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## Institutional Life in Making: Methodological Reflections on the Use of Video Recordings in Qualitative Research

### ABSTRACT

Qualitative research is always about some form of intervention into the real world, however that intervention is always mediated by various material practices employed in the research process. This article engages with material practices accompanying research to discuss the ways in which they influence the research process, the observed and the observer. More specifically, this article attends to the use of video technology in qualitative research to reflect upon the material practices that not only make the world visible but also shed light on the research process through which such worlds become known. Reflections from research on institutions and institutional life are used to demonstrate points of interaction that transform the worlds of research and the worlds of everyday life.

### Keywords:

video recordings, qualitative research, institutions, methodological reflections

*Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world*

(Denzin & Lincoln, 2005)

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## INTRODUCTION

One of the key points emerging from the above definition of qualitative research is the active position of a researcher who not only attempts to approach the worlds of researched persons as close as possible but also actively co-constructs these worlds. This echoes a broader perspective on knowledge and science that recognizes their constructed and social character. According to Longino (1990, p. 19), “Scientific inquiry is unlike portrait painting in two very important ways: it is social and it is complex, consisting of many activities carried out by different persons”. The observed never appears in its pure form and neither does qualitative research aim at revealing any kind of pure form. The observed and their characteristics depend on the observer and the tools she applies when carrying out her investigations. Thus, qualitative research is always about some form of intervention into the real world. The intervention inherent in qualitative research is also mediated by the use of various “material practices” that not only “make the world visible”, but also transform the research practice. Thus, by “taking ‘materiality’ seriously” (Heath, Hindmarsh, & Luff, 2010), this article engages with material practices accompanying research to discuss the ways in which they influence the research process, the observed and the observer.

The materiality of research may relate to a wide range of objects that either enter the research scene with a researcher, with the observed, or belong to a particular setting in which research takes place. This article focuses on objects brought to the research scene by a researcher. More specifically, this article attends to the use of video technology in qualitative research to reflect upon the ways in which material objects facilitate researchers in observing the social world, but also to shed light on the ways in which the researcher, the observed and the research process transform as the result of objects, such as video camera, brought to the research scene.

This article proceeds as follows: first, a brief introduction to methodological reflections upon the use of technology in qualitative research is presented. What follows is a theoretical contextualization of a research phenomenon observed with the use of video camera: institutional life. This part sets the agenda for specific research methodologies that aim at grasping the social world in happening. Thereafter, the use of video cameras in research on institutional life is discussed in relation to three core dimensions: changes in the research practices, changes in the observed, and changes in the observer (researchers). The article ends with a discussion regarding opportunities and risks ensuing use of video camera and video material in social research.

## THE USE OF TECHNOLOGY IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

In a historical overview of interview techniques, Lee (2004) demonstrates the extent to which the practice of qualitative research has changed because of the use of technology. The shift from writing up interview notes to pressing a record button on a Dictaphone created a whole new opportunity for both collecting and analysing qualitative data. The entrance of the voice recorder relieved the observer from the practice of writing, it created a space for more conversation-enabling environment and allowed for an extended eye contact reminiscent of everyday interactions. More than that, equipped with audio-recorded material, the observer could now repeatedly listen to the interview, she could pause, she could rewind and move forward the recording.

That seemingly trivial material practice has not only changed the practice of interviewing, but it also changed the analysis practices. For example, it has brought attention to the process of data transcription. Critical discussions regarding the process of transcribing interview material emphasize its interpretive nature – writing down what one hears has proven to be a process of writing down what one is able to hear. In her seminal work on transcription practices in qualitative research, Ochs (1979, p. 44) emphasized that “transcription is a selective process reflecting theoretical goals and definitions”. Transcription is always conditioned on choices that the observer makes, and these choices are deeply ingrained in what the observer aims to achieve and what she knows. To exemplify, Oliver et al. (Oliver, Serovich, & Mason, 2005) demonstrate how a choice between naturalized and de-naturalized transcription modes is wrought up with questions touching upon the issue of representation and related to that questions of research ethics.

Therefore, as much as technology may be enabling and supporting the research process, Back (2012) urges caution regarding the limiting and disabling aspects of its use. As researchers, we may become too dependent and too addicted to the use of recording devices that shutter our sensitivity to the social world. Furthermore, as Sparrman and Lindgren (2010) discuss it, the unreflective use of technology may become a form of normalising practice that encourages surveillance and sustains unequal power relations between research participants. For example, we may take for granted the spread and the positive attitude to visual communication, without asking critical questions about the purpose and use of images. Consequently, in addition to acknowledging that we use technology in research, we must also recognise that technology affects us and the entire research process (Wilińska & Bülow, 2017). However, far from being distracting, these dynamics simply reorient our attention to the process of research itself. For example, Gordon

(2013) advises that a focus on ‘conversational moments’ during which research participants openly interact with technology (e.g., voice recorders) allows us to delve into the various meanings that people ascribe to recorders and the general idea of being research subjects. In this, negotiating the presence of technological situational actors articulate the interactional potential of such equipment also for the conduct of everyday action and talk (Speer & Hutchby, 2003). Therefore, considering the material aspects of a research process provides the opportunity to explore the making of research, research participants and researchers. In this article, I focus on one such aspect: the video camera.

Reflecting upon the work of architects, Mondada (2012) drew attention to the active role of artefacts in the work of architects by calling them “objects-in-action”. “Objects-in-action” are material components of social situations that actively participate in making the situation. Similarly, a video camera in a research setting also becomes such an object-in-action – it not only becomes an essential part of the situational context, but it also acts upon its context and the situational actors. Änggård (2015) using the example of photo cameras and their use by children in research shows the extent to which having a camera changes the ways in which children walk, interact and behave. Camera and a child become intra-agents collaboratively constructing the social world that they are meant to report by taking pictures. However, such use of camera does not only illustrate the freedom and easiness of reporting the social world, it also cautions about the potential distancing that may occur as a result of being the one who holds the camera. Cameras become therefore important situational actors that trigger decisions and choices that are products of the very nature and social meaning ascribed to the idea of visual representation and display. Aarsand and Forsberg’s (2010) research into family and children lives demonstrates for example the ways in which the presence of video camera was used by research participants to delineate the boundaries between the private and public sphere of family life. The public/private distinction was produced by making choices about what could be shown, and video recorded, and what could not be. Above all else, the study highlighted the ethical dimension involved in producing and using images in research and a great responsibility falling onto social science researchers who need to position themselves and their technological devices accordingly.

All in all, this emphasizes the importance of considering qualitative research as a productive and constructive activity. Liegl and Schindler (2013) discuss here the idea of media assemblage through which research is made possible. In that, video cameras as well as other devices interact with researchers, research participants, locations and times to produce certain versions of reality that can only be seen as a result of those interactions rather than an evidence of reality.

## INSTITUTIONAL LIFE AND ITS DISCONTENTS

When asked about my research interest, I tend to broadly refer to inequality research. More specifically, my research focuses on the intersectional approaches to processes and practices of inequality (re)production within the context of welfare policies. In particular, I am interested in the agency-structure relationships within diverse contexts as well as the creation and use of various spaces of resistance at the individual, group, organizational, and societal levels. One of such spaces are institutions.

Our lives are dependent on institutions, yet we know very little about how institutions work. In most cases, we do understand the laws, rules and structures that define what institutions should do and how we should relate to them. Still, increasingly the institutional insiders and outsiders' reactions to the ways in which institutions work can be summarized with the following: *How has that happened?* Much of my own research starts from questions like this; rather than asking what has happened, I insist on asking the questions about what has made it possible for a particular situation, event or an act to occur.

Traditionally, institutions are perceived *via* the prism of fixed and rigid frames that force institutional actors to enter prescribed modes of thinking and behaving. Institutional has been therefore often equated with known, predictable and ordered realities. However, if that was the case – the surprise, the discontent, fear and anger that often accompany the 'how has that happened' questions regarding institutional reality would not pervade the social reality as often as they do. After all, in the predictable reality of institutions, there would not be place for surprises, there would not be place for hope and there would not be place for discontent and disgust with institutions.

The main premise underlying my research on institutions is that institutions are neither detached nor obsolete to everyday life; on the contrary, institutions are right in the middle of it, deeply embedded in life as it happens. As much as rules, laws and structures define the frame of institutional settings, they do not prescribe the type of human interactions involved in making those possible. There are human interactions that make life happen and that life does happen in the institutional settings. My focus is therefore on the ways in which institutions 'happen' rather than the ways in which institutions 'are'. Consequently, I pay attention to the ways in which institutions are embodied, embedded and emplaced.

## **INSTITUTIONAL LIFE AS EMBODIED**

In her discussions of neoliberal realities, Illouz (2007) fervently elaborates on the emergence of emotional capitalism that makes economic and emotional discourses merge. This, in turn, not only blurs the boundaries between the two, but also triggers processes whereby personal lives are marketized and economic performances are conditioned upon the relational and emotional realms. With concepts such as affective citizenship (Fortier, 2010), neurotic citizen (Isin, 2004) and emotion ability (Wilińska & Bülow, 2020), research has illuminated the process of managing and governing clients via an appeal to the emotional and relational aspects of life. Consistently, it is not enough to know what to do; increasingly, welfare clients are required to feel that the desired course of action is right and that they are content with it. The fulfilment of institutional tasks becomes conditioned upon the affective aspects of institutional encounters (Wilińska & Bülow, 2020). Institutional practices are therefore relational practices (Hunter, 2015), constituted by interacting actors who are influenced by and who influence the institutional life.

Therefore, the content of ‘the institutional’ and ‘the emotional’ becomes not only inseparable, but also undistinguishable under the current socio-political and economic circumstances. The social view of emotions recognizes their shared and individual character (Woodward, 2009). The shared character of emotions not only emphasizes the possibility of collective feeling, it also acknowledges their performative character and role of emotions in transforming societies and influencing people’s lives (Ahmed, 2014; Woodward, 2009). The process of constructing and responding to emotions is above all else a bodily process and it is through bodily movements and changes that emotions become readable. Within the institutional setting, certain emotions may therefore bind people together, but they may also impede any forms of dialogue or collaborative work. This may lead to changes in the institutional setting and institutional practices. When people are moved by and with emotions, so do institutions and forms of institutional life move along.

## **INSTITUTIONAL LIFE AS EMBEDDED**

Institutions and institutional practices and processes are situationally created, transformed and adapted to the changing conditions. This is because the core of institutions are human interactions and encounters that are far from being predictable, controllable and rigid. Importantly, those interactions are deeply embedded

in the societal structures that both define but also open up a space for different ways of relating to each other. In one of the classical texts on interactions, Kendon (1990, p. 11) defines interactions as “occurring whenever there is observable interdependence between the behavior of two or more individuals”. This definition originates in Kendon’s interest in face-to-face encounters and the ways in which participants of those encounters position themselves *vis-à-vis* each other and the space in which they find themselves. What is however crucial to that definition and the understanding of interactions in more general sense is the word ‘interdependence’. Interdependence, or rather intra-dependence as explicating the principle of being constantly in relation to others, affecting at the same time as being affected, changing at the same as being altered, is a perspective that will be used here to delve into the institutional life as embedded.

In examining the social embeddedness of institutional life, I particularly draw attention to the structures of age and gender. Both structures have been addressed within the context of institutional research to emphasize that neither of them can be bounded by any borders, and institutions are far from being ‘no zones’ to the processes and practices that (re)produce orders of age and gender. The use of concepts, such as gendering practices and practicing gender (Martin, 2003) and age relations (Calasanti, 2003) has drawn attention to the persistent and, yet, creative ways in which both orders of age and gender are continuously enacted and recreated. For instance, this can be observed in the work rehabilitation process when persons on sick leave meet institutional actors to discuss their future at the labour market. Age in such meetings is found to be one of the core moral frames applied to negotiate various scenarios that either encourage new careers and investments in working life or gradually lead to the labour market withdrawal (Wilińska, Rolander, & Bülow, 2019). Importantly, those processes and practices are seldom seen as problematic; on the contrary, they are often naturalised and normalised. This is, as Fineman (2011) argues, what makes them so powerful in shaping and organising social life.

## **INSTITUTIONAL LIFE AS EMPLACED**

The focus on processes and practices is contingent upon the engagement with the concepts of place and space that not only provide the context but are also (re)created as the result of those (Pink, 2012). Pink (2012), arguing about the importance of moving from the focus on individuals to settings, explains that the notion of emplacement allows to attend to the whole ecology of human actions and performances that not only involve human bodies but various places, sensations and practices.

In the already classical conceptualisation of space as a social product, Lefebvre (Lefebvre, 1991) presented a frame that allowed to explicate the relationships between the perceived, conceived and lived aspects of spaces. Thus, he proposed to conceptualize space as a three-dimensional phenomenon composed of: spatial practice (practices producing the space), representation of space (conceptualizations of space), and representational space (lived experience of space). To draw on such a frame means to recognize the constructed and fluid institutional spaces that are not created to exist, but to be lived through, and that process of living spans through various temporalities connecting what has been done to what is and will be accomplished.

What does it mean to look at institutions as spaces to be lived through? First, this entails recognition of spaces as open, dynamic and undergoing continuous changes. Such an understanding of spaces highlights their relational character and acknowledges the social and the spatial as constituted through each other (Massey, 2013). Second, spaces that are lived through are relational spaces, which means spaces that are also felt. Burkitt (2014) discusses emotions as patterns of relationships; relationships which point to involvement with others and with the outside world. This perspective stresses the importance of body on the one hand, and social structures on the other because emotions are about “social patterning of bodily practice within social relations” (Burkitt, 2014, p. 171). In this, emotions play a key role in our understanding and knowing ourselves, but also in our ways of relating and thinking about institutional encounters and institutional life. Third, institutional spaces contribute to different emotions and are shaped by emotions that move as people engaging in interactions do. This is, for instance, exemplified in research on emotion ability that as a concept was introduced to designate processes whereby welfare clients are not only made to agree with institutional decisions, but are made to express ‘the right feelings’ confirming their commitment and willingness to follow such decisions (Wilińska & Bülow, 2020).

To research institutions as embodied, embedded and emplaced is to research institutions in making. Video camera appears to afford such possibility by capturing social life snapshots and preserving them on a tape for repeated viewing and analysis. However, the use of video cameras in research on institutions is far from simple. The section below reflects upon various ways in which video camera comes to life during research process and the consequences it has for understanding institutions.

## **VIDEO CAMERA IN RESEARCH ON INSTITUTIONS: CHANGING THE RESEARCH PRACTICE**

Changing from a position of researcher to a cameraperson is neither an easy nor self-evident process. Socialized into social constructionist and feminist views of knowledge, I have been always aware of knowledge as always located and situated (Haraway, 1990; Lykke, 2010). “Social life is not an aspect, but the environment of human life” (McCarthy, 1996), and the same holds true for all knowers, who are always “in the middle of” the phenomena they study and/or try to know (Lykke, 2010, p. 5). Qualitative researchers as “immodest witnesses” (Clarke, 2005, p. 21) are prompted to bring the embodied knowers to the research process. Both our knowledge and the position of a researcher are embodied and situated (Clarke, 2005). The situations in which we find ourselves organise and influence our ability to see and to see in a certain way. Similarly, to study a situation is to be involved in the situation, as one can never rise above or move beyond it. “The conditions of situation are in the situation” (Clarke, 2005, p. 71); that is, the conditions and the situation are inseparable.

The challenge for a researcher is to find oneself in a situation and to be aware of the conditions that permeate one’s research. However, the more important task involves a reflection upon one’s own knowledge constructs. It is easy to engage in critiques of the existing knowledges only to claim the superiority of one’s own perspective. “*Situated knowledges* are, by their nature, unfinished” (McCarthy, 1996, p. 111), and no one has the final word. This is not a threat to researchers; quite the opposite, it is a great opportunity because “[...] only partial perspective promises objective vision” (Haraway, 1991, p. 190). Social reality and knowledges are interdependent, and both are experienced as real (McCarthy, 1996). The process of generating knowledge implies the process of constructing reality, and *vice-versa*.

The situated and located aspect of knowledge and knowing has always drawn my attention to various dimensions of social reality, social structures and social positions that both influence and are influenced by research practices. This has meant, for example, reflecting upon my own position as a female researcher from Central Europe living in a Nordic country and the ways in which I projected myself in research and the ways in which I was received during research process. However, it was the use of a video camera in research that drew my attention to the material situatedness and location of knowledge and knowing.

Few years ago, my colleague and I worked on a project during which we video-recorded institutional encounters between various health and welfare

professionals and clients. The purpose of that project was to shed light on the phenomenon of clients' participation and their ability to influence institutional agendas and decisions. The use of video camera gave us an opportunity to record such meetings in their natural setting and with that, to have an uninterrupted access to the ways in which various actors interacted with each other. However, to me, that project was also an invitation to reflection upon the materiality of research and knowledge and the idea that there is nothing 'uninterrupted' about using video camera to generate research material.

It all began with testing the equipment and video recording ourselves to check the quality of the sound and image. That triggered a lot of excitement not only among those who were recording but also those who were recorded. The video camera was brought to life. It ceased to be a still object, it instead began emerging as a research partner negotiating conditions of use and posing certain requirements on how to handle it. Suddenly, in addition to testing the quality of sound, we had to consider the ways in which things are seen in camera. Already there, a sense of double vision was created: it was one thing to see with your own eyes, it was quite another to see with the camera lenses. Instinctively, holding a video camera meant trying to get 'the best shot' as if that was the point of our research. The vocabulary of 'getting the best view' or 'capturing everything' has quickly entered the research process as if the camera vision was the only vision. Thus, for example, when taking notes while recording I could catch myself paying more attention to what was outside of the camera eye rather than trying to describe as much as possible and drawing images of the situation. In that, video camera seemed to relax my own vision. I approached it as a partner that is in charge of one part while I am keeping an eye on another.

The video camera was not a particularly light-weighted partner. The full package consisted of separate cases containing a camera, a tripod stand, batteries, cords and an external microphone. The process of assembling the camera was one of the first things that clearly indicated that a new form of research reality was being created. It took several minutes to open all the cases, to place all parts in their right positions and to adjust it to the physical location of the meeting room. Fixing a camera on a tripod stand meant that the recording was being made from a particular angle. As a research partner, the video camera was therefore rather decisive about what and how various scenes could be recorded. More often than not, the recording was therefore determined not by the researcher but rather by a researcher negotiating the recording with the camera. There were certain limits to which I could, for example, focus the camera, move it around or record a bird-view of the situation. The camera created also a sense of reliability and sturdiness that I also quickly accepted. That unconditional trust on my part resulted unfortu-

nately with one meeting being recorded with images only without sounds because the camera's microphone stopped working shortly after the meeting began. With no sign of failure, that was however discovered long after the recording was made. The sound recording was provided by a backup device which meant that playing images and sound from two separate devices and programs created many difficulties in assembling back the situation.

The camera liked to take space and it did not comprise on the space it needed. This meant, for example, that sometimes the meeting area was comprised by the requirements posed by the camera. For instance, the meetings' participants had to squeeze themselves to go through all the cords and devices, the seating places had to be rearranged to fit an area of small meetings rooms in which the presence of camera became clearly dominant. In large rooms, the presence of camera was less pronounced, and it occupied a position of a quiet observer rather than a dominant interrogator as it could become in very small rooms. The importance of spatial dimensions of institutions became also magnified. The differences between rooms equipped with oval *versus* square tables, the differences between meetings in rooms with and without windows, the differences between meetings with four or eight participants became more and more visible signifying in that way the importance of viewing institutions as emplaced.

The struggle for space was also visible in the relation between the camera and the researcher. Majority of the recording I did during that project was in the second part of my pregnancy. That not only made me more sensitive to the camera's weight but also to the space it needed, or rather the space it needed in relation to my own changing space requirements. The sense of discomfort on my part grew as the pregnancy progressed. Seating behind the tripod stand gave me some relieve from being on the spot, on the other hand, it resulted with visible physical constraints that, for example, affected my ability for taking notes while recording.

The video material produced by the camera created very unique conditions for the analysis. Starting the recording always meant moving back to the meeting room, observing the interacting actors, following their bodies, facial expressions and gestures. Discovering various features of media software allowing for pausing, enlarging, rewinding and repeating various scenes created an unprecedented opportunity to observe the institutional life in happening. The instances of laughter and cry, anger and disappointment, combined with faces moving from one direction to another, bodies changing positions and hands supporting and rejecting various messages were all evidencing that institutions are far from stable, fixed frame unaffected by interacting humans. The theoretical and conceptual thinking about institutions and institutional life became alive when watching the recordings. That resulted,

for example, in an analysis of the process of sympathizing during institutional encounters that demonstrated subtle ways in which institutional agendas interacted with societal norms regarding human interaction and participation, emphasizing the emotional underpinnings of institutional practices (Bülow & Wilińska, 2020).

## **VIDEO CAMERA IN RESEARCH ON INSTITUTIONS: CHANGING THE OBSERVED**

The video camera enters the institutional context as a powerful actor. Regardless of the constellation of people and case at hand, the camera's presence in the institutional context is that of another active participant rather than of a silent observer.

In an article discussing the role of camera in institutional meetings, my colleague and I (Wilińska & Bülow, 2017) demonstrated how such a role could be understood from the perspective of emotions and changing emotional energy. In addressing that, we leaned on Collins' theory of interaction rituals. That theory conceives of interaction rituals as special type of situations that are marked with a shared focus and mood among situational participants that clearly differentiate themselves from the outsiders. How the interactions proceed, what outcomes they produce depends very much on the context and situational actors that are present. One of the outcomes and conditions for participating in interaction rituals is emotional energy. Collins (2014) describes emotional energy as "an overall level of being 'up' or 'down'" that has consequences for patterns of participation. Generally, people are motivated by searching for situations increasing their emotional energy and avoiding those that may impede it. Emotional energy is far from being an inner state, it is rather an outcome of a socially produced situation created at the axes of various power systems. It is also related to the questions of belongingness and solidarity – the higher the sense of 'we', the higher the emotional energy level among the participants.

Using that theory, we looked into "conversational moments" (Gordon, 2013) during which the situational participants of institutional meeting visibly interacted with the video camera by either commenting on or talking to directly to the camera. One of the key findings in that study was the active use of so-called cinematic frame to negotiate the camera presence and to position oneself in the situation. Usually, at the beginning or the end of the meetings, the meetings' participants openly discussed the recording situation. Sometimes it happened through the use of film-making jargon, such as "cut", "action", "we are on air", and sometimes it involved commenting one's own and others' physical appearance and its appropriateness in the context of video camera.

The short situational moments illustrating the direct and open interaction of participants with the camera demonstrate also a changing power balance resultant from that levels of emotional energy. The institutional meetings that were recorded were by definition very formal and also involved a constellation of members positioned differently on the social scale. Clearly, the meetings were far from being an assemblage of equally positioned parties. However, when interacting with the camera, those different participants seemed attuned to each other by presenting a shared understanding of the situation and making jokes that everyone could relate to.

While the camera seemed to unite various institutional and non-institutional actors of the meeting during short conversational moments, it did not have the same effect on the relations between researcher and the research participants. Instead of uniting, those moments magnified the underlying power imbalances resultant from temporarily unclear rule regarding those who controlled the situation. The presence of the camera and a researcher created a moment of doubt as to the extent to which the institutional actors could remain in control of the situation as planned. Joking and making jovial comments could therefore be seen as a way of expanding on one's own emotional energy and regaining power over the meeting.

Above all else, the presence of the camera illuminated the dynamics underlying institutional meetings. The emotional climate and atmosphere that were brought to the forefront were revealing of different relations, alliances and positions that the meetings' participants negotiated, bringing in that way life to the institutional context.

## **VIDEO CAMERA IN RESEARCH ON INSTITUTIONS: CHANGING THE OBSERVER**

As a qualitative researcher, I thrive at listening to people. I am not particularly talkative, but I like listening to people and their stories, observing the social world as it unfolds here and now. Yet, I tend to use the listener argument to excuse my social awkwardness combined with hyper-sensitive view of personal spaces. Thus, at first, the use of video camera seemed as a tool just right for me. Making the camera into my research partner, I easily accepted the position of a background person – I was there but it was the camera that stood firmly in front; I was just hiding behind. Paradoxically, I wanted to use the camera to make myself invisible, to assure that my presence would not affect the recorded meetings. However, it is the exact opposite that happened. The camera not only showed off itself, but it also drew attention to my presence. Rather than hiding anyone, the camera and

I became a team, sharing the responsibility for intervening and transforming the situations we were to observe. Thus, what meant to be a recording of naturally occurring data was preceded by a negation of terms and conditions of the setting by a camera, by an observer and by the observed. Once more, the materiality of the situation drew attention to a sad conclusion that research participation on equal terms is further way than we would like to believe.

Recording is one thing, watching the recorded material and analysing it is quite another. As mentioned earlier, the use of video material creates unprecedented opportunities for analysis of practices and processes as they unfold. It opens up for numerous interpretations of the social world that is suddenly transformed into a set of takes and scenes. I recall a research seminar during which a group of qualitative researchers spent two hours trying to analyse a 2-minute long video-recorded sequence. Apart from having a great fun, the seminar provided us with a wide range of openings for various ways of viewing the recorded sequences and none of those was either more or less appropriate. The seminar made me also reflect upon the limits of such analysis.

To a great extent, video material provides a limitless opportunity for social analysis. However, it also poses some risks. One of them is the risk of tearing apart elements of social reality that shall not be teared apart. This daunts on me as the Janus face of video material: on the one hand, an opportunity to see the microscopic details of situations; on the other hand, the risk of drawing conclusions and making connections between parts that are not related. Language wields great influence on the way we see things and although there are no final words, words can make some things final. When discussing the emergence of sociology, Mills (2000) contested that before sociology, similar work had been performed by novelists, who described the human condition in rich detail. To describe human condition in rich detail was to connect the personal with the historical. When engaging with the analysis of video material, there is a risk of focusing on too many details and treating them as evidence rather than a product of the situation with its material and human participants.

Recognizing the potential danger involved in the analysis of video data, Liegl and Schindler (2013, p. 266) propose that researchers should practice their vis-ability:

Practice-trained vis-ability crucial for video analysis involves, therefore, intimate expertise, a central part of the participants' and the ethnographer's implicit knowledge that is not and cannot become data in its own right but is indispensable for the valid 'decoding' (Hall, 1980) of data. This expertise characterizes and enables the

ethnographer as a negotiator, translator, and mediator within the field, i.e., a heterogenic ensemble of persons, practices, bodies, and things.

In this way, as researchers we need to be always wary of the processes and practices that produce certain images and data and it is thanks to such awareness or rather reflexivity that we can also resist the lure of viewing video data as ‘the’ representation of social reality. The use of video camera can make us even more sensitive to the productive side of research processes through which we intervene in the world.

The analysis of video camera poses also challenges in terms of representation. While celebrating the multimodal composition of data afforded by video recordings, our analysis and representation of that data is often limited to written language. This may mean that through the process of analysis the video data is flattened out and stripped of the key qualities for which it was chosen in the first place. The transcription mode offered for example by methods for analyzing talk, such as conversation analysis, provides researcher with a wide array of tools to recreate the sense of life as recorded on tape. Further, such transcripts can be also supplemented with images created from videos. For example, the article concerning the concept of emotion ability (Wilińska & Bülow, 2020) discussed earlier combines those two styles of representing data. The making of such images though poses additional dilemmas on its own, such as ethical issues involved in visually presenting the research participants. In the aforementioned publication, we struggled with balancing the picture format, on the one hand, to preserve the image of the scene, and on the other hand, to dissolve images in order to prevent from recognizing research participants’ identities.

## **REFLECTION: MICROSCOPIC INVESTIGATIONS AND THEIR POTENTIALS AND DANGERS**

The main objective of this article was to shed some light on the material aspects of a research process by reflecting upon the use of video cameras in research looking into institutions and institutional life. The main premise underlying this article was the understanding of camera as an active device that while entering the research setting, makes certain impressions triggering various changes in the research process itself, in the observed world and in the observer. The use of camera in research offers therefore an opportunity to heighten the sensitivity to the ways in which social research transforms the world it aims at examining. Each

research practice, each research process is a highly social activity embedded in a particular socio-cultural context. This emerges as both a starting and ending point for qualitative research projects.

This article is based on reflections following research on institutions and institutional life. The use of video camera in that context was revealing for recognizing the unpredictable and dynamic nature of institutions. This has become visible not only via the analysis of what video camera recorded but also via the attention to the ways in which the presence of video camera was appropriated by institutional actors. As a researcher holding a camera, I entered institutional meetings with an intention of recording. However, what I recorded was a product of the situational context created by both human and non-human actors interacting in a specific space and time. The recording intention implying grasping how things are was therefore revised to imply grasping how the researcher, research participants and materiality of the social setting co-created a research scene.

To a great extent, the use of and analysis of videos can be reminiscent of using a microscope. The recorded images, watched scene by scene, create a lure of complete world that can be disentangled into the smallest possible parts. A second by second observation of somebody's face of bodily movements creates an illusion of reaching the ultimate images. However, even the best microscopes are created by people and there is always a limit to how much data can be placed under its lenses. In discussing the dangers with overusing the microscope metaphor in social research using video material, Büscher (2005) cautions social science researchers about their desire to 'see through' the material that effectively kills the object of study. Her advice is to instead use the opportunity afforded by video camera to 'see with' by focusing on the collaborative process of creating the social practices. This can be applied as much to research practices as to institutional practices. 'Seeing with' is about recognizing the opportunities and limitations afforded to us by different modes of vision. 'See with' the video camera is about trying to understand various modalities and the ways in which these are interdependent on each other. When we 'see with' the video camera, we invite that material object to join our research team and to actively contribute in negations regarding what and how we want to observe the social world that interests us.

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