



Feeling and acting ‘different’ emotions and shifting self-perceptions whilst facilitating a participatory video process



Elisa Bignante ^{a, *}, Jayalaxshmi Mistry ^b, Andrea Berardi ^c, Céline Tschirhart ^b

^a Department of Culture, Politics and Society, University of Torino, Lungo Dora Siena 100, 10153, Torino, Italy

^b Department of Geography, Royal Holloway University of London, Egham, Surrey, TW20 0EX, UK

^c Communication and Systems, Open University, Walton Hall, Milton Keynes, Buckinghamshire, MK7 6AA, UK

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ABSTRACT

Participatory video (PV) can raise new levels of self-perception and can contribute to forming, transforming and reconstructing the identity and visions of those involved. Although this aspect is often underlined in the PV literature, reflection on the emotional process underpinning these changes is lacking, particularly from the perspective of community researchers facilitating the PV process. Why and how does facilitating PV contribute to changing attitudes, roles and perceptions of community researchers? This paper explores these aspects by drawing on empirical material (interviews, informal conversations, participant observation, email exchanges) collected during a three-and-a-half year EU-funded project in South America where the PV process was led by five Guyanese Indigenous community researchers. We found that the community researchers working on the project had to repeatedly deal with a rollercoaster ride of emotions: from fear of failing, dissatisfaction, and social pressure; to pride, satisfaction, commitment, and belonging. The question we ask is: can PV shape emotions and emotional bonds in the community researchers in ways that render their actions more sustainable and effective across space-time? We show how the emotional force of PV practice creates ‘thick places’ where community researchers challenge their specific abilities, capacities and ambitions and develop more autonomous research skills.

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1. Introduction

As White (2003, p. 63) points out “participatory video as a process is totally self-involving”; researchers and participants film themselves and film others, they edit the video, they watch it, discuss and reflect on it and share it with others. The focus of this paper is on how this self-involving process affects the emotions of the people involved in participatory video (PV), with a particular focus on the community researchers facilitating the process. We discuss our experience within Project COBRA, a research project focused on the Guiana Shield region of South America funded by the European Commission 7th Framework program (see www.projectcobra.org).

The aim of the project was to integrate Indigenous community-

owned solutions within international policies in order to address current and emerging social and ecological challenges, through accessible information and communication technologies. Five Indigenous community researchers from four different Indigenous communities of the North Rupununi, Guyana, were recruited by Project COBRA on a three year contract to facilitate the identification and recording of community owned practices of sustainability through the use of PV, and share these with other Indigenous communities across the Guiana Shield. Two of the community researchers were female, of 25 and 18 years of age, unmarried and single parents, with previous experiences on a PV and on a cinema project respectively. The other three community researchers were men (of 25, 28 and 35 years of age). The two older have children and only one of them had previous research experience (with limited coordinating tasks). The five community researchers were supported by a rotating team of outside researchers and professionals experienced in community-based natural resource management and/or participatory approaches. The team included the authors of this paper. Out of a group of seven individuals, a maximum of three outsider researchers would support the

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: elisa.bignante@unito.it (E. Bignante), j.mistry@rhul.ac.uk (J. Mistry), andrea.berardi.ou@gmail.com (A. Berardi), celinetchi@hotmail.com (C. Tschirhart).

community researchers in field-based activities, but this would rarely exceed a period of three weeks, with community researchers often undertaking their work autonomously for months at a time. Our role (the authors) was to build their capacities in the participatory techniques (including PV) and the concepts underpinning the process of community engagement. We rarely engaged directly in the community research, but were very active in observing proceedings and supporting the evaluation of the activities and various outputs, including the resulting videos.

In the first phase of the project (September 2011–June 2012), the five community researchers were responsible for engaging their communities through a PV (and participatory photography) process, for the identification of a wide range of sustainability indicators (Berardi et al., 2013, 2015; Mistry et al., 2014a). In the second phase of the project (July 2012–January 2013), community researchers engaged with the wider community to stimulate thinking on future scenarios for their region and communities (Mistry et al., 2014a). In the third phase of the project (February 2013–August 2013), building on reflection carried out in the first two stages, six community best practices for survival were identified and thoroughly documented by the community researchers (Mistry et al., 2016). Finally, in the fourth and last phase of the project (September 2013–June 2014), the five community researchers shared and exchanged the best practices with six other Indigenous communities of the Guiana Shield: Kwamalasamutu (Suriname), Kavanayén (Venezuela), Maturuca (Brazil), Katoonarib (Guyana), Laguna Colorada (Colombia) and Antecume Pata (French Guiana) (Mistry et al., 2014b; Tschirhart et al., 2016). In each of these communities, the community researchers were central to training a small group of local people in identifying their own social and ecological challenges and best practices, and to use video and photography to record and share these with other communities and wider audiences.

We have already explored the ethical dilemmas that surface when community researchers take leading roles in the PV and participatory photography process (Mistry et al., 2015). In this paper, we focus specifically on the different emotional issues the community researchers experienced during the PV process, and particularly when they travelled to other Indigenous communities. These reflections are the result of a participatory ethnography carried out with the community researchers during the entire project. This process highlighted how facilitating PV activities in other communities affected the community researchers' perception of themselves and places, especially of their communities and 'home'. Indeed, there is a need to investigate how emotions relate to the way in which community researchers develop behaviors that help to organize, mobilize and sustain community participation through PV in a variety of distinct locations and during the unfolding of the process through time. This article explores the interplay between facilitating PV and emotions, with the aim of showing how emotions are often strategic in how community researchers are able to raise awareness of the PV process and to the sustainability of PV practice across space-time.

2. Challenging emotions in the PV process

The growing body of literature on emotional geographies (Anderson and Smith, 2001; Davidson and Bondi, 2004; Davidson and Milligan, 2004; Thrift, 2004; Thien, 2005; Davidson et al., 2005; Tolia-Kelly, 2006; Thomas, 2007; Smith et al., 2009a,b; Pile, 2010) has widely underlined the importance of taking emotions seriously within geographical discourse. Emotions matter not only at the immediate level of bodily experience but at different scales, such as affecting how we perceive and create home and community. Mobility shapes our emotions as well: travelling to different

places affects our perception of home and of the self and leads us to constantly re-negotiate our relations with the social and built environment. This is because all experiences, and the knowledge produced through these experiences, influence us emotionally through their spatial, social and temporal situatedness (Rose, 1997; MacKian, 2004). Emotions are a relational output of the relationship between peoples and places (Bondi et al., 2005; Thien, 2005; Sultana, 2011). They are not only personal mental states, isolated from contextual social matters; there is strong emotional relationality between people's minds and bodies and their environments (Bosco, 2007; Morales and Harris, 2014).

The role of emotion is central to participation, as engaging in a participatory process touches upon the desire to "do something in some way" (Askins, 2009, p. 7). Participation, in order to be sustainable and equitable must be attentive to both people and contexts (Kindon et al., 2007). As underlined by Morales and Harris:

"applied to participatory natural resource management, acknowledging these linkages between individuals and their context offers forceful suggestion that if participatory initiatives are to be successful, they must simultaneously engage individual capability and experience, as well as broader social and institutional contextual factors that mould and influence individual behaviours and senses of self"

(Morales and Harris, 2014, p. 705).

At the same time, there needs to be attention to place and its critical role in en/disabling certain emotions and behaviours within participatory processes, especially the relationality of different sites and localities (Wynne-Jones et al., 2015). Simultaneously, emotions can re-make place, in a mutually co-constructive way: emotions inspire actions which in turn shape place. Nowhere is this more clearly manifested than people's attachments to their gardens and backyards, where their dreams and aspirations are translated into labour, which in turn produces the crops, flowers and fruits, reinforcing this virtuous cycle between emotion and place (Gross and Lane, 2007).

Framing emotions means being aware of them, creating the conditions which lead to enhancing the possibilities for mobilisation, including the creation of trans-local coalitions and networks (Bosco, 2007). And framing emotions also means to promote cohesion between people in the participatory process. As Jasper (1998) and Taylor and Rupp (2002) point out, emotional bonds among activists often provide the building blocks that cement emerging networks for collective action. Moreover, in order to take power and politics into account within participatory research and practice, it is important to acknowledge that emotional and cognitive functioning work together, and that an holistic approach to empowerment and change needs to recognize that emotions are at the same time socio-culturally constructed and deeply embodied phenomena:

"[t]his means a recognition of the fact that our ways of thinking and feeling can be transformed, in part, through critical analyses and discourse, but also that new ways of thinking and feeling can be cultivated by using alternative methods and new media that directly engage with emotions as embodied (or affective) knowledge"

(Wijnendaele, 2014, p. 279).

One of these alternative methods is participatory video, which is defined as a "group-based activity that develops participants' abilities by involving them in using video equipment creatively, to

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