
Article

Video Diary Data Collection in Research with Children: An Alternative Method

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Abstract

The study of children's experiences in relation to various life situations is an essential task that imposes certain requirements on the researcher's choice of method for data collection. In this paper the author describes the use of video diaries as a method in child research, discussing its opportunities and limitations. Although video diary studies are still not particularly widespread, their use is predicted to increase as children become increasingly familiar and comfortable with the technology. Video diaries offer a useful supplement to more conventional methods as they are capable of eliciting data that would not otherwise be obtained.

Keywords: qualitative methods, video diaries, children

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Introduction

In this paper we focus on the use of video diaries as a method of data collection in research with children. We consider both its applicability for the pursued objectives and the ethical concerns incumbent on researchers. The method has been applied in an ongoing project, Millions of Stars, focused on obtaining knowledge of children's handling of serious cancer illness in a parent, the aim of which is to ensure the best possible care for the affected families. The basis of the article is formed by experiences from the project, supported by studies of the literature.

What is a video diary?

A video diary is a digitized diary used for research with purposes similar to those of studies using written diaries; that is, the collection of data on informants' lives over an extended period. The informants are supplied with a video camera and receive the necessary instruction on camera use and maintenance. They keep the video camera in their homes for an agreed period, for example one month. During this period the informants conduct a daily camera session in which they share information with the researcher concerning their feelings, reflections, and other matters relating to the day and its events. Technically, time and date of shooting are visible for the researcher. If the child regrets a shot, it is possible to rerecord without showing the researcher, and if the child regrets participating in the project, it is possible to delete the whole shooting. Because children often have a busy day with friends, after-school jobs, and leisure activities, it might be difficult for them to remember the daily session. It is therefore recommended that the camera session be scheduled for the same hour each day, for example just after the evening meal, thus creating a routine. After the agreed period, the camera is returned to the researcher for review and analysis of the tapes.

Background and previous research

Gaining knowledge of children's experiences in relation to various life situations is an essential task for researchers. This knowledge is useful for professionals to ensure support and care for children in various situations, whether in relation to abusive behaviors, their own illness, or where a parent is seriously ill or dying. Using children as informants places large demands on the researcher with regard to the method of data collection. In our project, video diaries were used in combination with qualitative research interviews for a three-phase study, the first of which consisted in an interview, followed by a month-long period with video diary recording. The last stage was a final interview that partly allowed us to obtain further information on details in the video diaries and partly provided an opportunity to ask the children about their experiences with the method. Our choice of video camera recording was based on the assumption that this data collection method would be suitable with contemporary Danish children as they are familiar with the medium and its technology.

At present, video diaries have been used for data collection in only a few studies (e.g., Noyes, 2004), probably because the method represents a relatively new approach in research. We therefore had no possibility of documenting this paper by reference to a wide range of studies. Instead, it is based on studies that use video for observing purposes, in some cases supplemented by written diaries, and on experiences gained in our own project.

Our position is that the video diary method is particularly well suited for child research, and we find several arguments in support of seeking alternatives or supplements to the traditional research interview. A crucial aspect of this methodological issue is the discussion whether differences exist between child and adult research, and, if so, what distinguishes the two types of research. Several researchers have pointed out that although the adult researcher has relatively little trouble in understanding the world of

other adults, it is more difficult for him or her to understand a world from a child's point of view (Fine & Sandstrøm, 1998; Punch, 2002; Solberg, 1996). As adults we tend to believe we understand children because we were once children ourselves, but even so, we will have forgotten or "unlearned" elements of the child culture. This makes it particularly important for the researcher working with children to develop good rapport with the children so that they are given the opportunity to comment on their own world and their own experiences.

Another difference stems from children's potentially greater vulnerability because of the asymmetrical balance of power between the adult researcher and the child informant (Punch, 2002). Although today's children arguably play a prominent role and are allowed a large influence in society and in family matters, they are generally conditioned to an asymmetric power relationship with adults. Besides, much of children's lives are controlled by adults, as illustrated, for example, by the requirement for them to follow school rules, obey bedtimes, and so on. Conversely, adults' roles put them in a position of control and "power" over children. In consequence, researchers do not only have to reflect on the choice of method; their own roles in relation to the child informant also need to be considered. When children are involved in research, a number of aspects should be taken into account; for example, that children's means of verbal self-expression are limited, their experiences of the world are restricted, and their attention spans are often shorter than adults' (Boyden & Ennew, 1997). Individual as well as age-related differences exist, but generally children's skills in these areas are less developed when compared to adult competences.

These factors would support the argument for research methods that are tailored especially for children's skills and interests. This was illustrated in the case of an informant in our project. Several times in the course of the first interview, he had to leave the room to have something to eat, talk to his cat, or just move about. The consideration of children and their competence levels had led several researchers into methodological reflection in relation to child research, which has resulted in the use of photos, diaries, drawings, and so on (Nesbitt, 2000; Punch, 2002). In some contexts a combination of traditional research methods and methods suited to children may be useful.

Following the traditional interview method, data are collected in the same way as with adults, but by combining this with the video method, allowance is made for children's disadvantages with regard to language skills, their capacity for concentration, and their need for confidence when interviewed by an unfamiliar adult. Thus, a combination of methods can make the data collection process more interesting for child informants while being effective in generating relevant data (Punch, 2002).

Opportunities

We find it essential to explore the specific opportunities and limitations inherent in the use of video diaries for research and to identify advantages that cannot be achieved through the use of more traditional research methods such as the qualitative research interview. For contemporary children and adolescents, who have grown up with reality television shows such as *Big Brother* (Endemol, 2001-2004) and *Popstars* (Metronome, 2001-2003), videos are familiar and confidence inspiring (Noyes, 2004). At present, there is no widespread use of the video diary for research purposes, but because of their familiarity with the audiovisual media, the younger generation might feel more confident with sharing their personal narratives (Rich, Lamola, Gordon, & Chalfen, 2000). This was evident in our study as the children immediately felt on home ground when the camcorders were handed out to them. One informant in particular was very adept with the camera, for example when he used it to supplement his commentary. On one occasion, 12-year-old Michael was sitting in front of the camera saying that he had had such a good day because the decoration of his new room had been completed. It had been painted in a super cool color, he told the camera, and spontaneously supported his observation with a pan around his room. Having thus documented his narrative, he put the camera back in place and continued the diary recording.

Video diaries also offer the opportunity to collect information on informants' thoughts, feelings, and actions over an extended period. Gaining a deeper understanding of another person would usually require that longer or repeated periods be spent with him or her. As video diary recordings can be sustained over a longer period, however, they offer a practical way of obtaining valuable historical, educational, and biographical material (Moinian, 2006). By combining them with an initial qualitative research interview, which typically covers a shorter period (Punch, 2002), the researcher and the child have an opportunity to get on friendly terms with each other before the camcorders are handed out. This relationship would qualify as an I-you relationship, according to Buber (2007), whose thinking is relevant here as it underscores the importance that this relationship seems to have for the child's attitude to the camera. For some informants the camera might become a sympathetic, sensitive, and loyal friend, an attentive ear that they can turn to for a talk about their thoughts and feelings (Moinian, 2006). If a trustful relationship between the child and the researcher is attained, there is a possibility that the camera can take the place of the researcher, thus giving it the role as audience, confidant, adviser, and friend (Noyes, 2004). This personification was evident in our study, especially in the case of 16-year-old Peter, who used the camera as a conversation partner. Rather than addressing a "Dear diary," he spoke directly to the researcher who had interviewed him previously. He would start the daily recording by saying, "Today I've got something to tell you" or "It is probably going to be a bit boring today, because I have no news to tell you." Several of the children also used the video diary for further reflections on the themes discussed in the interview. Thus, Christian had found it very difficult to talk about his feelings, especially his very pronounced angry emotions, but the video diary gave him an opportunity to reflect further on this, and he subsequently indicated that it had helped him to overcome a problem.

In the current project the researcher benefited greatly from the opportunity to examine both verbal and nonverbal expressions among the children, testimonies that were sometimes at odds. For example, on some days Michael's body language would deviate from his norm, which was familiar to the researcher from, for example, the episode with his room. On one occasion, as he told the camera about a good day he had spend playing cards at his grandmother's house because his mother had been admitted to the hospital with a serious complication, the researcher was able to gather that Michael handled a difficult situation by redefining it into something positive, but it was also clear that this could not remove his anxiety and uneasiness about the situation. It is evident that by giving a camera to the informants, researchers can learn about aspects of their lives that would not otherwise be accessible, among other reasons because the method allows for an examination of both verbal and nonverbal data (Joseph, Griffin, & Sullivan, 2000). Noyes (2004) has compared the data he obtained through interviews with children with data generated by video diaries and concludes that diary data clearly have a more profound quality, eliciting data of a more compelling, narrative character. There seems to be no doubt that video data can become an important element in vitalizing qualitative research projects (Camic, Rhodes, & Yardley, 2003).

A distinction must be made between written diaries and video recorded diaries, and between structured and unstructured diaries. One of the problems with written diaries is that they depend on the children's writing skills, whereas the advantage of video diaries is clearly that those who have difficulty expressing themselves in writing are offered the opportunity to use the spoken language (Larsson, Lilja, & Mannheimer, 2005; Maikler, Broome, Bailey, & Lea, 2001; Punch, 2002). This is supported by Morrow (2001), who reported a study that required children to use the written medium, but as a 13-year-old child was unable to read or write, he had to be provided with a tape recorder. In another study, Minnis and Padian (2001) compared adolescents' experiences with recorded telephone diaries to written diaries, thus demonstrating that young people clearly preferred the former. The reasons for this were found to be that recording was easier than writing the diary and that the telephone diary did not affect the participant emotionally as much. Furthermore, telephone diary reports were more informative than written ones. We have been unable to identify any studies that highlight the difficulties of young people who stutter or those who are too shy or experience other difficulties in relation to video diaries. However, this should be taken in consideration by the researcher, and the opportunity to use written diaries must be offered to such groups.

In comparison to interviews, video diary materials might offer a richer body of data (Noyes, 2004). Besides, the video offers the advantage of allowing the researcher to replay the recordings several times to scrutinize a detail and correct possible misconceptions (Halimaa, 2001; Joseph et al., 2000; Morse, Beres, Spiers, Mayan, & Olson, 2003). Analyzing the videos is a laborious task, but it is relatively simple to transform the material into writing. As the video medium carries nonverbal data, which is difficult to give a definite interpretation, greater demands are made both on researchers' knowledge of each child and their analytical skills. Video diaries also give researchers with narrative interests the opportunity to focus on the diary sequences' ability to create "the story to be told" (Larsson et al., 2005, p. 272).

Limitations

The most important limitation is using video diaries stems from the inherent lack of opportunity to immediately probe the information given by the informants. This applies in particular to the nonverbal material, which presents the greatest difficulty for the interpreter, but is true also for the verbal material. Meeting the informant in an interview session allows the researcher to verify and supplement his or her interpretations immediately, but this option does not exist where only video diaries are used, with the result that the researcher's interpretations might have to stand alone (Sorensen, 1989). The credibility of a study depends to a large degree on the researcher's opportunity to test what he or she has seen and heard on the tape. In the reported project, the interviewer took note of this insight by scheduling a second interview with the informants after she had reviewed the videotapes. This enabled her to check her thoughts and interpretations of the video sequences with the informants so that any unresolved question could be settled.

Another limitation stems from the informants' freedom from the researcher control exercised in a face-to-face interview. Although the children were encouraged to use the camera at the same hour every day, the researcher was not present in the period and had no way to ensure that they actually did so. If they did not feel like taping a certain day they could choose not to. Consequently, they were able to prepare themselves before facing the camera, which gave them the opportunity to reflect on what it would be appropriate to say, or to put up an act in front of the camera (Camic et al., 2003). Likewise, they might have avoided recording at times when they felt unable to control their emotions and worried about crying in front of the camera (Morse et al., 2003). This demonstrates the importance of the children's trust in the researcher for them to join the study wholeheartedly and use the camera as prescribed (Halimaa, 2001).

The children's experiences

When interviewing the children a second time, the researcher asked them about their experiences using the camera. None of the children had any kind of technical problems using the camera. They all found it a little peculiar to talk to an anonymous camera, so they chose to identify the camera with the researcher, who they knew from the first interview. Twelve-year-old Michael said that for him it was peculiar to talk to the camera in the beginning but he got used to it and found the possibility of telling about his thoughts and feelings very deliberating. Sixteen-year-old Peter found that talking to the camera could make him see things more clearly and prepare him to talk to his friends about his thoughts and feelings.

Ethical concerns

Regardless of the chosen method of data collection, research makes demands on the researcher's ethical considerations. The researcher complied with the ethical guidelines that apply to all researchers and followed ethical guidelines for nursing research in the Nordic countries (Northern Nurses Federation [NNF], 2003). The discussion here, however, concerns only ethical questions related to the video diary method.

In choosing to let a child record a video diary, the researcher is faced with two major ethical issues. The first concerns the risks involved in letting an unsupervised child confront a camera to talk about his or her innermost thoughts and feelings, a process that might provoke uncontrollable emotions, such as worries about what will happen to the sick parent, anxiety about losing a parent, or anger directed at the sick parent. The other issue concerns the question of how the child's right to confidentiality is ensured in contexts where the data include both sounds and images, information that, furthermore, is stored in the home for a longer period.

It is essential that the children's confidence be given the highest priority. Data gathering by the video diary method involves two stages with distinct risks and considerations. In the first phase, when children receives the video camera for recording in the home, the primary concern is to ensure that they have access to a place where they can be alone and feel sure that no one is listening when recording take place (Noyes, 2004; Rich et al., 2000). Second, it is important that the child have a safe place to store the recordings with the confidential material. It is not inconceivable that parents or siblings might take an interest in the recordings, partly to know the child's feelings and partly for fear that the child will "inform" on the family. If they were to gain access to the recordings, it would constitute a considerable breach of confidence.

The parents play an important role in research with child informants. They can take the role of research gatekeepers, who refuse research participation on behalf of their children (Savage & McCarron, 2009). As parents' authority over their children includes control of access to them, parental consent is required for the child's participation. The parents are informed and asked to sign the informed consent document (Helseth & Slettebø, 2004). Their need to protect their children must be taken into account, and both children and parents should receive detailed information, both orally and in writing. The unequal relation between parents and children must be taken in account because of the children's dependence on the parents' reactions and imaginable interfering in the project. In our project a joint information session was held for parents and children, in particular about the terms set out above. In the meeting, it was impressed on the parents how important it would be for their children that they could trust that their privacy was respected, and it was underscored that this trust would be vital for the children's freedom to express themselves, something that all parents agreed to respect and live up to. To accommodate the parents' demand for knowledge that would enable them to support their children in the best possible way, they were offered an interview in which children's needs were discussed in general terms, in particular when faced with a situation such as losing a parent. All the parents participated in such interviews and indicated that it had been helpful for them in their efforts to support their children.

In the second phase, when the tapes are handed over to the researcher, the need for confidentiality gives rise to renewed reflection. The children are entitled to enjoy confidentiality and anonymity when the research is reported, although in this context it is difficult to give a more specific description of what this involves (Noyes, 2004). The uniqueness of each child's situation makes it easily recognizable for the immediate family and friends. To the extent that the diaries represent the child's innermost thoughts and feelings about him- or herself and others, it is crucial to prevent data from being recognized or that it appears as if the children are reporting on their families (Ljusberg, Brodin, & Lindstrand, 2007). Ordinary measures, such as the anonymization of names, are insufficient when the child's face can be seen on the recordings (Noyes, 2004): It must be taken into account that informants might be recognized, either by parents or by acquaintances. Respecting secrecy involves that no child can be identified. The researcher must carefully consider what data should be released in reports and articles. Evidently, videotapes can under no circumstances be released without the children's and parent's expressed consent (Noyes, 2004). In the project under discussion, the children's names have been changed and, beyond that, reference is made only to information from the video diaries, which will under no circumstances be shown.

As mentioned above, another ethical issue that we consider to be specific to the video diary method concerns the child's experiences in facing the video without support from another person. The researcher should carefully consider what happens to a child that is left alone in front of the camera as a confidential but silent partner. The main concern is that the child might be harmed by focusing on his or her life situation and by the uncontrollable emotional processes that are provoked (Helseth & Slettebø, 2004; Rich et al., 2000). A definition of the concept of harm seems to be required here. According to Vestby (1999), participation in research, such as doing a video diary, can trigger or exacerbate negative emotional processes in the informant. In this case the child's confiding in the camera might bring him or her in touch with feelings that are difficult to manage. The researcher must be alert to the risk of such negative emotional processes when children are, in effect, encouraged to talk about their worries and frustration by giving them access to a video camera. Making children focus on problems in their lives requires the researcher to be ready to handle the strong feelings and ensure that support is offered. In our project both children and parents were encouraged to contact the researcher if they felt need for this. The research design further ensured that an interview took place two weeks after the child handled in the tapes, and the family was offered follow-up counseling by the researcher. In cases where therapeutic intervention was needed, a psychologist was at participants' disposal.

Conclusion

Video diary data collection is a useful method in child research. The use of video diaries for data collection offers a demanding but rewarding method that can provide further information on children's thinking in vulnerable situations. Provided that the limitations described above and relevant ethical issues are taken in account, video diaries in child research is an excellent supplement to more traditional data collection methods such as the research interview. The use of diaries over an extended period of time gains a deeper understanding of another person's life and gives opportunity to examine both verbal and non-verbal expressions among the children. Diaries are capable of eliciting data that would not be recorded through interviewing, and they give the children an opportunity for sustained reflection and communication in relation to their situation.

Video recording represents a method that will in future become more widespread as the technique becomes increasingly available. However, a more detailed understanding of the applicability of the method requires further systematic analyses.

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