

Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (All Submissions)

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Chaired by Pauline Miller Judd

Wed 11 Dec 2019

16:45 - 17:15

Breaking the fourth wall: Using ethnographic fiction in research

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Research Domain: Academic practice ,work, careers and cultures (AP)

Abstract: There are a variety of ways to refer to the use of fiction to represent data gathered in the pursuit of research: ethnofiction (Coates, 2019), 'neo-ethnography' (Varzi, 2014), ethnographic fiction (Narayan, 1999), narrative fiction (Cohen, 1998), critical storytelling (Barone, 1992), among other terms. These approaches seek to give a voice to the story that data is compelled to tell (Bell, 2015), to reflect how the data 'speaks' about the subject (Dourish & Cruz, 2018).

This paper will explore the ways in which researchers can and do use ethnographic fiction to represent their work, and how this can enrich the narrative of the data presented and of the experiences of our research subjects. Finally, it will discuss ways in which we can best communicate the value of this methodological approach to colleagues, and to students in our endeavour to incorporate research-led teaching into our practice.

Paper: If we accept that data and facts are the constructions of interpretation, we might agree that absolute truth is a fantasy (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000). If so, then why don't we, as researchers, use fantasy as a way of exploring and investigating social and cultural phenomena? Narrative or ethnographic fiction is becoming a more legitimate methodology within qualitative research, as it offers us the opportunity to make sense of feelings and emotions in an immersive way (Kara, 2013, p. 79). It allows us to better represent the experiences of both ourselves and our research participants, without flattening our voices. For qualitative researchers, traditional academic writing threatens to limit the narrative and reduce the writing to mere summary and interpretation, weakening the 'thick descriptions' we seek within ethnography (Wall, 2006).

There are a variety of ways to refer to the use of fiction to represent data gathered in the pursuit of research: ethnofiction (Coates, 2019), 'neo-ethnography' (Varzi, 2014), ethnographic fiction (Narayan, 1999), narrative fiction (Cohen, 1998), critical storytelling (Barone, 1992), among other terms. These approaches seek to give a voice to the story that data is compelled to tell (Bell, 2015), to

reflect how the data 'speaks' about the subject (Dourish & Cruz, 2018).

Ethnographic fiction is being used increasingly in cultural geography, sports science, sociology and healthcare studies as a means of exploring and communicating the experiences of research participants and researchers. Semi-fictional stories grounded in the data taken from interviews, focus groups and individual accounts offer the opportunity to explore some of the 'messier' aspects of human emotion and behaviour (Kara, 2013).

Here, I present a short piece of ethnographic fiction: an account of my own experiences (auto-ethnography) of engaging in qualitative research and 'finding' fiction as a way of representing my 'results'. Within this text, there are peppered academic references to acknowledge where further discussion of the issues presented can be found.

"I..."

"Don't use 'I.'" Says the voice (Wall, 2006) from its ivory tower. "Right... er..." And just like that, I don't know how to start. I don't know how to write it. I can't be present in my writing. I can't write 'I', because that implies that I am there, somewhere, in my work, in my data (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000), somewhere I'm not allowed to be. Off limits. Out of bounds.

"The author..." That's no good, either. An 'author' is a creator, and I haven't 'created' anything. I am simply, only, reporting on what has been investigated. 'Author' implies ownership, and ownership is not... elegant. Implied, but not said, not out loud. "Okay, how about 'this research'..." The research is the research, after all. Can't get any more neutral than that, right?

"Hmmm." The voice is judging me. I can feel it. "So... 'this research investigates the experiences of eight female Early Career Academics (ECAs), between the ages of 25-50'..."

I think about Mia. She made me laugh during the interview. Marian. Her passion and temper inspired me. Sally. Whose feminism had me silently cheering. I reread my introduction and find it lacks everything that made *my* research *interesting*. Omits anything that makes in meaningful (Dourish & Gomez, 2018).

And just like that, I know how to write it. I know how to keep Mia's humour and Marian's anger. I know how to bring their experiences – good and bad – to life, to make them meaningful to other people, to make my audience *feel* the way they feel. But it means taking a risk. Jumping in. Going against the grain. It means *telling their story* (Kara, 2013).

Ethnographic fiction allows us not only to explore the feelings and emotions of our research participants and ourselves, but offers us the chance to invest in our creative practice; to look at both ourselves and our data in new ways. Increasingly, higher education is metric driven, creating environments that can stifle creativity in an attempt to reduce risk and maximise performance. Narrative methodologies stand against that conformity to demonstrate the range of experiences amongst researchers and their research. Creative works of ethnographic fiction allow for alternative approaches to problem solving, pulling to the fore aspects of research that have not and do not 'fit

into the mould' of traditional coding and dissemination.

The use of narrative in education can help to guide learners' understanding, supporting students to make sense of complex information and experiences (Prins et al, 2017) that are, often, presented to them through incomprehensible, densely-packed traditional academic writings. Ethnographic fiction, then, can serve not only as a way to present complex, 'thick' descriptions in an accessible way, but allows students and academic colleagues to better understand the world that we and our research participants experience and live in.

In a society absorbed with grand cinematic universes and complex narratives in multi-season TV shows, ethnographic fiction can also help higher education shine a critical light on our own experiences and those of our students in a relatable and non-elitist way. It can help to acknowledge the challenges around academic research, and the role of the researcher in gathering and interpreting data in a more holistic way.

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