



Real Life Methods

Part of the ESRC National Centre for Research Methods

Senses and Resemblances

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‘The sensory’ – beyond ‘the visual’

- Current fashion for visual methods
- Longer tradition of visual anthropology. Pink – ‘how might a visual anthropology engage with other senses?’
- Senses as interconnected
- Beyond the sensory. Importance of non- and extra-sensory

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Resemblances – researching sensory experience

- Sensory and the senses are vital in family resemblances
- Ways of helping research participants evoke their sensory worlds.
 - Photo elicitation – people’s family albums and pictures on display or in shoeboxes or on PC
 - Asking about the sensory, tangible and intangible

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Resemblances – researching sensory experience

- Here we showed some photographs from our ‘creative interview’ study and explored the range of interpretations about resemblances that we can make from these

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Photo elicitation – why pictures are sometimes inadequate

Katherine: (laughs) So is it mainly the eyes, then, that you would say with your dad?

Fiona: Yes, and the sort of set of the face is (looking through photos) *oh there's no useful ones there...* (overlapping) Fiona: Now that's, that's my dad there. ... Now, he was about the age I am now, there... *You'll probably look at that and think, I don't think you look like, like, like, like him at all.* (overlapping)

Katherine: (laughs) Well, tell me why, why you think, you know, point out to me (overlapping)

Fiona: Well, it's, it's *the Mackenzie eyes*, and I, I do actually have other photographs somewhere, er which would be much better.

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Photo elicitation – why pictures are sometimes inadequate

On husband's family

Faye: And that's Mike's family, they all look different there but *when people are sitting in a room* they will say oh you do look alike.

Katherine: That's interesting, so the photo sort of hasn't captured the essence of...

Faye: Hasn't at all, no. And *they look different there, but in real life you can tell.*

On son

Faye: Yes, *you definitely look at the face all the time* and think oh, he looks like granddad today, oh he looks like uncle David, he looks like.

Katherine: Does this change then?

Faye: It does, it does totally, yeah.

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Resemblances – limits of photo elicitation

- People often not happy with pictures – ‘can’t see it there’, ‘no useful ones’
- Can help discussion of what can’t be seen (eg other sensory), but only up to a point .
- ‘Family photo session’ style of interacting
- Gendered.
- Essence of visual resemblance often cannot be captured in photos (or video) – fleeting, ephemeral, moving, changing, not only visual (other senses), visual but not subjective (eg only some can see), being manifest only over time (with much looking, at different ages, the MacKenzie eyes)
- Beware too literal/tangible an approach – resist temptation to try to ‘capture’ all through the visual

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Asking people about sensory experience, and observing the sensory

- Lots of talk about, eg, height, weight/size, wearing glasses, being musical, eating/taste, touch and the palpable – as ways of being connected or separated
- Physical, kinaesthetic, multi-sensory
- People can be very articulate about these

Some examples...

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Senses other than the visual - taste

Claire: Yeah, I have a lot of the same sort of dietary preferences as my mother for example.

Katherine: What like?

Claire: Well my dad has a really rampant sweet tooth and will eat anything as long as it's really really sweet and some of my brothers and sisters are like that *but my mum likes bitter things*, bittersweet like dark chocolate or like fry's chocolate cream because it's a bit sharper you know, just things like that and I think I have a very similar palette to her; despite the fact that we were not given' my mum cooks to my father's preferences.

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Senses other than the visual - touch

Devon: Erm, it's (afro hair) really hard to manage. Really, really hard to manage and then I'll comb it and then it just goes knotty again straight away. It's just really big and yeah.

....and...like growing up in Wales, there's just like no-one, no-one with afro hair. ... So there wasn't really anyone to ask. But, erm, yeah, knew quite a few, like my nan had like, erm, a friend who was from the Bahamas so she would like try and do my hair and give me like products and stuff when I was young but then it's, I hardly ever saw her so I don't, and it's just always a mess but now it's better I'm in Manchester there's more places. But yes, it's not as bad now.

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Fleeting and ephemeral real life occurrences

Edith: I mean you see somebody and you say now, yes, this is an instance on Wednesday night I was in the club playing bingo...and a lady came in, now she's elderly like myself, and when I went down near her she said 'Hello' and then when I moved away from her and sat back to where I was sitting I looked at her and I thought; My word, Kate is going to look like you when she's your age'. Now Kate is her daughter who I know through darts and when I looked at Mavis, which is the mother, and Kate in my mind ... the absolutely likeness is there only of course in an older erm, an older person... *That is a real life incidence* that's happened this Wednesday night and I'd, I'd' *it just struck me and I was sat there and we weren't doing anything* and the person who sits next to me, we usually talk but she was chatting to somebody else and I was just sat there looking around and it suddenly struck me

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Subjective – only some can see

(in response to whether there is a resemblance between him and anyone in family)

Andrew: (Pause) No, but I've been told my daughter looks like me.

Katherine: Okay, should we draw her in? *(onto family diagram)*

Andrew: Yes if you want to. Yeah...

Katherine: Okay and she looks a bit like you people say?

Andrew: Yeah but I can't see it but me brother says the other day, 'I saw Keisha the other day and she's the dead stamp of you' but obviously I don't see it.

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Beyond the sensory - character

Claire: Jack he's two, he doesn't look like my father but just his whole energy and mannerisms are very, they just remind me so much of my father and he's only two and he can't speak properly yet. My father is very mercurial and he'll get an idea and he can act on it and you can tell he's thinking about things and you can almost see the cogs going and Jack's very like that...

Katherine: I wonder what your father was like then when he was a baby.

Claire: Erm, well I think he was a bit of a terror because he says you know the aunts used to refer to him as that red haired terror

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Beyond the sensory – interplay of physical and character/personhood

(on his physical resemblance to brother)

Mike: To the point that when I shave my beard off, you were like no, that's your older brother.

Faye: (Laughing) I was sharing a bed with my brother-in-law. This is freaky.

Mike: And in fact someone, I think oddly enough I bumped into one of my brother's friends somewhere and I didn't know him and they thought I was him to that extent and he's three years older than me.....In personality we're extremely different.

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Beyond the sensory, beyond the person – interplay of physical and ethereal links

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

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Beyond the sensory, beyond the person – interplay of physical and ethereal links

Pete: I think I look a bit more like my dad than my mum er, my dad once er – I once gave my dad a shock when I was much younger because I smiled in a way that was exactly like his mum...and that gave him, that gave him quite a start actually er, because I...I'd never met her and she'd been dead for years er...it made me feel quite good because I was – I sort of felt 'oh well, I – you know, I – I'm linked with the past in that way' and er, yeah. I can – I can cheer dad up that way. Er –

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Research, the sensory and the senses – key issues and distinction

- Researching sensory experience – methods for accessing sensory realms. Beware too literal an approach.
- Using senses in research - researchers being attuned to and reflexive about their own experience of visual, olfactory, auditory, tactile. Involvement in resemblance interactions, dynamics and encounters.
- Methods for being attuned to and exploring interplay between sensory, non-sensory and extra-sensory in everyday lives

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