



Qualitative Research Methods in the Social Sciences  
Innovation, Integration and Impact

# Qualitative Researcher

Issue 7 February 2008  
ISSN 1748-7315

## Contents

Researching ordinary lives Gareth Williams	Page 1
Methods? Researching family back- ground in everyday lives Stewart Muir	Page 2
Negotiating Me, Myself and I: Creating a participatory research environment for exploring the everyday lives of children and young people 'in care' Alex Hillman Sally Holland Emma Renold Nicola Ross	Page 4
Reflections on the use of participatory mapping to explore social cohesion - a potential tool for Qualitative-GIS Stephen Burgess Eva Elliott Rebecca Lynch	Page 7
Present life: Mass Observation and un- derstanding the ordinary Louise Purbrick	Page 9
News and Forthcoming Events	Page 12

## Researching ordinary lives

Gareth Williams

In *The Classic Slum*, a memoir of working class life in Salford, Robert Roberts explains:

*This is a book made much from talk, the talk first of men and women, fifty or more years ago, of ideas and views repeated in family, street, factory and shop, and borne in mind with intent! Many among them shrewd and thoughtful could not only recapitulate experience, they knew how to assess its value in relation to their lives. "They're knocking our life and times away!" said an elderly Mancunian. We stood together gazing over the wilderness on which still another vast slum had been razed, and he spoke in grief. A kind of culture unlikely to rise again had gone in the rubble and he knew it (Roberts, 1973:9-10).*

Like the material in the Mass Observation Archive discussed by Louise Purbrick in this issue, Roberts' work was 'part history project, part anthropology, part auto/biography, part social commentary'. He himself was a product of the society he was describing. Whatever name we give to it, the methodological illumination comes from the connection Roberts creates between: 'we stood together gazing... and he spoke in grief'. He wasn't sitting at a desk interviewing a respondent, nor was he simply observing a scene. He was standing in a certain kind of research relationship that allowed an understanding to emerge of the impact of social and cultural change. In recent years social scientists have been exploring more closely forms of enquiry that involve standing or sitting with respondents, informants or participants in research projects, looking or talking or engaging in some practical task; and often taking advantage of the increasingly familiar new technologies for documenting and reflecting upon everyday experiences.

In an interesting 'anti-methodological' discussion of his own research, Stewart Muir provides a fascinating insight into the complex ways in which people make sense of their lives in terms of their understanding of their own and others' fam-

ily backgrounds. While his work made use of in-depth life history interviews, photo elicitation, 'home tours', participatory discussion, and other techniques, he maintains that very often methods are 'functionally equivalent', and that we should not get 'lost in enthusiasms' over new techniques. The paper by Alex Hillman *et al* explores what it means to do 'participatory' research with young people in public care. They describe a project in which they worked with young people to research their everyday lives, and explore how variations in the research context alter the degree to which participants can participate meaningfully. Stephen Burgess and his colleagues describe a project in which participatory mapping is used by researchers working with research participants in order to investigate the meaning and experience of neighbourhoods and their 'cohesiveness'. They emphasise that the purpose of the research is not merely to produce a map, but to participate in the mapping and the conversation which this process draws out. Finally, as I have said, Louise Purbrick uses material from the Mass Observation Archive which is built out of the writing of 'correspondents', self-defined 'ordinary' anonymous volunteers, who respond to 'directives' to write on an array of subjects relating to everyday life. Purbrick's article describes the work she did on a directive called 'Giving and Receiving Presents' and focuses in particular on 'Wedding Presents'.

All four articles provide interesting examples of specific new techniques, methods and data sources and, just as important, they do this, like Roberts, in the context of a philosophical orientation of attention to and respect for the sense-making capacities of the 'ordinary people' about whom they are writing.

### References

Roberts, R. (1973) *The Classic Slum: Salford Life in the First Quarter of the Twentieth Century*, Harmondsworth: Penguin.



# Methods? Researching family background in everyday lives

Stewart Muir

The research project of which I am a part, *Family Background in Everyday Lives* (a component project of Real Life Methods node of the ESRC Centre for Research Methods), is an exploratory investigation of how to best research and describe a particular facet of everyday life. Specifically, we are investigating the ongoing negotiation of difference and sameness within households and wider kin networks. Central to the project is an attempt to explore the interplay between where a person comes from, in a geographic, social, and cultural sense, and their connections to, and differences from, a variety of others. That is, we ask what role one's 'background', and the way this background is imagined and described, plays in the inheritance, creation, and maintenance of family and interpersonal relationships. In pursuit of this goal, the project incorporates a variety of qualitative and quantitative methods: life history interviews in up to forty households, photo elicitation, 'home tours' and cultural inventories, participatory discussion and analysis of participant-filmed family events (such as Christmas), and analysis of commissioned survey data.

However, despite working on a project ostensibly dedicated to exploring methods for researching 'real life', I must admit to some ambivalence about methodological writing: I find myself reluctant to say much about research methods. In truth, I would argue that specific research methods are often less important than epistemological and philosophical approaches and orientations, particularly when investigating and representing the 'real' or the 'everyday'. Of course, subject, methodology, and epistemology are inseparable and it is also true that some methodologies are better than others at evoking the *experience* of everyday life – one of the tasks that we have set for ourselves. Quantitative surveys of ostensibly 'everyday' subjects such as taste, for example, necessarily tend to focus on patterns and norms rather than fine-grained examinations of individual life-worlds. However, qualitative or mixed method research investigating taste has also often focused on the role of eating, leisure, etc., within larger social patterns: as inscriptions or inscribers of social and cultural forces (see Warde, Martens, & Olsen, 1999). Such research can have great explanatory power but can also – and this is not meant as a criticism – seem highly abstracted from life as it is lived.

My ambivalence about writing on research methods is likely a legacy of my

training in anthropology, a discipline characterised by reluctance to assess research technologies (as opposed to methodological issues pertaining to epistemology and ethics). Certainly I have tendencies in this direction and thus am not certain that this elision is always a bad thing. The fetishising of a methodological approach – participant observation – that often amounts to ad hoc 'sink or swim' data collection has obvious disadvantages (Stocking 1992: 14); nevertheless, focusing on what you want to know rather than on the methods you use can be curiously liberating<sup>1</sup>. Many social scientists would, I am certain, agree that research problems should precede and determine research methods (although it is unclear how often this really happens); however, some methods literature, and much funding for methods training and development, gives the impression that increased methodological capacity is an end in itself, that method can be detached from substance.

Nevertheless, despite my squeamishness about research methods, I want to reflect on what has proved most useful to my ongoing attempts to explore family hierarchies and histories of difference and how they shape or manifest in 'real life'. In doing so, I will adopt a slightly elliptical approach by opening with some data. The following excerpt is taken from an interview about the family background of a couple in their mid fifties, Helen and Frank. Helen and Frank were brought up in east and north London respectively and now live in the northwest of England. Both Helen and Frank described themselves as coming from an 'upper working class background' and they enacted, in the interview and afterwards, their teasing conversations about whose family was more respectable. Both described themselves as now living a 'sort of middle class' life. Equally significant for their relationship, now and in the past, is Helen's Jewishness (or rather, her Jewish family and their practices). This exchange comes at the end of a conversation about their different upbringings.

Helen: *Erm, I suppose the Jewish houses are, in your family's view, ostentatious.*

Frank: *Well, they're hotter. That's...*

Helen: *(overlapping) (laughs).*

Frank: *They're hotter.*

Helen: *Warmer, you mean?*

Frank: *Yeah. Well this goes, it, I always find, certainly in, in my mind, you know we never had central heating so I suppose it's different to ...*

Helen: *(overlapping) No, we didn't have central heating.*

Frank: *But there was a kind of frugality about heating and lights, you know I can always remember my dad saying 'don't leave that light on' and it was always about ...*

Helen: *(overlapping) No, which we never had. No*

Frank: *It was always about saving and conserving and, erm, keep the bills down. Whereas Helen's family, you never got that, nobody ever bothered, you know, you could leave all the lights on in the house and the heating be up as high as you need it to be up. That's the kind of sort of generosity of spirit and that all never really existed in my family, still doesn't, I don't think.*

Interviewer: *What about your house now*

Frank: *Well it's kind of half way, I still have a tendency to go round turning lights off and Helen still has a tendency to leaving em on, so (Laughter)*

Helen: *We tend not to like the house overly warm, but certainly when my family come and visit we're aware that we have to notch it up a bit, erm, because they wouldn't dream of wearing something like this [points to her jumper], you know, they walk around in a little short sleeved thing in the middle of winter cos they expect the house to be warm.*

I like this snippet of conversation because it is a vivid demonstration of the ways in which memory, identity, and the experience of difference can adhere in – and constitute – mundane practices. It is an embodied, lived memory. The conversation also alludes to Helen and Frank's ongoing negotiation with, and reaction against, inherited family practices and family habitus.

I am also fond of this extract because its illumination of the material and embodied experience of everyday life (now and over time) was obtained using a method – in-depth interviewing – that has been a standard practice in British qualitative sociology for more than fifty years (Savage & Burrows 2007). In-depth qualitative interviews remain useful for exploring those aspects of bodily existence that are most present in memory or are noticeable by their absence; that is, even modish research concerns, such as the sensory aspects of social life, do not always require novel or innovative combinations of research methods. This is not to say that

trusted methods, such as the in-depth interview, are necessarily the best way of approaching such topics. As the contributors to Knowles and Sweetman (2004) show, there are a range of visual research methods that have the potential to provide significant insights into social complexity. Indeed, Frank and Helen also participated in a filmed photo elicitation session that gave rise to similar reflections on sensory experiences of kinship, difference and parenthood. Filming such reflections allowed me to 'capture' such reflections in an easily communicable format (although one might argue that vivid prose could communicate much of the same information).

Although the currently almost ubiquitous technique of photo elicitation interviewing has thus far been a less useful 'ice-breaker' technique – when compared to interviewing without obvious visual prompts – than proponents such as Harper (2002) have suggested, thus far no single method has proved to be significantly better or worse than any other at providing good data. Really, my only point here is the data we have collected about 'real life', the 'everyday', and the non-tangible aspects of kinship and difference, could be collected using a number of qualitative methods. This is hardly a revelatory insight, but the fact that some qualitative methods may sometimes prove to be functionally equivalent can sometimes be lost in enthusiasms over new methodological techniques or fashionable orientations towards, for example, the 'visual'.

### Exploring research terms, exploring 'family backgrounds'

That we have been able to obtain what I believe to be interesting and vivid data is largely due to the fact that in the Family Backgrounds project we began from a commitment to being faithful to the textures and patterns of daily life, to the way subjects experience, remember, reorder, and narrate that life. Such commitments clearly shape the kind of data we collect and how we render aspects of life experience as useful data. In light of this desire to explore participant experiences – rather than simply seeing through them to an assumed underlying reality – the terms we use to frame our research have become a method in themselves.

Underlying and informing the range of data collection techniques deployed in the *Family Background in Everyday Lives* project, is the term 'family background' itself. In many respects this term has not only shaped the forms of data gathered, but has proved to be the most useful heuristic tool for the research. 'Family background'

is a phrase in everyday parlance through which people live and narrate their lives in association with and in relation to others. Although the concept overlaps with (and is sometimes used as a euphemism for) conventional variables of sociological differentiation such as class, race and ethnicity, it does not straightforwardly equate to such classifications. Rather, the term refers to origins as much as to current position, to a life trajectory. As such, using the term to frame the research has allowed participants to talk around issues of differentiation without feeling that they are being fixed in an overarching category such as 'social class' (see Savage, Bagnall, & Longhurst, 2001). Perhaps more importantly, use of the term has helped the researchers avoid reducing complex participant understandings and experiences to the abstract categories of social analysis.

This is not to say that terms such as race, class and ethnicity should be discarded: many of the participants in this project have spontaneously referred to variables such as 'class' when describing themselves and their life-world. However, the ways in which such terminology is used and lived, how it makes 'sense', overflows and eludes technical definitions (Jackson, 2005: xxvii). Indeed, as the earlier interview extract demonstrates, the experience and making of difference brings together understandings of categories such as 'religion' and 'ethnicity' with bodily experiences and concrete practices that do more than simply 'represent' or 'stand for' social relations.

Project participants have regularly – but idiosyncratically – drawn upon a combination of variables (religion, ethnicity, economic position, taste, values, etc) in describing their families, their interpersonal and social relationships, and how they deal with their past and differences on a daily basis. What this suggests is how deeply intertwined various axes of difference can be and how their relative significance varies according to context (and individual and family histories). Thus talking around the term 'background' in the interviews, and exploring practices that draw on aspects of family history – such as the participant-filmed Christmas traditions – has allowed participants to create multidimensional accounts of the place of similarity and difference in their everyday lives.

It is always going to be difficult to evoke the richness and complexity of 'everyday life' and still say something theoretically interesting; that is, to talk meaningfully about life experiences in a way that steers a path between individual anecdote and

reductionist abstraction. Such challenges are only partly related to the specific methods used; equally important are the concepts and epistemology framing such inquiry. The point of using a loosely defined term such as 'family background' is not that it necessarily better captures social complexity than more conventional categories of social analysis but rather that experimentation with the terms we use to frame inquiry can open up different perspectives on complexity by discomfiting the 'consoling illusion' that technical classification allows us to 'know' the social world (Jackson 2005: xxx).

---

<sup>1</sup> Moreover, in practice, the terms 'participant observation' and 'ethnography' conceal a host of techniques – adopted at need – and can thus allow for great methodological flexibility.

### References

- Harper, D (2002) Talking about pictures: a case for photo elicitation. *Visual Studies*, 17(1):13-26.
- Jackson, M. (2005) *Existential anthropology: events exigencies and effects*. New York: Berghahn Books.
- Knowles, C. & Sweetman, P. (eds.) (2004) *Picturing the social landscape: visual methods and the sociological imagination*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Savage, M. Bagnall, G. and Longhurst, B. (2001) Ordinary, ambivalent and defensive: class identities in the Northwest of England. *Sociology*, 35(4):875-892.
- Savage, M. and Burrows, M. (2007) The coming crisis of empirical sociology. *Sociology*, 41(5):885-899.
- Stocking, G.W., Jr. (1992) *The Ethnographer's magic and other essays in the history of anthropology*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Warde, A., Martens, L., & Olsen, W. (1999) Consumption and the problem of variety: cultural omnivorousness, social distinction and dining out. *Sociology*, 33 (1):105-127.

Stewart Muir is a Research Associate in the Real Life Methods Node of the ESRC Centre for Research Methods and in the Morgan Centre for the Study of Relationships and Personal Life, University of Manchester.

# Negotiating Me, Myself and I: Creating a Participatory Research Environment for Exploring the Everyday Lives of Children and Young People 'In Care'

Alex Hillman, Sally Holland, Emma Renold, Nicola Ross

## Introduction

Research contexts are greatly influenced by the methodological and ethical approaches employed and practiced by research teams before, during and beyond 'the field'. This paper foregrounds method and methodology in context, drawing on an on-going longitudinal ESRC-funded research project, *(Extra)Ordinary Lives: Children's Everyday Relationship Cultures In Public Care*. This is one of four demonstrator projects within the Qualitative research node (Qualiti) of the ESRC National Centre for Research Methods with the specific methodological aim to explore what it means to undertake participatory research with children and young people<sup>1</sup> in care. This paper seeks to explore the extent to which the research environment, and participatory ethos, generated by the project's theoretical, methodological and ethical research questions (see Renold and Holland 2006), provided increased opportunities for research participants to exercise control over the ways in which 'data' are generated and represented. Our aim is to illustrate how differing research contexts enable participants to share and represent aspects of their everyday lives in ways that are significant and meaningful to them and to explore the strategies adopted by young people when negotiating their participation.

Re-presenting transcribed conversations between one of our young teenage research participants, Keely<sup>2</sup> (pseudonym), and the project researchers and other participants, we critically explore key fieldwork moments of negotiation to foreground how the research context and methodological approach created opportunities for Keely to convey aspects of her everyday life. In particular, we are interested in exploring the ways in which the inter-relationship of method/ology and context enable Keely to manage and negotiate her participation. It was evident that she practiced a variety of strategies that gave her more control over the content and nature of the research - how she chose to share information about herself with us and in what moments, choosing when, how and who to talk to about aspects of her life. Through identifying these moments of negotiation and their accomplishment, this paper focuses attention on practices of participation, and raises questions about the extent to which such opportunities are available in more tradi-

tional research contexts and environments.

## Background to the project

The central methodological aim for the '(Extra)ordinary Lives' project was to develop a research environment for a small number of young people in public care<sup>3</sup> aged between 10 to 21 working in a participatory way with them to research their everyday lives, building upon methodological approaches developed within critical childhood studies (Mayall 2003; Christensen 2004; Hill 2006). Our research design was specifically set up to maximize young people's agency in the research process to the extent that young people could choose their own level of involvement and their own methods to record and represent aspects of their lives and identities (visually, textually, orally etc.). As a research team of four, we tended to primarily generate 'data' with them individually, set within the context of a group session (details below) held every fortnight, lasting up to 7 hours (with young people typically spending between 2 and 4 hours there each time). We also conducted a range of research activities, that included 'guided' walks around their local areas, road trips to previous localities of significance to them, and ethnographic conversations held in a variety of settings (in their homes, in cafés, at the university, and in cars whilst transporting them to and from the group sessions). As stated earlier, the research has both methodological and substantive aims and the 'data' include the works that the young people produce (if they choose to share it with us), ethnographic 'data' (our fieldnotes, recorded conversations with young people etc.) and a further ethnographic account reflecting specifically upon what it means to undertake a participatory project of this kind - particularly in relation to ethics. These 'data' vary significantly between participants and, as in most ethnographic research projects, were generated inter-subjectively in quite intensive one-to-one researcher-participant relationships (yet interestingly in this study these relationships were set within the dynamics of the group setting also) which enabled the team to critically explore the micro-moments of participation (Renold et al 2008).

The significance of taking this participatory approach has been in part an attempt to move beyond the representations of

young people in care that focus on the social problems that young people in care may (or may not) experience. Missing from many current representations of young people in care are their own accounts and understandings of their identities as negotiated and performed in everyday social situations. Although young people in care are a heavily researched group, the methods employed to undertake this research have tended to be single encounter, face-to-face interviews (Murray 2005). This approach may be particularly problematic with this group. According to Hepstinal et al. (2001) much may remain unexpressed in their responses given their observation that young people in foster care can tend to give short answers in one off face-to-face interview settings. The *(Extra)Ordinary Lives* project has attempted to move away from these more traditional methods in order to generate accounts and representations *with* young people in care, by building relationships with young people over time, in research contexts that allow young people greater choice and control of the research process.

## Research-in-context: an environment for participation

In order to illustrate how and in what ways our methodology, and its relationship to the research environment, shapes the ways in which we as researchers learnt about the everyday lives of young people who are looked after, and how young people themselves came to articulate their lives, the rest of this paper offers some examples of this research-in-context. Particular kinds of engagement and disengagement with the research focus are generated by and discussed in relation to the longitudinal nature of the project, the activities/methods on offer (e.g. filming) and to the different kinds of context-specific social interactions (e.g. group session talk to car conversations). Some of the extracts that follow illustrate disruptions and re-routings contained within research engagements, for example, when and how direct questions are avoided or negotiated by participants within moments of interaction with conversation 'cut short' or topics changed. These examples from our project are not offered as moments of 'failure', where answers to questions are avoided, or our attempts to engage research participants are rejected. They are included to show how participatory research-in-context increases the possibili-

ties for moments of negotiation, whereby participants are able to reflect upon and engage with the focus of the research when (and with whom) they choose. Other examples are included to further illustrate how and when conversations have flourished.

### Multi-media activity: generating talk and facilitating participation

During the project sessions we encountered many instances when the activities on offer generated time and space for conversations to take place with young people about their everyday lives, and their representations of these, i.e. during the process of making, editing, or constructing films, photographs, slide shows, scrapbooks etc. What these activities also afforded participants was greater opportunities to control the content and direction of research conversations. For example, the content of a video made by a young person might generate talk regarding who and what had been recorded, when and why, but it also provided a means with which participants direct the flow and focus of the conversation. The following excerpt is taken from a recording of a session activity in which Keely is working on a laptop with a series of photographs she has taken of her friends.

- Keely: *I – I've scribbled out chavs a minute. I can't be bothered having that in there.*
- Emma: *You've scribbled out chavs, okay ... And which one's the foster cousin, Lisa or Jenny? ... Is that Lisa? That's Jenny ... So you've known her for a while then I imagine? So have you – is this the one you knew before you went to the school?*
- Keely: *[Inaudible] so David Smith. I knew ...*
- Emma: *David.*
- Keely: *Which is her – her brother.*
- Emma: *Oh right.*
- Keely: *So it was my foster cousin.*
- Emma: *Uh huh. So do you look out for each other, or doesn't it work like that?*
- Keely: *I tell you what this is doing my head in i just might as well put quite a few in.*
- Emma: *Can you do that, put a few in?*
- Keely: *Yeah.*
- Emma: *Excellent.*

We cannot make any assumptions regarding the meaning of this change in the conversation; perhaps Keely is distracted by the activity rather than deliberately avoiding answering Emma's question. What is important is that the activity itself provides Keely with the opportunity to steer the conversation in particular ways and to avoid answering direct questions, without

making this obvious, a route less easily available in other research contexts, such as a face-to-face interview situation.

### Time, space and building research relationships.

There were many moments during fieldwork sessions when the practicalities of working with a range of different media and technologies disrupted research interactions. However, the longitudinal nature of the research permitted research relationships to grow over time, meaning that there were multiple opportunities for participants to address issues or return to conversations previously cut short. The interruptions and disruptions, the lost, paused, repeated exchanges formed part of the research context and this context allowed participants greater opportunity to decide when and by what means to share details of their everyday lives with us. Participants of research, like any of us, may not enjoy, be interested in or feel comfortable talking about an aspect of their lives in one moment, yet at another time or in a different context the same topic may be of much greater significance to them or might be a more comfortable situation in which to discuss it. A research context that allows for relationships between researchers and participants to build over time and across a number of different settings and contexts has therefore played a significant role in developing our understandings of the everyday lives of young people in care.

The following two extracts show how this element of the research context allows for more flexibility in the ways participants engaged with the project. During a session conversation Keely shifts the focus of the discussion away from a comment she made about 'slicers', that Emma then asks about, through turning her attention back to the photos she is working with. On the contrary, during a car conversation Keely introduces the topic of 'slicers' again and discusses them in more detail, this time responding to Emma's interest. Interestingly, the means with which Keely achieves the shift in the conversation during the session activity also tells us something about how Keely performs aspects of her identity through reference to her appearance and self image. This illustrates how such cuts or re-routing of conversations can themselves be ways in which participants perform their identities.

#### Session Conversation

- Emma: *Ah, okay. So mosher's more hardcore than a punk.*
- Keely: *Yeah.*
- Emma: *More – more into it.*
- Keely: *Yeah and erm punks are into it but*

*not as much, and goths are just full on bumf. And emos are just better – worse than goths; they're like slicers, that's heavy.*

- Emma: *Slicers?*
- Keely: *Just my eyes?, their eyes, they have wicked eyes. I'm loving the eyes, my eyes.*
- Emma: *Their eyes? [Inaudible]*
- Keely: *Just forget about theirs. My eyes are lush.*

#### Car Conversation

- Emma: *Are there different kinds of people now you have moved up your classes, do you find there's -*
- Keely: *Yeah there's better moshers in there and there's actually one emo. They say emos slice themselves and everything but they don't....*
- Emma: *They what? They slice themselves?*
- Keely: *Yeah, they say that but they don't, they don't though like self harm and they don't, everyone says that they do, because emo is like giving them the emotional isn't it, and they all said cause of that. No they don't.*

These two extracts illustrate how in two different situations Keely avoids or discusses 'slicers' and demonstrates how the research context provides greater opportunity and flexibility over how, when and to whom young people who are looked after communicate and represent their everyday lives and identities.

Building relationships between researchers and participants over time has also allowed young people to reflect upon previous representations of themselves, their lives or their relationships. The following extract is of a conversation in which Keely rethinks some previous discussions she has had with Emma about her allegiances to either 'moshers' or 'chavs'.

- Emma: *There's no volume on it, it's not on radio, do you want to put the radio on? Remember I've got it on Radio 4 you will have to fiddle around, what do you want? Er*
- Keely: *I'll do it.*
- Emma: *Yeah I was thinking if you didn't want to sit..*
- Keely: *No I don't want Kiss, kiss is chav, I don't do chav's no more.*
- Emma: *Oh you've gone off chav's? Okay.*
- Keely: *Did I tell you the last time that I went off Mosher's.*
- Emma: *You were still like queen chav and hanging in with the Mosher group at school, you were kind of doing both at the same time.*
- Keely: *I don't do chav's no more.*

The significance of these groups for Keely's own identity work is particularly complex, however what is interesting for our purposes here is how the approach employed throughout the project provides participants with opportunities to reflect upon their own representations of their lives and identities in ways that more traditional research contexts, particularly a one off interview, may not.

### **Negotiating participation and representing identities in group sessions**

The group sessions formed the focal part of the research activity as, although the guided walks, car conversations and other activities often generated meaningful interactions, these were mainly developed around the fortnightly group sessions. There is much to be discussed with regard to the researching with a *group* of young people in care, however what is of importance here is how the nature of the group sessions contributed to the overall research environment and how this contribution enabled further flexibility for participants' engagement in the project. One aspect that became apparent to us as the fieldwork progressed was how the interactions that occurred between participants could sometimes facilitate more comfortable or 'natural' conversation that related directly to participants' experiences of being in care, more so than those that occurred between researchers and participants. The extract below is taken from a conversation between two participants, Keely who is editing her film of her foster home and Jolene who has been watching. Keely explains why her foster brother is acting a particular way in the film:

*Keely: When he comes back off contact he's a bit - he goes downhill and he goes dirty again like he used to be.*

*Jolene: This is contact actually like when he sees his parents?*

*Keely: Yeah, and then he goes back to his old lifestyle and stuff.*

*Jolene: I used to do that.*

*Keely: Yeah, apparently I do it.*

This conversation continues and Jolene and Keely go on to discuss how their behaviour changes after 'coming off contact'. The activity of editing Keely's film allows her to talk more about aspects of her life that she has chosen to represent through her filming. The process of editing itself also allows Keely to make further decisions about what parts to take out and what parts to keep, thus generating more conversation about what aspects of her identity and relationships she wishes to represent. Finally, the nature of the group sessions is particularly significant. Participants became interested in each other's material, such as Keely's film

in this example, which created a space in which they could talk to each other about their everyday lives and relationships. Keely and Jolene's shared experiences of having contact with their birth families and then returning to foster carers creates a very different dynamic than the conversations that occurred between the researchers and the participants. A phrase such as being 'back off contact', between Jolene and Keely, needs no further explanation.

### **Conclusion: creating a participatory research environment**

This paper begins to draw out how an ethically informed, participatory approach can generate significant moments of interaction with young people who are looked after. The research did incur 'losses', where our attention was shifted away from meaningful conversations towards a busy road during a guided walk or by technical concerns with equipment during a project session. However, by creating a research environment where relationships between researchers and participants, and amongst participants, built over time and where participants were given choice over when and which research activities they wished to utilise to develop their own multi-media identity projects, richer, more collaborative representations of young people in care were generated. Furthermore this approach has also allowed us to explore, through our ethnographic work, the detailed situational contexts of research-in-practice.

---

<sup>1</sup>For the purposes of brevity the rest of the article will use young people to refer both to children and young people.

<sup>2</sup>Due to the limited space available to represent 'data', we have decided to focus on the material generated with one of our participants. However, as we discuss elsewhere (see Renold et al 2008), various strategies for negotiating engagement and disengagement in the research project were carried out by all of the participants with important methodological and ethical implications.

<sup>3</sup>These are children who are either subject to care orders (and are in foster or residential care, living with relatives, or placed back at home) or who are voluntarily accommodated away from home with the agreement of their parents.

### **References**

Christensen, P. (2004) 'Children's participation in ethnographic research: Issues of power and representation', in *Children & Society*, 18, 165-176.

Hepstinal, E., Brannen, J. and Bhopal, K. (2001) 'Adjusting to a foster family: children's perspectives', in *Adoption and Fostering*, 25 (4) 6-16.

Hill, M. (2006) 'Children's voices on ways of having a voice: children's and young people's perspectives on methods used in research and consultation', in *Childhood*, 13 (1) 69-90.

Mayall, B. (2003) 'Generation and gender: childhood studies and feminism', in *Childhood in Generational Perspective*, Mayall B. and Zeiher, H. (eds) Institute of Education, London.

Murray, C. (2005) 'Children and young people's participation and non-participation in research', in *Adoption and Fostering*, 29 (1) 57-66.

Renold, E., Holland, S., Hillman, A. and Ross, N.J. (2008) 'Becoming participant': problematising 'informed consent' in participatory research with children and young people in care (Working Paper, **Qualiti**)

Renold, E., and Holland, S. (2006) 'Ethical expectations: participatory research with looked after children and young people', in *Childhood and Youth: Participation and Choice*, University of Sheffield, 4-6 July 2006.

Alex Hillman works as a Research Associate for Qualiti where she has been a member of the (Extra)Ordinary Lives project team. Her involvement in the project has built upon her previous ethnographic research in the field of medical sociology.

Sally Holland is a senior lecturer in social work in the Cardiff School of Social Sciences. She is co-principal investigator of (Extra)Ordinary Lives with Emma Renold.

Emma Renold is a senior lecturer in Childhood Studies at the Cardiff School of Social Sciences, Cardiff University. Emma has published widely on children's gender and sexual identities and cultures, gendered and sexualised violence and researching sensitive topics with children and young people.

Nicola Ross is a Research Associate based within Qualiti at Cardiff University. Her research interests lie in the field of children's geographies and focus on children and young people's peer, family and community relations. She is interested in developing methods for researching with children and young people and in the use of visual and mobile research methods.

# Reflections on the use of participatory mapping to explore social cohesion - a potential tool for Qualitative-GIS

Stephen Burgess, Eva Elliott, Rebecca Lynch

Evidence suggesting that where a person lives affects their health (Macintyre *et al.* 2002) has generated interest in the relationship between health and place. However, places are complex social phenomena and understanding their relationship to health is a challenge. We have a broad interest in the use of Qualitative Geographical Information Systems (which we term QGIS) to investigate the relationship between place and health. One technique which may form part of a QGIS approach is participatory mapping. As part of a project investigating the apparent relationship between social cohesion and mental health<sup>1</sup> we are currently developing and applying participatory mapping techniques in order to investigate the meanings, experience and perceived nature of social cohesion. In this paper, we reflect upon the use of this method, its contribution to the study of place effects on health and the potential for QGIS in health research.

## Our use of QGIS methods in health research

Recent years have witnessed the emergence of challenges to the orthodoxy of GIS (Geographic Information Systems) methods for spatial analysis as quantitative endeavours. There is not the space to detail this challenge here, suffice it to say that there is emerging interest in the use of GIS for qualitative research (Kwan and Knigge 2006) with proponents "seeking ways to extend and diversify the forms of spatial knowledge that may be included and represented in a GIS" (Elwood 2006, 696). Practically, QGIS demands the adoption of new methods of capturing and representing spatial knowledge (Elwood 2006). These have included the use of: graphics (Pavlovskaya 2006); journal-keeping (Dennis 2006); narratives (Pavlovskaya 2006); neighbourhood appraisal (Dennis 2006; Pain *et al.* 2006); photographs/video (Dennis 2006; Elwood 2006; Pavlovskaya 2006); poster-making (Dennis 2006); three-dimensional representations (Elwood 2006); sound files (Elwood 2006; Pavlovskaya 2006) and various mapping techniques including sketch maps, mental maps and the use of topographical maps (Cinderby and Forrester 2005; Dennis 2006; Elwood 2006; Pavlovskaya 2006) to collect and represent spatial data within a GIS database. These can be seen as part of a broader growth of interest in methods that com-

bine newer digital technologies (e.g. desktop GIS; Global Positioning Systems; digital media) with more traditional qualitative research techniques (e.g. interviewing). QGIS strategies adopt geographical understandings of place as socially constructed and are used to map the social processes, relationships, perceptions and values that create place. However, such approaches are fairly novel both in general and certainly in investigating the relationships between place and health. If we are to develop our understanding of how place may moderate health, we need to ask questions about the nature of place which resonate with those data QGIS methods seek to capture.

Neighbourhoods, communities or localities are in practice defined and interpreted by the people who live in them in complex ways, and these 'subjective' perspectives are important for a comprehensive understanding of the impact of area on health. Qualitative dimensions of place worth investigating are those that may influence the development of neighbourhood social capital and social cohesion, with the literature suggesting their importance in creating and maintaining health and well being (e.g. Kawachi and Berkman 2000). In addition a body of work revealing a spatial concentration of poor health and well-being in particular localities and widespread area-based health inequalities has led researchers to explore the role of social capital and social cohesion as determinants or modifiers of the impact of poverty and social inequalities on health and health inequalities (e.g. Bartley 2006; Fone *et al.* 2007).

Our current study builds on evidence that in areas of deprivation, social cohesion can have a mediating role on *mental* well-being (Fone *et al.*, 2007). While many methods for capturing and analysing qualitative spatial data may benefit this investigation, in this study we only had the capacity to focus on one potential QGIS method: participatory mapping. The remainder of this paper reflects on the use of this to explore perceptions of social cohesion.

## The participatory mapping exercise

The purpose of the exercise was to facilitate groups in creating co-authored (collective) cognitive maps which focus on qualitative dimensions of place that

may influence social cohesion such as spatial and historical patterns of social relationships/community, socially meaningful places/activity and the meanings attributed to place. Adapted from Cinderby and Forrester's GIS-P method (2005), the workshop starts with an activity where participants are invited to individually identify socially meaningful places. This moves into a group discussion during which the group slowly builds up a map representing areas of social importance. Discussion around the map identifies factors that may affect social cohesion (e.g. safe/unsafe areas; social relations; reputation of area) which are represented on the map as they are discussed. The session is digitally recorded and the map digitally photographed as it is constructed.

The area of investigation, New Tredegar in the Rhymney Valley, South Wales, was chosen because we have access to aggregated social cohesion / neighbourhood belonging, deprivation and mental wellbeing scores for the 11 enumeration districts within New Tredegar collected as part of a survey across Caerphilly County Borough (Fone *et al.*, 2007). This meant that we could qualitatively investigate both these findings and the survey items used to obtain them. For example, enumeration districts are largely administrative areas and not socially meaningful for those who live and work there. Mapping would allow us to examine where the socially meaningful boundaries are, giving an insight into why the survey data may be problematic.

## Using participatory mapping to examine social cohesion

At the heart of our investigation is the need to understand how New Tredegar is experienced by those that live there. How may their experiences and senses of the place influence feelings of social cohesion and how have these changed? We have found the maps, alongside the discussions held while creating them, have generated interesting data surrounding this. For example the exercise offered insights into the spatial patterning of the changing social habits of a group of 3 young women (17 and 18 years old). When they were 'young' (by which they meant 2 - 3 years previously) they socialised largely in big groups and in public places, which the map reveals to have been concentrated in

certain areas of the village (e.g. sports centre and 5-a-side football pitches; youth club; kebab shop). As they got older, the locations of socialisation changed. They moved away from central public areas, placing more social importance on certain homes scattered around the area. At the same time, although larger house parties did occur, intimate gatherings of a few friends had become more common than larger gatherings. While public places were still important to the women, these had changed with the kebab shop giving way to the pubs as places for socialising, while the youth club had been occupied by the current 12-14 year olds. Their map also showed several streets considered important enough to warrant highlighting, echoing other findings that in some streets neighbourly relationships seem more developed than in others.

In an area where senses of community were clearly contested and changing, it was interesting that across the research, people connected differently with two buildings around which much new community development was happening. While some people were involved and engaged with this, others were detached from these areas of heavy investment.

Mapping also demonstrated the importance of the physical environment in understanding social cohesion. The railway line and river run along the bottom of the valley, cutting the ribbon development of New Tredegar in two. The extent to which these barriers and the shape of the valley impact on movement around the area was clear. The majority of communication links run north-south, with east-west movement more restricted. For example, although Brithdir lies just west of the railway line, it was only in the 18 months prior to the mapping group that a footbridge over the railway had connected Brithdir to the commercial centre, improving access for many. Although Brithdir lies on the valley side hardly any distance from the centre of New Tredegar, to get from there to the centre by bus would take two buses, one poorly timed connection and two hours. As such, the physical environment has led to the isolation of some areas and people within New Tredegar. It is this that may be partly responsible for the fact that what we perceived as New Tredegar, and what is often labelled New Tredegar is perceived by many locally as a series of small 'villages' (e.g. Brithdir; Phillipstown) each with their own identity.

This last point raises the issue of defining places geographically. At the beginning, as outsiders, we had our own ideas of where New Tredegar was - these were chal-

lenged almost immediately. An advantage of our mapping technique is that it allows people to define their own boundaries which may be reconsidered as the map develops. In piloting, we experimented with giving groups topographic maps to annotate but decided against this partly because providing such a map meant that we had to define the area in advance. Conversation around the map also allows us an insight into how social relationships and processes at the meso- and macro-levels may be influencing social cohesion. For example, during the mapping group mentioned above, it became apparent that the social networks of one participant stretched further and more often beyond New Tredegar than the others. It was this woman who expressed a desire to settle down elsewhere, while the other two ultimately still 'belonged' to New Tredegar. In this way, a more complex understanding of the relationship between place and social cohesion emerged.

Participatory mapping does also present some challenges. There are tensions inherent in negotiating a collaborative map from individual perceptions, although recording the group discussion helps to highlight these. Also, our challenge is in accessing a variety of perceptions of social cohesion. It is easy to access people through community associations and other organised groups, but these are often fulcrums around which socialising occurs, and can attract people with similar interests in, and perceptions of, the local place. Accessing those isolated from organised groups and networks and whose own communities are created in other ways is a challenge. We are constantly aware of the need to access these narratives of place of those who do not experience social cohesion, and who do not feel that they belong and the difficulties in doing so.

Despite the challenges, participatory mapping techniques can help achieve useful insights into perceptions of place that may influence social cohesion. It is important to emphasise that it is not only the map itself, but the act of mapping and the conversation that this draws out which allows investigation of the qualitative dimensions of space which may affect social cohesion, as perceived by those living in the areas in which we are interested. We have found that almost all of our respondents engage enthusiastically with the mapping exercise and many report their enjoyment of being allowed to unfold their personal narratives of place. In these ways, we have found that the mapping exercise helps us gain a richness of data around place and the lives that are lived in place, that we feel interviews alone would

not give us. Further, in order to refine our understanding of place, it is important to relate our understanding of New Tredegar back to those involved in the research and others living there, in order that they can contradict, confirm or elaborate on these. The visual and engaging nature of participatory mapping may facilitate this process.

Participatory mapping is only one of many techniques that are starting to be applied for the capture, representation and analysis of qualitative spatial data in QGIS approaches. Various data, collected via a variety of traditional and digital methods may be incorporated into a QGIS database (e.g. photographs; video; GPS plots; audio; transcripts) and linked and viewed together (e.g. photographs of places may be linked to a conceptual map) with data displayed in a visual and interactive format which engages people at all stages of the research process. Underlying the emerging literature on QGIS is an understanding of place as a social construct and, as such we believe that QGIS techniques, and participatory mapping as one of these, may be beneficial in developing understanding of the relationship between place and health.

---

<sup>1</sup> *Neighbourhood, social deprivation and mental health: the mediating role of social cohesion* Wales Office of Research and Development for Health and Social Care. Award reference RFS06/2/229.

## References

- Bartley, M. (ed) (2006) *Capability and resilience: beating the odds*. University College London, London.
- Cinderby, S. and Forrester, J. (2005) Facilitating the local governance of air pollution using GIS for participation. *Applied Geography*, 25:143-158.
- Dennis, S. F. (2006) Prospects for qualitative GIS at the intersection of youth development and participatory urban planning. *Environment and Planning A* 38: 2039-2054.
- Elwood, S. (2006) Critical issues in participatory GIS: deconstructions, reconstructions and new research directions. *Transactions in GIS*, 10:693-708.
- Fone, D., Dunstan, F., Lloyd, K., Williams, G., Watkins, J. and Palmer, S. (2007) Does social cohesion modify the association between area income deprivation and mental health? A multilevel analysis. *International Journal of Epidemiology*, 36:338-345.

Kawachi, I., Berkman, L. (2000) Social cohesion, social capital, and health. In Kawachi, I, Berkman, L. (eds.) *Social epidemiology*. New York: Oxford University Press:174-77.

Kwan, M. and Knigge, L. (2006) Doing qualitative research using GIS: an oxymoronic endeavor? *Environment and Planning A* 38:1999-2002.

Macintyre, S., Ellaway, A. and Cummins, S. (2002) Place effects on health: how can we conceptualise, operationalise and measure them? *Social Science and Medicine*, 55: 125-139.

Pain, R., MacFarlane, R., Turner, K. and Gill, S. (2006) 'When, where, if and but': qualifying GIS and the effect of street-lighting on crime and fear. *Environment and Planning A*, 38:2055-2074.

Pavlovskaya, M. (2006) Theorizing with GIS: a tool for critical geographies? *Environment and Planning A*, 38:2003-2020.

Stephen Burgess is a Research Associate based at the Cardiff Institute of Society, Health and Ethics (CISHE).

Eva Elliot is a RCUK Academic Fellow in Social and Economic Change and Health and is based in the Cardiff Institute of Society, Health and Ethics (CISHE). She currently leads a research theme in CISHE on the determinants of health and regeneration.

Rebecca Lynch used to be based at the Cardiff Institute of Society, Health and Ethics (CISHE) as a Research Associate. She is currently developing a doctoral research project.

## Present life: Mass Observation and understanding the ordinary

Louise Purbrick

This article reflects upon researching in the Mass Observation Archive. It is a paper archive that contains the writings of 'ordinary' people on the subjects of everyday life. Photographic images do occur within it but it is Mass Observation writing as well as the identity of the writers that concerns me here. Mass Observation writers, or correspondents as they are often called, are anonymous volunteers and this article also considers the treatment of their words as collective body of research, as a case study. My particular case is a study of the material possessions of married domesticity exemplified by the wedding present.

### The Mass Observation Archive

The Mass Observation Archive, which 'specialises in material about everyday life in Britain', is quite unique (<http://www.massobs.org.uk/index.htm>); it not only houses such material and actively collects it but, importantly, generates the documentation of everyday life by people who inhabit everyday worlds. The writing in and for the Mass Observation Archive is not produced by named authors, 'legitimate' writers including the by-lined journalist or recognised academic, but by those who have described themselves as 'ordinary' (Sheridan, Street and Bloome, 2000: 7). Thus Mass Observation is both a writing and a collecting project. There are two discrete but clearly connected collections in the Archive, housed at the University of Sussex: the original Mass Observation material compiled from 1937 into immediate post-war period and contemporary writings produced by a 'panel' of around 400 volunteer writers.

The establishment of Mass Observation in 1937 by Tom Harrison, Humphrey Jennings and Charles Madge is implicated

in histories of anthropology, sociology as well as the documentary movement and these interconnections have been subject of comment (Highmore, 2002; Hubble, 2006). The early or original material, the file reports, diaries, day surveys, directives, observations, overheard and questionnaires are valued as sources of everyday life by social and cultural historians of the mid-twentieth century but also collectively constitute a particular moment of history of social investigation. The new Mass Observation project, on-going since 1981, is still a little overshadowed by this history and perhaps deservedly so since the early Mass Observation method of recording everyday life with a panel of writers, keeping diaries and responding to 'directives', open-ended questionnaires, has been consciously revived and redeveloped. It is, however, a substantial project in its own right. It has involved 2,800 people since 1981, responding, often according to their own concerns and priorities, to directives on all the wild array of subjects that make up everyday life: gardening, war, shopping, royalty, tattoos, death, family, and gifts, to name just a few ([http://www.sussex.ac.uk/library/speccoll/collection\\_catalogues/massnewprojecttheme.html](http://www.sussex.ac.uk/library/speccoll/collection_catalogues/massnewprojecttheme.html)).

### The Wedding Present: A Mass Observation Case Study

The main 'source' for my study 'making homes and worlds' in Britain between 1945 and today, an account of giving, receiving and keeping wedding presents were writings held in the Mass Observation Archive (Purbrick, 2007). In 1998 I co-wrote a section entitled 'Wedding Presents' of a longer directive called Giving and Receiving Presents. My book drew extensively upon the responses to this directive (Purbrick, 2007). Mass Observa-

tion correspondents were invited to be 'as detailed as possible' about the objects they received when they married, who gave them, when they were given, whether they were requested, where they had been kept, how they have been used and if they hold any memories. There were 254 responses to the directive and while some wrote only a little, a few lines or a paragraph, about wedding presents most accounts of these objects were substantial, covering several pages of typed or handwritten script, weaving together descriptions of objects with a commentary upon marriage, domesticity and materiality. When I first read these writings, I was shocked by their intimacy. For example, a young female correspondent wrote about her parent's wedding presents:

*I knew they had a tiny coffee service because it is kept in our china cabinet and never used. They said they'd use it on their silver wedding anniversary, but my father died when they had been married only 16 years (G2769)<sup>1</sup>.*

How should such an account be read? What should it (and the other 253 responses that also told of how lifetimes were inextricably bound up with domestic things) be read for?

### A Method for the Archive?

There is no model method of working with Mass Observation material. Since Mass Observation writing positions itself, despite the physical location of the Archive, outside the institutions of authorised knowledge, it has not been subject to the disciplinary controls that might have prescribed one method over another. Dorothy Sheridan, the Director of Mass Observation, describes it as 'part history project, part anthropology, part auto/biography, part social commen-

tary' (Sheridan, Street and Bloome, 2000:12); the impossibility of pinning Mass Observation to the mast of any one discipline has ensured that its status within all of them has been rather uncertain. Could Mass Observation be considered informants of an ethnography? Are their writings evidence? Sociological data? Historical source?

My initial, and rather naïve, reason for Mass Observation directive was to gather evidence what people actually owned, the things they kept rather than those they were told to buy. I felt that whilst the home was being closely studied as a site of consumption, we knew really very little about the things within it that mattered most. Possessions we hang onto year after year cannot be traced through monitoring the shifting focus of advertising campaigns and the fluctuations of sales figures. I wanted to create a kind of collective wedding list in order to identify more meaningful 'cultural regularities.' And, I did find that china was consistently given as a wedding present across the whole period of my study. This is one way to read the Mass Observation account of set of tiny coffee cups that outlived a father: count them. Reductive and unsympathetic, searching for quantities in Mass Observation is probably the least productive path to follow.

The problems of both early and new Mass Observation material as 'data' for social sciences, 'fieldwork' in anthropology or 'sources' of history have been fairly well rehearsed (Sheridan, Street and Bloome, 2000: 88-93) but it is worth running over the criticism of Mass Observation that is most pertinent to my study: while the new Mass Observation panel might be sizeable, they are too self-conscious as writers, offering self-selected, anecdotal, subjective accounts that collectively cannot be regarded as representative enough to meet the requirements of a good survey. At time of the Giving and Receiving Present directive there was a clear gender, age and geographical bias within the panel. Older women living in England were over represented. Currently, the Mass Observation Archive has adopted a recruitment strategy to address this imbalance but researchers using Mass Observation material had already developed ways of 'thinking with' that allowed for both careful and revealing interpretations. In my study, I drew upon two methodological strategies to interpret the individual pieces of Mass Observation writing and their collective weight: each was read as a 'work' of writing and the whole treated as a case study.

**Reading Mass Observation as a 'work'** Practices of reading are, of course, theorised and contested, not least in art and design history, the discipline in which I trained. I attempted to pay close attention to the construction of meaning within the writing as well as the conditions of its production. Often the most fruitful passages did not answer the directive directly but were prompted by it into their own narrative. A passage from a response to the Giving and Receiving Presents directive from a retired shop worker from Brentwood, Essex, who married in 1950, is quite typical of the way that many Mass Observation writers relate experience rather answer questions. She begins by listing her presents but ends up providing a commentary on marriage and home-making practices in the post-war period:

*There was bed linen and blankets, even an eider-down of ducks feathers. Flower vases and glass "fruit" sets are still in my possession, even though some of the dishes have been broken. The majority of these presents were given to us on the wedding day after the wedding 'breakfast.' A table was set aside in the hall, and people just left them there. We opened most of them on the day after the wedding. We did receive some gifts of money, but not large amounts, as most people were only average working class. What we did receive was put towards a 'bedroom' 'suite' for our rooms we rented. These two rooms were in my Parents house. My 'bottom drawer,' which was exactly that, was full of items I had collected during the two years I was 'engaged.' Lots of bed linen and pillow cases I had embroidered myself. Cushion covers and tablecloths and dressing table 'doilys.' Antimaccassars I had made for my arm chairs and chair backs, of lace (H260).*

Her narrative presents a past (and an idea) of working class respectability that is secured through the appropriate possessions gathered together through the combined individual, familial and community efforts: her two years of collecting and embroidering domestic textiles, the use and payment for her parent's rooms and the money collected by wedding guests to furnish them. Her simple style of reporting suggests that all this is rather unexceptional, that she is only adding details of experience that is already known or even shared.

### **Being Ordinary**

To agree to write for an Archive that 'specialises in material about everyday life in Britain' (<http://www.massobs.org.uk/index.htm>) implies at some level that the writer considers themselves to be a representative of an everyday world, to be in some way ordinary. Importantly, Brian Street, David Bloome and Dorothy Sheridan's study of Mass Observation writers as 'literary subjects' demonstrates that to

be ordinary is to be inside one world and outside another (Sheridan, Street and Bloome, 2000: 7). 'I'm fairly ordinary,' states one Mass Observation correspondent, 'I think ordinary really, you think of yourself as someone who hasn't achieved great fame, or great success; just live a normal, everyday life, going to work and with your family' (Sheridan, 1996: 10, citing M1498). Thus 'ordinary' is a collective identity shaped by the common experience of the dual work/family destiny and shared position outside the spheres of economic, political and cultural influence. The 'problem' of Mass Observation's self-selection is also its strength; it has created of body of writing that has reasserted the place of the everyday and ordinary in the record of social life.

### **A case study without conclusion**

The Brentwood shop worker's account of her 1950 wedding presents contained a number of pieces of information that were also presented in many other responses to the Giving and Receiving Presents directive: gifts can be distinguished from other kinds of object because they are kept (despite any damage they might sustain), money is (paradoxically) a good gift, the practice of display (or 'show') of presents has declined and that what is usually understood as domestic consumption is not an individual or even a individual household pursuit but a community project. All these issues were repeated often enough for me to make a case, not one that read off very general patterns of gift and social relationships from such specific statements, but enough of a case to allow a re-assessment of theoretical propositions about the nature of the gift or the extent of consumption. This is, of course, the point of case study (Mitchell, 1984); it cannot claim to recast social worlds with representative findings but offers a substantive challenge to established ways of thinking.

A case study may well be important in its own right and present a compelling description of a specific time, place, cultural formation. But if we accept a case study methodologies (Miller, 2001; Mitchell, 1984) then any general claims or theoretical propositions are necessarily conditional; thus the completion of a case is not a conclusion but instead call for further studies or comparative analyses of existing studies to be made. My work with Mass Observation about wedding presents raises a series of questions. Does the function of wedding presents in British households between 1945 and today offer any insights into the operation of other gift relationships enacted at other times and places? What is the nature of the contemporary gift? Some of these questions

could be addressed by returning to the Giving and Receiving Presents directive to examine accounts of present giving at rituals other than marriage, at birthdays, for example. A television producer from Devon describes a dynamic of birthday giving and its effect:

*they don't give him anything. And yet the week before they'll have found cash for a boozy night out or new clothes. For me it represents more. It means they chose not to buy him something, even if it meant going without themselves. I have changed a little in the last two years. I no longer buy one-off gifts for my sister-in-law, like flowers; something for her home like mugs, a picture: because she stopped saying thank-you. It was, I felt, taken for granted. Sometimes I felt she thought 'she (me) can afford it.' Often I couldn't but did it to help or cheer her up (S2813).*

Compared to the passages devoted to wedding presents, this account deals much more explicitly with the matter of reciprocation of gifts (Mauss, 1990: 13) and reveals the coercive edge to the sociability of gift exchanges. Significantly, gift giving appears as female moral economy even when gifts are received (or not in this case) by men.

Aafke Komter has observed that an asymmetry characterises giving between women and men (Komter, 1996), which is clearly demonstrated by the television producer's reaction to the failure of both brother and sister-in-law to give a birthday present to her husband: a gift giving relationship between the two sisters by marriage is brought to an end. As revealing, is the producer's insistence on a deeper understanding of the meaning of gifts compared to that of her husband, who has, we must assume, a more care-free attitude: 'For me it represents more (S2813).' Pnina Werber's work, *The Migration Process: Capital, Gifts and Offerings among British Pakistanis* (2002) identifies a struggle over female stake in gift-giving as families moved between the Punjab and Manchester. Her study enables a challenging comparative analysis of gift giving as culturally specific form or as a practice that takes place at the interface between the family and market and reproduced with similarities and differences in many local contexts. It also presents the most testing question for my use of Mass Observation material as a work of ordinary experience. How is an ordinary subjectivity defined? Do ideas about what is everyday or ordinary exclude a migrant experience?

Completing a study, at least one claiming to be a case study is not, then, a conclusion. To adopt a case study methodology entails subjecting of any findings to com-

parison and constant questioning in order to define their range. Is there a culture where gift economy is not familial and female? Does the category of ordinary suppress difference? Is domesticity always ordinary? Or are there different kinds of ordinary? It is, of course, quite conventional to draw a study to a close by identifying the areas where more work must be done but this the inevitable end of a case study; the completion of one calls up the need for another. Thus, a case study methodology presses Mass Observation material into the slow process of clarifying the questions that need to be asked.

To prescribe one way of researching in the Mass Observation Archive would not do justice to its contents. Mass Observation writing, entangled in everyday life and processes of its representation, inevitably leads researchers in multifarious directions. For example, keeping china wedding presents could be understood matter for sociological, historical or anthropological enquiry because such a practice indicates the possessor's class and status, the historical moment that they belong or meanings of material culture to which they subscribe. Each type of enquiry demands a distinct method, a different way of using Mass Observation materials. But the everyday is usually not lived out according to academic frameworks through which we attempt to understand it. Relying upon only one of my methods (reading individual pieces of Mass Observation writings as 'works' and treating them collectively as a case study) would have missed some significance. For example, instead of counting the 'tiny' coffee cups and saucers that outlived a father and husband, attention to the writing of the female Mass Observation who recalled a parental absence through a material presence allowed me consider these gifts in her family history. Considering in her account in relation to that of others (both within the Archive and outside it) enabled me to think about the extent to which objects establish genealogies.

---

<sup>1</sup>To preserve the anonymity of Mass Observation correspondents they are allocated a number and series of letters.

## References

- Highmore, B. (2002) *Everyday life and cultural theory: An introduction*. London: Routledge.
- Hubble, N. (2006) *Mass-Observation and everyday life: Culture, history, theory*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Komter, A. (1996) 'Women, gifts and power.' In A. Komter (Ed) *The Gift: An*

*interdisciplinary perspective*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 119-131.

Mauss, M. (1990) *The Gift: Form and reason for exchange in archaic societies*. London: Routledge.

Miller, D. (ed.) (2001) *Home possessions: Material culture behind closed doors*. Oxford: Berg.

Mitchell, J.C. (1984) 'Case Studies,' In R. Ellen (Ed.) *Ethnographic research: a guide to general conduct*. London: Academic Press, 237-241.

Purbrick, L. (2007) *The Wedding present: Domestic life beyond consumption*. Aldershot: Ashgate.

Sheridan, D., B. Street and D. Bloome (2000) *Writing ourselves: Mass Observation and literary practices*. New Jersey: Hampton Press.

Sheridan, D. (1996) "'Damned anecdotes and dangerous conflagrations: Mass-Observation as life history,' *Mass-Observation archive occasional paper*, No.7. Brighton: University of Sussex.

Werber, P. (2002) *The Migration process: Capital, gifts and offerings among British Pakistanis*. Oxford: Berg.

Louise Purbrick is Senior Lecturer in the History of Art and Design at the University of Brighton. She is author of *The Wedding Present: Domestic Life Beyond Consumption* (Ashgate 2007). She also works on the material culture of conflict and is a co-editor of *Contested Spaces: Sites, Representations and Histories of Conflict* (Palgrave 2007) and *Re-Mapping the Field: New Approaches in Conflict Archaeology* (Westkreuz-Verlag, 2006).

# News and Forthcoming Events

## Qualiti Events

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

### Advancing the use of visual methods in research on children's cultures

Cardiff University

16 April 2008

This one day seminar event will focus on advancing our use of visual methods in research projects that focus on children's cultural worlds.

### Using new technologies in Qualitative Research—Training Workshop

Cardiff University

30 April 2008

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

### Multi-modal Qualitative Research—Training Workshop

Cardiff University

1-2 May 2008

This two-day workshop is primarily based on the combined use of textual, visual and audio data. It will give participants practical insights in to the advantages and disadvantages of different modes of qualitative data. **Please note:** We are recommending that delegates wishing to participate in this workshop also attend the 'Using new technologies' workshop listed above.

## Calls for Papers

### Vital signs

9 - 11 September 2008

University of Manchester, UK

Vital Signs is an international and interdisciplinary conference organised by Real Life Methods node of NCRM. It will provide a major forum for the discussion of approaches to researching real lives in complex worlds.

Deadline for submitting abstracts and session proposals - 7 March

Further details

<http://www.reallifemethods.ac.uk/events/vitalsigns/>

### The midterm of the ESA Qualitative Methods Research Network Conference Teaching Qualitative Research methods

15-17 September 2008

Lodz University, Poland

Deadline for abstracts: 15 March, 2008

Abstract max 300 words + name(s), e-mail address (es), affiliation, and three keywords to be e-mailed to both Krzysztof Konecki

([krzysztof.konecki@gmail.com](mailto:krzysztof.konecki@gmail.com)) and Anne Ryen

([Anne.Ryen@uia.no](mailto:Anne.Ryen@uia.no))

<http://www.soc-org.edu.pl/Conference2008/welcome.php>

### Space, Time and Image 2008 IVSA CONFERENCE

6- 8 August 2008

Buenos Aires, Argentina

Panel proposal submissions must be received by March 15, 2008. The english mail box is [ivs2008english@gmail.com](mailto:ivs2008english@gmail.com). There will be a separate "call for papers" after March 15 with a due date of May 15, 2008.

### Oxford e-Research Conference 08

13 September 2008

University of Oxford

The conference will bring together research from key e-Research projects from around the world examining the role of the Internet, Web and the Grid in research.

Abstracts or drafts of proposed papers, and workshop and / or panel outlines should be submitted to [eresearch@oii.ox.ac.uk](mailto:eresearch@oii.ox.ac.uk) by 15 March 2008.

Additional details online:

<http://www.oii.ox.ac.uk/microsites/eresearch08/>

### 4th International Conference on e-Social Science

18—20 June 2008

Manchester

The aim of the conference on e-Social Science is to bring together leading international representatives of the social science, e-Infrastructure/cyber-infrastructure and e-Research communities in order to improve mutual awareness, harmonize understanding and instigate coordinated activities to accelerate research, development and deployment of powerful, new research methods and tools for the social sciences and beyond.

To submit a paper, workshop, panel or demo, you must first register at the submission website (<http://www.conftool.net/ncsess2008/>)

Submission Deadlines

Poster and demo abstracts: March 21st, 2008.

Final versions of full and short papers: 16th May 2008

### The 7th Qualitative Research Conference

8-10 September 2008

Bournemouth University

This biannual conference has particular concern to support disciplinary diversity. Abstracts are invited from scholars and practitioners engaged in qualitative research from a range of disciplines which may include health, social care, psychology, sociology, anthropology, media studies, education, organisational studies and any other disciplines through which qualitative research is being advanced.

Call for abstracts, posters and session proposals is now open. More details

<http://www.bournemouth.ac.uk/hsc/qrc08.html>

## Seminars and Workshops

### An arts-based seminar on the ethnography of walking

17th March

Loughborough University

Part of \*Roam: a Festival of Walking\*

To book a place at the seminar please e-mail [rdar.info@lboro.ac.uk](mailto:rdar.info@lboro.ac.uk) with your name and institutional affiliation. There is no charge for the event and a buffet lunch is provided.

### Computer-Aided Qualitative Research 2008

10-11 June 2008

Amsterdam

Enhancing qualitative data analysis through QDA tools while creating support network among qualitative researchers.

To register: please visit the following website:

<http://www.merlien.org/events/program.php?cf=13>.

Places are limited to 30

## Qualitative Researcher ISSN 1748-7315

*Qualitative Researcher* provides an interdisciplinary forum for social scientists to share their research and discuss questions arising from the application, innovation and dissemination of qualitative research. *Qualitative Researcher* invites contributions in the form of opinion pieces and polemics that stimulate debate; brief articles presenting current empirical research projects; and reports of instances of methodological innovation. Submissions should be between 1500 and 2000 words and as a reflection of *Qualitative Researcher's* pragmatic and inclusive orientation endnotes and references should be kept to a minimum.

*Qualitative Researcher* is edited and published by Qualiti, a node of the UK ESRC National Centre for Research Methods. For enquiries and submissions, please contact [qualiti@cardiff.ac.uk](mailto:qualiti@cardiff.ac.uk)

### Editorial Team:

Inna Kotchetkova  
[kotchetkova@cardiff.ac.uk](mailto:kotchetkova@cardiff.ac.uk)

Alex Hillman  
[HillmanAE1@cardiff.ac.uk](mailto:HillmanAE1@cardiff.ac.uk)

Nicola Ross  
[RossN1@cardiff.ac.uk](mailto:RossN1@cardiff.ac.uk)

Rachel Hurdley  
[HurdleyR1@cardiff.ac.uk](mailto:HurdleyR1@cardiff.ac.uk)

Gareth Williams  
[williamsgh1@cardiff.ac.uk](mailto:williamsgh1@cardiff.ac.uk)

Editorial Assistant:  
Tina Woods  
[woodst1@cardiff.ac.uk](mailto:woodst1@cardiff.ac.uk)

### Correspondence:

Qualiti  
Cardiff School of Social Sciences  
Glamorgan Building  
King Edward VII  
Cardiff CF10 3WT  
Tel +44 (0)2920 875 345  
Fax +44 (0)2920 874 759

<http://www.cardiff.ac.uk/socsi/qualiti>  
Email: [qualiti@cardiff.ac.uk](mailto:qualiti@cardiff.ac.uk)

Views expressed in this journal do not necessarily reflect those of Cardiff University, Qualiti, the ESRC National Centre for Research Methods or the Economic and Social Research Council

E · S · R · C  
ECONOMIC  
& SOCIAL  
RESEARCH  
COUNCIL