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Using Diaries and Photo Elicitation in Phenomenological Research: Studying Everyday Practices of Belonging in Place

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Contributor Biography

Julia Bennett completed her PhD at the University of Manchester in 2012. She has since worked as a Research Associate at Manchester Metropolitan University and has recently been appointed as Senior Lecturer in the Interdisciplinary Studies department at MMU.

Relevant Disciplines

Sociology, social anthropology, human geography

Academic Levels

Intermediate undergraduate; advanced undergraduate; postgraduate

Methods / methodologies Used

Phenomenology; narrative biographical interviews; written and photo diaries; photo elicitation; family interviewing

Keywords

Phenomenology; visual methods; diaries; family interviewing; biographical interviews

Links to the research outputs

Bennett, J. (2011) 'Looks funny when you take its photo': stories of family and place in local belonging. [Online] Available at: <https://mmu.academia.edu/JuliaBennett>

Bennett, J. (2012) *Doing Belonging: a sociological study of belonging in place as the outcome of social practices* Unpublished PhD thesis: University of Manchester eScholar id :[184723](#)

Bennett, J. (2014) Researching the Intangible: A Qualitative Phenomenological Study of the Everyday Practices of Belonging *Sociological Research Online* 19 (1)
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Abstract

My PhD study of belonging in place took a phenomenological approach supported by a variety of qualitative methods: specifically narrative life history interviews, written and photo diaries and photo-elicitation interviews. Researching something as intangible as belonging is difficult and I wanted to evaluate the practices people undertake which demonstrate how they 'do' belonging, rather than asking about feelings of belonging.

This case study explains how and why I made use of a phenomenological approach in researching the everyday. It then shows how the particular methods chosen fit with the use of a phenomenological methodology. The case explores some of the challenges in investigating mundane aspects of daily life, which are increasingly the focus of sociological and geographical research. The focus in this case on multiple qualitative methods leads to a broader discussion of the use of a variety of innovative research methods.

Learning outcomes

By the end of the case study, students should be able to

- Describe the phenomenological method and illustrate how it can be applied in social research;
- Evaluate benefits and disadvantages of the narrative interview approach;
- Assess the merits of using diaries in researching the everyday
- Outline one of the ways in which photographs can be used in social research
- Develop creative approaches to research methods

Project overview

In 2008 I embarked on my ESRC funded PhD at the University of Manchester. I examined what people do, the practises they undertake, which give them a sense of belonging in place (Bennett, 2012). My original thesis (based on previous research I had undertaken as an undergraduate) was that families who have lived in the same place for multiple generations are likely to demonstrate a strong sense of belonging in place. I therefore set out to recruit multiple generations of the same family who had lived in the same town over three or more generations to find out what they did that demonstrated their belonging. The fieldwork was carried out between September 2009 and June 2010.

I wanted to avoid questioning people directly on whether they felt they belonged, as I was more interested in how people enact belonging. That is, I wanted to find out what people do which demonstrates their belonging in a place. Researching this intangible aspect of everyday life presented a dilemma as I was looking for details of individuals' and families' private lives which would be very difficult to observe ethnographically. I also wanted to have an understanding of family history and current practises which would demonstrate belonging in place, without directly asking about belonging. The family history was important as this often showed a connection to a place through time. Individual biographies were also needed to

show how particular choices made at key points in their lives meant that people stayed put throughout their lives. These different aims required different methods of collecting data.

Basing the research around multi-generational family groups enabled families to talk about their lives together giving both individual life histories and family histories. Participants shared details of their daily lives with me through written and photo diaries. Using testimony written by the participants puts the direction of the research in their hands thus reversing, to some extent, the traditional power relations between researcher and researched. The photos of places the participants visited during the week of their diary allowed me to 'visit' places which are a part of the daily life of participants in a non-intrusive manner. I chose these pseudo-ethnographic research approaches as they privilege the voices of the participants. My overarching consideration, however, was that I wanted to understand the world from the standpoint of the participants, rather than as an outsider looking in. My priority then, prior to deciding upon research methods, was to use a theoretical approach which allowed the perspectives of those taking part to guide me. I therefore chose to use a phenomenological methodology.

Methodological considerations: phenomenology

Everyday life is difficult to research because it is habitual and taken-for-granted. Many everyday activities are likely to be left unexamined and unquestioned. Where the researcher poses questions around the kind of daily activities that go to make up the social world being researched, the interviewee may be unable to provide an explanation for their taken-for-granted activities. Taking a phenomenological approach allows the researcher a different view of the activities of the research participants. I call this a 'sideways' perspective (Bennett, 2012; 2014). This can be likened to watching a play from the wings of the theatre at

the side of the stage, rather than from the auditorium where the audience sit. Watching from the side allows the flats on which the scenery is painted to be seen for what they are, but the play can still be understood too. Making visible the workings of the set is like opening up taken-for-granted behaviour to outside scrutiny.

The phenomenological method is a particular way of seeing the world as contingent, as 'just one of a series of possibilities' (Ferguson, 2006: 48-9). Husserl, the founding father of this approach, argued that people take their surroundings for granted and do not question them. He termed this the 'natural attitude' (Aspers, 2004). Heidegger then built on this idea by dividing our everyday engagement with the world into two categories: *zuhanden*, or ready-at-hand, and *vorhanden* or present-at-hand (Ferguson, 2006). Ready-at-hand is when we use an object without being consciously aware of it as a separate presence. For example, in using a pen to write we are not usually aware of the pen itself, until, perhaps, it runs out of ink, when it becomes 'present-at-hand' (Bennett, 2014: 2). When we become aware of the pen, due to its running out of ink, we realise that we could write with a different tool, such as a pencil, or use a computer perhaps.

The method of phenomenology is a particular way of seeing our everyday activities as merely one way of doing things (Ferguson, 2006 p. 48 - 9). This is accomplished through what Husserl calls the phenomenological reduction, that is bracketing, or putting to one side, our everyday knowledge and taken-for-granted, or ready-at-hand (*zuhanden*), understandings of the world. The sideways view of the stage shows us how the set is constructed so that we do not take for granted that a painted exterior of a building is backed up by real walls and a roof. We would need to see the walls and roof for ourselves. The researcher can then reflect critically on the life-world(s) being researched, that is, from a *vorhanden* (present-at-hand) perspective.

Crucially, the phenomenological method grounds explanation ‘in the first-order construction of the actors’ (Aspers, 2004: 2). That is, it is the voices and actions of the research participants that guide the direction of the research, rather than preconceived theories. In order to ensure the pre-eminence of the participants’ standpoint I had to ensure my research methods were driven by those taking part. The particular methods I used to do this are discussed next.

Research Design and ethical considerations

The best way to try to understand someone else’s life-world is probably to observe and take part in it – that is, using ethnographic research. However, this is often not a practical way of observing people’s daily lives. Instead, I followed Zimmerman and Wieder’s (1977: 481) suggestion of using daily diaries with a follow up interview. In addition I asked people to photograph the places they visited during the week. These pictures were then used during the post-diary interview to talk about the meaning particular places have for participants (Harper, 2004; Latham, 2003; Moore et al, 2008). Using photographs in this way is a type of photo elicitation where photos are used to facilitate discussion. The photos allowed me to visit the places mentioned in the diaries virtually, thus avoiding asking participants to accompany me on a visit, which would have taken up more of their time.

The diaries were combined with narrative style biographical interviews that focused on key decision points in people’s lives: leaving school and getting a job; getting married; having children; and so on, as well as family history, as far as this was known. These interviews served to ‘place’ people in both time and space. By combining unstructured interviews with weekly diaries I was able to build up a picture of the daily life of the respondent. All of the participants were interviewed once, and then those who agreed to, and subsequently completed, a diary were interviewed again to discuss the photos and the content of the

diaries. Some of the interviews were conducted in couples or family groups which gave some indication of family relationships as well. As far as possible, I was led by the interviewees in terms of the structure of the interviews and (within some pre-imposed limits) the content of the diaries, allowing the research to be user-driven. This approach produced data that was 'rich and deep' (Bryman, 1988: 103). The interviews included stories of ancestors working in coal mines and cotton mills and grandchildren going to university, as well as the respondent's own life story. The diaries gave a distinct flavour of daily life at home, school and work, and the photos and post-diary interviews told me how people feel about the place where they live.

Who to research?

Having decided on an approach to follow the next step was to find people who might be willing to participate. Whilst there are plenty of the kinds of family I was looking for living in Wigan – people would frequently tell me they knew people who fitted my requirements – it was not easy to persuade them to take part in the study. Ideally I wanted to interview three generations of each family. I decided a minimum of five families would provide sufficiently varied data to capture different ways of living local lives. As I could not find five families with three generations willing to take part then I included families with two generations willing to take part in the research and a third generation too young to take part. Five individuals also took part without other members of their families, although they were all able to give me a considerable amount of information on the generations preceding and following them. Altogether twenty-two people were interviewed.

I anticipated that recruitment would be difficult and time-consuming due to the level of commitment required from more than one family member. I used the published electoral register, letters to local papers and schools, the local council's 'citizens panel' who take part in various surveys and focus groups, attending local walks, contacting family history groups,

church groups and other local groups. Some of those I interviewed managed to persuade other members of their family and friends and neighbours to take part, which overall was the most successful recruitment method. After about eight months I had spoken to five families of two or more generations, and five other individuals comprising twenty-two biographical interviews with an age range from fifteen to eighty-five. I asked initially for interviews with multiple generations of the family; at the first interview I then asked people if they would be willing to complete a diary over the course of a week, including photos. I received ten diaries and conducted six post-diary interviews. In all, there were approximately one hundred photos to accompany the written diaries.

Ethical Considerations

Standard ethical guidelines were followed on informed consent and anonymity, and I gave participants the opportunity to read the transcriptions of their interviews. In addition I made some more specific ethical decisions due to the participation of multiple members of the same family, the use of visual data and my wish not to make the place where the research took place anonymous.

Researching families can bring its own set of ethical dilemmas, as Gabb (2010) describes in some detail. Anonymity of family members was a key concern especially as in many of my interviews more than one family member was present. This may have affected what each person was prepared to say, but I saw no evidence of this. In one family group the ‘mother/daughter’ (middle generation) did ‘police’ what both her daughter and her mother said. She corrected her mother on several occasions and sometimes answered questions on her daughter’s behalf. However the benefits of these interviews (detailed below) outweighed these drawbacks, for my research.

Using photographs in social research presents its own set of ethical issues. Tinkler (2013), in her book on the use of photographs in research, covers most of the issues likely to arise. In order to be able to publish the photos I received, I asked the respondents to assign the copyright to me, via email, which everyone was happy to do (Pink, 2001: 136). I avoided some issues around privacy by asking participants to restrict their photographs to places, rather than people. However I have still avoided publishing pictures of homes, homes of friends and identifiable local places such as schools and churches, as I feel these could reveal the identity of the participants.

As I did not wish to conceal the identity of the town where the research took place (which would have meant none of the photographs could have been published), I took care to disguise, and if necessary alter, professions and other personal details to avoid compromising informants' anonymity.

Narrative interviewing

In order to work out how people come to belong to a place I wanted to try to understand something of the biography and family history of the participants. I wanted to know:

- How did they come to be living here?
- Had they ever moved away?
- What school did they go to?
- When did they leave?
- What job/careers did they consider?
- Who are their friends?

Focussing on major life events and rites of passage helped to show how these decisions affected their lives subsequently. During the interview I bore in mind that I wanted to cover

these topics but I took a narrative approach and usually began with ‘tell me your life story’. This produced a variety of responses. Some respondents were happy to talk in great detail about much of their lives, others were slightly thrown by such a broad question and needed prompting with more detailed questions. It was interesting that those who were happy to talk at length with little further prompting often glossed over the less successful or less happy parts of their lives, such as divorce. The pressure to describe a happy life is something that Hollway and Jefferson (2000: 175) also noticed in their research. This only became clear to me on transcribing the interviews, but where there was a follow-up post-diary interview I took the opportunity of asking further questions about these times. At this stage I was known to the participants which made it easier to address sensitive questions.

I adopted a narrative approach in order to put some of the balance of power back in the hands of the informant. Interviews always take place within relations of power and part of my use of a phenomenological methodology was to overcome that power imbalance. A narrative interview leaves it up to the interviewee in what order, and which topics, are covered. The research is thus shaped, to a considerable extent, by the ‘subjective perspective’ (Aspers, 2004: 11) of the informants. By not having preconceived ideas about the informants’ lives their testimony shaped the direction of the research.

Family Groups

I was keen to base the research around multi-generational family groups as the family is, for most people, the centre of belonging and community. I allowed interviewees to decide themselves whether to be interviewed in groups or separately. In one family I interviewed the two generations taking part as two couples; in another three generations were interviewed

separately; in another three generations were all interviewed together. Where two or three people were interviewed at the same time the dynamics of the interview were quite different from those of a one-to-one interview. As well as me, the interviewer, asking questions there were questions and comments exchanged between the interviewees. I was able to observe their relationships at first hand. Where three generations were interviewed together the mother/daughter (middle generation) was clearly in charge of the situation; it was also in her home that the interview took place. In this particular three generational interview I became an observer of family reminiscences. The youngest started to ask her grandmother questions about her past and a general discussion of how things have changed over their lifetimes followed. The fact that the annual 'pot fair' where you could buy 'black peas' no longer takes place meant that 'it's not half as nice ... now as in olden days'. I felt privileged to be able to observe an intimate family conversation.

Where people were interviewed separately there were discrepancies between accounts of the same event from different family members. It did not matter which account was 'true' as the analysis of the interviews was concerned with *how* the stories were told, as well as with what was said. In other cases where the same event was told by different people from their own perspective it gave me a more rounded understanding of the event. This also happened through the diary entries where I had multiple diaries completed by one family over the course of the same week.

Photos and Written Diaries

The diaries had three principal aims:

- To gain an understanding of daily life without direct observation

(Zimmerman & Wieder, 1977)

- To allow the respondents' voices to be heard in the research (Meth, 2003)
- To show me the places respondents visited in the course of their daily lives and allow me to talk about these places with them in the post-diary interview (Latham, 2003)

I provided those respondents who expressed an interest in completing a diary with a notebook with the following instructions on the first page:

For one week (which can start on any day)

1. Take a photo of each place you go to, only 1 photo needs to be taken of each place (so if you visit the same place more than once a week only take 1 photo). Please avoid taking photos of family or friends for confidentiality reasons.
2. Make a note of the number of the photo, date and time and where it was taken together with any other comments you wish to remember, such as why you went there, who you saw.
3. Note down a brief account each day of what 'social encounters' you have had – who you met (actual names are not important e.g. 'friend from work', 'shop assistant'), where you met them and what was talked about. Add the number of the photo which relates to this.
4. Try to fill in the diary at least once each day for 7 days.

Respondents were also given a disposable camera although some chose to use their own digital phones or cameras which produced better results in terms of photo quality. One respondent completed a digital diary and emailed it to me. The others wrote their diaries by hand and I provided them with pre-paid envelopes to return them to me. I aimed to organise a follow-up interview as soon as possible after I received the completed diary, and always within four weeks. Even with this short time frame some respondents had forgotten the content of their diaries and where they had visited that week. I was sometimes in the peculiar situation of knowing more about what they had done that week than they remembered!

In acting as a substitute ethnography some of the diaries contained far more detail than I had asked for. I was given details of food that was eaten such as 'Grandpa's chicken', activities undertaken throughout the day at home including ironing and decorating the Christmas tree, and histories of relationships with both people and places.

The diaries captured daily life in far more detail than an interview could have done, all of which added to the breadth and depth of data gathered. Much of what was written down would not have been considered important enough to mention in the more formal situation of an interview.

Although I asked for a minimum of information in the diaries I did, however, need to be specific in the photo instructions to ensure I received pictures of places rather than people. It seemed that some of the older people equated taking photos with taking photos of people. These photos, whilst still suitable for the elicitation interview, have not been published.

The addition of photographs to the diaries was in order to use them in a photo elicitation follow up interview. Using photos as a form of aide-memoire, rather than just asking about places mentioned in the diaries, enabled a broad discussion about the place, the respondent's connection to it and its history. The data from this post-diary interview was the most

surprising that my various methods unearthed. People described great attachment to a variety of mundane, ordinary places which showed how people belong through small, everyday practices such as buying petrol or picking up grandchildren from school. Some of these stories are described in Bennett (2011). This also highlighted the benefits of asking respondents to take their own photos, rather than selecting photos of key sites within the town, as I would not have included supermarkets or McDonald's in a selection for discussion.

The diaries represent the kind of detailed data about everyday activities that I had hoped to discover. They showed me what people *do* in their everyday lives to (re)create connections between themselves and those around them, such as where children attend the school their parents went to, or when family history research uncovered a family link to a major landmark in the town. The photo elicitation interview allowed people to describe places in terms that demonstrated their feelings of belonging, without necessarily articulating it. The combination of written and photo diaries with the post-diary interview overcame, to some extent at least, the difficulties of researching the mundane, often inexpressible, aspects of the everyday.

Practical Lessons

In this case study I have focussed on the phenomenological method and the benefits of a particular selection of methods for my research into belonging. Here I would like to offer some further guidance based on my experience around the selection of method(s) for conducting phenomenological research and/or research into everyday life.

- I went into my fieldwork with only very vague ideas of what I expected, or wanted, to find. This did cause some issues in terms of explaining what I wanted to do to supervisors and others. However, research is messy. I recommend keeping an open mind and questioning everything.

- Use multiple methods if time allows. Different methods will draw out a wider variety of data and give more in-depth data overall.
- Put the participants in charge. Don't worry if they don't respond in the way you wanted or expected. Research is a joint project between researcher and researched. Allowing the participants' voice to come through can only enhance the findings.
- Receiving photos of supermarkets, McDonald's and a local garage made me think that I would discover little about attachment to particular places. However, these places proved to be rich in history and meaning for my participants. Phenomenology teaches us to question everything, this includes questioning our presumptions as researchers.
- Try to make it enjoyable. Two of my respondents told me how much they had enjoyed completing their diaries and how it made them realise their immense connections to friends, family and the place they live in. Taking part in research should benefit all parties.
- Be flexible and don't be afraid to change plans. I started out with plans to only include three generational families. This was, as my supervisor warned me, somewhat ambitious. In the end about a quarter of my participants took part without other family members.
- Be imaginative with research methods. There is more to qualitative social research than the semi-structured interview! New technologies can be used in imaginative ways to enhance all kinds of research and they are not only for younger people. Many of my older respondents did use email and have camera phones. Diaries can take the form of blogs, Facebook updates and so on. Visual methods can be used in a variety of ways. For many people a photograph can stimulate extensive conversation. Objects can also be used to elicit data in this way, for example, see Hurdley (2007) who asked people to describe the objects on their mantelpieces or display shelves.

- Keep in touch with your participants. Remember this is their research too. I made sure I sent out an update when I completed my PhD and several were interesting in reading the full thesis.

Conclusion: hearing the voices of the participants

What I sought to do in my PhD research was to find some of the practical ways in which people demonstrate belonging in place. In order to investigate this type of belonging I took what I have called a ‘sideways’ approach looking at the life-worlds of the participants phenomenologically. This allowed me access to their taken-for-granted world and to question every aspect of it.

The data collection methods provided information on different dimensions of everyday life. Using multiple methods of qualitative data collection gave me rich, in-depth data. The methods were largely ‘user-driven’ with the subject matter in the control of the respondents. This allowed their preoccupations and concerns to become visible to me. The combination of visual, verbal and written data from interviews and diaries gave a rounded picture of people’s lives. Interviewing multiple members and generations of the same family enabled me to identify what is passed on through the generations. This triangulated approach was able to encompass history, daily life and relationships, and the materiality of places giving a three dimensional view of belonging. The distinctive variety of qualitative approaches increased the richness of the data considerably. In small scale research such as this, where the numbers of respondents are limited for various reasons, a combination of data sources improves the quality and robustness of the findings. The originality of my thesis stems from the theoretical and practical methods I used. In allowing the research to be user-driven I was confident that I did justice to the voices of the participants and have, through my findings, articulated their ways of belonging in place.

Exercises and Discussion Questions

- 1) How important is a methodological framing for a research proposal? What is its key purpose?
- 2) In conducting research with multiple members of the same family (or small community) what precautions might you take to preserve informants' anonymity?
- 3) What might some of the drawbacks of narrative interviews be, for
 - a) the interviewer, and
 - b) the interviewee?
- 4) Is it ethical to conduct research without telling your participants exactly what you are researching? In what circumstances?
- 5) Why is it important to research the everyday?

Further Reading

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