Talking Pictures: A Study of Proletarian Mothers in Lima, Peru

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The aim of this paper is to discuss the use of still photography combined with open-ended interviewing as a research strategy. Using this method, the interdisciplinary team of which I was a part studied 200 proletarian working mothers in Lima, Peru.1 Some were illiterate but bilingual (Quechua and Spanish). Others, who had resided in the city all their lives, had a rudimentary education equivalent to the first three grades of primary education. They were street vendors, factory workers, domestic servants, and market sellers with fixed stalls in the main markets.

This research dealt with the development and application of a different investigatory tool which we labeled “talking pictures” and which enabled us to develop an in-depth understanding of the ways in which our sample of marginally employed proletarian mothers perceives, structures, and evaluates its worlds.

One of our main goals was to analyze the adjustments that these women, marginal to the occupational structure, had made in order to survive in an underdeveloped, dependent, capitalist structure. Such a “mode of production has enormous repercussions in shaping the ways in which the marginally employed view and experience their many worlds. Ultimately consciousness reflects existence.”2 Because of this, we wanted the women to formulate their conventional, explicit, and conscious rules of behavior as workers, mothers, and members of unions and to state their values, objectives in life, and aspirations. We also desired to tap an inner world of feelings, values, and significance. Relying solely on interviewing is not the best way of understanding the subjectivity of informants who may have difficulty with language.

Using photography in the social sciences is, of course, not new. We were influenced by Margaret Mead: by her courses at Columbia University on methods and problems in anthropology, and by her pioneering publications (Mead 1963). We have also learned and drawn many insights from Sol Worth and John Adair (1972), John Collier, Jr. (1967), Paul Byers (1966), Edward T. Hall (1959; 1966), E. Richard Sorenson (1975), Alan Lomax (1975), and Jay Ruby (1976).

Mead (1975) has stressed that the best camera recording is made by the individual who combines training in photography or filmmaking with anthropology. Although we share her general views, our approach, as we evolved the “talking pictures” technique, was interdisciplinary and collaborative, entailing its own methods.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE PHOTO INTERVIEW

We first investigated to see whether the subjects of the study were familiar with photographs, a luxury for most of the population of developing countries. Despite the high costs of photography, poor people in Latin America try to record the important events of their lives and those of their families, and sometimes of the neighborhood or community to which they belong. In towns and cities, extravagantly framed photographs of first communions, baptisms, or marriages may dominate otherwise bare walls in slum dwellings, and carefully packed photographs of a child’s wake and funeral may be kept under lock and key with such other important documents as a marriage license or a voter’s registration card.

Proletarian families are also familiar with movies and television. Television sets are found in the most dilapidated houses, a phenomenon common to large cities of Latin America. Families may lack the bare essentials of food and clothing but will become indebted for years in order to buy a television set. The most frequently watched programs are soap operas produced in Mexico, Venezuela, Argentina, and Peru. The plots invariably deal with a working-class female heroine, most often a domestic servant, who achieves upward mobility through sex. She is usually seduced by an upper-middle-class man, often a student, and gives birth to a child. Through self-denial, hard work, and refusal to settle down with a man from her own class, she wins over the child’s father and eventually marries him. This is the happy ending, although getting him to the altar sometimes takes a lifetime. These themes illustrate the rigid class structure of most Latin American countries and the lack of opportunities for upward mobility, especially for women.

Working-class women also devour Foto-Novelas, a weekly magazine which is the equivalent of the true confessions story or the dime novel for the English-speaking public. The novels are presented through the photographic arrangement of scenes illustrating different chapters or sequences. The only writing in the magazine is the short narrative captions printed in large white letters over the corners of the photographs. All the dialogue is also printed in this fashion.
Responses of Recent Migrants

For women and their families who have recently migrated into the city from the highlands or from jungle areas, photographs are a novelty. Their inclusion in the photo-interview added problems and introduced new variables to the expected range of cultural and idiosyncratic interpretations. This was especially true of some of the street vendors, or ambulantes, who, attired in Indian dress, peddle their goods inside and outside the markets and on the main streets of Lima. For example, we took a Polaroid picture of an ambulante who was selling prepared food outside a market. The photograph showed her leaning against a wheel cart, evading the strong sun by wearing a beautiful, wide-brimmed straw hat. We handed her the photograph and told her she could keep it as a recuerdo, or souvenir. She thanked us but politely refused to accept the fact that she was the woman in the photograph. She crossed the street to show it to a friend, another street vendor, who reinforced our statement. Matching her sense of self with the image of the straw-hatted woman staring back at her from the picture was such a forceful revelation that she erupted in childish glee. For about half an hour she abandoned her selling post to show her coworkers the photograph while giggling uncontrollably.

Latin American Indians and the rest of the mixed urban proletarian population are wary of tourists taking photographs of them; they feel cheated and used because they never see the end result of the action of the prowler with the camera. Therefore, in general we utilized a Polaroid camera to capture the interest of the female workers in our study, to fully engage the ones who were more knowledgeable about their environment and willing to help us, to open communications with these women, and to assure their trust in us. We also offered Polaroid photographs as gifts in exchange for the subject’s collaboration. The film is developed in a matter of minutes in front of the interested party, who can then take the photograph home as a token of reciprocity. Cross-cultural research with visual tools has indicated that in most parts of the world having one’s image made with the camera can be a very gratifying experience. As John Collier said, ‘The feedback opportunity of photography, the only kind of ethnographic note-making that can reasonably be returned to the native, provides a situation which often gratifies and feeds the ego enthusiasm of informants to still further involvement in the study’ (1967:13).

Phase One

During the first phase of photographing, we followed Collier’s recommendations closely. We shot pictures of the total environment of four basic occupational roles—street vendors, market women with fixed stalls, domestic servants or maids, and factory workers (Figures 1, 2, 3, and 4). We recorded overviews of markets, factories, and private homes belonging to the city’s different social classes. The team’s photographer-psychologist and anthropologist combed the streets of Lima for three weeks in order to choose salient aspects of the panoramic vistas and to become familiar with the complexity of the specific places we would select for the study. To interest women, we explained that we were investigating working mothers in the city to commemorate International Women’s Year, whose celebration in 1975 coincided with the Peruvian Woman’s Year officially proclaimed by the military government.

Phase Two

During the second phase of photographing, we had the full collaboration of key informants, about twenty-five women from the four occupational groups under study. They allowed the photographer and the anthropologist to follow them around during daily, weekly, and monthly

Figure 1 —Avocado vendor. [Ellan Young]
Figure 2 — Two maids pushing strollers. [Ellan Young]

Figure 3 — Factory women using machines. [Ellan Young]

Figure 4 — Comerciante estable arranging her fruitstand. [Ellan Young]
work and domestic routines. The traditional participant-observation approach was used to fully grasp the nature and degree of involvement of the women within the context of their occupational world.

Ideally, we would have taught the key informants how to use a camera and then incorporated their shots in the photo-interview kit. Sol Worth and John Adair (1972), in a pioneer experiment, instructed seven chosen native collaborators in filmmaking. We abandoned the idea for many reasons. The Navajo, although they live on reservations, are part of a large national culture which makes constant use of film, whereas our working mothers belong to a developing society in which cameras are luxuries and the process of picture-taking is surrounded by an aura of high complexity, if not magic. Continual communication between researcher and informant will, because of the informant’s knowledge of her/his culture, keep the researcher “from being carried away.” Informants not only help to determine the emic dimension of a phenomenon, but they check, correct, and modify the components in a set of photographs that will later serve to illustrate a whole category of events.

We asked our informants to point out to us what was important, interesting, and meaningful in their work environment. The material culture of their everyday working scenario was recorded in this way. We learned, for instance, that a woman having a fixed stall in the market pays a great deal of attention to the way her stall is built and to the ornate display of her products. Furthermore, she will judge other coworkers by the pains they take in the arrangement of their products to catch the eye of the public. The ambulante is always aware of whether other ambulantes sit on the ground while peddling their goods, hang them around their bodies, or carry the load in a wheel cart. Ambulantes rank the commercial talent of their coworkers on the basis of how far from the ground the merchandise is displayed; as they become more prosperous, the products offered for sale move from the floor, pavement, or sidewalk to a table or a wheel cart (Figures 5 and 6).

**Phase Three**

With camera in hand we moved from recording the public domain to recording the very private. Once we had learned some of the ways in which market women, factory workers, and domestics describe, perceive, and pattern their roles, we felt prepared theoretically and methodologically to move into participant-observation of their domestic roles. We must stress the fact that we relied heavily on informants who were always extremely cooperative and patient. In this respect, we fully share Stephanie Krebs’ (1975) views on the importance of exhaustive research cooperation from well-chosen native collaborators. When the photographs were developed, we took them back to our key informants for the first meetings. During these sessions we chose the most appropriate photographs, which were then included in the photo-interview kit. We kept in mind Collier’s assessment of the photograph as a focus on which the interviewee may center her/his attention. As such, it provides a fluid and fruitful context for insightful data gathering. Collier insists on the advantages of photography used this way when he states: “Methodologically, the challenge of comprehensive evaluation of life experience suggests the photo essay as an anthropological description using every sense and skill

![Figure 5](image1) —Ambulante with two ears of corn. [Ellan Young]

![Figure 6](image2) —Ambulante selling assorted merchandise. [Ellan Young]
of the photographer observer. When we assemble a photo-interview kit to probe Navajo values we are in effect presenting a selected essay on Navajo life which we have gathered and designed to give the Indian informant an opportunity to speak of the values and subtleties of his culture. The selection, stimuli, and language facility of the imagery determine the success of the venture. These are also the key elements in the reportage of the photo-essay’’ (1967:49).

We sought not only the cooperation of informants to evaluate, criticize, and help select the more illustrative scenes for the photo interview; we also asked them to aid us in a tentative arrangement of scenes under researcher-defined categories.

For example, which photographs would an informant pick to show the kinds of machines operated by men and by women in a factory? How many photographs would a proletarian mother pick to illustrate a day’s work in her market?

The preselection of photographs was discussed by all members of the research team. Each team member was in charge of an occupational group and was responsible for compilation of relevant information. The sociologist, social psychologist, political scientist, and anthropologist proceeded to add other photographs to those already preselected by informants with the goal of eliciting very specific reactions from the respondents.

The Photo-Interview Kit

The kit was assembled, with 120 photographs chosen from the 3000 that were shot. They were pasted in a large album designed for the study which, though bulky, was a versatile interviewing tool. It could be opened on the grass, and we were therefore able to talk to many maids while they were taking care of children in parks. The kit could also be opened over crates and piles of vegetables in markets. The showing of pictures was combined with a structured but open-ended questionnaire.

The whole photo-interview was then given to a group of informants who had not collaborated in the initial stages of its construction. They were asked to read the photographs, to respond to the questions, and to react by criticizing the interview. Only after this step did we go to the groups of working mothers selected for the study. During the first photo-interview sessions with informants, we became aware of the fact that, not only did they enjoy “talking pictures,” but they were eager to do well during the two-to-three-hour structured dialogue. They asked such questions as “How did I do?” or made such statements as “I liked our conversation very much; it is the first time that I talked about my life as a worker and as a mother.”

A decision was then made to focus on these extrapragmatic segments of conversation to aid in assessing both the informant’s evaluation of the photo-interview and the interviewer’s experience. Questions were appended to each interview. The informant was asked: (1) What did you think of our “talking pictures”? Do you think these photographs accurately illustrate the everyday life of a worker like you? (2) Would you add other photographs to the album? Which one(s)? (3) Which photographs in the album did you like the most and why? Not like and why? (4) What did you think of me [the interviewer]? The researcher also observed the subject and her general reactions to the event. (See the Appendix for an outline of the organization of the photo-interview itself.)

APPLICATION OF LABOR SUBSETS

For purposes of illustration I have chosen to discuss the results of administering the labor subset of the “talking pictures” method to fifty women with fixed stalls in three different Lima marketplaces. We wanted to understand how these comerciantes estables perceived their double role as proletarian worker and mother. We also wished to isolate the main themes related to their work and the key statements about their world and problems.

This labor subset can be used independently of other subsets to assess themes, problems, and conflicts generated by the commercial activities of market women. The photographs for the labor subsets of the other three occupational groups studied—street peddlers, or ambulantes; maids; and factory workers—are different from those of the comerciantes estables (see Appendix), because the photos had to depict factories and the interior of homes and the activities of the street. The pictures are different for the four labor subsets, but the ideological content and the questionnaire remain the same. The photographs and questions of the two other subsets that make up “talking pictures,” namely the “family subset” and the “participation subset,” are the same for the four occupational groups.

The following findings are related to the comerciante estable group of proletarian mothers. These conclusions emerged once we analyzed the responses of the women in our sample. (For lack of space we are not printing all the photographs used in the labor subset.)

Panoramic Vistas of Markets

Market women gave full accounts of the history of their markets and of the ethnic origin of the sellers. When they looked at the photo of Indian women mate carving while selling their goods, they explained that these must be recent migrants to the city (Figure 7). The women themselves make a distinction between jobs held by urban women and rural women. “I come from the sierra (soy serrana), therefore I am a market seller,” is a statement heard over and over again.

Ambulantes (see Figure 5) compete for customers with comerciantes estables (Figure 8) inside and outside the marketplace. Street vendors have the advantage of accosting prospective buyers while shouting and unfolding their merchandise; women selling at their stalls have to wait patiently for customers. Nevertheless the comerciantes estables bear no grudge against the ambulantes, arguing
that life is tough and that these mothers also have a right
to earn money for their families. It was discovered that this
solidarity stems from the fact that 75 percent of the market
women interviewed had been ambulantes when they
started their commercial activities. Sympathy toward their
competitors is an important factor in understanding the
passive tolerance of the women with fixed stalls. It was
explained that ambulantes are constantly harassed by the
municipal police and their goods confiscated; some end
up in jail for a day or two, for very few of them have the
legal right to sell in the established markets of the city.
Market women attribute a great deal of importance to
the physical layout of markets and to details of construc­
tion of their stalls. Lots of light and water and access to the
public are considered essential for a successful day's
work. Most women interviewed conceived of the ideal
market as a giant stage where they could afford a stall in
its center. The market is a place where things happen and
the preferred location is on a high level where the seller
can look down at incoming customers and keep track of
everything going on without abandoning their selling
post.

*Types of Work*

Market women with fixed stalls specialize in selling
meat, poultry, or fish. Some have small grocery stores in
their stalls; others sell prepared food which they cook on
the premises (Figure 9); others have newsstands (Figure
10). Some sell vegetables (Figure 11) or fruit (see Figure 4).
There are others who have small spice shops, clothes
stores, flower stands, or shops with native crafts.
Market sellers visually rate the economic capacity of
their coworkers by an assessment of the size or amount of
goods on display. A sparsely stocked stand on an early
Figure 9 — Woman frying doughnuts. [Ellan Young]

Figure 10 — Woman sitting beside a newsstand. [Ellan Young]

Figure 11 — Smiling woman in black with sparsely arranged vegetable stand. [Ellan Young]
morning is a sure sign of lack of capital. Butchers, seafood vendors, and owners of small grocery stores earn much more than sellers of fruit, vegetables, and spices or owners of small restaurants.

There is no sex segregation in the marketplace. Men and women work side by side and sell the same kind of product. The only difference admitted to by the market women is the greater physical endurance of the males. Therefore, selling meat is considered more appropriate for men, as the butcher expends much physical energy sawing and chopping large chunks of meat.

### Daily Routine

Market women start their working day at three or four o'clock in the morning. At that time they cook the midday meal so that their school-age children will find something to eat when they return home before the mothers, who work until five or six o'clock in the evening.

At five o'clock in the morning they set off with their babies and toddlers to La Parada, a wholesale market where they buy their merchandise for that day. As potato sacks and other goods are heavy, they have to pay a carrier, or carretillero, to take their load to a bus. If the load is too heavy they have to pay an extra fee to send it on a truck to their market.

Comerciantes estables finally arrive at their market at six-thirty a.m. They open their stands, arrange their merchandise, and eat breakfast. Selling starts immediately and the hectic pace decreases around one p.m. By that time they are exhausted (Figure 12) and very few of them have time for a midday break. Some manage to snatch a bite while selling. The more prosperous buy lunch at a neighboring food shop; others have members of their family bring them their lunch from home, although this is more generally the case with the ambulantes.

Around five p.m. marketplaces close and the proletarian mothers go home to their older children and husband or compañero (the mate in a consensual union). More work awaits them there. They have to cook supper, wash, and put children to bed.

All the women of the sample interviewed complained of the burden of their double day as workers and mothers; all of them would like to have more time to sleep and to rest, and all agreed that women work harder than men.

All the market women expressed discontent at the amount of money they had to spend each day on bus and truck fares and on meals bought at the marketplace for themselves and for their children.

### Services

Market women lack the appropriate services that would ease their work load. All the women interviewed expressed their concern about not having an emergency clinic, a day-care center, and sanitary toilets.

Women and children get sick at the marketplace; accidents happen—cuts and bruises—and there is no doctor or nurse at hand. Most women come to work with their toddlers and small children, who are prone to infections from contact with garbage piles inside markets that are not removed regularly. Women also complain that they lack any form of socialized medicine; whenever they get sick they run into debt in order to pay expensive doctors' fees. Market women blame their illnesses on their unhealthful working conditions: bronchitis, colds, varicose veins, kidney trouble, and gynecological problems. Many of them give birth at home during the night and the next day are working at their stalls to earn money for their families.

All our informants wanted the creation of day-care centers in the markets. Older children sometimes take care of the smaller ones, but as a rule working women feel less anxious if they can take their children to work.

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Figure 12 —Woman sleeping over vegetable stand while another woman stands. [Ellen Young]
Political Activity through Unions

Market women are not politically active in the pursuit of workers' benefits through unions. Though all of them identified Figures 13 and 14 as scenes depicting women on strike or fighting against authority figures, only a minority of them had been active in unions. A few had participated in strikes against the municipality, an institution that regulates everything concerned with markets, in order to veto a decree which had considerably increased the rental of their fixed stalls.

When asked about the causes of their political passivity, all women interviewed answered that they were too tired to engage in activities related to syndicates (men, who have more time, do) and that there was not enough time left in their daily routine for them to participate. The only association that was popular among working mothers was the credit cooperative. Every market has one. This allows workers to obtain emergency loans.

Interpersonal Relationships in Work

It was found that, as a rule, market women prefer working by themselves or with their husbands and children. They are distrustful of hiring nonrelatives for fear of being robbed or cheated on their earnings or having to spend too much money on an assistant's meals. Therefore, selling has become a solitary activity. Women think they earn more if they work by themselves.

Though most women like to work by themselves, they have developed solidarity links with their neighboring female coworkers. This way a woman can leave her stall unattended—while the neighbor keeps an eye on it—at intervals during the working day in order to run her own errands.

When women were urged to choose a working companion from a set of photographs, they unequivocally chose to work alongside other women rather than men, explaining that they had more to share with other women.
and that it was safer for their teen-age daughters who also came to help them. (The choice of women can be seen as fear of machismo behavior on the part of the men: sexual conquest to boost their egos and disregard for the young girls.) Market women do not enjoy working in the marketplace but feel that this work gives them a sense of security about earning enough to feed the family.

Only negative responses and attitudes and feelings of anger and powerlessness were vented by the comerciantes estables at the sight of the municipal inspector or policeman (Figure 15). He regulates the vendors to prevent cheating. If a woman is caught selling at a higher price than the one fixed by the Consejo Municipal (Municipal Council), she is fined or jailed. Some inspectors are corrupt and threaten to fine honest vendors if they do not willingly give the inspector free meat, poultry, potatoes, or some other product. Market women are very independent and resent this abuse of authority.

Evaluation of Occupations and Level of Aspirations

Of the 11 photographs presented to the market women, three were immediately rejected as portraying occupations for women which were harsh, unrewarding, and humiliating: (1) a peasant woman (because of the harsh working conditions and because of the poverty of the sierra which caused them and/or their families to migrate to the city; Figure 16); (2) a factory worker (because of the inhuman and stringent work routine—only two brief pauses during the day to eat and to go to the toilet—and because they are denied the company of their offspring at work; Figure 17); and (3) a maid (because of its humiliating and servile characteristics; Figure 18). The opinion of the market women, who are very independent, is that women engaged in the above-mentioned occupations are slaves to everyone, a condition that becomes even more intolerable because they are women and “if one is a woman, everyone feels they can boss you if you find yourself in a position of inferiority.”

The photographs which ranked highest were those of the nurse, schoolteacher, seamstress, and typist (Figures 19, 20, 21).

RESPONSES OF INFORMANTS

Patterned statements about the world of the subjects in our study emerged as we organized the responses of the 200 women. Of the pictures included in the family set, all the informants selected the same one as their favorite: a scene portraying a working woman at home, sitting at the table with her husband and her five daughters (Figure 22). She is laughing and looking fondly across the table at the toddler. The other girls are involved with the father, who is leafing through a magazine. Empty dishes and cups are scattered on the table. The recurrent evaluation of the
family scene by all the informants was: “It is a beautiful photograph because all the family is together”; “they are having fun together”; or “they have time to share each other’s company.” Most working mothers never have the time to enjoy their families. Factory workers have to comply with work shifts stipulated by management which contribute to further atomizing their already fragmented family interactions. Market women—street vendors and those with fixed stalls must awaken at three in the morning in order to buy merchandise at wholesale markets, usually taking infants with them and leaving toddlers and older children at home to fend for themselves. Domestic servants are the most alienated of all. When hired young—sometimes at the age of 10—they are cut off from their nuclear families, and when they grow older and become mothers, their slavelike seclusion in the homes of their employers diminishes the likelihood of healthy, happy family relationships.
Two other photographs in the family set were chosen unanimously. One shows a family consisting of a pregnant mother, her husband, and her four children: the mother is putting the baby to bed and the father is supervising the homework of the older ones (Figure 23). This family scene was praised because "the family was together and everybody was doing something in the company of other members of the family." The second photograph shows a young couple strolling in a park with their small son (Figure 24). The bodies of the parents are harmoniously linked to the child, who is in the middle and whose two hands are securely clasped, the right one by the father and the left by the mother. The shot was taken from behind the walking figures and against the scenery of one of the more densely forested parks in Lima. The women described to us their feelings about the theme of the photograph. The activity of the parents with the young son was perceived as an unattainable ideal situation, because most of the women never had the time to go on an outing solely for relaxation. All of them would like their husbands or compañeros to share more free time with their sons and daughters, something seldom done since the men go off by themselves.

The members of the research team naively but intentionally included with the rest of the family interaction scenes one of a man sitting by himself, in a comfortable sofa, watching TV. We expected the informants to read the photograph as one of an "uncooperative father" (watching news and film while his wife continued working around the house). The replies, however, carried the connotation that it was wonderful to have something (the TV) at home to entice men to spend more time there.

Photographs of the different types of dwellings in which most proletarian mothers live in urban Lima elicited both manifestations of upward mobility and conflict-laden attitudes: (1) the typical one- or two-room thatched house without roof, a common sight in the barrios jóvenes (shantytowns) that encircle Lima (Figure 25); and (2) the
Figure 22 — Irma's family. [Ellan Young]

Figure 23 — Pregnant mother putting child to bed; father with children near table. [Ellan Young]

Figure 24 — Couple strolling in park. [Ellan Young]

A STUDY OF PROLETARIAN MOTHERS IN LIMA, PERU 49
one-story brick house and the half-finished two-story home of the more prosperous families (Figure 26). Although about two-thirds of the women in the sample would instantaneously relate to the photographs and talk endlessly about their living conditions and describe their migration into the capital city as they pointed to the different-type houses in the barriadas where they had lived when they first arrived, the upwardly mobile women would set themselves apart from the scenes. These women, most of them having fixed stalls in the markets of the more affluent neighborhoods and having distanced themselves from the rest of the population still trapped within the context of the marginal pole of the national economic system, came up with patterned "market-stall occupational responses ... which were opposed to the ones verbalized by domestic servants, market peddlers, and factory workers." These women felt that their houses, compared to the one in the album, were so much more decente (decent, or of good quality), and that "certainly their neighborhoods were so much nicer" as they had managed to buy homes in urbanizaciones (middle-class houses in residential areas). In spite of such differences in outlook between owners of market stalls and the rest of the working proletarian sample, it was possible to conclude that the one material thing all the proletarian mothers dream about is owning a house, no matter how small. The majority of them at the time of the study were going through incredible financial stress to satisfy this generalized and strongly felt need.

The value attached to the economic role of children emerged from the pictorial analysis of working mothers photographed alongside their working children (Figure 27). The urban proletarian mother perceives child labor not as parental exploitation but as a necessity for the survival of the whole family. Eight- to twelve-year-old children become so skillful at selling, handling money,
preparing and marketing food, and performing domestic services that their income or salary becomes an essential part of the whole family's financial pool. Sometimes they make more than their mothers—usually the ones selling in markets—or work as substitutes for an ill or alcoholic father who is unable to work at his job as street vendor. In many cases the women interviewed had children who had sporadically assumed the role of worker and family provider, transforming the mother (when ill or giving birth to another offspring) or both parents into their dependents. Child labor was described as something of an introduction and a preparation for adult life. One of them explained: "When children suffer young, they make better adults . . . they become more clever at running a business." The economic roles of children were looked upon as part of the socialization process in the proletarian urban context. The following statements were recorded over and over again: "Children have to start working early in life; it's the only way in which they can learn their obligations as members of a family." "Boys and girls have to keep their minds engaged in something, otherwise they roam free on the street; work keeps them out of mischief." "When our children work we all eat better and lead a better life."

After the women had talked about the pictures, they were asked, "After having lived all these years, with all the good, regular, and bad things that life has in store for us, what choice would you make if you had the chance—would you like to be born as a man or as a woman?" Over two-thirds of the women interviewed openly confessed that they would rather have been born male. Caught in the subuniverse of the marginally employed and unable to rise because of lack of education and a rigid class system, most of the proletarian mothers expressed themselves thus: "I would like to be a man, because if he is educated he can go in and out of important places and earn more, because men were born to accomplish more." "I would like to be born again as a man, they only have one thing to worry about—bringing money home—and that's all; women have to look after the children, cook, wash, and work outside the home."

Clearly, the culturally patterned male and female roles, with their pertinent ideology, operate against the working proletarian mother. She has been socialized to accept the shared cultural belief in the inferiority of women as compared to men, itself a sine qua non for the perpetuation of the machismo concept.

Yet the photographs eliciting the most revealing responses, for all the working women studied, were the ones illustrating the most significant events in a woman's reproductive cycle: pregnancy, childbirth, and motherhood (Figure 28). Scenes depicting a young couple sitting together on a bench in a park (Figure 29) were the most evocative in bringing forth remembrances of past love experiences. (Marriage and raising a family were clearly perceived as manifestations of love and sacrifice.) Photographs portraying pregnant women extracted detailed accounts of the way in which they viewed their bodies and themselves, and a picture representing a factory woman breast-feeding her child was rated the most beautiful of all. These photographs stirred up hidden emotions better than any of the others shown. For nearly all proletarian working mothers, the experience of childbirth and motherhood—in spite of their economic situation—is the most meaningful experience of their lives, and the only one they can really claim as their own. It brings them the only real feeling of fulfillment, a sense of sheer being, tenderness, and joy.

The data also indicate a lack of political awareness. Working mothers do not have the institutional framework that would help them develop a sense of class consciousness and solidarity with the lot of their coworkers. They participate neither in unions nor in political parties (banned by the present military government). They understand mobility in terms of their own lives and occupational history instead of their socioeconomic position.
CONCLUSIONS

This paper is an attempt to discuss the advantages and disadvantages, pros and cons, of the “talking pictures” approach: the utilization of still photography combined with structured open-ended interviewing as a different and rewarding method for studying working proletarian mothers in developing countries.

Since males and females are active participants in creating, handling, and transmitting the social and cultural world they inhabit, it was deemed important to try to understand the patterned ways in which proletarian women—in our case Peruvian—saw, felt, labeled, and experienced their many worlds: work, private domain of the family, and those institutions to which they have no access, “including those sectors which produce the symbols and values that endow activity with cultural meaning” (Sutton, in press).

Aware of the role of culture in shaping perception and of its importance in the selection of what is considered universally significant for a given group, we decided to recruit the interest and collaboration of a number of informants—market sellers, domestics, and factory workers.

It is relevant to insist on the importance of involving members of the group under study with still photography during the preliminary stages of the research design. Informants turn out to be excellent assistants in determining not only the emic dimension of a phenomenon but also in checking, correcting, and modifying the cultural components included in a set of photographs that will later serve to illustrate a whole category of events. For example, an informant of the street vendor group looked critically at the set portraying a typical working mother’s daily occupational routine and said, “There are many scenes about our occupation that were left out here; the photos showing one of us carrying big bags with merchandise as well as our children strapped to our backs and tugging at our skirts and no one to help us; and there are not enough shots of us ambulantes inside and outside the markets—you have missed all that.”

Informants are also of utmost importance during the stage of standardization of the photo-interview. Their patterned reactions to the stimulus of a pictorial event or subject give the researcher the clue to that which is significant and meaningfully embedded in their shared world of thoughts, feelings, and beliefs. In our experience with this particular type of research we were prone to discard photographs that the informants had difficulty in deciphering.

A more sophisticated collaboration can be obtained from informants concerning the arrangement of photographs for the purpose of structuring a visual category of observation and analysis. The aim is to untap and release conscious, and sometimes not fully conscious, rules of conduct and statements of values, goals, plans, aspirations, attitudes, and feelings from the subjects under scrutiny. This stage provides the real testing ground for the efficacy of the collaboration between researcher and key informants.

In the development and implementation of the photo-interview technique, researchers have the advantage of communicating expediently with informants from the very beginning. Participant-observation provides the basis for an uninterrupted dialogue with members of the occu-
pational strata selected for study. With the help of a second group of informants, the intermediate stages of standardization of the photo-interview widen the spectrum of relationships for the researcher. The researcher eventually becomes more familiar with the problem under investigation and more in touch with the subjects, in this case the working mothers. Consequently, the field worker deals progressively with more complex networks of relationships.

The “talking pictures” approach can also be used as a research tool, both during its construction stage as well as during the process of its application to informants in which they are purposely used as “openers” for new data. Sol Worth stresses this point very clearly when he explains that the photo in the hands of a researcher not only serves its traditional purpose of an aide memoire to the scientist—equal to his pencil, notebook, or typewriter—but that the camera can be used as a tool to collect data about culture as well as of culture. In other words, following Worth’s thinking, the relevance of photography is its analysis of it, and the reason why some, unfortunately not all, photographs are records of a society and culture is the fact that “they are taken in ways which allow them to be analyzed so as to illustrate patterns observed by scientists who knew what they were looking for” (1976:8). In this respect we feel that a good number of the more than 3000 photographs taken during the initial stages of the research can be used to analyze important patterns of the economic activities of the proletarian working mothers.

For the purposes of a study such as ours, we doubt the existence of a better means than the “talking pictures” technique for establishing communication. Meaningful photographs had a cathartic effect on the women of our sample. They were often moved to tears and strong outbursts of emotion. Again and again, we heard such statements as “I have seen my life before my eyes and I cry for my sorrows and for the hard life of the working mothers like myself.” This was especially true of maids and market women, who lead an extremely rigorous existence. Experiencing the photographs, they released and discovered hidden dimensions of the ways in which they structure and conceptualize their life cycle. As researchers, we were invariably overwhelmed by their suffering. The constant reaching out to them during critical moments of the interview gave us added insights into their lives and exposed us to hitherto stifled dimensions of their battered existence.

This investigatory tool was successful as a means of retrieving a wealth of information from proletarian working mothers who had previous experience with photographs. These were the ones who had lived longer in the urban setting, had been exposed to television programs, mostly soap operas, had read foto-novelas, and had received a higher level of education.

We strongly recommend the use of a photo-interview technique for other studies in Latin America as well as other nations in the process of development. It is adaptable for the study of working women in any region, rural or urban, and in any nation. However, any study of the specific problems of women in the labor force must be done within an analytic context of the socioeconomic structure of the nation to which they belong.

Furthermore, if we want to penetrate the many parallel worlds in which the proletarian mothers live and manage to survive, and if we do not want to research the obvious, the “talking pictures” approach is the most useful, rewarding, and creative.

NOTES

1. The research team included an anthropologist, Ximena Bunster B.; a political scientist, Elsa Chaney; a psychologist, Carmen Pimentel; a social psychologist, Gabriela Villalobos; a sociologist, Hilda Mercado; and a psychologist who was also a professional photographer, Ellan Young. In addition, we are greatly indebted to Jeanine Anderson, anthropologist and research assistant in our study, who tested the interview kit critically and contributed creatively toward its standardization as a research tool.

2. Helen Th. Saffioti, personal communication with the author. For an important theoretical contribution to women’s studies, see Saffioti (1969).

3. Sol Worth’s paper (1976) is also relevant to the methods we used in Peru.

APPENDIX

THE ORGANIZATION OF THE PHOTO-INTERVIEW

The “talking pictures” kit consists of three general sets. Though overlapping, they can be used independently. They are:

1. Labor Set

This sequence of photographs is intended to help the working mother focus her attention on her work environment. It serves as a stimulus for interviewing, a tool for projection, and a means of establishing rapport at the beginning of the hour-and-a-half to three-hour-long recorded interview. Its subsets include:

Panoramic vistas. Shots of the exterior environment and personnel of markets, factories, and private homes, as well as shots revealing the complexity of the interiors of the homes and relevant aspects of the material inventories.

Types of work. Different activities within an occupation are illustrated with detailed photographs portraying maids applying for a job, then cooking, cleaning, laundering, and looking after children; street vendors engaged in the sale of assorted merchandise, with the amount, size, and quality of the products easily seen, from the women selling five ears of corn at the market to the fruit vendor pushing her well-stocked wheel cart.

Daily routine. This is a detailed photographic arrangement—a different set for each occupational group—displaying the typical daily work routine within each set. Factory workers are seen starting the day at the entrance of the factory, punching the clock, working, and ending their routine while eating prepared food, bought from local vendors, on the street. Market women are shown opening their stalls in the market, unloading trucks with foodstuffs, snatching a bite while selling to their...
customers, dozing off—exhausted during the early afternoon—over piles of vegetables while nursing their babies.

The analysis of the pictorial arrangements by the women interviewed was designed to elicit information relevant to their work load, occupational expectations, and behavior.

Services. A sequence of photographs illustrating the kinds of services offered to working mothers in an ideal factory, such as medical care, a day care center, counseling by a social worker, free busing, a cafeteria, and in-service training. These photographs were designed to discover whether such services were a part of the institution where the interviewed women were working as well as to probe into their perception and evaluation of them. For the market women, to whom the majority of these services were not available, scenes showing the lack of these facilities, such as a toddler sleeping in a carton on the street with toys scattered around, women nursing their children inside markets, and women eating on the sidewalk, were used.

Political participation through unions. To sift the women's views on the nature and frequency of their union participation, scenes of women marching with flags, factory women on strike, women arguing against two helmeted men in uniform during a public demonstration, and a full view of the Ministry of Labor building, where workers file their complaints against their employers, were shown.

Interpersonal relationships in work. Photographs of the work milieu of the factory worker, the market woman, and the domestic servant, intended as stimuli for the projection of the proletarian mother's preferential attitudes to different styles of interpersonal relations in work, were presented. For example, ambulantes were shown photographs representing a vendor working alone, selling fruit in one of the main streets of Lima; two ambulante women working together; a woman selling yarn from a bicycle cart with her husband and children; and a prepared-food ambulatorio vendor peddling her goods and chatting with a male ambulante. Other photographs capture occupational situations in which women are in a position of authority, such as supervisor at a factory, or are working under an authority figure, male or female, such as the case of the domestic servant in relation to her patron, or male employer.

Socialization. A cluster of photos of children of both sexes working alongside adults—included only in the photo interview of the market women—designed in this context to investigate attitudes about children working and the value of their economic roles. Photos feature a woman selling inside her market stall aided by a young boy; three generations of female artisans—a grandmother, daughter, and young grandchild—carving gourds in their shop; mothers being helped by their children in uniform at their work post in the market; street vendors shouting their goods while aided by their offspring. Sequence was also utilized to recall the interviewee's childhood and have her develop her occupational cycle starting from her childhood years' economic tasks and gradually moving into her present situation.

Evaluation of occupations and level of aspirations. Pictures of twelve women of all ages and ethnic groups, representing different occupations, aimed at investigating how informants ranked the occupations and which seemed suited for daughter. They included market women with fixed stall, peasant woman handling a hoe, artisan, schoolteacher, seamstress, nurse, salesgirl, secretary, and hairdresser.

II. Family Set

These photographs were designed to illustrate the proletarian mother's family life and to help us learn about the significance that the women placed on family. Among its subsets were:

House styles. A photographic record of the different types of dwellings and neighborhoods in the urban context, aimed to generate data on the family life and to help us learn about the significance that the women placed on family. Among its subsets were:

- The nature and frequency of their union participation, scenes of women marching with flags, factory women on strike, women arguing against two helmeted men in uniform during a public demonstration, and a full view of the Ministry of Labor building, where workers file their complaints against their employers, were shown.
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