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Where does the research knowledge lie in participatory visual processes?



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Photograph by Ray Gibson

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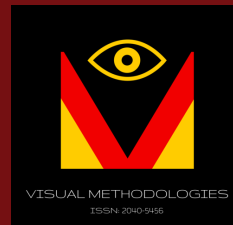
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Abstract

Over recent decades there has been a rapid expansion in the use of participatory visual methods to unearth neglected perspectives on complex issues. As example, participatory video can enable participants to show and tell, and connect marginalised communities with external audiences. However, there are important ethical questions raised, which echo wider debates in visual methods, such as the politics of public exposure and reception and the power dynamics between project actors. Furthermore, practical challenges are compounded by the tendency to view participatory video as a data production or research dissemination method, rather than the means to drive research dialogue or social change processes during action research.

This provocation draws on participatory video experiences in India and Kenya to raise critical questions about the potentially valuable but tacit or under-utilised sources of research knowledge generated, and the implicit sharing assumptions in contemporary visual practice. I interrogate participatory representation as theoretical frame, because it often functions practically to restrict possibilities for participants by binding activities to the priorities of external agencies. Whilst acknowledging the tensions, I suggest participatory video is more productively conceptualised as the means to mediate communication processes towards both deeper understanding and improvement action. I conclude, that attention needs to shift to ensure the most pertinent knowledge is not overlooked.

Keywords: Participatory video, social representation, action research processes, visual ethics, subjective and dynamic knowledge



Introduction

Visual processes as mechanisms for participatory action research

There has been a rapid expansion in the use of visual research methods to unearth overlooked perspectives on complex social issues (Gauntlet and Holzwarth 2006). For instance, video aids people in showing their situation, as well as telling through recorded speech (Humphreys and Lorac 2002). This is thought to provide access to neglected subjectivities, as well as being empowering for participants (e.g. White 2003). In actuality, the use of creative media within social research is not really new, even if the participatory turn is recent (see Buckingham 2009), and distinguishing between the diverse approaches that have evolved is essential. In this paper, I focus as exemplar on participatory video, in order to raise critical questions about where the research knowledge lies in visual processes such as this applied as participatory action research (e.g Ramella and Olmos 2005, Shaw 2015b).

Of course, action research is also not a unified method. It has an extensive history (see Reason and Bradbury 2006) and incorporates individual reflective practice, group action-learning, community-led participatory research and systems learning (Burns 2014). These typologies are not totally distinct and sometimes combined. However, they coalesce in the intention to solve real-world problems through iterative cycles of action, followed by reflection on the enablers and barriers to change, and further plan adaptation and improvement attempts. It is clear that this trial and error knowledge, necessary in navigating towards sustainability in complex circumstances, is not pre-existent and available for capture through traditional methods. Instead built from 'within' (Shotter 2006), it is co-constructed as project dynamics play out in situ.

Digital media offers enabling spaces in which participants can explore understanding and decide between future pathways (e.g. Jones and Humphreys 2006). Participatory video can mediate social relationships more equitably (e.g. High 2005), and both motivate participants and re-position them in external communication (Shaw 2015b). However, there is growing interrogation of the claims for empowerment and real-world influence in consequence (see Milne et al. 2012, Shaw 2012a). Ethical questions have been raised, as with other emerging visual methods, such as the risk of inappropriate exposure (e.g Milne 2012, Shaw 2012b), the politics of public reception (e.g. Kindon et al 2012, Wheeler 2012) and the power dynamics between project actors (e.g. Mistry et al 2014, Shaw 2015a). Furthermore, I propose that the way participatory video is often conceptualised both increases ethical dilemmas and limits the knowledge that can evolve.

Representing existing perceptions or evolving contexts for learning

Social representations are the shared values, stories and worldviews of a group or community (Jovchelovitch 2007). Social knowledge forms and propagates through the construction of shared narratives, with the capability to produce, interpret, re-frame and communicate stories considered a key source of social influence (Melkote 2004). Participatory visual approaches are thus presumed beneficial because they enable participants to tell their own stories as participatory representations. The assumption in the research context is these methods enable participants to communicate on their own terms, and this leads to authentic knowledge.

However, the notion that images and stories are somehow more genuine than speech has been challenged (see Buckingham 2009, Rose 2012). Visual media always convey constructed perspectives. Furthermore, visual methods are not simply for data recording, but the means to generate new perceptions (Pink 2006). In participatory research those involved examine their experiences together to evolve their understanding. In this way, research participant's interpretation of visual material (their own and others) is well recognised as learning site (e.g Rose 2012). Similarly, participatory researchers understand that deeper insight arises from progressive interactions as trust builds (e.g Wadsworth 2006). However, methodological awareness (Kindon 2003, Shaw 2012b) often isn't translated into participatory video practice. I contend this is compounded by the tendency to define it within research applications as data collection (e.g. interview recording (Lomax 2012), text production (de Lange et al 2008) and documentary production (Walsh 2012)), even when deliberation is conducted.

In response to the ethical issues, I have developed extended participatory video processes as the means to mediate longer-term participatory research and community engagement processes. Whilst full methodological discussion is beyond this paper's scope (for further details see Shaw 2015b), videoing and playback are used to drive cycles of activity and reflective discussion in progressively diversifying spaces as a project evolves. For instance, during the group-building and internally-focused exploration phases, videoing exercises are used to build trust, confidence and inclusive dynamics, and to explore shared concerns in safe, confidential space, but the recorded video material is not shown outside the group. During later externally-focused stages participants produce video materials to stimulate external dialogue with clear definition of the intended audience at each iteration of video production (e.g horizontal communication to peers or the wider community, or vertical to influential decision makers at different levels). Whilst the risk of unexpected responses or backlash remain intrinsic to the project territory (Shaw 2012b), this clear separation of confidential videoing at the beginning from making videos to promote external dialogue later helps navigate the challenges more ethically.

I next draw on my recent experiences applying extended participatory processes to provoke debate on the potentially valuable, but tacit or under-utilised sources of research knowledge in visual processes like this.

Case vignettes

The Participate research initiative (www.participate2015.org) brought the perspectives of some of the poorest people from 29 countries into global post-2015 policy deliberations (Burns et al 2013). As part of activities, I accompanied community-researchers in Kenya, Palestine and India in using extended participatory video processes (as above see Shaw 2015b), to build contextual knowledge on how change happens, and communicate to UN decision makers (e.g <http://www.participate2015.org/documentary/>).

Particular cases do not lead to verification bias (Flyvbjerg 2004), but are vital in revealing where social theories miss reality. Anecdotal theorising (Gallop 2002) involves mining practice narratives for more nuanced understanding, and next I draw in this way on my researcher diaries and Participate methods learning (see Shahrokh and Wheeler 2014).

Reflective dialogue as source of research insight

Over 9 months extremely poor communities in Nairobi researched issues of personal security, sanitation and disabilities (see Burns et al 2013). They used progressive videoing and playback activities to mediate their explorations. All sorts of video material resulted, including personal statements, contextual visuals, peer interviews, in-camera edited documentaries and dramas, and policy-focussed messages (see <https://vimeo.com/74427417>). For example, young researchers in the Mathare slum documented sanitation and security issues, and recorded community interviews before organising local screenings.



Real Time/Spatial Collective Mothare Mappers 2013



Real Time/Spatial Collective Mothare Mappers 2013

the visual aspect... made it exciting, so more of them sat down to discuss, than would have done otherwise ... they were grassroots decision-makers suggesting self-driven solutions ...

Kenyan project manager

*Real Time/Spatial Collective Mothare Mappers 2013*

However, the deepest insight was not contained in these video materials, as is typical particularly during single-loop action research (e.g. Shaw 2012b). For instance, through discussion after playback the community discovered how torches are shined onto security light sensors to turn them off, and the young men formed patrol teams to scare muggers off. Similarly, the non-verbal and embodied learning that arises through project dynamics can be the most relevant.

Videoing as context for learning about enabling and constraining dynamics

Parallel Participate research (Burns et al 2013) involved three urban poor groups in

Chennai. One came from a homeless community, based in the commercial district for forty years; one from an objectionable slum, which means the authorities don't support it; and one from a relocation site, where people have been re-housed in tenements 40 km outside Chennai following slum clearance. Each group produced a story about tackling problems, which concluded with a policy message for the UN.

However, the most pertinent understanding arose from the dynamics. The external assumption was that the street-dwellers must be worst off, because they live under canvas. In actuality, the reverse was so. Whilst the street-dwellers faced undoubted difficulties they were relatively in control of their lives, with regular work, strong support networks, and they were energised through success in securing electricity and pension provision. By comparison, the re-location residents had been forcefully removed from their livelihoods, had grossly inadequate services, and alcoholism and sexual abuse were rife. This knowledge was palpable in the contextual dynamics. For instance, during videoing fieldwork, many very angry people came out to express their views. This prompted much discussion between participants, the local participatory researchers and myself.

*Real Time/Praxis 2013*

The houses look OK, but it is a living hell, and that is hidden

Local researcher

Given the inquiry focus was how change could happen in context, the differences

between settings was crucial. Indeed, lack of hope and anger resonated as significant barriers to sustainable change in the global analysis. Conversely, inclusive dynamics, solidarity, and collective action were found to be important change enablers (Burns et al 2015), with Participate outputs (see Real Time 2015) identifying how visual research processes could build these aspects. However, the urban poor group's video focused on the continuum of experiences such as stigmatisation and criminalisation, rather than the nuances between the different settings (see <https://vimeo.com/74282091>). Indeed, the complex knowledge uncovered throughout the wider research was generally harder to convey on video. It is obvious how valuable but less tangible understanding is missed, if the sole focus of analysis is output videos as documented elsewhere (e.g. Kindon 2003, Shaw 2015).



Real Time/Praxis 2013

Questioning the sharing assumptions in video-mediated research

Finally, I would like to stimulate debate on the assumption that participatory video research will necessarily be disseminated on video. Part of the rationale for using visual processes in action research, is to access harder-to-reach knowledge. Implicitly connected is the significant risk of inappropriate exposure for vulnerable groups (Shaw 2012b), if sensitive disclosures are shown publically. This concern is incorporated in the extensive participatory research literature (see Gubrium et al 2014, Pain 2004). Yet there is less discussion of how to navigate it in context. I have advocated an extended participatory video process that clearly separates

exploratory video recording in safe spaces, from using video to communicate externally later during action research projects. This is helpful in negotiating this particular visual practice more ethically, against the considerable expectation that there will be video outputs, and that these will be available for public sharing.

Indeed, Participate funders agreed that no video material would be watched externally unless this was desired. Nevertheless, this challenged pre-conceptions. For instance, sex workers in India were motivated to take part by video, but the participatory researcher was concerned that they declined to show their work. This was partly because they identified as vulnerable women not sex workers. Rather than being unsuccessful research, this was a useful finding, which did not have to be recorded to be of value.

Conceptualising participatory video as a longer-term learning process, involving progressive cycles of videoing and reflection, rather than a way of producing visual or verbal data is more ethical. Sensitive issues can be in safe spaces, and be presented in written reports to maintain discretion. However, framing participatory video as representation has impeded this practical response.

Conclusion

Beyond social representation

As I have outlined, the implicit belief is that participatory video's main function is to communicate social representations. However, conceptualising it predominately as participatory representation or voice is inherently problematic as I argue fully elsewhere (Shaw 2012b, 2015b). In short, the most acute issues occur when participatory video is applied as a short-term production method. Such projects often close possibilities for participants because what should be the start of longer-term exchange finishes after decision-makers have watched their videos without anything resulting. This is comparable to Bakhtin's concept of finalization (Frank 2005)- a barrier to ethical dialogical research. We need to question the naivety of assuming participant stories result in more truthful data, free from researcher influence (e.g. Walsh 2012, Shaw 2015a). Situating the main value in the video output, both curtails and neglects the deeper research knowledge that can arise.

In this paper, I have considered examples to provoke thinking about the knowledge sources that can be overlooked, such as dialogue following video playback, and the dynamics generated by the videoing context. This highlights the need to document project processes and playback discussions effectively. During the Participate research, participants evaluated what was intended, hidden and missing in their videos. Nevertheless, the focus during global analysis was the videos produced, which risked submerging contextual nuances within the synthesis.

Participatory video as contextual means to generate new social dynamics

In re-casting participatory video as the means to drive longer-term action research and community change processes, I am not suggesting there is one correct method. There are many uses of video within research, and participatory video should be applied flexibly according to circumstances. However, it is necessary to define specific intentions, approaches and procedures in order to adequately understand the unspoken aspects of particular practices (Kindon 2015). My interest is in how visual processes can build enabling relational contexts within and across communities, and vertically back and forth to decision makers over time towards both new insight and actual influence.

At the same time, I am mindful of the considerable tensions between the motivating ideals and the practice reality in the typically contested project context (Shaw 2015a). Participatory video processes easily reveal relational dynamics, such as who speaks and listens, who participates and who is outside, and where the control lies. Group-members can be repositioned more influentially through videoing, but the response may draw attention to the constraining power dynamics. This means there is crucial learning available about the barriers to social inclusion. This begs a final question about how these kinds of embodied, interactive and dynamic forms of knowledge I have identified are adequately appreciated and incorporated?

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