

# Doing ethnography or applying a qualitative technique?

Reflections from research with non-traditional, mature students

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# Overview

- Research Overview
- Contextualising the Presentation
- Train Journeys
- The Waiting Field
- Recommendations
- Concluding Remarks
- Questions

# Research Overview

- Dawn Mannay
- Mothers and Daughters on the Margins: Gender, Generation and Education
- Melanie Morgan
- Motherhood and Mature Studentship: a Psychosocial Exploration

# Train Journeys



# Methodological Choices (?)

- Latest and greatest techniques
- Over-reliance on interview data (Atkinson and Coffey 2002)
- Arguments against autoethnography (Delamont 2007)
- Limitation of participatory visual methods (Packard 2008)
- 'Multiple Methods in Qualitative: Research: More Insight or Just More? (Darbyshire et al 2005)

# Techniques, methods or methodologies?

- Fragmented view of research
- Lack of epistemic cognition
- Can we move beyond 'the technique' and draw on wider ethnographic practice to make the most of our research journey?
- Ethnographic base in a family of methods (Lincoln 2012)

# Valuing the In-between

- Conducted interviews and employed visual methods of data production in our research
- But our writing and conversations with each other have also reinforced the importance of our time in the field 'waiting' to engage in these research techniques
- Waiting time in research is neither empty nor without use; and in times of waiting we often learn new things about our participants and ourselves

# 'Waiting Field'

- We offer reflections from our research diaries that document this waiting time; and the discoveries of others and of self doing ethnography in the 'waiting field'





# Waiting Spaces

- Spaces previous to
- Spaces of interruption/disruption
- Spaces of reflection
- Spaces in need of attention and appreciation

# Pyjamas

- Carla had forgotten that I was coming over and was sat in her pyjamas watching 'Under the Hammer' with Patricia (her mother)
- "I knew I was supposed to be doing something today but I couldn't remember what" said Carla.

# Wet Shoes

- It has been raining and I am waiting for Mally outside her house in the rain and when she arrives we go inside. Before the interview Mally said “I will have to put the radiators on to dry my shoes as they are soaked through with rain”, and she puts her shoes on the radiator. “I’ve only got one pair” she explains, “there is never any money left for me after the kids”. This is the reality of living on low income, having to walk around in wet shoes. When your income gets higher you forget about these things, the every day inconveniences and the small miseries. I have walked around with holes in the only shoes I’ve got, wet, cold feet and bronchitis on top. It becomes normal at the time and is forgotten when you have more shoes than you really need.

# Man Trouble

- Visitors and neighbours
- Fathers, sons and husbands
- Celebrations cancelled
- Theft and betrayal
- Advantages of small handbags
- Annoying but expected and accepted
- Tacit normalisation

# Waiting Field

- These types of records are important for capturing aspects of mother's and daughter's every day lives, the barriers to education they face; and our reactions and reflections. The ethnographic experience is accessible within these waiting times; the times where real lives carry on before they make room for the intrusion of the data production techniques

# Cutting the Grass

- Jordan is 21 and lives with her mum and brother and 22 month old son. She has a very supportive family and during our interview at home her grandparents turned up to cut the grass. Jordan explained that she was in the middle of an interview but the grandparents insisted “they wouldn’t be any bother”. As a result the interview took place with the grandparents partially present, going back and forth between the living room and the garden – which really disrupted the interview. My mind went blank.

# Mobile Phone

- Cheryl has accused Tanya of being a bad mother on several occasions because of her attendance at university/placement (even threatening to call social services), particularly when the children are ill. Indeed during my visit Tanya's home telephone and mobile rang at least a dozen times (it seemed constant). Twice I asked Tanya if she wanted me to stop so she could answer but she said "it's only my sister and she will only have a go at me". Within the working class post industrial communities in which we live there is often a pervasive cultural attitude: it is ok to do things as a woman as long as it doesn't interfere with what are considered to be expectations of "care" and understandings of what a good mother is/does. I'm angry.

# Waiting Rupture

- A backroom view of an interrupted/disrupted space where the omnipresent, but often hidden, relational and affective aspects of being a working class mature student mother, partially emerge during critical ethnography



# Reflexive Writing

- Across accounts
- Research diary
- Reflective and reflexive
- Empirical and methodological
- Acknowledging the ethnographic base
- Working with a 'family of methods'

# Recommendations

- Focus on applying ‘the technique’
- Sidelines the importance of ongoing traditional ethnographic and reflective engagement
- Students and new researchers in education may neglect the ‘waiting field’
- Centralising the salience of the ‘waiting field’ can produce more useful fieldwork in studies of participation in education

# Concluding Remarks

- Visual, narrative and interview techniques are valid methods of inquiry
- Embedded in traditional ethnography
- ‘Waiting field’ is an opportunity to explore the times where real lives carry on before they make room for the intrusion of the data production techniques
- Appreciation of discoveries of others and of self doing ethnography in the ‘waiting field’
- More nuanced understanding of educational journeys, ruptures and barriers

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