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Social Interaction

Video-Based Studies of Human Sociality

Researchers' participation roles in video-based fieldwork: An introduction to a special issue

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1. Introduction

This special issue brings together studies that explore the way in which researchers manage their presence in their own video-based fieldwork. In particular, the authors turn the analytical lens on themselves to discuss the various roles that they occupy during their fieldwork (see e.g., Cekaite, 2020, pp. 87–88; Heath et al., 2010, pp. 37–48; Heath, 1986, p. 175; Heath & Hindmarsh, 2002, p. 108). Video recording has been employed as a research tool for data collection to study human interaction in the social sciences (for an overview, see Erickson, 2011; Heath et al. 2010; Knoblauch et al., 2006; Streeck & Mehus, 2004). Approaches, such as micro-ethnography, video ethnography, conversation analysis, and ethnomethodology, among others, have used video recordings extensively for analyzing the ways in which people in different cultural contexts interact with one another. There are a variety of ways in which these methodological approaches handle the presence of the researcher in video recordings, ranging from an attempt to minimize the researcher's presence in the field site to being actively engaged in the interactions that are being studied. In this special issue, we examine how researchers manage their involvement in their field site by bringing together studies in which, for a variety of reasons, the researchers were not only present at the time of recording but were also active participants in the recorded scene. These studies provide some of the first attempts to illustrate how researchers' decisions about their participation roles emerge in moment-by-moment interactions with the participants they are studying.

Video analysis, along with allowing for the detailed study of embodied interactions in different contexts, also makes available for analysis the participation of the researcher in those same interactions. Through video recordings, it is possible to detect co-present participants' embodied actions. If the researcher is visible in the recording, his or her actions in the unfolding interaction can be analyzed just like any other participant. Even if the researcher is not present in the video frame, close analysis of the video recordings enables—at least to an extent—the often-not-verbalized “mutual monitoring” (Goffman, 1963, p. 18) between the researcher and other participants (e.g., unveiling if and when the research participants pay attention to the camera and/or the researcher). Furthermore, if the researcher is holding the camera, it is possible to uncover how the researcher orients moment-by-moment to the video-recorded interaction through the camera lens. In all instances, the recording then enables the moment-by-moment interaction to be analyzed “again and again” (Sacks, 1984, p. 26) or “repeatedly” (Mead, 1975, p. 10). In this special issue, the authors of the five studies employ video-analysis to reflect on their involvement in and impact on the interactions they study.

The concern with the impact of the researcher on the participants they are studying has been raised within a number of research traditions in the modern social sciences. For example, the reflexive turn in the field of anthropology

starting from the mid-1980s drew scholarly attention to how ethnographic researchers always in some way affect the community they study. This critical movement called for the need for researchers to expose their own positionality by describing their relationship with the people who are the subjects of their examination (e.g., Behar & Gordon, 1992; Clifford & Marcus, 1986). Within sociolinguistics, William Labov (1972a) coined the phrase the “observer’s paradox” (p. 181) to refer to the conundrum that researchers must be present to capture data, but in doing so, impact the very phenomenon under study. As Labov (1972b, p. 209) describes:

the aim of linguistic research in the community must be to find out how people talk when they are not being systematically observed; yet we can only obtain these data by systematic observation.

This concern has also been taken up in video-based approaches. More than any other research method, video-based studies evoke questions about the impact of the research project on the phenomenon under study (Duranti, 1997, p. 117). Researchers using audio and video-based methodologies have considered the impact of both the researcher and recording equipment on interactions under study. Most video-based approaches provide methodological discussions on how to minimize the involvement of the researcher in order to better capture participants’ interactions without focusing on the researcher (see e.g., Erickson, 2006, pp. 177–178; García-Sánchez, 2014, pp. 62–81; Goodwin & Cekaite, 2018, p. 11; Heath, 1986, p. 175; Heath et al., 2010; Ochs et al., 2006, p. 389). Yet, there are also studies in which researchers take part as participants in the video-recorded interactions (Goodwin, 2004, 2010; Hofstetter, 2021/*this issue*; Katila & Raudaskoski, 2020; Wooton, 1997). With regard to the influence of video recording, studies have explored if the presence of camcorders changes participants’ behavior (Hazel, 2016; Laurier & Philo, 2006; Speer & Hutchby, 2003; Tuncer, 2016). It has been suggested that rather than expecting that the camera is omnirelevant for the participants’ interaction, the individuals can deploy the camera as a momentary interactional resource (Goico, 2021/*this issue*; Hazel, 2016; Heath, 1986, pp. 11–13; Laurier & Philo, 2006, pp. 183–186; Mondada, 2013, p. 34; Speer & Hutchby, 2003). However, while the potential influence of the researcher and/or the video-recording on the interaction being studied has been unanimously acknowledged, video-analysis of the fluctuating participation roles of the researcher who is conducting the video-based fieldwork is still, to a major extent, lacking.

Starting from the perspective that the researcher in the field is always to some extent influencing and co-participating in the video-recorded interaction (e.g., Duranti, 1997; Goodwin, 1994; Heath & Hindmarsh, 2002, p. 18; Mitsuhara & Hauck, 2020; Speer, 2002), the authors in this special issue conduct video-based microanalyses of their moment-by-moment participation in the interactions they study. The authors’ analyses encompass topics which are at the heart of social

scientific perspectives to video analysis, such as the researcher's influence on the studied interactions and the ethical dimension of the relationship between researchers and the communities they study. The authors use video analysis to highlight decisions made regarding their participation roles and the technical setup used to capture the phenomena they study. They reflect on the consequences of their decisions, especially the benefits and challenges of their specific research choices.

The primary goal of this special issue is to advance our understanding of the ways in which researchers' participation roles develop in the field site they video-record; the special issue considers what consequences these roles have on the interaction being video-recorded and the community being studied. We aim to shed light on several important questions regarding researchers' roles in video-based fieldwork, including:

1. What are the various roles that are available to researchers who are active participants in the video-recorded activity, and how can these roles be analyzed as unfolding in the moment-by-moment interaction?
2. What are the benefits and challenges of researchers participating in the interactions they study?
3. What ethical issues arise with the researchers' different participation roles during data collection, especially when analyzing potentially vulnerable communities?

Our studies highlight the diversity of the role of the researcher in video-based approaches through video analyses and researchers' ethnographic observations. In doing so, we wish to encourage future discussion and openness about decisions regarding video analysis and the role of the researcher within video-based approaches.

2. Summary of the contributions

Hofstetter (2021/*this issue*), in her article "*Analyzing the researcher-participant in EMCA*", analyzes video data from rope climbing and board-game interactions, where she, as a researcher, was also a participant in the data she recorded. Contributing to the critical discussion about what is "naturally occurring" data (Speer, 2002), Hofstetter suggests that the researcher-participant can be considered as any other participant if s/he is treated as such by the other participants in moment-by-moment interactions. She moreover reflects on how the presence of the researcher affords unveiling members' "uniquely adequate" (Garfinkel & Wieder, 1992, p. 182) practices and phenomena, such as sensory experience, especially in hard-to-access specialized settings. As Hofstetter reflects in terms of her fieldwork in the context of rock-climbing,

my own experience of the climb becomes part of the research data. The camera could not capture a view of the climb that showed the nature of the rock wall well, but furthermore, no camera angle can capture the affordances of the holds for the body, the embodied sensation of the subtle (yet challenging) backwards slope of the wall, or the care of placing my hands to avoid camouflaged wolf spiders.

By proposing that every video-recorded interaction is “natural of *something*” (emphasis in original), Hofstetter argues that data analysis should be guided by the orientations of the participants, without a priori designating any data as “natural” or non-natural”.

Pehkonen, Rauniomaa, and Siitonen (2021/*this issue*), in their article “*Participating researcher or researching participant? On possible positions of the researcher in the collection (and analysis) of mobile video data*” analyse video recordings of people conducting various outdoor activities: picking blueberries in a forest and interactions of search-dog trainers with their dogs. Providing analyses of interaction moments where the researchers with video cameras make adjustments in the video angles while interpreting the ongoing activity, the authors show that a co-present researcher unavoidably participates in and, therefore, influences the interactional situation that they are recording. Taking as one of their examples an event where the researcher needed to chase away a mosquito from her hand, and eventually lay the camera on the ground to brush it aside, Pehkonen et al. vividly describe how the researcher is exposed to the same natural elements as the participants and how this may influence the actions of the other participants, as well as the video being recorded. As the authors confess,

we cannot avoid mosquitoes any more than others in the situation and we must move along on the same terrain as everybody else, adjusting our conduct to the prevailing natural conditions.

Building on Garfinkel and Wieder’s (1992, p. 182) notion concerning “the unique adequacy requirement of methods”, Pehkonen et al. moreover explore how a researcher familiar with the specific practice—dog training—can take a more proactive role in the context being studied. The authors show that researchers at the field site “may take usage of their own local membership as an analytical resource for understanding how membership-bound practices are enacted and negotiated.”

Goico (2021/*this issue*), in her article “*The participation role of the researcher as a co-operative achievement*”, illuminates her various participation roles in a

video-based ethnographic and conversation analytic study among deaf youth in mainstream classrooms in Iquitos, Peru. The deaf youth were living without sustained access to the linguistic resources of a named language, and their teacher was not a user of a sign language. In order to uncover the everyday classroom life of the deaf students in this setting of asymmetric access to language, Goico decided to position a passive observer in the classrooms. However, her detailed analysis of the emerging participation frameworks (Goffman, 1981, p. 137; Goodwin & Goodwin, 2004) in the classroom illustrates how other participants—especially the students—concurrently assigned her to active participation positions that emerged within moments of situated interaction. With a close analysis of her own and the students' embodied actions in the classroom, and by drawing attention to the agency of the students to shift her moment-by-moment participation roles in the classroom, Goico proposes that

I did not have to be aware of the actions of students for my status in the participation framework to shift.

Goico's analysis sheds light on how combining ethnography with video analysis of participation frameworks can disclose the researcher's varying participation roles in the field site, and make evident that the roles the researchers take on in their research is not entirely of their own making, but a highly co-operative achievement

Edmonds (2021/*this issue*), in her article "*Balancing research goals and Community expectations: The affordances of body cameras and participant observation in the study of wildlife conservation*" describes her fieldwork and analyses of video-data from a highly-mobile, loud, and wet environment: Limbe Wildlife Centre, a wildlife sanctuary located in Cameroon. She reflects on how she changed her original idea to use video recording and participant observation as separate methodologies to participating while video-recording by wearing a body camera. Research participants expected her to contribute directly to the physical labor the wildlife centre requires. As Edmonds describes,

When there was a shortage of volunteers, animal keepers faced a dramatic increase in their already demanding workload, and I quickly felt uncomfortable standing to the side with my video camera while they struggled.

Building on these observations, Edmonds discusses the researcher's ethical responsibility after being allowed to video-record. She reflects:

As a white foreigner myself, I felt that withholding my physical labor in favor of research activities would constitute participation in the racialized hierarchy at the sanctuary that I hoped to critique.

In order to fulfill these expectations, Edmonds wore a body camera to capture interactions in the sanctuary while also participating in the physical labor. She suggests that this method enabled her a first-person perspective to experience the same difficult communicative conditions as the research participants in the sanctuary. Therefore, her research provided a unique insight into the obstacles that the research participants faced as they worked together.

Chen (2021/*this issue*), in her article “*The researcher’s participant roles in ethical data collection of autistic interaction*”, examines her video-based fieldwork of non-speaking autistic individuals, showing examples from family and institutional settings. Examining the interplay of her participant roles as a researcher in collecting interactional video data, Chen discusses the technical and interactional challenges of navigating multiple participant roles during data collection as well as the ethical issues that arise during data collection amongst non-speaking and sensitive population.

Chen’s close analysis of an affectionate interaction between a younger brother (an autistic individual) and an older sister (non-autistic individual) shows that the presence of a camera seemed to create an expectation for an interaction to unfold. Thus, the intimate engagement between the siblings was at least partially engendered and performed for the camera. Turning to her video recordings from institutional interactions among autistic individuals, Chen explores an ethically salient question about what happens when an unanticipated situation of distress occurs during data collection. She analyses in detail an unfolding meltdown and conflict between a 26-year-old non-speaking male autistic student and his teacher at the institution. Reflecting on her own positionality as a researcher video-recording the event, Chen writes:

During data collection it can sometimes be impossible to make quick decisions about recording: I did not realize at the time that a distress display was about to happen. It was only after, during data analysis, that I was able to unpack the unfolding events.

Chen’s article vividly demonstrates the complex dialectics between researcher and participant and the ethical issues in conducting EMCA video-based fieldwork in an institution for autistic individuals. Concluding with an invitation for more discussion about how to prepare and support scholars wanting to practice video ethnography, Chen suggests that the researcher’s wellbeing should be taken into account in ethical discussions concerning the researcher’s participation roles.

In concluding this special issue, Frederick Erickson and Asta Cekaite and Marjorie Harness Goodwin provide commentaries on contributions concerning

the researcher's participation roles in the field site (Erickson, 2021/this issue; Cekaite & Goodwin, 2021/this issue).

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