Natural problems of naturalistic video data

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That question.

Routinely when we tell other social scientists that we have been filming what people do while they are in cafés¹ we are asked this question (or variations on it): Doesn’t filming change how people behave? This question appears to raise trouble for the aim of ethnographic filming in cafés to record naturally occurring activities since surely customers react to the presence of a camcorder thereby spoiling the record. The camcorder in the café, like the elephant in the kitchen is unavoidably and very noticeably there. Food made in the kitchen should surely be abandoned wholesale since the elephant’s presence contaminated all the cooking that was done there. Certainly an unexpected thing in a familiar place raises questions about its presence there that day and how much it will disrupt the workings of that place. The camcorder though an unusual thing has a special status, it is a recording device, it is expectedly making a record for some purpose and those that it films may become part of the record. Even though they have an agile and nimble trunk elephants play no part in preparing food in the kitchen nor do they takes notes about the cook’s technique.

Some reactions

Let us backtrack a little to one of the central methodological aims of the café project: to record, on video, spontaneous activities unsolicited by the researcher and events uncontrolled by any form of lab set up. What was taped during filming in the café would be ‘natural’ in that sense (Lynch 2002) and from the researcher’s side the camcorder had to be handled in ways that allowed things to happen and didn’t solicit events. New UK university guidelines on informed-consent required that customers should be aware of what was happening in the café consequently posters were put up in the café windows and counter and flyers were put on tables making the presence of the camcorder all the harder to ignore. They contained a brief explanation that the project was ‘a day in the life’ of the café and a request ‘please continue your business as usual’ (see left). The question for customers in the café of how to deal with what might be a spontaneous, unsolicited and uncontrolled camcorder² began to have an answer.

The poster and flyer’s request that customers ‘please continue their business as usual’ recognizes that customers have various ways of responding to the camera’s presence. In his seminal work

¹ For more details on the café project ‘The Cappuccino Community: cafés and civic life in the contemporary city’ see: http://web.geog.gla.ac.uk/~elaurier/cafesite/
² Putting camcorders where they are not expected can become a mild form of breaching experiment in that they both disrupt background routines and at the same time are recuperated into routine activities remarkably fast.
Heath (1986) reminds us to turn to the actual, rather than imagined, ways in which persons, at the time of filming, witnessably orient, react or respond to the presence of a camera and a microphone.

If we are to make an empirical case for the effects of recording on interaction, then we need to demonstrate an orientation by the participants themselves to the production of their action and activity to some aspect of the recording equipment. (Heath 1986) p. 176 quoted in (Lomax 1998).

What Heath (1986) demonstrated in his study is how a child’s shifts in gaze are used to bring a disguised camera’s presence into play during a doctor-patient interaction. He shows us, then, that while the camera is omni-present in the setting it is by no means omni-relevant. Lomax and Casey (1998) pick up Heath’s work to consider the ways in which the video becomes part of the organisation of fieldwork by ethnographers, its introduction, orientation and switching on and off being carried out as part and parcel of displaying sensitivity to what is being put on the (video) record. For their part the subjects being recorded display an orientation to their status as proper objects of the record, the particular technology of recording in terms of what it makes visible and what it misses and the preservation of the record for subsequent research. By examining actual instances as Heath, Lomax & Casey and others have done we can move beyond saying simply that there are changes, to re-specifying imagined changes as practical matters of witnessable reactions to the presence of a camera, relatedly of members producing recognisable actions for the video-record and finally the viewers’ analysis of the video in its scenic intelligibilities as part of record of a particular project in a particular place (Lomax 1998: , Jayyusi 1991: , MacBeth 1999).

Methodological advice from guides and courses on filming workplaces suggests firstly using distant or wide angle shots for recording groups of people in public spaces in order to not to miss how people respond to another (Heath 1997: , Heath&Hindmarsh 2002). Secondly, it suggests, where possible, leaving the camera unattended on a tripod in order to further minimise distraction and disruption to persons in the setting (Barbash&Taylor 1997). A particularly interesting warning came from Paul Luff who had said that trying to move the camera to catch an action occurring would always miss the beginning of that action and hence would be an incomplete record (Luff 2003). This was because the camera movement would be initiated by the camera operator first noticing the beginning of something, and then bringing the camera round to bear on it. MacBeth (1999) points toward just this aspect of looking with the camera when uses the anthropologists Tim Asch and Napoleon Chagnon filming women and children crying “we as viewers of his record, are in the midst of a motivated search, without knowing what could be promised for it, or where” p154. The anthropologists’ camera sweeps inelegantly until it finally catches up with a fight already in progress. MacBeth (1999) is explicating what is entailed in finding something going on with a camera in as the course of a shot which is in itself a visual inquiry. Where MacBeth (1999) reveals how the camera chases down an event, we decided following Luff’s advice that we would analyse the spaces of cafés for their promising locations and set the camera up to record what happened there. Figure 1 was a preferred spot in the café where a sofa and two arm chairs were arranged under a skylight.

Having established where the locations were in the café setting up the tripod and camera involved compositional work. With the amateur camera operator’s sense of the limited angle of vision the scene was assessed for what could be filmed and with an orientation to the camera being visible but not positioned in front of a customer’s face. A perspective had to be selected in terms of being over the shoulder, from another table, from the passageway and other possibilities. This would be tried out with the tripod to check whether its legs could be fitted in
and the height of the tripod adjusted. Through looking and then looking with the camera the framing was finely adjusted. Once the camera was set-up, as with Lomax and Casey’s study it was left in that location by the researcher, though in our case it was left recording. Alongside the positioning of the camcorder, the absence of a camera operator at the device were methods by which the presence of the project was minimised.

With an intendedly low key presence, the camcorder on its tripod was not always immediately seen by customers and this is what happens in figure 1.

*Fig 1. An inquiring look at the device*

Filming from the spot that produced figure 1, the camera on its tripod was hidden from arriving customers in a corner overlooking a popular coffee table with two sofas under a skylight. Coming round from the counter the woman with the cap sees the camera early on but doesn’t bring her full scrutiny to bear until she sits down in frame 2. Having looked at the camera and worked out that this spot is what it is trained on, she puts her bags down frame 3. She then leans forward to read the flyer (see appendix) on the table in front of her in frame 4. It’s remarkable that she locates the flyer so quickly. One thing we can note is that the presence of an unattended camera on a tripod raises the expectation of a forthcoming account for its presence, where a pram or an umbrella might not. Objects, in other words, not only carry as part of their category membership of classes of objects (e.g. still cameras, microphones, CCTV) uses to which they can be put, they are also analysed in relation to the place in which they are found. “What is a DV camera doing in my café?” (A question not posed by those in tourist zones nor amongst trainspotters or in a camcorder sales shop etc.) versus “What is an umbrella doing in my café!” Moreover in public spaces they are analysed by members as potentially belonging to the place or to individuals (e.g. the chairs and tables versus an umbrella).

We can also note that there are ways of coming into shot: a camera zooming in on you, a camera operator walking up to you, a camera panning toward you. In this case the woman walks into the shot. Her inquiry then follows as to ‘what have I walked into?’ One of the things that people routinely do is to get out of the way of people taking photos or filming if they think they are in the way at the wrong moment. They are stepping into the middle of some ongoing work of filming, they look at the direction of the camera, they follow the projected course of its filming to see what in that scene could be an activity, person or thing worth filming / that is filmable? The classic is the tourist couple, where husband snaps wife, and you find yourself walking between3. In his analysis of the observational shot, MacBeth (1999) examines the documentary maker’s work as they follow a person through a crowd while walking themselves or search across a scene to find and/lose the scene. What we are seeing here is member’s inquiry work in entering a scene of recording as to whether they are the intended objects of the recording.

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3 See Brown et al’s (2003) work on practices of tourist photography.
In figure 2 when the women move off, the companion in front simply walks by the camera (frame 1), her blue shoulder flashing briefly on the screen. The second woman while passing close to the camera, stops briefly to wave directly into the camera. Her wave tracks from off-screen to mid-screen, the gesture emerging as it does so. Its movement comes to a halt with her face on the right and hand to the left filling the screen (frame 3). She upgrades her joke-wave at the camera to squeezing her nose to make a funny face, using the distortion of getting too close to the camera to add to this (Katz 1999). She is doing a strategic manipulation of the optics by coming in too close to the lens, in a two part way. Her appearance is juxtaposed with existing depth of the scene, we see her joke as a play on the expected distance persons will maintain from a tripod that is analysably recording the café in general (as against them in particular). What is already involved here is that members are competent in analysis of what a static lens will capture in its field of view and how they should align themselves to it to produce a joke. The static camera on its tripod can be looked at and analysed by members, be they out-of-shot or in-shot, as an oriented recording device. So to begin to break down the question, what people can do in front of the camera, where this might be a limited repertoire, depends on what camera’s properties are found to be: roving, panning, zooming in on them or fixed. This woman frames herself for the recording device which in its fixed look otherwise misses the world that all the other customers are witnessing. In stopping off at the camera she topicalises the camera for other customers in the café. Its presence is briefly made relevant to the customers as a collective, they look toward the scene she is making and by smiling respond to what she is doing.

In Harvey Sacks’ (1992: pp104-113) lecture on the therapy group where one of them begins by saying “testing, testing”, which is taken up by other members later, the joke is used to disrupt how later analysis can be done by therapists of their talk. What is important in that case was that the alternative categorisation of their talk as acting and not being who they really are so that whatever they say cannot be straightforwardly used as evidence against them. The important distinction is that in the café persons as customers are not being observed for evidence of their problem or progress toward rehabilitation as Sack’s therapy group were. Given these differences in what way then are their gestures related to the recording of their setting? The notion of the café customer is not a contested one for café customers so observing them as doing something unproblematic for their moral worth does not lead us to expect that they would try and hide what they were up to. The joke does display one of the alternative responses to doing what you usually do which is to fool around in front of the camera. Customers and staff at the cafés made visual jokes on camera with an orientation to their recognisability and reception as such by later viewers of the video and in relation to a request for, and extensive record of ‘appearances as usual’ in the café. In making jokes like this they did not of course contaminate the entire record any more than a joke a ballot paper spoils the entire election. The created something easily seeable on the record that for observational documentary would be consigned to the digital trash bin for deletion, which are on the other hand the ‘bloopers’ beloved of ‘It’ll be alright on the night’ and endless television shows that raid the out-takes and rubbish bins of other programs for funny material. Their production adds them to record in this way that they might find the audience of makers at the time and amuse or outrage them, and indeed may make their way forward into a precious store of items that display humour in the midst of serious projects, as they have done.
with our corpus.

**Ethno-inquiries into video recording**

The video ethnography produced a data-set of naturalistic or naturally occurring customer activities in cafés in the way of all social scientists making records of everyday activities in ordinary places. The video data-set is an accountable and expected product of a funded social science research project on the relationship between cafés and civic life. To produce the data-set the project has been committed to making recordings of ordinary life in cafés even though much of what occurs there is common knowledge and ‘in its seamless familiarity, the world can become difficult to find for the record’ (MacBeth, 1999, p158. On the other hand, as historians of popular culture warn, the familiar habits and objects of our present are just as ephemeral and perhaps more likely to go unrecorded than the spectacular. Our commitment, then, has been to ensure that these everyday un-noticed ephemera are documented but that was not our only aim in the project. What is a perplexing and confusing element in the café study we have been doing is that like Wieder’s (1974) ethnography of a half-way house we are also interested in treating ‘the ethnographic occasion as an object of study’ p43. Like other ethnomethodologists we have an interest in ‘naturally organized ordinary activities’ (Garfinkel 1991, quoted in Lynch 2002) whether they be those of laboratory science (Lynch 1985), interpreting ethnography (Wieder 1974), throwing a stick for a dog (Goode forthcoming) or making espresso.

So with our social scientist’s shoes on we transform cafés’ daily events via video recording into the video documentary record of certain times and places and stable naturalistic data for the social sciences. What we do not claim is to use reflexivity as a way of taking one step up above, not only everyday activities but also the methodologies of the social sciences (Lynch 2000). Slipping our social science shoes off, to put our feet on the rough ground of practical reasoning, we walk through the methods of the social sciences and try not to trample through those of other more vernacular experts. This barefoot indifference to the methodological or theoretical warrants of the social sciences arises out of an ethno-archaeological interest in what makes particular practical forms of knowing possible and certain naturally organised ways of inquiring intelligible (Laurier & Philo 2004). A legacy of positivistic research in the social sciences, and indeed its critique by qualitative researchers has been that the term natural continues to be equated with objective and universal (Lynch 2002). Although naturalistic studies do not necessarily presuppose a concept of universal nature they often find themselves critiqued as if they do. Relatedly records of naturalistic activities when deployed in the social sciences are inspected and may be dismissed for the distortions, bias and artefacts of that same universal nature that they should be revealing (McHugh, et al. 1974; Raffel 1979). It is thus that Mike Lynch (2002) provides a reminder why that question of changed behaviour seems to carry such force when asked by an audience of social scientists. It indexes a series of concerns that form the basis for the evaluation of the worth of a social scientific investigation.

Questions about bias, contamination and representational adequacy inhabit (indeed, they haunt) the practical projects of converting naturally organised ordinary activities (NOOA) into data and reviewing such data in analytical efforts to construct structures of NOOA. The confusion that puzzles, and to some extent entraps … is a product of a slippage between a praxiological orientation to naturally organized activities to a more conventional social scientific effort to analyze naturally occurring data. (Lynch 2002)
It is a perfectly acceptable shift to a concern with the quality of the data, what it waylays is an ethnomethodological investigation into practical reasoning and the very constitution of data. How then, through, and as part of naturally organized action, is this naturalistic video data constituted? We have begun to hint at what happens at the time in a reasonably straightforward methodological sense and we have brought in the problematic of inquiring looks at the camcorder and jokes made for the record. Although the intelligible intentions of these acts are quite different with only the latter having the record as its target, nevertheless both display the presence of the recorder. Raffel (1979) points out that, in making records, while there must be an observer there, the good observer should be an ‘absent presence’ (p29). The unattended camcorder displays a kind of absent presence, though the observer and their subjects are instead beset by the camcorder’s particular kind of presence. What then is the lived work of being there and not being there at the same time with the camcorder?

There is more to video’s reconfiguration of social science data because it offers the possibility of a fundamental shift in where, how often, with how many and how long after the activities the observing occurs. With traditional ethnographic written records, the activity of observing may precede and always entails its recording at the time or later in notebooks. Entries such as:

*The café is pretty full when two women arrive in café with prams. A guy sitting in the window notices them arrive and offers his table.*

As Raffel (1979) remarks, there is no real separation of the two since to observe is to ‘take note’ of something. Akin to the use of the ethnographer’s placement of herself in any setting with her notebook and pen, the placement of the camcorder at the time and subsequent shifts are also bound up with what can be observed there and then. That is, as we mentioned earlier, the filmmaker surveys the scene to work out where the camcorder could be placed and does it with an orientation to a visibility that is not constant. Moreover the placement is done with the expectation that events will occur that can be eye-witnessed and recorded from its spot. However in its preservation of the audible and visible activities of some event when the video recording is re-played during editing, data sessions and seminar presentations it initiates a further occasion for observing, and as such finding further things in the video record and, as likely as not, making transliterations from the visual record to textual records. Observation of naturalistic activities, once they are rendered as Garfinkel (1992) would put it, or transformed as Latour (1999) would put it, into video data change the work site organisation of social science observation fundamentally from the ethnographer with her notebook and camera. In this way its analysis bears strong resemblances to the use of tape recordings of naturally occurring talk that were crucial in the founding of conversation analysis (CA) (Lynch 1997). Rather than the many subjects with one observer and many interpreters that is the commonplace of empirically-based social science, there would be the possibility of a community of observers.

What the video recording provides in the way that it preserves is seemingly a re-observation of an emerging event. In the practical efforts made to avoid changing the events being recorded and to exclude from the record events that were clearly produced by the presence of an observational device, the recording serves the activities in that each clip (e.g. figure 1 & 2) lasts only as long as the activity. The video records allow the researcher to examine past activities not as past but rather as ‘formerly present’ (Raffel 1979). Like photographs what is given is that the record is produced simultaneously with the activity it records which strengthens its claim as a record

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4 Video also promises that the fallible ethnographer’s memory which was once supported by the notebook gains further strength through the recordings as a detailed archive of what happened in one particular place at one particular time.
produced, then and there, in a way that a textual record which could be made at home in another country or hours or years later does not. What Raffel (1979) warns us of is that recording all that happens in an effort not to forget the good or, as we would put it here, not to find the worth of what customers and staff in cafés do, becomes an unwillingness or deferral of differentiating the good from the bad.

In differentiating the ‘bad’ in the form of clips that are those that are visibly reactions to the presence of the camera observers of the video record let themselves be governed by what is presenting itself. As a form of observational science of human action our earlier account refuses to investigate what does not appear in the clips and investigates instead two formerly present video recordings. In them the original activity’s insufficiency is its incompleteness since unlike other activities kept in the video recordings it is made complete by the observer. For all other activities their completeness is found without the observer’s presence and in that sense they are allowed to pass into collection naturally occurring activities. To return to that question, then, to answer in an observational mode activities that displayed reactions to the camera were excluded from the main data-set. To answer in an ethnomethodological mode producing naturally occurring data, the endless tasks of recording are accomplished in the constitutive gap between absence and presence in the observational-video setting.
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