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The researcher within participant videos: The not so ‘absent’ presence

Developmental Paper

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Paper Summary:

We offer a reflexive examination of methodological issues encountered in a researcher-prompted participant-produced video study within a wider inter-disciplinary research project. We highlight practical and methodological issues that challenge some of the more emancipatory claims made for video methods. We explore the not so ‘absent’ presence of the researcher within participant-produced video data, suggesting that these videos are in fact a co-production between researcher and participants. Our aim for the session is to elicit discussion on our methodology and on the potential for development of further exploration of the power relations between researcher and participant, in particular in how video images and the camcorder mediate this relationship.

Track: Research Methodology

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Introduction

We offer a reflexive examination of methodological issues encountered in a researcher-prompted participant-produced video study within a wider inter-disciplinary research project. Whilst a relative ‘blind spot’ in management studies (Bell and Davison, 2013), video studies are a well-established research methodology, for example, in sociology and anthropology (Erickson, 2011). They offer rich data (Brown et al., 2010), enabling access to parts of lives that would otherwise remain out of sight to researchers (Bloustien and Baker, 2003). Lately, whether to supplement the ‘linguistic’ turn (Alvesson and Karreman, 2000), or in response to the ubiquity of the visual image, recent reviews urge us to explore the potential of visual methods in management studies (Bell and Davison, 2013, Meyer et al., 2013, Pauwels, 2010, Ray and Smith, 2012). These authors demonstrate how greater use of the visual can enhance our understanding of work and its settings. At the same time, researcher-reflexivity within ethical video research offers the opportunity to examine power relations, for example, in how video images and the camcorder mediate the relationship between researcher and participant (Pink, 2006).

Aim and Structure of the Paper

Our focus is on video methodology involving the creation of video data as an integral part of the research design (rather than analysis of pre-existing video material). Our aim is to contribute to this debate and provide reflexive insight in this field. We outline current conversations around video data in the social sciences and explore these through the reflexive lens of our video study (part of a wider inter-disciplinary project) using participant-produced videos in a work setting. We explain the challenges we encountered and their implications for power relations between researcher and participants in this field.

Current Issues in Video Methodology

When the camcorder is in the hands of researchers in occupational settings, some detect a fine line between video as a method of surveillance and objectification, or as a means to ‘envisage alternative kinds of workplace identity’ (Iedema et al., 2006, p 158). Putting the camcorder in the hands of participants may address concerns about the ‘invasive’ nature of ethnography in management studies as well as the need for ‘desirable data’ (Bargiela-Chiappini, 2011, p 1187). There are both optimistic (Bloustien and Baker, 2003) and more sceptical (Muir and Mason, 2012, Gibson, 2005) claims for the emancipatory nature of participant-produced video data in terms of its ‘transformative’ potential (Brown et al., 2010), the opportunities for collaborative or participatory methods and for participant voice. It also generates the methodologically unexpected (Shortt and Warren, 2012, Ray and Smith, 2012), underscoring the need for researcher reflexivity and flexibility.

Recent reviews (Bell and Davison, 2013, Meyer et al., 2013) also highlight the range of epistemological and ontological assumptions that underpin research in this area (surfaced in debate as to whether video is a lens on ‘reality’). Jarzabkowski et al (2014, p 3) remind us that of the need for ‘careful consideration’ of these issues when borrowing methods from other disciplines. Frameworks or typologies of visual studies in management studies are

somewhat embryonic as reflected in the different approaches of recent reviews, (Pauwels, 2010, Bell and Davison, 2013, Ray and Smith, 2012, Meyer et al., 2013). We suggest it may be premature to attempt to fix any such classifications without a wider and reflexive examination of the methodological challenges encountered in such research.

Our Research Aim and Methodology

The aim of our video study is to observe how and why people switch between roles and the boundaries that they create, comparing how these practices differ between the digital and corporeal world. The study is part of a wider multi-disciplinary research project exploring how modern communications affect our ability to manage switches across work life boundaries.

Participants (13 social entrepreneurs) undertook a week of video recording, focusing on their different roles and how they switched (or tried to switch) between them. The approach required them to capture what they saw in front of them rather than to narrate these switches retrospectively, though we explained this would be a useful supplement to switches too difficult to capture as they happened. We invited them to experiment with the brief, stressing that it was up to them how to record the material and to be creative in how they approached the task.

The table below sets out the key steps in our methodology. It excludes utilisation of video data and analysis in the further stages of the research project, including follow-up interviews when our selection of their videos was discussed with each participant. We previously conducted a pilot study with ourselves (eight members of the research team) as participants plus a handful of our university colleagues. Whilst this was a useful exercise in enabling ‘forward reflexivity’ (Pritchard and Whiting, 2012) we nevertheless found that new unanticipated challenges emerged in the main study. We therefore include our commentary highlighting issues we encountered as the research unfolded.

Table 1: Methodological steps

Stage	Methodological step	Commentary
1	Camcorder, instructions for taking part in video and consent form are posted to participant (for briefings via Skype). The camcorder is pre-loaded with a 32GB memory card and has a small tripod so that participants could set it up on, for example, their desk to capture their interaction with technology.	We used a mixture of one-to-one and group briefings dependent on participant availability. We initially intended to do individual face-to-face (F2F) briefings with each participant but abandoned this as too time-consuming when it became clear that we could use Skype. We discovered the efficacy of briefing via Skype when the first author (based in London) was unable to travel to Lancaster due to the first of the major storms in the UK in the winter of 2013/14. Another member of the research team hosted the briefing (providing lunch, handing out camcorders) in Lancaster as planned but with the first author joining the meeting via Skype instead of in person, using Skype’s ‘Share Screen’ option to present the Powerpoint briefing and more generally to answer

		participants' questions.
2	<p>Camcorder and Instructions handed over (in case of F2F briefing). Researcher briefs participant (either in F2F meeting or via Skype) using Powerpoint presentation to supplement written Instructions regarding camcorder use and what to record. Consent form explained, signed and collected (or returned later with camcorder and data). Participant indicates when they intend to start their week of recording (date diarised by researcher).</p>	<p>Most of the F2F briefings were therefore conducted in small groups where participants were based at the same or nearby locations. We realised that this offered a networking opportunity for participants who (due to our eligibility criteria for participation) would necessarily share an occupation and geographic location with each other. This then became a feature of how we promoted taking part in the research. We found that it was beneficial for participants to receive the camcorder at or in advance of the briefing so that they had the opportunity to experiment with it and ask questions. We piloted two models (Philips CAM295BL/00 and the Sony HDR-CX190E) and found the former with its pistol grip, ease of use and small size to be the preferred choice. It was almost immediately discontinued. We therefore used a very similar (and newly launched) model for the main study (Toshiba Camileo S40). It was important that the camcorder was compact and reflected latest technology (Bloustien and Baker, 2003) and didn't look cheap even if not expensive (Muir and Mason, 2012).</p>
3	<p>Participant carries out a 7 day period of filming. Copies of the Powerpoint presentation and all other participant documentation were also made available to download from the project website which also featured a series of FAQ. The research team also maintained a dedicated project email account to which the participants could direct queries.</p>	<p>Participants didn't always start on their intended day and sometimes took (much) longer than a week to conclude their 7 days of filming. We received relatively few queries and those we did were of a technical nature e.g. camcorder freezing during use (we replaced it) and difficulties in uploading data from the camcorder to a participant's computer (we suggested an alternative means of upload via card reader instead of cable). One participant asked early on in his week if he could record for more than 7 days (we agreed) though he later commented that the novelty had worn off and he didn't record much more than one additional day.</p>
4	<p>Researcher contacts participant to arrange collection of camcorder, data (and consent form, if not already received). Participant retains copy of data for review prior to interview. Researcher arranges de-brief.</p>	<p>This could be a time-consuming process as it involved finding a slot during which participants would be available in one location for the courier to collect the camcorder.</p>
5	<p>Researcher debriefs participant via Skype or telephone.</p>	<p>These were short conversations, usually lasting about 10 minutes, occasionally longer. Originally included as part of ethical good practice to check on participants after taking part, we asked them to reflect on their experience of the video study. We took</p>

		contemporaneous notes (subsequently typed up) of the conversation as we knew from the pilot study that these reflections were useful and interesting. For example, two participants in the main study commented in the debriefing on how the camcorder had become an ‘invisible friend’ during their week of recording, a notion we explore below. Others reflected on what they had observed about themselves during the week of recording or on how they would approach it differently with the benefit of hindsight. There was further opportunity for exploration of these issues at the subsequent interview (outside the scope of this paper).
6	Researcher reviews video data	The review was an initial step in the analytic process, assessing quantity, film quality and scope of content of the footage. It was at this stage that we noted creative options adopted by participants (e.g. interviewing their family members for their perceptions about work life balance issues) and how they had interpreted the brief.

Reflexive Commentary on Current Issues

Classifying

We struggle to classify our video method within the existing typologies of visual studies, settling for now on ‘participant-produced video study’. It shares features (e.g. first person perspective) with video diaries (Bates, 2013), participant-generated video archives produced to capture activities and events within a participant’s life that are researcher-defined. Our study allowed us to see places and behaviours that we would not otherwise have seen (e.g. the early morning routine of one participant as he switched between firing up his laptop, eating breakfast, playing solitaire on his notebook, listening to the radio, checking work emails, feeding the chickens and stocking up with wood for the Aga) but was more specific and directed in its (intended) focus than some diary studies. It also shares features with video ethnography (Iedema et al., 2006), but with the camcorder in the hands of the participants not the researcher it was a tool for ‘ethnography by proxy’ (Bloustien and Baker, 2003, Wallman et al., 1980). Indeed, as we explore below, the camcorder became an increasing focus of interest as we re-thought power relations in the study. Our video method also shares features with visual elicitation methods in which visual data, found or made by participants, are used in conjunction with interviewing techniques to elicit responses (Newbury, 2005). Our videos are to be used later in the project as prompts within subsequent narrative interviews with the participants in our quest to consider their reflections on their own data and elaborate on the issues emerging from them. In sum, we have found it to be more useful to describe and reflect on, than to classify, our method.

Whose research is it anyway?

Video studies allow degrees of researcher involvement from hands-on (Rich et al., 2000) to hands-off (Holliday, 2004). Ours followed the latter, in that we briefed participants then

stepped away from involvement for the week of filming. Some argue that this shifts the control, and the balance of power, from researcher to participants, with the latter then choosing the scope and time of their involvement as well as how to direct, narrate and edit their video material (Brown et al., 2010).

We share the view of Gibson that ‘the researcher, whether physically present or not, is inevitably part of the research world being studied’ (Gibson, 2005, p 3). And, as Worth (2009) notes, one-way conversations and comments like ‘I thought you’d like to see this’ reaffirmed the presence of both our research agenda and the research team as an audience who would later see and hear the footage that was being recorded for them. We also share the sceptical view of Muir and Mason (2012, p 3) regarding the ‘grand claims for participant empowerment on the basis of giving people video cameras’ on the basis of the demands made by the methodology on the participants. This was particularly the case in our study where we were asking them to record moments or more extended periods of time when they were already engaged in activities of high cognitive load. What unfolded prompted reflexive examination of the relationship between researcher and participant.

Difference between ‘intended’ and ‘realised’ research strategy

Although we asked participants to film primarily what they saw, some turned the camcorder on themselves, recording many pieces to camera with accompanying narrative. Interestingly this mirrors other research, e.g. a photo elicitation study (Shortt and Warren, 2012) and video diaries (Brown et al., 2010). In the former study, participants were asked to take photographs of ‘objects and spaces that were “meaningful” to them and that said something about their “personalities” at work’ (Shortt and Warren, 2012, p 22). These researchers noted how participants turned the camera on themselves and took “self-portraits”. This allowed the researchers to explore ‘performative and creative dimensions’ (Shortt and Warren, 2012, p 19) in their study of hairdresser identity. Their research focus allowed them to go beyond the ‘intuitively obvious’ explanation that people will inevitably take a self-portrait when asked to photograph their identity. This offers a useful starting point in our own research where we are interested in what different or additional issues are raised when dealing with video rather than photography. For a start, the camcorders allowed participants in our study not only to film themselves but to capture an accompanying narrative. The methodological combination of visuals and narrative is not unique to video, as photo-narrative studies such as Woodley-Baker (2009) show, but it does offer the unique combination of participant decisions over what to film and narrate simultaneously rather than as a two-stage process. We can also see this as the emergence of ownership (Brown et al., 2010) of the video diary as these ‘to camera’ pieces were often reflexive accounts rather than the ‘as it happens’ aspects of their lives we had sought.

This allows us to offer some tentative commentary and explanation. First, by handing camcorders to participants, we are utilising *their* video practices to open up spaces and narratives to the scrutiny of ourselves as researchers (Tinkler, 2008) regardless of our research question and priorities. This means our study included the subjective choices and experience of the participants in relation to the spaces and objects they filmed, reiterating the

importance of exploring ‘whose eye is behind the lens’ in bringing attention to what might otherwise have been overlooked or unseen (Shortt and Warren, 2012, p 31). Our instruction to the participants to record ‘what they saw in front of them as it happens’ was an attempt to see the world through their eyes. By filming their faces we potentially saw a wider part of their world, the ‘behind’ or background context to their lives, whether the result of conscious or unconscious decisions by the participants but revealing elements of their visual culture and its influence on identity formation (Shortt and Warren, 2012). Our participant-produced videos are examples of meaning-making events in which participants perform identity work to present a particular kind of self. Including their own images, particularly their faces, is a form of ‘absent present’ (Barthes, 1981), an anchoring of themselves in places where they no longer are.

The role of the camcorder

Other researchers have examined the role of the camcorder in video methods (Bloustien and Baker, 2003, Bates, 2013, Gibson, 2005). In our study, it allowed behaviour and observation to occur both in front of and behind the recording device (Shrum et al., 2005). As a third agent in the study, the camcorder offered a set of eyes and ears for the participant to speak to (Bates, 2013) as noted above, with a couple of participants referring to it as an ‘imaginary friend’. This confessional role has been noted in other research (Bloustien and Baker, 2003).

Our ‘absent’ presence

We observed how both the influence of the camcorder and the agency of us as researchers enter into the participants’ videos, leaving a trace or an account of our involvement in the research process and our relationships with participants (Pink, 2001). We were unexpectedly present through the recorded voice of the first author who (unknown to her) was recorded by one participant as she briefed him via Skype. Our emails to the participants appeared on computer monitors in the footage. Participants addressed us occasionally by name in their narratives.

There were also less obvious instances of our presence. Some participants adopted the language of the research study in their narrative recorded on their videos, adopting terms we used in our briefing material. For example, we asked them to focus on their ‘switching’ or ‘transitions’ between different roles in their digital or corporeal world and both words appeared in their descriptions of their activities captured on film. On the face of it, this is slightly at odds with claims that video diaries allow participants ‘to use their own voices, language and expression to narrate their lives’ (Brown et al., 2010, p 423). However, we also reflected on *how* participants used our language, for example, parodying our use of the terms ‘switching’ and ‘transitions’ as in the case of one participant who filmed his usual commuter train and simply narrated ‘transitioning tool – most days’ by way of description. Arguably participants can be seen to be controlling the narrative, their adoption of our terms closing down rather than opening up the narration, using our language as the end point, not the starting point of their own narrative and implicitly challenging us to explore further.

Concluding thoughts and further development

In this paper, we explore our not so 'absent' presence as researchers within participant-produced video data. We suggest these videos are in fact a co-production between researcher and participants. With further video data to co-produce and analyse in coming months, we welcome discussion on our methodology and on the potential for further exploration of the power relations between researcher and participant, in particular in how video images and the camcorder mediate this relationship.

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