



Real Life Methods

Part of the ESRC National Centre for Research Methods

Researching Real Life

Jennifer Mason
University of Manchester
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Why real life?

- Frustrating capacity of social science to flatten or fail to resonate with real life, eg abstractions, sanitisations, atomisations (*Macintyre*)
- Or to resonate too singly through inappropriate generalisation of the parochial/anecdotal
- Or to resonate but fail to explain

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MacIntyre, 2004: 204. *After Virtue*

'...Modernity partitions each human life into a variety of segments, each with its own norms and modes of behaviour. So work is divided from leisure, private life from public, the corporate from the personal. So both childhood and old age have been wrenched away from the rest of human life and made over into distinct realms...'

He goes on to identify a tendency in sociological theory:

'...to think atomistically about human action and to analyze complex actions and transactions in terms of simple components'.

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What is real life?

Some ideas to be going on with

- Experienced, familiar as well as distanced
 - *Sentient, cerebral, abstract, outside, tangible, palpable, visual, sensory, material, imagined, metaphysical, ethereal, magic/spiritual....*
- Messy, complex (*Law*), patterned, ordered, chance
- Not necessarily parcelled up into social science disciplines, approaches, topics
- Everyday, encompassing the ordinary and extraordinary (*Moran*), mundane, arbitrary, vital - it matters
- Parochial, multiple

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(Law, 2004: 2. *After Method:
mess in social science research*)

‘Pains and pleasures, hopes and horrors, intuitions and apprehensions, losses and redemptions, mundanities and visions, angels and demons, things that slip and slide, or appear and disappear, change shape or don’t have much form at all, unpredictabilities, these are just a few of the phenomena that are hardly caught by social science methods...If much of the world is vague, diffuse or unspecific, slippery, emotional, ephemeral, elusive or indistinct, changes like a kaliedoscope, or doesn’t really have much of a pattern at all, then where does this leave social science?...If we want to think about the messes of reality at all then we’re going to have to teach ourselves to think, to practise, to relate, and to know in new ways’.

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(Moran, 2005: 166. *Reading the Everyday*)

‘Recent terrorist attacks, or attempted attacks, have taken place in the spaces of daily life – subways, trains, aeroplanes, office blocks – at the height of the working day. A particularly shocking aspect of news reports of these attacks is the accounts of violent death when set against the prosaic details of quotidian routines: paperbacks, umbrellas and laptops found in the wreckage, unclaimed cars left in car parks, mobile phones ringing unanswered, office stationery raining down on surrounding streets. Follow-up news stories of these atrocities often focus on individual people fleshing out their journey to work or the uneventful morning at the office that was cruelly interrupted. These accounts are haunting because they involve people going about their daily lives that seem so similar to our own’.

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A practical strategy

- Social science is better at apprehending some of these elements than others.
- We want to find out what some of these messes and realities look like.
- And work out how we can 'know' them, not only to philosophise about them

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How we are exploring real life: 5 key elements

- Real life concepts, eg 'resemblances', 'background'.
- Importance of 'novel' questions that push the boundaries of particular ways of knowing, whilst acknowledging that how you ask shapes what you apprehend.
- Interdisciplinary 'gatherings' (*Law*).
- Multi-dimensional methods, experimenting.
- Dialogic explanations, creative tensions.

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Example: the living resemblances study

Resemblances are resonant, everyday (ordinary and extraordinary) and experiential

We spot them...

We cultivate and display them...

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We speculate about and enjoy them publicly...



Posted By: Rayelan Date: Thursday, 28 August 2003, 11:24 p.m.
www.rumormillnews.com/.../forum.cgi?read=36121

Shields, 2003: 23. *Duet*

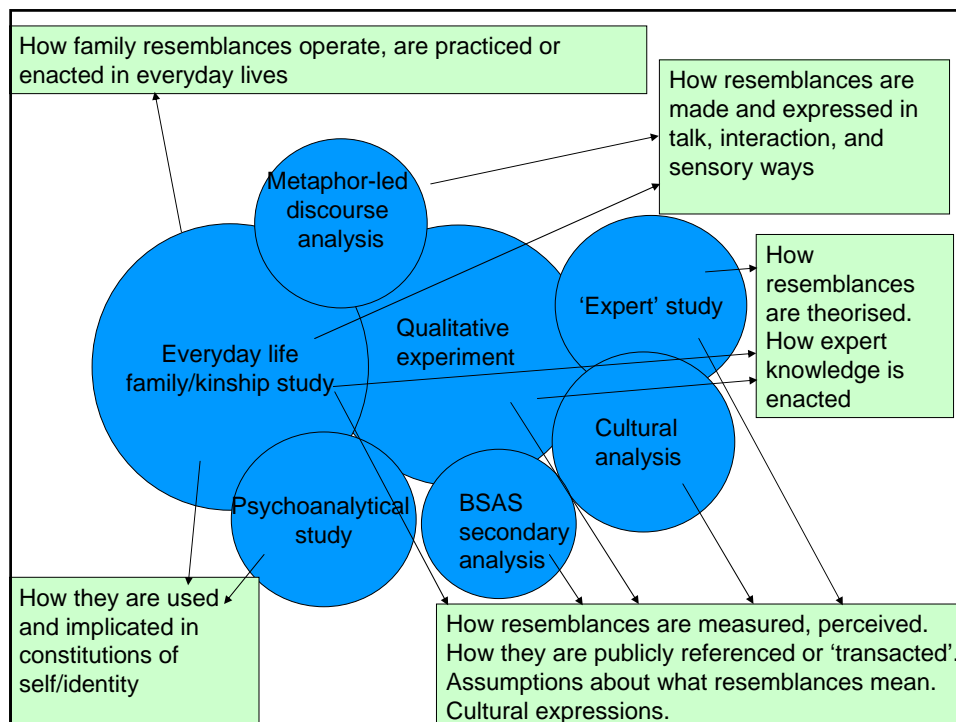
'As Meredith grows up I look at her and think, who does she remind me of? A shaded gesture, a position struck, or something curious she might say will touch off a shock of recognition in me, but I can never think who it is she is like. I flip through my relatives – like flashcards. My mother. No, no, no. My sister Charleen? No. Charleen, for all her sensitivity, has a core of detachment. Aunt Liddy? Sometimes I am quite sure it is my old aunt. But no, Auntie's fragility is neurotic, not natural like Meredith's. Who else?...Last night at the table, just as she was cutting into a baked potato, she raised her eyes, exceptionally sober even for her, and answered some trivial question Martin had asked her. The space between the movement of her hand and the upward angle of her eyes opened up, and I almost had it. Then it slipped away.'

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Living Resemblances

- Real life concept – ie fits well with our 'ideas to be going on with'
- A range of questions, and ways of asking
- Interdisciplinary gatherings –
 - Sociology – Katherine Davies
Carol Smart
Jennifer Mason
 - Psychology – Josephine Green
 - Psychology/Psychoanalysis – Brendan Gough
 - Socio-Linguistics – Lynne Cameron
 - Education/Visual Methodologies – Jon Prosser
- = question focussed interdisciplinarity, thinking about what we miss/see from different vantage points, thinking 'outside the box', thinking 'real life'.
- Multidimensional methods and experimenting

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Living Resemblances

- Dialogic explanations and creative tensions. Not integration, not triangulation. 'What the engineers call "loosely coupled systems" are more robust than those that display a single and definite logic' (Law, 2004: 142).
- How to get the best out of the distinctiveness of different approaches, rather than lowest common denominator or a dominant integrative framework.
- Multi-nodal explanations – different ways of asking questions as well as answering them need to be part of the explanatory process.

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www.reallifemethods.ac.uk
jennifer.mason@manchester.ac.uk

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