

video interaction

Dear Mom,

Video in groups is a powerful tool; the trick is to keep it out of reach of the psychiatrists, social workers, and manipulators, and put it into the hands of human beings. I have found that the act of showing a group to itself is almost always a very tense, potentially explosive situation but one which is invariably valuable both for myself and the group involved. Over the past two years I have had to learn the hard way some of the do's and don'ts that should be followed when bringing the innocent little portapak into a group situation.

The first hurdle that must be overcome is the well founded fear of TV and media in general. From the beginning, I tell people that the images are being recorded exclusively for use by the group and are not meant for exhibition elsewhere; they will not be "used" as they may have been with other media.

The second thing to be aware of on entering a group situation with your Sony under your arm is that one's first video view of oneself can be a shattering experience. The split between what we are and what we think we are becomes amplified to the size of a gaping wound on the TV tube.

We are a society of face savers, and to have all our little twitches zoomed in on and put in focus for all present to giggle at is more than many of us can take. I having been using this equipment for over two years now and I still can't bear to see my sniveling pompous self displayed on the TV tube despite this fact.

When I first started working with TV, I naively could not understand the immediate hostility evoked by me and my camera as I innocently proceeded to destroy everyone in the room. I now behave much more gently with this potential weapon. I do not use it myself initially, I set the camera and recorder up in the middle of the room and let other people play with it. I set up direct feedback so that the image being photographed is immediately displayed on the TV monitor, and when I do begin recording, I explain that the tapes being made in this situation are going to be seen only here and now and will, unless they wish to save them, be erased immediately after viewing.

If properly directed, video can be a tool which has the property of reinforcing what is happening as well as one which allows for continual and continuous self examination. My most difficult job was to suppress my own ego. We all have our particular bags and video can be used as a weapon to further any particular ends that flesh is heir to. In order to achieve maximum effectiveness video must genuinely be used by the group and not on it. They themselves must discover how it is useful to them. The person with video experience (who will probably end up being behind the controls most of the time) must suppress the very real temptation to take charge.

The only rule I found it necessary to lay down was that the video not become an escape. Frequently people will wish to take the Portapaks out and tape in the street. This is OK with me, but I insist that they first be prepared to deal with the experience of being taped themselves before they subject others to the same discomfort.

Even though communal use of the camera should be encouraged as much as possible, in actual practice you will end up using the camera most of the time. You must naturally be extremely alert to what is going on. If you come into a situation as an observer, you and your camera will be treated like one. Participate in what is going on even while holding the camera.

One of the most difficult decisions to make, especially at the beginning, is when to play back the tapes. I have found it best to wait until something happens no matter how subtle. I tend to play it back and comment on it stressing all the time that I am no expert; this is just my reaction to the situation and other people, particularly the participants, are welcome to comment. After several such playbacks further infolding should only be presented upon request. What you think is happening is seen through your own particular filter and others are going to surprise you in interpreting the same event in different ways.

It is also the case that the presence of the video is almost forgotten or ignored... which is perfectly OK. The over-eager video man can destroy that which he should be trying to reinforce. You must be prepared for the possibility that video is not particularly wanted or needed in that specific situation.

What Video Does to Groups

1) It solidifies the group. The very act of taping the group puts its members under a common stress and makes for an immediate communal experience. People are surprised to learn that they are not alone in having squeamish reactions to their image on the screen.

2) It makes people in the group more aware of each other. We all exist to some extent in self-image bubbles. These are deflated when you see other people reacting to what you are saying and doing. (Someone yawning for example, just when you had thought you were saying something vital). In people's reactions to themselves on the screen, you become aware of their own self-image and to what extent it corresponds to the reality of the situation.

3) Video tends to emphasize the emotional as opposed to the semantic aspects of inter-personal relations. Through the lens of a camera you can stare at each other, pick up on cues that are normally (for convenience in social functioning) ignored. Face and body language are isolated on the TV screen and become more readily visible. During the actual situation they are equally important but may not be consciously recognized. Thus the video distortion takes place in the direction of what people are feeling rather than what they are saying, or, it may be argued, what they are really saying as opposed to the words they are mouthing.

4) Thus video acts as a probe below the surface of a situation. There is a tremendous pressure to be sincere sometimes beyond the bounds of social niceties. Because you are forced to deal with your own behaviour on the screen, it is more difficult to put on an act. There is the desire, especially during the playback, to explain what you "really" meant by this or that remark or what you are really feeling.

5) Situations almost always become very tense very quickly. The positive feedback which video offers seems to have the same effect on a group as that which you get pointing a microphone at a loud-speaker. The video consultant must (to mix metaphors) be prepared to insert control rods into an overheating reactor, because any potential sources of conflict can become amplified to the point of distortion during the video process. This happens particularly quickly when people get behind the camera and feel detached from the group and free to express their personal feelings. Armed with a camera people will feel much freer to say "Why do you have long hair?" or "Why do you behave in a certain way?"... questions they wouldn't dream of asking during normal, polite interaction. On the other hand, it is precisely these things which people are going to have to get off their chests if the group is going to have any success in the future.

Ron Blumer

Who is Miss J?

Despite itself, psychoanalytically-oriented psychotherapy is being profoundly affected by video. Before the advent of video, this is the kind of non-information upon which decisions were made:

"Miss J., a 29 year old white Jewish female, presented to the emergency department of our hospital complaining that her 'world was falling apart.' She was last perfectly well three years ago, when her boy friend, F., left her. At that time she took an overdose of Seconol, and was treated overnight in the emergency department..."

The History of Present Illness goes on, followed by the Family History, Past History, Sexual History, etc.

Who is Miss J? Regardless how complex and detailed her history is, regardless how much we know of her childhood and family, on the basis of this information no one can identify her in a room full of patients or even of "normal" people. Where is her presence (essence? soul? vibes?), that vital aspect of human nature that existential psychotherapy has rediscovered.

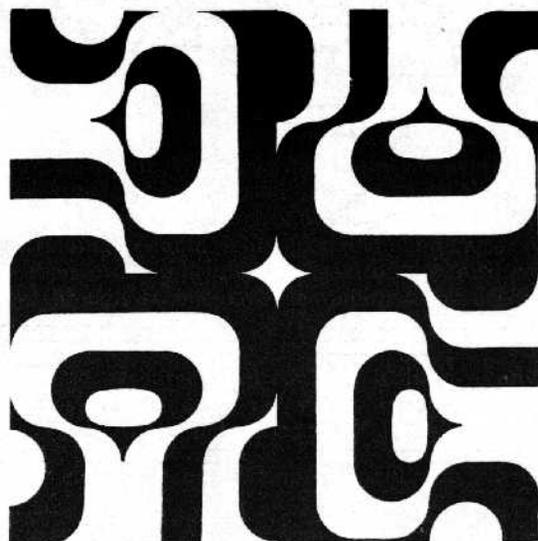
Although this was not intended, video delivers the person of the patient to those who play semantic games with his life story and his destiny. Video also delivers the person of the therapist who is often revealed on the TV monitor as considerably more fucked-up than the patient.

In the past, the only way a patient had to reveal himself as a living, breathing presence was by being "presented" to a room full of bearded, pipe-smoking geeks in turtle-neck sweaters—a humiliation that no one should have to endure, least of all someone with problems.

Here is how video has changed rounds in the psychiatric department of one hospital in Montreal. The session begins with staff psychiatrists, residents, social workers, etc., watching a tape of one resident interviewing his patient. The interview is then discussed; observations are made (the usual psychiatric clichés.) Only then does the resident read aloud his 12 page case history. Then there is more discussion, and treatment is decided. In the case of Miss J., a patient whom I presented, the Chief Shrink asked the question that everyone was thinking while watching the tape: "So what's she doing in hospital?" The video presentation made everyone realize that in spite of the jargon used to describe her hysterical personality and "conversion reaction", the living creature on the screen was not sick. She was immediately discharged after being told she was all better. Video achieved a miracle cure! Without video she might have developed an easy dependency on the ward, and might have become one of its many addicts.

Video has been adopted by psychiatrists mainly for convenience. Although it has in rare cases been used for therapy, its interactive potential has not been understood by the psychiatric establishment. It has, however, injected an existential component into the otherwise lifeless buttocks of institutional psychiatry. The video camera in the hands of the traditional therapist is a gun held by the wrong end.

Norman Bethune Levine



Computer Graphic