

# **Doing Research Differently: Methodological Creativity and Innovation in the Sociology of Families and Relationships**

Hosted by the BSA Families and Relationships Study Group

12 June 10am-5pm, University of the West of England, Bristol

## **Conference Schedule**

10.00-10.15: Welcome and tea/coffee on arrival

10.15-11.15: Zine making workshop – Laura Way

11.15-11.30: Break

11.30-12.30: Keynote speaker – Professor Debbie Watson

12.30-13.30: Lunch

13.30-14.30: Parallel sessions (choose from Panel A or Panel B)

14.30-15.15: Workshops (choose from Workshop 1 or Workshop 2)

15.15-15.30: Break

15.30-17.00: Panel C

## **Panel A**

- Strength based research with trans and gender diverse youth: methodological considerations for archivable participatory engagements - Lizzie Reed
- Drawings and Elicitation Interviews Using News Stories: Creative Methodologies Fostering Engagement, Reflexivity, and Intimate Knowledge in Research with Children on the Move - Andrea Cortés Saavedra
- Conversations in Motion: Using Walking Interviews to Engage with Difficult Topics - Rachel Stewart

## **Panel B**

- Queer Family Dinners - Polly Maxwell
- Experiments with Fiction and Research - Leah Gilman
- Intergenerational Stories of Alcohol Consumption in Gypsy, Roma and Traveller Communities - Samantha and Catherine Wilkinson

## **Workshops**

Workshop 1 - Methods for Queer Kinship – Lizzie Reed and Milou Stella

Workshop 2 - Creative processes and studying sensitive topics faced by migrant care workers – Sharon Ramer Biel

### Panel C

- Collage as a Creative Method for Exploring the Existential Nature of Childbearing in Contemporary China – Hao Li
- *Why are things this way?* – Eileen Alexander
- 'The household portrait' – Emily Christopher
- Exploring Living Situations and Identities of Hong Kong Youth Immigrants in the UK: A Workshop-Based Illustrative Inquiry – Hayes Ng

## Abstracts

### Panel A

#### **Strength based research with trans and gender diverse youth: methodological considerations for archivable participatory engagements**

Dr Lizzie Reed (University of Southampton, UK) with Prof Olu Jenzen (University of Southampton, UK), Dr Matty Kennedy (University of Southampton, UK), Dr Ruth Pearce (University of Glasgow, UK) and Dr Abby Barras (University of Brighton, UK)

The liveability (i.e. to exist beyond survival; to thrive) of trans and gender diverse (TGD) young people is under pressure globally, due to an increasingly hostile political climate and attacks on their human rights. Resultingly, TGD young people experience increased levels of victimisation, discrimination, and multiple inequalities including social isolation, family estrangement, limited access to healthcare, under provision in education, and poor mental health. To meaningfully engage TGD youth in research agendas, research paradigms need to operate from a trans-centred and gender-affirming position while cultivating a critical awareness of the challenges that TGD youth face in their everyday lives. In our project, we seek to redress the underrepresentation of TGD young people everyday lives and curate an alternative archive of TGD youth resilience, vitality and creativity. Achieving this requires intervening in institutional ethics procedures, acknowledging the history of violence experienced by trans communities in research settings, and actively supporting participants' agency. In this paper, we present the ethical and practical considerations associated with one of our methods: one day diaries collected from TGD young people as part of the Mass Observation Archives 12th May Diary Day.

## **Drawings and Elicitation Interviews Using News Stories: Creative Methodologies Fostering Engagement, Reflexivity, and Intimate Knowledge in Research with Children on the Move**

Andrea Cortés Saavedra, Universidad de O'Higgins, Rancagua, Chile

This presentation explores two creative methodological techniques I used in an ethnographic study conducted in 2019 with migrant and Chilean children at a school in Iquique, a city in northern Chile. First, I employed drawings as a research technique to foster engagement with the children participating in the study. The production of drawings is grounded in a visual and representational approach to discourses, which helps build rapport between the researcher and the participants (Pauwels & Mannay, 2020). Moreover, using drawings allows for a deeper exploration of the children's narratives about their families' migration processes, embedding their experiences within a multimodal discourse. Second, I utilised elicitation interviews using news stories. This technique involves presenting excerpts from news articles to prompt responses from participants, encouraging them to reflect on their experiences, ideas, opinions, and memories. Inspired by the principles of photo-elicitation interviews, this novel approach aims to spark participants' reflexivity while prompting them to connect broader societal narratives—especially related to migration—with their personal experiences and family memories. These creative methodologies provide access to knowledge that might otherwise be difficult to uncover through traditional research methods

## **Conversations in Motion: Using Walking Interviews to Engage with Difficult Topics**

Rachel Stewart, Leeds Beckett University, UK

Having conducted ten walking-in-nature interviews, this presentation examines the use of this method as a creative and spatially innovative approach in sociological research, particularly for exploring sensitive topics with hard-to-reach groups. The study focuses on the experiences of parents whose children were placed for adoption without their consent and their involvement in shaping their children's life story narratives.

I will discuss how walking as a method influences the dynamics of the interview, fosters participant comfort, and facilitates deeper, more open discussions. Notably, each participant consented to their full recording being used for a public podcast, providing an opportunity for their voices to reach a wider audience and promoting a greater public understanding of their experiences.

In this study, walking interviews allowed participants to choose the setting within their local area, with the researcher following their lead. This approach fostered a sense of co-production and shifted traditional power dynamics. The presentation will also address the practical and ethical challenges encountered, including considerations

around confidentiality, emotional responses, and the role of physical movement in shaping interactions.

This short presentation will reflect on the successes and limitations of walking interviews, considering their broader implications for sociological research. By aligning with the conference theme of innovation and interdisciplinarity, I hope to stimulate discussion on how walking interviews can facilitate the exploration of complex emotional topics while ensuring ethical and methodological integrity.

## **Panel B**

### **Queer Family Dinners**

Polly Maxwell, University of Bath, UK

Queer family dinners invite participants to give the researcher a seat at the dinner table. In their current context these dinners are a series of ethnographic observations specifically related to queer families who have experienced the death of a member. This methodology builds on sociological explorations of family as a site of shared substance, a provision of resources and a practice of care, as well as cultural rituals surrounding food and bereavement. Drawing on recent social practices that attempt to “normalise” conversations about death and dying, such as Death Cafes, To Absent Friends and Death Over Dinner, this method combines elements of these events with observational research methods historically used to explore food culture. In the same vein as Death Over Dinner, meal cards, which consist of A5 cards on the dinner table provide participants with ideas for specific talking points or questions around the topic. Used in a similar manner to semi-structured interview questions, these prompts allow for a consistent gathering of data whilst preserving the intimacy and conversational tangents this topic requires.

### **Experiments with Fiction and Research**

Leah Gilman, Research Fellow in Sociology, Manchester Metropolitan University, UK

In this interactive session, I will explore why and how sociologists of families and relationships might wish to use fiction in their research. Drawing on our recently published book, *Fiction and Research: A Guide to Connecting Stories and Inquiry* (co-authored with Becky Tipper and published by Policy Press in 2024), I will share three common theoretical underpinning and rationales for researchers who combine research and fiction: stories as fundamental to human experience, concerns regarding ‘representation’ and fiction as speculation. I will briefly examine some examples of the different ways in which researchers have used fiction, including a short story about egg donation based on my own research and ongoing collaboration with Becky Tipper. I will reflect on the process of creating these fictions (including the ‘difficult’ questions and

challenges raised) and invite the audience to consider and briefly try out some ideas for bringing fiction into their own research.

### **Intergenerational Stories of Alcohol Consumption in Gypsy, Roma and Traveller Communities.**

Dr Samantha Wilkinson, Senior Lecturer in Childhood and Youth Studies, Manchester Metropolitan University, UK.

Dr Catherine Wilkinson, Reader in Childhood and Youth Studies, Liverpool John Moores University, UK.

Gypsy, Roma and Traveller (GRT) communities experience significant health inequities, such as higher morbidity, mortality and infant mortality. People in these communities are considered vulnerable to problematic alcohol use, due to social exclusion, discrimination, lack of awareness and difficulties in engaging with addiction treatment protocols. GRT communities have a rich cultural history of orality, prioritising social interaction and regularly engaging in lively conversation in deeply intertwined family and community networks (Condon et al., 2019). Respecting these cultures, and working with project partner Friends, Families and Travellers, participants were recruited to take part in unstructured focus groups, enabling them to tell their drinking stories without the interruption that may come with more structured interviews. This paper argues that a story-telling methodological approach eradicates the issue of not asking the right questions of participants, due to an inability to overcome 'truths' that travel with the researcher from previous research in other contexts. It resists researcher 'prompts' to focus on the topic at hand, avoiding leading questions (Jayne and Valentine, 2023), and enables finding out more of drinking-not-drinking practices, experiences and performances. This approach provides a way for researchers to overcome their own situated knowledges, and avoids foregrounding alcohol in a way that eclipses other threads of empirical evidence. This paper also reflects on practical, methodological and ethical complexities of undertaking such a storytelling methodological approach with seldom heard GRT communities.

### **Workshop 1**

#### **Methods for queer kinship**

Dr Lizzie Reed (University of Southampton, UK) and Milou Stella (Independent)

Queer kinship exists across the anchoring and reinvention of past, present, and future, though it is persistently conceptualised as being in tension between tradition and radical transformation. A key challenge in engaging with this complex position of fluid reinvention is finding ways to capture experience of, and imagine, queer kinship without setting up a false binary between queer and normative kinship. Drawing on the work from our recent exhibition (Reed and Stella, 2025), our 3-year collaboration, and

published work (Reed and Stella, 2024), we invite attendees to join us in a 45-minute workshop demonstrating methods for researching (and staging of) queer kinship beyond such a binary.

In the workshop, we ask attendees to share a piece of inherited wisdom in the form of a proverb or superstition from your family, culture or country. From here, we'll create new proverbs. We'll also play with magnetic poetry to explore the domestic disruption of fridge magnets and wilful incoherence. There will be time to reflect on what we collaboratively make, explore the imaginative possibilities of playing with inheritances, and to consider the challenges of imagining new futures when our tools to do this are steeped in tradition, experience, and norms. Our activities dramatize the mixing, disruption and stickiness of culture, knowledge, belonging, and tradition in our everyday and generational translations of kinship and belonging.

## **Workshop 2**

### **Creative processes and studying sensitive topics faced by migrant care workers.**

Dr Sharon Ramer Biel, Academic College of Tel Aviv-Yaffo, Israel

This workshop explores the contribution of creative processes to studying sensitive topics faced by migrant care workers. These workers navigate transnational family structures, maintaining emotional closeness with their distant spouses and children while simultaneously managing quasi-familial relationships as live-in caregivers for elderly people. These relationships extend beyond typical employer-employee dynamics, resembling familial ties due to the physical and emotional proximity created by daily interactions and mutual dependence. However, professional hierarchies remain, exposing workers to sexual vulnerabilities from their employers and their families, as well as unrecognized grief and loss when employers pass away.

The workshop introduces a methodological model using creative processes to explore topics that are difficult to approach with conventional qualitative research tools, particularly in the context of cultural and class differences between researchers and participants. Participants will engage in a personal creative process within a group setting, facilitated in an online space where each participant connects from a different physical location. The workshop will demonstrate how to facilitate creative processes on shared topics using various techniques, combining art materials with everyday household items. The session will conclude with an interpretative phase, where participants will describe their work, the creative processes, and their personal interpretations. These interpretations will emerge from the dialogue between the creator and the artwork, as well as the collective group resonance. Together, we will formulate the unique contribution of integrating art as a tool for data collection and analysis in the study of sensitive issues within the context of complex contemporary familial structures.

## **Panel C**

### **Collage as a Creative Method for Exploring the Existential Nature of Childbearing in Contemporary China.**

Hao Li, PhD candidate, Sociology, University of Cambridge, UK.

Qualitative sociological research into families and relationships often uses verbal or textual narratives as primary data sources. While these approaches are effective in capturing articulated beliefs and negotiations, they often fall short in addressing the pre-reflective and existential dimensions of familial decisions. My doctoral research explores how urban women in China negotiate childbearing decisions amidst recent shifts from a one-child to a three-child policy. This paper introduces collage as a creative, visual methodology uniquely positioned to investigate the existential and affective aspects of fertility and family negotiations in contemporary Chinese society.

Collage, as a method, allows participants to visually and materially articulate complex existential themes, such as anxieties, aspirations, cultural pressures, and the embodied experiences surrounding fertility decisions. Drawing on phenomenological frameworks inspired by Merleau-Ponty, this methodological approach recognizes fertility decisions not merely as rational choices but as existential negotiations. Collage empowers participants to creatively express nuanced understandings of selfhood, social expectations, and cultural norms surrounding motherhood and family life, offering comprehensive insights into their lived realities.

Furthermore, collage facilitates participatory and democratic knowledge co-production by disrupting traditional researcher-participant hierarchies. Participants actively shape the research narrative, visually communicating their inner worlds and relational tensions within families. This methodological choice aligns with feminist epistemologies and multimodal methodologies, emphasizing embodied, sensory, and emotional knowledge. By focusing explicitly on collage, this paper highlights its transformative potential to provide deeper insights into fertility negotiations among urban Chinese women.

### ***Why Are Things This Way?***

Dr Eileen Alexander, Fellow, Department of Methodology, London School of Economics, UK.

The presentation takes as its departure point a coproduced artwork titled *Why Are Things This Way?* exhibited at the LSE in spring 2024. The exhibition explores how people conceive of themselves, their relationships, and society at large within the context of the cost of living crisis.

In this current moment – in which the divides in society are stark and growing – it is particularly urgent to create spaces where we can encounter the narratives, analysis

and creative outputs of people who are rarely given public platforms. In this presentation I will argue that the promise of creativity can motivate people who would otherwise refuse to take part in social science research by offering them an expansive and exploratory way of engaging with topics. Rather than extracting a particular experience or engaging with someone based on a limited aspect of their identity, participants are asked – over a sustained period – to draw on the full breadth of their experience to create something new. Methods based on creative practice can offer an ethical way of engaging people in challenging conversations and can create outputs over which group members have control, feel ownership and a sense of pride. This form of research practice directly engages with epistemic injustice by facilitating a research space in which participants actively decide the content and shape of the final research output.

View *Why are things this way?* here: [www.andysewell.com/why](http://www.andysewell.com/why)

### **‘The household portrait’**

Dr Emily Christopher, Aston University, Birmingham, UK.

In this talk I will discuss my use of the interactive, visual methodology, ‘the household portrait’. I used this method as part of a longitudinal study which explored how heterosexual working parent couples divided paid work, housework, and childcare over an eight-year period, including the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath. The ‘household portrait’ involves couples being given a set of housework and childcare cards, each listing a particular task, and then discussing together which member of the couple undertakes each task most of the time. Once they agree they then stick the cards in one of five columns on an A1 sheet of paper relating to the person who ‘mostly’ does the task which are labelled as (a) woman only, (b) woman (man helps), (c) shared, (d) man only, and (e) man (woman helps). This method encourages couples to debate and discuss each other’s perceptions of who carries out tasks. I will talk through how these observable dialogues between couples make visible gendered differences in how couples conceptualize their own and their partner’s contributions. These include varying understandings of what it means to ‘mostly’ do a task, different meanings of the tasks themselves, and the varied criteria which couples draw on to rationalize their perceptions of who does what and why. Further, I will discuss how this sheds light on the reasons behind the well documented differences between partners reporting of task divisions in surveys and, more broadly, implications for our choice of methods within the field of the domestic divisions of labour.

### **Exploring Living Situations and Identities of Hong Kong Youth Immigrants in the UK: A Workshop-Based Illustrative Inquiry.**

Hayes Ng, PhD student, Kingston University, UK.



This contribution presents my current study, which explores the identities and lived experiences of young Hong Kong Chinese immigrants in Kingston upon Thames and nearby areas. Through participatory illustration, this study examines their sense of belonging, cultural adaptation, and personal narratives, offering an innovative approach to migration research. Participatory illustration is not just a means of artistic expression but also a credible research tool that facilitates dialogue and narrative expression. By integrating creative visual methods with social and geographical inquiries, this interdisciplinary approach bridges art-based research, human geography, and cultural heritage studies. It also examines how participants are not passive learners but active contributors to new knowledge in a co-creative role. I aim to propose a short presentation (15 min) and exhibition display. The session will introduce the methodological framework of participatory illustration workshop research in timely social issue, demonstrate selected artworks and visual narratives, and reflect on the role of creative methods in social research. Selected research method include qualitative mapping, object as narrative, emotional pattern making, and personal collage. There are 29 immigrant youth (age 10-17) participating in the study. The exhibition will display 19 pieces of personal collage made by them and translate into AR technology developed from their emotional pattern. This contribution aims to enhance discussion on how illustration may serve as both a research practice and a participatory tool for exploring identity, migration, and cultural integration. It also considers the evolving role of art practitioners in qualitative research. By using creative methodologies, not only will this research amplify underrepresented voices but also provide an alternative approach to studying migration, offering insights for educators, policymakers, and community organisations working with immigrant youth