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## Why are we doing it? Exploring participant motivations within a participatory video project

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## **Why are we doing it?**

### **Exploring participant motivations within a participatory video project**

#### **Abstract**

One of the most recurring strengths attributed to the use of participatory video is its ability to enable social change, advocacy, activism and empowerment. Yet, to what extent is this a joint vision of all parties involved in the participatory video process? Why do researchers and participants do participatory video? What are their differential motivations and how does this affect decision-making during the participatory video process? In this paper, we reflect on these questions through discussing participatory video experiences of research carried out by the authors in collaboration with indigenous communities in the North Rupununi, Guyana and in Tumucumaque, Brazil. Participatory video formed part of a project involving local communities, local, national and international civil society organisations and academic researchers. We evaluate the different perceptions and distinct worldviews of the individuals, groups and organisations involved in the participatory video process, and show how these determine the ways in which people participate. We conclude that a significant component of the participatory video process needs to include the iterative surfacing of individual motivations and worldviews using an adaptive research approach. This helps to negotiate expectations of all researchers and participants at different stages of the

participatory video, enabling greater outcomes for all participants, while at the same time producing more nuanced and grounded academic research.

**Keywords:** participatory video, Guyana, Brazil, expectations, motivations, decision making.

## **Introduction**

Through its oral and visual mode of engagement participatory video has the means to allow marginalised and/or oral-based groups or communities to shape and create their own films according to their own sense of what is important, and how they want to be represented (Shaw and Robertson, 1997; Johansson et al., 1999; White, 2003; Lurch and Lurch, 2006; Pink, 2006). By giving a 'voice' to these people, participatory video can potentially enable social change through raising awareness on issues, building capacity to engender action and as a vehicle for communicating and potentially influencing decision-makers at local, national, and global levels (Plush, 2012; Lemaire and Lurch, 2012; Wheeler, 2012). Indeed, much of the past literature on participatory video has focused mainly on highlighting its efficacy and benefits. However, more recently, there have been an increasing number of studies reflecting critically on participatory video's capability of fostering social change, advocacy, activism and empowerment (e.g. Chalfen et al., 2010; Shaw, 2012; Walsh, 2012). Milne (2012), for example, points to the fact that as facilitation and production costs will have normally been granted by external agencies, there is an onus on participatory video researchers/facilitators to have a

tangible product, a material deliverable, sometimes at the detriment to the participatory video process (i.e. if, how and why people participate). Its increasing use within academia as a research tool can also bring about a myriad of tensions (see Kindon et al., 2012; Miller and Smith, 2012). For example, Mistry and Berardi (2012) explain how, in their experience, the goals of the academic researcher produced clear conflicts with the standard objectives of participatory video practice (empowerment, emancipation, etc.) which included clear academic objectives to be achieved within the timeframe of the funded project. These objectives did not necessarily match the wider aspirations of the communities they were working with.

Underlying many of the issues and complexities of participatory video are the differing motivations and expectations of those who participate in a participatory video project. This is relevant because different motivations not only lead to decisions on whether to participate or not in the process, but also determine how people participate, and influence the decision making process. Indeed, the intended “beneficiaries” of the process, usually described in proposals as “marginalised communities” who “require empowerment”, are rarely the process initiators. The technical and procedural complexities of the approach usually require the leadership of established organisations. These organisations could potentially be accused of having a “solution looking for a problem”. In addition, the people who would be creating the films, and the members of the wider community, are seldom fully and equally involved in writing the funding applications. Participatory video projects are still, in the main, introduced and governed by

researchers, activists and practitioners working for, or funded by, universities, NGOs, governmental or charitable funders or donor agencies. Related to this is the point at which people enter the participatory video process: whether people are involved in project conceptualization, contribute to a short interview, or are part of the dissemination phase, may determine their level of commitment and involvement to the participatory video aspect of the research.

In this paper, we explore the distinctive motivations supporting the participatory video process amongst a wide range of people working within an international research project investigating community-owned solutions to natural resource management challenges with indigenous communities in South America. As members of this project and clear advocates of participatory visual methods, we (the authors) aim to understand some of the potential problems arising from our participatory video approach to enable better practice and outcomes for everyone involved. And, as Pain and colleagues (2011) underline, we state the importance of addressing struggles in a reflexive manner while the participatory video process is ongoing, rather than limiting our deliberations to fostering discussion within the academic community.

### **Context and methodology**

Our research focuses around the COBRA project - a research project funded by the European Commission 7th Framework programme with the mission to "...find ways to integrate community solutions within policies addressing escalating social,

economic and environmental crises, through accessible information and communication technologies" in the Guiana Shield region, in South America (see [www.projectcobra.org](http://www.projectcobra.org)). The project involves ten partners across Europe and South America including civil society organisations (CSOs), research institutions, and a small and medium enterprise. The first phase of the project engaged two distinct indigenous communities; one situated in the North Rupununi, Guyana, and the other located in the Tumucumaque Indigenous Territory, Amapa, Brazil.

Integral to the project is a participatory action research approach to stimulate constant reflection and, if necessary, adaptation of the practices, outcomes and impacts of the project (cf. Reason and Bradbury, 2008). Our reflections in this paper form part of this process. participatory video and participatory photography are key visual methods as part of our participatory approach. Our motivations (as academics) for initiating these methods within the project were to promote the collection and sharing of information addressing the key research objectives in an accessible way, while at the same time helping to build capacity of local participants and contributing to dissemination and advocacy work. The project as a whole was subject to comprehensive ethical reviews by the coordinating UK university, as well as in-country procedures following the international rights of Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC). In the first phase of the project, on which we will concentrate, participatory video was used to explore and foster reflection on challenges facing indigenous communities in the North Rupununi and in the

Tumucumaque Indigenous Territory with regards to the use and management of natural resources.

Through semi-structured interviews (Bryman, 2008), we asked participants involved in the project to participate in our investigation of how participatory video was being perceived and used by different people. Of these, two CSO members (two males of 45 and 60 years of age) declined to participate; the reason given was their minimal involvement with this aspect of the project. However, other CSO members who also had minimal involvement in the participatory video process did contribute to the interviews. Interviews therefore took place with four academic researchers (three females of 33, 36 and 42 years of age and one male of 42), three international CSO members (males of 70, 32 and 44 years of age), three national CSO members (females of 34, 35 and 45 years of age), six local researchers hired by the project in Guyana (two females, 22 and 25 years old, and four males in their thirties) and thirteen community members from the villages of Rupertee and Fair View in the North Rupununi (four females under 30 and four between 40 and 55 years of age, three males under 25 and three males between 45 and 54 years of age), involved in participatory video activities.

Interview questions explored different spheres for understanding how people's motivations were influenced in the participatory video process. They included peoples' knowledge on participatory video, their background, experience and perceptions of video technology and participatory video in particular, motivations

for taking part and what was expected from them, when they got involved in participatory video activities and with what level of participation, and finally, their favourite story/experience/memory of participatory video.

In Guyana, the indigenous communities have had considerable previous experience of working with researchers and some prior experience of participatory video (see Mistry and Berardi, 2012). However, in Brazil, the Tumucumaque communities have had very few research project collaborations, and undertaking interviews with the local researchers or community members on participatory video would not have been viable at this stage of the project. It was decided therefore that we would evaluate and reflect on the participatory video process through participant observation. Two academic researchers kept reflective field diaries on comments and reactions to participatory video activities during two field visits to Tumucumaque of two and three week periods. All interviews were coded in order to extrapolate emerging themes and perspectives, and then integrated with topics emerging from the field notes taken in Tumucumaque.

## **Findings**

Our central question in this paper is to what extent is the emancipatory focus of participatory video a joint vision of all the participants involved in the project? From the interviews and observations, it is clear that although everyone focuses on emancipation, it is articulated in different ways. For local community members, participatory video is useful for self documentation of the 'truth': "to find out what



really happened in the village in the past years”<sup>1</sup> and “to make sure that it is true and not false”, to share information at the local level: “it is helpful because even people that did not participate will get the opportunity to see the pictures and video, and our children”, and to allow communication of local knowledge to future generations: “taking photographs is important because it is something that remains as history to us”. In both Guyana and Brazil, where social and environmental changes are rapidly changing indigenous lifestyles and culture, losing their past: “if something is filmed, it will not disappear” is a key concern to local people. At the same time, there are underlying reasons for wanting to preserve traditions through participatory video: filming customs and rituals is easier because that’s what past anthropologists have done and it is something communities expect (or presume) western projects to be interested in: “all the projects want to know about our traditions”; and because traditions, “true”, “museum like” or reinvented as they may be (cf. Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983) can bring money to the communities: “when tourists come we can show our traditions if we don’t lose them”.

Similarly, local researchers mentioned the importance of participatory video for recording the ‘truth’: “If we just talk we would have one set of evidence, but the participatory video will assist you to have better information of what people say, it being a 100% equal to what people say, more precise, we are able to record information from different people and different backgrounds and not just one” and for communication: “...communities views that can be shared with other

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<sup>1</sup> All quotes refer to interviews with Guyanese participants.

stakeholders, within all projects”. However, the local researchers also see other uses and benefits of participatory video including an appropriate way of engaging with people: “videoing helps involving people. It is ‘everybody participating’. Video helps because people who don’t know how to read and write can participate” and as a way of stimulating some form of action: “I think it is that communities will actually do things and video the community members and showing it back to the wider communities and by doing so people will learn about how to doing things, not by saying things but having communities doing things”.

Academic researchers in the project used more clear scholarly vocabulary when explaining the uses of participatory video, emphasising social change goals and participatory video as a research method: “it is empowering as the community group or individuals can determine who they want to interview, what they want to record, undertake the recording, the film making and the distribution of the film themselves without outside involvement”; “using the participatory video process is very good..... for community emancipation, giving them tools, regarding the project”. One could argue that this comes from the accepted "discourse" perpetrated within the academic literature, particularly concerning how participatory video is capable of giving people “a voice” (Chalfen et al., 2010). Nevertheless, as on-the-ground facilitators and trainers of participatory techniques, including participatory video, most of the academics had critical comments on the process, and recognized that “it places much power in the hands of the individual researcher” (as it emerges also in Walsh, 2012 and Milne, 2012).

Most CSO members, on the other hand, knew little about participatory video ( 'lack of knowledge' was the basis of two CSO members refusal to be interviewed), and felt that their role was to watch the participatory video process from the 'outside', to keep 'quality control' in different ways: "[to make sure] videos don't get into wrong hands so people use traditional knowledge without permission and then circulate in YouTube, whole copyright issue and intellectual property"; "it's important to know when this tool is good to use and makes sense and when it doesn't and has little value". From interviews, CSOs seemed to feel that participatory video was something they didn't need to deal with directly, but that the end-products would have great potential use in their dissemination and advocacy work: "Our perspective [on] benefits is using videos to communicate. It can serve as a kind of shaman....not to lose traditional knowledge and documenting it"; "to show it to policy makers"; "to help them to show and share their culture and traditions to the world. Also it helps them to communicate with society and other communities"; "dissemination and outreach is an important element of this project and videos can be immensely important, and participatory video can raise the interest of spectators in other places".

As illustrated, the rationale for using participatory video varied between project participants. Although 'helping' the communities in some way was at the core of all motivations, there were varying degrees of importance consigned to the 'participatory' and the 'video' components of participatory video. Community

members and CSOs consistently talked about the usefulness of the videos and films, whether for documentation and/or dissemination (cfr. Miller and Smith, 2012). Emphasise was commonly placed on the end-product, exemplified by a CSO member when he says “for certain communication purposes, videos could have a purpose, and in some cases it might be better to have a professional to make the video. It’s important people using video as a communication means know when a professional approach is preferred”. Academics and the local researchers instead stressed the participatory goals of participatory video, underlining the sharing and learning features of the process and how this could be useful to the communities.

We found that a key aspect linked to these incongruent motivations is the time at which participants enter the participatory video process. For community members, apart from participation in consultatory and consent meetings about the overall project and its objectives, they had minimal input in the initial stages of participatory video i.e. project conceptualisation. This shaped their overall view of participatory video, which in many cases was conflated with the project itself i.e. they considered participatory video and COBRA as the same thing. In addition, some people saw video as just another way of researchers/activists collecting information to be used for their own means. And very often it was seen as more problematic compared with interviews because community members were afraid of how researchers would make use of the material (How will they be used? Who will see them? Will facilitators make money out of it?). In this perspective, “the introduction of audio-visual aids can impact very negatively on the researcher-

subject relationship, actually reducing the level of access” (Byron, 1993, p. 385). As one local researcher in Guyana explains: “some people want to know what you are doing, think you are making money out of their picture. It is difficult to do the shooting if they think so”. Asked about community reactions to participatory video, one of the community interviewees answered: “people were worried COBRA was filming to steal information and bring it to other countries”. CSOs as well, although consulted throughout the proposal writing, did not initiate/propose participatory video as a research tool. Their “unfamiliarity” with the technique together with the fact it was not chosen by them (a CSO member answering to the question “Why did you agree to take part in a project that uses participatory video?”: “No choice, I’m director so just had to sign it off”) reflects the expressed disconnect between themselves and the participatory video activities.

Plush (2012), in her case for strengthening the use of participatory video for social change, points to capacity as a key requirement. We would agree and also suggest that as peoples’ capacity for facilitating and using participatory video increases, their motivations for the ideals of participatory video begin to come through. In Tumucumaque local researchers for example, said the primary motivators for being involved in the project was the fact that they would be learning new technical skills. With little technological development in the region, they were keen to acquire new skills and participatory video was viewed as a vehicle for this. Perhaps as they engage more strongly with the technical aspects and the process, the participatory nature of participatory video may become more apparent in their motivations,

although we realise that this depends on their context and how this might change in the future.

Nevertheless, we found differences in the local researchers in the North Rupununi; most of them had been part of a previous participatory video and local cinema project (facilitated by two of the authors), and during that time were not able to articulate so well the more 'participatory' aspects of participatory video. We found that now that they were adept at the technological aspects of participatory video (and with more experience of the overall technique), they were more interested in how participatory video could help their communities and bring about desired changes, although they, like the community members, only entered the participatory video process during project implementation: "because I believe in what the project is about, local solutions for local people., and being more responsible in planning, generally being prepared for things"; "if we as local, work with the communities, people would communicate, but this is our local people, this is why I choose to be part of the project"; "to have a wider base of experience on how the participatory video process can influence development, policy maker, decision making, governance". An academic on the project makes the point: "it is important to teach them [community] some basic filming skills and rules (e.g. long shots etc.) that they can use to tell their stories. This [technical skills] seems to be taken for granted – none of the theoretical literature seems to recognise this". There is a virtuous cycle between tool familiarity and identifying potential benefits; if a critical mass of community members have access to computers, video

recorders, projectors, and the skills to operate these, then participatory video can truly become a technique “owned” by the community. Moreover, through developing technical skills, there is a growth in awareness of other possible goals participatory video can help to reach such as fostering discussions in the community, and with other communities and policy makers.

However, building community capacity for operating video cameras and associated techniques, and then subsequent training in editing to produce a concise and engaging piece, requires immense resources, both in terms of time (long-term and repeated engagement) and excellent facilitation skills (Mistry et al., 2009). During interviews, one project researcher stated that ICT training previously provided had to be carried out from scratch since many community members had lost capacity in the intervening period of four months. In addition, considerable time is needed to move from acquiring technical competences to using them in a participatory interactive process (Eade, 2007). For academics, time is often in short supply, and “capacity building” is certainly not a metric for institutional audit exercises such as the UK’s Research Assessment Exercise (RAE). As Pain et al (2011. p. 184) states “one visible legacy of RAE is a substantial increase in high quality scholarly articles situated in anti-neoliberal, post-colonialist, anti-sexist, anti-racist, anti-globalisation, pro-humane politics; but not necessarily a growth in engagements beyond the journal article that might contribute directly to these struggles”. We found that academics are consistently negotiating and making compromises on their

participatory video aspirations, juggling their ideals with the realities of doing participatory video (as discussed by Shaw, 2012).

In addition, there is a strong ethical argument against promoting a technocentric approach to participatory video. As Capstick (2012) states: “it is vital that technical skills in filmmaking are not given precedence over the broader social and psychological benefits of participation...the rapid, hands-on learning of video equipment use stressed in [standard] definitions of participatory video is, in fact, much less important than making adaptations to the process which allow each person to take part on his or her own terms” (p.2). However, in this paper we argue that technical competence is not necessarily in opposition to emancipatory ideals. Confidence in using the technology can result in a shift of participant interest, away from technocentric aims, and towards social concerns.

Bennett and Schurmer-Smith (2002) point out the empirical success of video strictly depends on its content. They discuss how they were able to record special events, whereas participants would not allow them to film family quarrels. We would add that video content can change according to people’s motivations. For example, local community members saw participatory video as one way of preserving their traditions and passing it on to younger generations – this meant that some people decided to include aspects they found important in relation to history, traditional skills etc in their videos, rather than answering project questions. Although this can “demonstrate the degree of ownership exercised [...] over the



process and products” (Kindon, 2003, p.148), it can bring with it tensions with other members of the project. The local researchers are at the forefront of these dilemmas; in order to please local people, they themselves can end up going in the direction of shooting aspects more linked to what people want to record than what the more 'emancipatory' project goals would demand filming.

Also, in this process community motivations can become researchers' motivations. We found that when local researchers in the North Rupununi saw that a particular topic engaged local communities, and saw people starting to participate, they felt as if their goal (being participative through using the video) had been achieved, regardless of content or how people's engagement took place. Similarly, in Tumucumaque, academics found that local researchers had a strong motivation to learn technical skills within participatory video. Faced with this need (and also possessing strong personal motivations of transferring knowledge), training per se began to be the focus of the participatory video activities rather than the social goals of the project. As one of the academics points out: “we started to call them [referring to the Tumucumaque local researchers] ‘students’ because they kept on calling us ‘professors’. It is a professor-student-class relationship we are experiencing. But there's nothing we can do about it, without the training they can't work”. These examples clearly show how motivations of different participants can affect the decision-making during the participatory video process. The risk is that this could lead to a partial loss of a common shared goal, privileging the “paying

back” to local communities for their participation and things they are interested in and potentially limiting overall project objectives.

## **Conclusions**

To date, there is little evidence in the literature that communities themselves are the primary champions and users of participatory video. Our analysis confirms this tendency. Participatory video is still a process that is led by external funding and specialised CSOs/academic institutions. Full ownership of the participatory video process by communities is still limited by access to technology and human capacity. And although communities receive benefits, they are significantly more mundane than the headlines provided by participatory video proponents. In our view, supporting the ultimate beneficiaries of participatory video, the communities themselves, could be enhanced by:

- involving all participants in project conceptualization, thereby allowing differing motivations to emerge and be discussed from the start;
- taking into account participants’ drivers for supporting a facilitated participatory video project versus their desire for a professional video production;
- appropriately integrating the participatory process into existing livelihood activities and governance processes;
- fostering technological capacity in the form of training, equipment and Internet connectivity for sustaining participatory video to allow emancipatory ideals time to develop;

- undertaking ongoing evaluation with participatory video participants in different project stages to assess how various and continuously evolving motivations guide people to participate in the process.

We recognise that the technical motivations of some participants, *within this particular context*, are just as valid as the higher-level "emancipatory" motivations of others – indeed, one outcome of our investigations is to place equal weight on long-term technical capacity (both skills and equipment) rather than the exclusive focus on the “final emancipator” documentary. Motivations are often subtle and multilayered, and surfacing them could lead to conflict and/or non-participation. Nevertheless, participation may be severely limited if participatory video facilitators went into a situation with predetermined assumptions about what participants want. A significant component of the participatory video process, therefore, needs to include an explicit and open exploration of motivations using an adaptive research approach (Reed and Peters, 2004) and constantly asking “why are we doing participatory video?”.

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