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The politics of performance: Methodological challenges of researching children's experiences of childhood through the lens of participatory video

Helen Lomax, Janet Fink, Namita Singh and Christopher High

The Open University

Abstract

This paper examines the value of participatory video (PV) for exploring childhood and children's experiences within the context of a larger research project which sought to examine the everyday lives of residents in a neighbourhood identified as 'disadvantaged'. Participatory methods are often premised on ameliorating the gap between the concepts and models of researchers and those of individuals and communities. However, within PV there has been much less focus on the process of participation and its implications for research outcomes. This paper addresses this gap in order to explore how the children, researchers and residents co-produced a visual narrative about life in the neighbourhood and in particular, how a methodological focus on PV as process makes visible its potential to offer valuable insights not only into children's social connectivities, relationships and friendships but also to the theorising of children's identities and childhoods.

Introduction

> …. participatory video demands critical attention to the *exercise of power* within research relationships, it challenges us to explore reflexive ways that enable us to "join with another, to see together *without claiming to be another*" (Kindon, 2002:146, our emphasis)

The aim of the paper is to critically examine the contribution of PV for making children's experiences and relationships visible. Drawing on footage from our PV project with children

living in a 'disadvantaged' neighbourhood[1] we explore the nature of the children's participation, the politics of peer group, community and researcher relations and the wider ethical concerns governing research with children (Ali, 2010; Horton, 2008; Oates, 2006; Prosser, Schafer and Yarwood, 2008; Wiles et. al; 2008). Using an ethnomethodologically informed conversation analysis (CA)(Antaki and Widdicombe, 1998; Speer, 2005 Stokoe, 2006) we examine how participants co-produced and performed multiple identities (as neighbours, daughters, mothers, friends, interviewees, interviewers and film-makers) and consider the ways in which these performances, mediated by a wider ethical framework and structured by pre-existing and emergent relations of power, rendered particular experiences more visible than others. We suggest that the burgeoning literature on childhood (Holloway and Valentine, 2005; James, Jenks and Prout, 1998; Morrow, 2008; Prout; 2005) provides a useful means of theorising children's participation while CA provides the methodological framework through which we can interrogate the meanings of childhood and children's relational lives as they are performed and made visible during film-making. A focus on the situated activities of the children as filmmakers provides a methodological hook through which we can critically examine PV's claims to 'look with' (Kindon, 2003) and its contribution to social science knowledge (Van Aucken et. al. 2010).

Situating the research and its methodological challenges

It is from the theoretical standpoint of childhood studies and the sociology of childhood, in which children are recognised and valued as competent social actors with knowledges about their social worlds (James, Jenks and Prout, 1998; Mayall 2002; Sutton, 2009) that we undertook our PV project to explore children's experiences of living on what is frequently identified as a socially 'deprived' estate. However, it is important to make explicit the ways in which we were troubled from the outset of the research by what we perceived as the tensions and contradictions between the literatures on childhoods (Holland, 2004; Holloway and Valentine, 2005; Kehily, 2010; Palmer, 2006; Ward, 1977) and child poverty (Hendrick,

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[1] In order to protect the anonymity of our participants and to respect the lives of other residents who did not take part in our project, we have not included any statistics or references which may distinguish the neighbourhood and the ways in which it has been identified as 'disadvantaged' or 'deprived'.

2003; Layard and Dunn, 2009; Palmer et al., 2007; Sutton, 2009; UNICEF, 2007; WHO, 2010) and the methodological challenges of working participatorily with the children.

First, the social stigma of poverty makes it difficult to talk overtly about poverty with participants (whether adults or children) and its impact upon their lives. This has been systematically documented in the social science literatures; children, for example, may refute this identity or not understand themselves to be poor (Backett-Milburn et. al, 2003; Lister, 2004; Sutton, 2009). We did not, therefore, talk explicitly with children about poverty or the estate as 'disadvantaged', recognising that such language may not have been meaningful, salient or relevant to some or all of them. Secondly, we felt that it was ethically and politically contentious to construct a 'difference' between their lives and those of other children; a difference of which the children themselves may have been unaware and which could preclude them from sharing their own perspectives, including the ways in which they might see themselves as 'advantaged'. Thirdly, we wanted to resist a 'deficit-model' lens which, as Morrow and Mayall (2009) have warned, has serious negative consequences for children's self-worth and does not accurately reflect their experiences. For each of these reasons, our aim was to work with the children in ways which recognised that they have informed perspectives on the nature of the world in which they live their daily lives (Hendrick, 2003; Morgan and Ziglio, 2007).

At the same time, whilst we were theoretically and ideologically committed to working participatorily with children, we were unconvinced about the claim in the PV literature regarding its capacity to empower individuals and communities and the implicit assumption that PV is more unmediated than other research methods (Dowmunt et al, 2007; Kindon, 2003; Mayer, 2000); claims which we felt failed to sufficiently acknowledge the significant work from within the childhood literatures in which the 'impetus towards … participation (is subject to) debate, critique and theorisation' (Holland et al, 2010: 36; Gallacher and Gallagher, 2008; Gallagher, 2008; Schaefer and Yarwod, 2008). In this we were supported by an emerging critique within the wider visual methods literature in which its participatory assumptions are increasingly subject to scrutiny (Buckingham, 2009; Mason and Davies, 2009; Prosser et al, 2008).

Another claim in PV relates to its ability to mobilise the power of the visual as a means of creating social change (High, 2006; Kindon, 2003; Okahashi, 2000; Shaw and Robertson, 1997; Shaw, 2007) and this also appeared problematic to us. Such a claim is premised on

participants' visibility in the PV output which is arguably antithetical to contemporary visual ethics and the emphasis on subjects' rights to anonymity and confidentiality (British Sociological Association, 2002; Wiles et al, 2010). While contemporary sociological writing and the emerging critique of regulatory responses to visual research methods (Crow and Wiles, 2008; Morrow, 2008; Prosser et al. 2008) may offer some support for PV practices, Wiles et al (2010) have highlighted how discussion has traditionally focused almost exclusively on ethics as understood by researchers and research institutions, limiting discussion to the principles of anonymity, confidentiality and control of images. Such emphases have been to the detriment of a consideration of participants' own understandings of ethical practice and the situated nature of visual ethics. As we discuss later in the paper, the challenge of mediating different understandings of ethical practice is of critical relevance to PV methodologies.

There are also other tensions in the PV literature that we sought to acknowledge in our methodology. Although it is claimed that participants are crucial to the construction of PV outputs (c.f. Haw, 2008), we want to suggest that the interests and concerns of the academic members of the research team can be equally influential and, as such, need to be reflexively acknowledged (Kindon, 2003; Lomax and Casey, 1998; Pink, 2007; Schnettler and Raab, 2008). Moreover with its capacity to review *all* aspects of the film-making, including un-anticipated events, dilemmas and contradictions, the research team is arguably central to developing understandings of how the process and politics of participation as well as the wider ethical concerns governing research with children might shape the production of PV data.

Our methodological approach was, therefore, shaped by our engagement with these wider childhood, child poverty and PV literatures, through which we sought to reflect consistently upon the ethical and political issues they generated in our research planning, fieldwork practices and strategies for dissemination. So, for example, we enabled the children to choose for themselves the topic, method and genre of the visual output and we helped them develop the technological skills necessary to achieve their aims. However while this meant that, methodologically, the research 'felt right' in that the children were given the scope to pursue their own interests, it was also a discomfiting experience for us. We would frequently remark between ourselves that we were in the fortunate position of being largely unconstrained by wider political objectives imposed by funding bodies and stakeholders but,

at the same time, we were perpetually anxious (at least during the period of fieldwork) about this disruption to the researcher-centric gaze and how the children's 'output' might (or might not) contribute to our understanding of their lives. We are, therefore, attentive to the ways in which this constellation of theoretical interests, methodological concerns and personal anxieties might have shaped the nature of the children's participation and the 'final cut' of their video.

Research origins and neighbourhood contexts

Our research began as a collaborative piece of work between the lead investigators of an ESRC funded Seminar Series, *Visual Dialogues: New Agendas in Inequalities Research*[2], and a local Action Learning Project (ALP). The ALP was set up to investigate the quality of life in a 'disadvantaged' neighbourhood and was funded by the Department for Communities and Local Government. Aspects of the ALP were predicated on assumptions about the neighbourhood's lack of community and anti-social behaviour and, at the time of the fieldwork, children on the estate were being threatened with an evening curfew after which they would be 'escorted' by police to their parents. However amongst many residents, irrespective of age, the desire for community remained an 'intrinsic part of social life' (Brent, 2009: 242) and there was a determination to acknowledge the positive features of the locality. With the election of the coalition government in 2011, the grant was withdrawn and the ALP prematurely brought to an end but we continued to work in the neighbourhood and to complete the two visual projects to which we had committed. The focus of this paper comes out of the first of these projects, in which we worked with children attending an out-of-school play scheme and enabled them to make a video about their lives.

The research took place in a large, relatively affluent town in the UK but, more particularly, within one of the most deprived wards in that town. The neighbourhood is one of the 10% most impoverished in the country (anonymized source) and was recently identified, through measures of 'health', 'exam results' and 'crime,' as one of the most impoverished in the locality too. Its stigmatised status has not gone unnoticed by residents (including children) but this is also bound up with its social and economic history, particularly in relation to its

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[2] More information about this seminar series can be found at www.visualdialogues.co.uk.

architecture and planning. One of the first to be built in the town as part of a UK wide programme of slum clearance and replacement social housing, the neighbourhood is described as 'failed' because of the inferior quality of the homes and the number of 'problem tenants' who were moved into the area (anonymized source). The poor state of the fabric of the houses is an on-going problem for residents who report problems with damp, mould and ill-fitting windows which affect their health and well-being. In addition, and despite its abundance of green space and the generous Parker Morris (1961) housing standards, visitors find the unconventional design of the houses and the layout confusing as the gardens appear to be situated at the front of the houses. This has resulted in many residents erecting high fences to mark the boundary of their homes; fences which are suggestive of 'barricades' but which serve to establish a 'private' garden within the very 'public' spatial design of the estate.

Research methods and filming contexts

Nine children (five boys and four girls) aged between eight and thirteen took part in the PV project during a three day period in August 2010. All the children lived on the estate within walking distance of the out-of-school play scheme through which they were invited to participate in the research. This invitation was addressed to them and their parents, in writing, and was followed by discussion with us about the aims of the PV project and the children's rights to 'opt in' (Morrow, 2008) and withdraw at any time. The research was framed by the stipulations of the University ethics committee and was managed in accordance with British Sociological Association (2002) and other research guidance (Oates, 2006; Morrow, 2008; Wiles et al, 2010). Prior to the filming we discussed with the children the importance of 'caring and being careful' including the need to 'ask permission before you film people; to respect the privacy of individuals and groups and the different ways in which people live on the estate whilst keeping your own safety in mind.' In this way we sought to recognize and respect the children's own moral agency (Mayall, 2002). We also organised filming in small groups supervised by at least one of us.

Day One	Day Two	Day Three
Build relationships between the children and between the children and the research team	Children conduct filming, using two cameras in order to capture scenes from different angles (and thereby record	Research team and children work in small groups to review the film footage and photographs

	the PV process)	
Explain the project	Children interview residents	Edit materials
Listen to ideas and experiences (particularly of friendship and moving into the area)	Children take photographs of themselves, residents and scenes and objects on the estate	Identification of additional images needed for the film's narrative
Decide on format of project output (documentary film)	Four hours of film footage and over 600 photographs generated	More film, photographs and art work produced to include in the narrative

The children's commitment to a documentary format resulted in the production of a four minute film containing a series of interviews with residents about their experiences of living on the estate, including how they came to live there and what they liked and liked less about the neighbourhood. The film thus offers the viewer an insight into residents' (adults' and children's) ideas about what constitutes a good place to live but, as we suggest, the PV film alone is only a partial version of the children's experiences and was itself mediated by the children's relationships, social constructions of childhood, the film-making process and wider ethical and research governance frameworks.

The politics of participation: Power and performance in the PV process

In this section we examine extracts from the video footage in order to critically explore the participatory process as it is made visible in the children's interactions with each other and with the adults on the estate during film-making. Our CA focus on participation as discursively accomplished and displayed in participants embodied 'talk-in-interaction' (Flewitt et. al., 2009; Schegloff, 1968; Stokoe, 2006) points to the complexities of participation. Similarly the identification of talk as social action (Atkinson and Heritage, 1984) through which identities are discursively constructed allows us, as analysts, to make explicit participation as a performance framed by the immediate research context and wider socio-cultural expectations about children's identities and childhoods. A reflexive consideration of the ways in which participants orient to and make these overt enables us to attend to the ways in which the film-making process is constitutive of the children's identities

whilst also offering specific insight into the ways in which PV performs and reiterates social networks and identities (Jenkins, 2009).

These themes are immediately evident in the film sequence in which Chloe[3] can be observed interviewing her mother, Jane. The interview takes place, to camera, in the front garden of their home. Also present are NS and the other three (female) film-makers, two of whom are operating a video camera and one, 'Holly', who is observing.

Sequence 1: Chloe and Jane: Performing (multiple) identities[4]

		((Chloe smiling broadly))
1	C	(right) since we-since you moved down here have you liked it?
		((nodding and smiling))
2	J	Yes (.) we have liked it
3	C	*Okay then* Was it easy (.) making new friends like next door neighbours across the road and everyone
		((arms folded across chest, smiling broadly and nods))
4	J	Yes it was very easy (.) Everyone has been very nice to us
5	C	Yeah um (.2) (ahah) *help me Holly*
6	Ch	aha
7	J	ahah
8	H	m do you like *Estate*?
9	J	Do I like *Estate*? *Estate* is alright (0.2) yes it's very nice
10	H	Which do you think is best? *Shire* or *Estate*?
11	C	yeah?
		((turns towards 'Holly'))
12	J	Pardon?
13	C	Where do you prefer where we used to live down *Shire* or up here
14	J	U::m probabl:::y (0.2) ((swallows)) up here. *Shire* is okay if we want to go
15		on holiday but there's not much work down there or anything
16	C	Alright then. What is your favourite part in *Estate*
17	J	Oh definitely the shopping centre
18	H	What do you think we can improve in *Estate*
19	J	Sorry?
20	C	What do you think we can improve in *Estate*
21	J	What can we improve we::ll there's lots of things we can improve isn't there (2.0)
22	H	Li::ke (1.0)
23	H	Stuff!
24	J	No!! ahahah a lot more activities for <u>you </u>in the holidays (but) there's a lot more activities going on compared to what we used to have (.)
		((raises eyebrows))
25		Most of the other things are to do with the council improvements-nothing

[3] All participants and the locations which they discuss have been given pseudonyms to protect anonymity.

[4] Please see appendices for explanation of the transcription system.

26   to do with *Estate* itself
                          [
27   C   Aha alright

Analysis of this sequence shows Chloe performing a number of identities as interviewer, daughter, friend and film-maker. Her opening question to her mother, Jane, through her repair at line one ('since we-since you') displays, for example, her dual identities as interviewer and daughter. Jane, too, is negotiating her different identities as mother, interviewee and neighbour and her observable difficulties in constructing responses to several of Chloe and Holly's questions display how interviews are framed by the immediate discursive context. Of particular significance is the ways in which Jane's multiple identities collide and are made visible through the question: 'Where do you prefer where we used to live down *Shire* or up here?' This causes a moment of interactional difficulty, suggested by Jane's hesitation and the momentary discomposure visible in her breaking eye contact. Her brief adoption of a middle distance gaze and exaggerated licking of her lips which precede her elongated 'u:::m' and 'probably' (at line 14) display to Chloe that her mother needs a moment to think about this before she replies, 'up here'.

Given the public accounts of the estate as one with problems of which residents are all too aware, Jane may be anxious of articulating any negative comments 'for camera', which she knows will be preserved and reproduced (Lomax and Casey, 1998) and possibly scrutinized by others (including her family, friends and neighbours). Jane's hesitancy might also be understood as revealing her difficulty in formulating a response which is congruent with her role as knowledgeable and informed interviewee and her identity as mother of the (child) interviewer. Furthermore she is being asked sensitive questions which could be seen as challenging her decision-making and authority as a parent. Jane's reply is thus a carefully composed response designed to counter potential negative attributions from her daughter about why the family moved (protecting her identity as responsible parent), from the child interviewee (protecting the child from any unpleasant 'facts' about life on the estate) and from other residents (protecting her identity as friend and neighbour).

The particular emphases in Jane's replies display an orientation to friendship and neighbourliness and a pragmatic acceptance of what cannot be changed by the residents. This is indicative of a wider ethic of care towards the children which was evidenced across the set

of child-adult interviews and mirrored in an earlier interview with an older (male) resident. When asked quite difficult questions about life on the estate, he struggles to present an 'honest' account with one which will not upset the children; for instance, he couches his dismay at speeding cars as 'a danger for you' and is reluctant to label the estate as unfriendly. Thus although he offers a more critical response in his emphasis that life is 'not what it was', his answers, like Jane's, are oriented to the interviewers as children and serve to protect not only their identities as children but also how childhood should be experienced.

This desire to construct life on the estate as positive is exemplified across the children's interviews with adults, from Jane's it's 'alright (0.2) it's very nice' to an interview with Lesley, which had brought out her contribution to new developments on the estate, including activities and resources (such as discos and an internet café) which have provided opportunities for children to socialise with each other and children from neighbouring estates. An examination of one sequence from this interview (Sequence 2 below) shows how Ellie's question (at line one), which comes towards the end of the interview, allows Lesley to perform her identity as interviewee and advocate of the estate in a very specific way:

Sequence 2: Ellie and Lesley: Performing place

1   E   Which is your favourite estate in *Town*
          ((exaggerated lip movement)) ((looks away briefly))
2   L   Oh::: (0.2) .h.h.h (exaggerated inbreath) my <u>favourite</u> (0.2)
3   E   yea:h
          ((turns back, re-establishing eye contact accompanied by theatrical widening of eyes and
           shaking of head))
4   L   I'm gonna have to say *Estate* ahah
                                        [
5   Ch   ahah

Lesley's comments can be seen to resist wider public discourses about the estate as lacking. However in so doing Lesley, in common with the other adult interviewees, presents an incomplete picture of life in the estate which glosses over the discomforting public details about curfews, lack of opportunity and poor housing. Her claim at line 2 that the estate is her 'favourite' seems to confirm the gloss she is promulgating but it is delivered theatrically and with exaggerated humour, thereby suggesting that she and the children are aware that this statement might have only a partial truth and mitigating against a potential challenge. As in the earlier sequences, the children's laughter here can be seen to resolve any difficulty

10

presented by this gloss but it is also allows us to see them as knowing participants in this particular construction of their social world.

We suggest from the analysis of these sequences that the adult interviewees are often providing responses to the children based on adult-centric assumptions about what is appropriate for children to be told about the neighbourhood; responses which are cognisant of wider understandings of the estate as 'disadvantaged' and framed by a desire to present a positive account of residents as friendly and 'coming together.' However, although the interviewees seek to shield the child interviewers from the more negative 'adult' versions life on the estate, CA allows to see how these repeatedly threaten to disrupt the interviews. As a result we can identify how assumptions about childhood as a time and space that needs to be protected inflect the interviewee's responses but also how a reluctance to acknowledge children's own knowledge and experience shapes the interview encounter. This has important implications for the participatory and collaborative claims of PV because, while the children may desire to produce a documentary that reveals 'true' life on the estate, they are curtailed in their efforts by the constructions of childhood deployed by the adults around them. It highlights the methodological limitations of participation in that children can control the questions, the technology and the choice of output in a PV project but they cannot control the ways in which adults respond to them. Their status as children is constructed by adults as necessitating a particular account or response, which is determined by the social, cultural and political contexts in which the research is taking place and by the ways in which the adults are themselves situated in those contexts

Ethical frameworks, children's moral agency and the shaping of participation

Like the adults interviewed, the children too showed a strong ethic of care towards one another. This became an important element in the ways in which the children participated in the project with analysis of the footage showing their generous capacity for democratic decision making and a commitment to supporting each other with the technical and social complexities of film-making and interviewing. The moral agency of the children was also strongly in evidence during editing when the children displayed considerable sensitivity about the selection of images and footage to be used in the final film thereby ensuring that the participation of the whole group was acknowledged and made visible. What was striking

about this was the ways in which the older children appeared to recognise the different needs and competencies of the younger children, proactively seeking to involve them in ways which recognised their skills. Significantly, for interrogating the value of PV methodologies for exploring children's experiences, the supportive ways in which the children worked with each and developed their friendships at this neighbourhood level is in contrast to that reported in school based research (Gillies and Robinson, 2010) and research on children's experiences of relationships within schools (UNICEF, 2007).

Yet although relationships were actively constructed during the PV process we were also aware that some children had less positive relationship experiences with their peers, which included bullying in the neighbourhood more generally. Nevertheless we took the decision not to include these experiences in the final film because we did not want any child to be identified and further harmed. We have already indicated the importance placed in PV regarding the visibility of participants' identities but it is also crucial that, as researchers, we display an ethic of care which recognises the 'social and cultural contexts in which images will be viewed and interpreted' (Barrett, 2004; Davidov, 2004; Pink, 2007). All the same our intervention meant that, despite the children's very active involvement in the PV process, the wider complexities of children's relationships are not visible in the final film and the portrayal of childhood in this neighbourhood is not a comprehensive one.

A further example of the ways in which wider ethical frameworks of participation determined the PV output is illustrated in a sequence in which one of the children, Jack, interviews an older resident and asks where she lives on the estate. The change in her manner from one of patient and mild interest in what the children were doing to one of anxious hesitation is observable in the film out-takes (as are our assurances that this will not be included in the final cut). Thus, while the ethical implications of *this* question in *this* context may be obvious to us, as academic researchers, they were not so apparent to Jack, raising important issues about the ways in which child-participants understand issues about their own safety and the safety and privacy of others. We suggest, therefore, that an important contribution of PV to the theory and methodology of social research is to pay critical attention to the ways in which ethics are situated, made visible and practised during field-work.

Concluding remarks

Using this example from our research, we have highlighted the complicated dynamics of the PV process while illustrating that participation is not neutral, that all participants are engaged in an ethic of care towards others, that multiple levels of identity work have to be performed and that film-making as a lasting record of opinion and outlook can be a site of anxiety for those taking part. However by theorising children as competent social actors and moral agents and by recognising that they have valuable insights and knowledges about their social worlds, which they can choose to show us in ways which are meaningful to them, we have argued that PV also brings important insights into the dynamics and contexts of their everyday experiences. At the same time we have stressed the importance of recognising that children's participation is a situated and unequal element in the research process, mediated by intergenerational power relations and the contexts in which these are embedded. As Bulmer (1977) remarks: 'Doing research is a messy affair as dependent on negotiation, adjustment, personal choices and serendipity as a careful and meticulous preparation.' What we would add is that theoretically informed, methodologically focused and sensitively managed PV offers an opportunity to critically interrogate these choices and negotiations and to use them creatively in exploring the ways in which 'childhood is constituted and understood' (James, Jenks and Prout, 1998) by the children themselves.

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Appendices: Transcription system

Data was transcribed and analysed according to the system developed within CA which continues to evolve and encompass visual interaction (Goodwin, 2001; Flewitt, 2009). The transcribed sequences follow closely the original video tape, detailing the speech of the participants verbatim. For brevity, we have represented relevant body movement, gaze and gesture above the speaker's speech (but see Flewitt et. al.'s (2009) excellent discussion of the range of methods for representing body movement).

TRANSCRIPTION NOTATION

Symbol	Explanation
H/Ch	Identifies speaker (H = Holly; Ch= children and so forth
[ ]	Overlap in speakers' talk
word	Speaker's stress on a word or phrase
Word	A quietly spoken word or phrase
wo::rd	Extension of the sound preceding the colon (the more colons the longer the sound.
((raises head))	Contains transcriber's description of body movement etc.