

Editor's Note: This exercise involves critical analysis of the video, "Stranger With a Camera", about violence that resulted from documentary film-making in a small Appalachian community. (See complete information in the Video Resources on this webpage.) It uses the video as a vehicle to consider issues and challenges for conducting community research in context.

Stranger with a Camera

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Things to Think About

1. **Researcher/Participant Relationships** - What would have been different if people had asked the community members what they felt their community needed or how they felt their community should best be portrayed? Could this tragedy have been prevented if the filmmakers had talked with community members beforehand about their project and taken the time to develop a relationship with the community rather than just being strangers with cameras?
2. **First-Order versus Second-Order Change** – Why are poor people, rather than corrupt corporations and state politicians, the subject of the many films that were made about Appalachia? Did the many volunteers who descended on this community with a sincere desire to help concentrate on first-order or second-order change? What would have been different if there were a coordinated effort to bring about second-order change?
3. **Ecological Levels** – This community provided a venue for local expression of a macro-level conflict, the culture clash between “red-blooded Americans” and “communist agitators.” What role did that macro-level conflict play in this local setting? How did environmental and individual factors combine to create this situation and its aftereffects on the community and on individuals such as O’Connor’s daughter and the filmmaker Elizabeth Barrett?
4. **Sense of Community** - Why did the community rally around Hobart Ison after he killed Hugh O’Connor? How did the fact that O’Connor’s filmmaking team was just the latest group to invade Appalachia impact this event?
5. **Contextualism** – Towards the end of the film, a member of O’Connor’s crew talks about the defense summation in Ison’s trial. It was not about Ison himself. It was about the exploitation of community members by corporations, journalists and filmmakers. He says about the summation, “I think Ison should have just been thrown in the slammer. But this was a poem about Eastern Kentucky that was beautiful.” Ison only served one year for his crime. How did the context of this crime influence the way it was viewed?
6. **Qualitative Methods** – Documentary films like this one can be seen as a form of qualitative narrative in that they provide a “thick description” of the community. Are they a valid form of research? What impact do these visual images have on how you think about the coal miners and their families? What impact do they have on how you think about the photographers and filmmakers who created them?
7. **The Aims of Community Research** – Think about how you would answer these questions if you were given the task of designing an intervention to reduce extreme poverty among this Appalachian coal mining community. From what perspective of theory and values would you approach this problem? What ecological level(s) of analysis would you target? How would you go about gaining an understanding of the cultural context here? What relationship with the community would you like to have?
8. **Social Change** – All those people, all that attention and documentation. All that time, energy and money spent to make things better. Yet if we look at Appalachia today, we see that little has changed. Why did all these massive social change efforts fail?