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**The challenges and opportunities of using participatory video in geographical research: a case study exploring collaboration with indigenous communities of the North Rupununi, Guyana**

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## **Abstract**

*Participatory video, a methodological approach with a history in social and community development, is increasingly being used in geographic research. In this paper, we reflect on the dual processes of research and participatory video and discuss some of the challenges, struggles as well as successes during the process of using participatory video as a means of creating and communicating geographical knowledge. Working within a natural resource management context with indigenous communities in the North Rupununi district of Guyana, we trace our participatory video research journey and highlight some of the tensions as well as opportunities arising through the participatory video process. We conclude that if an adaptive research approach is taken when doing participatory video research, it can engender greater enabling outcomes for research participants, while at the same time produce more nuanced and grounded academic research.*

## **Introduction**

Participatory video (PV) is a process involving a group or community in shaping and creating their own films according to their own sense of what is important, and how they want to be represented (Johansson *et al.*, 1999). Cain (2009) provides a detailed account of how alternative modes of film production first emerged during the working class movements of the 1920s and 1930s in different parts of the world. However, it was not until the 1960s that emphasis on ‘participation’ through the film process and/or film product by ‘subject-participants’ became prominent, spearheaded by feminist filmmakers, radical film collectives, ethnographic filmmakers and film activists in the Global South. The latter was particularly active in Latin America, fuelled by the emancipatory and Freirian ideologies emerging in the region (Freire,

1970), focusing on values of participation, learning and empowerment for steering the processes of social change (Gumucio-Dagron, 2009). For example, the Third Cinema movement emerging from Argentina questioned the traditional model of the male/white/Western filmmaker or ethnographer representing the 'other', focused on provoking change through the use of film, while at the same time promoted the involvement and response of the audience (Burton, 1990). These critical elements of purpose and process have effectively shaped how PV is practised today.

Although there are an increasing number of examples of how PV has aided and enabled social change, advocacy, activism and empowerment (e.g. White, 2003; Suarez *et al.* 2008; Khamis *et al.*, 2009; O'Neill, 2009; see work of Insight at <http://insightshare.org>), there is as yet limited research on the use of PV in the context of academic inquiry outside the assessment of empowerment and emancipation (Cornish and Dunn, 2009). Film- and video-making, mostly in the form of observational visual ethnographic methods, have a long history in the fields of sociology and anthropology (Pink, 2001), yet, few geographers have until now used video within their research. Of these video encounters, the majority have been confined to forms of visual note-taking or as part of a triangulation process (Pink, 2001). One reason for this may be the tensions surrounding the 'researcher's gaze' and the imbalances and power relations this can create in the research process (Kindon, 2003). At the same time, pressure from academia to produce 'high' impact REF-returnable outputs in the form of (mostly) written manuscripts, may limit methodological experimentation and promote outputs that guarantee 'fit' into the academic 'industry', rather than address the needs of research participants (Garrett, 2011). Nevertheless, Dwyer and Davies (2009) highlight the recent growth in innovative qualitative methods being employed by geographers, including artistic

collaborations such as film-making (e.g. Parr, 2007). As Pain (2004) and Kindon (2003) advocate, video can be a vehicle for engendering participatory research agendas which actively engage and benefit people by involving those conventionally 'researched' in some or all stages of research.

There is an inherent tension between what constitutes 'research' for academics and PV. Geographical research comes in many forms; physical, human, quantitative, qualitative, top-down, bottom-up, and approaches vary from the abstract, theoretical, generic and de-contextualised to the contextual, practical, specific and vernacular. Nevertheless, in terms of *process*, much of this research is predominantly linear in nature, where research activities (or those planned), are traceable through a series of steps from their source to their end point (as illustrated in research proposals), and characterised by an (assumed) degree of control over the research process (Reed and Peters, 2004). As a methodology, PV can also be approached in a number of ways where the *process* of participant/community involvement varies. For example, participants could be involved in the choice of topics/subjects being filmed, contribute to the filming stage, provide feedback to film footage, give input into editing and/or initiate their own film project without (or with minimal) outside assistance (Cain, 2009; White, 2003).

Managing these dual processes of research and PV is the central focus of this paper. Working within a natural resource management context with indigenous communities, we ('we' throughout this text refers to the authors) discuss some of the challenges, struggles as well as successes during the process of using PV as a means of creating and communicating geographical knowledge.

### **The context and process of the participatory video intervention**

The PV project was initiated while implementing an integrated conservation and development project in the North Rupununi, Guyana, linking local indigenous livelihoods with biodiversity conservation (Wetlands Partnership, 2006, 2008). During discussions with local communities and leaders, it became clear that the historical context of the region was an important influence on current natural resource management practices. At the same time, deeper reflection on the research process (see Mistry *et al.*, 2009, where we explicitly discuss our own background and its impact on the research process), and engagement of the authors with PV through dialogue with Insightshare (Participatory video NGO based in the UK: [www.insightshare.org.uk](http://www.insightshare.org.uk)), led to the idea of exploring research questions through more participatory forms of engagement with local communities. Further discussions with local colleagues focused our enquiries towards exploring how communities' social memory, defined as the shared narratives that influence collective thoughts and actions, had emerged over time in response to significant social and ecological events. We were particularly interested in investigating how social memory, in turn, influences natural resource management practices. At the same time, a primary objective was to enable local communities to take greater ownership of the research process, present their views authentically, and provide an immediate and accessible dissemination output in the form of films.

Funding from a UK academic society was obtained for an eighteen month exploratory project. This began with a non-residential PV training workshop for young adults (18-25 year old) from all sixteen villages of the North Rupununi facilitated by the first author and members of the larger project. The aim of this workshop, attended by eighteen people, was to introduce the project (each individual attending the workshop would then go back and present their experience to their

community), give some basic PV training to all participants, and then be able to select individuals to carry out the main research. In developing the research methodology, we had a number of meetings with Insightshare to discuss their approach to the PV process, which was aimed primarily at development practitioners (Lunch and Lunch, 2006). It is acknowledged that there are other distinct approaches to PV that have emerged within the South American context (e.g. Turner 1991; Rodriguez, 1994), but it was felt that the approach promoted by Insightshare provided a method that had been tested and produced successful outcomes over many years. We were also able to discuss the approach directly with Insightshare, and could access extensive supporting documentation in English, the official language spoken in Guyana.

The workshop took place over nine days and involved training in participatory methods, ethics, basic filming techniques, editing and a final screening of films. At the end, four young adults, three men and one woman (co-authors on Mistry et al. 2011) were selected by the workshop facilitators as community researchers based on their video camera and computing skills, their ability to speak local languages of Makushi and Wapishana and their enthusiasm for undertaking the main research project. All community researchers were engaged through a paid part-time position over an eighteen month period.

Through iterative cycles of discussion and practical PV work, the community researchers set about selecting, meeting and interviewing individuals (using semi-structured interviews) within the communities and the local NGO, the North Rupununi District Development Board (NRDDB), using PV to facilitate the process. Initial meetings took place with older members of the community to see what memories they had of social and ecological crises. These narratives would then be used to investigate the influence of social memory on the adaptability and resilience

of the local communities to current and emerging natural resource management challenges. Further interviews took place with individuals from different age groups, focusing on crises events. At the same time, initial video interviews also explored the range of present day natural resource management challenges facing different communities. All raw video footage was collected using digital video cameras and copies stored on separate hard drives as a repository for the clips, thus ensuring the long-term sustainability of the audio-visual material. As filming continued, the community researchers began to translate interviews into English and edit the clips into themed films, and these were screened to communities at all opportunities, allowing group reflection on the findings. The community researchers took opportunities at all stages of the project, from the initial project workshop and training, to the final viewings of the film, to monitor and evaluate the impacts of the project using personal discussions with the authors, as well as more formal written evaluation forms.

This paper draws on the experiences of the authors during training workshops, filming, editing and screening of PV films. It is also informed by research diary entries, as well as emails, minutes of meetings and evaluation forms completed by workshop participants. The analysis of the video material and the use of PV in relation to the natural resource management issues are described elsewhere (see Mistry *et al.*, 2011) – the aim of this paper is to give an empirical account of the issues arising from the PV research process.

## **Discussion**

Upon reflection on how the PV research was managed, it became apparent that we had envisaged a series of steps/research activities that would take us from the



formulation of the research questions to the PV and then through to academic end products. In order to achieve research funding, there was a requirement to identify clear boundaries, and one of the strongest boundaries was an exclusive focus on integrated social-ecological dilemmas facing the communities. This linearity of expectations and boundary constraints contrasted greatly with the practice of doing PV, as promoted by Insightshare. Firstly, we were not prepared for the unexpected. During initial meetings with the community researchers, key concepts behind the research were discussed as a group and used as a basis for formulating the methodological approach. We found it challenging to articulate the detail of these concepts to the community researchers as a result of differences in the use of the English language (both orally or written), especially to find the appropriate language (metaphors and practical examples) that described the theory in depth. So, when the initial PV interviews were analysed, we assumed that synthesising and simplifying the concepts to a form that could be understood clearly by the community researchers had probably led to the conceptual underpinnings of the research project being 'lost in translation'.

However, as the project continued it became clear that what the community researchers were collecting was in fact the 'social memory in use' (they had understood quite clearly what the project was about), but it did not fit neatly into our academically-informed, well-defined and pre-conceived models of how social memory should be represented, especially because the recorded narratives were straying far beyond the social-ecological remit. This element of 'surprise' in the research results emerged directly from the way PV was undertaken by the community researchers.

Initially, while in Guyana and present at face-to-face meetings, we facilitated the research and associated PV process mindful of our research questions. However, as time passed and the community researchers became more involved in the PV process (and at the same time we had returned to the UK), they began to explore new and/or other avenues of interest, taking the project in their own direction outside of the social-ecological theme (revealing the ‘surprises’). We had not sufficiently recognised that the emancipatory PV advocated by Insightshare, with whom we had discussed the project and whose approach we had enlisted for training the community researchers, would not necessarily be suitable for the pre-defined research outcomes we had planned for. As we realised what was happening, there arose a conflict (as well as considerable anxiety) between wanting to steer the process to focus firmly on our needs and ‘letting go’ to the extent of allowing the community researchers to explore what they judged as important information. White (2003) states that the intent of the PV process should be “to promote self/other respect, a sense of belonging, a feeling of importance, a claim to identity”. Aggett (2006), in PV research with young women in Honduras, describes her experiences as continually ‘walking a tightrope’ between the needs of the women and her own. Evans *et al.* (2009) hold that in true participatory relationships “reciprocity involves the open and honest disclosure of what researchers wish to get from the research, and how the research process may *sometimes* be shaped by the needs of the researchers” (p92).

In the end, we may not have been able to directly answer the research questions we started out with, but the PV research gave us alternative, unexpected understandings, more representative of the participants’ worldviews and realities. This resonates with Hanson’s (1997) suggestion that geographers should use methods that “maximise the chance that we will see things we were not expecting to see, that leave

us open to surprise, that do not foreclose the unexpected,...to...avoid....simply affirm[ing] what we already believe“ (p.125). Rather than losing control, certain research practices could be explicitly built into the PV process that enhance the capacity for learning and adaptation. These include openly and actively seeking feedback about the expectations researchers bring with them from their particular field, and building in more frequent cycles of feedback within and between PV stages (training, preparation, filming, analysing, editing), so that methodological approaches as well as interpretations of findings can be evaluated and modified as necessary (Reed and Peters, 2004).

Another consequence of the shift of control in the PV process was a change in the relationship between us and the community researchers. When the project first started, we as ‘academic’ and ‘foreign’ researchers were clearly ‘in charge’. Although the idea for the project had been developed in collaboration with the local communities, we had largely defined the intellectual impetus and particularly the theoretical context for the research in order to obtain the necessary funding. As described in Mistry *et al.* (2009), issues of positionality, including educational status, language, financial power, overlaid onto centuries of oppression and undermining of indigenous culture and knowledge, led to the community researchers initially taking a passive role in driving the PV process and reluctance in voicing ideas and criticisms. But as they began their journey through the practice of PV, there was a significant “degree of destabilization of conventional power relations in the research relationship” (Kindon, 2003 p.146) – the community researchers became more confident in expressing themselves, their concerns/experiences were shared more easily and there was a move towards more mutual exchanges within discussions. Parr (2007), working on a video collaboration project with a mental health organisation,

describes how it was only really during the 'doing' of the filming, i.e. the practice itself, that the image of her authority over the project began to be dispelled and her collaborators began to feel more ownership of the process.

The increased participation and motivation of the community researchers was definitely a positive development for the research, building trust, empathy and friendship within the PV team. But it also uncovered other, previously hidden, power issues. Certain male community researchers now felt able to make chauvinist remarks they were obviously used to making in their own personal social circles (they come from strong patriarchal communities), but were not appropriate or pleasant to us. Moreover, it became clear that the female community researcher had to cope with chauvinism in the PV group, not in the allocation of tasks but the way she was talked to. These issues were tackled through a mentoring/buddy system that had been set up within the project, but they were not easy. It also highlights that issues of positionality are not just confined to the academic, but are equally applicable to our co-researchers/participants. By being more 'participatory', we had allowed for traditional social relations to be manifested more explicitly within the research process. One could therefore argue that our attempts to intervene in this 'unpleasant' situation went against our original wish to devolve control of the process to the community researchers.

Another aspect of this unravelling of the team was the exposure of our (unrealistic) expectations that the community researchers would assume the 'academic' persona of a co-researcher, when in fact they continued to behave very much as, primarily, members of their communities, with the associated continuous non-research related distractions and problems.

The remoteness of the North Rupununi means that transportation by road and boat is difficult and seasonally hazardous, there is no electricity or mobile communications, equipment breakdown is routine and limited Internet access, chances of falling ill with malaria, for example, are high, and the general capacity of individuals as defined by international standards of development (educational level, etc) are low (see Mistry *et al.*, 2010). Data collection involving the use of videos and computers added an extra dimension to these problems. Throughout the eighteen months of the main project, there were numerous logistical and capacity issues documented in the minutes of meetings. The result was that research took longer than anticipated and some aspects could not be completed within the timeframe. Once again, there were consequences in sharing control of the research process. Equipment and logistics were transferred to the hands of individuals who did not necessarily have the same appreciation of mechanical fragility and/or awareness of project deadlines.

Nevertheless, what we got from the community researchers taking a more self-initiated/directed approach to PV was a greater understanding of the indigenous (Makushi/Wapishana) perspective to the issues under study, which emphasised and focused on the dynamic circularity between the spiritual and physical worlds, was context based and situated in specific places and time (Louis, 2007). PV promoted a narrative, oral history or storytelling response from participants, a form of knowledge communication familiar within the communities (Mistry, 2009). Sharing this knowledge, through the community screenings, not only reinforced communal modes of knowledge transmission, it also allowed communities to shape how they were being represented (Harris, 2009; Wheeler, 2009), a key critique in indigenous geographies (Shaw *et al.*, 2006; Louis, 2007).

For example, a key event many people retold was the 1969 Rupununi Uprising, where individuals from local villages were involved in an uprising for a separate state led by local ranchers of European descent, and supported by the Venezuelan government. The Rupununi Uprising was an event that almost everyone, from young to old, knew about to differing degrees of detail. The PV process, particularly the screenings, allowed people of different villages and generations to arrive at a shared understanding of the event. Audience participation created significant opportunities for the participants to “construct images of themselves, and how others (both inside and outside) come to see the community via the representations created” (Evans *et al.*, 2009, p89). After one screening, viewers complained that the heavy-handedness of the army during the Uprising had not been emphasised enough and suggestions were made as to how the film could reflect this part of the story more appropriately. In another screening of the same footage, people complained that significant parts of an interview with a key individual who had taken part in the Uprising had been omitted from the film and they wanted it to be put in again. The particular parts mentioned by the audience involved the individual crying on screen. The community researchers had thought this material to be too sensitive to include in the final film, but many members of the audience related very directly to this emotional outpouring in the form of their own suffering. As Ramella and Olmos (2005) point out, PV also offers a way to include what they call an ‘extended language’ i.e. people’s emotions, expressions and gestures, thereby allowing much greater depth of communication in the research process.

As the PV recordings were screened to the communities, other issues related to the PV product surfaced. In our experience, the audience appreciated the strong element of collective knowledge, but were also keen and happy to watch full-length

interviews of particular individuals describing events in minute detail. This defied the notion that films need to be edited using the 'take home message' approach in order for the audience to be interested and engaged, and opposes the data analysis method of editing (see Laurier *et al.*, 2008), which tends to anonymise individual research participants and then generalise the conclusions arising from research. This relates strongly with Evans *et al.* (2009) working with the indigenous Metis in Canada where "multiplicity rather than closure or cohesion are the goals. For people from within the community, there is great value in recording and honouring individual voices and diverse representations" (p98).

Prior to commencement, it was agreed that all PV footage would remain the property of the communities and we would have access to the material only for professional academic purposes. However, during the PV process and screenings, it became clear that some film footage was clearly only for internal, community consumption and potentially not even appropriate for viewing by the authors. The Rupununi Uprising material, in particular, was deemed by most people as too sensitive to be seen beyond the boundaries of the North Rupununi. People were anxious about the safety of certain elders who had taken part in the Uprising, as well as the repercussions for the whole North Rupununi should government officials see the material (the general belief being that, as a result of the Uprising, the region was disproportionately and violently punished, and forcibly isolated and neglected in terms of development thereafter). As recalled by a community researcher "a few communities were afraid to share sensitive information as it would pose a threat to their immediate lives in this case relating to the 1969 Rupununi Uprising which many of the elders were somehow involved, either directly or indirectly. This event had

caused a deep and painful past experiences to few elders” (pers.comm, November 2007).

This highlighted the private and public boundaries of community knowledge and the acknowledgement that not all information shared is meant for a general audience. It means researchers need to consider ‘respectful (re)presentation’ (cf. Louis, 2007) of the communities they work with i.e. different PV content may be used in different ways for different audiences. This also links back to diverse assumptions of what a finished film should look like. Although we were not denied access to the PV Uprising footage, the visual, recorded nature of the data means that people may be more reluctant to share sensitive material. For the same reason, self-censorship and non-participation are potentially greater.

A concern often raised by indigenous communities is the appropriation of their knowledge by foreign researchers which, when published by the latter, is then made inaccessible to these communities through intellectual property protection (Louis, 2007). One approach which we have used is for the release of research deliverables through the Creative Commons License, which guarantees open access to the material. Conversely, any material which has not been given permission by community representatives to be released under the Creative Commons License would remain under the intellectual property of the communities. We have found that this approach allows communities to retain control over, and access to, their own PV material while allowing researchers to release some findings to a wider audience.

Although this PV project did not explicitly take a participatory action research approach (Kindon et al., 2007), as the project progressed it became apparent that people recognised the potential of PV for action. One workshop participant highlighted the ‘doing’ aspect of PV, “it [PV] was very different from a lot of courses,



we actually did the things that we planned to do instead of just planning”. Reflecting on the PV process, one community researcher commented “many community members thought that the PV could be a powerful means of getting information across many groups of people especially in the context of Guyana where many Amerindians are losing their life styles, beliefs and traditional customs. It could be used to revive the languages in many Amerindian groups. It was also thought to be a useful tool to raise community issues to governmental agencies in the forms of videos produced by locals”. The project stimulated individuals to think about communicating for change – the community researchers began producing their own ideas about films, some specific to the villages from which they came. Post-project, some individuals have gone on to include PV in their village based projects or funding proposals.

## **Conclusion**

Our experiences from this project highlighted that when using PV in research, it is imperative to take a research approach that is adaptive (Reed and Peters, 2004), based on the principles of participatory action research (Kindon et al., 2007). As we journeyed through the project, we became more flexible in our research practices, but they were reactive responses rather than planned strategies for learning and modifying our practices throughout the PV process. This could have been done by having more frequent iterations of project/process evaluation, feedback and revision, thus allowing us to reflect on our aims, expectations, methods and interpretations. The framing of the research questions are central – the improvised nature of PV, especially in its more emancipatory forms, leads to an acknowledgement that initial research questions do not have to be retained throughout the process (Nakamura, 2010). As learning occurs from PV, there has to be space for refinement of the research questions and/or

the emergence of new ones as unexpected understandings are surfaced. Research involving research participants as researchers, such as PV, lends itself more open to the unexpected and unpredictable, yet creative outcomes/understandings (Lomax et al., 2011). This is in stark contrast to more traditional ethnographic research approaches, such as structured interviewing, where the tighter control on questioning does enable the researcher to remain within the prescribed boundaries established at the outset of the research. However, we would argue that the efficiency of these well-established approaches does not allow for transformative surprises.

Research being led by community researchers meant that they could navigate the cultural norms and rules so as to create relatively safe spaces for community members to participate and reflect on their experiences (Wheeler, 2009). Yet, it also meant that a good deal of time and energy had to be spent on building the capacity of the community researchers and then supporting them through the PV process. At the same time, sharing video footage with communities and using their feedback for editing is time consuming but important in terms of informed consent and representation, and requires substantial negotiations with people. PV as a research tool can be intensive, high commitment and expensive, and academics need to be aware of this in terms of research planning and budgeting.

We conclude that if an adaptive research approach is taken when doing PV research, it can engender greater enabling outcomes for research participants, while at the same time produce more nuanced and grounded academic research.

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