

Reflections on the craft(ing) of qualitative research

Robin Smith

It has become somewhat of a truism that qualitative research, and particularly fieldwork, cannot be taught but is best learnt in practice, out there, in the field. This can likely be traced to the early days of the Chicago School where students were sent out to study a tract of the census, or neighbourhood, at almost the outset of the course. This, of course, does not mean that the students were not instructed and 'taught', just that the priorities were of a somewhat different order than that suggested by the recent proliferation of 'methods' textbooks, courses, and workshops. This corpus, at least, suggests a belief that good practice in qualitative methods and fieldwork can, at least, be documented and communicated and that doing so is a worthwhile endeavour. There is, however, something to be said for the argument that no amount of reading the classics nor attending methods workshops can really prepare you for undertaking your first independent piece of qualitative research. The challenges are many; from the first slightly awkward arrival at the field site, through managing the many, often sensitive, relationships you enter in to, to wondering what to do with all those data and the craft of writing up.

This issue features articles from four contributors at the outset of careers as qualitative researchers. Each article reflects upon issues arising at various stages of the research process, from accessing participants to field relations to transcription and (or perhaps better, *as*) analysis. In the first, Darren Roberts reports on research on spaces of music production, consumption and performance. The article makes a case for local study and, specifically, local music scenes in producing a 'decentred' understanding of the contemporary culture industry. Roberts demonstrates that attending to local detail can challenge monolithic representations of structures such as 'The Economy'. In the second article, Morgan Windram-Geddes reflexively discusses how

her body was constituted in interactions during the study of physical education activities in school. Windram-Geddes considers how her 'thinness' (seen to equal healthiness) was enrolled by school PE teachers in displays of popular discourses regarding health, exercise, and obesity. The researcher's body, in a literal sense, became both instrument and object of the research.

In the third article, Gareth Thomas reflects on his research experiences in discussing the affordances and issues relating to the sampling and accessing of respondents via online, virtual means. Thomas considers the role of the gatekeeper and, as with other forms of digital and virtual social science, raises the question of the degree to which platforms such as Facebook engender new forms of social interaction or simply a different means of mediation. The final article by Donald Leffers discusses transcription and the (un)certainly of such materials in relation to claims making. Via a discussion of literature and his own experiences Leffers considers 'naturalised' transcription procedures against some of the more technical conventions necessary in other areas of the social sciences, concluded with a welcome scepticism and reminder to be aware of the process through which knowledge is produced.

In sum, these contributions raise a number of questions about qualitative research practice: familiar issues to many readers but questions raised by the articles here are no less significant for their familiarity. We hope that the issues raised by these articles will, for novice and seasoned researchers alike, act as a reminder and give cause, to reflect upon our own practices in the craft and crafting of qualitative research.

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Local Music Practices and the Cultural Economy: Three Spaces of Research

Darren Roberts

Introduction

Over the past decade there have been a number of calls from across the social sciences to engage music as both the object of study and a tool for research (cf. Revill, 2000; Connell and Gibson, 2003; Wood et al., 2007). These calls come at time when major shifts in technology and cultural economic policy have significantly altered the music industry. For example, new digital technologies (especially MP3) have transformed the everyday consumption of music (Leyshon, 2000) and a new breed of creativity-focussed local economic policy has reshaped local music industries (Florida, 2002). As such, this paper explores new ways of conducting qualitative research that engages with music. In particular, it addresses the question: *how can research into local music practices inform our understanding of contemporary cultural and economic relations?* This paper argues that a focus on localised music practices can have a ‘decentering’ effect on our understanding of the cultural economy. Moreover, it aims to challenge the “tendency to reify ‘The Economy’ as a singular economic body” which writes a “singular script of economic development” and treats “‘the music industry’ as a singular sector ... of production, distribution and retailing” (Gibson and Kong, 2005:553).

The research used to demonstrate this argument was conducted as part of my PhD which explores power relations within the local music industry in Birmingham, England. I conducted in-depth interviews with individuals involved in Birmingham’s local music industry exploring how they consumed, produced, and performed music. I also carried out participant-observation in a number of sites where these three practices (consumption, production, and performance) take place, for example, nightclubs, recording studios, and live music venues¹. These methods enabled

me to understand localised issues of exclusion and illegitimacy, technological inflection, and informal networks that may go undetected in research which treats the music industry as a series of economic inputs and outputs². In addition, these methods enabled me to participate in and observe different practices taking place in their natural setting without the need for individuals to describe how they consume, produce or perform music. Using examples from each of the three research areas, this paper demonstrates how research which examines local music practices can challenge conventional understandings of cultural and economic relations.

Consumption

In this section, research conducted in Birmingham’s local music industry is used to shed light on shifting music consumption practices. In the last decade, patterns of music consumption have been framed in a discourse of technological advancements and internet piracy which have resulted in a crisis for physical record sales. This research reveals an alternative perspective on why these changes are taking place, in particular the reasons why online consumption spaces such as YouTube resonate with certain forms of localised black and urban music³ in Birmingham.

Due to a deep-seated association between black music and localised urban gang culture, black musicians and music have experienced repeated forms of exclusion from conventional commercial spaces of consumption in Birmingham such as clubs and live music venues. KMD, the in-house producer for a community studio in Handsworth⁴, explained the difficulty he experienced in trying to book venues for black music events.

... when promoters try to book their events ... and you told them what kind of music you were play-

ing, they would be like, ‘no, you can’t have no garage, there is no garage allowed in this club.’ ... you got to a point where as an MC or a DJ, you weren’t getting bookings, not in Birmingham anyway...

Arguably, the exclusion of black music in Birmingham is the consequence of a “normative discourse” of creativity in which “only certain types of creativity are promoted and tolerated in society while others ... are rendered unproductive and abject” (Gibson and Kong, 2005:552). As such, rather than thinking about the use of new consumption spaces (such as YouTube) simply in terms of technological advances, this research indicates that these changes are, in part, the result of spatial exclusions at a local level. For black musicians in Birmingham, these new technologies offer alternative spaces for the consumption of music forms that have been illegitimatised and excluded in the local music industry. KMD also gave the following response to a question about whether he thought the internet was a primary platform for consuming black music.

Yeah, because everyone can get to a computer, even if you don’t have internet in your house, there are internet cafes or go to your mate’s house... Now it’s like you have got all these tools that you can take advantage of.

Localised forms of exclusion as well as changes in access to technology have resulted in a grass-roots reshaping of the spatialities of consumption in Birmingham. By focusing on local music practices in our analysis of contemporary consumption practices we can develop a more nuanced explanation of changing cultural and economic relations. Moreover, it was only by

asking individuals involved in local black music about how they consume music that I was able to understand the everyday use of music technologies by excluded and non-mainstream groups in the city. In contrast to conventional understandings of how new music technologies are used and integrated into consumption practices, these interviews revealed localised inflections of music technologies which are being used to overcome different forms of social tension and exclusion.

Production

Similar to the way in which feminist studies have theorised the “household as a site of noncapitalism” (Gibson-Graham, 1996:139), in this section I examine local recording studios in Birmingham as sites of alternative (noncapitalist) cultural and economic relations. For Gibson-Graham (1996), a large part of decentering our understanding of the cultural economy is demonstrating that noncapitalist relations are something other than “marginal and inconsequential” vis-à-vis capitalist relations (p.144).

Music studios proved to be a valuable site for participant-observation; they are highly dynamic and visceral spaces in which it is possible to observe the interactions of different actors, technologies, practices, and sounds. I conducted participant-observation in five local recording studios; this involved observing a number of recording sessions and personally recording three different songs. Through this, I gained first-hand experience of the diverse ways in which different music studios are organised around noncapitalist relations.

Music studios are central to the mainstream commercial music industry as sites where various actors – artists, producers, record labels, and sound-engineers – enact commercial relations around property (i.e. song) rights (Gibson, 2005). Indeed, large commercial recording studios have arguably become central spaces of capitalist exploitation – “the appropriation of surplus labor by someone other than the laborer” (Gibson-Graham, 1996:165). From the perspective of a functionalist model which portrays

“all noncapitalist class processes as subordinate to and reproductive of “capitalism”” (p.117), smaller studios are seen as spaces where commercial/capitalist relations are simply reproduced. However, research conducted in independent recording studios in Birmingham exposed the existence of “branches and pathways” which divert from the “sequential ladder” (p.115) of commercial growth, that are nonetheless central to their activities. In particular, the research revealed a wide-spread *non-exploitative* appropriation of surplus labour whereby “individuals or collectives appropriate their own surplus labor to distribute it as they wish or require” (p.165).

For example, the marketing manager at Blue-Whale Studios⁵ explained how profit and commercial relations were, in certain circumstances, subordinated in relation to the owner’s desire to develop particular local music:

Where his love lies really ... he likes to work with a band as much as possible ... if we found a band we really want to work with, we'd work with them for free ... but, obviously that means that you're not earning any money in the studio.

In a similar vein, the owner of Iron Man Records⁶ established the record label in order to offer an alternative to the traditional model of commercial record production which involves a record label covering production and promotion costs in return for album rights. Indeed, Gibson and Kong (2005:545) argue that “[r]ecord companies ... no longer perceive themselves as firms who release music, but instead describe themselves as traders in copyright material”. In contrast, Iron Man Records demonstrates relations which are not simply reproductions of conventional capitalistic relations of exploitation:

... I'm not gonna sign Dufus [band] and then own them, control them, tell them how to do it, and see how much money

I can make out of them... I don't want to influence, dominate, or govern the future of the band ... I didn't wanna say, 'I'll only sign your band if you give me X amount of rights to your record'...

In this case, it is unhelpful to depict these local studios and record labels as “passive receptacles” of the dominant politico-economic “norms, values, and signs” of larger commercial music studios and labels (Gibson-Graham, 1996:144). This research reveals an alternative perspective whereby non-capitalist relations are ordered heterarchically in relation to capitalist relations as something other than “marginal and inconsequential” (p.144).

Performance

This final section demonstrates how a focus on local music practices enables the researcher to see beyond representative images of the local live music scene in order to reveal more complex and less visible cultural and economic relations. A representative, or surface-level, image of Birmingham’s live music scene has been constructed by local public and commercial institutions in order to promote specific live music activities which add significant cultural and economic value to the city. Within this representation of the city, particular live music venues have been elevated to a position in which they come to represent and embody the city’s live music activities. However, this image arguably distorts and hides many of the realities and complexities of live music in the city.

One prominent live music venue in Birmingham’s outward cultural image is the Academy⁷, which since it was established in 2000 has become a pinnacle of the local music industry. Seen from the surface, the Academy is viewed primarily in terms of its impact on large-scale commercial live music activities, in particular, as one of Birmingham’s most significant venues in the national and international touring circuit. However, having interviewed a range of local musicians, audiences, and music promoters, it is clear that from their perspective the

effect of the Academy's arrival in Birmingham is far more extensive than revealed from the surface.

For some local promoters the arrival of the Academy simply represented a further corporate incursion into the local music industry. For example, one local promoter explained the restrictive nature of organising a live music event at the Academy in Birmingham:

...there was no concession to the artist, it was like, 'we will pay a fixed fee and you'll have X number of tickets sold and we'll take a percentage of your merchandise'. It's 'take it or leave it', there's no option for anything different... they don't put on bands they like, they don't put on bands that they think need a break, they put on bands that make money.

Though, to some extent the Academy's arrival can be framed in terms of 'cultural homogenisation' or 'profit' (cf. Cowen, 2004), for many promoters and bands in Birmingham the arrival of the Academy meant the possibility for new musical activities. For example, another local promoter explained how, prior to the Academy,

[t]here were no small venues, you could play the Jug of Ale and then the next one up was the NEC, there wasn't any particular middle ground⁸.

In addition, interviews with local music industry actors revealed that the Academy became a venue for local bands to "aspire to" and provided a space for local bands to forge relations with touring acts by securing support slots. The arrival of the Academy created new opportunities which significantly altered potential trajectories for local artists, in turn reshaping the local music industry in Birmingham.

The subsequent attraction of touring acts and injection of investment into to the city's live music scene, follow-

ing the Academy's arrival, also resulted in a flourish of new smaller music venues and promoters in the city. As a local musician explained,

... they're the type of venues that we lacked up until a few years ago, and, probably, is it only because the Academy landed in Birmingham that we can have these smaller venues.

What these local music practices reveal is a shift in performance practices and growth in the cultural economy that has been facilitated by the arrival of a new commercial music venue. Seen 'below the surface' from the perspective of local actors, the Academy "revitalised" the local live music scene beyond simply providing a space for national and international touring bands. In a sense, the Academy made things happen, sparked new commercial as well as non-commercial relations, and in doing so, it "renewed people, reworked commodities and recast surfaces" (Thrift: 2005:16-17).

Conclusion

By demonstrating that "[m]usic is produced, distributed and consumed in and through social and economic formations that are multiple, shifting and contested" (Gibson and Kong, 2005:553-554), this research challenges the notion of capitalist relations as either total or entirely repressive. It reveals a heterarchical spatial ordering of cultural and economic relations wherein noncapitalist relations are, in different spaces, both central and marginal. In addition, it also reveals relations that concord with Thrift's understanding of capitalism "as a vital intensity" (2005:16-17) which is central to the changing cultural and economic landscape. This paper demonstrates that a focus on local music practices can offer a more decentred and fresh understanding of the contemporary cultural economy.

End Notes

¹ Though I have distinguished these three areas of the musical landscape on paper, in reality they all overlap, meaning that at any one time my research could take place in all three areas. Nonetheless, I have attempted to identify individuals, spaces, and methods that enable me to understand the processes that take place in each of the three spaces.

² See Amin and Thrift 2007 for discussion of conventional economic research in which culture is reduced to economic input.

³ These forms of music conventionally include genres such as reggae, dancehall, hip hop, garage, grime, and dubstep, all of which are characterised by heavy bass lines, electronic sampling and rapping (aka spitting or mc'ing).

⁴ Handsworth is an area in North Birmingham which has been the location of repeated gang related criminal activity. It is also one of the primary territories in Birmingham's postcode wars which are fought by rival gangs from the city.

⁵ Blue-Whale Studios is a Birmingham based recording studio working with a variety of artists and bands from the West Midlands (<http://bluewhalestudios.wordpress.com/about/>)

⁶ Established in 1997, *Iron Man Records* is an independent record label based in Birmingham.

⁷ The Academy is a live music venue in the centre of Birmingham which is owned and operated by the Academy Music Group (AMG), the UK's leading owner and operator of live music and club venues.

⁸ The Jug of Ale was a small live music venue in the Moseley area of Birmingham, and the NEC (National Exhibition Centre) is the city's largest arena venue.

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Reading the Researcher's Body

Morgan Windram-Geddes

Introduction

This paper draws from a qualitative PhD study in Central Scotland to focus on research participants' interpretations of my (the researcher's) body. The research investigated the embodied experiences of health among girls aged 10-14 (P6-S4)¹, through discursive spaces of school-based physical activity. In three Scottish secondary schools, participant observation and semi-structured interviews were conducted with Physical Education (PE) teachers. Focus groups were conducted with female pupils during PE class. PE staff interpretations of my body are analysed alongside responses from female pupils, to contribute important research findings.

In her editorial for *Qualitative Researcher*, Coffey (2007: 1) writes, "qualitative research in its purest form, is experienced by and embodied through the researchers themselves". While my embodied experiences of physical activity inform my research interests, I never intended to centre myself as a subject of the research. However, it became apparent that the socially inscribed thinness of my body mattered to PE teachers who were keen to demonstrate knowledge in support of the popular health discourse regarding physical activity and obesity. I acknowledged my participation in long distance running with PE staff through informal conversations. However, I did not claim long distance running to be 'healthy'—I often argued how my obsession with running is unhealthy. Despite my

attempts to be critical, PE teachers read my body within a western cultural belief in the exercise = slenderness = health triplex, theorised by Kirk (2006). Through this triplex, calorie restriction and exercise are the methods to weight loss resulting in 'health'.

Reflecting on the readings of my body by PE staff enabled me to find out how staff conceptualise and teach about health to their female pupils. Understanding how health is constructed is paramount when investigating girls' wider experiences and practices of health and in respect to the continued decline in participation in physical activity among girls, aged 11-13 in Scotland (The Scottish Government, 2009). My findings have wider relevance for programmes of physical activity (PA) and PE in western contexts. I begin by contextualising the research, before discussing key readings of my body by PE staff and their implications for girls' experiences of health.

Research Context

Following publication of physical activity levels and overweight and obesity prevalence in all children aged 2-15, the Scottish Health Survey (2009: 198) confirmed that "[t]here was no significant association between children's activity and their [Body Mass Index] BMI". That is, similar proportions of children who were classed as 'healthy', overweight or obese according to the BMI² met physical activity recommendations³. When delineating the results by sex,

the confirmation does not change. Despite the lack of association between physical activity and 'healthy' body weight, the Scottish Government continues to employ a health discourse emphasising weight loss as the goal: "to manage childhood obesity, we need to help children increase their physical activity (and consequently their energy expenditure) while reducing their calorie intake" (The Scottish Government 2011). Rice (2007) reveals how the above discourse which informs school based programmes of physical activity (such as PE), subscribes to a model of health which states that overweight and fat is a 'condition' that is neither healthy nor physically fit.

The uncritical assumption, that a fat body is neither fit nor healthy has "less to do with what the body can do than with what the body *looks* like it can do" (Wright and Burrows 2006: 278, emphasis added). We are led to believe that when we *see* a 'thin' body it must be a healthy and/or fit body. At the very least a thin body—particularly for girls and women—is seen to be fitter or healthier than a fat one⁴. Rice (2007: 165) has revealed how socio-political messages about fat are presented through visual and vocal media "positioning fat as opposite to fit" to teach us that "fatness and fitness [can] not coincide within the same body". There is limited knowledge of how cultural anti-fat attitudes sustain this discriminatory message through spaces of PE where teachings of health, sport and the body collide. See Kirk (2006) and Rice (2007) for

exceptions. Furthermore, the impact of teachers' anti-fat attitudes on girls' experiences of PE and overall health and wellbeing has received little attention.

Two Body Readings

Below I articulate two ways in which my culturally inscribed thin body allowed me to gain insight into the gendered health discourses operating amongst PE teachers. The first example tells how one PE teacher made the assumption that I shared her anti-fat attitude because I occupied a thin body and was doing research on 'health'; this allowed her to share with me an instance where she addressed the non-participation in PE, of a large(r) girl. In the second example a PE teacher used my visual body as an example to give his pupils a 'lesson' in healthy eating for exercise.

Reading 1: My Thin Body Must Believe that Weight Loss = Health

"Did you see that girl, the rather large one down there doing volleyball this morning? She started not bringing her kit and sitting out and...I wasn't going to let her get away with that. I mean she's not doing herself any favours; she's not helping herself by sitting there and getting bigger...So I got on her case and got her starting to bring her kit again" (fieldnotes, March 2011).

A female PE teacher offered the above comment to me as I was leaving the PE base office at Sunnyside High. I believe that the PE teacher felt comfortable saying this to me because she saw me as having a 'thin' and therefore 'healthy' body. Because I occupied such a body she trusted that I would be in agreement with her. As Solovay and Rothblum (2009: 1) argue, "people deeply divided on almost every important topic [...] easily and seemingly organically agree" that "fat is bad". I argue that it is only through my thin body—and the cultural signifiers that accompany a thin body in respect to health, that I was able to glean candid beliefs of PE staff about girls' health and physical activity. Along with the PE teacher's direct comments about the female pupil, I

made another observation: During a PE class earlier that day a number of—thinner—girls were sitting out. The teacher did not "get on [the] case" of any of these girls.

Reading 2: My Thin Body as an Example for a 'Health' Lesson

...Mr. Nunes asked them (2nd year girls' swimming class) to get out and sit at the side of the pool...he asked, "How many of you had breakfast this morning?"...Six or seven of them replied 'yes'; the rest said 'no'... Then he said "I bet this girl (me), who's a marathon runner, had breakfast this morning, probably porridge"...and then he asked me if I had breakfast; I said "yes I did"— I answered honestly. And he said "see, she ate breakfast; she has to because she's a professional athlete! There's no way you girls can go from 5pm or 6pm last night until 11am today and have enough energy to do swimming. Those of you who haven't had breakfast have to sit the next few laps out!" (fieldnotes, March 2011).

At Sunnyside High, by drawing on my thin and assumed professional athletic body Mr. Nunes used my body as a 'healthy' example for his lesson. As acknowledged in the Introduction, I admitted my passion for running to PE staff, but I never claimed to be a professional athlete. Assumptions about my body as thin and healthy informed further assumptions, that as an athlete I would have 'healthy' eating practices. This reading differs from the first one; here the teacher drew on my body directly as a teaching tool, to illustrate connections between weight, fitness, eating and ultimately health. For this teacher, the moment of my body's visibility—and its association with sport and diet—is central to the understanding (and teaching) of health.

Implications for Girls' Experiences of Health

While it is beyond the scope of this paper to detail the full impacts of staff conceptualisations of and teachings about health on girls' experiences of physical activity, I will summarise

notable implications. Further analysis shows how staff beliefs about 'health' (many of which were gleaned from readings of the researcher's body) in respect to body weight, physical activity and diet are enacted and embodied by female pupils.

During focus groups, girls who occupied a wide range of body shapes and sizes as well as self-identifying fat girls offered negative experiences of doing PE. At Pleasant Hill, Sasha and Vikki explain,

Sasha (S3):

Yeah but see sporty girls stare at you like the sporty girls who are thin and muscular and good at PE and I'm insecure about my body when I'm with people who are really good at PE.

Vikki (S3):

Yeah see that's one of the reasons why I really didn't like coming to PE because all the other girls were like really skinny in 1st and 2nd year in my class and I wasn't and I felt really self-conscious about what they thought.

The girls' feelings and experiences of insecurity or self-consciousness about being larger than other girls in PE are unsurprising given the anti-fat attitudes expressed by the PE teacher in Body Reading 1. I substantiate Rice's (2007: 171) claim that "...negative perceptions and practices are likely to do little to promote physical fitness in girls. Instead, by framing them as unfit, anti-fat discourses may produce fat girls' presumed lack of physical ability, strength, and skill".

Furthermore, subscribing to a model where body weight determines 'health' is troubling. As Wann (2009: xiii) writes, "...health is a problematic concept when linked with weight. Health is not a number, but rather a subjective experience with many influences". Several self-identifying 'healthy' weight girls in my focus groups at Pleasant Hill revealed engagement in 'healthy' practices such as exercise to offset supposedly 'unhealthy' practices such as eating "bigger portions than what I should

have” (Lauren S2) or consuming “a bunch of junk [food] (Sarah S2)”. Girls at Willow High revealed similar practices:

Carla (S3):

I never eat healthily but I just do a lot of sports.

Leah (S1):

Um yeah... [PE] like keeps you fit and you can eat loads of like chocolate and it's not going to like exactly make you go fat.

For the girls above, eating unhealthily or “loads of chocolate” is justified as long as you “do a lot of sports” or participate in PE, so as to remain thin. Recalling Body Reading 2 and reflecting on the girls’ responses above, teachers’ lessons of the relationship between food/eating and physical activity in respect to creating or maintaining a ‘healthy’ body may be resulting in contradictory ‘unhealthy’ embodied practices in their female pupils.

Conclusion

Through interviews with seven academic ethnographers, Walford (2007: 7) revealed how researchers’ bodies influence “what they [are] able to do in ethnographic work and thus the data they were able to generate”. The author highlights how researchers’ bodies can influence their ability and the research itself through limitations of the body when—for example—the research involved playing an instrument or dancing. For me, it was not the limitations of my body that influenced my ability to conduct research. Rather, it was the way in which my body was interpreted—in particular by PE teachers, in respect to wider social conceptualisations of health. As researchers we should pay attention to how our bodies are implicated in the research and/or interpreted by research participants, and reflect on what kind of knowledge this allowed or denied us.

I argue that occupying a thin—read culturally ‘healthy’ body, allowed me unbiased knowledge of PE staff about their beliefs and practices of ‘health’ in relation to physical activity and the weight/fat of their female pupils. It is

apparent through my research that socio-political conceptualisations of exercise = slenderness = health, which inform the teaching of school-based physical activity have an adverse impact on girls’ embodied experiences and practices of health.

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End Notes

¹ In Scotland, pupils enter primary school between the age of 4 ½ and 5 ½, and attend primary school for seven years (Primary or P1 through Primary or P7). Pupils enter secondary school at age 11 or 12 and attend secondary school for four compulsory years followed by two optional years (Secondary or S1 through Secondary or S6).

² Body Mass Index classifications are used widely by health professionals to determine if a body has a ‘healthy’ weight; the classes are as follows: < 18.5 = underweight, 18.5-24.9 = healthy weight, 25-29.9 = overweight, ≥30 = very overweight or obese. The Scottish Health Survey recognizes the limitations of the Body Mass Index for children: “Constant changes in body composition during growth mean that the relationship between weight-for-height and adiposity during childhood and adolescence is age-dependent, and this relationship is further complicated by ethnicity and gender” (The Scottish Government 2009: 254).

³ Physical activity recommendations for children aged 5 to 18 years state that “[a]ll children and young people should engage in moderate to vigorous intensity physical activity for at least 60 minutes and up to several hours every day” (Department of Health 2011; (Web only).

⁴ See Fraser (2009) for a historic discussion of how slenderness has come to be a desirable feminine trait, within the conceptualisation of health in western cultures.

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Beyond tagging, poking, and throwing sheep: Using Facebook in social research

Gareth Thomas

Introduction

Much excitement, public and scholastic, surrounds the ascent of Facebook, a social-networking website attracting over 500 million users since its inception in 2004. Facebook has been increasingly integrated into the public sphere, proliferating media activities, communication practices, and social experiences. It has become a glowing reference to the mounting centrality of internet technologies in our everyday existence. A burgeoning phenomenon showing no immediate sign of exhausting the interest of the current populace, Facebook offers its users various functions including, but not limited to, requesting 'friends', chatting among peers, playing games, uploading and 'tagging' photos, creating events, posting on a user's 'wall', 'poking' or 'throwing sheep' at other users, and sharing media with other users. Academic attention on Facebook has identified its importance as a communication tool for users to support existing offline connections (Bumgarner 2007), together with how it contributes to the experience of jealousy in romantic relationships (Muisse et al. 2009), how it provides university students with a backstage area where role-conflict is worked through (Selwyn 2009), and how it presents a risk to privacy invasion by prompting users to disclose personal information (Debatin et al. 2009).

Overwhelming coverage within the social sciences has been dedicated to the relationship between Facebook and privacy issues, online friendships, and building social capital. Given much less attention, however, is the methodological profits it has for our field. Referencing a qualitative study exploring how mothers adapted to their child being diagnosed with Down's syndrome (Thomas 2010), this paper takes issue with the capacity of Facebook to be employed as a methodological tool and its role in the development of both the research

topic and the methods facilitating an investigation of this topic. As well as being identified and approached using Facebook, mothers participated in online interviews via the social-networking site. The paper is best described as a reflexive account as opposed to a piecemeal compendium detailing each 'correct' course of action for achieving the methodological potential of Facebook. Rather than tending a *how-to* guide, thus, the paper is, au fond, a *how-I*.

Research beginnings

My study explored how mothers of children with Down's syndrome rectify a breach of expectations and defacement of the mother role. In considering consolation as a social process, it captured the strategies employed by mothers to erect an acceptance of their situation and establish a positive relationship with their child following a diagnosis. The topic developed following observation of a Down's syndrome support group meeting. Although I had unrefined themes which I intended to explore, this support group session, perhaps better described as a group interview since some questions were directed to members, helped establish appropriate questions for further research, arrive at a better understanding of the social context, and highlight areas which were too delicate to discuss further. This support group session would be followed by fourteen semi-structured interviews with mothers. Interviews were selected since they, together with producing an in-depth evaluation of individual lives, provide valuable insights into the organization of personal experience, such as how people structure their perception of events, of themselves, and of others. The semi-structured interview, thus, in allowing participants to transmit their personal truths and construct their lived reality, seemed the most appropriate means of investigation when exploring mothers' personal experience of

discovering that their child has a disability, the method allowing for a principled analysis of life-as-experienced.

Following the support group, I had to decide how I would both access participants and conduct interviews. Wendy, a family friend and mother of a child with Down's syndrome, put me in contact with Rachel, the director of a Down's syndrome organisation assisting parents whose children have heart problems. Rachel suggested that she had access to a cohort of three-thousand potential participants, all of which were members of a Facebook group dedicated to her organisation. A network of three-thousand individuals surpassed my initial proposal for enlisting mothers (via support groups and word-of-mouth). I also suspected that using Facebook to conduct interviews online would hold two significant benefits: i) the production of an interview transcript, in a time-conscious study, absolved of the labour the transcription process involves; ii) the identity of participants would remain hidden under conditions of extreme sensitivity. As such, Facebook was incorporated as a fundamental component of the study. The essential characteristics, virtues, and flaws of online methods have been well-established (Hine 2005), yet very few have dealt with research in practice when using Facebook. A discussion of my own experience follows.

Using Facebook in social research

Rachel proposed that if I created a Facebook group page which explained my research, she would invite her group members to join my group. I subsequently produced a group page which included a description of the study, its aims and objectives, a background of my academic credentials, and an explanation of why I undertook the research. A structured questionnaire, which included twelve

questions and was intended to be a precursor for later in-depth interviews (i.e. to give participants information about the likely content of the interview and to offer me knowledge of their background prior to the interview), was added to the group page. Rachel and I agreed on her inviting sixty members of her group to join my group, believing this to be an adequate number in order to recruit between twelve and fifteen participants. The group was given a private setting with the intention of preventing uninvited persons from joining it and to ensure that if people wanted to 'post' anything personal or potentially discrediting, this could only be viewed by group members.

Despite the majority of those invited joining my Facebook group, no-one posted a comment and only four members returned the questionnaire within three weeks. Given my time constraints, I contacted Rachel in order to discuss other means of recruitment which may be more successful. We agreed that she would post a message about my research on her 'profile page' which is available for all of her Facebook 'friends' to see. Twenty-six people responded to this message, all mothers of children with Down's syndrome, expressing an interest in taking part. From here, ten women were selected and contacted¹, along with the four women who had previously answered the questionnaire. Out of the fourteen people contacted, eight responded and agreed to interviews. From here, I intended to find three or four more participants. I contacted all sixteen mothers remaining from the twenty-six that expressed an interest in taking part on Rachel's profile page. However, not one of these mothers responded before I had finished collecting data. Rachel subsequently posted a second invitation message on her profile page two weeks later, whilst I messaged all members of my Facebook group asking whether they would like to participate if they had not already. Four mothers responded to these requests and three accepted the interview invitation, meaning there were now fourteen mothers willing to be interviewed.

Out of the fourteen mothers participating in interviews, eleven were recruited using Facebook. The reason behind some mothers initially expressing an interest to participate but not responding to subsequent correspondence is unclear, although one may assume it was out of unease with the topics addressed, a preference for being recruited face-to-face, forgetting to respond, or not reading the information in the first place. Nonetheless, I suspected that given the subject matter, including prospective abortion and receiving a diagnosis of child disability, recruiting participants would become a difficult task. On the contrary, many participants displayed an unanticipated degree of trust and participated in the study without knowing too many details. Of these mothers, five participated in an online interview (8 more participated in telephone interviews and 1 face-to-face). Online interviews ranged from approximately one hour to over two hours in length. Broad, semi-structured questions were formulated with reference to the questionnaire provided on my group page and data collected during early interviews and the initial support group session. Questions invited mothers to tell a story regarding their experience of receiving the diagnosis, a means of observing how they see their own experiences, lives, and interactions with others.

Reflections

Using Facebook had two major benefits, aside from supplying ready-made interview transcripts: i) access to a wide-range of participants; ii) hidden participants during interviews. Without a doubt, having an ally in Rachel played a huge role in the recruitment and (convenience/snowball) sampling process. The role of the gatekeeper as an architect of trust and linchpin of a cohort has been well-rehearsed within qualitative inquiry (Whyte 1955; Venkatesh 2008). In this instance, the recruitment capacities of my gatekeeper were considerably amplified through using Facebook. Rachel had access to a legion of 3000 potential participants; her public endorsement of the study reached a virtual network which far exceeds that of recruitment via conventional means (i.e. support

groups and word-of-mouth). Facebook bestows its users with a relatively uninhibited forum in which subjects can be contacted from all over the world and in which a plethora of perspectives can be accessed on demand. Given the short time-scale of the project, Facebook assured a quick, sure-fire means of recruiting participants.

In addition, online interviews via Facebook offered participants an appropriate opportunity for self-disclosure under the protective cloak of anonymity or, rather, *quasi-anonymity*. I employ the term *quasi-anonymity* since I could still see the 'profile page' of participants (displaying photos, marital status, age, and other information) and vice versa. Although still hidden behind the computer screen, participants could benefit from knowing some basic particulars of the researcher, whilst feeling secure that they are unlikely to encounter the recipient of such delicate accounts in person². Though the existence of my profile meant that I had a physical/social face which participants knew of, I still retained the position of a 'stranger' (Simmel 1950: 404) who mothers could share their confidences with, confidences 'which would be carefully withheld from a more closely related person.' From the researcher's perspective, Facebook supplies extended access to participants in comparison to face-to-face methods, the latter also being a more expensive and time-consuming practice. From the participants' perspective, online interviews may have eliminated any discomfort felt when disclosing sensitive information. It was expected that experiences would be difficult for participants to discuss, yet this angst seems to be alleviated once the recipient of such delicate data is hidden from view, the interaction somewhat taking on the character of a religious confession.

Discussion

Academic research is seldom without its challenges; using Facebook was no different. Relying on a convenience/snowball sample can be criticised for it is often a subjective and bias process. Whilst individuals engaged in supportive and close-knit relationships

were likely to have been recruited, this could have been at the expense of social isolates, that is, mothers not connected to any network which I tapped into. In addition to potentially operating (inadvertently) under these inclusive and exclusive conditions, the absence of bodily cues during online interviews resulted in me having no immediate way of discerning the participants' comfort before, during, and after the interview. Whilst the paper avoids claiming that Facebook is a peerless model of methodological innovation, it remains clear that in considering my own study, it effectively facilitated investigation into the topic at hand. I make no apologies for the brusque, skimpy, and sometimes absent consideration of the practical and ethical issues arising from the use of Facebook in academic research. My focus has instead been directed toward whether its meteoric rise could prove lucrative for the social sciences. Here, I contend that it certainly can be. The internet has had, and will increasingly have, a major impact on the research process, particularly in methodological considerations. Facebook, accordingly, must be considered as contributing to that process. A website, a world, a research tool.

Notes

1. I assumed since all 10 women expressed an interest in being interviewed, each one of them would par-

ticipate in the study. Naively, I had underestimated the possibility of dropouts.

2. The idea that participants are unlikely to encounter the recipient of delicate data in person can be said of telephone interviews as well. Participants decided whether they wanted their interview to be conducted via Facebook or telephone; why they decided either way is not the focus here.

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Transcription as a 'research moment'

Donald Leffers

Introduction

Transcription of interview material can be a daunting task for the qualitative researcher, not only in terms of the extensive time requirement, but also due to concerns around producing transcripts that 'accurately' reflect interviews. This reflection paper addresses some of the tensions I experienced as a geography student encountering transcription for the first time. It is neither an assessment of techniques for transcription nor an evaluation of the various tools one can use to facilitate transcription and manage interview material. It is more of an

epistemological reflection on how knowledge is produced – how researchers go about producing 'data' that is ultimately accepted (at least in certain circles) as 'knowledge'.

Questioning transcription

Transcription is a process that remains for me an area of uncertainty. As part of my MA in geography, I carried out in-depth interviews within a qualitative research project in which I used critical discourse analysis to interrogate a variety of urban sustainability initiatives in Ottawa, Canada. I used a digital voice recorder during

interviews and transcribed these interviews with what perhaps can be characterized as 'open' (Jenks 2011) or 'naturalized' (Oliver, Serovich & Mason 2005) transcription – a process whereby interviews are transcribed in their entirety and with as much detail as possible in order to produce complete and accurate records of interviews. I returned transcripts to interviewees for 'participant checking' – a process through which informants were given the opportunity to verify responses, comment on what was covered in the interview, and have a final opportunity to decide how their state-

ments would be used in the research project. Participant checking proved to be a useful exercise for me. When I returned a transcript to one interviewee for participant checking, he remarked on the laborious inclusion of hesitations and false starts, and jokingly suggested that this might be a psychological study on how opinions are formed. I appreciated this comment because it made me interrogate my motivations for this type of 'exact' transcription, rather than simply accepting that this was the *correct* way to transcribe. I responded to this participant to the effect that a less exact transcription would necessarily require a certain amount of interpretation of the conversation and would thus present more opportunity for inaccuracies. In other words, I would be imposing my own interpretation of what was said as opposed to simply writing, to the best of my ability, exactly what I heard.

Although at the time I felt this was an adequate response, upon reflection, I am not entirely convinced. It implies that since my transcription is so thorough, it is a 'truer' reflection of the interview than one that leaves out certain types of vocalizations or hesitations. Following the logic of an open or naturalized transcription process, recording every detail stems from the assumption that "language represents the *real* world" (Oliver et al. 2005) and verbatim recording allows the research to access this 'reality'. This is very much an empiricist and rationalist notion, where "the data and transcript speak for itself" (Jenks 2011, p. 13), in effect removing the researcher from the data 'capturing' process. For these reasons, I am someone disturbed by my own claims and consider this experience a 'research moment' – a particularly insightful point in the research process that led to my increased reflexivity and a questioning of accepted techniques for interview transcription.

My first transcriptions were very detailed and included all vocalizations, pauses, and false starts (denoted by three dots or spelling out the 'umms' and 'ahhs') and also incorporated a variety of additional parenthetical observations of the interview process.

I also used an interview guide as a fieldnote logbook, drawing on this guide to make additional comments about non-verbal activities or contextual information that I felt would not be captured in a digital audio recording. This detailed transcription method was motivated by two factors. First, as mentioned above, I wanted to capture the interview as 'accurately' as possible and thus felt compelled to include as much detail as possible. Second, the literature on interviewing and transcription suggests using a robust, time-consuming, and complex system of transcription, motivated by reflexivity and claims to nuance that require hermeneutical systems of codes and symbols to capture as much interview detail as possible (see for example, Conradson 2005; Dunn 2005; Longhurst 2003). This transcription process is purported to "capture talk *as it actually occurs*, in all its apparent messiness" (Hutchby & Wooffitt 2008, p. 71, emphasis added) and must include all vocal cues since "any sound may have interactional import and communicative meaning" (ibid. p. 72). The pauses, hesitations, audible breaths, stretched syllables, and so on, might mean something and therefore must be recorded. At a most basic level, transcriptions represent data to be analyzed; the more detailed the transcript, the more data there will be for analysis (Jenks 2011).

Despite this literature and my own motivations, I struggled with these arguments and continue to question the insistence on using complex systems of symbols to capture nuance or make the process 'robust'. I am also troubled by my own transcriptions as purported 'records' of the interviews. My unease with extensive use of transcription symbols can be summarized in two main points. First, I am sceptical that any system of symbols can unproblematically 'capture' the atmosphere of the interview or the intent of participants' speech. Second, my particular method of analysis was not necessarily suitable for the analysis of detailed transcription symbols. These two points will be discussed in turn.

Transcription as translation?

Although clearly some use of symbols is necessary (for example, to indicate sarcasm, especially where opposite meanings are intended), all symbols are translations of meaning and despite the best of intentions, may or may not be accurate. After all, transcripts are not unproblematic records of interviews, but rather are "constantly evolving (interpretive) cultural practice" (Jenks 2011, p. 4). Furthermore, differences between participants' styles of speech and/or mannerisms tend to become standardized when using conventional transcription symbols; these symbols overemphasize things like false starts or mis-speech, leaving it to the researcher to construct meaning – to interpret communication in particular ways (ibid).

Conradson (2005) gives the following examples of transcription symbols: square brackets to denote where two participants are speaking at once; bracketed numbers to indicate the length of pauses between speech; underlined text to emphasize speech; and capital letters to signal increased volume. In a recent article in *Qualitative Researcher*, Henwood, Finn, and Shirani (2008) make use of one of these techniques by inserting numbers within interview transcripts to denote timed pauses in seconds. This very act of recording and documentation makes the pauses seem important. But how does one judge the significance of these speech patterns? If someone pauses for thought, does this mean they don't understand the issue, are hesitant to give a response, or perhaps simply want to take some time to give a well thought out response? What about those paralinguistic features such as intonation and volume (Jenks 2011)? If at one point someone begins to speak louder, what does this mean? Does it mean the same thing across participants? Clearly, any set of symbols will not only fail to accurately capture meaning but it will also *produce* meaning, only part of which may be accurate.

Although criticisms of transcription procedures exist, they often revolve around the utility or consistency of transcription itself or of the analyst,

but often fail to question what certain transcription techniques *do*. For example, Hutchby & Wooffitt (2008) cite problems with what can be a certain arbitrariness and inconsistency with transcription symbols: it becomes difficult to consistently record things like tempo, pitch, and loudness when they can represent such a wide range of differences. The solution to these problems then become ones of developing more 'expert' transcription techniques or perhaps more complex and consistent transcription conventions. In other words, these are technical problems with technical solutions rather than questions around how knowledge is produced and the researcher is situated.

Similarly, Jenks (2011) discusses the challenge of interpreting non-verbal utterances: "[l]aughter, for example, may be interpreted as a sign of being humorous, nervous, or reprehensive, to name a few. The way researchers interpret or hear laughter will in turn influence how the phenomenon appears on their transcripts" (p. 15). This is a relatively unproblematic assessment and one could conclude from this that one should be careful about ascribing too much coherent meaning to laughter. But this is not Jenks' conclusion. On the contrary, he suggests that limitations to transcription are more a function of the analyst; with a proper commitment to the listening process, one should indeed be able to interpret things like laughter: "researchers possess different levels of proficiency in the transcribed language and years of transcription experience and training. A researcher educated in identifying pitch contours may hear sounds differently than a researcher who lacks this training" (p. 15-16). But does this not imply that interview participants are relatively homogenous in terms of the utterances they make – that their vocalizations first of all mean something specific, and second that meaning is transparent, only requiring a competent interpreter to be revealed? I find this a highly problematic notion: that more data are inherently better, and that all data can be translated accurately given a competent researcher. Data are not innocent, they *do* things (Latour, 1993); their very presence

means that they have effects, the most obvious of which is they get translated in specific ways. Acknowledging this should be a central component of transcription, not a 'reflexive' afterthought.

Methodological (in)compatibilities

My second source of unease with transcription symbols involves the potential incompatibility with methods of analysis. During the process of discourse analysis that I employed, most of my initial transcription symbols for false starts, and 'umms' and 'ahhs' were effectively left out of my final paper. They remain un-interpreted and un-used, not only because this type of semiotic analysis is somewhat beyond the scope of how I used critical discourse analysis (although other types of linguistic discourse analyses might render them more useful, for example conversation analysis; Hutchby & Wooffitt 2008) but also because I was extremely uncomfortable in assigning written meaning to non-verbal cues (for those reasons mentioned above). Furthermore, as explained by Rose (2001), discourse analysis [she refers here to a critical, Foucauldian discourse analysis] does not claim to reveal hidden meaning or rely upon hermeneutics to discover meaning. Discourse analysis examines what can be articulated through language and perceived through practice (Waitt 2005) and how 'regularities' or 'discursive structures' can be found through careful analysis of statements (Foucault 1969/1972). Meaning can be surmised through careful scrutiny of texts – and through recognition of regularities across texts – rather than through indepth analysis of sub-text. Foucault (1969/1972) also advises that the discourse analyst suspend all pre-existing assumptions and read texts with an open mind; this is indeed a challenge when reading and re-reading familiar material, but doing so is essential to find those meanings that may not be immediately apparent and/or to allow the possibility of finding 'regularities' even if initial readings have excluded them.

Towards a more reflexive transcription process

The intent of this discussion is not to undermine the significance of non-

verbal cues, paralinguistic and other speech patterns, or attempts to capture mood and context during interviews. Nor is it to simplify the transcription process in order to make it 'easier'. If researchers find value in transcribing interviews in particular ways due to specific methodological requirements (e.g., sociolinguistics; Jenks 2011), they should continue to do so. The point is that one should be wary of relying too much on transcription symbols – one should never become too confident in how they assign meaning to interview material, and should constantly interrogate how interview material becomes translated during the transcription process. My interview material became meaningful and useful through the use of a variety of techniques, including a very limited suite of transcription symbols. More important techniques included: multiple re-readings and systematic cross-referencing of transcript texts; multiple listenings of the audio recordings (Hutchby & Wooffitt 2008); and (perhaps most crucially) engagement with my fieldnote logbook, analytical memos, and research diary (Longhurst 2003), especially for the purpose of recording non-verbal interactions (Jenks 2011).

Even here, however, one should never get too comfortable and assume one has 'captured' the truth. I cannot claim that audio recordings are *the* record of informants or that my various notes result in a complete and uniform picture. Interviews were situated: I selected both participants and questions, and relationships of power were woven throughout the interview process. That said, I relied heavily on the audio recordings themselves, often using multiple listenings to gain a better understanding of non-verbal cues, atmosphere, irony, sarcasm, and so on, and in fact used this in the final paper (as well as written comments of, for example, obvious physical gestures). Despite these techniques, giving text particular meaning based on my own translation of what non-verbal cues represent is not something that I ever became comfortable with during the course of the research project.

Conclusion

Particular methods and techniques, including those around interviewing and transcribing interview material, are integrally connected to the research question and methodology. Oliver (2005) notes that 'naturalized' and 'denaturalized' transcription methods represent the extremes of an almost endless suite of methods that must be used purposively based on research objectives. According to Jenks (2011), a transcript is "a research construct because it is created through the analytic lens of a data analysis methodology ... a transcript is neither atheoretical nor completely free of predisposition" (p. 11). Specific transcription procedures are closely connected to the research objective. Thus, I hesitate to make any broad conclusions about the purpose of, and techniques employed in, producing interview transcripts. If one were carrying out an analysis of power relationships in group interviews, for example, perhaps it would be important to try to tease out, through the use of symbols, *how* individuals are speaking and what mannerisms they use to indicate certain social positions or attempts at exercising power. In this context it may be necessary to record things like overlapping utterances, and stresses and intonations in speech (Jenks 2011). However, at least based on the literature coming out of recent geography textbooks, one can quite easily conclude that more 'naturalized' transcription techniques are *always* better. But this should never be a given.

As a researcher, one should always try to be aware, to the extent that one is able, of one's positionality in producing particular forms of knowledge. In terms of interviewing and transcription, this should include an awareness of the situatedness of the researcher in participant selection, interviewing, transcription, and analysis. One should not only question how best to 'capture' interview material. One should also constantly interrogate

how the very act of capturing might enact and privilege particular knowledges at the expense of others. As a student in geography, I have learned that one should never become too comfortable, either with theoretical universalities or with one's own convictions; there is something to be said for what Foucault (1997) called an 'ethics of discomfort'. I am encouraged and cautioned by this ethic, as it compels one to question constantly how knowledge is produced, not only during the process of interviewing and transcription, but also through all aspects of research design, interpretation of results, and the development of theory.

Acknowledgements

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End Notes

¹ Oliver et al. (2005) contrast naturalized transcription with denaturalized techniques, which are focused less on verbatim recording of speech and more on meanings and depictions that are suggested through speech

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