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[Event Review] 'New ethnographic contexts and methodological innovation: creativity, imagination and performance'

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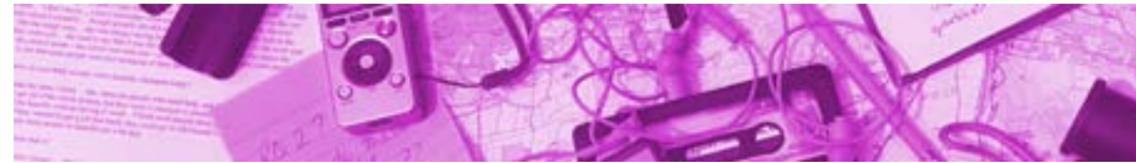
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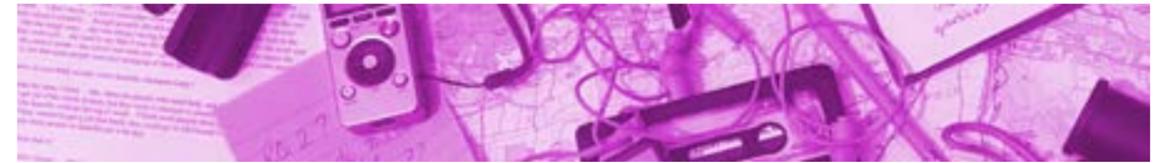
Review of the University of Kent's Centre for Ethnographic Research's event; 'New ethnographic contexts and methodological innovation: creativity, imagination and performance'

Kiera Pratt-Boyden



"Imagination is a constituent element in the process of how we produce our social and material realities"

(David Graeber 2009; 526).

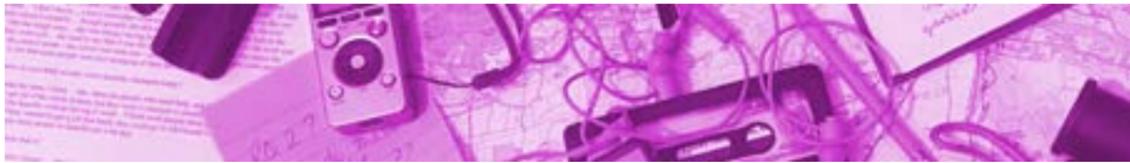


Workshop participants learning about 'embodied responses' to ethnographic data, led by Dr Jennifer Leigh

On the 8th of June, a group of academics and students from diverse backgrounds met at the University of Kent's *Centre for Ethnographic Research* to discuss and experiment with different ways of representing and processing ethnographic data. The workshop began with an experimental practice session and culminated in a discussion about ethnographic methodology.

Sweta Rajan-Rankin started the session by reading a piece of auto-ethnography, which was rich and personal. She described her experiences of going to a Kentish hair salon and her 'hair encounters' in the white, racialised space. Sweta described how she felt entering the salon - seeing the posters of groomed, light skinned women carefully placed on the walls; the bottles of shampoo and products resting in glass bowls; feeling the burning heat of the hairdryers around her, and the conversations she endured which resulted in her having extra hair treatment because her hair was "too dry".

She recalls the uncomfortable proximity of one of the salon employees, who seems to want to share some unspoken secret with her; and sits too close, playing with her jewellery and watching her apply make-up. She describes constantly feeling 'out of place' in the salon, as if she is sporting a "large, unruly afro" even after her 2-hour straightening treatment is finished.



Sweta admits initially she felt quite nervous sharing her story- it is personal and revealing. With her 'researcher's hat' on, she explains how she didn't want to 'lead' our experiences of the data. She confides to us, what many already know, that field-work can feel very solitary and that it can be difficult to separate your experiences and emotions from research accounts and analysis. She explains that she is aware of how her story reflects the anger, hurt, sarcasm and opposition she experienced in the salon, and that it plays a part in how she represents the salon and the workers in a particular way (such as her amusement at one particular employee's 'man bun').

After Sweta told her story, we were invited to respond in various ways – through embodied responses, drawing and storytelling (which is similar to free-association).



Some drawn responses to Sweta's auto-ethnography



Props to aid 'thinking through' Sweta's experiences of the hair salon

The story-telling group came up with an array of individual, unique responses to Sweta's auto-ethnography; including telling it through the eyes of the salon mirror, as well as a customer in the shop. One attendee's response was written as an inner monologue, reminiscing about another time, place and set of activities unrelated to the workshop. This broke the 'fourth wall' of the exercise, reminding us that ethnographic accounts are intimately shaped by us as individual researchers are products of a particular time, places and our own contexts. Responding to Sweta's auto-ethnography had helped remind us that our research encounters can be thought through in very different ways at different times and by different people. We as individuals choose what to reveal and conceal, and our imaginations can be useful resources for reflecting on the way we think through our research and how we choose to represent it.

The second half of the afternoon involved a panel discussion led by Professors Les Back and Dara Culhane which opened up many more questions than it answered. One of the key issues raised in the practice of creative and experimental methods was how they need time, particularly because they involve extra levels of reflection and often, working with materials. This reminded me how a mentor once told me that, sometimes 'staring out of a window' can be equally as important in the writing process as the actual writing. Time, and more importantly, time to think is a privilege and a luxury we don't often have as academics, particularly in an environment where funding and budgets restrict these creative and iterative processes.



We asked questions, such as; what is the purpose of using different methods? Do subjects 'lose' authority in the creative process? Are we just appropriating, or fragmenting people's lives? How do we negotiate the tensions between our ideals and representation? Is the ideal to "give people a voice" or 'defer' to our interlocutors, or could that be considered patronising?

We discussed how there are often personal, political reasons behind choosing methods, and that one needs to think through the reasons and motives behind these choices, which might mean speaking honestly about how your feelings and experiences shape your data.

As an ethnographer who works with mental health activists, working through Sweta's data creatively felt more akin to the modes of engagement and communication often deployed by my interlocutors who typically use creative means such as painting and poetry to express themselves. It left me wondering whether using creative methods might be more inclusive or empowering for them, particularly as previous research experience revealed that many are wary of the institutionalised power differences inherent in more common methods such as interviews.

A key focus of my research is understanding the role of imagination in social life, including how mental health activists talk about possibilities and desired future(s) as well as how these futures inspire, motivate and sustain them throughout the day. Imagination is considered a vital part of everyday life for my interlocutors it was refreshing to experiment with frameworks which take people's fantasies and trains of thought seriously.

The methods we experimented with at the workshop invited us to think about how we might represent social processes differently to the written word. At the same time, difficult questions were also raised, including whether, through the process of artistic production, we were reducing ethnographic data to artefacts and objects in a kind of 'return to wonder' harking back to social science's uncomfortable legacy of colonialism.

The workshop was undeniably a unique experience. It was strange, at times, fractious and not much of it was easy. Things which are new, or experimental in nature, are always going to be challenging, especially when they are embedded within complex debates about honesty, accuracy, fairness and representation in research. People come with very different reasons, motivations and approaches to what is the 'right' or the 'wrong' way to do ethnography. Challenges, disagreements and at times, frustration, were all part of process of the afternoon and part of what it takes to think through what alternative, creative methods really mean to us as researchers. I would recommend anyone interested in using innovative methods start by opening up a space for exploration, experimentation, discussion and reflection, where you can learn what practices might work for you and your participants before thoughtfully and carefully applying them to your own research.



References

Graeber, D. (2009). [*Direct action: an ethnography*](#). AK Press: Oakland, CA.

Suggested further reading:

Culhane, D. and Elliott, D. (2016). [*A different kind of ethnography: imaginative practices and creative methodologies*](#). University of Toronto Press: Toronto, Canada.

[Keira Pratt-Boyden](#) is currently undertaking a PhD in Anthropology at Kent University with a graduate teaching scholarship. Her research focusses on the ethics and practices of care among mental health activists in London. Specifically, she is examining how individuals who reject health services and conventional biomedical models re-configure therapeutic approaches by drawing from imaginative practices and incorporating care into everyday life. Previously, she worked as a research assistant at Sussex and Oxford universities, on various projects related to improving the experiences of people involved in health and social care services.