked at the work of many different artists, and photographers Steve McCurry and Fazal Sheik presented the most astute comparison. Steve McCurry is a National Geographic photographer who captured the famous *Afghan Girl* image, one that has caught the eyes and attention of millions of people across the world. McCurry travels extensively across Southeast Asia and is known for work that similar to *Afghan Girl*: vibrant, exotic, digital. Alternatively, Fazal Sheik is a photographer and activist who specializes in work that provides a voice to marginalized communities. He tends to live for extended periods time within the marginalized communities he photographs, has been awarded funding including MacArthur Genius grant in 2012, and takes his images on medium and large format film cameras.

One juxtaposition of the two photographers includes of their work in Vrindavan, India – a village that has developed the reputation of being a send-off place for females who are widows. In his book *South Southeast*, McCurry includes one image from Vrindavan that is accompanied by other images from an assortment of his Southeast Asia travels. McCurry's vibrant photograph from Vrindavan draws a visual metaphor between the hunchback of an elderly woman and that of a camel. In a different manner, Sheikh produced *The Circle*, a book that consists solely of black and white portraits of women in the village, arranged in chronological order by age. I had to determine where I fell on this spectrum.



Photograph by Steve McCurry, Vrindavan, India



Photograph by Fazal Sheikh, Vrindavan, India

I recognized that the goals a photographer has for their projects are crucial to how that body of work develops and is interpreted by others. I pondered what my goals were in my project. I knew I wanted to be as true as possible to the people I would come across and photograph. I also knew that the digital color images I would take in India would inevitably be exotic to people who have limited exposure to India. While I did not want to glamorize Indian heritage, I did want to educate people on the culture of India while providing a voice to the individuals who would be in my photographs.

My time photographing in India changed me. I realized that my connection to India, which I had visited many times prior, was shifted when I had a camera in my hand and the intention to document and share the region with others. Previously, I might have been curious about a person or their circumstance, but I wouldn't have stopped like I did when I had my camera. I think this was at least partly due to feeling that I didn't have the time, or authority to ask for the time of another person. But the camera changed that. The camera was a universal symbol for seeking stories. When coupled with approaching people with the utmost respect and sincerity, the camera became an open invitation to a conversation.

I stopped on the sides of streets to talk with people and inquire if they wanted to be a part of my project. I had a notebook in hand and my loving sister by my side to hold a video camera for me as I interviewed people. I learned about views on topics ranging from family values to experiences with caste system discrimination. I proceeded to collaborate with these new found friends and photograph them.

I returned from my trip with thousands of photographs and hours of interviews. I worked with Professor Charlee Brodsky for a semester long Independent Study, through which I made *Journey To My Beloved India*- a photographic artist book that told narratives of the region of Tamil Nadu, India through photographs and text. Working on this initial project allowed me to begin to appreciate the complexities of people and cultures, and to recognize the importance of cross-cultural awareness in today's increasingly interconnected world.

This interdisciplinary Senior Honors Thesis through the departments of Psychology, Photography, and Design, at Carnegie Mellon University is an opportunity for me to not only deepen my exploration of my heritage, but also bridge my experiences in India to my studies in social psychology and documentary photography. I hope to share with you the undeniable prejudices we each portray onto our perceptions of people and groups that are different from our own. By having an understanding of the formation of cultures, and their often unequal representation in worldly dynamics, we can become more sensitive towards the diversity that exists.



## Literature Review

### Part I. Psychology

Human cognition has evolved such that one's past experiences shape the platform through which they perceive their future environment. This adaptation is adequate if one's perception is accurate. However, satisfactory sociocultural understandings stem from prolonged exposure and exploration of one's environment, such that a person can develop a reasonable background for their own cultural heritage if they invest enough time and effort. Because the world today that is becoming more and more interconnected than ever before, there is a lack of ideal knowledge when engaging with various social groups. Therefore, in modern interactions and experiences, there remains an inclination to utilize one's own past knowledge and experiences to function in the given situation, including to understand the social context of another person or culture. Because exposures with groups other than one's own are not as rich and well understood as one's own group, there exists a continual challenge to truly see a situation from another's perspective. In this manner, judgments are quick to form, and in many ways, they both help and hurt our relations with others.

### *Universal Understanding*

For years, researchers have attempted to improve the human condition through the generation of novel knowledge. While advancements in the form of data, inventions, and interventions have been generated, there is an imbalance on the cultural home of these findings, such that research itself is predominately conducted in North America and Europe. Social science is a particularly troublesome area for this phenomena to be taking place due to how the human experience, the very subject of a predominant portion of social science research, varies depending on where people live. The tentative looming presence of Western cultural bias in the social scientific understanding of the norm of human behavior becomes more concerning upon recognition that the West consists of a shrinking 27% of world (Triandis, 1994, p. 2). Therefore, not only may social science findings be inaccurate when applied to non-Western regions, but they may also be less representative of the world at large.

In addition to how academic research has struggled to be entirely reflective of the world's population, the implications for human advancements have also been prone to these concerns as seen from the governance of the United Nations. When referring to the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the United Nations defined this document as "the common standard of achievement for all people and all nations." This is a sound goal, but becomes complicated when analyzed through the philosophical perspective of cultural relativism.

Cultural relativism is the notion that each region of the world has had its unique historical events that have culminated towards the social norms, beliefs, and values of that region (Fluehr-Lobban, 1998). This perspective can be used to explain how attributes of a region like its geographic location and climate can contribute towards that particular region's agriculture and lifestyle, which could cause it to differ greatly from another region with different qualities. This observation can also be seen in the development and effects of religion, such as how it is the moral norm to not eat beef in India, while the opposite is true in the United States. Additionally, this brings to light how the developed culture of one region can be logical for that region, but can be impractical when analyzed from another cultural perspective. It is important to note that another grounding principle of cultural relativism is that no region is inherently superior to another (Marien, 2006) – that is, the cultural norms, beliefs, and values of one region should not be used as a lens when evaluating another region. Instead, through the cultural relativist perspective, each region is entitled to its own culture, such that all cultures are on an equal playing field due to how each culture is accredited intrinsic validation based on its historical events.

When analyzing the Universal Declaration of Human Rights through cultural relativism, the first Article of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that “all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.” To the Westerner, this is sound – the high value placed on independence and self-asserted behavior is normal. But what about traditional Eastern regions where interdependence and collectivism is valued more than independence (Triandis, 1994, p. 112)? In these regions, people are socialized to put the needs of a group, including a family or living community, above the desires of a person (Aronson, Wilson, & Akert, 2013). There is a difference in cultural values between the West and the East, and because neither is more superior than another as seen by cultural relativism, is it moral that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights showcases differently?

### *On an Individual Level*

In order to understand what the perspective of cultural relativism means at the individual level, it is important to recognize how sociocognitive processes occur. At this moment, bring attention to how your feet feel against the surface they are rested on. If you try, can you pick up on the background noise that surrounds you? Did you notice these sensations before you were called to recognize them?

According to psychology's social cognitive theory, people form categorizations of sensory stimuli in order to comprehend and utilize what would otherwise be an overwhelming amount of information (Whitley & Kite, 2010). For example, irrelevant tactile sensations and tonal noises can be classified as such and not clutter the mind. Alternatively, sensory stimuli like beams of light from this surface can be absorbed by the retina in one's eye and perceived as letters that,

when joined, create words that consist of meaning. This ability to translate stimuli detected by sensory receptors into workable and meaningful information is an evolutionary adaptation that makes the high functioning of humans possible. It is what allows for a child to learn that something with wings is likely a bird and for an adult to recognize and utilize objects, such as a chair or spoken word, at their disposal.

Similar to how humans apply the cognitive framework of categorization to better understand the outer world, they also apply categorization to better understand themselves and each other. In the form of analogy, it can be said that letter is to person as word is to race. Rather than perceiving the abundance of information that comprises an individual, people dilute these details to form categories (Aronson, Wilson, & Akert, 2013). This categorization of people is referred to, both colloquially and academically, as stereotyping (Duguid & Thomas-Hunt, 2014). Stereotypes are beliefs or opinions about a group that result in the formation of attitudes, beliefs, prejudices, and discrimination. These stereotypes can be applied to a myriad of human conditions including race, class, and gender (Middleton, 1998; Whitley & Kite, 2010; Aronson, Wilson, & Akert, 2013). Stereotypes are functional as categorization devices in that they often contain what is referred to as a “kernel of truth.” Because they are generalizations, however, they are also prone to exceptions (Whitley & Kite, 2010). For example, the internationally held stereotype that elementary school teachers are females (Beilock et al., 2009, Inandi, 2009) can be accurate in the statistical gender breakdown of school teachers, but is undermined by the existence of male elementary school teachers.

In addition to being generalizations, stereotypes can also cause oversimplification of more complex information. For instance, a person from Trinidad with familial roots from Nigeria, Cuba, and India can be stereotyped as “Black” because of the color of their skin. In fact, society also promotes the dilution of information and the use of these categories for perceived functionality, as seen by the obliged usage of demographic inventories in which people, even those from complex intercultural backgrounds, are prompted to define their race as one of: Caucasian, Hispanic, Black, Asian, Pacific Islander, etc. In this manner, details are lost in the utilization of stereotypes.

Despite being too brief, stereotypes are perpetuated in society through additional means. One phenomena, known as the self-fulfilling prophecy, is an example of the dangers that come with stereotyping. People stereotype Black males as being associated with aggression, crime, and lack of education. By holding the prejudice that Black males are threats to society, and then acting on such a prejudice through discrimination and mistreatment of Black males, the stereotype can become a reality through provoking Black males to act out against such mistreatment in a way that validates the stereotypes. Additionally, even exceptions to the stereotype of Black males, such as President Barack Obama, can be discounted in people’s concept of Black males. This later phenomenon, known as refencing, prompts people to deem exceptions to a stereotype (e.g.

President Barak Obama) as not belonging to the group (e.g. Black males), therefore causing the categorizations formed to be prone to large faults.

Human diversity, in its variations of biological, physical, geographical, and social environments, offers immense excitement in the amount of perspectives and experiences that exist. While the diversity in and of itself is not problematic, it can lead to discrepancies between diverse groups if the basis of categorization that groups use to analyze each other is not adequate. This complication addresses the very intersection between social cognitive theory and cultural relativism.

An example of the intersection of social cognitive theory with cultural relativism can be used to better understand its intricacies. In America, there is a general stereotype held that Asian Americans are “book smart” and the “model minority” (Tawa et al. 2012). This stereotype casts the Asian American group as appearing to have a seamless minority experience, when in actuality, Asian Americans feel pressure in terms of familial obligations to perfectionism such that they hold negative relations on their self-esteem and overall mental health (Methikalam et al., 2015). In this example, social cognitive theory would explain that groups have coined a stereotype of Asian Americans based on what might be noticeable at surface level interactions or media – when there is more depth to the social group than is acknowledged through the stereotype. In a related manner, cultural relativism would propose that the very perception of Asian Americans from the Western-American view requires utilizing Western values to make a conclusion about a partially non-Western group, thereby violating the principle that the values and beliefs of another group (e.g. Western values) should not be used to a particular group of interest (e.g. Asians), and instead, that the values of the interested group itself should be used when analyzing it. In this regard, it could be said that Western value of independence causes Westerners to oversee the pressures Asians feel as a result of collectivism and familial ties, creating discrepancy with one group’s perception of another.

Overall, cultural relativism prompts individuals to think of all cultures as equal to each other and also encourages using the metrics of social norms, beliefs, and values that are inherent to the culture of interest when analyzing it. Meanwhile, social cognitive theory leads one to utilize their own cultural lens to observe and analyze other cultures. This predicament between the ideal in-depth sociocognitive relationships between groups and their actual surface level affiliations is highly problematic, especially in a modern world where cultural outbreaks like the Black Lives Matter movement and the Syrian refugee crisis are of high concern. By better understanding and acting upon these issues, societal relations can inch closer towards improved comprehension and appreciation of cultures.

## *Being Cultural*

Although the implications of social cognitive theory can be unsettling in terms of the low accuracy and fairness of stereotypes formed about other groups, this difficulty presents a necessary insight into the complication of intercultural interactions. The cognitive processing of human diversity acts in similar ways within people of a particular culture. In the words of Triandis, “culture is to society what memory is to people” (1994). Because cultures shape the customs, knowledge, and beliefs that people utilize, there is a shared blueprint that people within a culture hold (Middleton, 1998).

One example of the common norm that can exist for a particular region is how arranged marriage existed has been the accepted social norm for marriage in India for centuries. Interacting with another culture stimulates recognition of the culture that one is a part of (Triandis, 1994) and also provokes variation in each of the interacting cultures. Continuing with the example of an arranged marriage, it is now increasingly common in India for there to be “love marriages” – an alteration of norms that is likely attributable to the increased exposure of Western ideals within India. The causal relationship of the influences that cultures have on each other can go both ways, as seen through how the ancient Indian practices of yoga and meditation are becoming mainstream in Western societies, such that 13.2% of Americans have engaged in practice of yoga in their lifetime (Cramer et al., 2016).

The knowledge of cultures is lagging a few steps behind the interactions of cultures as seen through the rising concern of cultural appropriation (Long, 2009; Rogers, 2006) and of cross cultural studies (Ellis & Stam, 2015). In the case of yoga, for example, Asian Indians report feelings of frustration about the malpractice of yoga in the West – which, for starters, should be called Asana and not yoga. Another mishap includes how the practice is intended to be sacred rather than treated as a casual exercise (Saraogi, 2014; Batimangalkar, 2014).

Based on the aforementioned, it is plausible to claim that people act in non-ideal manners in which they utilize stereotypes which become exhibited as prejudices, or attitudes projected towards people due to the receiver’s group membership (Whitley & Kite, 2010). Knowing that stereotyping and prejudice are cultural problems, the question then becomes, how can prejudice be reduced and cultural sensitivity be increased?

The most promising manner through which one can reduce stereotype based thoughts and behaviors is through the multicultural perspective (Smith & Trimble, 2016). This approach emphasizes ethnic identities as being fundamental to one’s self-concept, such that people should maintain their cultural heritages and coexist peaceably with each other (Hornsey & Hogg, 2000). Not only does multiculturalism recommend that people be salient about their ethnic identity, but

it also incorporates allowing individual groups to have their own identity while simultaneously encouraging an umbrella identity through which all people can unite (Dovidio, Kawakami, & Gaertner, 2000). This overarching identity can include that of an American or as a human-being, and does not compete with one's ethnic group identity (Hornsey & Hogg, 2000).

Multiculturalism can be approached in personable manners to reduce prejudices. Perhaps the backbone in achieving multiculturalism is to actively learn about other cultures in order to increase competency and understanding of that group and of diversity in general. This weaves together the intergroup contact theory, which suggests that interaction between groups can positively improve the attitudes and feelings that the groups have about each other, and the outgroup homogeneity effect, which explains the tendency people have to view the members of a particular group as being vastly similar rather than acknowledging the variety that exists within that group (Whitely & Kite, 2010). If one tries to interact with other group members and actively learn about them, then this could lead to the beneficial outcomes of decreasing stereotypes while also increasing understanding of the diversity within groups.

## Part II. Photography

### *Images as Tools*

Photographs posit themselves as unique tools to reduce prejudice and improve attitudes through the doors they open to learning about other cultures and helping people become aware of their own prejudices. Unlike other forms such as writing or drawing, photography precisely captures a moment in time. This moment is incredibly complex, given the wide assortment of happenings that can be taking place within the frame. However, due to the longevity of a photograph, the image can be probed to better understand what is occurring and how this is different from the viewer's original interpretation. The wide array of responses to images, and the underlying meaning of such interpretation can be fathomed by several occurrences, ranging from the Rorschach Inkblot Test, criminal investigations, and participatory storytelling methods such as photovoice.

The Rorschach Inkblot Test involves showing individuals a set of inkblots with the intention of being able to reveal their personality based on their interpretation of the inkblots. But from where do these varying interpretations stem? The underlying personality types consist of introversion vs extraversion, psychopathological tendencies, talents, and interests (Hertz 1932), revealing that humans differ on these qualities and that it is possible to surface principal aspects of an individual based on their reported interpretation of images. When responses to the Rorschach Inkblot Test were analyzed in relation to prejudices, it was found that college women who demonstrated prejudice against minority groups showed an average of decreased interest in thinking and capacity for empathy than nonprejudiced college women (Reichard, 1948). This

goes to show that the interpretation of something as ambiguous as an inkblot correlates with that person's prejudices of another.

Courtroom investigations, too, involve the application of prejudices. Interracial trials involve Black defendants being subject to racial bias from White jurors, even when there are no blatant racial issues present (Sommers and Ellsworth, 2001). In this manner, people carry anti-Black sentiments with them to the jury box without even without realizing. In addition to racism being present in juror bias, it is also present in the eye witness testimony and facial recognition as they relate to photographs. When shown with photographs of people's faces, people are more accurate at differentiating and recognizing those of their own race in comparison to members of different races (Corenblum & Meissner, 2006), causing minorities to be at a disadvantage.

Another implication of prejudices can be observed from responses to racially threatened trials. When George Zimmerman, a White police officer, was under trial in 2013 for shooting the Black adolescent Trayvon Martin, the entire historic Black neighborhood of Sanford, Florida was invested in the case. MSNBC released the article "In Black Sanford, A Place To Gather And Wait For A Verdict," which was fact-driven, written in an objective manner, and contained compelling photographs of the average lifestyle of those in Sanford. Yet, the comments in response to the news article fumed racial biases that suggested to "let the Blacks riot" and that "Zimmerman was a hero." The salient role of stereotyping, and in the lack of recognition of details included photographs, can be observed from counter-responses such as:

"I firmly believe Americans have been conditioned to see what's not there. Is there a crime in progress in any of these photos? .... To assume poverty in a black neighborhood equals crime is sad." – comment to MSNBC "In Black Sanford, A Place To Gather And Wait For A Verdict," 2013



Photograph by Wayne Lawrence, "In Black Sanford, A Place To Gather And Wait For A Verdict"





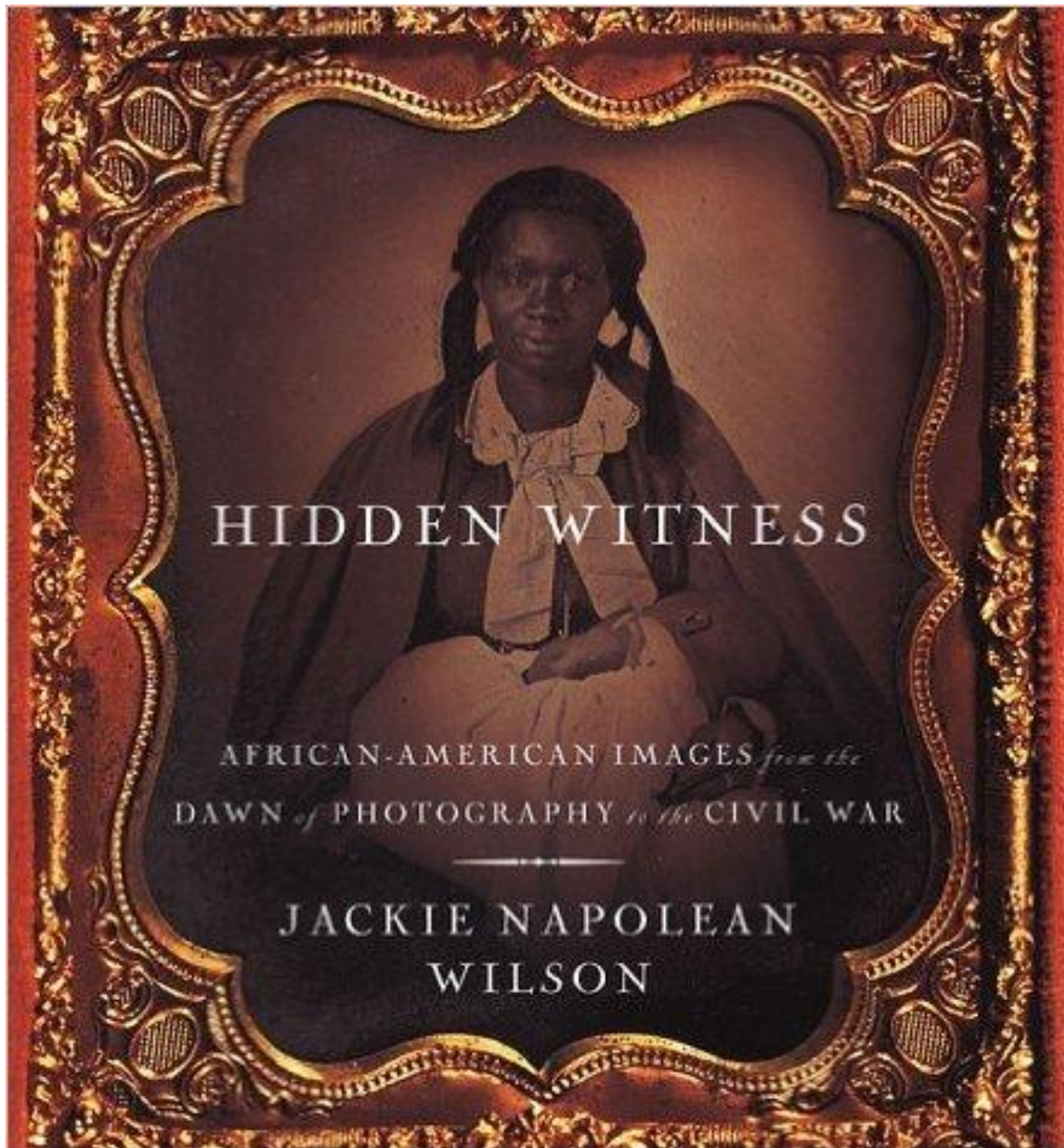
Photograph by Wayne Lawrence, "In Black Sanford, A Place To Gather And Wait For A Verdict"

As seen by the Zimmerman article, insightful photographs require being analyzed in order to have impact. It is important to experience what happens when proper attention and inquiry is attempted with photographs? In the body of work "Hidden Witness," curator Jackie Napoleon Wilson gathered daguerreotype and ambrotypes made in the Civil War. These photographs date back to the mid-1800s when photography first came to America. They were made by light projections onto light-sensitive materials of tin.

If a person were to ask you to look at the included image, what would you perceive? You may perceive a Black female sitting. And if you looked more closely, you may predict that given the women's wardrobe and expression, that she was a slave at some point in her life.

Did you notice the wedding band on the women's left hand? What happens if you were told that slaves were not allowed to marry until the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments were added to the United States Constitution? The pride on the woman's face is in some ways equated with her pride of wearing, and purposefully showing, the wedding ring on her hand. This

woman is a symbol of rebirth of a nation – and it took some discerning to arrive at that. This comes to showcase the ability for photographs to serve as a historical record and contain compelling meaning. In this instance, they functioned as witness to African Americans during the nineteenth century, a time period in which African Americans were widely invisible during American history.



Photograph by Unknown, “Hidden Witness: African American Images from the Dawn of Photography to the Civil War”

## *Cautions With Photography*

While photographs can serve causes as notable as bringing light to marginalized experiences that inform preconceptions, photographs also have the ability to strengthen negative categorizations and create a false sense of reality. Media and advertisements rely heavily on the use of digital photographs, which are often prepositioned in a nonrealistic manner and/or use digital enhancement to create a false reality. Prepositioning sets can create scenes that did not occur naturally but look as if they did. One instance of this is having objects or models be positioned in particular ways to showcase qualities. For example, in order for female bodies to look slender, it is common for photographers to stand on a chair and photograph at a downward angle that makes the body appear slimmer. Alternatively, cosmetic campaigns often desire showcasing faces that are wearing their products as powerful, thereby photographing from slightly below the eye level of the model and exhibiting a bold and powerful adorned face.

In addition to prepositioning shots, seamlessly post-processing images also contributes to a false reality. Along the lines of portraiture and glamour photography, images are regularly enhanced to create desired perfection. This can be as simple as removing a wrinkle from a person's shirt or as drastic as making a person appear as if they were ten pounds lighter. Additionally, other elements like the colors and background of a photograph can be altered as desired, allowing the editor to select specifically what they want to convey, even if it never happened.

The controversy of media campaigns can be observed through the 2014 clash between the Victoria's Secret "The Perfect Body" campaign and the response by Dove with their "The Perfect Real Body" campaign. While the former contained young toned bodies of similar slender proportions, the later contained women with body sizes more representative of the typical population. The Victoria's Secret's campaign was ultimately criticized for generating unhealthy body image, and gained a petition with 26,000 signatures against its campaign (Victoria's Secret 'Perfect Body' ad stirs backlash). The serious implications of photo-manipulation can be seen from the high dissatisfaction people have of their body perception (Docteur et al., 2010) and how adolescents analyze their bodies according media, prompting them to also strive to be virtually perfect through image retouching (Harrison & Hefner, 2014).

Overall, the ability for photographs to create one's conception of a particular topic comes to show the power that images have in creating a sense of reality. Additionally, this suggests that photographs are influential tools that should be used responsibly to create the most beneficial outcomes.

The ability for photographs to be used responsibly and for the betterment of social good can be seen from the use of photography in the Athens Photographic Project (APP). Founded in 2000, APP is a non-profit project based in Athens, Ohio that strives to use photography to aid in the mental health recovery process. APP provides the opportunity for individuals to engage in self-discovery and expression through the lens of a camera. Through weekly sessions, APP artists learn how camera techniques such that they can share their story creatively and meaningfully. These weekly meetings also involve each participant sharing their photographs and narratives with each other to create a dynamic for growth and trust. In this manner, APP utilizes photography to enable contemporary reflection and the expression of individual voices in a meaningful way (Revealing Light).

Another effective use of photography to create social change can be seen from photovoice. Photovoice is an immersing photography-based research method that is based on community-based participatory research method. Photovoice involves providing individuals from a given community cameras to use to enable individuals express their unique experiences in any given context of interest. Photovoice is based upon the SHOWeD principle, in which participants are asked “What do you See here? What is happening? How does this relate to Our lives? Why does this problem or strength exist? What can we Do about it?” (Teti et al., 2012).

Photovoice has been used in many dimensions, one of which is mental health. In the realm of mental health, photovoice has been able to provide unique perspectives about the recovery from mental illness, by allowing images taken by an individual to be used to reveal themes and metaphors about mental illness (Mizock, Russinova, Shani, 2014). In addition to the principles of APP, photovoice also utilizes the camera as a research tool to formulate conclusions about interventions and other assistance.

Photovoice has additionally been used in other related initiatives. This includes the use of photovoice for adolescents in Peru to express their experiences of health, well-being, and sexuality (Bayer & Albuquerque, 2014), as well as how photovoice has been used to enable women living with HIV/AIDS to tell their story (Teti & Johnson, 2012). In this manner, photovoice leverages photography to enable researchers to better understand the conditions of the population they are trying to serve, while simultaneously creating participant empowerment within the targeted population.

In addition to images being used proactively in photovoice, they are also used in other facets within research. One example is the ability for participant-driven photography to be used to generate more useful survey instruments than otherwise possible. In a multicultural research team that was studying the role of alcohol in the lives of Thai adolescents, it was found that the researchers had a difficulty in accurately understanding the Thai adolescent experience, thereby hindering the efforts of the researchers. By asking the adolescents to take photographs and then

discuss their photographs as a group, researchers were able to learn about the role of alcohol in the lives of these adolescents in a way that was otherwise not conceived by for the researchers.

### *Photography and Culture: My Approach*

Photographs have been demonstrated to be effective in assisting researchers obtain a better understanding of the experiences of the community that they are interested in serving. It would be more impactful and widespread, however, for the insightfulness of photographs to reach the public in a similar manner. One opportunity for photographs to engage in this role is educate the public about cultures through photographs. As seen by the multicultural perspective and intergroup theory, this would ultimately reduce stereotypes and prejudices.

As we return to the notion of increasing understanding of other cultures through research, it is important to recognize how complex of an endeavor it is to study another culture. One consideration to take into account is that the instructions used to measure cultures may be understood differently across cultures. The measurement of multiple choice testing, for instance, would not be fair to use in a culture that does not regularly use these types of testing (Triandis, 1994). Another dimension to adhere to is that the testing situation itself can contain varying connotations across cultures. The wording of a set of questions can imply different underlying meanings a same question to other cultures. Additionally, the environment of a testing situation can project differences between testing conditions that skews results in an undetected way. For instance, if white researchers were to study the intelligence of intercity African American children, it has been found that the children perform better if researchers play games with the kids by sitting on the ground and non-formally interact with the children, than if they do not play with the kids ahead of time (Triandis, 1994).

In my own research of culture in Tamil Nadu, India, I navigated these difficulties by engaging in what Triandis proposes is the best way of studying culture: a multipronged approach. Because each specific method of examination – from surveys, to testing, to interventions – has its own pros and cons, using multiple methods allows for the maximum resource pool and thus maximum confidence in results. Overall, my research has been qualitative in nature, incorporating many tiers of observational analysis into an ethnographic study of Tamil Nadu. I will expand on each of these aspects of my research, including how they were conducted and their implications on my workflow.

As anthropologist James Spradley describes, “Rather than studying people, ethnography means learning from people” (1980, p. 3). In ethnographies, the researcher does intensive fieldwork on a particular group of people in an identified environment. Being hyperaware of the subtleties of a scenario requires a caliber of competency about culture, which is rare to come across. A foundation to my examination of Tamil Nadu, India was the heritage that I shared with the

region. Because I was a fluent speaker of Tamil and have studied the culture in other settings throughout my upbringing, I essentially had gathered the experience that a social psychologist would have to train to acquire in order to conduct an ethnographic study. My upbringing allowed me to readily engage in an in-depth study of Tamil Nadu – something that non-native researchers would have to work towards for a much longer duration of time to achieve similar results.

One unobtrusive way in which I have studied Tamil Nadu, India is by making detailed logs of my experiences abroad. This included references like note taking, picture making, and video recording documentation of my surroundings. I was also as removed from the scene that I was observing as possible, attempting to not disturb it while still using my Tamil language skills and cultural competencies to accurately record the scene. This approach was guided by basic psychology research methods I had learned and was helpful in that I was able to objectively log and document aspects of the culture in its raw form for deeper analysis at a further day. I was glad to later recognize that the method of rigorously writing down observations and remain as discrete as possible was validated by Simonds, Camic and Causey (2012) due to the ability to capture evocative experiences that would otherwise be fleeting and left overlooked, as well as by avoiding attract attention that would potentially disturb said situation in unnatural ways.

At other times, I was more involved in the scene, walking through streets and stopping to introduce myself to locals and then, if they were interested, asking them questions that would often bloom into conversations that would continue for hours. In this interactive approach to studying Tamil Nadu, I conducted interviews of locals to better understand the complexities of their stories. The interview process itself involved a gradient of depth. As is common in quantitative psychology interviews, the interviews I conducted began in a more regimented manner with the asking of a predesigned set of questions that all locals I was interviewing would answer. This allowed for the benefit of being able to compare and contrast responses across different interviewees such that I could analyze how the same question can evoke different responses amongst individuals of the same community. These interviews, which began in a similar standardized manner, developed into varying levels of complexity based on participant answers. All of these interviews were video recorded with the permission of the participants. Similar to how the observational approach was warranted by psychologists as described previously, the interview dynamic I conducted was also recommended for optimal ethnographies. By engaging in informal interviews, researchers benefit from a more natural connection with the respondent, in which prompts and talking points provide additional depth and guidance for the interview (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006).

Overall, ethnographies can be described as a “detailed analysis of the real-world context” (Simonds, Camic, Causey, 2012). The ability for ethnographies to dynamically research a particular group or population of interest holds the theoretical benefit of accessing information about human behavior that would otherwise be difficult to tap into with similar success in a

contrived setting (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). My work in India paralleled these benefits by giving me the freedom to explore each participant's unique personal narrative in a manner that led to uncovering details of aspects of their lives that I would otherwise not have thought to ask extra questions on. Interestingly, the documentation of photographs is another recommended aspect of ethnographies. By documenting the environment with images, photographs assist in bridging the gap between the "physical realities of an environment and the psychological effects of them" (Simonds, Camic, Causey, 2012). While I had engaged in my research style intuitively, it is encouraging to learn that the methods I was using in terms of observation, interviews, and visual documentation were each supported by other social scientists.

### *Conclusion*

Overall, it can be recognized that there is a presence of stereotyping and prejudice that impacts human interactions. To combat this problem, the multicultural perspective and intergroup contact theory suggest taking pride in one's ethnicity and actively learning about people from other identities. When used responsibly, photography provides a unique means to engage in this solution. Specifically, the ability for sensitive photographs to provide insight into a myriad of scenes and realities is a worthwhile endeavor, as it can generate access to real stories and real people – ultimately enabling the rigidity of stereotypes to be dissolved.

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