

## **6. Doing it Tidy: the open exploratory spirit and methodological engagement in recent Cardiff ethnographies**

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In this section I describe and explore a number of core principles of the ethnographic work that has practiced and developed the 'open exploratory spirit' described elsewhere in this text, and espoused in the teaching of fieldwork methods at Cardiff. There are, I suggest, various strands of work that have been influenced by the earlier seminal ethnographies of Atkinson and Delamont, and their methodological writings and teaching that, although certainly distinct, bear out a family resemblance in terms of their commitment to thoroughly sociological analysis and critical engagement with methodological development and innovation in various substantive projects. Here, I discuss the various methodological contributions made by Cardiff ethnographies and the lessons that such studies have for others looking to do ethnography 'tidy'.

'Doing it tidy' is a phrase recently adopted by Paul Atkinson to describe something of both the Cardiff approach to ethnography and, more generally, the ways that fieldwork and ethnographic practice might and should be done. It was also the title of the talk that I gave at Paul's Festschrift conference in 2015; a talk I develop herein. 'Tidy' is a local South Walean expression which has a number of meanings beyond the more generally recognised sense of things being 'in their place'. 'Tidy', for locals, is a positive term, meaning 'good' or 'pleasing' or agreeing in the affirmative: "Are you coming for dinner?", "Tidy!". The metaphor is worth pursuing further in both senses. In line with the general sense, Cardiff ethnographies might well be characterised by a certain 'tidiness' in their analytic and theoretically informed attention to social orders and organisation. Although there is a recognition of and engagement with 'mess' and 'complexity' and 'uncertainty' (see below), an abiding concern within the 'Cardiff School' has been with the ways in which people themselves make sense of the complexity of the social world. Which is to say, a concern with how people find and manage mess in their everyday lives. This is not to say, of course, that Cardiff ethnographies bear out a disdain for methodological complexity or resort to a naïve empiricism – far from it. A 'tidy' approach to ethnography is thus "predicated on the recognition that local social organisation and the conduct of everyday life are complex, in that they enacted through multiple modes of social action and representation" (Atkinson, Delamont, and Housley, 2008: 31-2). In this sense, a number of projects have examined aspects of social complexity found in 'discourse and social interaction', 'narrative', 'materials', 'places and space', and 'visual and sensory cultures' not as matters to be 'celebrated' as conceptual or methodological novelties but as, first and foremost, *phenomenological social orders*. Various Cardiff ethnographies, have been characterised by both a contribution to the leading edge of methodological development whilst, at the same time, providing a critical engagement with the methods employed in the studies themselves. In this sense, then, the Cardiff School might be said to have contributed to various 'turns' (the visual, the spatial, the mobile) whilst, at the same time, remaining resolutely resistant to spurious claims to novelty and intellectual 'wilful ignorance' (Atkinson, 2015). The methodological work of the Cardiff School thus represents a sustained programme of methodological inquiry.

A second sense of 'tidy' might be taken to relate to the 'open exploratory spirit' itself. 'Doing it tidy' – in place of the American, 'doing it right' – implies a sense of openness to a wide range of approaches, theoretical influences, field sites and means of doing fieldwork. Not a restricted code of practice, but a recognition of the breadth of ways in which fieldwork and ethnographic writing can get done whilst retaining a focus on rigour, the politics of representation through writing and other means, and perhaps above all, an *analytic sensibility*.

In focussing this paper, I recognise a theme running through a number of ethnographic and qualitative studies conducted in the past decade or so. Namely, a sustained critical engagement with various methodological innovations within the social sciences and the affordances of various emergent technologies for the doing of fieldwork. These projects have been characterised by an empirical engagement with innovation in which the contribution of any particular 'new' way of working has been thoroughly 'field tested' in relation to the production, capture, analysis, and representation of qualitative materials. Again, the visual, the mobile, the spatial, and so on, have consistently been explored and handled as social orders, accomplished, and handled in situations by people, but also, as imbricated in the production of the contours of various social settings from regenerated waterfronts and city centres, to post-industrial communities and their rural surrounds, to science education centres and university buildings. This stands in contra-distinction to the wider pursuit of methodological innovation and the uptake of 'qualitative research' across the social sciences and beyond. As noted by Housley and Smith (2010) "...the growth of qualitative methods across the social sciences represents a space through which innovation and post-disciplinary collaboration is promised; however, it also serves to obscure disciplinary logics and thereby facilitate analytical accounts for phenomenon for which there are no questions". We might also note that innovation is also often justified and accounted for in pursuit of 'everyday life' in such a way that ignores or, equally as often, aims to negate previous established concepts and studies that have done much to shed light on what it is that people do to make social organization possible and which, ironically, both obscures and 'explains' everyday practices.

An implicit influence, recently foregrounded (Smith and Atkinson, 2015), is an enduring concern with method and measurement practices (Cicourel, 1964). In some instances this has led to the direct empirical study of social researcher's practices (Housley and Smith, 2015), in other cases conceptual critiques (Housley and Smith, 2010; Smith, 2014). In the majority of cases, however, Cardiff ethnographies have served as critical test beds for methodological development and inquiry. The projects display a deep interest in method not in terms of a narrow development of technique but, rather, with the ways in which methodological and measurement practices necessarily involve the making of practical decisions by the researcher in the doing of their craft. In many ways, Cardiff ethnographies have sought not only to practice the ethnographic maxim of making "the strange familiar, and the familiar strange" but also to adopt the principle in scrutinizing their own research practices in a direct manner. In what follows I describe a number of these projects. This is not an exhaustive list, and I of course apologise to colleagues, past and present who have contributed in various ways but whose names or work does not appear here. These projects are, however, indicative of the core principles of 'doing it tidy'.

### **Hypermedia, multimodality and digital ethnography**

A key strand of methodological innovation and critique at Cardiff concerned experiments with the affordances of digital multi-media in terms of the documentation, analysis, and representation of ethnographic and qualitative data. Early projects were concerned with the methodological examination of the use of CAQDAS (Weaver and Atkinson, 1994) and the affordances of hypermedia for analysis and the then nascent 'digital ethnography' (Dicks et al, 2005). Cardiff was one of the first centres in the United Kingdom to investigate the possibilities of digital research for analysing fieldnotes and other materials in ways that went beyond the standard 'code and retrieve' model. This foundational work was followed up in the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and National Centre of Research Methodology (NCRM) funded *QUALITI* (Qualitative Methods in the Social Sciences:

Innovation, Integration, and Impact) suite of methodological projects (see, for example, Hurdley and Dicks, 2011). The 'Watching, Listening, Reading and Clicking: Representing Data Through Different Media' project examined the ways in which audiences understood and constructed, epistemologically and ontologically, various multimedia representations of the same project. Such work provided early developments in the representation of ethnographic projects as digital artefacts whilst at the same time enabling an empirical inquiry in to the relative epistemic status of multi-modal representations of research findings. Of course, in keeping with the ethos of the School it wasn't so much the novelty of going 'beyond the text' that was interesting here but an analytic concern with how the science centre itself employed a range of multi-modal and multi-sensory media to communicate aspects of physics, chemistry, and biology to an audience of families and children and how this was 'understood' by visitors (see, for example, Coffey et al, 2006). This, then, underpinned the second layer of the research in which the findings of the project were produced as a traditional academic essay, a video, and as a website through which the audience could choose how to and in what order to 'read' it. It is interesting to note that despite these initial experiments, the *publication* of academic research still lags beyond the wide array of technologies and multi-modal engagements that researchers have with the field (although see the 'Innovative Ethnography' series edited by Phillip Vannini (2012) for an attempt to bridge this gap).

Most recently, various Cardiff ethnographers have been involved in analysing developments in the disruptive impact of new technologies and aligned emergent forms of 'digital social science'; again, demonstrating both the continued and necessary contribution of ethnographic and qualitative studies and analysis (Smith, 2014). Roser Beneito-Montagut (2015) has, for example, conducted ethnographic fieldwork investigating older people's use and understandings of social media, whilst other work has investigated the affordance of 'big data' in dialogue with existing forms of research (see Edwards et al, 2013). Gareth Thomas (with Lupton, 2016; 2017) has written of the impact of digital technologies upon the experience of pregnancy and neo-natal diagnoses, Jamie Lewis and Andy Bartlett have studied the emerging field of 'bioinformatics' (Lewis et al, 2016) and Neil Stephens (2013), in vitro meat laboratories. So, whilst many are questioning the validity and worth of ethnography in 'digital society', it is clear that there is much work to do and many opportunities for ethnographers.

### **Visual, participatory, and collaborative methods**

Another strand of ethnographic work at Cardiff has involved the development of collaborative, participatory, and co-produced research methodologies, often built around visual materials. In ways similar to those outlined above, this work is also characterised by substantive concerns and critical methodological development. Through the early work of QUALITI (see, Hillman et al, 2008; and a series of films produced by Bambo Soyinka) and, later, that of the Wales Institute for Social Economic Research Data and method (WISERD), ethnographic projects located in Cardiff and Heads of the Valleys communities provided sites for the development and critical exploration of a range of methods and encounters in and through which to engage with young people's lives and experiences of their locale. Experimenting with various elicitation exercises and visual resources the projects sought to explore the relationship between locality and the experience of 'growing up' and the spatial and mobility practices of young people. A series of localities studies conducted by WISERD researchers investigated the 'worlds' of young people living in communities of the Heads of Valleys. Here, researchers worked with and alongside young people, often completely handing over processes of data capture and the devices to them, in order to get closer not only to their subjective experiences but to better understand their local knowledges and

skills (that were often not recognised in formal educational settings).

In a separate programme of research, Dawn Mannay has pioneered, and critiqued, the use of a range of visual practices including sketching and drawing (2010) to, again, develop a less extractive (see Singha and Back, 2013), way of researching with young people. Going beyond standard talk or observational based approaches, the active and participatory research encounters provided ground from which to also explore and critically consider shifting power relations within the research encounter in a way that goes beyond well trodden discussion of positions held by researcher and researched to consider representation, communication and responsibilities to 'non-consenting others' (2015). More recently, this strand of work in Cardiff has been developed by Emma Renold and colleagues in a number of projects that have explicitly sought out collaborative encounters with young people that, again, go transgress traditional forms of research interaction and representation (see, for example, Libby et al, 2017). Coproducing artefacts and multimedia representations with young people about their own lives has proved tremendously effective both in terms of the research itself but, perhaps more significantly, in terms of communicating with policy makers and stakeholders. Such work has demonstrated the potential and power of ethnographic and qualitative research to make meaningful impact in a domain routinely assumed to be dominated by statistics and graphs.

### **Place, mobility practices and (the) walking (interview)**

A recurrent concern across a number of Cardiff ethnographies, and one certainly present in the various projects mentioned thus far, has been with 'place' and 'mobility' and, more specifically, how place might be said to be constituted in and through multiple social orders. A central concern here has been the analysis of the ways in which 'place' and 'mobility' intersect with the everyday lives of particular groups and individuals. Various QUALITI and WISERD projects made use of walking interviews to investigate the intersection of mobility, place, and experience in explorations of 'third spaces' (Moles, 2008). Tom Hall, Brett Lashua, and Amanda Coffey (2008) experimented with how the roving interview or 'soundwalk' disrupted both the production and assumptions of the 'conventional interview' as a kind of pristine data extraction situation. The soundwalk, instead, allowed for the unexpected and the contextual – a street sweeper driving past whilst conducting an interview on a busy street, for example – to enter in to and, more importantly, be analysed as salient within the research encounter. In this, and other work, the walking interview was used to explore the worlds of key informants, not simply as a novel method nor uncritical celebration of walking per se, but as a means to better understand the organisation of experience for groups whose lives were intimately bound up with public space (see Hall et al, 2009; Ross et al, 2009). More recently, Kate Moles' work (with Angharrad Saunders, 2015) has explored the production of 'place' through soundwalks. Here, participant-produced audio tours produce an alternative understanding and mobile biography of place, acting as both methodological experiment and disruption of marginalizing and stigmatizing narratives of peripheral urban areas.

Street-level mobilities and walking practices were also the focus of Tom Hall and Robin Smith's ethnography of urban outreach workers (Hall, 2016; Hall and Smith, 2015; Smith, 2011; Smith and Hall, 2016); not, in this instance, as a research practice but as a practice already employed by their informants. In this sense, walking was taken as an 'already in the world' ethno-method through which outreach workers not only searched for their rough sleeping clients but also a pedestrian encounter with the city through which their knowledge of place is accomplished. Walking the city with outreach workers over the course of six years not only enabled an intimate knowledge and competency in the practice, but also a street-level ethnographic view of the 'politics of public space'. Methodologically,

the project experimented with Global Positioning System technology as a means of both capturing where the team moved but also as an experiment in capturing their 'local knowledge' enacted in movement. Hall and Smith (2014) were, however, dissatisfied with and highly critical of the ways in which GPS traces, plotted on a base map, misrepresented and, in fact, inverted the mutually constitutive relation between knowing and going.

In a less obvious sense, perhaps, the ethnographic study of Capoeira – a diasporic Brazilian martial art with roots in the Portuguese colonies of West Africa – by Neil Stephens and Sara Delamont (see 2014; In Press), is also concerned with mobility, space and place. In their 'two-handed' ethnographic practice, Delamont and Stephens investigated the ways an embodied practice such as Capoeira could be studied by a separate participant and observer. Capoeira is thus mobile in two senses – the direct embodied sense of the whirling spins and kicks, and as a cultural practice born of mobility in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century and then in the globalized world and the various ways in which it is glocalised.

The significance of these projects has, then, been both a contribution to the mobilities paradigm and the continued demonstration of how careful attention paid to local practices can also shed light on some of the 'big questions' of contemporary social science in a world on the move (Sheller and Urry, 2006; Büscher et al, 2016).

### **Skilled practices and material manipulations**

Cardiff ethnographers have also focused on the ways in which materials are worked with by people in everyday and professional settings and how materials are themselves active in the production of experience, place, memory and home. Taking the latter first, this has long been a central concern in the work of Rachel Hurdley. Paying attention to institutional arrangements and uses of spaces such as corridors (2010a) and domestic arrangements centering around the mantelpiece (2013), these studies have both shed light upon the often unnoticed and unremarked relationship of materials to people's everyday lives. They have also – in keeping with the previous themes of work – considered matters of data capture, representation, research ethics (Hurdley, 2010b). Hurdley's work characterises a kind of 'everyday multimodality'; a combination of archive documents from Mass Observation, interviews with people about their own mantelpieces, sketches, photography and video. I say 'everyday' because, again, the approach in this work reflects an attempt to get closer to the ways in which everyday life is itself complex and comprised of multiple orders, yet sensible and storyable to those that live it.

Finally, there is the most recent work of Paul Atkinson that, drawing upon his earlier studies of practice and pedagogy in the medical context, provides what he describes as a 'micro-ethnography' of precise and skilled practices (2015). In a series of studies, Atkinson has turned his ethnographic eye to an attention to the actual detail and lived competencies employed by people when doing, for example, shaping metal, blowing glass (2013), or life drawing. The contribution of these studies is found in the provision of detailed descriptions of practice that demonstrate and describe the ways in which people themselves are skilled practitioners and innovators; developing, critically testing, and teaching and transmitting methods for the production of a vase or screen print, say, in *just this way*. Indeed, and as might be expected, this attention to detail and analytic sociological sensibility is the essence of 'doing it tidy'. It might seem odd to cite being analytic as a quality of the work of the Cardiff School, yet, we note, far too often analysis is lost to reportage and subjective assessment. A closeness to lived practice, a clarity of description, and an analytic rigour, often gained through 'just enough' or an 'aliquot' of fieldwork is prioritized over any moves to mobilise "essentially non- or even anti-sociological explanatory frameworks are treated as explanatory resources" where "Sociological interests are too often subsumed into accounts

of the subconscious, of subjectivity, or of identities, all divorced from their social and cultural matrix” (Atkinson, 2009).

### **Conclusion**

In this section I have described some of the key work that has been conducted at Cardiff in the past decade or so. I have focused on work that both demonstrates ‘doing it tidy’ and that has critically engaged in methodological development and innovation. There are further works – notably PhD studies – that have been completed and are on going in the School that fit in to one or other or both categories. ‘Doing it tidy’ is a sensibility toward ethnography, developing from the principles of the Cardiff School discussed elsewhere, that acknowledges a wide programme of ethnographic work that shares something like the following core principles:

- An analytic treatment of social orders in cultural and social context
- Sustained methodological inquiry and critique, coupled with a healthy skepticism of innovation and novelty
- Critical engagements with technology, multi-media, and the digital (both as research methodology and as found in the world)
- An attention to the specificity of practice
- An engagement with areas of everyday interest alongside and as where to find ‘big’ societal issues
- A faith in faithful description
- A strong influence of symbolic interactionism, Goffman, and ethnomethodology
- ‘Theoretically informed’ ethnography drawing on multiple influences (including French post-structuralism and ANT)

Developed over the course of the past forty years in and through the work of a large number of researchers, PhD students, collaborators and colleagues, the Cardiff School of Ethnography, guided by Sara Delamont and Paul Atkinson and those who now follow, looks set fair to continuing making substantive and methodological contributions in to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.