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Video diaries: audio-visual research methods and the elusive body

CHARLOTTE BATES

The contemporary rise of body studies has led sociologists to take embodiment seriously, however, the issue of methodology in relation to the body remains largely under-explored. This article addresses the concern to capture the elusive body from a methodological perspective and discusses the video diary as a novel device for attending to bodily experience. The article considers how observation is redesigned through the video camera and describes the different ways in which bodily experience can be represented on screen. Using examples from video diaries made by participants in a multi-method study of the body, health and illness in everyday life, it shows how video diaries can contribute to an embodied sociology by making the body visibly, audibly and viscerally present.

INTRODUCTION

Bodies are essential, indispensable, pressing, compelling, a matter of life and death. They are also lively, active and hearty. One way of holding onto this vitality and liveliness is to work with research methods that viscerally and vibrantly resonate with living bodies. As an audio-visual research device, video offers the possibility of extending traditional talk- and text-based research methods and has the potential to reanimate sociological description and attention (Back 2010, 17). In this article, I discuss the production and presentation of video diaries made by participants in a multi-method study of the body, health and illness in everyday life. Using examples from these video diaries, I discuss how working with video can help to develop a sensorially attentive research practice that takes the body seriously. As such, video diaries are presented as a novel device for attending to bodily experience, and as a technique with which to address the concern to embody sociology (Shilling 2005, 764). Through three examples, I show how video diaries can contribute to an embodied sociology that makes embodiment central rather than peripheral (Williams and Bendelow 1998, 125) by making the body audibly, visibly and viscerally present.

The body, 'at once the most solid, the most elusive, illusory, concrete, metaphorical, ever present and ever distant thing' (Turner 1984, 8), has been an absent presence in sociology for some time (Blackman 2008, 13; Shilling 1993, 8). As Kelly and Field write, 'Its existence is seldom explicitly denied, but its presence has a kind of ethereal quality forever gliding out of analytic view' (Kelly and Field 1996, 242). Within the sociology of health and illness there is a growing concern to situate sociological bodies and issues of embodiment more centrally (Ettorre 2010, 1), and to explain the body without explaining it away or wringing the life out of it. One way of doing this is to find different ways of encountering and representing the body, and to experiment with other ways of seeing and telling (Becker 2007; Myrvang Brown, Dilley, and Marshall 2008, 1.4). Instead of distancing the body through 'language, technique and the sociological gaze' (Scott and Morgan 1993, 19), or stripping it of its 'smells, tastes, textures, and pains' (Stoller 1997, xiv), video offers the possibility of creating data in more 'vital, physical and sensory registers' than other methods might do (Muir and Mason 2012, 4.2), and as such has the potential to bring lively bodies closer.

The video diaries presented in this article were one component of a multi-method study of the body, health and illness in everyday life, which participants actively chose to take part in by responding to a call for public participation. The study was advertised on a dedicated website and on Gumtree (a free classified advertisement website), and details were circulated through several email lists and via personal contacts, who were asked to forward the study details on to their contacts. Participation was open to anyone living in London aged between 18 and 50 with a long-term physical or mental health condition. These parameters were set to avoid logistical issues that might be involved in working outside of London and to exclude issues specific to childhood and aging. I met with every person who

contacted me, eventually closing the study when I felt that the sample consisted of an adequate gender mix (five men and eight women), some social class diversity, people at various life stages and a range of conditions (asthma, bi-polar disorder, chronic pain, depression, type 1 diabetes, epilepsy, joint hypermobility syndrome, muscular dystrophy and rheumatoid arthritis).

After an initial meeting to discuss what participation in the study would involve, participants were interviewed and asked to complete a hand-drawn questionnaire. They then made a video diary and/or kept a journal. Around a month later we met again so that I could collect the video camera and journal, discuss any issues and concerns, and re-confirm consent to use the interview, video and journal data. After copying the data that had been made I returned the original journals and DVDs of the unedited video footage to each participant by post. Nine of the 13 participants chose to make a video diary, which they recorded with one of the two study video cameras (a Sony HDR-SR10E and a Sony HDR-TG7VE). Both video cameras were capable of recording high quality footage but were also small and easy to use. The participants were given basic video camera operating instructions and simply asked to use the video camera to show and tell about their body and their condition. Approximately 10 hours of video footage was produced in total, in which the participants brought their bodies to attention in new ways and revealed the remarkable practices of their everyday lives.

These video diaries and their methodological implications are the focus of this article. In the following sections, I consider how observation is redesigned through the video camera, describe the different ways in which the sensory and affective qualities of bodily experience can be represented on screen, and discuss the practical and ethical dilemmas that working with audio-visual methods entail.

REDESIGNING OBSERVATION: BODIES BEHIND THE VIDEO CAMERA

The availability of digital technologies is rapidly increasing and many people now record aspects of their personal lives on video cameras or mobile phones and share them in the public sphere (Forsyth, Carroll, and Reitano 2009, 214; Muir and Mason 2012, 1.1). Despite the current popularity of video, the participants in this study were often initially uncomfortable with the idea of filming in public places, being in front of the video camera and recording their own voices. To make recording a video diary less daunting they were encouraged to film short clips of their daily lives. This format meant that long monologues did not dominate the frame, and it allowed everyday sights and sounds to come into focus. The hints and traces of bodies shown in different acts and contexts – in hospitals, at work and at home, exercising, gardening, eating and sleeping – provided glimpses into the participants' lives that would have been hard to access with other methods (Muir and Mason 2012, 2.3).

In their study of Christmas traditions and family practices, Muir and Mason note that participant-recorded video is 'full of goings on' that are hard to perceive in the moment, let alone recount in an interview (Muir and Mason 2012, 4.2). Similarly, in Myrvang Brown's study of recreational mountain biking and walking, headcams were able to record 'the rhythms, moments and improvisations of practice that are beyond text or not easy to observe, recall, verbalise, or otherwise express' (Myrvang Brown, Dilley, and Marshall 2008, 7.2). In both studies, video cameras were used to record details that would otherwise have been difficult to see. But this does not mean that video footage offers an objective record of what people actually do. As Pink writes, research videos are not realist representations, but 'expressive performances of the everyday' (Pink 2003, 55). In the same vein, Silverman notes that research interviews do not give researchers privileged access to how people behave (2007, 91). Like the tape-recorder used for recording interviews, the video camera is a recording device that does not necessarily capture reality, but instead opens up possibilities for encountering social life. As Back writes,

The recordings made by the sound device provide the illusion of 'being there'. If we leave behind the simple idea that they 'capture' the real but instead produce a realist imaginative object then they may provide a different kind of possibility for social understanding or revelation. (Back 2010, 20)

In asking the participants in the study to make a video diary, I invited them to take an ethnographic position and experiment with observation. Instead of removing the observer (me) from the picture or providing a one-way lens, the video camera allowed behaviour and observation to occur both in front

of and behind the recording device (Shrum, Duque, and Brown 2005, 1). As a third agent in the study the video camera offered a set of eyes and ears for the participant to speak to, and as a physical object it led the participant-observers on a tour of their own lives. This did not mean that participant and video camera were alone in their explorations, as Gibson writes, 'the researcher, whether physically present or not, is inevitably part of the research world being studied' (Gibson 2005, 3). And, as Worth (2009) notes in her study with visually impaired young people using audio diaries, one-way conversations and comments like 'I thought I should show you this' reaffirmed the agenda and established the presence of an audience who would later see and hear the footage that had been recorded for them.

The participants also brought their own visual skills to the task of making a video diary, and found their own ways of working with the video camera and their own filmic language. They made different choices about what and how to film, and controlled the degree to which they revealed their bodies and identities to the video camera. Just as Muir and Mason's 'Christmas videos' were made up of a mixture of narration, explanation to the camera, fly on the wall documentary and home-movie (Muir and Mason 2012, 3.2), the video diaries made for this study ranged from reality television to intimate personal diary, and from action shots to quiet reflections. While cultural references helped the participants to style their video diaries, they did not appear to influence what was enacted for the video camera. Similarly, Myrvang Brown notes that the mountain bikers in her study 'were often apologetic for there not being more "action" in their footage, thus acknowledging the cultural expectation of the visual spectacle, whilst noting how mundane their footage seemed in comparison' (Myrvang Brown, Dilley, and Marshall 2008, 6.6).

Sometimes, the video camera itself became responsible for instigating situations in which observational dilemmas were acted out, as Imogen recorded in her video diary:

They wouldn't let us film in hospital because I hadn't asked permission, which I find weird because it's all about data protection, and you know that they're allowing CCTV cameras to record you, which is somehow different than when you want to record your own body, but they said if I'd asked permission there wouldn't be a problem so what can I do? I can do it at home, or like this, or at the side of the hospital. It's strange, the negotiation you have to play with your own body, what can be filmed, what can't be filmed about yourself, purely because you're in a hospital and who owns your actions or whatever.

The distinction between the hospital CCTV and Imogen's own observations through the video camera points to the different modes of surveillance that can be enacted, and shows how making a video diary can redesign observation in terms of both who is observing and what is observed. In the next section, I discuss how embodied experiences are represented on screen and explore how the video diaries show and tell in different ways.

SHOW AND TELL: CAPTURING ELUSIVE BODIES

The innate potential of video to make the body audibly and visibly present made it an ideal device with which to unlock bodily experience and bring the sensuous and affective qualities of embodiment to the screen. As Pink writes, 'the use of a video camera encourages research participants to engage physically with their material and sensory environments to show the ethnographer their experiences corporeally' (Pink 2009, 105). The video camera is beautifully sensate and can be used to record a wide range of bodily sensations, activities and practices, from domestic practices in the sensory home (Pink 2009) to mountain biking and walking (Myrvang Brown, Dilley, and Marshall 2008). In this study, video cameras were pointed at heaving asthmatic lungs and aching arthritic shoulders; they were taken on walks and to the gym, carried on bicycles and held while running. The methodological strength of video to vividly communicate the sheer physicality of embodied experiences (Myrvang Brown, Dilley, and Marshall 2008, 5.11) transformed the body from elusive to sensorial, and made it knowable in the flesh.

In Myrvang Brown's study of recreational mountain bikers and walkers, the sounds of strenuous breathing recorded on headcams helped to impress the physical strain of the activities (Myrvang Brown, Dilley, and Marshall 2008). Sometimes, however, the representations that are recorded on

video are at odds with the embodied sensation. Anna's footage of running, for example, sends the viewer lurching left and right at a heavy and heaving pace. Although her 'running with camera technique' improved as she went on, the resulting footage contradicts Anna's own experience of running, which helps her manage her depression and makes her feel fluid, light and free:

Running, this is half to a third of a normal run, it lurches all over the place! (I think the 'running with camera technique' gets a bit better as I go on). The important thing is how much running helps me, and also being outside, away from my obsessive thoughts and away from noise. It's like a trip to the countryside, and all that green seems healing for me. I do think when I run, but it seems more fluid, less negative. On this run I felt better and better.



FIGURE 1. Anna's running shoes, which she alternates for each run.

The video camera can also distance the body on screen through the immediacy of the encounter. Imogen, for example, recorded as she injected her insulin, the video camera zooming in on the needle piercing the skin of her stomach. Filmed in silence, such 'indiscriminate and uncompromising' (Rich et al. 2000, 162) moments purposefully lay bare the reality of living with type 1 diabetes and challenge the viewer to look when they would normally turn away. The footage has the power to show that injecting insulin is a discreet, clean and domestic act but at the same time it can evoke reactions that re-perform Imogen's own experiences of injecting in public, as she explained during her interview:

The points where I have felt uncomfortable have been at work once, where a woman, she was an idiot, she was frustrating in every possible way and it made so much sense when she said, 'Do you have to do that here?' I was injecting at the lunch table, which she wasn't eating at I should point out. We got into this whole debate, about well would you say that to a type 2 diabetic taking their tablet. When you inject it's very discreet really, it's into the belly, and quite frankly my attitude is that if someone doesn't like it then look the fuck away, because I can't look away, I have to put it in my body. But the best bit was when I said, 'But it's not like I'm injecting heroin!' and she said, 'Well really what's the difference?' Where do I begin with that?

While filming made the body audibly, visibly and viscerally present, the elusiveness of the body remained evident in the interplay between proximity and distance that was apparent throughout the video diaries. Within the video diaries bodies were perceptible and imperceptible, visible, audible and hidden. Not always shown in their entirety, the traces of bodies were present in other ways. Parts of bodies were shown to the video camera, shadows were trailed on pavements and chased by vacuum

cleaners, and reflections were captured in windows and coffee pots. Bodies were heard speaking, but they were also present in the sounds of breathing and footfall, and sometimes they were silent. The hazy edges and sometimes soft focus of the shots, which are indicative of the video camera's auto-focus function struggling to adjust to fast hand-held movements, reinforced the presence of the bodies that made them even when those bodies were invisible on screen. Through the subtlety of these recording strategies bodies were not directly seen or heard but remained sensed or felt, and by evoking some of the intangible aspects of bodily experience the video diaries showed that it is important to avoid a literal or wholly tangible interpretation of embodiment (Mason and Davies 2009, 601).



FIGURE 2. Anna's footage of running sends the viewer lurching left and right at a heavy and heaving pace.

Meghan, for example, evoked embodied recognition in her video diary through the movements, textures and aromas of her morning routine. The routine includes preparing a glass of water with freshly squeezed lemon, a drink that forms part of a complex relationship that she has with her rheumatoid arthritis. In the opening shot Meghan's bed lies empty, still crumpled and warm from her body. There is a momentary pause before thumb and forefinger turn and twist a plastic handle, opening the metal blind to let the early morning light in. The streetlights, still illuminated, shine palely through the dark blue sky and down onto the residential street. Toes flex, feeling for the support of the yoga mat before the video camera swings up and away, turning the room and its contents upside down then swinging slowly back to her toes, fuzzy at first, but with just enough time to come into focus before the video camera swings away again, passing a shadow on the carpet, returning to the mat in a smoothly flowing arc. A healthy body glows from the front of a shiny magazine cover at the top of a pile of titles that have been consulted in the search for a healthy lifestyle. Water pours from a clear jug and air bubbles rise to the top of the glass as it fills. Her hands grasp a lemon and a knife, working the blade swiftly back and forth in an action that slices the fruit in half. She squeezes one half into the glass, fingers working to release drips of juice that cloud the water. A wall clock indicates that it is 6:33am, seconds tick by. She reaches to pick up the glass, lifting it out of shot. The video camera remains fixed on the kitchen worktop, green and yellow apples fill a basket. The sound of the water being gulped, swallowed, drunk seems to fill the screen before the almost emptied glass is returned to the worktop and the video camera switch is clicked off.

Meghan's narrative runs over this sequence, as she explains how sleep, exercise and diet are interconnected and crucial to the everyday management of her condition:

I usually like to start my day with some kind of physical activity. But that only usually happens if I have enough sleep. At the very least, I can do some sun salutations. I used to do a yoga DVD, but somehow it got to the bottom of the pile. I spend a lot of money

looking for answers, even though I know better. One book told me, every morning I should have room temperature water, with the juice of a fresh lemon, finished off with a pinch of cayenne pepper, which I don't have. I should drink all this before anything else. This morning routine means I can't just roll out of bed and leave the house, and normally it keeps me busy an hour before I leave.

Although her body is not visible on screen the recognition that takes place within the performance of the routine produces a situation of bodily intimacy. The historian Carolyn Steedman describes how she gets close to Hamilton's eighteenth-century kitchen and pantry through the same charm of recognition that comes from personal identification with particular sensate physical activities. As she writes, 'physical activity carries the past and something of everyone who has sliced a lemon in half for squeezing' (Steedman 2008, 27). The empty bed, the swing of the video camera through Meghan's morning sun salutations, the knife slicing through the lemon, the squeezing and dripping of the lemon juice into the glass, and the sound of the water being drunk all evoke an intimate and embodied sense of Meghan's morning routine.

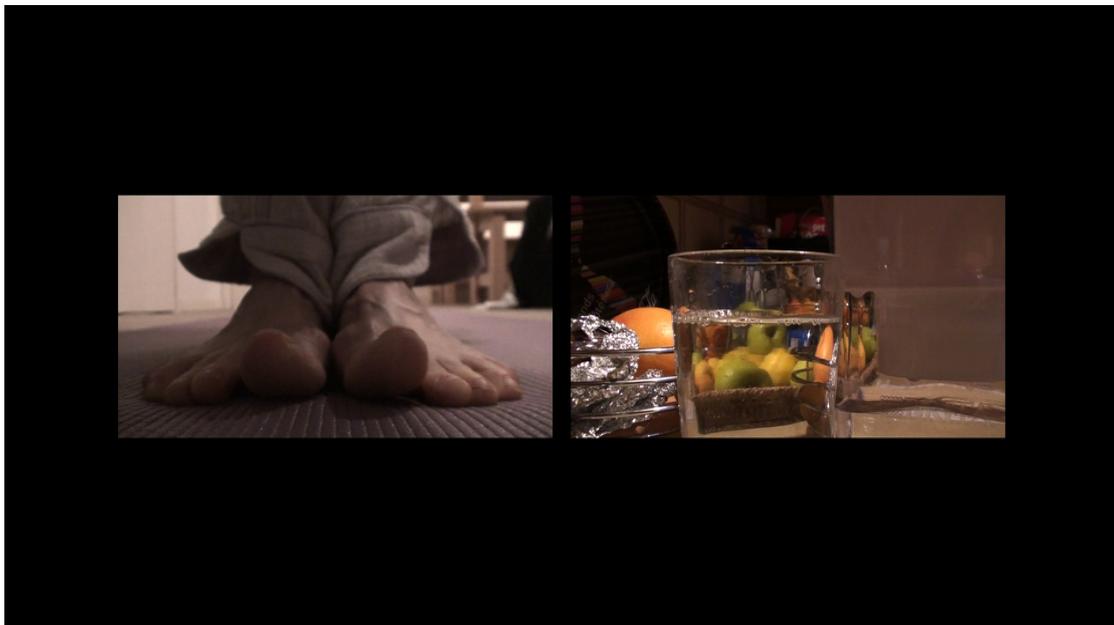


FIGURE 3. Toes flex, feeling for the support of the yoga mat before the video camera swings up and away.

Each of these examples illustrates the subtle ways in which the body came into focus and was brought to attention by using video diaries as a research device. As Muir and Mason (2012, 4.5) note of their participant-made videos, much of the footage occupies a position between showing and telling for the video camera. More than simply presenting the body on screen, the video diaries created a space within which bodies could be seen, heard and felt. In doing so, they generated a sensorially attentive research practice that captured a sense of the elusive body and illuminated some of the more invisible dimensions of everyday life (Pink and Leder Mackley 2012, 2.6).

REPRESENTATION AND ETHICS: BODIES ON THE SCREEN

The use of video diaries as a research device presents some key issues that need to be considered, including how to work ethically and manage visual representation. Video is a useful tool for recording the sensual and affective qualities of bodily experience, but in making bodies present it can also make people present. While the visible and audible presence of the participants on screen strongly conflicts with the sociological ideal of anonymity in research, it was also important that participation in this study did not add another layer of secrecy to living with a long-term condition or reinforce the stigma that already surrounds public perceptions of illness.

Taking these considerations into account, I decided to work collaboratively with the participants in the study (Pink 2009, 58) and to follow an ethics of recognition rather than one of protection or concealment (Sweetman 2009, 8). In their statement of professional ethics, the Association of American Geographers state, 'Informants should be asked whether they prefer anonymity or recognition, and the project should be implemented and its results should be presented in keeping with these individuals' preference' (see http://www.aag.org/cs/about_aag/governance/statement_of_professional_ethics). By using this definition of ethical research conduct I was able to adapt the video diary method as I worked with each participant. For example, in order to maintain her anonymity Anna (a pseudonym) wrote notes to the video camera, which were then placed as subtitles on the screen. This allowed her to make a video diary without revealing her identity through the recognisable sound of her voice, and ensured her privacy without restricting her participation.

When filming was completed I worked with the video diary footage in two ways. As research data, each of the video diaries was transcribed, integrated with interview and journal data and analysed thematically. By identifying categories and concepts across the different methods I was able to support my interpretation of the video diaries with other data and consider them within a broader context. I then developed the emerging themes by returning to the original footage and re-incorporating the more-than-textual and multisensual (H. Lorimer 2005, 83) elements of video into my analysis. I also wanted to work with the video diaries as moving images and use them to present the study in a more experiential and embodied way. To do this, I edited some of the video footage into a series of split-screen films, stills from which are included in this article. The process of editing, cutting and re-framing footage helped me to become fully immersed in the video data and develop a heightened attention to both the audio and the visual components of the video diaries. As had been discussed with the participants, the responsibility for selecting and conceptually framing the video diaries at this stage of the study was my own.



FIGURE 4. 'Physical activity carries the past and something of everyone who has sliced a lemon in half for squeezing' (Steedman 2008, 27).

A final selection of short split-screen films was produced for academic use. By pushing the video diary footage into new forms of sociological representation and animated description that are 'contextual, kinaesthetic and sensual: that live' (Halford and Knowles 2005, 1.2), I hope to encourage readers and viewers to encounter this study with their own eyes and ears. The films play with the difficulties of data production and highlight the practical craft involved in producing new forms of sociological representation, and, as Lorimer notes, they 'provide lively materials for subsequent presentation and evocation' (J. Lorimer 2010, 251).

In this article I have also tried to suggest possibilities for working with and between video and text. Several articles incorporating video clips with text have recently been published online (Myrvang Brown, Dilley, and Marshall 2008; Muir and Mason 2012; Pink and Leder Mackley 2012). Here, video footage has been presented through thick descriptions, quotations and still images in order to illustrate how video opens opportunities to make and work with evocative data in a range of different ways that can inform and enliven textual accounts, while short clips of the films from which the still images are taken can be viewed online (see <http://vimeo.com/videodiaries/videos>). As Pink writes, visual methods are not simply an alternative to writing. Instead, text and image can work in relation to each other to create a sense of intimacy and engagement (Pink 2009, 134).

CONCLUSION

Together with several other articles and books on video-based methods (Lorimer 2010; Muir and Mason 2012; Myrvang Brown, Dilley, and Marshall 2008; Pink 2009; Pink and Leder Mackley 2012; Spinney 2009) this article has highlighted the potential that video has to make bodies audibly and visibly present in accounts of embodiment. As an audio-visual medium that resonates with multiple registers of feeling, video is an ideal device with which to bring living, feeling, breathing bodies to the screen and to the page. By creating a novel form of encounter, video can disrupt usual ways of telling, unlock bodily experience and ‘bring into focus aspects of practice that have previously been blurred or out of shot’ (Spinney 2009, 828). In doing so, it provides the opportunity to generate different ways of knowing bodies, create a more immediate empathy of bodily experience (Myrvang Brown, Dilley, and Marshall 2008, 9) and attend to some of the details of embodied life that often escape talk- and text-based approaches (J. Lorimer 2010, 242). While, as Simpson has written, video methods do not necessarily show the felt aspects of embodiment (Simpson 2011, 8), they do have the potential to evoke both tangible and intangible bodily experiences – there are a variety of ways in which video can be employed as a research method, and different recording and editing strategies can create different kinds of data.

Within the spectrum of video-based methods, first-person perspective video diaries offer a particular mode of evocation and witness (J. Lorimer 2010, 238) that is especially suited to the task of capturing the elusive body. As Law writes, methods of inquiry often fail to catch the texture of the world, and ‘talk of “method” still tends to summon up a relatively limited repertoire of responses’ (Law 2004, 3). Current research methods often deal poorly with many aspects of reality, including the elusive, the sensory and the emotional (Law and Urry 2004, 403); and finding ways of capturing the elusive requires new ways of thinking, practising, relating and knowing (Law 2004, 2). Video cameras offer one device with which to expand our methodological repertoire and tackle the challenge to embody sociology. In attempting to present a richer sense of bodily experience through a sensory engagement with the video diary as a research method and as a form of representation, this article has aimed to show that the elusive body can be captured through research methods that resonate and support its sensuous qualities, and that an imaginative engagement with method can re-enchant some of the details that make up the richness of embodied life.

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