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Day of Our Lives: Making and sharing multi-media documents of everyday mothering

http://modernmothers.org

The Making Modern Mothers study is an empirical research project that attempts to capture and characterise the experience of a diverse group of British women all becoming mothers for the first time in 2005 (Thomson et al 2011). The study has been a collective endeavour involving four researchers: Rachel Thomson, Mary Jane Kehily, Sue Sharpe and Lucy Hadfield. Starting with 60 participants, we narrowed our focus on first 12 families, and then on just 6, who we followed initially from pregnancy into the second year of the child's life and most recently again when the child was eight years old. The research used a range of methods in order to capture aspects of the women's experiences including interviews, photographs and observation (Thomson 2011). The 'day in a life' experiment involved participants allowing us to spend an 'ordinary' day with them. Our approach was inspired by 'work-shadowing' methods used in organisational research – which seeks to make mundane practices visible, inviting the subject to narrate and explain activities that are usually taken for granted (McDonald 2005). Underpinning the 'work-shadowing' method is the view that the experience of being observed is invigorating and enlightening for both parties. As researchers we liked the idea of walking alongside our subjects, recognising and documenting maternal labour, using ourselves and our reactions as research instruments, and throwing away our digital sound recorders.

In the end we used the method with 5 women, producing 'micro-ethnographies' composed of photographs taken over the course of the day and reflective field notes written by the researcher soon after the observation. In comparison to the recorded interview material that made up most of the study, these 'day in a life' studies had a very different quality – revealing a more concrete, material and immediate aspect of maternal experience. The method also allowed us to include children within the project in a new way. Rather than seeing them as thwarting our attempts to talk to mothers, interrupting narratives, we entered into the fields of activity that were woven around the child. This brought us into connection

to our subjects in different ways. We have written elsewhere about how food and eating became a focal point of our observations, as well as the way in which the physical spaces of mothering and movement between them came to the centre of our analysis (Thomson et al 2012). However writing is not necessarily the best way of communicating the insights generated by this kind of project.

Despite an explosion in the popular use of digital technologies, social science communities have proved to be highly conservative, holding on to the authority and value of restrictive formats such as the journal article. Online publishing is only slowly beginning to make an impact on what is seen as acceptable or authentic academic outputs (e.g. Muir and Mason 2012). Rachel's understanding of what might be possible in this area was inspired by her involvement in the interdisciplinary space of *Studies in the Maternal* and seeing examples of digital art such as Christine Wilk's *Underbelly* which employs a range of audio and visual material within a digital landscape shaped by an overarching narrative. As part of her work for the Open University she had the opportunity to work with film-makers to create teaching materials, exploring the structuring and layering opportunities allowed by DVD Rooms as a way of showcasing and re-animating material collected for research purposes (Open University 2007). Her vision for the project was to find a way of animating and sharing research findings – and to see whether the final product could find an audience. Having worked closely with filmmaker Susi Arnott on a different project she invited her and her collaborator photographer Crispin Hughes to help the research team create something that was new for us all. Susi has worked mainly in educational television, observational/ethnographic documentary and participatory video. The issues of subject characters, audiences, and their possible relationships to content have always interested her. The way different media converge on new sorts of websites was also stimulating – 'slideshows' with audio accompaniment are fashionable again after spending 30 years out of favour, for example! So the proposal to collaborate was a very welcome one.

The raw material for the website were the 'day in a life' reflective field notes and photographs that researchers had produced as a result of spending a day with each mother. These accounts were far from raw, but were self-contained pieces of worked-on ethnographic writing that had been produced for and shared within the research group. For the researchers these accounts were highly edited and condensed texts, boiling down many hours into several thousand words. A single example was then shared with Susi and Crispin who used it to

develop ideas for animation and display. The first shock for the researchers was that their texts – though highly condensed- were much too long for use within a visual landscape. An early idea of recording researchers reading their field notes in full was transformed into researchers reading fragments of the text – identified by Susi with her editorial skills as capturing and expressing significant moments within the day and themes that infused the case. We characterised these fragments as 'Carverised' – as if they were short stories by Raymond Carver extracted from a baggy 19th century novel. These extracts had to carry the case and the narrative of the day. Working with an editor who had less investment in the material and was able to privilege the visual narrative was both anxiety provoking (raising concerns about transparency and evidence) and liberating (freeing us from the burden of 'data'). A decision to make the full 'data record' available as pdf files allowed us to step into the possibilities allowed by the narrative form that we were entering. However, Rachel fought to hold on to more of the slow pacing of the original material, which reflected the detail and the tedium of maternal work with a toddler.

The next stage of discussions involved a negotiation of the visual landscape into which the digital material would be stored, including an investigation of technical possibilities and the realistic limits of our resources. The resulting model of a journey through a hand-drawn map fulfilled our desire to represent the passage of time and movement between places within a single 'layer' that could be navigated by the user. Excited by the idea in abstract, Susi only realised later how many assumptions she had made about the amount and nature of 'raw material' that would be available to work with. Drawing cartoon versions of the locations preserves anonymity but is very loaded; Susi's own feelings about sofas and mantelpieces become part of the piece, alongside the 'atmosphere' tracks of background traffic noise, passing buses, ringing doorbells or washing machine noises. The hand drawn quality of the maps blended with the 'home-made' character of the photographs used. Using this landscape a single case study was then mocked up – providing us with an example that could be used with the research team and the research subjects to negotiate consent.

Although all the mothers involved had agreed in principle to the 'day in a life' material being used in an interactive digital website, we had promised that we would negotiate with them in the process of production. The first stage involved in this process was for researchers to share the written field notes with the mothers, identifying any material that should be omitted or changed in order to protect confidentiality. This also included negotiating as to the

use of photographs. Given that researchers would not usually share written field notes with research participants and had certainly not written these notes with a view to them being read by subjects, this was a sensitive process that involved confidentiality for the researcher as well as the research participant. Once this process was complete Susi and Crispin got to work on filling the full set of 'days' which involved drawing the maps, recording researchers reading the 'Carverised' field notes and compiling the images and sound data. Once the cases were completed they were checked first with the research team who made any necessary changes before sharing the website with the mothers for final approval. A key issue that emerged towards the end of the design process was whether and how to use sound beyond the recorded voices of the researchers. An experiment using ambient sound to enrich the digital environment on the pilot case was compelling, yet all felt uneasy about the project of retrospectively adding material that was not collected at the time. The final product is rather uneven with the use of sound for these reasons. A subsequent exercise involving the creation of a 'day in the life' with the children in the family (also included in the website) involved the collection of sound as part of the research process.

Working together to create this website has been a rewarding creative experience, but not one without challenges. Here we conclude this introduction to the website by identifying the key areas where we experienced some kind of collision between the academic and the artistic frameworks of reference.

Problems of control and re-use: The difference between made to measure and dissemination

As researchers we delayed the act of sharing the 'data' that we had generated with mothers, seeking to agree a practical and ethical framework for display in advance, without Susi and Crispin having the opportunity to see and work with the material. We had not collected our 'data' with the intention of creating an output. Once we shared the material we encountered issues of professional standards in quality of the material – not simply in terms of resolution, focus or colour, but also choice of subject matter, framing, juxtaposition etc. We realised how different it would have been to start out the research with the 'product' in mind, collecting purposively. Here we encountered one of the boundaries between social science research and the practices of documentary making, realising that the character of 'research' shifts according to the anticipated outcomes – be these journal articles or digital website. On reflection we realised that we could have done much more to enrich the data record, for example collecting

many more images as well as recording ambient sounds in the environments that we were observing, which could then have been woven into the representation of the day in the life. We all felt unhappy about adding material such as images and sounds later in the production process, fearing that such material would be misleading or 'inauthentic'.

Between archiving and editing: using a documentary aesthetic to guide 'data display'

For the researchers there were tensions between the desire to use the digital as a way of depositing data in full and creating something that was processed/ digested. Susi encouraged us towards something much more edited than we had originally envisaged. She was concerned that we understand the difference between reading aloud a text that had been written for the page and text that had been scripted for voice. Her 'Carverised' nuggets condensed and animated material that we already saw as highly condensed narratives. As researchers we needed the safety blanket of the accompanying full field notes for making it 'authentic' in research terms. Editing is a central practice of both academic work and film-making, yet it operates according to different criteria and values. Susi is aware of disparities between the different cases, despite her attempt to Carverise the texts. She wonders how much this might be due to differences in textual style and attitude of the original, her own feelings about the content and characters, and also simply the timing. The pilot case 'Monica' was the first and only text for quite a while, and she had the time and 'bravery' to be fairly bold with this one in the knowledge that she and Rachel would be able to speak freely and engage with style and content in an honest way, and disagree productively if necessary. Some of the others seem very baggy on reflection – but on thinking it through and playing some of the troubling pieces she realises that yes, she had thought about trimming further but been worried about losing too much 'content', especially after Rachel's melancholia at losing the sense of tedium to the work.

Working with(out) an audience

As we worked together we were constantly confronted by the uncertainty about who the audience for this work might be. In Rachel's mind the primary audience was academic, the project being a demonstration of new ways of reporting research and in so doing broaden the audience for research. Yet she was also attracted by the idea that in creating digital outputs you can generate new audiences. While the 'day in a life' website might be sophisticated as a research output it might be rather unsophisticated in terms of e-documentaries and digital

literature. What became increasingly interesting to us all was the notion that we might speak to more than one audience simultaneously, or that the audience could be offered something that involved different packages of input and which crossed the boundaries of academic genre. If so, how might the output be judged within the terms of academic or artistic frameworks?

Ethics, display, consent, ownership

The process of consulting with participants (both researchers and mothers) and getting their consent for the creation and publication of the resulting website was central to our work. It was hard to know at what point in the process to do this. Sharing our written field notes was very challenging as this is the kind of data that is almost never shared/ negotiated within research relationships. As such we were working with pretty raw materials in terms of the researcher revealing her views/feelings – which for Susi at least was what made the material interesting. We also faced a challenge to participants' anonymity in which visual and descriptive data combine to identify people. We gave participants a veto and right to edit – yet in practice few changes were requested - although at least one mother asked for particular images to be included that the team had edited out for reasons of anonymity. The editing process could have been more iterative than it was yet we were constrained by resources.

The Making Modern Mothers website has been an experimental collaboration between researcher and media professionals, framed by a culture in which digital methods are transforming the meaning of data, of modes of recording, publishing and the very notion of the 'professional'. What the project meant to us at the outset of our collaboration was very different to what it means now. The experience of working together on this project has convinced us of the value of expanding or understanding of what might be relevant 'data' in a research project – understanding the value and richness of ambient audio recording for example. It has also encouraged us to imagine how a research project might be transformed if we integrated the idea of 'display' from the earliest stages, working together with participants to make public documents. These lessons have been integrated into our most recent experiments using the day in a life with the eight-year-old children involved in the project with whom we have collected sounds and images across the day. The website continues to be developed and augmented as part of our on-going longitudinal project through which we revisit mothers and children over time. In this way we hope that the website may operate as a

dynamic space for all participants to reflect on what it means to document and share the mundane practices of mothering and every life.

To find out more about the most recent stage of the project in which the everyday lives of children and teenagers are documented and shared using freely available software see http://blogs.sussex.ac.uk/everydaychildhoods/

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