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Innovation, Integration and Impact

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The modes & conditions of qualitative data

Chris Taylor

In this issue of *Qualitative Researcher* what constitutes qualitative data is explored in two ways. First, each of the articles contained in this issue discuss different 'modes' of qualitative data, and how different medium are used to solicit these contrasting but equally revealing perspectives of the social world. The second way the notion of qualitative data is explored is the way in which all the articles discuss and consider the related role and importance of the 'conditions' in which these different modes of qualitative data are produced in the first place.

The first article by Fincham, Scourfield and Langer reports on one of the demonstrator projects of QUALITI, by outlining the diverse modes of data found within coroner's files of suicide cases. This documentary research highlights the importance of the different conditions in which such qualitative data is designed and produced. The authors go on to argue that this multimodality *within* a single case offers an example of multi-method research or triangulation; that of offering multiple perspectives on a social phenomenon.

The second article in this issue by Mellor considers other modes of qualitative data, generated from an ethnographic study of children and friendship. The author begins by discussing the relationship between the researcher's notebook and the research participants. Mellor then describes the way in which notebooks were used by the children to generate drawings and stories about their understanding and interpretation of friendship in an opportunistic and ethnographic fashion. In this article we see the importance of the conditions in which the non-formal qualitative data is generated and collected.

The following article contrasts quite markedly with Mellor's opportunistic

conditions for generating new modes of qualitative data. Instead, we see how Scott purposely designs or dictates the conditions in which her qualitative data was generated. In the article interviews and focus groups are employed as the medium for collating qualitative data in two research projects examining the nature and importance of shyness and anxiety. Scott concludes by suggesting that the researcher plays an important role as a stagehand, nesting between the other roles of the interviewer as producer/director and repetiteur.

The final article in this issue by Edwards considers another mode of qualitative data, that of participant diaries. In this article the author discusses the methodological challenge she found in conducting research on the use of public space. Through this study Edwards reveals the complex issues encountered in establishing and responding to the 'conditions' in which the diaries were produced.

It is interesting to note from these four methodological articles how different 'modes' of qualitative data are revealed; and as distinct from the *medium* for collecting such data. Furthermore, the 'conditions' in which the articles report how qualitative data is produced contrasts quite importantly from the *context* in which the studies are located. Most qualitative research now routinely reports the medium of data collection and the context of the research study. But further distinctions between the modes and conditions of qualitative data is perhaps also necessary in ensuring greater clarity and rigour in qualitative research.

Please let us know what you think about the issues raised in this edition of *Qualitative Researcher*. You can find our contact details are on the back page.

Chris Taylor is Deputy Director of QUALITI.



Documentary data: single medium, multiple modes?

Ben Fincham

Jonathan Scourfield

Susanne Langer

Introduction

The aim of this brief paper is to open up discussion about the diversity of evidence within documentary research. Specifically, the idea of multimodality is employed to aid conceptualisation of the diversity of qualitative documentary data. The idea that the medium of written 'documents' is mono-modal is questioned, with reference to research with coroners' suicide files. These reflections arise from a qualitative sociological autopsy study of individual suicides, one of the demonstrator projects within the QUALITI node of the ESRC's National Centre for Research Methods. The project has involved analysis of case files from a coroner's district in the UK, as well as interviews with those who knew the deceased well (such as family members) and local newspaper reports. It is the analysis of the coroner's case files that the paper refers to.

The term 'multi-modal', which derives from semiotics, is being increasingly employed to describe projects which combine diverse qualitative data (see, for example, Dicks *et al.*, 2006). Kress and Van Leeuwen (2001) outline a theory of multimodality which it is useful to refer to here. These authors focus on 'resources' and 'practices' in the processes of representation and communication, in order to move away from the idea of 'fixed, stable entities' (p4). They conceptualise four different 'domains of practice' for the communication of meaning; namely discourse, design, production and distribution. They also focus on articulation and interpretation on the part of audiences. These ideas about the dynamic and interactive dimensions of signifiers can arguably extend the more traditional notion in social scientific research of 'triangulation'. The term 'triangulation' could be seen to have potential overtones of seeking confirmatory evidence to support singular truths, which might explain why it seems to be rather out of favour in a constructionist research climate. We do not propose, however, abandoning the idea of triangulation. The term helpfully conveys the importance of building cross-checks and balances into research by not relying on one register or one particular view of the

effect or site under study. The concept of multi-modality can arguably, however, deepen our understanding of the process of triangulation.

Multi-modality is clearly an appropriate concept for projects that include, for example, written text, speech and moving images, as these represent distinct modes of representation and communication. However, it might also be argued that within data categories that are more conventionally thought of as mono-modal, such as 'documents', the diverse *sources* of the written texts might just about warrant the description 'multi-modal'. Kress and Van Leeuwen (2001) differentiate between modes and media. Modes they see as abstract, non-material resources of meaning making, such as writing, speech, image, gesture and narrative. Media, however, are the material resources via which modes are realised, such as a word-processed document or a recording of speech. Dicks *et al.* (2005: 72) point out that 'the same mode can be achieved by different media', and we argue here that the same medium – for example written documents in a coroner's file can be understood as multi-modal insofar as different documents are produced under very different conditions. The modes-media distinction is useful insofar as 'it encourages appreciation of the different (or, indeed, similar) kinds of meaning that different media afford' (Dicks *et al.*, 2006: 83). The acknowledgement of different modes within the same medium is important as it serves to strengthen the validity of conclusions drawn from documentary data.

With one obvious exception, the artefacts in the coroner's files we have studied are all written documents; however, the origins of these documents vary considerably. As will be illustrated, some derive originally from processes of speech, others writing. Observations about dissection of the body and the subsequent documentation are as different in their abstract meaning-making from an account by a distraught witness to a suicide as to be considered *modally* different, because of the conditions under which they were designed and produced. The items within the coroners'

files which are not documentary, at least as conventionally understood within the research methods literature, are the photographs of the dead body. Since these clearly constitute a different medium, we are exempting them from our main claim in this paper, namely that a single medium (a pile of written documents) can arguably be understood as multi-modal. At this point we go on to illustrate our main claim by describing the different types of data in the files and making some brief reflections of the conditions under which they are designed and produced.

The different types of data

Initially we assumed that in conducting our research project we would be engaging with three distinct types of data, and that the multimodality of the project lay in the combination of interviews with people bereaved through suicide, analysis of coroners' files and analysis of local media coverage of individual suicides. However, we realised early on in the study that the files alone were full of documents that derived from such diverse sources as to be considered different modes of data. The following are examples of the different types of data to be found in the coroner's files and this is not an exhaustive list. However, it gives an impression of the variety of data that could be blandly, and singularly, described as documentary. We argue that there is diversity in respect of the conditions under which these data are designed and produced and the semiotic modes (e.g. writing or speech) that have been used in originally generating the data.

Suicide notes

These are generally written in conditions of extreme anxiety and distress, in the period immediately before death. This writing is preserved in the original and from the coroner's legal perspective must not be tampered with. The production of the notes varies considerably, with messages being left on A4 pads, the backs of envelopes, on prescriptions, in ornate notebooks, on computers and in mobile phone texts. The notes are also written with particular audiences in mind

and anticipate some of the reactions that might be expected to the suicide. There are some common aspects of design, including (often, but not always) apologies to specific individuals, explanation of reasons for the suicide and instructions for a funeral or disposal of possessions.

Interviews with relatives and friends

There are written witness statements from relatives and friends of the deceased that originate as spoken accounts but are subject to remediation by the police officers and codified in professional language to meet the needs of the court. Statements are taken shortly after the discovery of a suicide and are a mix of factual and emotive statements. They often contain details about the recent past, the deceased's state of mind and key events in the life of the deceased that may have contributed to the eventual suicide. The orientation of these statements towards the perceived needs of the legal process (via the culture of the police force) results in a formula (or 'grammar') that should perhaps be seen as a 'mode of regulation' (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2001: 22). There are some familiar elements of narrative that tend to reappear quite often, including reflection on the deceased's trajectory of happiness / depression, the events leading up to the death, the last exchange the witness had with the deceased and so on.

Interviews with eye witnesses

Subject to remediation by police officers, these accounts describe the circumstances surrounding the death itself and its aftermath. Bodies are discovered by close family members, by people who knew the deceased but were not members of the family and also by people who did not know the deceased, but who just happened to be around when the suicide occurred. Eye witnesses who are unknown to the deceased have fallen into at least three categories (see below). Again, since these statements are conveyed via conventions of police recording, they are structured by a clear grammar of design, in Kress and Van Leeuwen's terms.

(1) Members of the general public

These witnesses have simply happened upon the suicide. They include hotel chambermaids coming across bodies in rooms, people walking their dogs and coming across a body hanging and passers-by witnessing someone jumping in a river. Just occasionally an expression of powerful emotion ends up in a witness statement, but because of their primary

legal role as evidence of the means of death, these statements rarely convey any shock or horror. One would imagine that in many cases, as with close friends and relatives, a fairly emotional account becomes recorded by police officers as a rather detached description of body location and condition, because of priorities of design.

(2) Police Officers

The police are often called when someone – a family member, neighbour, or passer-by - notices that something is amiss, for example a suicide note has been discovered by a relative and the house is locked and the police are called to break in. These statements are very explicitly couched in the institutional language of police procedure.

(3) Paramedics

Paramedic statements involved additional formulas for describing medical procedures carried out on the deceased. Occasionally they convey a tone of professional defensiveness – perhaps anticipating complaint or litigation where suicidal individual might conceivably have been kept alive through paramedic intervention.

Pathology Reports

The pathology reports are inevitably clinical in their content. They contain details of the size, weight and condition of major organs and detail any physical trauma suffered. These accounts can be distressing to read in a very different way from the more personal accounts of friends and relatives. The level of detail about often horrific injuries is reported in such a way as to accentuate the dissection of the body. Again these reports reveal a clear grammar of design, with the same headings and sub-headings appearing in almost every report and considerable repetition between reports of the same anatomical and pharmacological terminology.

Psychiatric and Psychological Reports

These reports often chart the emotional collapse of the deceased and occasionally reveal elements of personalities or relationships not mentioned by, and perhaps not known to, relatives or friends. It should be pointed out that there are differences in the statements between psychiatrists, who will often catalogue reactions to drug prescription regimes, and psychologists who tend to focus more on reactions to life events or significant relationships. As with the other professional reports noted above, there are occupational grammars of design,

although psychiatric and psychological reports are less formulaic than those of pathologists. As with paramedic reports, there are occasionally reports which are constructed in anticipation of possible complaints. These contain considerable detail of the chronology of appointments and treatments offered.

Conclusion

As can be seen, the data we have encountered in the coroners' files vary considerably with regard to the conditions under which they were designed and produced. There is diversity in terms of the emotional climate of their production; the orientation of the author towards the subject matter, be it professional or otherwise; the intention of the author and the origin of the evidence in a spoken account or writing. This diversity is such that we question whether indeed the single medium of written documents in a case file in fact is better understood as multi-modal. This discussion of multimodality in documentary research is in its infancy, but the importance of such a discussion relates to the now standard demand for multiple, corroborative methods in social science research. If indeed in the coroner's files that we have examined the sources of data are so diverse as to be considered modally distinct, then the demand for multiple methods (or 'triangulation') may be seen to be at least partially satisfied, as the whole point of using more than one method is to gain multiple perspectives on the part of the social world under scrutiny. The confidence with which assertions can be made on the basis of the coroner's files is strengthened when the multimodality of the data is appreciated. We have argued that the notion of 'documents' as a singular mode of representation 'black boxes' the different kinds of written materials contained in such files, materials which enable the researcher to explore different constructions of the same event; constructions which vary not only according to discourse of suicide causation but also in terms of the conditions under which they are designed and produced.

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Stories and sketches of friendship

David James Mellor

Introduction

This article outlines some important questions about the kinds of things that are treated as data in ethnographic research with children. My central point is that there are systems of communication and representation that are often overlooked by adult researchers working with children, and that this is to the detriment of qualitative, social studies of childhood because children invest a great deal in communicating and representing in these ways (see, for example, Jones 2003; Philo 2003). Specifically, I look at a cohort of children from my own fieldwork and their practice of writing stories about and drawing pictures of their friendship groups. Several researchers have spoken with me anecdotally about instances when children have written and drawn in their research notebooks, but none have gone on to fully explore either this practice or the content of the drawings. With this short article I hope to instigate discussion about this common practice, suggesting that it is vital that researchers' methodologies take into account the creative, communicative processes present in children's relationship cultures¹.

Researching children's friendship cultures

During my doctoral studies I undertook a longitudinal school based ethnography, working with a cohort of children aged between 10 and 12 who attended several primary schools and followed them as they made the transition to high school². While the research took place in schools,

this was a cultural rather than an educational study, which focused on the dynamics of children's friendship groups. The research was undertaken across several spaces inside and outside the schools. The main areas were the playgrounds and playing fields during morning and lunch break, and various classrooms, corridors and assembly halls during lesson time. There were also more 'unofficial' spaces, like the streets during the walk to and from the school. As is typical of a school based ethnography, the research activities centred on observation and semi-structured interviews, but also occasionally included various other structured activities like creative writing, drama, and diary writing. These structured activities were mostly situated in the first phases of the project because as the fieldwork progressed I made a conscious decision to move away from them and closer to the daily activities already present within the children's friendship cultures. The rationale behind this move was a determination to locate the research within the children's own everyday lives and to develop a methodology that did not produce too much of what I call 'scripted dialogue'. This was particularly important because, as far as possible, I wanted to avoid framing the research as 'school work' and giving the children the impression that there were correct or expected things to say; a common concern for researchers undertaking this kind of project.

The ethnographer's notebook

Observation and note taking are key practices within ethnography and the note-

book is an important, if not vital tool in this kind of research. Research participants' perspectives on a researcher's note taking activities can be crucial and may have a critical effect on the quality of field relations. The notebook itself is an undeniable symbol of the power of the researcher (Hammersley & Atkinson 1995). From my first days with the children at all the schools I visited, I was aware of their varying understandings and acknowledgements of the notebooks. For some, the notebooks were considered as tools of surveillance and treated with caution, while for others they were either not noticed or ignored (perhaps accepted as yet another form of growing adult surveillance and auditing in the primary school classroom). It was my policy from the outset to let the children know exactly what I was writing in the books. Aside from being part of a wider aim of promoting openness about and accessibility to data between myself and the children, I also considered it to be a useful way of subtly showing the children the kinds of things I was interested in recording about their daily lives, thereby giving them an informal prompt about what they might like to discuss with me. This approach meant that I allowed the children to see, handle and read the notebooks whenever requested and at a suitable time (not, for example, when they would get into trouble for reading when they should be doing school work or when I was actively trying to take notes). Their interest in what I was writing was relatively short lived, but I felt satisfied with having been able to open up this act of surveillance to scrutiny by those who were being watched.

Communal notebooks

Within a short time some children began to use the notebooks creatively and started to produce stories and pictures in them. This raised a number of complex ethical questions. For instance, while not wanting to guide or solicit the production of drawings, I also wanted to ensure that as many children as possible had an opportunity to take part in something they clearly enjoyed, and ensure that arguments and fights did not result. It soon became clear that using notebooks in this way not only illustrated important issues of group identity, but also raised significant concerns about the communal nature of the notebooks when utilised in this manner. For example, I had to consider issues about who could use the books and when, and whether this should or could be regulated. As already noted, I was aware that the notebooks were symbolic of the power relationship between researcher and researched, and part of the reason I was open with them was in an attempt to disrupt this relationship. What I also wanted to avoid was the accentuation of power relationships between the children: between, for example, popular and marginalized or older and younger children. Both of these issues were only partially resolved, as I had to draw on my position as an adult to deal with such concerns by encouraging the children to develop a fair way of using the notebooks, and it was the older children who decided what this system should be and how it should be regulated (which included asking me to marshal the process because, as one of the girls noted, 'you are the adult' – an indication of the futility of trying to 'be' a child or even take the 'least adult' position in childhood research) (Epstein 1998). In order to further disrupt this system I introduced supplementary notebooks, so that within a couple of weeks there were three in circulation each break period. This appeared to be enough to stop the majority of conflict over turn taking.

It quickly became clear that while I might not necessarily wish to encourage the drawing of pictures (thereby creating another organised research activity), I could facilitate the practice of playground drawing by simply arriving with notebooks and pens and handing them out on request. This way the activity remained part of the research process, with the drawings undeniably being 'products' of the fieldwork, but these drawings were products that mirrored the children's pre-existing creative, leisure activities. For example, one

group explained to me how they would make up similar stories after school and on the weekend when at home, while the decorative pictures that covered many of their schoolbooks mirrored those produced in the notebooks. (In many respects I would argue that it was the children who were being 'methodologically innovative' within the boundaries of the fieldwork). This was important because as Christensen (2004:166) suggests, the researcher working with children should ask: "Are the practices employed in the research process in line with and reflective of children's experiences, interests, values and everyday routines; and what are the ways in which children routinely express and represent these in their everyday life?" What Christensen argues then, is that it is vital that we work within children's own cultures of communication, forms of expression, literacies and competencies. By adopting this position the tension between research activities and the everyday practice of the children's cultures could be openly recognised as inevitable and turned into something productive, as opposed to something problematic.

Tales and sketches

My research focused on children's understandings of and investments in romantic love, and the way this shaped, and was in turn influenced by, their relationship cultures. The data generated in the notebooks were extremely interesting, as many narratives from popular romance were evident, and there was a wealth of data about many aspects of the children's lives, which can be analysed through various theoretical lensesⁱⁱⁱ. The stories contained the voices of several child authors, the influences of their immediate friendship groups, and narratives from popular culture. Pictorially the children produced a rich variety of images, including self-portraits, representations of their friendship groups and families, portraits of their researcher (that is, me), and a plethora of logos including global brands like Nike and the local football team mascot^{iv}. Sometimes the tales and sketches were produced by single authors or artists, but most often they were the work of two or more children. As they shared the pen and paper I made my own notes about their conversation and the negotiation of the narrative as it unfolded between them.

Practice and text

I suggest that the children's stories and drawings are important in two intercon-

nected ways. Firstly in terms of practice, the drawings can be viewed as junctures in the ongoing processes of friendship. They are acts of individual and group identity expression and negotiation that occur through several channels of communication. Secondly, I want to claim that the drawings should be simultaneously explored in terms of textuality (or perhaps more accurately intertextuality). They contain many overlapping and interacting symbolic references that are open to narrative and discursive analysis. This analysis is no simple process and should arguably remain partial, incomplete and open ended, just like the texts themselves. In my own research, these drawings are analysed as symbolic texts created in specific social contexts, so that there is an important and necessary connection established between their content and the processes of their creation within children's friendship cultures (and the boundaries of research). I argue that the drawings demonstrate the complex ways that children articulate, understand and invest in various elements of popular and local cultures in their everyday constructions of personal and group identities. There seems to be a certain attraction to using the drawings to say certain things about relationships – things that might otherwise be difficult to articulate – because of the displacement and playfulness made available by this medium. The drawings show how the children had to constantly reclaim and re-negotiate identity within their friendship group, often in terms that are not defined by them. This was the case in terms of the social interactions that they were part of, and in terms of the cultural repertoire that was available to them to express things about relationships that were understandable – they were restricted in what they could say by accepted relationship genres.

Conclusion

My provisional analysis indicates that children's transitory communal stories and drawings are important expressions of their everyday lives. They are a cultural space of great investment that should not be ignored. By appreciating and focusing on the stories and pictures produced by children in field notebooks, a valuable and under-explored supply of ethnographic data can be illuminated and utilised. Even if momentarily, many children invest greatly in these texts, meaning that they represent an important expression of what they value in their everyday lives. Furthermore, and as a result of this, to under-value or overlook these tales and sketches is also to adopt an adult-centred

view on childhood, which, of course, stands at odds with the aspirations of many within the social studies of childhood (Qvortrup 2005). The drawings also show important ways in which the social worlds of the (adult) researcher, by entering their cultural spaces, overlap and interact with the social worlds of their (child) participants.

ⁱOf course, some researchers do use children's drawings as a way of investigating non-verbal means of communication, but they do this by getting/asking the children to draw, rather than using the practice of drawing opportunistically (see, for example, Atkinson 2006; Kress 1997).

ⁱⁱMy PhD is titled 'Playground Romance: An ethnographic study of romance and friendship in children's relationship cultures' and was funded by the ESRC (Award Number: PTA – 030 – 2002 – 00613).

ⁱⁱⁱIn this article I have focused broadly on the methods and ethics of acquiring such drawings, rather than the analysis I conducted. This is because I think it is important to discuss the methods of collection and acquisition as issues in themselves, and that this is an appropriate forum for such a discussion. Fur-

thermore, the methods of analysis applied to the drawings could vary quite widely; to explore and develop these sufficiently would require more space than is presently available.

^{iv}For the same reasons as noted above, I have not included examples of the children's work in this article. The drawings and my analysis of them will be discussed extensively in forthcoming work.

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Theatres of Talk: The Interviewer as Stagehand

Susie Scott

Introduction

In a previous article (Scott 2004), I discussed the importance of methodological innovation in helping us to rethink the idea of 'good' and 'bad' research participants. This argument was based on a qualitative study I conducted of forty self-defined shy people, using in-depth interviews and an online mailing list. The first part of this article explains how I created 'shyness-friendly' research settings in that study, and what it taught me about managing encounters with socially anxious participants. I then discuss a second, related project about lecturers' experiences of stage fright, which posed similar dramaturgical dilemmas. Drawing on Atkinson's (2006) idea of the social researcher as producer/director or repeteur, I suggest a third theatrical role – the stagehand – that can be of use when dealing with such issues. That is, we cannot just complain about respondents not 'performing' in interviews without also considering the part we play in staging

these productions.

'Won't they be too shy to turn up to the interview?'

At first glance, the idea of researching shyness seems like a contradiction in terms (Scott 2004). Common sense would tell us that people who are quiet and self-consciously inhibited represent the very anathema of the 'ideal' (talkative and open) research participant, posing a real problem for researchers. However, this assumption can be challenged if we bracket out the idea that 'shy people' are a distinct group who are shy at all times in all places. I have argued that shyness is a socially negotiated role-identity that emerges from interaction, and so it is possible for anyone to drift in and out of shyness. My research with forty self-defined shy people showed that it was possible to create research settings that do not evoke feelings of shyness, thus enabling participants to drift out of the role;

in fact, ironically, my 'shy' participants proved to be extremely talkative. What I have called 'the paradox of shy vocality' is therefore apparent in the way that people who would otherwise be written off as hopeless conversation partners can actually be forthcoming in accounting for their reticence.

This intriguing research finding emerged from two methodological techniques that I developed for the study. Firstly, it was important to conduct the face to face interviews in as relaxed and informal a manner as possible, so as to create a comfortable 'backstage' area in which participants could slip out of role (cf. Goffman 1959). By making the interviews conversational, identifying myself as a fellow shy person, and emphasising that there were no right or wrong answers to my questions, I was able to build a rapport with my participants that put them at ease. By casting myself in the role of the 'active listener' (Holstein & Gubrium 1997), I made the situation as far removed as pos-

sible from the kinds of public performances they dreaded, wherein what they said 'under the spotlight' would be subjected to critical scrutiny.

Secondly, I created an email-based discussion list, to which I recruited the majority of my participants, from forums and message boards devoted to shyness, Social Phobia or Social Anxiety Disorder. This helped me to access not only a more geographically diverse sample, but also those people who would not have felt comfortable in face to face interviews. The merits of online discussion groups have been widely discussed in relation to accessing people with chronic or stigmatising conditions (see for example Lewis 2006). These include the asynchronous, text-based nature of email, which gives the writer time to plan, rehearse and edit their responses rather than feel under pressure to perform (Markham 1998). Email also creates a sense of invisibility and disinhibition, for it can be extremely liberating for an otherwise shy person to speak out from within the safety of their 'cybershell'. Finally, online discussion groups function as virtual communities for those who fear social encounters in the offline world, providing something of a safe haven. As one of my respondents, Urchin, put it,

"I don't mind at all talking about myself in this forum (in fact, it's the first time in my life I've ever been this open), but only because it's anonymous, and I know I can drop out at any time and never have anything to do with any of you ever again!"

Lowering the curtain

The second project I conducted in this way was a study of 'stage fright' and performance anxiety in university lecturers. This was an attempt to find out whether such feelings decreased over time, as people gained in teaching experience, and to compare their concerns with what students actually thought of them. I conducted semi-structured, individual interviews with five 'novice' and five 'expert' lecturers (the former being new lecturers on a PGCertHE course and the latter being those who had won prestigious teaching awards), and two focus groups with undergraduate Sociology students, whom I had taught that year on a course about identity performance and who had expressed an interest in the project. The results of this study are discussed elsewhere (Scott 2007).

When interviewing the lecturers, I soon realised that they could be construed as another socially anxious group. Stage fright is a feeling of uncertainty and fear about creating the impression of incompetence upon a critically evaluative audience. Actors worry that forgetting their lines or appearing flustered will 'unmask' the self behind the character (Aaron 1986), who will then be judged harshly. Although I wanted my respondents to discuss stage fright in relation to teaching, I soon realised that there was a risk that the interview situation itself could evoke similar emotions. There is an element of performance in the process of recounting stories of the self, particularly in the interview as an interpersonal encounter (Denzin 1970), because the respondent is concerned with putting the 'right' version of events across and presenting themselves favourably.

It was therefore important to reduce the performative aspect of these interviews and put the participants at ease. I endeavoured to create a 'backstage' atmosphere so that they could relax out of role, reflect on their behaviour 'frontstage' and contradict the impressions they would consciously create there (Goffman 1959). Thus rather than adopt the stance of an interrogative questioner, I explained that we would have an informal conversation to explore ideas together, and that everything they said would be in confidence. It was as if the curtain has been lowered on the stage, allowing us talk without encountering the audience's gaze. As I was genuinely interested in the stories they recounted, and indeed could empathise from my own experiences of stage fright, the interviews quickly took on a 'confessional' tone, with a great deal of rapport between us. As Douglas (1985) argues, treating one's interviewee as a 'goddess' makes the encounter much more creative and fruitful. The physical appearance of the room was significant too, in that it was my office, a private, small and personalised area that created a sense of being 'backstage', away from the classroom. One incongruous feature, however, was the tape recorder, whose conspicuous presence served as a reminder that this was not an entirely 'natural' conversation.

Conducting the focus groups with students required different staging techniques. On the one hand, I wanted these respondents, too, to feel at ease and not experience anxiety about the prospect of revealing what they thought. After all, I

was their tutor as well as the researcher and moderator, and so the students might have tried to please me with the answers that they thought I wanted to hear. This raised an ethical question of whether the power differential often found in interviewer-interviewee encounters might be augmented by the dynamics of the teacher-student relationship. To address these issues, I gave the same assurances of anonymity and confidentiality, but also said explicitly that this would have no impact on the way I thought about the students or evaluated their coursework. The students had volunteered to take part in the focus groups, having enjoyed discussing aspects of performance in our classes, and they seemed comfortable and relaxed in each other's presence. Furthermore, by positioning myself as a non-judgemental listener, accepting and supporting whatever narrative performances these informants gave, I hoped to *invert* this power relationship to some extent. On the other hand, I did want to recreate something of the formal atmosphere of a teaching session, in the hope that this would remind students of particular classes they had been in, and trigger off their memories. Staging one focus group in a lecture theatre and another in a seminar room, I found that this was indeed the case. The larger rooms took on a 'frontstage' look, with either a lectern and tiered seating or seating 'in the round', but this was softened by the lack of any actual presentation. Consequently, the students felt relaxed enough to talk quite frankly about their experiences of more and less successful lectures, while reliving the emotional experience of sitting in a class. For example, this comment from Max revealed how the 'setting and scenery' of a lecture theatre made him feel aware of the status differences between teachers and students:

"the environment of the lecture theatre makes it - you're sitting here, the big audience, and then there's one person standing at the front, (Others: Yeah) and telling you as you're taking it in - whereas - I think that makes you feel a bit like 'we are the crowd' and 'you are the God'. (laughter)"

Staging the interview

In his ethnographic study of an opera company, Paul Atkinson (2006) suggested that two theatrical roles mirror those of the social researcher. The latter can function as a *producer/director*, elicit-

ing and managing the performances of others, or as a *repetiteur*, unobtrusively accompanying the actors as they rehearse their lines. When interviewing people prone to social anxiety, however, I would argue that it can be helpful to adopt a third theatrical role: that of the *stagehand*. This person is responsible for making sure that all of the practical aspects of a performance run smoothly, by setting up the stage, providing props and scenery, and making sure that microphones and sound equipment work. The stagehand is sometimes described as a theatrical technician, but to be able to do this job they must also understand the needs of every actor in the cast and the relationships between them. This is typically an invisible, unpaid and thankless task, but one that is absolutely essential to the smooth running of the performance, whether this takes place on a theatrical stage or in the research interview.

Conclusion

Doing research with socially anxious people raises dramaturgical dilemmas that require methodological innovation. The interviewer must assuage any concerns participants may have about being questioned under the spotlight or of having to perform their answers to a critical audience. One way of doing this is to turn the research site into an egalitarian,

backstage region, although in some cases it is helpful to make the encounter feel more contrived. Whatever their strategy, the researcher plays an important role as a stagehand, attending to the practical and technical aspects of a performance and supporting actors as they present narrated versions of the self. This role can be adopted alongside those of the producer and the *repetiteur*, and insofar as the interviewer moves between these three positions, s/he contributes another level of performance to the theatre of social research.

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Capturing an understanding of public space use: the role of diaries

Rebecca S Edwards

As you leave work, home or school, often you are entering a public space. Which park, café or street you choose is often based on a series of decisions so ingrained in daily life they are barely noticed. My recent research has sought to evaluate New Labour's policies for public space as outlined in the 'urban renaissance' documentation. I conducted a national survey and studied two case study areas to gain an understanding of impacts of the Blairite prescription for public space at a local level, consulting many 'experts' on public space. Yet, very little information emerged about who the people using the public spaces actually are and why they chose to use any particular public space. In order to fully understand the impact of New Labour's public space policy, I needed to gain a sense of why people use the public spaces that they do, and how they feel about them. Methodologically, the process of exploring

and recording the use of public space presents a number of difficulties. Public spaces present themselves as a boundless field of enquiry, in which people move in and out, seemingly anonymously in their own closed and personal world. Sennett (1970) has explored how public space creates the spaces in which strangers interact, but as Merrifield (1996) notes, human nature produces a desire to avoid strangers (as the dangerous unknown) within public space. For researchers, how do you capture the unconscious experiences of the use of public space, in a context that is apparently open but also bounded by private experience of the individual?

A missed understanding of public space use?

Public space professionals I interviewed frequently stated that researching the use

of public space was near impossible. The reasons cited for this included a lack of resources and they doubted that any information collected would be of use. As one respondent stated:

'in all honesty getting at really reliable information about using parks is next to impossible for all sorts of reasons. We don't have the staff to do it... I'm not all that sure that just getting numbers and the reason that they are there necessarily tells you very much'. (Parks manager in a suburban local authority, south-east England)

This sentiment prevailed with many practitioners involved in public space policy and provision. Yet, this was based on an assumption that a tick-box style survey to gain quantitative data would be the only way to effectively research public space use. However, I felt that this approach would not explore the intricacies of public space use or the complex reasons for using one particular public space over another which a more qualitative approach

could perhaps achieve. In effect, I wanted to gain an understanding of the palpable reasoning that determines the use of public space.

One possibility was to focus on a particular park or square, and record the activity occurring in that public space. The use of public space then could have been recorded through methods such as filming the use of the space over a certain time period and making observations about how the public use the space. Alternatively, public space users could have been stopped and interviewed within a certain space. However, these methods were rejected, as I wanted to gain a sense of the motivations that made people use public space. I did not want to determine a public space that I thought was an appropriate example of public space, instead I wanted those that use public space in my case study areas to tell me the spaces that they use and the stimulus that took them there.

I could have interviewed the public space users *in situ* as they used public spaces. Spinney (2005) has researched cyclists' sense of place, by interviewing 'in-the-saddle'. However, Spinney sought to engage with the construction of space through the embodied experience of cycling. But to apply this to my research would have involved interviewing in (and becoming part of) the public space, whereas I wanted to remove myself and my ideas about public space and allow the participants to bring data forward that I may not have considered. This led to the ideas of using a diary to record individuals' personal reflections on different spaces.

Diaries as a research method have long provided a part of qualitative research, as highlighted by Hoggard *et al* (2002) who explore how diaries became an important aspect of the ethnographic research pioneered by the Chicago School. With this awareness in mind, throughout my research I kept a diary that recorded the public spaces I visited, the observations that I made in them and archived my thoughts and feelings about the spaces in which I was researching. This led to a realisation that a diary could provide a space in which insight into the use of public space could be developed. From this understanding, I felt that my research needed to gain an understanding of the minutiae of thought that motivate other users of public space, and to gain a sense of why they use the public spaces that they do. But how do researchers investigate the inner thoughts and exter-

nal stimulus that lies behind the decision making process in our actions?

Diaries have been used by researchers in a number of fields to attempt to gain a sense of why events happen. Notably they have been used in medicine in an attempt to connect how humans feel to the treatment they receive. For example, Guyuron *et al* (2003) asked patients to keep a diary of their migraines whilst undergoing surgical treatment in an attempt to relate the therapy to any changes in their condition. Hunfeld *et al* (2002) have used diaries to attempt to assess the impact of chronic pain experienced by children on the wider family. In geography, Meth (2003) explores how she used diaries to fulfil feminist methodological criteria by giving a voice to those who were not normally heard. In my research into public space, having identified that public space users had been under-represented in policy development, I felt this qualitative tool could be used to explore the thoughts and feelings of public space users.

Deploying the diaries

I focused the public space user diaries on the two case study areas which I had been using throughout my research project. Concentrating my research on these two areas allowed the diary entries to be compared with other research I had completed. It also gave access to users of public spaces through connections that I had made within each locality. Ultimately, I decided to work with eight public space users (four in each case study area) which I felt was the maximum scope that my project could take on board without compromising the depth at which I intended to work. Following the initial meetings, I discussed the diaries with the public space users. The amount of guidance to give them proved tricky. On the one hand, I wanted to avoid the respondents feeling daunted by the task of writing on a blank page and hence not producing any data. However, I also wanted respondents to have the freedom to express their views about public space. To achieve this I decided on a semi-structured approach, (similar in style to such authors as Meth, 2003). For this, I produced a booklet that asked the public space users to complete four detailed entries about a public space they would normally visit, over the course of a month. I then subdivided each section asking the respondents where they had been, why they had been there, what they had seen, who they had

met, if they had enjoyed the experience, how accessible the public spaces are, how they could be improved and finally a section for any other thoughts, feelings or comments. I stressed to the participants that they were to only use those prompts as a guide and were free to write what they wished. As an additional tool, I gave the public space users a disposable camera and invited them to take photographs to illustrate their diaries.

Fresh insight into public space use

The results of the research diaries provided a rich source of data through the textual accounts written by the public space users and the photographs that they had taken. Although the style and details of writing differed, it was important to find any themes that emerged from the empirical data. In order to gain a sense of why the respondents used public spaces and explore the significance of what they said about them, I coded the text and what the respondents were describing compared to the visual images they had photographed. The diaries provided insightful comments from those engaging in the public spaces I used in my case study areas. As an example, one strong theme that emerged through user diaries was mobility. For example, Carol explored how her choice of public space was affected by mobility constraints:

'Wherever I go I see street furniture, shop displays, notice boards, bollards etc blocking paths, aisles etc. This restricts space and can be a hazard for visually impaired people (and for those not looking where they are going!).'

This comment reveals concerns for those with accessibility challenges about safety of the space that may not be immediately obvious to others. Carol continued in her diary to explore how her choice of public spaces was shaped by the places that she could get to in her wheelchair. Other respondents also wanted to change the movement of people around the space. For example, Joanna who suggested a retail area could be improved by:

'Pedestrianise the street. This would make it safer and cleaner. It would also mean that the pressure on the pavement space would be lessened because people could walk on the road'

These diary entries added deeper and more insightful information about the views of public space users in the case study areas selected for my research, in

addition to providing an understanding of how the same individuals use different public spaces.

Limitations of diaries in researching public space use

Although the use of public space user diaries added depth of data and the voice of public space user, as a research method, it also has considerable limitations. First (and arguably foremost) the method relies on participants having a good standard of literacy that allows them to be able to express their views and feelings on public space through the medium of text. The danger that this research method presents, is excluding the input of those with lower levels of literacy. This might include participants such as children, those from ethnic minorities, those with learning difficulties or other groups who are more likely to have limited literacy. For those targeting 'marginalised groups' the approach taken by Finney and Rishbeth (2006: 27) using multiple methods including site visits and participation may be more appropriate. Good quality data from diaries is reliant on respondents being able to connect their thoughts and feelings to written language, potentially excluding those with learning difficulties, such as dyslexia. In terms of practicality, research diaries can pose a number of difficulties. These include recruiting participants and ensuring the diaries are completed (Crosbie, 2006). The validity of the data is also questionable, as respondents may manipulate their entries to reflect issues they believe should be given priority; examples I encountered included immigration and car parking.

Conclusions

Researching how and why public spaces are used (or not used) presents something of a methodological puzzle. How do you access the tiny thoughts and considerations that affect the use of public space, in a site of geographical enquiry that is, on the one hand open and free to access, but on the other limited by its un-gated nature? A lack of understanding on how to access these users of pub-

lic space has led to national and local government policies, developed without a critical understanding of the factors that influence our use of public space. In order to tackle this, I propose that diaries can provide a way of accessing the minutiae of thought that influence the use of public space by creating a space in which individuals can reflect on their seemingly banal movements through public space.

Of course, diaries as a research method offer a number of limitations. They are reliant upon high standards of literacy, which could exclude many users of public space. The entries recorded may reveal a highly subjective picture or push issues of personal importance to the fore. Yet, these are difficulties that could be limited, by combining diaries with other research methods, such as in-depth interviewing to reveal these subjectivities or ethnographic observations situated within public spaces. In researching the use of public space, it is the people who actually use public spaces who are the experts on the 'little things' (Thrift, 2000) that shape the use of public space. Using the established method of diaries, fresh insight can be brought on how to tackle the methodological quandary of researching the use of public space.

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Erratum

In the article 'The secret life of a research project' by Tilly Mortimore (Issue 4, February 2007), we spelt the author's name incorrectly. We apologise for this mistake and note that the

author's name is Tilly Mortimore not Tilly Mortimer as was printed.

CAQDAS 2007: 'Let a hundred flowers bloom!'

Alex Hillman
Rachel Hurdley
Nicola Ross

The Qualiti research team attended the 2007 CAQDAS conference at Royal Holloway. As a follow-up to their inaugural meeting in 1989, this was an exciting event attended by academic and non-academic researchers, software enthusiasts and developers, eager to meet, talk and exchange ideas about the relatively new and ever-changing sphere of computer-aided qualitative data analysis. The presentations varied in focus but many engaged with the challenges of how textual, visual and audio-visual data can be collated, managed and analysed, using software to support this process. Moreover, they contested a persistent presumption that CAQDAS is a good tool simply for efficient data management or just 'another way' of following a grounded theory approach. Some speakers particularly focused on how multiple forms of data can be represented both alongside each other and alongside more traditional textual data. In highlighting possibilities for synchronising the increasingly wide variety of qualitative research materials, speakers explored innovative methods of representing and understanding complex socio-spatial settings. For example, the new version of Atlas-Ti is linked with Google Earth, making the world our data (as Thomas Muhr, Atlas-ti's creator, suggested). At last, we have a chance of real power...

As Jo Haynes (Bristol) suggested in her presentation, the CAQDAS project is 'heterogeneous' and 'bespoke': a small, but growing group 'talking among ourselves'. It was this idiosyncratic polyvocal culture that made the conference so exhilarating, in literally humanising computer analysis packages. This awareness of the people in the machine was a timely reminder that, as with all research methods, use of software ideally depends on the researcher being able to make a well-informed choice that fits the aims of a particular project, rather than plucking the one familiar package off the shelf. The sheer variety of packages, both commercial and open source, was opened up through the presentation of research findings. These make the integration of multimedia data possible, and also the analysis of enormous qualitative datasets without losing

complex nuances. Examples included extensive and close-up discourse analysis of large interview datasets (*Alceste* and *Prospero*), and linking analytic notes directly to soundfiles, thus eluding the often false clarity (or confusion) of transcripts (*Audacity*).

A number of packages, mostly through the use of a timeline, enable a researcher to integrate various media so that they can be viewed simultaneously. These include not only video footage, scanned documents and audio recordings, but also transcribed field notes, analytic memos and annotations. To be able to view our research materials as a whole opens up and enriches avenues of qualitative research analysis, as the intersections between aspects of sound, moving image, talk and time are made more visible. The process of connecting up these modes and media shape the way the data is viewed, heard and interpreted.

Sarah Pink's plenary talk focused on her desire for software and IT to enable this bringing together of audio-visual and text. However, her wish for this synchronisation was not to facilitate analysis, but rather for the representation of her work; not only in presenting her findings to other academics, but also in engaging with wider publics. For Pink, it is the complex interplay between text, image and sound that can convey local and ethnographic meanings: her strategy, currently, is to use information technologies such as CD ROMs and hypermedia where audiences can navigate images and text together. This presentation of an ethnography of a community garden caused a stir among the audience, since she had not employed CAQDAS.

Pleasingly, the expressive multi-media representation of Pink's project, involving photograph, film and text complemented the discussion in the Qualiti-led workshop on multimodal representations of research. In shifting the focus slightly to the presentational, both these sessions complemented the principal theme of the conference, since it is vital that we pay constant attention to the mediating attributes of CAQDAS.

These are not just tools for analysis, but, as many past commentators have pointed out, they entail processes of selection, framing and transformation that do re-present data. Aspects such as the design and interface of the particular software package have their effects. However, to the extent that all research materials are representations of the world, the possibility of bringing these together must surely be viewed positively. Our job as methodologists is to add our voices of reflection and comment, and to be mindful that exciting, innovative and rigorous research happens with and without CAQDAS. To echo Ray Lee and Nigel Fielding, let a hundred flowers bloom in this garden!

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News and Forthcoming Events

Qualiti Events

<http://www.cardiff.ac.uk/socsi/qualiti/events.html>

Developing Mobile Methods—An Interdisciplinary Seminar

Cardiff University
12 June 2007

This seminar considers the opportunities afforded by and difficulties associated with undertaking qualitative research 'on the move', bringing together contributors from a range of social science disciplines

Using new technologies in Qualitative Research

University of Bristol
19 June 2007

This workshop will provide hands-on practical experience in using different technologies and equipment for the collection of qualitative data

Qualitative Research and Suicide

Cardiff University
2 July 2007

This event has been organised to bring together both researchers who already have a common interest in various approaches to suicide research and those with an interest in using qualitative methods in future.

Qualitative Research and Arts Practice - An Interdisciplinary Seminar

Cardiff University
18 September 2007

This seminar addresses ways in which qualitative research can draw upon arts practice. This seminar has a particular focus on the training and capacity building implications of blurring the boundaries between arts and social science

NCRM Node Workshops

ESRC Visual Methods Training Events

An introduction to Visual Methods
University of Leeds
27-28 June 07

A masterclass in Visual Methods
University of Westminster
10 July 2007

For further details:

<http://www.reallifemethods.ac.uk/events/index.htm>

Introduction to Systematic Reviewing

Cardiff University
27 July 2007

How can we translate evidence for policy and practice? This workshop will introduce the principles, methods and critiques of systematic reviews.

<http://eppl.ioe.ac.uk/cms/Default.aspx?tabid=830>

Other UK events

The Centre for Qualitative Research—Three Masterclasses in 2007

Bournemouth University

June 07—New and novel methods for transformative learning: evocative portrayal in research and teaching

Sept 07—Surviving in the research marketplace

Oct 07—An introduction to critical qualitative research

<http://www.qualitative-research.co.uk>

Mixed Methods Conference

Fitzwilliam College, Cambridge
8-11 July 2007

The conference will consist of a series of keynote speakers and workshops on various topics. Participants will be encouraged to share their views on mixed and multi methods research. For further details visit the website:

<http://www.hshs.ac.uk/research/events/MixedMethods2007/MixedMethods07Home.html>

Gender, Work and Organisation: 5th International Interdisciplinary Conference

Keele University, Staffordshire
27-29 June 2007

This conference will provide an international forum for debate and analysis of a variety of issues in relation to gender studies.

<http://www.keele.ac.uk/research/ppm/research/gwo.htm>

Ethnographic Futures: Voice, Politics and Representation

Keele University, Staffordshire
5-7 September 2007

The key aim of this symposium is to provide an interdisciplinary forum for academics to explore current trends and future directions in qualitative research. The symposium will appeal not only to organization and management academics but also those working within sociology, anthropology, human geography, law, criminology, politics, cultural studies, environmental studies, gender studies and social and public policy.

<http://www.keele.ac.uk/research/ppm/research/ethnography07.htm>

International conferences and workshops

8th Annual Conference of the European Sociological Association

Glasgow, Scotland
3-6 September 2007

This conference will bring together scholars from across the globe to explore contemporary citizenship in Europe and debate the state of democracy and the fate of civil, political and social rights that have been the political lifeblood of European societies. <http://www.esa8thconference.com/>

EUROQUAL - Qualitative Analysis of Visual Data

Berlin, Germany
17-20 September 2007

As part of the ESF programme; EUROQUAL, this workshop is particularly aimed at developing and sustaining excellence of research in the field of social sciences within Europe. Visit the ESF website for further information http://www.esf.org/fileadmin/be_user/research_areas/social_sciences/documents/cfpvisualNEU.doc

3rd International Conference on e-Social Science

University of Michigan, USA
7-9 October 2007

The conference will bring together international representatives of the social science and cyberinfrastructure research communities in order to create better mutual awareness, harmonize understanding, and instigate coordinated activities to accelerate research, development, and deployment of cyberinfrastructure to support the social science research community. <http://ess.si.umich.edu/index.htm>

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