Social Interaction

Video-Based Studies of Human Sociality

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Researcher participation, ethics, and cameras in the field

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1. Introduction

The articles in this special issue examine issues rarely investigated in work in conversation analysis or video ethnography: How can we analyze filming and fieldwork as a practical co-operative (C. Goodwin, 2018) contingent accomplishment (Garfinkel, 1967)–as a practice that is ever-changing and on the move from moment to moment?

Five video ethnographers uncover for us taken-for-granted assumptions and practices that enable and guide their research. Rather than taking as the norm for filming a somewhat stationary environment, such as a dinner table or workstation, the papers instead investigate situations where people are actively moving their bodies through somewhat distinct and difficult terrains: Climbing a mountain, cleaning cages in a Cameroonian wildlife sanctuary, foraging, navigating multiple frameworks in a multi-activity Peruvian classroom among deaf as well as hearing students, and intervening in interaction between an autistic adult and his teacher.

The papers ask "What does it mean to be a social actor or researcher in the field?" This is consequential, because being a researcher means being responsive not only to the participant roles that the videographer initially takes on, but also the roles that other participants, as social actors in the field, make relevant as they ascribe roles to the ethnographer. Fieldwork demands that the researcher assume multiple participant roles depending on how others orient to the researcher as well as the technical affordances and researchers' knowledge of the practices being investigated.

Early work in CA used fixed cameras on tripods at dinner tables and in workplaces where the setting does not change. This research was foundational in developing initial observations about the interactional organization of everyday life in families, among friends, and at work. Examining the interactive organization of a sentence (C. Goodwin, 1979), mutual monitoring (M. H. Goodwin, 1980), forms of storytelling (C. Goodwin, 1981, 1984), diverse participant roles (C. Goodwin, 1981), etc., allowed us to reveal in detail the fabric of social life. The examination of interaction in work settings such as a doctor's office (Heath, 1986), an airport operations room (M. H. Goodwin, 1995, 1996), a news studio, a control room, an operating theatre, or a design meeting (Heath & Luff, 2000; Heath et al. 2010, p. 41) uncovered practices entailed in the co-production of work. Where participants are seated for extended periods of time at home or at work, a fixed camera provides a good solution for filming (Hindmarsh & Llewellyn, 2018, p. 418). As stated by Heath et al. (2010, p. 38) "in Conversation Analysis, where the focus is on the details of social interaction, a fixed camera is ordinarily used to encompass all active participants in the scene." In such settings it is frequently stated that the researcher need not be present (ten Have 2007; Heath et al., 2010).

More recently researchers have been concerned with settings where practices are in various ways mobile (C. Goodwin, 2000, 2018; M. H. Goodwin, 1998, 2006; Haddington et al., 2012, 2013; Mondada, 2013, 2017; McIlvenny et al., 2014) or "roving" (Heath et al.; 2010, pp. 38-40). Notable is the mobility within the video-ethnographic study of private settings, i.e., families' everyday life in the home (Cekaite, 2010; Goodwin & Cekaite, 2018) as well as families' social activities outside the private home sphere (M. H. Goodwin & C. Goodwin, 2012). It is through the active involvement of video ethnographers that attention has been brought to the richness of social practices entailed in "bodies-in-motion" (Merleau-Ponty, 1962), allowing us to add spatial and material characteristics to the choreography of social actions such as embodied directives within the material, spatial, and temporal context of family life. In mobile situations the researchers present make active choices with regard to what and how to film; and the researcher necessarily becomes an active participant because s/he is on the scene.

2. The positionality of the researcher when on site

A significant contribution of the special issue concerns discussion of the role of the researcher. The researcher who is present to make video-recordings can, as demonstrated, adopt or be positioned to take on a variety of social roles vis-à-vis the participants and the practice in focus–i.e., as friend, authority figure or observer (unaddressed or addressed recipient). Goico (2021/this issue), for example, adopts such various roles vis-a-vis deaf students in an Iquitos classroom. Hofstetter (2021/this issue) and Edmonds (2021/this issue) participate in the scene as members of the activity in progress, as a fellow rock climber and a zoo cleaner, respectively. Chen (2021/this issue) becomes a participant in the scene when asked by the teacher to help in managing a situation of distress involving an autistic adult student. Pehkonen et al. (2021/this issue) take on a neutral role in the activities in focus, primarily as videographers. A series of key questions related to the dynamic role of the researcher-on-site are identified and addressed in our essay in this special issue.

2.1 How does researcher participation affect understanding of the activity?

Being "there" does necessarily involve interactions with the participants, although the researcher does not (from the perspective of a linguistic anthropologist) act as a participant observer who attempts to immerse and participate in the social practice. However, as demonstrated by Hofstetter (2021/this issue), the ethnomethodological interest in the "unique adequacy" of a social practice can be achieved by the immersion into the practice. It is part of an extensive tradition in ethnomethodology (i.e., Sudnow, 2001, etc.). Hofstetter discusses the binary division between (1) "natural" data that are associated with avoidance of

researcher co-presence and interference–so that the data are not "co-produced with or provoked by the researcher"–and (2) data gathered when the researcher is a part of the activity (ten Have 2007, p. 63; Hofstetter, 2021/this issue). Hofstetter convincingly argues that the question should deal with "on what basis we may raise concerns about naturalness, and moreover, what we may gain, or concede, in different forms of researcher co-presence" (2021/this issue). In her analysis of her actions and the co-present participants' orientations towards her during their climbing activity, Hofstetter shows ways in which "video analysis is both augmented and complemented through researcher participation" (2021/this issue), contributing to the understanding of members' practices. In particular she argues that in climbing activity, no camera could capture the embodied sensation of the backward slope of the wall or the care with which she moved her hands to avoid wolf spiders; these sensations involved her own lived experience as a climber–her participation in the encounter. In the case of the Goodwins documenting interactions of Chil, a man who spoke only three words, both ethnographer/videographers were similarly highly involved participants in the scene (M. H. Goodwin et al., 2002; C. Goodwin, 2018, pp. 59-129). As members of Chil's family, the Goodwins were keenly aware of Chil's interactive competencies–as a participant who could produce meaning not only through embodied gesture and prosody, but also through invoking the collaboration of his co-interlocutors. Our understandings of the history of his interactions as an aphasic individual as well as his unique biography greatly enhanced our understanding of what was taking place in the interaction we recorded. The presence of the researcher can have substantial benefits for comprehending the situation through first-hand embodied access to the lived activity in ways a camera cannot.

2.2 How is decision-making about cameras affected by participant knowledge of the activity?

As a researcher on the scene, one is alive to a projected, unfolding development of activities, constantly making projections about what to anticipate, and thus making changes in the use of cameras and camera angles. Notably, as demonstrated by the contributions in this special issue, mobile situations involve a certain degree of spontaneity in the ways in which they can be documented visually and aurally, and require a certain degree of anticipation by researchers. In their contribution dealing with a variety of social activities filmed in outdoor environments, Pehkonen et al. discuss the ways in which the focus of the recording is flexible (unlike statically mounted cameras) and is dependent both on mundane conditions (such as mosquitoes in the forest) and the researchers' knowledge, or membership, in the practice that is being recorded (for example, with respect to search dog training, knowing not to enter the running line of the dog or make abrupt movements.) Pehkonen et al. show that they adopted different positions and camera foci that varied according to the availability of

videographers' knowledge as members. It is shown that when collecting data, researchers have to "evidently make decisions about what to record and how to participate in the ongoing activity, […] which thus reflect their spontaneous, negotiable and planned participation on site" (Pehkonen et al., 2021/this issue). Specific participant knowledge or membership can also evolve during the data collection, if the researcher takes a reflexive attitude towards what constitutes appropriate and relevant participation. This is usually the case during long-term video-ethnographies that provide the researcher the time to observe, discern, and learn to anticipate the types of social relations, participant constellations, and spatial-material characteristics of their social interactions, such as how, when, and for how long to film whom (Cekaite, 2012).

2.3 How is camera choice related to ethical issue in the field?

Camera choices have an impact on technological, as well as social and ethical issues in the field. For example, Edmonds, in her study of communication at a Cameroonian wildlife sanctuary, describes the ways in which her race and privileged position were factors she considered in deciding how to conduct fieldwork: which camera to use and how. Given the power differentials in the field–there were sharp contrasts between people who were involved in intensive physical labor with cleaning animal cages and those focused on research and managing the sanctuary–Edmonds did not want to present herself to Cameroonian zoo workers as someone incapable of doing the daily "shit work" required in the wildlife center. After a few weeks in the field, Edmonds revised her initial set of priorities in fieldwork as well as the type of camera she wanted to employ, choosing a GoPro, so that both of her hands would be free to shovel, rather than occupied writing ethnographic field notes. This choice was also motivated by weather conditions that prevented the use of other types of cameras. Joining in activities with keepers improved her ability to interact with various categories of participants, as it engendered a certain rapport that enabled her "to build strong, mutually beneficial relationships". During her fieldwork she was able to collect ethnographic data on larger scale issues of language ideology and conservation as well; the videotaped interaction she obtained provided for "microanalyses of how individuals manage, reinforce or resist" the larger ideologies she saw taking place in the sanctuary.

2.4 How is camera positioning related to evolving trajectories of action as well as the nature of language–aural or manual–involved?

Camera positioning, as well as the physical position of the researcher in the room/location vis-à-vis those being filmed, is quite revealing of one's interests–is it the teacher or the students who are in focus? Camera angles are also instrumental in enabling the capture of the use of sign language. For example, Goico, dealing with the exigencies of filming in a classroom with deaf students,

had to find a way to capture the signing of three deaf students who did not necessarily sit in one place all the time. Typically, the settings where deaf individuals are filmed are deaf clubs, homes or restaurants where the primary activity is talk. In contrast, Goico approached deaf students in a highly complex and simultaneously mundane social environment–the classroom: The participants there are located in multiple spaces. Moreover, students' facing formations and types of engagement are quite fluid. Goico's field site demanded multiple cameras on tripods. She positioned one Canon Vixia HF M500 camera so as to capture the *front* of a signer and those nearby and another *diagonally behind* the principal signing participant to capture the student's interactions in case of the student turning around. A third wide angle GoPro camera captured the entire scene in what Goico describes as "a complex social ecology." This way of filming was in contrast to the way that videographers have traditionally filmed signers, in a more frontal face-to-face context. Filming with multiple cameras allowed Goico to capture both wide angle views and to zoom in into the specifics of the signing, documenting the contextual configurations that were made relevant by the participants in situ.

2.5 How does the role of the researcher shift over time?

The role of the researcher in the field is not static. Rather, it is continuously negotiated and re-calibrated as the researcher orients to multiple aspects of activities emerging in situ. This is vividly seen in the fieldwork with deaf students of Iquitos studied by Goico. She argues that her participant status was constantly in flux, as the participants assigned to her various roles intricately coordinated vis-à-vis their signing and gestures. Her choice, however, was to distance herself from these possibilities of involvement as much as possible by sitting in the back of the room, far from the cameras positioned on the deaf students. At such points the researcher was a *ratified overhearer* of what was taking place in the classroom. At other points the students treated the ethnographer as an *addressed recipient*, sharing thoughts about the lesson or sticking out their tongue as a commentary on classroom activities. And on still other occasions Goico was taken to be an *unratified overhearer*–as someone students did not want to be observing their antics of surreptitiously assisting their classmates in solving a math problem. The videographer was alternatively cast by the students in the roles of ethnographer, friend, and authority figure.

Yet another important feature of researcher participation involves the researcher acting within multiple, rather than a single, clearly defined participation framework. In her article, Chen observed the multiple participation frameworks within which she conducted research with autistic individuals. In a first example she is involved in two simultaneous participation frameworks initially: one with autistic children being filmed and one with Aunty, the person observing the children. At that point she is an addressed recipient vis-à-vis the aunty and a *non-addressed recipient* with the children. However, her role quickly shifts from that

of a non-addressed to *an addressed recipient* when the children perform for the camera and ethnographer with loving gestures. In a second example from data collection in an institution for autistic youth Chen discusses the "blurred and contradictory positionalities" she encountered. An autistic adult who takes the hat of a fellow student becomes distressed when he is subjected to control touch of the teacher. Chen is summoned by the teacher to intervene and return the stolen hat; suddenly, her role as a bystander or observer changes to that of ratified participant and aide to the teacher in a situation of student distress. In this situation, Chen stops filming to help the teacher (aligning herself with the institution rather than the student in distress). For Hofstetter, there is less switching of roles, as the roles of ethnographer and participant in the climbing interaction are not so dissimilar. As she states, "the researcher's co-participation can be treated as member co-participation, as long as their contributions are treated as adequate on the basis of local activities, rather than research agendas." (2021/this issue).

Across these settings we find that one's research participants may quickly switch their orientation. When they switch from addressing each other to talking to the researcher, the videographer's role changes from unaddressed to addressed recipient. When this occurred in the Iquitos classroom, Goico's solution was to change her location in the ecology of the classroom so that she was less accessible. We see in Chen's materials the way that performing for a receptive audience may evolve as children orient to the researcher as addressed recipient. However, Chen viewed orientation to the camera and performing intimacy as an opportunity for obtaining glimpses of autistic individuals who defy accounts of their inability to emotionally reciprocate displays with one another. Shifting roles thus yields different forms of social affordances. Ethical dilemmas are posed when aligning with those in power means leaving the less abled participants vulnerable.

3. What are the tradeoffs, ethical issues, and possibilities of anthropologically-based studies involving videography?

Rarely have researchers discussed the ethical issues involved in filming individuals diagnosed with various communicative, cognitive, and physical disabilities. By considering forms of participation and multimodality within embodied autistic interaction, we not only expose the complex abilities of those labeled disabled, but also, as Chen states, make possible "a reconceptualization of autistic sensibilities." Filming the disabled requires thoughtful consideration of possible vulnerabilities of those who are filmed. For more than eight years, Charles Goodwin did not film his father Chil, because he was sensitive to the situation of an aphasic person being filmed and his interactions used for research purposes. Only when Chil himself made it clear that he felt it was important for

others to know about his ability to survive well with the help of his family did Chuck decide he would film.

4. Conclusion

The authors of this special issue provide a much-needed contribution to the heterogenous field of interaction studies that rely on video recordings of specific social practices or full-scale video ethnographies of communities. By bringing together these different craftsmen's reflections, we can identify both the necessary critical understanding of the researcher's positionality during the field work, and the affordances and limitations of video-recordings. It is frequently argued that transcriptions do not provide an objective "representation" of the recorded social practices; rather, they are amenable to the analytical choices of the researcher, for as Ochs (1979) reminds us, "transcription is theory." In a similar way, with respect to the position of the camera, C. Goodwin (1994, p. 64) states "any camera position constitutes a theory about what is relevant within a scene, one that will have enormous consequences for what can be seen in it later, and what forms of subsequent analysis are possible." Clearly the practices used in filming are directly related to the questions posed by the researcher. Video-recorded data is necessarily only a *partial* documentation of a social situation. One of the valuable contributions of the special issue is thus the informed exemplification that the concept "perfect data" with no glitches and no technical troubles is more of an ideal than an attainable option, especially in cases when one's focus is on mundane social practices that include mobility and spontaneous, emergent interactions.

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