We need to talk about ethics: using video methodology in child and family social work research

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Introduction

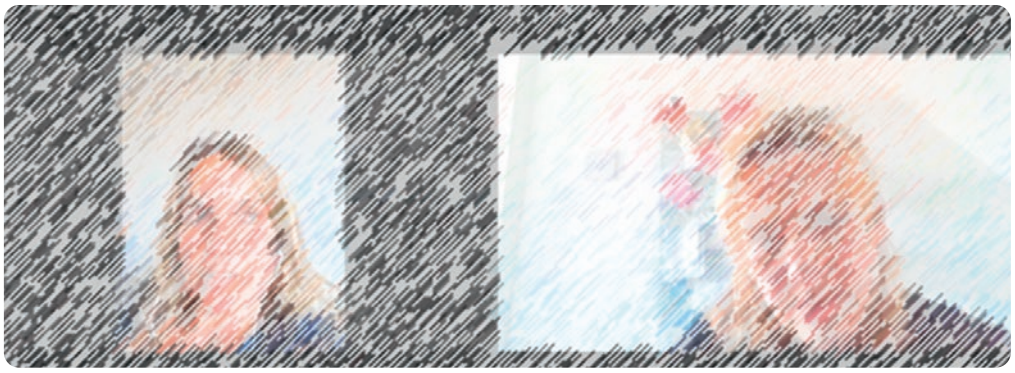
The use of video methodology in social work research has the potential to bring attention to and provide a detailed picture of the 'invisible trade' of social work practice that mostly remains hidden due to practice occurring in the family home (Pithouse, 1987). The adoption of video methodology is relatively rare in social work research, though it has been used more widely in other social science disciplines, such as education (Chan et al., 2019). The methodological opportunities presented by video relate to the 'very graphic representation' of practice that can be analysed using a range of approaches to increase its visibility and develop meaning and understanding (Chan et al., 2019, p.200). Ethical issues relate to child and family social work's concern with safeguarding children and protection of individual identities which are directly challenged by the use of video.

As two researchers in the early stages of doctoral studies in child and family social work, we are grappling with the ethical conundrum of whether to include video methodology in our research designs. We are fortunate that our supervisors are early adopters of video methodology in social work research and have experience of conducting projects and negotiating ethical dilemmas (Hadfield et al., 2020; Lefevre and Hall, in preparation). This paper outlines key ethical issues related to the application of video methodology in child and family social work research that we identified in two focussed conversations.

Method

The two focussed conversations explored dilemmas associated with the ethics of videoing children and parents/carers in the context of social work practice. Because of the travel and social restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic in April 2020, we were unable to hold our planned informal group interview on campus. Instead, we held our discussion using video-conferencing in two stages. Firstly, we (the doctoral researchers) held a conversation to discuss the ethical issues that were of concern to us. We then invited our supervisors to view the video-recording (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Obscured still from doctoral researchers' conversation (Source: Author's own)



Secondly, our supervisors discussed and video-recorded their reflections and responses to our ethical dilemmas (see Figure 2). This recording was then sent to us so we could view the discussion.

Figure 2: Obscured still from supervisors' conversation (Source: Author's own)



The two video recordings were approximately 25 minutes in length and an automatically-generated transcript of the supervisors' conversation was produced. We each viewed the two video recordings and reviewed the transcript to identify the ethical issues that generated the most concern for us. Given the limit of space for this paper, we agreed on three core themes and selected extracts from both conversations to illuminate the issues. We each reflected on the themes and situated them in the context of relevant literature. We shared an early draft of the paper with our supervisors, inviting them to confirm their agreement with our inclusion of quotes, themes, names and obscured images. Within this paper, we use the convention of inserting (…) to reflect where we have edited original quotes to remove verbatim text, and […] to insert text to verbatim quotes to reflect where we have added text for ease of comprehension (Bryman, 2016).

Parallel nature of the method

By choosing to video-record both conversations, we directly experienced some of the ethical issues we had identified, both in our role as 'participants', by recording our conversation, and as 'researchers', by viewing our supervisors' conversation. Whilst our approach has offered us some direct insight into how our participants may experience the ethical issues associated with this method, we recognise that our positionality as researchers means that there may be a significant distance between ours and our participants' experiences.

Analysis – core ethical conundrums

During our supervisors' conversation, they highlighted the unique methodological opportunity presented by video in social work research in getting close to practice, which is often private and only observed by those present. They commented how video methodology may enable close "scrutiny, interrogation and analysis" of this private practice. They offered valuable insights on the ethical concerns we had discussed around videoing being potentially exposing for both the family and their social worker. The supervisors reflected on the "knotty" issues of this "particular ethical conundrum". We discuss three of these issues here. The first two issues, informed consent and authenticity, have relevance across disciplines in social science research. We feel that the third issue, surveillance, scrutiny and intrusion, presents a particular challenge for social work research.

Informed Consent

The use of video methodology in the context of social work practice raises challenges about informed consent. Securing informed consent in research can be described as "ethics-in-practice", as it requires an ongoing process of reflexivity and negotiation by the researcher, in collaboration with the participants (Parson et al., 2016, p.133). The beginning of this process requires time and sensitivity to ensure that participants have the space to understand and consider their involvement in the video method. This includes practices such as: introductory meetings; providing age-appropriate information sheets and consent forms outlining what participants are consenting to; introducing and explaining the technology for recording, including how participants can turn this off during an interview, if they wish; how anonymity and confidentiality will be addressed in relation to use of images and video clips; how to withdraw consent and how, where and for what length of time participants' data will be stored.

Once participants have formally agreed to participate, the next step and ethical dilemma is to consider how we would determine informed consent throughout the videoed interaction.

> Amy: "…is it ethically ok if people have forgotten that the camera is there?"

This idea was elaborated on by one of our supervisors, Michelle, as she described how in being videoed there is perhaps a "degree of disassociation" by participants, meaning that they start to ignore the camera. This raises ethical questions of whether researchers should be reminding participants of the presence of the camera at intervals throughout a videoed interaction. We thought we would need to consider attending to the participants' ongoing presentation during the videoed interaction, including monitoring both verbal and non-verbal cues.

Authenticity

One of the assumed benefits of using a video methodology is that this medium can capture something real or authentic. This "allure of reality" has been critiqued and it is argued that like other methods, video methodology is limited to offering "some semblance of reality or truth" (Noyes, 2008, p.134). Use of video methodology requires ethical consideration of the power dynamics in the research-participant interaction. The factors under consideration will vary depending on whether videoing is "researcher-produced" or "participant-generated" and how power can be shared between the researcher and the participant (Clark and Morriss, 2017, p.33).

> Anna: "Who's holding the camera? Who's in control? Who is the author of what is the focus of the camera?"

> Amy: "The fact of the video camera being there, I would hypothesise that it would change what is happening in the room, maybe it is better just being there as a researcher?"

The above quotes reflect our concern relating to authenticity; the very act of videoing could actually reduce authenticity. Our supervisors' discussion of the concept of "performativity" further challenges the notion that videoing can capture something "authentic". This suggests that the presence of the recorder may serve to increase the level of "performance" compared to observation-only.

> Michelle: "I wondered about issues of performance and performativity. I think Judith Butler's work [Butler, 1993] is quite interesting on how we might perform being a social worker, or being an academic or a client in these recordings."

Our supervisors also commented on how at the beginning of the video, we, the doctoral researchers appeared uncomfortable; our behaviour was changed by the process of being video-recorded. They discussed their parallel experience, how this was replicated in their interactions at the outset of their conversation:

> Gillian: "…thinking about and reflecting on the process of video recording, we are starting in a similar way which is really interesting isn't it?"

> Michelle: "…there is an initial awkwardness, and embarrassment…a state of being exposed."

The issue of exposure is central to our third theme, related to surveillance, scrutiny and intrusion, which has particular significance for child and family social work research.

Surveillance, scrutiny and intrusion

Parents' experience of scrutiny in social work has been associated with feelings of fear, shame and anxiety (Gibson, 2019). In a parallel process, social workers experience the "notion of being under constant scrutiny" within the system (Gibson, 2016, p.125). Identifying a risk of emotional harm and distress for parents and social workers associated with the use of video technology, we anticipate that the application of video methodology to record social work practice could be experienced negatively by participants:

> Amy: "…the presence of the camera…the experience of the families of being scrutinised and under surveillance in social work, the added element of the video camera being there..."

> Anna: "…there's a risk that social workers also feel under scrutiny by us as researchers…"

Amy: "…as though we are OFSTED[1] or a 'Quality Control' department."

In considering the experience of being video-recorded ourselves, we discussed the fear of being judged by our supervisors. We reflected that if we were to decide to include video in our research design, that it will be important to draw on this current experience to understand how participants may be feeling:

Amy: "That element of judgement (…) am I going to expose myself in saying something stupid (…) somebody is going to watch the video of you (...) although that wouldn't be the intention…"

Anna: "We're not even talking about anything sensitive or personal (…) we can feel those things (…) we need to hold onto that (…) what we're asking of families."

The anxiety associated with the feeling of scrutiny was also experienced by Michelle, who reflected how "nerve-wrecking" it was to be video-recorded as "people can rewind and scrutinise".

We also felt that the intrusive nature of the video recording equipment may add to the feeling of surveillance. Gillian reflected how in social work, the camera needs to be set-up at the beginning of an interaction which "provokes participants' awareness", rather than being a "normal part of the apparatus" of an environment. Gillian and Michelle's conversation continued:

Gillian: "Is video used in other professional settings and this is this whole issue of, you know (…) is it because of the invisible nature of social work…video feels more problematic because (…) there is something about the use of the video in the private space of the home rather than in the private space of, you know, a meeting room or office or something like that. That does make it different…"

Michelle: "That sort of level, because again, they've [clinics and classrooms] just got the cameras shoved up in the corner. So this, this notion of, like, the more portable taking it into the home into the everyday space is probably more challenging."

Michelle returned to this theme towards the end of her and Gillian's conversation, reflecting on how the video camera was increasingly invading our personal space and eroding the boundaries between home and professional life in the context of COVID-19:

Michelle: "These cameras are coming into our family homes…we would have met face to face…the space between home and professional life is eroded."

Reflections

The use of video methodology is a fairly novel approach in social work and has the potential to bring attention to and provide a detailed picture of the private worlds of social work practice that have remained hidden. As a researcher, taking time to pause, reflect and experience a proposed methodology for oneself is illuminating. By engaging in the described video exercise, we have had first-hand exposure to what might be felt by our potential participants. This has assisted in our reflections on the ethical dilemmas and merits of using this approach. There are a number of gritty ethical issues that arise from using video methodology. The ones that were key for us include informed consent, authenticity and the theme of surveillance. However, these issues are not necessarily insurmountable. It is possible that they can be navigated and negotiated via ethical reflexivity in collaboration with participants, supervisors and peers. Our decision whether to move forward with video methodology will be made in conjunction with our supervisors following careful and realistic consideration of the nature and extent of the anticipated benefits, impacts and associated risks.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank our supervisors, Professor Gillian Ruch and Professor Michelle Lefevre, for their time and support with the development of our feature.

[1] OFSTED is the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills that inspects and regulates services that care for children and young people **www.gov.uk/government/organisations/ofsted**.

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