That question

Routinely when we tell other social scientists that we have been filming what people do while they are in cafés\(^1\), we are asked this question (or variations on it): *Doesn’t filming change how people behave?* This question appears to raise trouble for the aim of ethnographic filming in cafés to record *naturally occurring* activities, the suspicion being that customers must *react* to the presence of a camcorder, thereby spoiling the ‘natural’ record. The camcorder in the café, like the elephant in the kitchen, is unavoidably and very noticeably there. Food made in the kitchen should surely be abandoned wholesale since the elephant’s presence contaminates all the cooking done there; and some might therefore conclude that our efforts at videoing should also be abandoned. Certainly an unexpected thing in a familiar place raises questions about its presence there that day, and about how much it will disrupt the workings of that place. The camcorder, though an unusual thing, has a further special status, it is a *recording* device; it is expectedly making a record

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\(^1\) For more details on the café project »The Cappuccino Community: cafés and civic life in the contemporary city« see: http://web.geog.gla.ac.uk/~elaurier/cafesite/
for some purpose and those that it films may become part of the record. Although they have an agile and nimble trunk, elephants play no part in preparing food in the kitchen nor do they take notes about the cook’s technique. In this sense the camcorder, and the overall project, is more intrusive and disturbing, potentially distracting customers not only by its presence but moreover by topicalising the making and consultation of a visual record. In what follows we want to respond to that question, but we want to go further and expose the grounds of that question.

**Producing naturalistic footage**

Let us backtrack a little to one of the central methodological aims of the café project: to record, on video, spontaneous activities unsolicited by the researcher and events uncontrolled by any form of lab set up. What was taped during filming in the café would be ›natural‹ in that sense (Lynch 2002), and from the researcher’s side the camcorder had to be handled in ways that allowed things to happen without soliciting those events. New UK university guidelines on informed consent required that customers should be aware of what research was happening in the café, and so posters were put up in the café windows and on the counter, while flyers were put on tables making the presence of the camcorder all the harder to ignore. The posters and flyers contained a brief explanation that the project was ›a day in the life of the café‹ and alongside the request ›please continue your business as usual‹ (see figure 1). The question for customers in the café of how to deal with what might be a spontaneous, unsolicited and uncontrolled camcorder thus began to have an answer.

Methodological advice from guides and courses on filming workplaces suggests using distant or wide angle shots for recording groups of people in public spaces in order not to miss how people respond to one another (Heath 1997, Heath & Hindmarsh 2002). It also suggests, where possible, leaving the camera unattended on a tripod in order to minimise further distraction and disruption to persons in the setting (Barbash & Taylor 1997). A particularly interesting warning comes from Luff (2003) who points out that trying to move the camera to catch an action occurring will always miss the beginning of that action, and hence will be an incomplete record. This is because the camera movement would be initiated by the camera operator first noticing the beginning of something, and then bringing the camera round to bear on it. MacBeth (1999: 154) points toward just this aspect of looking with the camera when referencing the anthropologists Asch and Chagnon in their

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2 Putting camcorders where they are not expected can become a mild form of breaching experiment in that they disrupt background routines, and at the same time are recuperated into routine activities remarkably fast.
filming of women and children crying: »we as viewers of his record, are in the midst of a motivated search, without knowing what could be promised for it, or where«. The anthropologists’ camera sweeps inelegantly until it finally catches up with a fight already in progress. MacBeth is explicating what is entailed in finding something going on with a camera in the course of a shot, which is in itself a visual inquiry. Where MacBeth reveals how the camera chases down an event, we decided, following Luff’s advice, that we would analyse the spaces of cafés for their promising locations and set the camera up to record what happened in such locations. Figure 2 was a preferred spot in one café, where a sofa and two arm chairs were arranged under a skylight.

![Fig. 2: An inquiring look at the device](image)

Having established these café locations, setting up the tripod and camera involved compositional work. With the camera operator’s sense of the limited angle of vision, the scene was assessed for what could be filmed and with an orientation to the camera being visible but not positioned in front of a customer’s face. A perspective had to be selected in terms of being over the shoulder, from another table, from the passageway and other possibilities that emerged in the analysis of the space of the café for setting up equipment. A set-up would be tried out with the tripod to check whether its legs could be fitted in and the height of the tripod adjusted. Through direct looking and then looking with the camera, the framing was finely adjusted. Once the camera was set-up, as with Lomax and Casey’s (1998) study, it was left in that location, although in our case it was simply left recording for up to an hour. The camera would be moved every hour or less to record from other viewpoints and occasionally at the request of customers or staff. Alongside the positioning of the camcorder, the absence of a camera operator at the device was another method by which the presence of the project was minimised. The researcher was nevertheless always a couple of tables away from the camcorder and easily found for those who had queries about the project. With an intendedly low key presence, the camcorder on its tripod was not always immediately seen by customers, and this is what happens in figure 2.
Recognising the un-naturalistic

In his seminal work, Heath (1986) reminds us to turn to the actual, rather than imagined, ways in which persons, at the time of filming, witnessably orient, react or respond to the presence of a camera and a microphone. »If we are to make an empirical case for the effects of recording on interaction, then we need to demonstrate an orientation by the participants themselves to the production of their action and activity to some aspect of the recording equipment.« (Heath 1986: 176, quoted in Lomax 1998).

What Heath (1986) demonstrated in his study is how a child’s shifts in gaze are used to bring a disguised camera’s presence into play during a doctor-patient interaction. He shows us that, while the camera is omni-present in the setting, it is by no means omni-relevant. Lomax and Casey (1998) pick up Heath’s work to consider the ways in which the video becomes part of the organisation of fieldwork by ethnographers, its introduction, orientation and switching on and off being carried out as integral in displaying sensitivity to what is being put on the (video) record. For their part, the subjects being recorded display an orientation to their status as proper objects of the record, the particular technology of recording in terms of what it makes visible and what it misses, as well as the anticipated preservation of the record for subsequent research. By examining actual instances, as these and other researchers have done, we can move beyond saying simply that there are changes, to re-specifying imagined changes as practical matters of witnessable reactions to the presence of a camera. This entails asking about participants producing recognisable actions for the video-record, and also about the viewers’ analysis of the video in its scenic intelligibilities as part of record of a particular project in a particular place (Lomax 1998, Jayyusi 1991, MacBeth 1999).

Filming from the spot that produced figure 2, the camera on its tripod was hidden from arriving customers in a corner overlooking a popular coffee table with two sofas under a skylight. Coming round from the counter, the woman with the cap sees the camera early on but doe not bring her full scrutiny to bear until she sits down in frame 2. Having looked at the camera and worked out that this spot is what it is trained on, she puts her bags down in frame 3. She then leans forward to read the flyer on the table in front of her in frame 4. It is remarkable that she locates the flyer so quickly. One thing we can note is that the presence of an unattended camera on a tripod raises the expectation of a forthcoming account for its presence, where a pram or an umbrella might not. Objects, in other words, not only carry as part of their category membership of classes of objects (e.g. still cameras, microphones, CCTV) uses to which they can be put, they are also analysed in relation to the place in which they are found. »What is a DV camera doing in my café?« (A question not posed by those in tourist zones, nor amongst trainspotters, nor in a cam-
corder sales shop etc.) versus »What is an umbrella doing in my café!« Moreover in public spaces objects are analysed by members as potentially belonging to the place or to individuals (e.g. the chairs and tables versus an umbrella).

We can also note that there are ways of coming into shot: a camera zooming in on you, a camera operator walking up to you, a camera panning toward you. In this case the woman walks into the shot. Her inquiry then follows as to ›what have I walked into‹. People routinely seek to get out of the way of others taking photos or filming if they think they risk being in the way at the wrong moment. They are stepping into the middle of some ongoing work of filming, they look at the direction of the camera, and they follow the projected course of its filming to see what in that scene could be an activity, person or thing worth filming. The classic instance is the tourist couple, where husband snaps wife, and you find yourself walking between the two.³ In his analysis of the observational shot, MacBeth (1999) examines the documentary maker’s work as they follow a person through a crowd while walking themselves or search across a scene to find and/lose the scene. What we are seeing here is the member’s (in an ethnomethodological sense) inquiry work in entering a scene of recording as to whether or not they are intended objects of the recording.

Fig. 2: Filling the screen of scene A with a close-up of X
In figure 3, when the women move off, the companion in front simply walks by the camera (frame 1), her blue shoulder flashing briefly on the screen. The second woman, while passing close to the camera, stops briefly to wave directly into the camera. The woman’s wave tracks from off-screen to mid-screen, the gesture emerging as it does so. Its movement comes to a halt with her face on the right and hand to the left, filling the screen (frame 3). She upgrades her joke-wave at the camera to an exaggerated version of picking her nose, using the distortion of getting too close to the camera to add to this (Katz 1999). She is doing a strategic manipulation of the optics by coming in too close to the lens, in a two-part way. Her appearance is juxtaposed with the existing depth of the scene: we see her joke as a play on the expected distance that persons will maintain from a tripod that is demonstrably recording the café in general (as against them in particular). What is already involved here is that members are competent in analysis of what a static lens will capture in its field of view, and how they should therefore align themselves to it to produce a joke. The static camera on its tripod can be looked at and analysed by members, be they out-of-shot or in-shot, as an oriented recording device. So to begin to break down the ques-

³ See Brown et al’s (2003) work on practices of tourist photography.
tion, what people *can* do in front of the camera, where this might be a limited repertoire, depends on what the camera’s properties are found to be: roving, panning, zooming in on them or fixed. This woman frames herself for the recording device which, in its fixed look, otherwise misses the world that all the other customers are witnessing. In stopping off at the camera, she topicales the camera for other customers in the café. Its presence is briefly made relevant to the customers as a collective: they look toward the scene she is making and, by smiling, respond to what she is doing.

The joke displays one of the alternative responses to doing what you usually do in the café, which is to fool around in front of the camera. Customers and staff at the cafés made visual jokes on camera with an orientation to their recognisability and reception as such by later viewers of the video, and also in relation to a request for, and extensive record of, ›appearances as usual‹ in the café. In making jokes like this, they did not of course contaminate the entire record any more than a joke on a ballot paper spoils the entire election. They created something easily recognised on the record, the sort of artefact that in pursuing naturalistic behaviour would normally be consigned to the digital trash bin for deletion. A simple point here is that there were very few such recognisable acts for our camcorder, though there were plenty of the inquiring looks at the camera that we documented at the beginning of this section. In looking at these un-naturalistic activities, categorised separately in our data set, we have nevertheless looked at aspects of their natural organisation (of which more later) and by their recognisability we can anticipate how a dataset can be tidied of the un-naturalistic events and visual inquiries occasioned by the camcorder’s presence. Moreover, while they reveal aspects of the café as a place where fun can be poked at officialdom, where there are other customers present as observers (though not observers making a record of the place), customers can only lark around in limited ways and as a place However *that* question still looms. What is required now is to excavate the question’s grounds.

**Ethno-inquiries into video recording**

The video ethnography produced a data-set of *naturalistic* or *naturally occurring* customer activities in cafés akin to how many species of social scientists make records of everyday activities in ordinary places. The video data-set is an accountable and expected product of a funded social science research project on the relationship between cafés and civic life. To produce the data-set, the project has been committed to making recordings of ordinary life in cafés, even though much of what occurs there is arguably common knowledge. Yet as we have constantly remind ourselves, ›in its seamless familiarity, the world can become difficult to find
for the record (MacBeth 1999: 158) which of course was the launching point for our project. As historians of popular culture warn, the familiar habits and objects of our present are just as ephemeral and perhaps more likely to go unrecorded than the spectacular. Our commitment, then, has been to ensure that these everyday unnoticed ephemera are documented, but that was not our only aim in the project. What is a perplexing and confusing element in our café study is that, like Wieder’s (1974: 43) ethnography of a half-way house, we are also interested in treating the ethnographic occasion as an object of study. Like other ethnomethodologists, we have an interest in naturally organized ordinary activities (Garfinkel 1991, quoted in Lynch 2002) whether they be those of laboratory science (Lynch 1985), interpreting ethnography (Wieder 1974), throwing a stick for a dog (Goode forthcoming) or making espresso.

So with our social scientist’s shoes on, we transform cafés’ daily events via video recording into the video documentary record of certain times and places as stable naturalistic data for the social sciences. What we do not claim is to use reflexivity as a way of taking one step up above, not only everyday activities, but also the methodologies of the social sciences (Lynch 2000). Slipping our social science shoes off, to put our feet on the rough ground of practical reasoning, we walk through the methods of the social sciences and try not to trample through those of other more vernacular experts (i.e. the ‘members’ of ordinary worlds). This barefoot indifference to the methodological or theoretical warrants of the social sciences arises out of an ethno-archaeological interest in what makes particular practical forms of knowing possible and certain naturally organised ways of inquiring intelligible (Laurier & Philo 2004). A legacy of positivistic research in the social sciences, and indeed also of its critique by qualitative researchers, has been that the term ‘natural’ continues to be equated with objective and universal (Lynch 2002). Although naturalistic studies do not necessarily pre-suppose a concept of universal nature, they often find themselves critiqued as if they do. Relatedly, when deployed in the social sciences, records of naturalistic activities are inspected and may be dismissed for the distortions, biases and artefacts of that same ‘universal’ nature that they should be revealing (McHugh, et al. 1974, Raffel 1979). It is thus that Lynch (2002) provides a reminder why that question of changed behaviour seems to carry such force when asked by an audience of social scientists. It indexes a series of concerns that form the basis for the evaluation of the worth of a social scientific investigation. »Questions about bias, contamination and representational adequacy inhabit (indeed, they haunt) the practical projects of converting naturally organised ordinary activities (NOOA) into data and reviewing such data in analytical efforts to construct structures of NOOA. The confusion that puzzles, and to some extent entraps … is a product of a slippage between a praxiological orientation to naturally organized activities to a more conventional social scientific effort to analyze naturally occurring data.« (Lynch 2002: 535).
This is a perfectly acceptable shift to a concern with the quality of the data, but what it waylays is an ethnomethodological investigation into practical reasoning and the very constitution of that data. How, then, through and as part of naturally organized action, is this naturalistic video data constituted? We have begun to hint at what happens at the time in a reasonably straightforward methodological sense, and we have brought in the problematic of inquiring looks at the camcorder and jokes made for the record. Although the intelligible intentions of these acts are quite different, with only the latter having the record as its target, both still display and betray the presence of the recorder. Raffel (1979: 29) points out that, in making records, while there must be an observer, the good observer should be an ›absent presence‹. The unattended camcorder displays a kind of absent presence, although the observer and their subjects are instead beset by the camcorder’s particular kind of presence. Those clips that we have been examining are those where the camera has what we might call a present presence. The work of making the naturalistic dataset is that they be recognised as such and either dropped on the cutting room floor or categorised separately from the other clips (we labelled them ‘unnatural’ clips in our corpus).

There is more to video’s reconfiguration of social science data because it offers the possibility of a fundamental shift in where, how often, with how many subjects and how long after the activities the observing occurs. With traditional ethnographic written records, the activity of observing may precede and always entails its recording at the time or later in notebooks⁴, with entries such as: »The café is pretty full when two women arrive in café with prams. A guy sitting in the window notices them arrive and offers his table.«

As Raffel (1979) remarks, there is no real separation of recording from observing since to observe is to ›take note‹ of something. Akin to the use of the ethnographer’s placement of herself in any setting with her notebook and pen, the placement of the camcorder at the time (and subsequent shifts) are also bound up with what can be observed there and then. That is, as we mentioned earlier, the filmmaker surveys the scene to work out where the camcorder could be placed and does it with an orientation to a visibility that is not constant. Moreover, the placement is done with the expectation that events will occur that can be eye-witnessed and recorded from its spot. However, in its preservation of the audible and visible activities of some event when the video recording is re-played during editing, data sessions and seminar presentations, it initiates a further occasion for observing, and as such finding further things in the video record and, as likely as not, making transliterations from the visual record to textual records. Observation of naturalistic

⁴ Video also promises that the fallible ethnographer’s memory of what happened which was once supported by the notebook gains further strength through the recordings as an archive of details in one particular place at one particular time.
activities, once they are rendered, as Garfinkel (1992) would put it, or transformed. as Latour (1999) would put it, into video data fundamentally change the work site organisation of social science observation from the ethnographer with her notebook and camera. In this way, its analysis bears strong resemblances to the use of tape recordings of naturally occurring talk that were crucial in the founding of conversation analysis (CA) (Lynch 1997). Where participant-observation is characterised as consisting of many subjects with one observer and many interpreters, the video-record has minimal participation and a potential multitude of observers. Observational work is displaced from the fieldsite to the computer or TV screen.

What the video recording provides in the way that it preserves is seemingly a re-observation of an event’s emergence, course and ending. In the practical efforts made to avoid intervening in the events being recorded, to exclude from the naturalistic corpus events that were clearly produced by the presence of an observational device and to preserve the activities ›whole‹ (e.g. uncut, ‘real-time’), the video records hold the promise that the researcher might examine past activities not as past but rather as ›formerly present‹ (Raffel 1979). Like the documentary photographic record, the video record is apparently produced simultaneously with the activity it records, which strengthens its claim as a record produced, then and there, in a way that a textual record which could be made at home in another country or hours or years later does not. What Raffel (1979) warns us of is that the commitment to recording all that happens in an effort not to forget the good or, as we would put it here, not to miss the surprising details of what and how customers and staff in cafés do what they do, this commitment becomes eventually at best a deferral or at worst an unwillingness of differentiating the good from the bad.

In differentiating the ›bad‹, in the form of abandoning or separating out clips that display visible reactions to the presence of the camera, observers of the video record let themselves be governed by what is presenting itself. As a form of naturalistic observational science of human action our earlier account refused to investigate what did not appear in the clips. There are all manner of things that do not appear so we would seem to be opening the doors to bringing up whatever thing we want as having not appeared. The empirical grounding manoeuvre was to stick with the video record examining instead how items recognised as not fitting with the naturalistic corpus were recognisably so. In these clips something particular rather than anything we might want, as social scientists, cultural critics or natural scientists to mention, is absent. Or to put it another way, the record points toward its incompleteness, unlike the other activities made present in the video recordings it is unavoidably, irretrievably and irreplaceably made complete by the presence of an observer. It is made complete twice over, at the time and when the observer finally consults their recordings, dividing the good from the bad. For all the other clips their completeness is found without the observer’s presence and by that criterion they are allowed to pass into the central corpus of naturally occurring activi-
ties in cafés. What is forgotten is their completeness is nevertheless found through the observer’s presence in the daily work of analysing video clips and sorting them into a corpus. Their completeness is found through analysis not through their being self-contained, self-presenting or self-evident. Returning to that question, we can answer it in a video observational mode: activities that displayed reactions to the camera were excluded from the main data-set. We can answer in an ethnomethodological mode: to produce naturalistic data, the practical reasoning of video recording everyday life is accomplished in the constitutive gap between the absence and presence of the observer in the observational-video setting. Despite the hopes of certain natural sciences for video, there is no way out of the dilemma, the gap is what constitutes the video record. That question will always accompany naturalistic video in particular because it’s the natural question to ask, if a question that can, to adapt a saying of Wittgenstein, lead us like flies back inside the bottle buzzing furiously around its limits.

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