Whose voices are heard? Towards a more comprehensive ‘Brexit’ picture
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It was the 7th of June 2017, the day of the snap General Election (yes, we all know what happened…) and there I was, first time campaigner in my local area. It was also the day the fan of semi-structured interviews in me started seriously thinking of the concept ‘multimodal ethnography’.

After a few hours having various conversations on the doorstep, I find myself speaking to yet another friendly person. The living room window, as much as it resembled the style of all the other windows on that street, distracted my attention from saying the usual ‘party line’ encouraging people to vote.
‘Oh, that’s my 8-year-old son’s’, the woman on the doorstep explained. ‘It’s quite powerful’, I commented, looking at the drawing. “We will look back in many years and we will regret our decision”, that’s a really big thing to say, isn’t it?’ ‘Yes, my children were quite upset because of the whole referendum situation’.

I asked the mother if I could take a photo, as this drawing is not something one encounters every day. She was happy her child’s views would reach other people too, not only the few interested passer-by neighbours.

Later that evening, I realised what that drawing actually represented. It was not merely an expression of disagreement with the Brexit vote, or an optimistic illustration of the friendship between the EU27 states, all holding hands and having smiley faces.

The drawing was the means by which an 8-year-old expressed the voice that they did not have during the referendum campaign. Similarly to non-UK EU citizens, who were rarely given a platform for their views in a debate which was partly about immigration (I wrote a blog post showing, amongst others, the lack of voice EU migrants had in campaign ephemera here), children could not express their views in the same way as the voting-able and voting-age population.

This experience changed the way in which I now think about data collection for my PhD. Instead of only following the topic guide and trying to do as many interviews as possible in the short time frame, I tried a range of more creative methods that ended up helping me to be more reflexive throughout the research process. It equally enabled participants to be more honest in their answers, particularly on controversial topics such as attitudes towards migration, that my PhD centers on.

One such method was including a ‘space for your thoughts’ flipchart during a mini-exhibition I had at the Bloomsbury Festival in 2017. People could look at a sample of leaflets which all spoke about immigration, published before and after the referendum campaign. The flipchart provided a space for them to express their thoughts on the referendum itself, or more specifically on how migration was represented during the campaign.

This image (left) shows one of the completed pages in this flipchart. Although those are not collected in the two locations I research for my PhD, many of those comments inform the approach I take in the interviews. A few
people who talked to me at the festival stall, reading the first comment on the page, told me that this type of view won’t be freely expressed in a recorded interview setting, especially given my EU migrant background. One of them disagreed in writing with the first comment, which I found to be an intriguing use of the flipchart. Although I had occasions of direct negative views towards migrants being expressed in previous research interviews, there is some truth in that writing down on a flipchart or drawing something enables more honesty than expressing views in a one-to-one setting which is eventually recorded as well.

After these conversations at the Bloomsbury Festival, both in words and on paper, I decided to include a selection of leaflets and newspaper titles as stimulus materials for the recorded interviews. I try to start each interview by asking the participant to write down one-two sentences about how the referendum made them feel.

To keep all those materials in an organised way, I created ‘The Book of Brexit’. Inspired by the ‘In Limbo’ book, a collection of testimonies from non-UK EU citizens in the context of Brexit, I aim to collect first impression or thoughts people have about the immigration debates. The contributors will not only be the interview participants, but anyone who finds the book in the different places I travel to. The colorful record cards on which thoughts are written will include a diversity of voices, some not heard at all during the official debates, to form a collective image of attitudes to immigration in the context of Brexit.
Most would agree all this is nice and often empowering for people, whatever their politics or attitude towards Brexit. But how can this be used beyond only informing ‘serious’ research approaches such as the semi-structured interviews? Can all this even be considered research data? The ‘Making Connections’ workshop was inspiring in answering some of the questions around this, by showing how data in different formats (drawings, stories, research notes, photographs) can indeed be brought together to form a coherent picture!

As my fieldwork progresses, techniques of collecting thoughts such as the ones I showed in this post could encourage often marginalised voices to be heard, but also voices that are temporarily hidden due to the nature of the interaction between researcher and participant and the researcher’s positionality.

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