Working Assumptions

HOW-TO

Photographing Community with Care

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workingassumptions.org

Working Assumptions is a cultural non-profit that explores the everyday give-and-take of family and care through visual storytelling, encouraging reflection and dialogue.

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This **how-to** is designed **for learners** of all levels, from **beginners to experts**. It's a guide before starting a collaborative photographic project with a community.

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Overview

When we photograph a community, we enter their space and share their story. A guiding star for connecting with communities is to lead with care. Whether we have been invited to collaborate or feel a calling to initiate a project, prioritizing care is essential for building trust and fostering collaborative art-making.

Materials

Paper
Pen or pencil
Time to think through the lens of care

Helpful tip: In a care-centered approach, it's important to consider how consent influences photographic practices. For guidance on respecting individual agency, see the Photography and Consent lesson plan.

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This how-to offers guidance if you are interested in photographing a community or its people. It should help you reflect on your motivations, your role, and the responsibilities that come with photographing others. Think of it as a starting point for building trust and approaching the collaboration process with care.

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Approaching Collaboration

These prompts will guide you to approach your collaboration with clear intention and careful consideration.

What does collaboration mean to you?

What is your motivation for pursuing the project?

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What will make the collaboration enjoyable to you?

How might your project benefit or harm the community you hope to work with?

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How will you build trust with your chosen community?

Are there any gaps in your knowledge, experience, or perspective that you want to be mindful of in this work?

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Consider This

Now that you've wrapped your mind around connecting with communities, it's time to dive into our suggestions for collaborating.

There is no one-size-fits-all approach, so trust your instincts and adapt the plan based on what *feels* right to you and your collaborators.

- ☐ **Practice Transparency**: Understand why you are drawn to this project. Be honest and direct when sharing your goals and motivations with potential collaborators.

- ☐ **Build Relationships First**: Spend time in the community and attend local events to build relationships before starting your project.

- ☐ **Collaborate and Share Space**: Shape your project with the people you collaborate with. Participation should be ongoing, mutual, and genuine.

- ☐ **Know When to Step Back**: Recognize moments when it's better to put the camera down and simply be present.

- ☐ **Make Room for Joy**: Invite joy into the process. Allow enough time for connection, play, and enjoyment—not just documentation.

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Practicing Care in Collaboration

Following the suggestions above, below are five scenarios that illustrate how to build a caring, collaborative environment.

Scenario 1: Practice Transparency

You've learned that a local community center is being restored by community members. Feeling personally connected to the space, you want to photograph the restoration, but are unsure how much to share about your personal motivations in your initial conversation.

- Before starting, reflect on why this project resonates with you and what moments you want to capture.
- When approaching leaders and community members, ask them about what is important to them.
- Set boundaries mutually: What are they comfortable documenting, and what might be off-limits?

Scenario 2: Building Relationships

You'd like to approach a person you've seen at community events participating in your project, but you don't know them personally.

- Ask someone in the community if they would be willing to introduce you.
- Attend gatherings where they will be present and start building familiarity before you begin your project.
- Introduce yourself and your project, being mindful of their comfort level.

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Scenario 3: Collaborating

You're collaborating with people who hold deep knowledge of gardening traditions. As you build a relationship with them, they express that they feel uneasy being photographed from certain angles.

- **Offer to collaborate on sample photographs to gather feedback and learn their comfort levels.**

Scenario 4: Stepping Back

You are photographing a gathering in a community park and notice a moment that feels emotionally charged: Someone is grieving while another person offers comfort.

- Put your camera down and reflect on your intention. Is this moment for you to photograph or give space for their healing?
- Communicate with those involved in the gathering and ask for their consent before photographing the moment. Their comfort should guide your next steps.

Scenario 5: Making Room for Joy

The person you are collaborating with appears to be overwhelmed and distracted. Their usual energy is missing.

- Pause to check in with them personally, outside the project context, and ask how they are doing.
- Revisit the timeline and highlight joyful times that you've witnessed together. Slowing down might open up space for a stronger, more enjoyable collaboration when the time is right.

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Project Prep Worksheet

You're ready to start your photography project! Use this worksheet to guide your collaboration.

1. Intention

Why do you want to do this project? Reflect on what motivates you, and what you hope to learn or share.

2. Consideration

How will you approach collaboration? Consider how you will initiate the conversation and engage the community.

Helpful tip: Plan how you will sustain a relationship with your collaborators over time, even after the project ends.

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3. Plan

What is your plan for execution? Consider what collaboration will look like

Helpful tip: Make time to enjoy and nurture the process. Find a location that feels mutually comfortable and accessible.

You're ready to start your collaborative photographic project with a community!

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