

# Lessons of the Lower Ninth: Methodology and epistemology of video ethnography

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## Abstract

This essay is an account of use and advocacy of video ethnography as a social research method. We focus on the contemporary technology of digital video in contrast to prior methods of ethnographic data collection, using the Lower Ninth Ward of New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina to describe the capture of an infrastructural context. The importance of audio is emphasized, including the sound of silence and natural sound. Comparing camcorders to still cameras, we argue that former are superior for methodological reasons, including vivacity and deflection (the process through which methodological tools construct the boundaries of interaction). We conclude by arguing that video ethnography has important epistemological consequences, representing an opportunity for the expansion of social scientific outputs, understanding, and public engagement.

Published by Elsevier Ltd.

*Keywords:* Video ethnography; Camcorder; Cameras; Audiovisual; Photography; New Orleans; Hurricane Katrina

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...for the Third Age was over, and the Days of the Rings were past, and an end was come of the story and song of those times [1].

## 1. Introduction

Unique moments define different methods and encapsulate their strengths and weaknesses. This article focuses on audiovisual ethnography as a method, and uses our field experiences in the wake of Hurricane Katrina—in some ways the worst natural disaster in American history—as an illustration. Although video data may be used for structured coding and quantitative analysis [2], video ethnography is fundamentally qualitative in nature. It is more revealing to compare it to close cousins, such as traditional ethnography and photographic representation, than to surveys and experimental work.

In his introduction to ethnography for epidemiologists, Michael Agar tells about an episode that occurred in southern India in which he took a packed lunch in his knapsack before walking to a nearby village. The cook placed a lump of charcoal on top of the food, not for cooking but for protection against spirits. That led to discussions with villagers about the occasions (particularly around noontime) and types of people

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(especially young wives and labor migrants) that were particularly liable to danger and attacks, eventually resulting in a greater understanding of village culture and modernizing influences [3]. Agar's story, which he cited as a parable to illustrate participant observation, the importance of context and coherence, and the construction of understanding from problems or "rich points" in fieldwork, may be found in a section with the nostalgic title "the old days."

The "old days" of remote villages and lumps of charcoal are passing. In the new millennium, developments in connectivity, communications technology, and continually evolving media have become so important that the international community came together not once but twice for World Summits on the Information Society. In the fall of 2005, the second summit approached, as did Hurricane Katrina. For one group of sociologists at Louisiana State University, the Hurricane swept away our doubts, and the flood washed away our sociographic sins. It became a defining moment, as epistemology and practice collided, and opportunity and obligation merged. Our team had spent the last few years exclusively in international work—Nairobi, Thiruvananthapuram, Accra, Concepcion, Los Banos. Now we were truly in the eye of the storm, and the storm was at home. As one colleague said, when Katrina hit, "maybe all that experience was just preparation."

In what follows, we outline several considerations for the practice of video ethnography. For the video ethnographer, the social world consists of actors and events. The ideal of video ethnography is the capture of situations, the real occasions of dyadic, group, and crowd interactions, where the dynamics of social life occur [4]. Video ethnography is compatible with the "extended case method" described by Buroway [5], but it does not presuppose a particular theoretical approach.

While our own approach is a form of radical micro-sociology, we do not see a great deal of difference in its sociotechnical application were the investigator to approach his or her subject using Marxist concepts of domination and reproduction. Macro and micro approaches to sociology are uninteresting from the standpoint of data collection, since reified theoretical constructs like "society" cannot be filmed. Close observation of the micro world is not just an option but a necessity. There is only one possibility for the video ethnographer: to film the events and actors within the frame and to embark on a tenacious search for the best possible frame for the longest possible time. In that sense, *video ethnography is the purest form of sociological consciousness*—because it is consciousness rather than theorizing. Theory might tell you what is important, but it will not get you your shot.

In the first section of this essay, we introduce a particular social context, the Lower Ninth Ward of Orleans Parish in early October 2005, about 1 month after the worst natural disaster in American history. Using the Lower Ninth in most of our illustrations, we first describe our initial experience, capturing the infrastructural context of time and place. We then turn to the importance of audio, emphasizing both the sounds of silence and the importance of wild sound. In the next section, we argue that camcorders are superior to cameras for methodological reasons. The degree of vivacity is important here, but also the degree of deflection—the process through which methodological tools construct the boundaries of interaction. Finally, we argue that video ethnography has important epistemological consequences, representing an opportunity for the expansion of social scientific outputs, understanding, and public engagement. While we stop short of proposing that ethnographers completely cease the use of still cameras and stand-alone microphones, we do feel that they are a waste of time and money, anachronistic at best.

## 2. Drive-throughs and infrastructural context

To borrow from Fellini's description of his *Satyricon*, the Lower Ninth Ward of New Orleans embodied "the infinite variety of life." In the period after Hurricane Katrina, even as the waters were being pumped from the now famous Ward, Hurricane Rita swept through the makeshift levees and the Lower Ninth flooded again. In early October, when the water was finally gone, on the first day residents were allowed back, we received permission to enter. Not knowing where the main breach occurred and disoriented—like many of the residents themselves—we passed the checkpoints but turned the wrong way, right off St. Claude into the Holy Cross neighborhood.

And so it was that our first interviews were in the "lower" Lower Ninth. The houses were demolished. Rubble and belongings littered the streets and yards. There were a few residents—every third or fourth block.

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