Journal of Rural Studies 27 (2011) 403–413

Contents lists available at SciVerse ScienceDirect

Journal of Rural Studies

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jrurstud

Reflexive audiovisual methodology: The emergence of "minority practices" among pluriactive stock farmers

Pierre Marie Stassart*, Valérie Mathieu, François Mélard

Liège University, Campus Arlon, Avenue Longwy 185, B-6700 Arlon, Belgium

Keywords:
Participatory research
Methodology
Pragmatism
Filmmaking
Stock farming
Pluriactivity

A B S T R A C T

This paper proposes a new way for sociology, through both methodology and theory, to understand the reality of social groups and their "minority practices." It is based on an experiment that concerns a very specific category of agriculturalists called "pluriactive" stock farmers. These stock farmers, who engage in raising livestock part-time alongside another full-time job, form a minority category within the agricultural profession.

We address the question of how to analyze and represent the practices of this kind of "social" group or category through participatory filmmaking. Our research shows that beyond the collaborative production and screening of the film done in close cooperation with the stock farmers themselves, a second unexpected dynamic emerged around the sequences that were cut in the final editing round. These cut sequences reveal hesitations and disagreements among the breeders about their own practices in relation to their work and to animal welfare. These hesitations are not considered weaknesses, but rather as proof of the emergence of this group of stock farmers as "practitioners". In the realm of intervention research, the participatory film-making process is attractive because it enables the farmers to raise new questions on their own, discuss them, and eventually resolve them, while also encouraging the researchers to identify the conditions that must be met in order to achieve this fragile linkage. This process and its outcomes force us to revisit the theoretical question of what constitutes a pragmatic definition of a "practice."

How to succeed in "working together"…where phenomena continue…to speak in many voices; where they refuse to be reinvented as univocal witnesses (Stengers, 1997)

This methodology paper asks the following question: how does one account for or describe a group's practices? We reformulate this classic problem of the social sciences by asking, instead: how does one get a group to emerge? In response, we put forward a double hypothesis. The first concerns the necessity for researchers to engage in a social form of participatory research where the intersubjectivity between researchers and "actors" enables the latter take hold of their own social reality. The second one concerns the creation of that social reality: specifically, that having researchers involved in the process makes it possible for a type of collective to emerge in which "minority practices" become visible.

We address these issues through analysis of a collaborative filmmaking project led by eight stock farmers and two committed researchers (the first two authors of this paper). The case study or, rather, experiment, highlights a specific group of poorly known and unrecognized farmers: namely, "pluriactive" or part-time livestock farmers. A marginal group within the agricultural realm, these farmers raise their stock as a sideline to off-farm, full-time jobs or business activities.

Our contribution to the special section "Subjecting the Objective: Participation and Agroecological Research" therefore returns to a critical issue in the operationalization of sustainable development: that of taking minority groups into account. The definition of sustainable development that revolves around the three pillars of economic, environmental, and social issues has often suffered from insufficient attention to interdependencies and a tendency to separate social, economic, and environmental analyses (Kemp et al., 2005). Such treatment makes little of the role that minorities – weak, poor, and marginalized – might have in the debate about sustainability and, especially, about the relationships between its three pillars. Taking up this criticism, (Newman and Kenworthy, 1999) stress the fact that, paradoxically, while global cooperation on environmental issues is an important issue, sustainable change can occur only with community-based approaches that take local

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +32 63 230 816; fax: +32 63 230 818.
E-mail address: p.stassart@ulg.ac.be (P.M. Stassart).

0743-0167/$ – see front matter © 2011 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.
doi:10.1016/j.jrurstud.2011.07.007

culture seriously. Sustainable development is thus a political issue (Hajer, 1995). Our paper contributes to this discussion by investigating how to take minority groups into account so as to operationalize sustainable development in a more democratic, less technocratic, and less elitest way.

1. Theoretical framework

Although it was initially inspired by the reflexive visual anthropological approach, our participatory research in fact belongs to the tradition of Participatory Action Research (PAR). Participatory Action Research is essentially emancipatory and political in nature (Chambers, 1989; Greenwood and Levin, 1998). It is a paradigm in which the researcher's role becomes one of encouraging participation and upholding ethical commitments. The originality of our research lies in its analysis of the connection between the production of visual materials and the production of research results, an approach about which the tradition of PAR says very little (Catalani and Minkler, 2010).

Reflexive visual anthropology proposes to take on the "fictional" side of documentary-making. It recognizes that communicating reality in its entirety is impossible (Ruby, 2000) (Pink, 2001). Unlike conventional ethnographic film, it uses the creation of visual material as an intermediary and medium in the relationship between the observer and the observed (Banks, 1998; Pink, 2001; Rouch, 2003): the researchers' reflexivity on the construction of their point of view (Ruby, 1980) and the observeds' reflexivity on the image that they create for themselves under the gazes of others (Rouch, 2003). Reflexive visual anthropology belongs to the tradition of feminist studies that defines intersubjectivity as an approach of "reciprocal sharing of knowledge and experience between researcher and the researched" and an understanding that the researcher unavoidably takes part in the production of knowledge (Shields and Dervin, 1993).

In Participatory Action Research (PAR) and, more specifically, participatory photography and variations such as "photovoice" (Wang, 1999; Catalani and Minkler, 2010), participants, local communities, and researchers create and use visual materials (drawings, photos, maps, etc.) to exchange their experiences and collectively build diagnoses and knowledge on a given topic (Prins, 2010).

Participatory photography is rooted in three theoretical traditions: Freire's philosophy (Freire, 1973) of using photographic materials and drawings to analyze social issues and collective action; feminist critiques and reconceptualizations of sociocultural power (Maguire, 1987); and community-based photography, in which ordinary people use "images of themselves" to counteract stereotypes (Spence, 1995 cited by Wang and Redwood-Jones, 2001). By having subjects use visual materials to document their perspectives, the participatory photography method can unearth meanings and actions that subjects would otherwise seldom – or poorly – express in words (Barndt, 2001) cited by (Prins 2010)). However, the gap between the methodological ideal and the reality of practices remains a challenge for participatory photography, for many reasons (Williams and Lykes, 2003). For one, photographs are difficult to decode as they are embedded in complex local histories and asymmetrical social relations. Further, making the invisible visible through photos creates controversy and tension within groups (Mcintyre, 2003). Finally, romanticized views on some epistemological and ethical issues can lead researchers to put too much faith in the equalizing effects of participatory research. They may naively assume that they have subverted the researcher/participant hierarchy (Smith et al., 2010) and given voice, autonomy, and transformative results to the paricipants when, in reality, they have only silenced them in new ways.

The production of visual materials as intermediaries between researchers and participants raises the question of the audience for whom the materials are intended. The process of defining an audience often raises suble and unexpected challenges (Pini, 2001) that Esther Prins described as "ethical dilemmas" (Prins, 2010). Film is a technology of power with contradictory potential. On the one hand it can empower; it equips marginalized groups with the tools they need to bring knowledge and practices to light by challenging dominant notions of what counts as knowledge (Chambers, 1997). But at the same time, film is a technology of surveillance: it facilitates social control by delimiting what is showable and what is not. Esther Prins emphasizes in particular how much the weight of the camera's "eye" ends up by being internalized and the extent to which the subject being made visible "maintains the disciplined individual in his subjection" (Foucault, 1975/1995) p. 187, (Foucault, 1980). To understand how we treat this dilemma methodologically, it is necessary that we first take a closer look at the stakes riding on the "exposure" of our group of this category of "pluriactive farmers".

2. The case of pluriactive sotck farmers, the filmed output and its unexpected outcomes

Our initial intention, as researchers, was to give voice to stock farmers through the joint production of a film. There were two reasons for this approach: first, the multisensory nature of film would allow these farmers to express practices and knowledge that, because of their emotional dimensions and despite being part of the participants' identities as farmers, might not come to light in other contexts. Second, a joint filmmaking task would create the necessary medium for collaboration between researchers and farmers. We decided to focus on a category of minority stock farmers: part-time or "pluriactive" stock farmers, who raise stock (primarily cattle) part-time alongside another job. These farmers are marginalized in the agricultural community. However, they seem neither to search for specific recognition nor to avoid it, for they remain dependent on professional farmers and their institution.

Our study and the existing literature emphasize value of pluriactive farmers, however. Representing up to 20–30% of the stock raisers in areas of unintensive ranching, these farmers maintain many valuable environmental practices (Eikeland and Lie, 1999) (Kinsella et al., 2000) and employ alternative economic strategies based on principles of autonomy and cooperation (Evans and Ilbery, 1993). We chose to study this group in large part because of their unique practices. Our choice was additionally based on the following fact: the practices of these pluriactive farmers, mostly located in Gaume, a small area of 50,000 square kilometers in the southeastern tip of Belgium, differed considerably from the Belgian standard of intensive cattle farming, at least in terms of the breeds that they raised (*i.e.*, the "Belgian Blue") (Stassart and Jamar, 2008).

The film, the final product of this project (a short version is available on the Web[1]), depicts the atypical reality of these farmers. The eight pluriactive farmers involved in the film worked with five different cattle breeds[2] without our having deliberately made this choice. They were not mere "enthusiasts." On the contrary, they kept herds of from twenty to sixty head of cattle and managed the acres of pastureland and hay meadows necessary for their herds' subsistence. As a result, their relationship to the agricultural profession, and especially to full-time stock farmers, remains ambiguous. Their access to land is strongly

[1] The 22′ short version is available at http://reflexions.ulg.ac.be/cms/c_25435/eleveur-autrement?hlText=%C3%A9leveur+autrement.

[2] Limousin(1), Blonde d'Aquitaine (2), Maine d'Anjou(1), Charolais (1), and Belgian Blue (3).