Using creative methods to research across difference.

An introduction to the special issue

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This special issue explores some of the methodological challenges that are brought into play when scholars deploy creative methods to research across difference. Within the research methods literature, the term 'creative methods' is typically used to refer to an approach that enables people to express themselves in non-verbal ways (Gauntlett, 2007), often used in combination with more traditional methods such as interviews and focus groups. Mannay (2016) (drawing on Pauwels, 2011) suggests that creative methods can be categorised under one of three approaches. First, researchers can focus on a variety of 'found' materials. While this has been a well-established approach within the disciplines of history, art and archaeology, it is also now frequently used in the social sciences. Here, emphasis is placed on the importance of analysis and interpretation, rather than creation and production. Examples include the analysis of the visual content of: school websites and marketing materials (e.g. Wilkins, 2012); posters promoting sexual health (e.g. Jewitt, 1997); and fanzines produced by young women (e.g. Harris, 2004). Second, projects may be built around 'researcher-initiated productions' (Mannay, 2016), in which researchers are positioned as image-creators – for example, taking photographs of tattoos (Jacobson and Luzatto, 2004); sketching the layout of shared housing (Heath and Cleaver, 2004); and filming classroom interactions (Baines et al., 2009). Third, participants may be involved in more participatory ways, where the researcher acts as facilitator. Such approaches have included: documentary-making with young people (e.g. Blum-Ross, 2013); running photography workshops with refugees (e.g. Finney and

Rishbeth, 2006); and playdough modelling with school children (e.g. Ingram, 2011). This third strand of work has become increasingly popular over the past decade or so, informed by a concern to give research participants more control over how their lives are represented, facilitate the involvement of those who may be less confident speaking or writing, and enable exploration of topics that may be too sensitive to talk about (Heath et al., 2009). Indeed, writing about her request to the participants in her research to record their own visual impressions of their environment through photographs, collages and maps prior to an interview, Mannay (2016) contends that this approach provided 'a gateway to destinations that lay beyond my repertoire of preconceived understandings of place and space' (p.28), and allowed her participants time to reflect on their lives 'without the direction of an intrusive research voice' (p.41). It is also important to note that some scholars adopt a rather wider definition of creative methods, focussing not only on the facilitation of individual expression but generating data about larger social entities – through, for example, remote sensing and other techniques employed by human geographers.

Like any research method, however, creative approaches have their own limitations, and these have also been discussed well in the literature. Writing with respect to participatory methods in particular, scholars have noted that some potential participants may be uncomfortable at having to engage in creative practices, and variations in artistic ability may have a significant impact on what is produced and the meaning that can be drawn from such artefacts. In addition, the considerable time commitment that can often be required may deter some potential participants. Researchers have also questioned the extent to which such approaches can disrupt power relations, some arguing that even when the researcher 'steps out of the site of … data production', through asking participants to engage in their own creative practices, 'this leaves a space that is often filled by the "intrusive presence" of

significant others' (Mannay, 2016, p.44). Moreover, social norms and artistic conventions can also have a strong influence on what it is produced. Finney and Rishbeth (2006) note that in many photo-based studies, for example, participants tend to reproduce common cultural conventions, such as taking pictures of friends, panoramic views, and oneself in prestigious locations. In addition, some scholars have argued that creativity in method can be reified to the extent that rigour is abandoned. Specific ethical issues are also brought into sharp relief by the use of some creative methods, particularly those that involve capturing images of identifiable individuals (Brooks et al., 2014; Wood and Kidman, 2013).

This special issue engages with this broad body of work about the use of creative methods in social science research. However, it also pays particular attention to using such approaches to *research across difference*, and the specific methodological issues that are raised by such studies. Our interest in this topic came about as a result of a cross-national project we were working on, that explored the ways in which higher education students were understood by a variety of different social actors in six different European countries. As part of this large mixed-methods study, we deployed two creative methods – specifically, an analysis of university websites (examining layout and images as well as text), and playdough modelling during focus groups with undergraduate students[1]. While the playdough activity was introduced as a means of making tangible students' thoughts about their identity as students, we were concerned – before the data collection began – that it may be imbued with different cultural value in the various countries in the study, and thus generate data that may be hard to compare. We thought, for example, that students may be more suspicious of the value of this kind of endeavour in nations with more formal higher education systems and approaches to

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[1] We are grateful to our former colleague Jessie Abrahams who introduced this particular aspect of the research design, drawing on previous work she had conducted using such modelling with the UK (see Abrahams and Ingram, 2013).

pedagogy, such as Germany and Poland, than in those such as England and Denmark where students may be more used to informal practices within the classroom. Ultimately, our concerns were not realised; we found that all the students in our sample were happy to engage in the activity and, irrespective of country of origin (or other aspects of social difference such as gender, social class and ethnicity), took the playdough modelling seriously, producing interesting objects that stimulated thoughtful discussion in the focus groups (see Abrahams and Brooks, 2019 for an example of research that drew on the focus group data). Nevertheless, in our preparation for these focus groups, we had done significant reading on the use of creative methods and were struck that there was very little discussion of the methodological issues involved in using such approaches cross-culturally, or indeed to research across other aspects of difference. We therefore organised a one-day seminar, held in June 2018 at the University of Surrey (and kindly funded by the *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*) to bring together scholars who were interested in discussing such issues collaboratively. Six of the seven papers in this special issue were given at this seminar (and the seventh is authored by one of the seminar co-organisers, Predrag Lažetić).

As we have already noted, in the special issue we seek to explore issues related to researching difference – broadly conceived – rather than just the national differences that initially stimulated our interest in this area. Nevertheless, a number of papers do engage with the challenges of researching cross-nationally using creative methods. Indeed, various authors tease out various practical and ethical issues that they encountered, which were brought into sharp relief because of the cross-national context (see those by Burningham et al. and Harman et al.). In other respects, however, contributors suggest that the use of creative methods can help to overcome some of the challenges of working across different countries. Chawla-Duggan et al., for example, contend that their use of filming helped to alleviate some

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of the linguistic barriers that emerged from working across four different countries. Moving on to examine other aspects of difference, Donnelly et al.'s contribution explores the extent to which a sense of intra-national geographical difference (here, discussed primarily with reference to the UK) affected educational decision-making, while Bernardi's research (conducted cross-nationally) focusses on a group of children who are often positioned as different (by virtue of their autism), and Rainford's contribution foregrounds *institutional* differences instead. Lažetić's critical appraisal of website analyses focuses on both institutional and national differences, and outlines an agenda for further developing work in this area.

As well as examining various aspects of difference, the seven papers that make up the special issue also draw on different substantive areas of enquiry (including education, family, violence, youth studies, childhood studies and disability) and different national contexts to explore some of the theoretical, ethical, political and practical issues that are raised by the use of creative methods to research across difference. The particular approaches that are covered by the special issue include: filming of participants; analysis of visual material on public websites; photo elicitation; facilitation of art workshops and activities; Lego modelling; and geographical mapping (by participants). The notable emphasis within the special issue on photography, film and art is testament to the influence of both visual sociology and art therapy on the development of creative methods. Further details about all seven papers are now given in the section that follows.

The first article of the special issue, by Burningham et al., engages with various ethical issues raised by using visual methods in cross-national research. Their research involves work with young people using photo-elicitation methods across a wide range of countries (Bangladesh,

Brazil, India, Japan, New Zealand, South Africa and the UK). Burningham et al. stress the importance of having a flexible approach in conducting visual research which involves many different cultural settings and research teams. For instance, they argue that the specific technology used for taking and sharing photos can greatly influence participants' engagement and thus influence our understanding of how young people are situated in family and community relationships. Burningham et al.'s article also develops a more critical perspective on the concept of privacy. Privacy protection that is enshrined in many institutional codes of ethics was not always locally appropriate or acceptable in practice. For example, in New Zealand, the high degree of privacy of communication assured by social media apps emerged as a source of concern; in Bangladesh, parents wanted to check the images their children were sharing with researchers; and in South Africa participants rejected anonymity and private communication with the researcher in favour of building dialogue and relationships with each other. Drawing together the different strands of their argument, Burningham et al. extend the concept of 'methodological immaturity', which was developed specifically for childhood research, to international visual research, emphasising that flexibility, humility and willingness to learn within research teams are all essential.

The second paper of the special issue, by Harman et al., also focuses on exploring differences and similarities in a cross-national context. They use visual art workshops in studying the 'liminal experiences' of female survivors of domestic violence in Portugal and England. By liminality they mean the positioning of these women in the in-between spaces that often lead to experiences of social invisibilty and exclusion. Rather than following a more traditional method of interviewing the participants about their stories, Harman et al. adopt a feminist methodology of 'giving voice' to these women living in these liminal spaces by exploring their relationships to their material possessions. By providing an opportunity to represent and

discuss participants' past, present and future possessions, their aim is to identify new aspects of the identities of women who have experienced domestic violence and have spent time living in a women's refuge. Indeed, they find this is a powerful way to disrupt stories dominating in the media that typically represent such women as only 'violated bodies' and often ignore any other possible identities. In comparing the experiences of their participants in the two national contexts, they found more similarities than differences. However, they argue that 'giving voice' proved to be a complicated project, regardless of their use of participatory and art-based methods. This provokes them to reflect on the questions of 'what does it really mean to give voice to someone?' and 'who is speaking for whom?'.

The third article, by Chawla-Duggan et al., also aims to give voice to a vulnerable group, in this case to children. The paper shows the benefit of visual methods to research young children in a cross-national context, in England, Hong Kong, Norway and India. They showed film footage to the participants from previously self-filmed father-child interactions in conflict situations. This research approach enabled children's 'visual reflexivity' and established a dialectical process through which learning and development takes place. They argue that it is the visual method that exposes the ways in which the child's attention and attunement develops in the research situation, hence providing an understanding of the situation from the child's perspective. Furthermore, they conclude that the visual methods used in their study contribute to the field of cross-national research by highlighting a new approach to knowledge production, which allows researchers to address differences in representation without the obstacles commonly encountered in in cross-national projects, such as difficulties understanding those who speak other languages.

The fourth article by Bernardi, uses visual and creative methods to give voice to children with a diagnosis of autism attending mainstream primary schools in in Central Italy and North West England. While the study was originally conducted in two distinct national contexts with the purpose of engaging with differences and culturally-situated experiences, the focus on children's identities and the social structures in which these are enmeshed meant that commonalities emerged strongly across sites. Bernardi explores ways of engaging with the children in her research by avoiding methods that rely on participants' verbal skills. Instead, she presents a model that respects the children's agency, capability and expertise through methodological choices that privilege autonomy and multimodality. The paper emphasises the importance of validating and exploring children's agency through creative practices that are both meaningful and productive, while contributing to debates about representation, recruitment and inclusion/exclusion.

In the fifth paper of the special issue, Lažetić provides an insight into how university websites can be used as a means of studying similarities and differences between higher education institutions and systems, as well as between higher education policies, and staff and students. The paper is situated in the broader context of the visual and digital turns in social research, and discusses the current state and methodological challenges of higher education research against this backdrop. Lažetić conducts a systematic literature review of existing studies based on university and college websites focussing, in particular, on the differing purposes of comparison, and the various organisational aspects in higher education which are compared. As a result, the paper highlights potential research gaps, and encourages higher education researchers to engage with the visual and digital turns in social research to further develop our understanding of universities in cyberspace.

The sixth paper of the issue, examines the use of a visual method in studying differences *within* a country, in this case, the UK. Donnelly et al. introduce a 'mapping tool' to explore the socio-spatial imaginaries of young people in the UK. This tool involves participants creating visual representations of their geographic imaginaries and, in so doing, capturing their relational understanding of different localities. The mapping exercise was followed by an interview in which the participants explained their maps to the researchers. Donnelly et al. argue that the mapping method elucidates how participants' understandings of class identity and place-based identities are constituted. Furthermore, they show how the method combined with interviews reveals the role of economic, cultural and social structures in the participants' construction of groups and places. The authors highlight the relational dimension of the tool that enables the active consideration of the 'other', exposing the class-based differentiation both between and within class categories and across different locations.

The last paper in this special issue by Rainford also focuses on study of differences within the UK. The paper explores differences in understanding of widening participation policies and practices in higher education across two different types of university in England. Rainford used creative methods - based on making models with Lego blocks, and drawing - within semi-structured interviews (conducted in in seven universities) to attempt to explore deeper understandings of everyday widening participation practices. Comparisons were made across the two types of institution. In his paper, he shows how, while the Lego modelling was used successfully, participants were reluctant to engage in the drawing exercise. Rainford theorises this using the concept of 'creative confidence', and gives examples of four key barriers to creative practice: fear of the unknown, fear of judgement, fear of the first step, and fear of losing control. The paper also demonstrates how creative methods encouraged more

reflective discussion of everyday issues, increased levels of rapport, and heightened engagement in the interview process.

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