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# BECOMING RESEARCHED: THE OPPORTUNITIES OF AUTOETHNOGRAPHY IN TOURISM RESEARCH

Caroline Scarles PhD  
*School of Management, University of Surrey*

Eleanor Sanderson PhD  
*School of Geography, Environment and Earth Sciences, Victoria University of Wellington*

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## **Becoming Researched: The Opportunities of Autoethnography in Tourism Research**

Caroline Scarles, Ph.D.  
School of Management,  
University of Surrey,  
Guildford, GU2 7XH

Eleanor Sanderson, Ph.D.  
School of Geography,  
Environment and Earth Sciences,  
Victoria University of Wellington,  
PO Box 600, New Zealand

### **ABSTRACT**

*This paper explores the concept of 'becoming researched' through the opportunities for autoethnography as a technique of data collection. This research emerges from both authors' PhD research experiences and explores the ways in which autoethnography mobilises an appreciation for the embodied, sensual and emotional experiences of tourist and research practice. As such, it proposes communication through inter-subjective negotiation and facilitates an enriched research space within which previously 'hidden' spaces emerge through stimulating creativity and deepening connection through mutual appreciation between researcher and participants.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

In response to recent developments in qualitative methods, this paper seeks to investigate the application of autoethnography in tourism research. Following recent calls by authors such as Franklin & Crang (2001), Coleman & Crang (2002), Crang (1997, 1999), Crouch (2000a/b) and Edensor (1998, 2000, 2001) to address the embodied, performative nature of tourist practice, research methods adopted in tourism research are beginning to experience significant change. This subjective turn seeks to engage with tourists in ways that move beyond traditional realms of representation to access the haptic, non-representational spaces of the tourist experience. In recent years, there has been a wealth of literature attending to 'situating' the researcher through self-reflexivity (see for example: Adkins, 2002; Cloke *et al*, 2003; Coffey, 2002; Crang, 2003; Denzin & Lincoln, 1998 & Kleinman, 2002). Autoethnography provides one avenue through which researcher subjectivity is embraced within the tourism research setting (see for example: Morgan & Pritchard, 2005; Sparkes, 2000; Westwood *et al*, 2006). Drawing from the assertion by Ryan (2000) that subjectivity is equally part of the tourist experience and research process, autoethnography is one response to Tribe's (2004) call to explore more intellectual space for 'new' tourism research. Moving beyond dichotomies of insider/outsider that posit researchers as detached and passive facilitators of research, it explicitly discusses the experiences and presence of the researcher in the overall research context (Krieger, 1996).

Where traditional approaches of ethnography advocate the observation of respondents over an extended period, through long-term, situated and embodied practices of watching, talking and doing (Cloke *et al*, 2003), auto-ethnography does not demand such extended immersion to facilitate an understanding of grounded ways of life and worldviews that gradually become apparent via observing respondents. Thus, observation is no longer a method per se; a study of what people say they do, or are seen to be doing by recording a series of selected, concrete events (Angrosino & Mays Perez, 2000). Nevertheless, such a move does not serve to negate the importance of respondents and the vital role they play as

knowledgeable, situated agents who hold a wealth of rich accounts and insights into how the world is seen and lived (Cloke *et al*, 2003). Responding to Crang's (2003) weariness of work that "divides positionality formulaically into being insiders (good but impossible) and outsiders (bad but inevitable)" (: 496), we propose autoethnography as a fusion of both observation and first-hand participation, which seeks to compliment tourists' experiences with the researcher's own personal becoming and encounter with place. Rather than moving to deny the inherent reflexivity of research, autoethnography fully embraces the subjectivity of researcher. As Krieger (1996) suggests, there becomes the need to resituate the 'I' in research and generating a series of affiliations and insights to develop a fuller sense of self so that our understanding of others will not become fractured or artificial. Hence, "we need to link our statements about what we study with statements about ourselves, for in reality neither stands alone" (ibid. 2004: 191-192).

We therefore suppose that going beyond subjectivities (Coffey, 2002) also requires a *balancing* of subjectivities; a flexible, shared responsibility as both researcher and respondents reveal their inner selves to the research. Autoethnography therefore is underpinned by mobilising the essence of interpersonal interaction between researcher and respondent that enlivens and facilitates the sharing of detailed, situated understandings through intersubjective episodes. As Cloke *et al* (2003) suggest, we should treat people as people not objects in order to stimulate openness, emotional engagement and creative exchange via friendly relationships. Observations are no longer 'realities' extracted from the field, but intersubjective truths, negotiated out of an unfolding interactive process (Parr, 2001; Hoggart, *et al*, 2001, cit. Cloke *et al*, 2003). Communications with participants become fluid, dynamic co-constructions mobilised by mutual, situated understandings via intersubjective episodes. Participants are no longer objects from which to extract information and nor is the researcher 'safe' from being researched themselves. Rather, autoethnography facilitates communication as a process of negotiation (Fontana & Frey, 2000) through intimacy (Oakley, 1981) as interactions stimulate openness, emotional engagement and personal exchange. Westwood *et al* (2006) refer to the 'playfulness' of such approach. Thus, by embracing rather than denying the inherent implicitness of researcher subjectivity, research emerges as a poesis of voices and selves.

Finally, as Crang (2003), Spinney (2006) and Thrift & Dewsbury (2000) suggest, such an approach advocates an inherently kinaesthetic and embodied approach to understanding the practices of respondents. As researchers we engage in the process of self-witnessing as we commit our bodies to the intimacy of encounter and experience first-hand some of the intimate connections with place as it continually and endlessly unfolds and is experienced in a multiplicity of ways by tourists. Through negotiation, an animated, enriched spirit of research emerges that allows the space and possibility to explore, ignite and access the creative, embodied and inevitably emotional pluralities of tourists' practice. In exploring the performative, embodied and haptic spaces of tourist practice, the body becomes implicit in research as focus rests on the actual processes of learning through bodily responses and gestures: haptic knowledges (Crang, 2003). As Kleinman (2002) supposes, we are not automatons, distanced from that which we encounter and our emotions are crucial for understanding and provide clues about the world. Thus, no longer does the researcher rely upon the verbal communication of respondents, but communication becomes a rich fusion of words, sensation, emotion and bodily gesture as researcher and respondents alike find comfort and familiarity through mutual understanding. As such, attention reaches to unpack the "*felt, touched and embodied constitution of knowledge*" (Crang, 2003: 501) as attention rests not on that which is represented, but on that which is practised. Respondents are no longer merely agents conveying inherently personal information, but are supported and *understood* by the researcher as both have experienced that which is being researched. We

therefore propose that through autoethnography, researchers are able to gain deeper appreciation *of* and sensitivity *for* the multiplicity of attitudes, habits, sentiments, emotions, skills, sense and preferences in each of our research contexts.

## METHODS

The common strand of autoethnography emerged within the different research settings from both authors in response to methodological challenges both faced in their respective PhD fieldwork. Caroline's research was conducted in Peru and explored the ways in which tourists immerse their self with other through photography. The focus of autoethnography thus rested, not in following respondents to observe their photographic practices, but in immersing my self within such practice I sought to gain a deeper understanding and appreciation of some of the potential practices respondents may encounter and accommodate within their imagined, experiential and reflexive encounters of Peru. In becoming researched, *I became tourist*: following the 'tourist trail' around the key highlights of the Nasca Lines, Arequipa, Lake Titicaca and Puno, Cusco, the Inca Trail and the ultimate tourist goal of Machu Picchu. Thus, subsequent conversations emerged as a rich negotiation; sharing and mutual understanding of experience as my subjective positioning moved from researcher to 'researcher-as-fellow-tourist'. Additionally, as the focus of research lay in tourists' photographic practice, visuals in the form of tourists own photographs, postcards and tourist brochures also enriched conversation. The presence of such visuals further facilitating engagement with respondents as the particularities of the failings of representation and the importance of non-representational practices and encounters could be realised. Indeed, when respondents became lost for words and were no longer able to communicate the intensity of their feelings and connections to destinations, visuals offered a space for reflection and became tools for reinforcing and sharing the embodied visualities of the tourist experience.

Eleanor's research took place among a Melanesian settlement community in Fiji and focussed upon community members' perception and approach to community development. As this settlement is located in an identified tourist area of Fiji, aspects of negotiating tourism informed broader conversations about community members' descriptions of their community and their desires for its future. The research approach taken was explicitly participatory, where research participants co-determine and potentially direct the research process. Seeking to facilitate participatory research is a challenging process as research becomes negotiated through complex interactions between perceived and experienced subjectivities. Pain and Bailey (2004) highlight how negotiating participatory research spills out many various sensations for the researcher; personal engagement is necessary and the control of the research becomes fluid to a more or lesser extent, depending upon the 'depth' of participation. My own reflexive journey through the research process recognised that I am simultaneously subject to being researched. In addition, the action-orientated aspect within participatory research meant that our research was not primarily a reflective comment *on* community development, but became an active expression *of* community development. Autoethnographic journaling of this process provided an analytical space to explore this research relationship and the approach to community development explicit within it. Through the concerted self-analysis that autoethnography requires, I was able to discern empathetic ways of facilitating communication as we collectively discerned what being researched together might come to mean.

Thus, in the context of qualitative and semi-structured interviews autoethnography provides a means of accessing deeper, embodied nuances of experience and facilitating greater communication and engagement between researcher and research participants. In the context of participatory methodologies, it offers a reflexive tool for negotiating the relational demands of the methodology and for analytically processing the multiple subject positions

that were being called upon by the research relationships. Thus, autoethnographic journaling and writing complimented and enhanced our respective methodologies and subsequent research.

## FINDINGS

Firstly, we propose researchers are repositioned when they are themselves ‘becoming researched’ in the subjective shift within autoethnography. Via autoethnography, we propose researchers are able to compliment respondents experiences through subjective appreciation as they also experienced first-hand, similar activities and encounters as participants. Thus, researchers appreciation *for* and *of* tourists encounter stimulates deeper, enriched connection, affiliation and understanding with respondents (Angrosino & Mays Perez, 2000). Both become embodied, emotional and sensual agents as researcher positionality moves from researcher to being-researched. Observations are no longer realities extracted from the field, but are intersubjective truths of an interactive, unfolding process as both researcher and respondent via shared, embodied knowledges of encounters. Attention now turns to the empirical examples that support these assertions. Drawing on the authors’ research experiences in Peru and Fiji, we now move to unpack the ways in which autoethnography, in blurring the boundaries between researcher and researched, provides opportunity to access the nuanced ‘hidden’ spaces of embodied, haptic and affectual encounter. In doing so, we argue that while verbal communication and representation become tools for expression, they never fully impart the intensity of experience and are inevitably left lacking. Indeed, it is the intensity of frustrations, the vexation and ultimate hopelessness of representation within qualitative research methods, that emphasises the importance of the moments of non-representation as conjoined and extending beyond moments of representation as *doing* and somatic knowledges (Thrift & Dewsbury, 2000) that enriches findings. We propose autoethnography provides a pathway through which both researcher and respondents are able to engage in sharing spaces of *speech* and *silence*. It is within these spaces that autoethnography emerges as an opportunity to illuminate knowledges for both researcher and respondent to establish relative connection as communication moves into the “realms of sensate life” (Smith, 2001, cit. Cloke *et al*, 2003) that cannot be quantified or represented. Indeed, it is by conjoining researcher and respondent through subjective emotional and cognitive engagements, encounters and experiences of destinations that the opportunities of auto-ethnography emerge. Firstly, attention turns to sharing of *speech*.

### Sharing Speech

Sharing of speech emerges through the shared recognition of a mutual encounter which then opens up the ability of a dialogue that is only made possible by that recognition of points of mutuality between the ‘researcher’ and the ‘researched’. In the dialogues that follow, the boundaries between the researcher and researched become broken down as the speakers engage in a process of shared articulation. What causes the break down of this opposition to occur, is that both researcher and researched draw upon similar strands within their own subjective experience, which cultivates a mutuality that is then able to be shared in verbal communication.

*Caroline’s Story.* In exploring tacit moments of experience, it was not uncommon for discursive discrepancies to emerge as respondents experienced an inability to verbalise affectual connections and non-representational aspects of experience. Thus, as conversations moved beyond the factual practice and process of holiday selection into lay knowledges and experiences, respondents generally became uncertain and their responses short and uncomfortable. However, as I imparted my own personal anticipations, imaginings or experiential encounters as ‘fellow tourist’, respondents became more relaxed and engaged in

more animated reflection as they too recounted their own journeys of their tourist experience. Indeed, many respondents commented on the ‘travel connection’ or ‘understanding’ that emerged between us. Such connection was juxtaposed against respondents’ expression of frustration in conveying the intensity of experiences to family and friends when sharing their photographs: “*when you are showing other people, you would look at the best bit first and then it’s just a bit boring after that...it wouldn’t be for you or me because we have been there. It means something*” (Martin). Thus, looking at respondents photographs and talking around their embodied, reflexive encounters became a process of mutual appreciation and sharing of reflexive remembrance. Such connection is exemplified by Angela (see figure 1):  
Caroline: “...and yet the emotions and feelings and messages

**Angela:** *it’s quite incredible isn’t it*

Caroline: you can convey just through, which in itself is just an empty photograph

**Angela:** *...and this is when it becomes very, very personal. I mean it’s different for you because you have been there but if someone else was flicking through these they would see a bit of sand, a bit of rock and a little hut. Yeah, and it doesn’t mean anything at all*

Caroline: yeah...that then kind of makes me feel...I have got something to tell you

**Angela:** *exactly, it tells a story...it’s not technically a brilliant photograph but it says, from the emotional point of view...exactly what I wanted it to say”*



Figure 1: The Nasca Desert, Respondent’s Photograph

Sharing through speech facilitated an exploration of the issues surrounding such as the opening of the graves of the Nasca people as a tourist attraction, imagined histories of the Nasca people, the texture of the landscape and the deep intensity, vastness and vulnerability of self in the desert. Consequently, as respondents and researcher share and interweave experiential encounters of place, barriers of discomfort and unease become permeated. In giving a part of my self, I became researched: a fellow tourist with whom connection through mutual understanding was made. Ponderous silences no longer create fractures in conversation: disjointed breaks that halt and stagnate the fluid poesis of communication exchange. Rather, a deeper appreciation for the respondents’ experiences unfolds as autoethnographic exchange facilitates a dynamic, fluid intersubjective exchange.

*Eleanor’s Story.* The explicit intention of ‘researching with’ community members, implicit within participatory research, also facilitated the process of ‘experiencing with’ community members. This experiencing however occurs in the myriad differences and multiplicities of subjective positionality that Thrift & Pile (1995) highlight. Given the cross-cultural context of my research I was particularly concerned to separate out the personal

subjective processing of my experiences from those of my research partners. Yet, those shared experiences also opened up spaces of shared processing: spaces of mutual reflection where mutual sensations are released. Such a space was opened up by being invited to experience the filming of a documentary programme at the Cultural Centre where many of the community members worked. The filming focused on actors playing a young tourist couple and their visit to the centre:

*The film crew arrive and invasively film and take photos immediately as they jump out of the van, without any of the personal welcomes, greetings and introductions so important here. They move the community members about whilst they are performing in order to position them around their 'model' tourists. I am told this is a National Geographic filming, which I have no way of confirming, but as a geography researcher I feel so intently inside myself the tensions and contradictions spurring my research and the paradox of being invited by members of the community to accompany this 'tourist film' on their cultural tour. Through their filming I get so angry at the sense of them rendering invisible the experiential geographies of this community that have been expressed to me and instead only pulling out the commodified content of their cultural geography – that content that tourists from the 'West' will pay to see. [My reflexive auto-ethnography of this experience]*

The following day I am invited to share in a bowl of kava (a traditional Fijian ceremonial drink) with the owner of the Cultural Centre and some other male members of the community in order to discuss together the research around their community development. The owner of the Cultural Centre, in the midst of talking about the importance of cultural integrity for this community, referred back to the experience of the filming:

*"This happens quite a lot. I met them in the USA and they want to come for two and a half days filming, but they say they have a small budget to film. I know the sorts of budgets these people have and they are huge. They are trying to cheat the Fijians; they think people here are still living in the darkness! I tell them to f\*\*k off a long the road! I saw their script, but I didn't take that money – instead they can just come to the show. They think Fijians are block headed people! Those peoples are not bringing money to our culture they are making money from our culture. They use our culture to make money! This often happens. These people are not bringing money, but trying to use us. If you think culture is cheap, no, it's very important and very expensive. You can buy other things but you can't buy culture because culture was there before man created money. That's why most cultures are getting lost because of money."*

Through the shared articulation of this experience by myself and this member of the community, we cultivate a new empathetic experience. This is an experience that facilitates our ability to then communicate together further. This man recalls this experience of the filming in order to share with me the strength of his convictions about retaining the cultural strengths of this community in whatever future development may occur. As his words and emotional expressions parallel so similarly those expressed the night before in my own journaling, we are able to jointly process this anger in the context of our conversations about community development and that process of mutual empathy opens up a new dynamic within our subsequent spoken communication.

### **Sharing Silence**

Building upon the assertions of sharing speech, our second opportunity of autoethnography reflects upon the sharing of *silence*. Indeed, the ultimate failure of words in capturing the intensity of emotions, imaginings, sensations and affectual connection often created silences, intense rambling or alternatively moments of intense frustration as respondents were unable to articulate their feelings. Verbal communication therefore becomes a tool through which the intensity of affectual connection can be partially imparted,

but ultimately never realised as it never fully accommodates the individual within its boundaries. Thus, while representation such as speech, provides opportunity as a medium through which expression, intention and realisation of practice can be achieved, it falls short as: “*we find ourselves always already within patterns and regimes of truth as the very resources which allow us to aggress or disagree. We come to ourselves already entwined in the unfolding historicity of many such regimes that our intentions...our desires, action and words will never have been quite our own*” (Harrison, forthcoming: 19). Thus, where representation fails, autoethnography provides a fundamental pathway to access the nuanced intricacies of the practices and processes of the tourist experience. It is the intensity of frustrations, the vexation and ultimate hopelessness of representation that emphasises the importance of the moments of non-representation as fused to and extending beyond moments of representation: where doing and becoming and the role of somatic knowledges (Thrift & Dewsbury, 2000) enrich findings. It is in the moment where silence prevails that such voices are heard.

*Caroline’s Story.* In observing respondents’ reactions to their photographs, I watched as they engaged in moments of self-reflection; gaining deeper insights into their thoughts as their embodied reflexive performances communicated that which words could not. As Angrosino & Mays Perez (2000) suggest, body language and gestural clues came to lend meaning to words and responses as researcher and respondent connected through spaces of *silence*. Referring to figure 2, Sarah shared her experiences of an encounter with local children during her visit to a school outside Cusco:

*Sarah: “...these guys are laughing because they are getting balloons, fruit, pencils. He is singing me a song, they stood there and...they got things, they did another one, they got things, there’s another picture I have with the kids running own the street and I am thinking ‘oh Jesus do I have enough?’*

*Caroline: Yeah*

*Sarah: But so many kids that we gave things to, I mean when we got right out into the country and we were giving them sweets we had to show them how to unwrap that, anyway (gets very upset and stops talking)”*



Figure 2: Local Children, Respondents Photograph

Very quickly, emotion took over as Sarah fought back the tears: the embodied intensity of the memory taking over. However, having experienced similar encounters, I too became absorbed as through mutual appreciation, sympathetic to the intensity of her remembrances. Her emotions triggered and mediated my own reflexive performance. Spaces of silence emerged within which we were each able to reflect as we sat together in silence for a moment; sharing a feeling and humble appreciation that arises through such encounter. Words were no longer appropriate and silence prevailed as Sarah’s tears and sadness filled the space of the interview. The depth of gesture conveyed the intensity of her embodied,



deeply emotional experience; one we had both encountered individually during our own journeys, yet recounted together through mutual appreciation. Indeed, while it would be unwise to suggest autoethnography eradicates possibilities for misunderstanding. Had I not experienced encounters similar to that of Sarah, an understanding of the intensity of the deeply affectual, embodied connection she felt between herself and the children in the photograph would have been lost. Thus, in engaging in my own similar experiences of being a tourist in Peru, I was also positioned as an ‘insider’. The affectual connection between my self as researcher and respondents unlocked the possibilities of moving beyond the confines of that which is tangible, to explore the depth and richness of that which goes beyond words. In becoming researched, I gained an insider perspective, thus facilitating a deeper connection to Sarah (and other respondents) as I did not seek to piece together abstracted accounts with no real understanding, but through experiential encounter, was able to reach beyond that which could not be rationalised into words and move into the realms of senate life that cannot be quantified or represented. Subsequently, the paradox emerges in that within spaces of silence there is reverberation through an affectual richness in understanding and appreciation. Silence therefore emerges both through and also facilitates *connection*, as both respondent and researcher communicate via a negotiation of intersubjective appreciation. It provides space of comfort and reassurance that respondents are not alone, but can share their emotions as they are paralleled with those of the researcher. Indeed while the inherent subjectivity of encounter forever denies the possibility that both experiences are the identical, it is the opportunity for sharing that comes to the fore. Thus, as a space for sharing silence, autoethnography mobilises confidence in connection. Both researcher and researched open their self to each other, thus mobilising a vulnerability of the self as emotions take over. Each of us became vulnerable: revealing emotions and opening intimacies of our self to the potential scrutiny of other. Through mutual understanding, appreciation and connection, the risk of such openness becomes negated through an unspoken trust: a bond that joins researcher and respondent as “tourists-who-have-travelled-to-Peru” and have experienced place first-hand.

*Eleanor’s Story.* An important part of risking mutuality is the necessary recognition of difference and the different access to language that occurs, a difference particularly evident between cultures (Bhabba, 1994) and between the sexes (Irigaray, 1985). In the spaces of silence where language fails or where the language available might oppress rather than expand, there is still an articulation. Through my research I faced the challenge of enabling silences to remain. At times, to let empty pages speak out the necessity to recognise silences of experiences which I knew were decided, particularly by women members, not to be shared. To hear this silence requires the cultivation of our perception, which in turn can be facilitated by autoethnography. Some of these silences were silences created by oppressions and trauma. For me to try to bring those aspects into vocality, particularly given the differences in perceived power within my research context, would be a potential violence. Gradually through my research experience I came to appreciate that the tensions of silence embodied within myself corresponded to the silent tensions at the heart of my research. Cognisant of the vulnerability and trust shared with me by my research community, I then expose(d) myself in vulnerability and trust to those who come to ‘visit’ with me through sharing in the ‘outputs’ of my research. I therefore explicitly retain silences expressed within my research community and instead communicate the tension of that silence through my own body and my own subjective self. Autoethnographic writing entitled ‘writing as weeping’ therefore accompanied the articulation of ‘research findings’ within my doctoral thesis, of which the following is an extract:

“Why would I write? What would compel me to bring out of the perfect safety of interiority those things that I have found bruised by the society that seeks speech, that something inside you be extracted from you and then be open to dissection and analysis. Everything I speak right now, I speak with tears, with tears and chokes of expression that simultaneously seek acknowledgement and yet freeze in the abject fear of being open to its gaze... Writing as weeping is the most fearful passionate process of wanting to somehow stop the pain of silence but avoid the violence of speech.”

Autoethnographic writing can therefore facilitate communication when traditional ways of communication are insufficient – when haptic knowledge itself pushes against the boundaries of language. Whether in sharing a moment of silence between those involved in research or in a relevant empathetic articulation of silence, autoethnography can both emphasise the importance of that silence and enable it to be heard.

### CONCLUSIONS

Reflecting upon work by Crang (2003), this paper furthers recent suggestions that a new orthodoxy of qualitative methods is emerging within which the embodied, sensual and emotional experiences of tourists cannot be ignored. Autoethnography provides one pathway to achieving this. Rather than a methodological subset, we have proposed autoethnography as an integral part of research where participants actively seek to engage researchers in the emotional and transformative processes being researched. Our own research has demonstrated how autoethnography has facilitated this process through the sharing of speech and the sharing of silence. As Thrift & Pile (1995) warn, researcher subjective positionality is pervaded with difference and qualitative multiplicity creating potential for bias and subjective interpretation. Yet, like Thrift & Pile (1995) we also suppose researcher and participant subjectivities ultimately serve to enrich findings through a process of ‘wayfinding’. Thus, in autoethnography, subjectivity becomes constructive rather than destructive; accessing ‘hidden’ spaces, stimulating creativity and deepening connection through mutual appreciation between both researcher and participants. In autoethnography, therefore, the researcher is becoming researched and this process can ultimately enable a far richer research engagement and insight.

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**Contact Information:**

Dr. Caroline Scarles  
 University of Surrey  
 Guildford, Surrey, GU2 7XH  
 (0044) 1483 689653 voice  
 (0044) 1483 689511 fax  
 cscarles@surrey.ac.uk