



## Real Life Methods

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# Personal Heritability and Everyday Life

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## The Living Resemblances Project – 2005-2008

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### The team:

- Sociology (Katherine Davies, Carol Smart, Jennifer Mason)
- Socio-Legal Studies (Carol Smart)
- Psychology, health and social understandings of genetics (Josephine Green)
- Psychoanalysis (Brendan Gough)
- Socio-Linguistics (Lynne Cameron)
- Visual Methodologies (Jon Prosser, Jennifer Mason, Katherine Davies, Carol Smart)

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## Research Questions

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- What role do family resemblances play in everyday family life, in the 'politics' of kinship, in power relations, in individual and family identity and sense of self?
- How do people theorise about family resemblances in their own lives and outside?
- What does this tell us about kinship, connectedness, heritability (including but not solely genetic inheritance), and identity?

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## Methods

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(fieldwork in progress)

- Ethnographic/creative interviews
- Qualitative experiments
- Expert interview study
- Photo case study/work with professional photographers (and Who Are You Like Exhibition)

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## Methods: creative interviews

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- 'Ethnographic' interviews (target 30)
- Asking grounded questions about appearance, ways of being, the sensory and ethereal elements of people's kinship and relationality.
- Observing interactions and the 'doing' of resemblances.
- Visual methods including photo elicitation, video, photography

Some examples from the data.....

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## Spotting resemblances - experiencing the social relations

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- Various family photographs removed

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## Spotting Resemblances: experiencing the social relations

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Pauline: This is Isabel and this is Stan

Katherine: Oh yes

Pauline: Can you see the likeness?

Katherine: Oh yes, definitely

Pauline: Can you see that the features are the same there?

Katherine: Yeah

Pauline: (tearfully) And his Mum looked just like Isabel....

I'm glad you said that actually because I can see it but I wanted to see what other people thought

Katherine: I can definitely tell

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## Spotting Resemblances: experiencing the social relations

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Pauline: You see Imogen's very much Stan's side. Stan was a mild mannered man and wouldn't say a bad word about anybody, he was a wonderful person and Imogen's exactly the same. It's like having Stan here all over again having her here (tearful).

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### Spotting Resemblances: the twins test and the question of competencies

- Photograph removed

### The twins test

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'The photo elicitation was really interesting (if a little bit awkward). Two of Fiona's daughters are non-identical twins and she showed me a number of photos of all four of them together and asked me to identify the twins – which I couldn't do and kept getting it wrong. I was feeling horribly embarrassed about it and Fiona kept pushing me to spot them but when I was eventually allowed to give up Fiona said she had done this because no-one can ever spot which ones they are. Fiona told me that the twins also have very different personalities – one is much quieter than the other'.

(Extract from Katherine's fieldnotes)

## The twins test

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- Revealing of assumptions about what can be read from appearances about how people are connected
- Establishes the cultural assumption that you can or should be able to 'see' twinship, or consanguinity, in **visible appearance**, but the 'trick' or fun is that you can't (always, or in this case)
- Simultaneous presence of 'contradictory' ideas is normal (resemblance does and doesn't tell you honestly or fully about connection, the visible both is/isn't highly evidential)
- The politics of competency, the interactive 'doing' of resemblances. Who ought to be able to do it. Who is good at it and what it means to be good at it.

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## Measuring and interpreting resemblances as a cultural practice

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- How do 'we' (people, experts, researchers) know or decide a resemblance exists (or doesn't). How do we 'measure' it ('objectively', 'scientifically', artistically, intuitively)? Role of sensory/visceral/haptic knowledge in everyday life and interactions, and expert knowledge.
- Do 'we' see resemblances as **evidential**? (the concept of skill, the idea of 'correct' answers)
- What are they evidence of? eg kinship, connections and affinities in emotion, spirit, character, health, across generations, beyond the present/without need of personal contact. Genetics, inevitability, fate, prophecy, ethereal or spiritual connection. But remember that resemblance is possible without kinship
- Why? Power relations (controlling resemblances in personal life, building expert status), emotion, longing.

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## Janet and the strange case of the Spencer resemblance

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Janet: In fact it's really strange because I went on holiday to Ireland a few years ago and erm, I was er, I was with a group of people and this lady came up, and its no word of a lie, this lady came up to me and she said 'I don't mean to be rude' she said 'but you don't know somebody called Jim Spencer do you?' and I went 'yeah, it's me Dad'. She said 'I thought it was' she said 'ooh, you aren't half the image of your Dad'. And I thought, and yet, I mean to look at me, I don't think I am, you know, I mean I'm not like you know white hair, big tummy, and I'm thinking 'What? Do I look like me Dad?' (laughter). But yeah she said she'd just seen that, the link, that 'she must be a Spencer that one' you know

Katherine: Gosh so that was a physical thing then that she spotted?

Janet: (Overlapping) Yeah. But a lot of people say that 'you must be a Spencer because we're all quite, I mean.... we're all fair, we're all fair skinned, er we've all got big saucer blue eyes

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## Janet – theorising 'the link'

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- An evidential claim.
- Simultaneously is and isn't physical.
- Something ethereal or beyond rational comprehension.
- A kind of family aura, that is both intangible (hard to put your finger on), yet tangible (others/strangers can spot it)
- Beyond embodiment (link with the idea that the social is not only embodied, but (dis)embodied - Hockey and Draper on fetuses/unborn and dead. Konrad on presymptomatic persons in predictive genetic testing for Huntingdon's Disease)
- Relational, not individual. Seeing 'the link'. Beyond/between individuals.

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## Metaphor Analysis (Janet) – traits ‘inside’

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### WITH PHYSICAL AND MENTAL TRAITS INSIDE

coming out	1228	J	like the rebellious <u>side's coming out</u> now
outlet	2757	J	so I think he does <u>find</u> that <u>outlet</u> for his creativeness.
Blocked	431	J	a lot of it's <u>blocked</u> .
occupy	414	J	to just <u>occupy</u> that mind
<b>coming out</b>	<b>2118</b>	<b>K</b>	<b><u>yeah and that's the fairness coming out.</u></b>
<b>coming out</b>	<b>2235</b>	<b>J</b>	<b><u>there's like the red hair coming out there as well.</u></b>
brought her out	801	J	and <u>brought her out a little bit</u> more.
Exterior	438	J	with this very <u>bluff exterior</u>
in	2296	J	she's not no malice <u>in</u> her at all and

Metaphor analysis by Lynne Cameron

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## Traits ‘inside’

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- But relationally, not simply inside an individual
- Not ‘simply’ genetic

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## Methodological and Theoretical Challenges: The Visual, Haptic and Ethereal

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### Evidence

- How different types of real life 'evidence' are used and work
- Exploring the legitimacy, seduction and influence of different types of evidence (evidential nature of the visual, of the observations of strangers)
- Social science's role in analysing and critiquing dominant ways of theorising/expert knowledge, including its own.

### Questioning straightforward social/biological/genetic distinctions, and nature of interpersonal relationships

- Especially where 'social' is defined in opposition to 'genetic' or 'biological'. Engaging with clinical/biogenetic moulding of concept of inheritance. 'Tangible affinities', as well as sensory and ethereal and genetic.

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## Methodological Challenges

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### Appearance and Social Science Research

- Methodological and political/ethical challenges. The personal, relational and wider politics/ethics of appearance. Difficult territory, especially eg disability, 'race'. What can be read about how people are connected to others, what they are like, attributes etc.

### Challenging the ontological tyranny of the individual – researching relationality

- In social science (individuals as units of analysis), in genetics (genes inside a body/person) and biology. Conceptualising and researching what is inside-between and beyond persons.

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