



Toolkit #04

Participant Produced Video: Giving participants camcorders as a social research method

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1. Introduction

This toolkit is a basic introduction to asking research participants to record film or video footage of themselves and their lives. The focus here is on practical issues, rather than on methodological theory or data analysis, and draws on our experiences of using participant-made films in the *Family Background in Everyday Lives* project.



Still from Family Background project Christmas video

2. Why give participants camcorders?

Participant produced films have been used in social research since the 1960s. Although not yet as common a research practice as providing research participants with still-photo cameras, providing participants with a film or video camera is increasingly popular. In the research methods literature this practice is described using a variety of terms, including visual auto-ethnography, Participant Authored Audiovisual Stories, and video diaries. Although these different terms can indicate important differences in methodology or theoretical orientation, at their core is the basic practice of giving a research participant a camcorder, film camera, or other audio-visual device and asking them to film something that says something about themselves and their lives.

There are a number of reasons – some of which are listed below – why a researcher may want to use one of the variants of this method. Clearly, however, you need to think hard about whether this method is right for you: whether it addresses your research questions and whether it will get better results than other methods. It may be that an interview, a written diary, or participant-observation may provide you with all the material you need and in a more convenient format than film or video. Indeed, video footage can be difficult to analyse and take up valuable space on your hard-drive.

If the method is not well planned or integrated into the project, it is easy to end up with a large amount of footage that you simply do not know how to use.

Those who do decide to provide participants with camcorders often cite some or all of the following as benefits of the method:

- Providing participants with camcorders can make it easier for them to record and reflect upon everyday experiences that they might not otherwise notice or remember.
- Participant filmmakers can access areas of everyday or private life that are inaccessible to the researcher. Providing participants with cameras can give them some control over the researcher's gaze. For example, in the *Family Backgrounds* project we wished to investigate family Christmases. However, few people wanted me to attend their family Christmas (and in any case, I could only visit a few families on the day). Giving the participants camcorders helped them to feel comfortable whilst giving me an insight into their family life; the camera could go where I could not.
- Giving participants cameras can afford access to their worldviews whilst also giving participants a 'voice'.
- Many people also feel comfortable taking photos or films because they are already familiar with the practice. Similarly, video-diary methods can seem familiar and easy to understand because they resemble both the written diary as well as the video diaries commonly used in reality TV.
- Many participants enjoy the process and find filmmaking to be a lot more fun than, for example, standard qualitative interviews.

However, it is also worth bearing in mind that these benefits do not apply to every participant or every case. The flipside of giving participants control of the cameras is that they may not capture the footage you want. You can end up with hours of unusable footage. Moreover, not everyone feels comfortable with a camcorder, not everyone has a visual imagination, and it is easy for researchers to overestimate the degree to which participants will feel empowered by the process or even want to be 'in control'. Some participants can feel burdened by the responsibility of having to collect footage whilst others feel nervous about being filmed (even if by a friend or family member). Furthermore, whilst some people love directing the research, others would rather not; after all, why should they do your job?

3. What kind of film should participants make?

Having decided to give a research participant a camcorder, the researcher then has to decide what kind of footage they want the participant to produce.

Options include asking participants to:

- construct a story or narrative about their lives
- produce a personal video diary

- produce a documentary or ethnographic film that explores or reflects their social lives or worldview
- produce home-movie style footage of their everyday lives or of family and social events

You may wish to draw on a combination of styles or simply leave the style of film-making up to participants. For example, you may be interested in what genres or styles the participants draw upon when representing or exploring their lives and you may thus encourage them to experiment.

What genre of filmmaking you choose will often be related to what you intend to do with the data: that is, do you plan to use the film itself as data or do you wish to use the film as a tool for participant reflection and for elicitation in an interview setting?

Whatever you decide, you need to explain to participants what you want them to do (even if all you want is for the participants to decide for themselves what kind of film to make). If people are unsure about what they are supposed to be doing, then they may not do it at all.



Video stills from participants' Christmas videos



Instructions for Christmas Camcorders

1. The aim of giving out the camcorders is for you to record and narrate bits of your family and Christmas rituals, traditions and practices (old and new, interesting and mundane). It can be helpful if you think about whether the thing you are recording is something that happens often or not, or if it reminds you of anything done in the past (or not). However, this is a loose instruction for you to interpret as you see fit.
2. Within this general theme, it is up to you to record what you like, say what you like, and to record for as long as you like. You can record in long or short takes, talk directly to the camera or simply record what is happening in front of you.
3. There are two memory cards for the camcorder. One is already installed in the camera, the other is in the box. Each will record about 1 hour and 20 minutes of footage. Feel free to use both cards, but don't feel that you have to. The exercise should be interesting and fun, not a chore.
4. I will be collecting the cameras early in the New Year and we can talk about the footage you recorded either then or later. I will be providing you with a DVD copy of the footage you record.

Instructions given to participants in the Family Background project to help them make Christmas videos.

4. Equipment and technical issues

There are a range of cameras and video formats available and choosing the right equipment for your project can be very important. When choosing a camcorder the main issues are usually:

- ease of use
- size and relative mobility of the camera
- quality (of the camera and of the footage)
- cost
- appearance
- video format
- length of battery life

Camcorders that are too obtrusive or difficult to use can discourage use; particularly if you want the participants to feel confident experimenting with the camera or using it in social settings. You also need to decide whether you want the camera to sit on a tripod or to be carried around by the participant. Is it more important that the camera produce high quality images or that it be unobtrusive? Would it be easier if the participants simply used the cameras on their mobile phones? The size, shape and usability of a camera will affect how it is used.

No matter how easy the camcorder is to use, you should ensure that you provide adequate instruction; otherwise, you may end up with three hours of dimly lit, blurry images of the back of someone's head. It may be helpful to produce a small laminated card with basic camcorder instructions on one side and task instructions on the other.

There is also, inevitably, a trade-off between cost and quality. Cheaper camcorders can rarely produce the same quality footage – particularly in low light – as models that are more expensive. However, the need to buy several camcorders, and the fact that you are lending them to research participants, may limit how much you are willing or able to spend on each camera. The questions to ask are: a) Can you afford to have cameras lost, broken or stolen? and b) How important is high quality footage? If you do not need broadcast quality video then there is little point in buying a very expensive camcorder.

The camcorder's appearance may seem a trivial matter, but it can influence participant interest and enthusiasm. In the Family Backgrounds project, we gave the participants palm-size camcorders that recorded onto a flash card. We used these cameras, in part, because they were relatively cheap; however, they did not *look* cheap. Rather, they were small, attractive and looked easy to use (which indeed they were). We found that people became noticeably more enthusiastic about the task when they had seen the cameras (one participant later went out and bought an identical model). Other researchers have noted that young people in particular can be less than enthusiastic when asked to use cheap or unattractive cameras.

Your camcorder's recording format and media are also important. MiniDV camcorders usually produce images of higher quality than those that record onto DVD, a hard drive or flash drives/cards. However, such high quality footage can take up an enormous amount of space when put onto a computer for editing or storage and footage of this quality is not always necessary. You may find yourself converting the footage into another format for storage and editing anyway. On the other hand,

because miniDV cameras record onto a physical object – the miniDV tape – you will have a backup of the raw data.

Some cameras now use flash drives or flash cards that can record footage in a compressed format that takes up far less space on your computer than other video formats. Most such cameras do not produce high quality images – and rarely perform well in low light – but the flash technology means that the cameras have no moving parts and are thus relatively durable and very portable. They are also usually very small and relatively cheap. However, despite the compressed format such cameras are usually unable to record as much footage as, say, cameras that record onto a hard drive. Furthermore, most editing software is not designed for the formats used by flash-based camcorders. This will soon change, but is a consideration depending on how much editing you plan to do.

Battery size can also be important; no matter how much footage a camera can store, the battery life will limit the filming time. If the camcorder has an external battery then it may be worth providing spares and/or investing in a more expensive battery with a longer life. Whatever the battery type, external or internal, you need to consider whether to provide a charger with the camera. This decision will probably come down to how much footage you want participants to produce.

It is also worth thinking about how much footage you want to collect because you will eventually have to analyse it and/or sit with participants to watch it again. It is worth considering how much of the footage you can fit onto a DVD. It is good practice to provide participants with a DVD and/or electronic copy of their footage. Providing participants with a copy means that they know what data they have given you and in many cases allows them to feel that they received something from the project. We found that participants enjoyed watching their films and were pleased to have a permanent record of their participation in the project and of the events that they filmed. However, this pleasure might have been reduced if they had twenty DVDs to sit through.

Real Life Methods is part of the National Centre for Research Methods which aims to improve research methods across the UK social science community.

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