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‘Second Star to the Right [of the Universe], and Straight on Till Morning’: Following Directions and Finding New Ones on International Journeys in Creative Research Methods

Locating Neverland

This Think Piece draws from my keynote address at the International Creative Research Methods Conference held in Manchester, United Kingdom, in September 2024. I was delighted to be invited by Dr Helen Kara as a keynote speaker and was pleased to receive this related invitation to be part of the second issue of the *Journal of Creative Research Methods* to share key points from my talk with the readers of this exciting new space.

In the title of this talk, ‘Second star to the right, and straight on till morning’ are the directions given to Wendy Darling by Peter Pan to find Neverland in Scottish novelist, James Matthew Barrie’s book *Peter Pan* (Barrie, 1995). Wendy and Peter are of course fictional characters in a fictional setting, yet in some ways Neverland is evocative of the imagination, innovation, and inspiration that we may associate with creative research methods. However, Neverland is also a place where we may not grow up or decentre, and growth, development and adaption are necessary to enable ethical and effective studies. Accordingly, the insertion [of the universe], borrowed from Rosie Canning’s (2024) innovative doctoral thesis, is important as it takes on the salience of the new and the ability to change, making something known now different.

In this Think Piece, I reflect on some of my encounters with creative research methods, considering aspects of design, data production and dissemination as well as engaging with the creative practices of other researchers. In sharing how researchers have followed directions and found new ones, I hope to communicate the learning in the finding and to encourage an openness to the novel and a respect for the underlying texts and practices which enable our contemporary ethical engagements with creative research methods.

The paper is structured around six key themes. It documents the usefulness of creative methods for facilitating reflexive and collaborative project design, before contemplating how creative approaches can engender ethical practice. There is also an emphasis on the importance of acknowledging the creative legacies that underpin methodological approaches, a consideration of how data can be analysed creatively, and an appreciation of the ways in which multimodal techniques can contribute to research impacts. The paper concludes with a reflection on the emotional labour of research and the value of building connections and systems of support within the creative methods community.

Creative Methods for Project Design

In my initial research projects, I drew on visual and arts-based materials as a tool to generate data with participants, and I had not fully appreciated their potential to support in the design of new projects and ventures. It is essential to plan carefully, and this often involves creating spreadsheets and written documents, which meticulously map the journey to the destination of project completion. However, in planning a co-authored book with Dr Vicky Timperley, she suggested that we use sandboxing as a reflexive and projective tool to consider what we wanted to provide for readers, what was important to include, and our understandings of the central themes (Mannay and Timperley, 2025).

There was, of course, a written proposal and the accompanying chapter plan and timeline, as we could not simply rely on photographs of our sand tray and figures to secure a publishing

contract. However, working with sand and figures to literally and metaphorically represent our experiences, emotions and commitments was a valuable addition to the design process.

INSERT Figure 1: Sandboxing the Book [source Mannay and Timperley – first published in *Sandboxing in Practice: Qualitative Interviewing with Sand, Objects, and Figures* by Policy Press in 2025].

Creative methods have also featured in work with communities to consider how they would like to take part in research and in wider projects where co-researchers, peer researchers, and advisors have guided the design and development of studies. These experts-by-experience have direct personal insights of the area of research interest because of their lived experience and may also have undertaken training to equip them with knowledge of research methods (Mannay et al 2019; Mannion and the R&S (Relationships and Sexuality) Research Team, 2024; Staples et al. 2019).

In one project, we worked with children and their foster carers as experts-by-experience to test, suggest and evaluate different activities including stone painting, decorating drinks bottles, and building model cars – asking them for ‘a little bit of advice’ about how we should work with children and offer a space for them to share their subjective experiences (Mannay et al., 2024). This meant we were able to develop, rework and refine a menu of activities drawing on the invaluable expertise of children and their carers.

It is not always possible, ethical or practicable to involve communities in project design, not least because of the ‘time pressured work of the qualitative researcher in the neoliberal academy’ (Leigh, 2021, p 72; Costas Batlle and Carr, 2021). Nonetheless, where there is no dedicated time to involve communities there are opportunities to consider or draw on earlier learning. For example, the work we did with children and their foster carers has informed later studies with children (Chicken et al., 2025) – and there are many creative studies that have been guided by experts-by-experience that can offer advice, ideas and support in the design process.

Creative Ethical Practice

As the pin badge of the 2023 Creative Research Methods Conference acknowledged, ‘Ethics are Everywhere’ and they are ‘concerned with consequences and relationships between researchers and the worlds they move within and between’ (Khoo, 2024, p 9). There are ethical guidelines and committees that set out codes of practice to be followed but these hold no guarantee for situated ethics, and as Loewenthal (2023, p. 134) maintains ‘appropriate thoughtful practice can be more ethical than an ethical code’. This is important as although a code may require an informed consent form, consent is uninformed if participants do not fully understand its implications. A signature can be ‘hastily scribbled without a full reading of the consent form, and, in such cases, there may be signed consent—but we should not deceive ourselves that such consent is in any way informed or ethical’ (Mannay, 2014, p 113).

One creative way that researchers have tried to address this is by connecting with participants in more engaging ways, for example, using film to create Participant Information Clips that hold the viewers’ attention and carefully explain, inform and debrief participants (Hammond and Cooper, 2011). There has also been a work to materialise ethics, including *The Case of Ethics* which consists of a travelling salesman’s suitcase filled with numerous items including a voice changer which was used to explain to young people the ways in which what is vocalised by a participant is then transcribed, analysed, edited and published (Timperley, 2019). *The Case of Ethics* has inspired others and was adapted in a study with adults with intellectual disabilities

(Mannion, 2023) and reframed to be the smaller and more easily portable Research Ethics Tree in a study with service children (Robinson, 2024, 2025 - see Issue 1 of this journal). These innovations have helped move from uninformed to informed consent, with careful, creative and considered ethical practice.

Acknowledging Creative Legacies

Another ethical priority is knowing where our creative tools come from, acknowledging their backstory and considering their suitability as research methods. Earlier, I discussed sandboxing, and this research method was influenced by European psychoanalysis and therapeutic practice, particularly the pioneering work of Margaret Lowenfeld and her World Technique (Lowenfeld, 1950). The equipment used in sandboxing, the sand, tray and collection of figures and objects is inspired and adapted from the World Technique, but we had to think carefully about the ethics of taking a psychoanalytically informed practice outside of the clinical situation of the consulting room and into the research arena (see Mannay and Timperley, 2025), as well as considering the absences or misrepresentations within sets of figures and objects provided to participants (Mannay, 2025).

In response to the work of Professor Caroline Lenette and her keynote talk at the 2023 Creative Research Methods Conference (Lenette 2025 - see Think Piece in Issue 1 of this journal), we also began to think about how we had located the origins of sandboxing in European psychoanalysis and looked no further. As Dahal and Gautam (2024, p 25) contend the 'coloniality of design' often silences the historical legacy of creativity outside of the geo-political North and Caroline's discussion of her work on the Anti-Colonial Research Library led us to consider the long history of sand and storytelling in Indigenous communities (Yunkaporta, 2019). In drawing on and adapting creative methods it is essential to have some understanding of how and why they have been used and to acknowledge the associated creative legacies.

It is equally important to understand why we want to draw on creative methods. In my practice, I found visual and arts-based methods effective in fighting familiarity for the researcher and encouraging processes of defamiliarization for participants (Mannay, 2010). This is important as when a researcher is indigenous or knowledgeable about a particular area of study, there is a risk that their preconceived understandings can overshadow the research (Delamont and Atkinson, 1995). However, introducing creative activities can potentially provide different ways of knowing and understanding, making the familiar strange for both researchers and participants. I was also drawn to the ways in which creative methods play a role in quietening the researcher voice, enabling participants to lead conversations (Mannay and Turney, 2020). Accordingly, creative ways of working can avoid 'prepackaged questions' that 'have little or no meaning to the person being interviewed' (Harper, 2023, p. 97) and help researchers gain insights into the subjective perspectives of communities.

However, the methods applied need to match methodology and underlying philosophy of a study, rather than an ad hoc creativity for the sake of creativity. Additionally, researchers should not ask participants to take part in creative activities that they would not feel comfortable about completing themselves (Pottinger et al, 2022). Dr Karijin Kakebeeke cautions against 'in and out' research and its 'colonial' resonances, warning that it is important not to be 'too idealistic' (in Harper 2020, p. 130), so it is imperative not to be lulled into a false sense of the creative being necessarily more participatory, kind or sensitive than other methods – the value of the approach is developed with thoughtful attention rather than glitter, paint or photographs.

Collect Less, Analyse More

The pin badge from the 2024 Creative Research Methods Conference invited attendees to 'Collect Less, Analyse More' and whilst there are no 'data analysis fairies' we can call on to organise our data into 'a coherent new structure' that will explain everything (Thorne, 2000, p 69), creativity can play a part in the analytical process. In co-editing the Handbook Creative Data Analysis (Kara et al., 2024), I was privileged to be introduced to a range of creative approaches to working with data. For example, the analogue journey method that is resonant of the evidence wall familiarised by crime dramas (Gray and Lazenby, 2024), the effectiveness of slow stitch hand-made hexagons to better understand the data generated with each participant (Clarke, 2024), how survey data can be reinterpreted in the form of a graphic novella (Carruthers Thomas, 2024), and the potential for reflexivity in a shared (shamanic) journey (Hammond and Fuller, 2024). Creative methods then can play a part in familiarising, imaginatively interpreting, collaboratively co-constructing, and reflexively revisiting the data generated in research studies.

Creative Sharing and Impact

As Heng (2020) contends, 'Communicating social research in visual forms is becoming increasingly popular, not simply because of the affordances of technology like smartphones, e-publishing and digital printing that support the visual, but also because of the acute awareness that we as social researchers have, that we are all living in a world that constantly consumes and produces visual material' (Heng 2020, p. 617). These forms of creativity are important for making findings and recommendations accessible and engaging, and for communication with wider audiences to inform policy, practice and positive change. However, there are tensions about what to 'conceal' and what to 'reveal', particularly in relation to photography, film and other modes that identify participants, and it is important to balance 'advocacy goals with ethical considerations and participants' comfort' (Ripero-Muñiz et al., 2025, p 48).

In the documentary tradition, La Toya Ruby Frazier's photographs set in a North American post-industrial steel town 'reveal' her black working-class family members as an act of 'bearing witness to the history that we find ourselves in', whereas Susan Meiselas' 'A Room of Their Own' chooses to 'conceal' the identity of women who have suffered domestic abuse (Harper, 2022, p.45). In relation to the ethics of recognition in social research, Sweetman (2009) makes a compelling argument that participants should be named, seen and heard in research outputs. However, confidentiality and safety both in the present and the future can mean that it is not always possible or ethical to make participants identifiable (see Clark 2019; Brady and Brown 2013).

In projects with care experienced children and young people, where confidentiality has been essential, I have worked with partners in the creative industries, communities and third sector partners to re-visualise and re-vocalise recommendations from participants in outputs including animations, music videos, magazines and artworks (Mannay et al., 2019; Mannay, 2020). More recently, researchers have developed a range of impactful creative outputs from their important study exploring children's racialised experiences and the impact this has on their mental health and wellbeing (Gorell Barnes et al., 2024), including a children's book, a billboard campaign and an animated training resource (Gorell Barnes, 2024a, 2024b; Jones et al. 2025). These forms of 'revisualization and revocalization can only retain traces of the participants and enable a differential, and partial, form of authentic voice' (Mannay, 2020, p.665), however, they can communicate key messages from participants and work towards achieving positive impacts.

Sharp Tools and Impacts on the Researcher

Whilst impacts from research may be regarded as positive, there are other often overlooked impacts to consider. 'Emotion is not an intrusion into the research process, but a constitutive element of it' (Loughran and Mannay, 2018, p 2), and whilst research is rewarding it has other emotional resonances for researchers. For example, Jayne et al. (2024, p 283) described being 'saturated by the pain held in the stories of people', and creative methods can be sharp tools that take both participants and researchers on unexpected and unintended journeys (Burnard, 2018).

There are many institutional processes in place to protect participants from harm, and an ethical imperative to ensure safeguarding and support, but those hearing traumatic accounts can be subject to forms of vicarious trauma (McCann and Pearlman, 1990; Maniatt, 2025). These impacts on researcher wellbeing can be understood as a vulnerability of systems and institutions rather than individual researchers (Mannay, 2023). As whilst psychotherapists, social workers and others negotiating trauma in their work roles may have access to clinical supervisions to ensure regular therapeutic support, researchers and doctoral students have reported feeling 'let down' in relation to a lack of consideration for the emotional impacts of their studies (Bloor et al., 2010).

Consequently, researchers need to find ways to support their mental health and wellbeing, and creativity can be useful in this process, for example, engaging with reflexive writing and poetry to work through distressing research encounters (John, 2024). Colleagues also have a role to play and Lisiak and Krzyżowski (2018, p. 33) have noted how supportive relationships within research teams can be helpful in negotiating the 'emotionality of social science research and the wider emotional labour of academic work'. Communities of practice (Leigh et al., 2024) can also provide emotional and practical support.

Conclusion

This Think Piece has reflected on study design, the communication of ethical practice, the importance of acknowledging the development and source of research approaches, creative data analysis and multimodal dissemination. However, as I did in my keynote talk at the 2024 International Creative Research Methods Conference, I close this Think Piece with a call to the creative methods community. For me, this community, in conferences and events, projects and collaborations, emails and messages, has been a continual and reliable source of stability, friendship and assistance. It is important then to act with empathy, kindness and gratitude and ensure that as a creative methods community we continue to be welcoming, inquisitive and generous to each other in following directions and finding new ones that lead beyond the second star to the right [of the Universe].

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