



Capturing Christmas: The Sensory Potential of Data from Participant Produced Video

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Abstract

In this paper, we discuss our use of participant-produced digital footage of family Christmases, collected as part of a larger project exploring family backgrounds and family traditions. The audio-visual recording (and subsequent dissemination) of these otherwise difficult-to-access domestic celebrations provides important insights into the multi-dimensional, multisensory, physical and situational nature of such family traditions. With their blend of genre styles – from narrated documentary to home-movie style wobbly camera work – the 'Christmas videos' show both conscious 'displays' of family life and practice (performed for the camera, for the participants and for posterity) and largely unscripted, and sometimes noisily chaotic, interactions. Although videos cannot provide unmediated access into what such traditions are 'really like', in combination with our other data sources the footage has helped to push our thinking about family traditions as being at once intellectualised productions and a series of bodily engagements with a host of practices, understandings, knowledges, family histories, things and people. This form of 'backstage' analytical usage of the video data has been very productive for us. However, we argue that there are ethical issues in publicly presenting such data alongside other forms of data, eg interview data, in a deep sociological analysis of people's personal lives. There is the potential not only for the production of incisive knowledge and insight, but also for a prying and distinctively sociological intrusiveness, and sociologists need to think carefully about how to proceed.

Keywords: Visual Methods, Audio-Visual Media, Digital Video, Family, Tradition, Christmas

Introduction

1.1 Digital technologies make it easy to record personal lives. Indeed, these days it has become commonplace for a range of family events and aspects of personal life to be 'captured' in videos and pictures taken on mobile phones and hand held video cameras, and these images are very often shared with a large online audience via social networking sites and online photo galleries. The near ubiquitous nature of such technologies and that fact that many people are comfortable being filmed in this way, raises some exciting possibilities but also some challenges for sociologists interested in understanding personal and everyday lives. In this paper we explore some of these possibilities and challenges, using the opportunities presented by the medium of an online journal. We discuss, and more importantly we *show*, some of the participant-created footage collected as part of a broader project on family backgrounds, that we have characterised as the 'Christmas videos'. Our intention here is to showcase some of the sensory potential of audiovisual research materials and to show how the participant-created footage has helped inform our broader thinking on 'family traditions' and merged with our analysis of other data sources. This is essentially a methodological paper therefore, and we do not attempt a full-scale analysis of these audiovisual materials nor do we undertake a complete explication of our broader research into family backgrounds and family traditions, some of which is reproduced elsewhere (Mason and Muir 2011). Instead, we provide some insights into the *kinds of* sociological knowledge that such footage can help to create. We also discuss the use of participant video in combination with other materials in a strategy that deploys the videos in a 'backstage' analytical capacity, and we go on to consider the difficult issues involved in publicly presenting analyses using these different kinds of data. We argue that this might be said to constitute an inappropriate yet distinctively sociological form of intrusiveness into people's personal lives that sociologists need to think carefully about.

Eliciting Christmas Videos

2.1 The clips we have included in this paper comprise a small methodological strand of the Family Backgrounds in Everyday Life project^[1]. The project as a whole centred on ethnographic interviews and interactions with forty-eight people (twenty-one couples and six individuals) living in the north-west of England, who defined themselves as couples who came from different family backgrounds^[2].

2.2 The 'Christmas videos' formed a small part of this larger study and were specifically focussed on understanding family traditions. Our focus on self-defined family backgrounds, and the way these played out in the present, had led us to a particular interest in family traditions and rituals as both part of a remembered childhood and as a kind of family inheritance that people might try to recreate, continue or challenge as adults. In the interviews, our participants highlighted the continuing salience of tradition to their lives whilst leading us away from any notion of tradition as a straightforward process of transmission of resources and practices between generations (Mason and Muir 2011). Rather, people's traditions – and the way they spoke about them – conjured a dynamic and interactive sense of time, trajectory, stability and change. The way they did 'family tradition' brought elements of the past into the present, as the term 'tradition' implies, but were also inescapably intertwined with the present as couples and their kin had to navigate the family politics that could determine what traditions, from what parts of the kin network, were carried on and which ones buried in the past.

2.3 In the interviews, Christmas emerged as a particular hub of family tradition, one that could involve the doing and denial of a range of 'traditional' things and could bring differences in family practice into focus. In particular, many of our participants spoke of Christmas as a time that physically brings together different parts of kin networks and/or their different inherited practices, as a time that they looked forward to (or found trying and stressful), and as a time

when there was frequent discussion and debate about how to 'do' Christmas. To aid our understanding of Christmas as an occasion that blends formal celebration with mundane routines and that can bring together disparate parts of kinship networks and family histories, we invited several participants to record their Christmas using small handheld camcorders. In so doing, as with so many other researchers who provide cameras to their participants (cf. Pink 2006: 88), we hoped that our participants could afford us a glimpse into a realm of their private life that would otherwise be difficult for us to access.

2.4 Researcher-prompted participant-produced audiovisual materials – a subset of the broader visual research category that Ramella and Olmos (2005) term 'Participant Authored Audiovisual Stories' – have been a part of the social science toolkit from at least the time of Worth and Adair's (1972) 'Navaho Film Themselves' project. Much of the work in this research genre is designed to gain access to participant worldviews, to facilitate participant self-representation, and, not incidentally, to empower participants by giving them a 'say in the construction of their image', through video diaries for example (Bloustien 1998; Holliday 2001, 2004; Ruby 2000: 219).

2.5 Actually, we are somewhat sceptical about some of the grander claims made for participant empowerment on the basis of giving people video cameras. Part of our scepticism about the emancipatory possibilities of self-representation – or rather, our scepticism about its necessity or inevitability – stems from the demands that such research makes on participants. Although all four of the couples who accepted the cameras were relatively enthusiastic about the project, in subsequent discussion the couples we have called Gareth and Holly and Trevor and Mary told us that they sometimes felt that they would have preferred to be doing and acting rather than recording. Further, the couple who did not complete the recording did so because a recent death in the family made them feel that the recording was too much of a burden on an already heavily weighted day. The fourth couple, the ones we have called Sheila and Richard, also expressed some ambivalence. Sheila mostly enjoyed the process, recording more than anyone else; moreover, she told us that because her mother had fallen ill not long after the recordings were made she was relieved to have a record of what might have been her mother's last Christmas. However, at certain points in the filming she also expressed some fatigue and irritation with the process. Moreover, Richard did not take part in the filming and appears only fleetingly on screen, unwilling to take the stage in the presentation of his family. We mention this discomfort only because it is sometimes assumed (cf. Harper 2002; Prosser and Burke 2006) that research participants can feel more comfortable, or can better articulate their views, with the visual and/or with having greater input into the research process. However, this assumes that all participants will have a particular interest in public self-representation (which they may or may not do) and/or that they will have the same interests as researchers. In our experience, this was not necessarily the case.

2.6 In any event, we did not ask our participants to produce video diaries and indeed we were not seeking the production of a reflexive individual narrative, or a 'story of the self', in that sense (Bloustien and Barker 2003: 69). Our primary interest was in capturing the performance and display of inter-subjective relations between people, and being able to see and hear how those were set in and amongst the spaces, places, materialities and atmospheres of domestic environments.

2.7 Certainly, we were keen to see how particular couples and kin groups might represent their relationships and activities. We were interested in both the potential of the footage for (informal) elicitation and for its auto-ethnographic elements (Bloustien 1998); that is, we wanted to see what people thought was important about their Christmas, what they chose to film, and how

they chose to frame it. However, we were also genuinely interested in the subjects of the films and, in particular, we wished to take advantage of the sensory possibilities afforded by audio-visual media (cf. MacDougall 2006). That is, by asking our participants to record these parts of their domestic lives, we hoped to draw on the audio-visual medium's ability to 'record nuances of process, emotion and other subtleties of behaviour and communication' and to 'understand the sparkle and character of an event, a place, a people' (Collier and Collier 1986: 144).

2.8 In doing this, we did not expect the footage to provide unmediated access to the private lives of our participants; rather, we were interested in the ways in which participants engaged in forms of family display (Finch 2007) and the performance of tradition. When ranged alongside interview materials, such performativity provided significant insight into the ways that 'tradition' and 'family' were conceived and practiced. Yet we found more than this too: as is almost axiomatic in visual research, images can overflow the intentions of their makers. Indeed, James Moran (2002) has suggested that amateur video is able to provide a more complex picture of family life than traditional snapshots and home movies – which critics like Slater (1991) describe as presenting a normative and commoditised vision of the nuclear family – because the technology allows for longer recording times that can, eventually, capture relatively unguarded behaviours. This possibility is manifest in the multi-person events recorded for this project: people shout and speak out of turn, children cut in front of the camera, cues are missed, people mishear questions, participants in family settings and family traditions exhibit expressions of boredom or discomfort. All of this can undercut neat stories of family or tradition, whilst at the same time giving hints of the kinds of multi-sensory dynamics and atmospheres that characterised people's family Christmases (and other significant family events).

The footage

3.1 The three sets of recordings that were made were not intended to be, and indeed could not be, 'representative' of our wider participant group, let alone of a wider population, nor even necessarily of the Christmases of the participants in question. In using them we are not claiming that these are typical or normative families, or that they stand for or represent key differences in family traditions, and these concerns were not driving our identification of these particular couples. Actually, we were fairly pragmatic in asking couples who were likely to say yes on the basis of their enthusiasm and engagement with the research thus far. For moral and ethical reasons, we avoided selecting couples whom we suspected might have been undergoing particular personal crises and difficulties. And for practical reasons, to do with the level of resources available to us for an essentially minor part of the study, we only asked a small number of participants to make the videos. Essentially, the films were something of a methodological experiment, intended to give us a more multi-dimensional taste of what Christmas was like for some of our participants than interviews could provide, and to see how they chose to present it to us as observers^[3].

3.2 We gave our participants minimal instruction about the filming: their sole task was to record (parts of) their Christmas in whatever way they saw fit. As it happens, all ended up filming other things alongside Christmas Day, with Sheila and Richard filming New Years Eve and a birthday, and Gareth and Holly and Trevor and Mary filming the days around Christmas. All of our filmmakers had previously been interviewed for the project and knew that we were interested in family backgrounds and, to some extent, in family traditions. As we discuss in more detail below, the recordings reflect this awareness, with some of the footage clearly presenting family practices to an audience interested in traditions. Yet at the same time there is a move through genre styles: the clips include 'objective' narration, direct address and explanation to camera, and a mixture of observational mode (or 'fly on the wall') documentary style filming and home-

movies. Further, in each case, to varying degrees, the early clips begin with explicit narration, and sometimes on camera explanations, which segue into mostly silent recording of the action unfolding as each recorded day goes on.

3.3 The camcorders used were inexpensive and simple but nonetheless quite stylish and did not *look* cheap. Bloustien and Baker (2003) have noted that participants in visual-methodology research can be unenthusiastic when asked to use cheap disposable cameras. The cameras were also small, easily held, and easy to use. The disadvantage of the particular model used was its inability to be placed on a tripod or to sit stably on a table. Hence, participants had to carry the camera when it was in use; some, admittedly, found this a chore yet because the camera was not static it was, in some cases, passed around family members to interesting effect, as we shall see. Another technical limitation was the limited recording time: the SD cards storing the footage held a maximum of four hours' worth. This necessarily cut down the amount of footage that participants could record and required them to make decisions about what could and what could not be recorded. Although in some ways this might have been a limitation, it nonetheless allowed us to see the choices that participants made in creating their recorded version of Christmas (and in any case, some participants still recorded clips of continuous action that lasted for up to an hour). As the extracts show, participants did not all make the same kinds of decisions about subject matter or recording style. We also think that the limited recording time meant that the whole task did not become too great a burden for participants, and they knew that we were not expecting real time coverage of the whole of the Christmas and New Year season.

3.4 We shall now introduce the recordings. We suggest it is best to click on, watch and listen to them in the order that they appear, and to read our commentary and discussion in that sequence too.

Mary and Trevor^[4] – an educational performance of Christmas Tradition

3.5 Trevor (47, banker) and Mary (47, nutritionist) live in northwest England with their two children. For the project they recorded four days of Christmas, two with the 'nuclear family', one with Trevor's sister and his parents, and one with Mary's parents. Our extracts show scenes from the first two of these.

3.6 In the early footage the focus is very much on the children and their enthusiasm about Christmas and its associated rituals is almost palpable. In one characteristic scene, filmed on the night of Christmas Eve, Trevor 'interviews' the children, Charlotte and Oliver, asking them to describe the family traditions connected with the Christmas tree and its decorations. The children, dressed in pyjamas and visibly excited about the following day, explain at some length the procedures of tree decoration. Their explanation is clearly for the camera (and the researchers), but it also shows a comprehensive knowledge, and practised way of telling, that suggests a deep familiarity and concern with these practices. This kind of knowledge – at once practised and felt – is similarly evident in the following clip in which Alice describes how the family tradition of 'the Jesus twins' came about.

Clip 1 . The Jesus Twins (1.02 minutes)

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3.7 However, Christmas is clearly not all about the children and the latter footage moves on to show some of the other kin interactions and obligations centred on this period.

Clip 2. Photographing the table (24 seconds)

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3.8 The clip linked to above is from the Boxing Day dinner at Trevor's sister's house, with his parents present also. There is much less of a focus here on child-centred 'traditions'. We can see an elegant table, special food, best clothes. We can hear soothing classical music in the background, and there is a sense of amiable formality in the proceedings and an overall atmosphere of cultivated sophistication and style of which Trevor's sister is clearly proud (in another piece of footage she explains the long processes involved in bringing this meal to table). This pride has ultimately been ritualised in the 'tradition' of photographing the dinner table. The demeanour of the children is different, and less relaxed, when they are out of their home setting, until Oliver 'naughtily' makes a noise.

3.9 Trevor and Mary produced a number of clips like this. For the most part, their Christmas is presented as structured and consensual; indeed, Trevor had already told us that they always know what they are going to be doing for the whole Christmas period, that one thing, one ritual, one family visit, always followed another in predictable sequence. The clips they recorded were often, though not always, instructive in style. The majority of the footage is self-consciously about traditions in a positive sense – whether old or new – and they often have a focus on the children. The style of engagement with the children is educational so that the video is part of a kind of orchestrated learning and display of family traditions. For example, the twin Baby Jesus' clip is a nice description of how a particular family practice has come about but the film is also an example of the reinforcement of the 'tradition' – and of a particular parenting style – involving and centring the children, and explaining 'why we do things this way'. It is at once a self-conscious presentation of the family and what they do and a ritualistic retelling of the practice.

The footage shows an investment in how these celebrations are presented to us, the viewers, but also a concern with how the practice is presented and enacted for and by the participants themselves. We do not think this is entirely or only a self-conscious artifice of the medium or the method: such re-tellings, and of course such filmings, can be part of what such events are about – as in the photographs of the dinner table. The children seem schooled in narrating the event because part of the ritual of Christmas is talking about how it should be and how it always is.

Gareth and Holly – A Warm Atmosphere and Smella-vision

3.10 This impression of order and structure, and an explicatory style of filmmaking, contrasts with much of the footage made by the other couples. For Gareth and Holly – two junior civil servants in their mid to late thirties – the style of filmmaking is less didactic; a style that perhaps reflects the nature of what is recorded. They do not have children and there is consequently no particular emphasis on parenting, educational or otherwise, in the clips. There is, as we shall see with the first two clips shown here, some explanation of the action to the presumed viewer but there is fun here too – something that becomes even more evident in the later clips when the camera records family banter, drinking, and a host of tactile engagements as the camera is passed around those present.

3.11 This first clip was taken the night before Christmas and shows Gareth and Holly explaining to camera that they are about to go to the pub. Rather than an ordinary visit this is a special event, something 'we always do', the night before Christmas.

Clip 3. Off to the pub (37 seconds)

3.12 Despite this direct address to camera, this clip is best understood when contextualised with our other materials and knowledge of the family day. As the opening clip suggests, Gareth does not spend all day with Holly but rather, he arrives in the evening after spending the day with his father and stepmother. This day spent apart was the basis for a range of comparisons of family Christmases and family styles made in the interviews, something barely hinted at in the footage to follow for here we only get one side of the family story: the 'relaxed' warmth that Simon attributes to Holly's family Christmas.

3.13 The rest of their footage consists of recordings at Holly's sister's house. Echoing Gareth's explanation of the day as 'manic at times, especially if your sister's shouting at the kids but it, you know, its just warmer', the footage is less structured, more informal than Mary and Trevor's – both in its style of filming, as it moves swiftly from explanation to long un-narrated shots of family action, and in the action taking place.

Clip 4. The Christmas turkey (1 minute)

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3.14 In this clip, Holly and her sister try to convey the sensory qualities of their Christmas through the medium of 'smella-vision'. David McDougall (2006: 52) has noted that smell is one of the senses that visual recordings are least equipped to evoke, although Holly and her sister make a good stab at it here. The attempts at explanation through film began to break down over the course of the day but as they did so, they more clearly began to evoke the physical sense and atmosphere of people interacting.

Clip 5. Brussels sprouts (4.15 minutes)

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3.15 The Brussel Sprouts^[5] sequence, for example, shows informal banter and teasing, and is only partly for the benefit of 'the film' and the researchers: the footage shows people interacting with each other and with the camera as well as acting in front of it. The sequence also references practical knowledge of family likes, dislikes, and tendencies: the sprouts incident dates back to the previous Christmas when some of the family decided to mark sprouts with a cross and if the boys received one they had to eat them (something they were unwilling to do otherwise). Thus the sequence both exhibits and enacts family knowledge.

3.16 Both of the latter clips exude a kind of multi-sensory atmosphere of conviviality and relaxation, fused with tradition and ritual. They both show that such atmospheres are not only produced by the sometimes chaotic coming together of multiple people and groups, but also that they are constituted in multiple registers involving different sounds, smells, sights, materialities, tempos and places.

Sheila and Richard

3.17 Similarly in the following two clips, Sheila (49, social care worker) and Richard (58, builder) provide a window onto a heavily peopled, multi-generational form of Christmas and New Year festivity.

Clip 6. First footing (3.12 minutes)

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Clip 7. Family sing-along (1.35 minutes)

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3.18 Less formal in both filming style, and in apparent subject matter, than Trevor and Mary's Christmas celebrations, Sheila and Richard's footage of Christmas and New Year shows a whirl of people in rambunctious multi-generational engagement with family practices and traditions. (It is also worth noting that the clips we show here are relatively quiet – and therefore more intelligible – extracts from very long takes of busy social activity.) For example, in their attempts to explain – to the researcher and to each other – and to enact the practice of 'first footing' on the New Year, they show the inter and intra generational interactions with a tradition that is collectively brought into being by children and adults but that constantly teeters on the edge of going wrong or not happening at all. This sense of tradition, of family knowledge and memory being evoked and brought into being in the present, is similarly manifest in the way that family history is performed in the scenes of singing, as Sheila exhorts her mother to 'sing barefoot days' and 'remember when we went to Eastbourne'.

3.19 Once again, the clips tell of a multi-sensory vibrant and at times rather chaotic atmosphere. We also get a sense of the differential engagement, demeanour, and perhaps also degrees of enthusiasm of the participants in the practices and in the production of the film itself. We can see from this and the clips from the other couples that traditional practices can involve gentle (and sometimes not so gentle) persuasion and exhortation by some people for others to join in, to 'have fun', and to engage with the traditions being enacted.

Discussion

4.1 What can we learn from the experience of asking participants to film their Christmases? As

we have suggested, our Christmas videos study was a small and methodologically experimental part of a wider project, so what can we say it has contributed to our understandings of family traditions? More generally, what kinds of insight and knowledge are produced by this kind of participant video data, and to what extent are these more than, or different to, the kinds of knowledge we might get from more conventional methods such as interviews?

4.2 The footage undoubtedly provides data in more vital, physical and sensory registers than interviews about these topics could do. Where interviews necessarily depend upon interviewees' powers of description and evocation of these kinds of things, video can provide audio-visual footage that is full of goings on that would be hard for one person to perceive, let alone recount and evoke for an interviewer. This also means that researchers can view and hear aspects of situations, including the presence and role of other people, animals, things, places and so on, that might 'escape' the singular retrospective narrative of an interviewee. On the other hand, we do not always know who or what everything is in a participant produced video, and we cannot always tell what is going on. We do not see the dynamics that go on behind the camera, nor in the significant tranches of time and in the other venues of any of the couples' Christmases, where filming did not take place for whatever reasons. Moreover, our interpretation of the meaning of it all for those involved, or the immediate or longer term context of the particular sequence of footage, are things we have to try to read from the video itself, or accept we cannot know about, unless we have other data or knowledge that we can link it with.

4.3 The specific 'affordances' of the Christmas videos for our interest in family traditions are, unsurprisingly therefore, focussed on the *physical, sensory and situational* nature of the footage. For example, this has helped us come to the following understandings about the nature of tradition:

- *Traditions are partly intellectualised, and partly enacted in situational dynamics involving bodily/sensory/material engagements.*

4.4 Notably, this footage (and especially when taken together with the interviews), helped to propel our thinking about family traditions as both *partially intellectualised* – as in the case of Trevor and Mary's well-explicated family traditions; practices that were at once enjoyable and self-conscious – and as a *series of bodily engagements*. These engagements were not just between people, but with a host of sometimes competing practices and understandings (how you are meant to do 'first footing'), with memory (remembering the words of songs or what we did last year), with things (Brussel sprouts, presents, alcohol), people in the films, and the situations they were immersed in, offered different blends of the self-conscious, intellectualised and the bodily enacted and interacted, but overall the films helped us to understand that what we think of as 'traditions' or 'traditional' are assemblages of these things, rather than simply cerebral sets of rules or belief systems.

- *Performance and 'family display' have a key role in family traditions.*

4.5 Much of the footage occupies a position between 'showing' or 'telling' family practices for the camera – a kind of story of the family – and being itself a kind of family practice; what Janet Finch (2007) has described as 'displaying family', whereby families present themselves both to others and to themselves, in this case by re-enacting family for the camera and creating filmic memories for later consumption. Of course, as Tinkler (2008: 256–257) has observed, one must be careful to not conflate the insights gleaned from 'photo-methods' research such as this with participants' visual practices outside the framework of academic research; the genre and style choices our participants made do not necessarily reflect their more usual practices. Yet the footage does frequently slip into a kind of 'home-mode' (Chalfen 1987) filmmaking and home

videos are a fairly naturalised part of the Christmas experience for many people. This 'home-mode' was true both of their style – with clips shot in chronological order, no attempts at editing, only sporadic attempts at a consistent narrative, and frequent panning shots – but also of their content: a special occasion in which social relationships are displayed, documented and, potentially at least, stored for future consumption. Although the acts of filming were initiated by us, and ostensibly carried out for us, and thus involved some 'performing for the researchers', we think that productions demonstrate that some of these elements of display, performance and recording are also routinely part of Christmas interactions and traditions. So, although we are not claiming that we acquired an 'untainted' or 'natural' view of family display in any simplistic sense, we do think that this method allowed us an insight into versions of the multidimensional, multi-sensory, multi-peopled, multi-thinged and interactional nature of the display and performance of traditions – more so than would, for example, interviews alone.

- *The situational dynamics of family traditions can be non-consensual, ambivalent and chaotic.*

4.6 The videos show clearly that family and Christmas/New Year traditions are not fully participated in or agreed upon by all; they can involve dissent, embarrassment, awkwardness, sulkiness, resentment or just a general discomfort. Although interviews with individuals can and did also tell us about disagreements or a lack of consensus, their narrative logic and the fact that they are usually one person's story, may tend to augur against this. This is not least because the narrator in an interview is not necessarily aware of all the situational dynamics and nuances. But in the videos we have the opportunity to interpret people's facial gestures, interbodily movements, tones of voice and expression, and a general sense of an 'atmosphere' in the proceedings (Brennan 2004, Mason and Muir 2011). Interviews cannot show us, in the same way that a video can, the situational dynamics of consensus or ambivalence and dissent, who is making a face or a 'rude noise', who looks 'stressed out' and so on. In a video we can see that what happens can be a jumble of practices, meanings, innuendos, misunderstandings and mishearings, mild subversion and ambivalence, involving sometimes quite subtle interactive/interbodily exchanges and dynamics. In the clips we see that the kind of display described by Finch can in practice be haphazard, uneven and even chaotic. Rather than the seamless performance of a unified 'family', an ideal set of kin relations, or a single body of 'family tradition', what appears on camera can include a range of different ways of participating in family events: people sit quietly with a pint of beer whilst others sing, people duck the camera, and narrators – charged with a kind of sense-making responsibility in their real time voice-overs – sometimes find themselves in the role of instigator of the action, or conversely at odds with, or perplexed by, what is going on.

- *The situational dynamics of family traditions can enact and make visible physical, sensory and material relations of age, gender, class and culture.*

4.7 We get glimpses or hints in the videos of gendered and generational orders and dynamics in households in who seemed to have and take responsibility for certain things – for example, cooking and serving the turkey, carving it, laying and presenting the table, photographing it, topping up the wine glasses, enforcing the eating practices of young people, differential orientation to certain kinds of food, knowledge of particular local songs or practices, insisting on children's bedtime, joking, leading the singing, narrating the film, and so on. Similarly we can potentially 'read' certain aspects of social class and culture in, and especially perhaps *between*, the different video 'cases'. Contrasting styles and atmospheres between one set of clips and the next can 'hit' the viewer in a visceral kind of way (Mason 2011b), and when we analyse what these contrasts involve there is a range of factors that we know are relevant in what has been

referred to as the 'cultural turn' in the analysis of social class (Devine and Savage 2005). For example, there are contrasts in what people are consuming and in what ways; what they are wearing; what they are eating, where and how; whether the TV is on; whether music is playing; what their houses and Christmas decorations look like; how they talk to each other and to camera; in their accents, intonations and colloquialisms; how loud, quiet, brash or restrained they are; in their inter-physical relations and so on.

4.8 Such data are important for helping researchers get a feel for and insight into the multi-dimensional, multisensory, and embodied ways that personal lives are lived. Social science abstractions about, for example, intergenerational relations, social class, gender relations, and sometimes even tradition itself, can feel too far removed from the vitality of these sorts of dynamics, and video data can be an important corrective. It can help us literally to see inside people's houses, into situated, sensory and physical aspects of their consumption and relational practices, and into interactions and occasions when a researcher cannot, for all kinds of reasons, join in and be present themselves. To paraphrase Collier and Collier (1986: 144), we felt we were getting a sense of the 'nuances' and 'sparkle' of characters, events, places, people. Viewed in this way, this kind of data could potentially provide important insights into a range of phenomena, including how 'intersectionality' – the layering of gender, age, class, culture – can work in physical, sensory and situated ways.

4.9 However, there are also significant limits to the affordances of video data and these are both epistemological and ethical. To begin with, if these data are used in a stand-alone way rather than linked to other forms of data and knowledge, then arguably they are not deep enough. Films can provide glimpses that are sometimes quite profound, but usually quite eclectic and always partial, into aspects of the kinds of phenomena and processes sociologists are interested in. But although they tell us something about, for example, traditions, gender, age, class and culture that other methods cannot, they do not tell us everything we want to know in order to conduct a sociological analysis. For example, tensions or issues around the different backgrounds of partners and their kin, and how these helped configure particular Christmas traditions, are not readily visible in the videos (although we knew about some of them on the basis of the interviews). Similarly, aspects of the celebrations that we knew to be strategies for negotiating particular histories of relationship, cannot be read from the videos alone. And neither, interestingly enough, do we think that the (sometimes different and mixed) social class orientations of the participants, are easily 'readable' from the videos alone, notwithstanding that the videos do give some sensory, physical and situational insight into socio-cultural class practices.

4.10 However, if we then decide to deepen our analysis by using the films side by side with other forms of data, there are difficult ethical concerns to negotiate, arising from the nature of video data on people's personal lives. Anonymity is an obvious issue. In the footage we have presented here, our participants are visible to an audience they did not necessarily imagine and which we might say *cannot* be fully imagined, especially perhaps given the nature of this as an online journal available to readers and search engines alike. We have given people pseudonyms in the text and edited out spoken names in the clips to preserve anonymity as much as possible. To make this task somewhat easier we have not here included the many clips in which large groups of people are introduced, by name, to camera (such introductions were intended for us, as strangers being introduced to the family, but also as a record for posterity). Yet this is clearly a workaround that cannot entirely mitigate the effect of showing participant faces, bodies, gestures and homes. It also means that there is some video data that we as researchers have decided is out of bounds for public presentation, notwithstanding its potential analytical and sociological value.

4.11 There is also a great deal of screen time occupied by people who were not fully part of the research and the written informed-consent procedure that we adopted (although they did agree to the film being shot for the purposes of research and so in that sense did provide consent). For such people, understandings of the project may be hazy; some people were also visibly uncomfortable with being filmed (and perhaps might not have been recorded at all if the researcher were in charge of the camera). Again, we have excluded clips where we felt this might be the case. But despite our editorial efforts, these people could potentially speak and act in ways they may not (on reflection) want others to hear or see. We have additional concerns in relation to some of the children who featured in the videos. Although their parents gave consent for their appearance, and for use of all the footage, the children's own consent was effectively achieved through a combination of parental proxy and their own willingness to participate in the films. Although, we have included some clips featuring children, as well as some adults who were not part of the written-consent process, we have selected these carefully and also made the decision to hold back others.

4.12 Those who did give direct written consent to film and be filmed obviously had more control over their presentation – either via performance or by redacting those clips they did not like (although, as it happens, none chose to do so). But no participants are immune to the potential problem that at some point in the future they may regret having given consent. We therefore think it is vital that clips are chosen with great care, and we have endeavoured only to select clips that we believe are non-controversial and unlikely to become a cause of regret for those involved (see Wiles et al 2008 for a discussion of ethics in visual research).

4.13 These issues become even more problematic if we want to follow the full imperative of a substantive sociological analysis (rather than a discussion of method as contained in this article) and to present video and other data about people's personal lives side by side in a deep and integrated analysis. Ethics aside, there would be clear epistemological benefits in doing this. The kinds of sensory and physical interactions that the Christmas videos involve are capable of breathing a vitality into sociological analyses that can otherwise seem one-dimensional and static. Without using video clips to communicate, one has to have considerable literary skill as a writer, and imagination as a reader, to conjure up the kind of vitality the clips convey. Moreover, situating the material side by side would enable the partialities and eclectic nature of video clips to be absorbed and extended through the much more detailed and systematic narratives and accounts of people's personal lives, family Christmases and family backgrounds, which were gleaned in the interviews.

4.14 However, whilst we have felt happy to present video clips here in the context of a methodological discussion, we have adopted a different strategy for the presentation of our substantive analysis elsewhere. Essentially, the Christmas video data has embellished an analysis we were developing on the basis of our other methods, and helped us appreciate the sensory and physical dynamics of traditions and social relations. Where we have both interview data and video footage from study participants, we can make links between them in our analytical practice, if not in our presentation of data. Where we do not, our experience of the Christmas videos study has enabled and encouraged us to use our sociological *imaginings* and take inspiration from the small number of films we do have, to attune ourselves to the more sensory, physical and sensory possibilities and hints in cases where we do not.

4.15 In terms of sociological analysis then, the data produced by this method have helped give us insight into some of the multi-sensory and multi-dimensional possibilities that we might imagine lie behind or beyond data produced by our other methods. They provided us with better and more inspired ways of seeing/thinking/hearing in relation to *other* data in our study.

Crucially, the films helped fire our research and analytical imaginations about what the lived worlds of our participants – including those who did not participate in the Christmas video exercise – might be like in their messy, sensory and physical complexity. Video data can therefore inform sociological thinking and analysis in a rather backstage way, without necessarily being used or presented publicly in themselves.

4.16 In this article we have presented a selection of the Christmas video clips but we have stopped short of tying these in with a detailed analysis of those people's interview transcripts. Elsewhere we have produced analyses of family traditions and family backgrounds that explicitly use our interview data, and that is informed in this backstage way by elements of the Christmas videos along with other ethnographic observation (see Mason and Muir 2011). We have done this because we feel that the results of this merged data becoming public would potentially be too personally intrusive for the participants in our study. There were clips we did not select because of some of these factors, even though they could provide important sociological insight (and often made for good viewing). Equally, we have significant amounts of other data from our ethnographic interviews that could potentially be used to make sense of particular parts of the footage – where we know, for example, about a particular context of difficult family relationships, or of gender relations, or of the playing out of particular differences in family background. But again we felt it would be too intrusive to draw this knowledge into an article where people's faces, bodies, homes, and quite intimate family practices, are available for public viewing alongside things that they said in interviews away from the camera.

4.17 Readers may feel we have gone too far, or not far enough, in these respects. In some ways, in our digital age, where 'reality TV' and self publicity through social networking is commonplace, we think it may sometimes be surprisingly easy for researchers to seek and gain 360 degree entry into certain aspects of people's lives, in full colour vision and sound. In that case, we would argue there is a strong moral imperative to think carefully about what we do with the footage and the data, and how we communicate these things in the process of sociological analysis and theory. The issue for sociology is that if 360 degree sound and vision is accompanied by searching and robust sociological analysis, then there is the potential not only for the production of incisive knowledge and insight, but also of a prying and distinctively sociological intrusiveness. Sociologists need to be prepared to think through not just how they can better know about, but also *how much* (or how little) they should *show* of people's everyday worlds and personal lives.

Notes

¹ The Family Backgrounds project was a component of the Real Life Methods programme (ESRC grant no RES-576-25-5017), part of the ESRC National Centre for Research Methods. The family backgrounds project explored the way that people viewed and framed their interpersonal relationships and life trajectories in relation to their geographic, social, and cultural origins. In particular, we were concerned with couple relationships and focused our attention on couples where partners identified themselves as having 'different' family backgrounds; because such difference was self-identified it included widely recognised markers of difference such as ethnicity, socio-economic status, and religion, as well as more ineffable, but personally significant, differences such as parenting styles, modes of emotional expression, taste, and values. Our concern here was only tangentially with notions of 'difference'. More important for this study was the role that such self-perceived 'difference' played in emphasising the role of 'background' in personal life. We were interested in how elements of 'background' including how and where one was brought up, and what one's family of origin and wider kin were 'like',

remained as a presence in contemporary interpersonal relationships. The project has some links with important work on mixedness and transnational kinship (see for example Gouldbourne et al, 2010; Smart 2007, chapter 4)

² The majority of our participants – thirty three – identified as White British, but there was also one Russo-Ukrainian, one Bulgarian, one Iranian, one Egyptian, three British Afro-Caribbean, one British Greek, one British-Italian, four Irish, one white American, and one white Australian. In addition to a range of (nominal) Christian backgrounds there were two Jewish and two Muslim participants.

³ This kind of methodological experimentation fed into a wider strategy called 'facet methodology' where the aim is to use sometimes very small 'mini-studies', conceived as substantive and methodological facets in a metaphorical gemstone, to create flashes of insight into the phenomenon under exploration, rather than to try to directly represent or fully document it (Mason 2011a)

⁴ All names are pseudonyms

⁵ Brussels Sprouts are a 'traditional', but not universally loved, component of the British Christmas Dinner

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