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### ***Photographing Guests in a Soup Kitchen: Examining the Application of Exchange Theory***

**Abstract**

*This ethnographic project explored the question: How are the photographer and the homeless impacted by their exchanges over one year of photography in an urban soup kitchen? In this study, I explored how the exchange process played out when the subjects were homeless and guests at a church-based soup kitchen and I, the photographer, was a middle-class, middle-aged, White, female professor. Exchange theory was applied here because of the metaphor between producing and consuming photos of the homeless and the ethics of consuming the homeless being portrayed. Elements of critical and confessional tales are included to describe my feelings from initial entry into the soup kitchen until I was eventually given the affectionate title of "Picture Lady" by the soup kitchen guests.*

**Keywords**

homelessness, soup kitchens, family, photography, visual methods

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## **Background**

The project began when the pastor of a large Midwestern church, who had a strong interest in photography, asked me to work alone and with interested church members to shoot and exhibit photographs of various elements of church life as a way of improving relations between the church and the low income, inner city neighborhood surrounding the church. A small gallery space was established in the church for the photographs to be exhibited for public viewing. As a result of the pastor's request, I regularly took photos at indoor and outdoor church-community events, including free community dinners and a farmers market. I served as a judge for a church photo contest which asked members to take photos that illustrated a Lenten theme. We involved neighbors and church members in a joint "photographic field trip," using the church bus for transportation, to show the diverse aspects of the area and to visually define and represent their shared "neighborhood."

The soup kitchen was one element of the church's identity that was considered an integral part of the church-community linkage and which is the focus of this paper. The soup kitchen in this church began in the early-1980s as an inner city neighborhood nutrition program. The program was designed originally to provide lunches for the neighborhood children during the summer. What began as an outreach program for children became an outreach program to feed any hungry person who came to the church. In the beginning, volunteers prepared gallons of soup in the big kettle in the main church kitchen every Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday morning. Some guests wanted to take the food home, so carryout service was provided, and is still available today. The soup kitchen currently averages approximately 50 guests each Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday. It is staffed by volunteers and the food is provided by a non-profit organization delivering hot meals to several locations in the city. The breakdown of guests is as follows: 75% men, 5% families with children, 86% African American, average age-55 years, 75% currently or intermittently homeless, and 100% living below poverty. Some guests had been frequenting this soup kitchen for over 20 years, and several of the volunteers had been involved as long, as well. This ethnographic project explored the question: How are the photographer and the homeless impacted by their exchanges over one year of photography in an urban soup kitchen?

The following statistics from the 2011 annual Homeless Count paint a picture of the homeless situation in the metropolitan statistical area of approximately 1.7 million residents where this project was conducted (Coalition for Homelessness: Intervention and Prevention 2011): Of the 1,567 individuals found and identified as experiencing homelessness, a) 114 (7%) were unsheltered and found on the street, and 1,453 (93%) were staying in emergency shelters or in temporary housing programs (93%) ; b) 444 (28%) were members of families, including 248 children under the age of 18, and representing 155 families; c) 85 (15%) were employed while they were homeless; d) 457 (29%) cited a lost job or the inability to find employment as the reason for their homelessness; e) 642 (41%) suffered from a chronic addiction; and f) 219 (14%) suffered from severe mental illness. These data point out that at any given time, because of frequent mobility, not all of the homeless are living on the streets, unemployed or alone.

## **Literature**

For this study, the initial literature review covered photography and the homeless, photography as an exchange process between the photographer and the homeless, and ethnographic studies of soup kitchens. As the year-long project evolved and new findings emerged, the literature was also reviewed concerning relationships between the homeless and their families, and identity development as a result of repeated social exchanges between the author as photographer and soup kitchen guests. Each area will be summarized below.

### *Photography and the Homeless*

Numerous documentary photographers have produced portraits of the homeless, often when the subjects were on the street or in social service centers, such as shelters and soup kitchens. The levels of the homeless individuals' involvement in the photographic process, consent, and mutual subject-photographer exchange have varied. A high level of involvement, verbal consent, and exchange is evident in the auto-photography by the homeless themselves, particularly if followed by photo-elicitation interviews (Aiken & Wingate, 1993; Bradley, Hodgetts and Cullen, 2005; Dewdney, Gary & Minnon, 1994; Johnsen, May & Cloke, 2008). For example, Aiken and Wingate (1993) studied the auto-photography of middle-class, homeless, and mobility-impaired children. Johnsen, May, and Cloke (2008) explored the physical geography of where the homeless lived by having the subjects take photos of where they slept. Moderate involvement and exchange is seen when photographers produce photo essays of the homeless with their consent (Blodgett 2007; Hollyman & Irwin 1988; Mendel 1995; Zald 2004). And finally, photography of the homeless has little subject involvement and no exchange or verbal consent when it takes place in public areas where the homeless do not know they are being photographed (Rosenthal & Dreamwalker 2008; Wodiczko 1990). This project attempted to support a high level of involvement, exchange and consent on the part of the soup kitchen guests.

## **Photography as Exchange**

Exchange theory operates on the assumption that all social life can be treated as an exchange of rewards or resources among actors (Zafirovski 2003). Homans (1961) described exchange theory as human behavior that often results in materialistic rewards. It is a type of reciprocal exchange which will eventually end if the mutual reciprocity is not continued or supported. Photography has been described as a means of social exchange between the photographer and the photographed (Hingley 2011). Durbin (2000, p. 9) explored the nature of the social exchange during the taking of another's photograph by asking: "How can this often brief encounter allow for the possibility of feeling for others, enable a consciousness of how others live and engage in the world? The very act of posing for a photograph is always situated within a social relationship between the photographer and the photographed-a moment of exchange." Within the cultural economy of image-making, the pose represents the point at which

value is set. This is the moment of transaction when the deal has finally been struck (Lowry 2000). Finally, Hunt (2000, p. 53) stated that “the most important aspect of the photograph is its exchange of interest with the viewer, but the agreement made with the subject is nonetheless indicative of the kind of society in which it is made.” The exchange of gazes and purposes that occur between the photographer and the subject(s) cannot be ignored, particularly if the subject is also the intended owner and viewer of the photograph, as was the case in this project.

In this study, I explored how the exchange process played out when the subjects were homeless or near homeless and guests at a church-based soup kitchen and I, the photographer, was a middle-class, middle-aged, White, female professor. Exchange theory was applied here because of the metaphor between producing and consuming photos of the homeless and the ethics of consuming the homeless being portrayed in the photos. Contemporary documentary photographers have to worry about, and justify, their relations with the people they shoot. Image-makers record lives with cameras that are often considered revealing and possibly unethical and exploitive (Aubert 2009). Becker (1986, 2007) expands on this risk of exploitation by summarizing that the subject can feel superior to, equal to, or inferior to the photographer. He refers to this process as a form of reciprocal exchange. The goal here was for the guests to feel equal to the photographer.

Hingley (2011, p. 266) used photography to explore the circumstances of urban faith communities along one road in Birmingham, England for one year. Her project had many similarities to the present study, although it was conducted at a slightly later time. She described the process of engagement and exchange that evolved during her project. Her subjects frequently questioned what right she had to document their lives and beliefs. She handled this issue by assuming a collaborative approach to image-making and gaining as deep an understanding as possible of the lives of subjects before capturing them on film. In addition, she asked people to take images of herself to explore how she was being perceived. She stated:

I see the personal as well as the intellectual rewards that come from relocating daily research in a shared space where boundaries between myself, as photographer, and subject, as stranger, become permeable. I offered people services in return for their hospitality, such as driving the Thai Buddhists monks to the wholesale market at 5am (their spiritual status means they cannot drive), and babysitting for a Muslim family...using digital camera equipment enabled me to share results and offer my subjects copies of their images quickly and easily; this became crucial in building trust and sustaining relationships and access. Photography then became the currency of our exchange.

### **The Homeless and Families of Origin**

Studies of how the homeless lose connectedness with their families of origin have tended to concentrate on subgroups divided by gender and used a variety of theoretical approaches. Pippert (2007) conducted in-depth interviews with 45 homeless men about their extreme social isolation.

While applying social exchange theory, he reported that they a) had attenuated relationships with their families of origin with little or no contact; b) had fractured relations with their ex-partners and children; c) had on-going searches for companionship; d) were uncomfortable asking for help from families and ex-partners; and e) were unlikely to get emergency support from their families, which exacerbates problems of poverty and prolongs periods of being homelessness. In another study by Holt, Christian and Larkin (2011), they explored the experiences of older homeless men living temporarily in hostels. Using a model of interpretative phenomenological data analysis on the data from interviews with ten men, they described one of the reoccurring themes as the balancing independence with needed assistance from others. Losing a sense of connectedness to family was perceived as a precursor to becoming physically homeless. Feeling a lack of connectedness was primarily described in terms of the loss of relationships with partners, children, and friends, as well as the wider community as a whole.

On the other hand, Jackson-Wilson and Borgers (1993), studied how low income African American women who were, or had been, homeless perceived their families of origin. They compared how homeless and nonhomeless women perceived their families of origin and social support systems. Using a developmental model of disaffiliation, they randomly selected and compared 76 first time homeless and 74 nonhomeless women. They reported that a multi-dimensional model significantly discriminated between the two groups. Retrospective memories of the family of origin's ability to handle crises contributed to the disaffiliation function, which differentiated the two groups, and was correlated with the number of, and feelings of satisfaction with, personal social supports.

Anderson conducted intensive interviews with 20 women and interpreted the findings through a feminist framework. She reported that almost all of the women had negative perceptions of their families of origin, including physical, sexual, and emotional abuse. Relations with their mothers were described as involving betrayal, devaluation of self by others, enmeshment, lack of emotion, and destructive family coalitions. Relations with their fathers involved devaluation of women and male oppression.

### **The Soup Kitchen as Living Room**

Glasser and Suroviak (1989, 95) describe the soup kitchen as valuable beyond the physical nourishment that it provides. The relationships formed in this setting can compensate for the loss of contact and relationships with partners, children, friends, and extended family.

The soup kitchen is a symbolic living room whose marginality takes the forms of low income, long term unemployment, debilitating physical conditions, serious mental illness, loneliness and separation from conventional family relationships...the soup kitchen becomes the very center of their social existence...Most soup kitchen guests lack the sources of human contact that people take for granted in work, family relationships, and consumer activities.

Most soup kitchen guests miss the social aspect of sharing photographs with family members, as has been discussed by several authors. Many of the guests who frequented this soup kitchen had lost touch with their families, had lost their family photos, could not afford to take new photos, and/or hoped that sharing their new photos from this project with relatives would re-establish familial contact. According to Sit, Hollan, and Greenwold (2005), the process of sharing printed photos serves as an anchor for continued conversation. Chalfen (1987) described the important social component of sharing and discussing family photos around such communal space as the kitchen table or on the living room sofa. Such conversations bring out hidden meanings, strengthen relationships and give pleasure. They can involve telling stories, reminiscing, asking questions, giving information, and having reactions to the photos. In addition, sharing and discussing photos with other guests, volunteers, staff, and the Picture Lady served as a surrogate for filling social and familial needs in the home. While I was an outsider throughout the project, my sustained presence, informal conversations, and dual photographic approach served as means for the guests to revisit the value of family and family photos in their lives.

### **Ethnographic Tales from a Soup Kitchen**

Miller, Creswell, and Olander (1998) adapted Van Maanen's (1988) three types of ethnographic tales (realist, critical, and confessional) to describe their experiences conducting qualitative research in a soup kitchen for the homeless or near-homeless. They defined realist tales as employing an impersonal point of view; conveying a concrete, scientific, and objective description of the experience. They provide ethnographic analysis of the culture of the soup kitchen.

Critical tales often involve social justice issues and address such questions as: Did you have appropriate permission(s) to have access to the site? Did you have permission from the homeless to study them? How did you reciprocate the homeless in exchange for the privilege of entering their lives, listening to their stories, and taking their photographs? And how did you "give back? The critical tale can include reflexive concerns pertaining to the research process.

They described confessional tales as focusing "on the researcher's experiences as his or her views of the setting and guests changed by the end of the project" p. 470. Confessional tales are methodological in that they are often told to other researchers or students as a way of educating them about what took place in the field. According to Flick (2009, 416), confessional tales display a personalized approach with the authors' viewpoints considered as integral data. Naturalism is used to tell the tale of the author and the culture finding each other. The field work is described as a learning process where the field researcher is or is not successful. In this project, I kept detailed field notes that included elements of critical and confessional tales in order to explore in detail how the process of exchange played out over one year of photography with the homeless who were guests at one church-based soup kitchen.

### **Evolution of My Identity from Outsider to the Picture Lady: Six Confessions**

Although when the project began I was introduced to the guests as working on a project with the pastor, and this provided a level of acceptance, I was an outsider (not a church member, kitchen volunteer or homeless individual) and had to establish my own identity. As a result I attended the soup kitchen at lunchtime two days per week for one year (June 1, 2010 to May 31, 2011) in order to a) get to know the guests, some of whom had sporadic attendance due to illness, incarceration, lack of transportation, etc.; b) get to know the volunteers and church staff who were the “gatekeepers” to allow me direct access to the guests; and c) observe temporal and seasonal variations in relationships, guest attendance, neediness, life circumstances, employment, and places of residence. To further my acceptance, I took photos of both the volunteers and the guests and distributed and displayed them in the same manner. I also allowed the guests, volunteers, and staff to take photos of me and with me. In addition, I drove guests places if they needed to receive social services, get medical care, apply for jobs etc.

The idea of “giving back” (critical tale) to the guests was an important element from the beginning of the project. Pink (2007) describes how traditional ethnographers leave the research site and often very little remains for the participants. On the other hand, when visual ethnographers return copies of photographs to the participants, they are making a lasting exchange with the participants for their involvement in the fieldwork.

On the first day, I entered the soup kitchen at 11:30 with two cameras: a Kodak Easy Share Digital and a Polaroid 300. These cameras were purposely selected to be low key, small, unassuming, and inexpensive. I mingled among the tables and asked the guests if they would like their pictures taken. I told them that I would give them a Polaroid copy immediately and come back the next day with the 4 x 6 digital pictures to handout. Several accepted my invitation to get free photographs. I printed the images that evening in case the guests returned the next day specifically to get their digital photos. Two guests did return the next noon specifically to get their digital pictures. I was encouraged by their responses and decided to continue the dual Polaroid and digital approach. As another way of “giving back,” each digital photograph was stamped on the back with the date, church name, address, and telephone number. Guests were encouraged to sign their names, as well, for future identification purposes. If the photos were found on them or among their possessions the church could be contacted. The six confessions below show my concerns for my own well-being as well as the well-being of the guests, as in a critical tale.

*Confession #1.* Safety was one of my initial concerns that diminished somewhat during the project. The church employed security guards who watched the entrance to the building and the parking lot. In the beginning, I was told by the volunteers that my car would be stolen or vandalized at least once during the year. It did not happen but my winter coat was found slashed in the closet area. On two occasions male guests handed me notes asking me to meet them at nearby bars in the evening. It was difficult to establish feelings of security and trust when I did not accept their social invitations. I formed a type of “sisterhood” with the female guests. They looked out for my safety and whispered to me when particular male guests were drunk or should

not be approached at that time. One day when I had not yet arrived at the soup kitchen, a guest asked if the “Picture Lady” was coming and the name stuck for the rest of the project. From that point on, I was affectionately known as the “Picture Lady” and was treated with more respect. I was warmly greeted by the guests when I saw them at the church, at bus stops, or on the street.

*Confession #2.* I was concerned that I was going to cause the guests pain, embarrassment, or stigmatization from having their photographs displayed publically at the church, on the soup kitchen walls and in the church photo gallery. This did not appear to be the case for those who agreed to participate. In fact, some guests requested that copies of their photos be hung in separate areas outside of the soup kitchen facility for others to view, including in the new church gallery. Some guests left their photos on the soup kitchen wall for weeks because they wanted others to see them. After taking over 20 photos of one woman, she looked at her photograph and stated, “You finally got it right...leave it on the wall.” Periodically, a guest could be overheard remarking that he or she agreed to have another picture taken because the Picture Lady liked doing it so much, it was doing her a favor.

*Confession #3.* I was concerned throughout the project that I would in some way be exploiting the guests by taking their photographs, given some of their physical and mental conditions (critical tale). As a result, throughout the project I never took a photograph without asking for their verbal permission, even if I had taken more than 20 photos of the same guest during the year. While it was rare, some guests refused to have their pictures taken throughout the year. Others refused intermittently based on how they felt, what they were wearing, etc. Table 1 shows a summary of the reasons for not wanting their pictures taken. The responses ranged from feeling that they did not need any more photographs to feeling that they would get in trouble, particularly if the wrong people or the government got the photos. Racial tensions flared up occasionally. For example, one male guest said that “he would never have his photograph taken by a White woman,”

Table 1. *Guests’ Reasons for Not Wanting Their Pictures Taken*

| Reasons   | # of Guests With Similar Responses |
|---|------------------------------------|
| 1. You have already taken lots of me and I don’t need any more                              | 10                                 |
| 2. I am wanted by the police/FBI  | 4                                  |
| 3. When you take my picture, you capture my soul  | 2                                  |
| 4. I better not let my husband see it because he will think I am sending it to another man. | 2                                  |
| 5. I am illegal   | 1                                  |
| 6. I am homeless and have no place to keep it...no pockets or wallet                        | 1                                  |
| 7. I don’t have anyone special to give it to  | 1                                  |



|   |   |
|---|---|
| 8. People can get you in trouble if they have your picture. | 1 |
| 9. This is my first time here and I won't be back this way. | 1 |
| 10. I will never let a White woman take my photograph.      | 1 |

Confession #4. I began by being unsure how to establish mutual trust, as trust was a critical part of the exchange that had to take place between the Picture Lady and the guests. I went “overboard” to honor all of the promises that I made to them and I made every effort to get their photographs to them, even if they had sporadic attendance at the soup kitchen. Experience showed me that the guests preferred to have the printed digital images distributed three ways and I accommodated their preferences: a) if the guest was present the next day, I personally handed the photograph to him or her and engaged in conversation about the photo; b) if the guest was not present the next day, I hung the photograph on the cork board on the wall of the soup kitchen which contained instructions that they were welcome to take their pictures any time; or c) I spread the photos out on a table and they were free to view the photos and take theirs. Some guests preferred to view and handle all of the photos (as many as 30 at a time) instead of just their own (see Figure 1).



Fig. 1 - Photos on table

If a guest wanted more than one copy of a digital photo, I made sure he or she got all that were asked for within two days. I developed a filing system on my office computer so that each of the digital photos was categorized by day of the week and date when it was taken. It was not uncommon for a guest to appear after being gone for several months and ask to see his or her photographs. I was able to find their photos on my computer and distribute them the next day,

or leave them with the Assistant Pastor to give to them in the future, after the completion of the project.

As a result of mutual trust, a voluntary system emerged in which the guests would recognize other guests in photos and volunteer to give them the photos when they saw them on the street, in their apartment buildings, at the store buying beer at night, or at different social service centers. Anecdotal information pointed to the fact that most of them did pass the photos on to the owners. In addition, I asked for their help to identify individuals in the photographs and to give me advice about where they might be or when they might be returning to the soup kitchen. The regular guests generally knew the status of the others. In addition, one of the long time guests was murdered during this project. Some of the guests asked me to print the photos that I had of him and we made a memorial to him on the wall.

Confession #5. Approximately four months into the project, I was not in complete control of the process and was both pleased with their level of commitment and concerned about relinquishing my authority. The guests began to take charge of the shooting, and I had to relinquish some decision-making power, when they started a) selecting their own settings for the photos, both inside and outside; b) stating where to have their photographs taken; c) showing with whom they wanted to pose; and d) deciding ahead of time what they wanted to wear. It was popular in the winter to want their photographs taken in the snow. One man asked me to take a photo of him by a used truck he had just acquired so he could send it to his girlfriend, who was in prison. One woman wore a long dress and said that it was her birthday and she wanted to look beautiful in her photograph. They soon learned to express their preferences for having a head shot, waist, or full-body frame without being asked. They might say, "Just get my face today because my clothes are dirty." I originally suggested a spot for them to stand in the soup kitchen that had adequate lighting, and was not in the way of the volunteers as they worked. It soon became the spot where they would most often initiate picture-taking by standing there and asking to have their pictures taken. Many times they had to wait their turn to have this done. I showed the guests the digital display of their photographs in the camera and discussed what they liked or didn't like about them. Occasionally they would ask to have me retake the photo and I would.

The following are examples of how the guests valued the process and assumed ownership of it. One guest brought a different shirt, sweater or jacket for each of 25 photos that he wanted to give to his estranged relatives. The clothes were selected to please particular relatives. He got the clothes from a nearby Goodwill store and he carried them in large black plastic trash bag. He changed his clothes in the church restroom before each photo. Approximately six months into the project, some guests began to bring others (who were not necessarily homeless) with them to be included in the family photographs (See Figure 2.). They included sisters, brothers, in-laws, children, grandchildren, and a puppy. Several brought their grandchildren to have lunch with them on the children's birthdays so the Picture Lady could take birthday pictures (See Figure 3). Several newly married couples planned that these were going to be their only wedding photographs. One couple had me document the woman's pregnancy each month (See Figure 4).



Figure 2. Invited relatives



Figure 3. Grandparents and birthday party



Figure 4. Pregnant Couple

Confession #6. I feared that the guests would become bored with my repetitious questions and either refuse to be photographed and/or refuse to answer my questions because when I took a photograph I always asked: “What are you going to do with the photo?” This

often resulted in lengthy conversations about their life situations, medical conditions, estranged families, and children. I kept field notes quoting how the guests answered the question about what they were going to do with their Polaroid and/or digital photos. The results are summarized in Table 2. The most frequent response categories were that they were going to: give them to relatives; keep them in their wallets, bible or other special storage places; and/or put them to practical uses (i.e., plug holes where mice entered his apartment, help police identify her body if she were to die, put it on her homeless sign that she carries when she is begging for money, use it as an obituary photo, and use it for identification).

Table 2. *Guests' Descriptions of How They Would Use Their Polaroid and Digital Photos.*

| Description   | # of Guests With Similar Responses |
|---|------------------------------------|
| 1. Give/send it to my _____   | +35                                |
| 2. Keep it in my wallet   | +30                                |
| 3. I don't know   | +20                                |
| 4. Put it in my album/file folder   | +10                                |
| 5. Put it under/on a Christmas tree   | 5                                  |
| 6. Keep it-we have been dating for__ months and have no pictures of us together.  | 5                                  |
| 7. Send it to my wife/children's father/ brother -s/he is in prison   | 5                                  |
| 8. Treasure it/them   | 4                                  |
| 9. Frame it   | 3                                  |
| 10. Plug the holes where the mice are getting into my house   | 3                                  |
| 11. Give it as a Christmas card next year   | 3                                  |
| 12. Use it as our wedding picture-we don't have any   | 2                                  |
| 13. Use it as my obituary photo-my family does not have one   | 2                                  |
| 14. Put it on my refrigerator   | 1                                  |
| 15. I lay them out and look at how much improvement I have made since last year   | 1                                  |
| 16. Give it to my mother so if the police need a recent photo of me, she will have one  | 1                                  |
| 17. Sell it   | 1                                  |
| 18. My son's 12 year old birthday is tomorrow and this is going to be his gift  | 1                                  |
| 19. I write the date on the back of all of the pictures you take of me and I am collecting one each month for a year. I started in July and this is the September picture | 1                                  |
| 20. Use it as my parole picture   | 1                                  |
| 21. Give them to our children who just been removed from us and placed in foster care   | 1                                  |
| 22. Show it to the mice in my apartment   | 1                                  |

|  |   |
|--|---|
| 23. Put it in my bible   | 1 |
| 24. I want to give it to my mother but I have not seen her in a year and I lost her address                                    | 1 |
| 25. Put it on my cardboard homeless sign that I use when I beg for money   | 1 |
| 26. Use it to scare away the mice in my apartment  | 1 |
| 27. Keep it forever-I don't have any pictures of myself  | 1 |
| 28. Save it so my grandchildren will have pictures of us   | 1 |
| 29. Give it to my brother because he wants a picture of me to have after I die.  | 1 |
| 30. Give it to the adoptive parents who took my son when he was two months old. He is eight now and they want a picture of me. | 1 |
| 31. Use it for identification  | 1 |

The importance of using the photos to connect with family members was a strong theme and resulted in me or the church staff occasionally being asked to supply envelopes and stamps for the guests to mail their photos to relatives. Several individuals stated that they were going to send them to relatives who were in prison. Others mentioned giving them to their grandchildren, mother, or brother, none of whom had pictures of them. One young woman cried when she asked to have her picture taken because she told me that she had recently had a request for her photo from the family that adopted her son. He was removed from her eight years earlier because of her drug use. I felt empathy for her situation because I adopted my son. We took 15 photos because these had a special purpose. Unfortunately, she never returned to get her digital photos. We hung her photograph in several places in the soup kitchen and asked for information concerning her whereabouts. Six months after the year-long project ended, the Assistant Pastor called me and told me that he and some of the guests had tracked her down and given her the photographs.

### **Post-Project Thoughts**

As a result of this work, I came to agree with Miller et al. (1998) when they described the soup kitchen as a useful setting to better understand the homeless population because it is where guests develop social groups and communicate with others like themselves. The researcher is able to see the problems that arise for the guests, volunteers, and staff because the soup kitchen is a microcosm for studying the homeless over time. The project elaborated on what the photographer believed she and the homeless gained from their exchanges. Both the photographer behind the camera and the homeless in front of it learned about and experienced mutual understanding, trust, and relationship-building. To summarize, positive feelings were exchanged between the Picture Lady and the guests as they became more involved in the project, such as when they: a) were given copies of their photographs in exchange for allowing their photos be taken; b) helped identify and locate missing individuals shown in photographs; c)

helped distribute unclaimed photographs to their owners who were not at the soup kitchen but were present in the neighborhood; d) assumed more responsibility for the shooting locations and poses they preferred, rather than having the Picture Lady make the decisions and arrangements; e) felt they were doing something that gave the Picture Lady pleasure by letting her take their pictures, and f) used the photographs to pursue connections with their estranged families.

Glasser and Suroviak (1989) proposed soup kitchens act as symbolic living rooms to the guests who frequent them. Several similarities can be drawn between the exchange process that took place in this soup kitchen “living room” and what Musello (1979, 101) coined as the term “home mode” to mean the body of photos produced and accumulated by and for family members within the context of family life. Musello (1979) described images made in the home mode as made for private, as opposed to artistic, use and more valued for their domestic intimacy as opposed to technical or formal qualities. As the guests assumed more control over the production of their photographs and provided input during the shooting, they moved closer to acting in a home mode and were more likely to plan to either keep and cherish the photographs or send them to family members.

Musello described the “family correspondence,” “communion” and “interaction” functions of family photographs as well. The “family correspondence” role was the most evident in this setting. In this mode, photographs are used as reminders or “surrogates” of people separated by space and time. Their role is to demonstrate the conditions of people, places and things which others cannot see. For example, a number of guests wanted pictures taken so they could be sent to relatives or significant others who were in prison. Others planned to get their photos to estranged family members to let them know that they were alive, and also so they would not be forgotten at the present time or after they died.

The “communion” mode is evident when the emphasis is on documenting rites of passage such as births, weddings, family events, deaths etc. As previously described, some of the guests in this project wanted specific photos of birthdays, weddings, pregnancies, memorials etc.

The “interaction” function of the home mode photograph involves looking at it as valuable in the social interaction it garners before, during, and after shooting versus the content of the image itself. Musello (1979) describes the shooting process as a form of interactional entertainment for the observers and actors. Picture-taking in this soup kitchen became a form of group entertainment. Guests, volunteers, and staff often watched as others were photographed. Some guests humorously suggested who should be paired in the photos (sometimes volunteers and/or Picture Lady and guests together), how they should pose, etc.

In addition, according to Musello (1979), home moders seem to take three broad approaches: idealization (formal and posed), natural portrayal (snapshots of everyday life), and demystification (alternative images such as when family members are asleep, half nude, strangely dressed, etc.). The guests overwhelmingly preferred the idealization approach and chose formal poses that showed them at their best in carefully selected settings, such a next to fir tree covered with new snow (See Figure 5.). Some were able to wear carefully selected second-hand clothing for the occasion; some women displayed carefully arranged hair styles (such as when long hair was tied,

rolled or clipped in creative ways). These behaviors were testimonies to the value they placed on the idealized photographs.



Figure 5

Sarvas and Frohlich (2011) describe the present age as on the “Digital Path” and discuss the potential role of social network services and the continued diffusion of cameras into computers, telephones, etc. In this project, I observed only one guest with a cell phone. The guests make up a group who, for the most part, have been left out of or dropped out of opportunities to experience the changes that are taking place in domestic photography and technology, yet they have needs for and value self and family photographs in this visually-soaked culture.

## Conclusion

I began with some insecurity about how to manage this project and left with a sense of curiosity about its replicability. It would not have been possible to schedule separate individual photo-elicitation interviews with most of the guests given their life circumstances, physical conditions, and unpredictable attendance patterns. Therefore, information that I received from them had to be gathered informally, while eating lunch with them, driving them to appointments, distributing photos, etc. This informality and lack of structure was popular with the guests but also resulted in my having feelings of uncertainty at times, as evidenced in my confessions.

There are a host of unanswered methodological questions that need further examination as a result of this project. These include: What would the exchange process have been like if a) the guests had not been given copies of their photos in exchange for their permission to be photographed? b) the photographer had been male and/or a member of the homeless community? c) the project had not been sanctioned and supported by the pastor, the church staff, and the long time soup kitchen volunteers? d) the duration of the project had been significantly shorter or longer than one year? And e) the role of the Picture Lady became institutionalized and was an on-going feature of the soup kitchen?

Finally, a way to show the mutual impact of the project is to examine how the guests' responses changed over time. In the beginning, when the guests were asked to have their photographs taken, the typical comment was, "Sure, why not. It is free." By the end, their responses involved more than the self and were more like this one which included references to the Picture Lady and their families: "Sure, the Picture Lady sure likes to do this and my mother keeps asking for a picture of me before I die, she doesn't have any."

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