

SY7035 – Critical review of a published piece of qualitative research.

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1 Introduction

This essay will review “Domestic genealogies” by Lipman and Nash (2019). The objective of their research was to explore how people relate to their homes, how they imagine the lives of previous inhabitants, and how they situate themselves in relation to those lives. The article is split into two parts, and begins with a discussion of how residents relate to previous occupants from the distant past.

1.1 The article

Lipman and Nash take the biographies of a home’s historical occupants separately from the material history of the building. They highlight the ways residents see their house through a form of ‘co-habitation’ with the lives of past occupants. This theme of co-habitation is directly addressed in Lipman’s earlier book, *Co-habiting with Ghosts*. Although Lipman points out that she’s not referring

to ghosts in a paranormal sense – only to the ways by which the presence of past inhabitants is felt and imagined. This approach to genealogy can take on a recreational element (Scully 2018, p. 3), both as a leisure activity, and as a means of recreating the domestic life of the past.

The second part of the article discusses how people relate to the immediate previous occupants of their house. A house is a personal space, it reflects the individual tastes and personality of its occupant, and some participants felt uncomfortable in a house which did not feel like it was theirs. They referred to a desire to assert ownership of the house, to purge the presence of the previous inhabitants (Lipman and Nash 2019, pp. 9-10).

Lipman and Nash note that the transfer of occupancy from one person to another is often mediated by an estate agent. The agent plays a role in separating landlord from tenant, and buyer from seller, so that they might never have to meet in person. This severs the relationship between current and previous occupants, while not quite erasing the physical marks of occupancy left behind on the home. The lives of previous inhabitants were written into the material fabric of the house itself, through choice of wallpaper, furnishings, (ibid., p. 9) or plants in the garden (ibid., p. 11). The article concludes by arguing that the generations of occupants within a house are ‘not unconnected;’ the participants saw their house as a site of ‘shared belonging’ or “kinship” (ibid., pp. 12-13).

1.2 Participant selection

Participants were sought from local history centres, as well as from advertising the project at general community gathering points – supermarkets, libraries, cafes. Some of the participants were actively engaged in researching their domestic genealogies, while others were just satisfying an idle curiosity. The researchers were seeking a broad, if not strictly representative, range of participants. To

that end they also advertised their project through the “traditional methods”(Lipman and Nash 2019, p. 5) of maintaining a website, giving talks, and issuing press releases.

The researchers referred to the ‘emotional stamina’ necessary for finding participants, which suggests it was not an easy process. They identified their nervousness from the long wait for participants to respond, as well as concerns over their ability to engage communities who don’t typically research house biographies. This nervousness is normal, and has been identified as a consequence of the way participants see the researcher. Especially for people new to research, they have a need to appear competent, to give off an aura of credibility and professionalism.(Feldman, Bell, and Berger 2003, pp. 7-8,29) This performance of authority manifests itself as emotional or psychological distress when prospective participants fail to act in accordance with research goals and objectives.

The last point highlighting concerns over engaging different communities is significant as the majority of participants were white British people. This speaks to wider questions about *whose* genealogies are being studied and re-told. Is local history the preserve of a particular group, or the common heritage of the community as a whole? Who ‘owns’ the history of a house? These questions go beyond the practical methods of recruiting participants, although they are relevant to the content of the article. For example, the emotionally-affecting experience of domestic genealogy ties in well with critical ideas of how traditions and communities are ‘invented’(Hobsbawn and Ranger 1992, pp. 1-8) or ‘imagined’(Anderson 2016, p. 6). People interpret domestic genealogies from a personal perspective, so what does their interpretation tell us about the participants themselves? What behaviours and traditions do they value, and why? This could also tie into arguments around how popular heritage is constructed,(Krämer 2005) or areas where the representation of history is contested.

2 Personal reflection

I chose this article partly out of an interest in the temporal/historical aspects of gentrification, and partly due to my own experiences of domestic genealogies. Last year, my parents moved into an old Victorian terraced house. They wanted to put a new floor in, and when comparing the height of the ground floor relative to the street, it was obvious that the house had been through several new floors before. I was taken by the idea that you might dig through the floor of the house, with each layer revealing some intimate clue as to the lives of previous occupants. Lipman refers to this as a form of 'extending archaeological practice' to the home, or 'accidental archaeology'(Lipman 2019, pp. 2,9). It's there that the material qualities of the built environment crossed over with the imagined lives of anonymous families who once lived in the house. I also used to live in a shared student house, where previous students had written their names and dates of occupancy on a section of wall. The list went back several years, and before leaving the house I carried on the tradition, carefully adding my name in biro. It was an important domestic record, especially as student houses churn through a new set of occupants almost every year. The landlord disapproved, and considered it vandalism, but this only gave the act an exciting dissident dimension.

In my research on gentrification, struggles over cultural heritage and ownership of an area are often raised. Connections between the built environment and some imagined past serve as an attractive value, which can be realised by property developers for profit. They also tie into an aspect of gentrification which highlights shifting use values. For example, Lipman and Nash refer to family houses in Lewes which had previously seen mixed use as shops and apartments(Lipman and Nash 2019, p. 12). There is a row of these house conversions on a street near the train station, these transitions leave behind traces, testament to the awkward transition, they result in buildings which seem out of place. Many of them still retain the features of a shop, such as the large display windows.

These windows, previously designed to make the interior open and available to the street, were now covered up to provide residents with privacy. How do the residents feel about that? How do they experience living somewhere which was not originally designed as a living space? These questions point at the shifting of value extending beyond political-economic presumptions to tint the way people relate to their homes on an emotional level.(Harvey 2019)

3 Strengths

Lipman and Nash mentioned that their project resulted in an exhibition, produced collaboratively with the participants, they also asked the participants to conduct tours of their homes as part of the interviews(Lipman and Nash 2019, pp. 14,16). Although the practical details of the method not discussed in any depth in the article, it gives us an indication of the general approach to the research, and the reasons why participatory methods were used. The researchers wanted an insight into how participants related to their homes, and by interviewing them while walking around the house, it gave participants the opportunity to make contextual observations. The setting prompted them to talk about small details, such as in one of Lipman's other articles, where a participant spoke about a brass doorknob.(Lipman 2019, p. 6) The participant speculated about previous residents who had grasped that very same doorknob and passed through the door. Interviewing the participant in their home allowed them to consider their embodied reactions to the domestic setting. As they gave the tour of their house they were prompted to physically re-enact domestic life in a conscious and reflective manner. Elsewhere the participants refer to objects which are visibly worn, and the evidence of past lives marked by years of use. The strength of walking interviews lies in these spontaneous observations. The researcher alone would not have understood the significance of something as ordinary as a scuffed doorknob. At the same time, interviewing the participant in a different setting

outside of their house might not have been as effective in teasing out their most lucid thoughts.

The research approach taken by Lipman was appropriate to the kind of data she was seeking to collect – rich descriptions, personal thoughts, and contextual insights. In-depth interviews were the best method for collecting this kind of qualitative data. More impersonal methods such as surveys might be capable of generating a greater number of responses. However, they have less capacity to prompt subjects to reveal the emotional details which Lipman’s article relies on. Here Lipman leans towards the quality, not quantity of the data. A relevant perspective on the issue of quality comes from Luisa Passerini, who responded to the question ‘how many qualitative interviews is enough?’ that “there is no one number that can define successful qualitative interviews.”(Baker and Edwards 2012, p. 32) He even went as far as to suggest that good research can be done on the basis of a single interview. As a last point on qualitative character of the interview data, it’s interesting that Lipman made no attempt to augment or process her results. If she did code or mark-up the interviews, those editorial additions were not mentioned in the article. She therefore leaves the participants to speak for themselves through her piece, giving their voices a raw, authentic tone.

4 Limitations

Houses are personal spaces, and Lipman’s research falls under what Laine refers to as the “distance-closeness dilemma”(Laine 2000, pp. 108-109). On one side the researcher can subsume themselves in the research activity and join the other participants in the co-production of knowledge. Alternatively, the researcher can refrain from intervening, only there to record data and collect findings. The two approaches to research cannot be reconciled, instead they are framed in terms of a balance between participation and observation. In the case of Lipman, she chose to take an active approach, to en-

ter the participants' home, and in doing so she may have sacrificed her position as a neutral, impersonal spectator. In a previous essay I described this problem as a contradiction arising within "an academic attitude which requires objectivity and detachment, as well as engagement and intimacy."

If Lipman had valued objectivity over intimacy she might have preferred to gather data through an anonymous survey, or by passively listening in on local history meetings. This would have severed any closeness between her and the participants, and thus prevented her from directly influencing the data. The appropriate balance is again determined by the kind of data you want as an outcome. Lipman was not interested in gathering impersonal observations, she was looking for personal and emotional reactions. Douglas Ezzy defends the right of researchers to seek emotional data, arguing that,

if research is always emotionally framed, evaluated, and embodied, then the dispassionate model of research leaves important aspects of the research process unexplored. [...] Each emotional and evaluative framing of the research will produce different forms of knowledge. The challenge, I suggest, is to explicitly acknowledge that embodied emotional orientations always and inevitably influence the research process and to engage these in dialogue.(Ezzy 2010, p. 169)

In other cases, social media has been suggested as a source of personal data which reveals an array of private and guarded emotional thoughts, while also being publicly available(Goodings 2011, pp. 12-16). The blurring of public and private boundaries allow the researcher to gain intimate insights into the lives of subjects, without having to engage or interact with them. However, there are ethical considerations related to collecting social media data, as the frankness of the conversations indicates that participants may not always be aware of how public their platform is. Some organisations

soften this issue by maintaining codes of practice to regulate how they exploit and contribute to voluntary social media.(Richardson 2018, pp. 67-68; Fouseki and Vacharopoulou 2013, pp. 7-8)

Sturges and Hanrahan argued that telephone interviewing is able to produce responses with a similar content and level of quality as face-to-face interviews(Sturges and Hanrahan 2016, pp. 112-113). Phone interviews seem to be set against an academic tendency for creative or innovative methods, which include active interviews such as house tours or walking conversations. Sturges and Hanrahan identify some advantages to a more detached approach to interviewing; they point to benefits in terms of convenience and safety for both the researcher and participant. Neither party has to travel to the same location, and social conventions around telephone use sometimes lead to conversations that are kept brief, without any unnecessary rambling(ibid., p. 108). Another study using telephone interviews cited conversations of “10-37 minutes long”(Elliot et al. 2018, p. 4). The lack of travel, as well as time savings can also make telephone interviewing a cheaper alternative to more engaged interviews. Lastly, Sturges and Hanrahan noted that some participants felt more comfortable on the phone.(Sturges and Hanrahan 2016, p. 109) They were able to speak in confidence with the researcher, while maintaining the illusion of distance represented by the phone line. This again sets out a drastic contrast to Lipman’s interviews, where she entered the participants’ private space to interrogate them in person. Alongside the general benefits of a distant research approach in Sturges and Hanrahan’s study, telephone interviews had a specific benefit for them as their participants were prisoners. Therefore they had to face extra organisational and safety issues around physically accessing their subjects, which was not the case for Lipman.

Researchers can still empower participants while limiting their direct involvement, through the use of photovoice(Woodgate and Kreklewetz 2012). For example, in Lipman’s case, rather than accompanying the participants on their house tour, she could have asked them to film or photograph their tour, and recount their expe-

periences through the resulting imagery. It's another way of balancing the distance-closeness dilemma by giving the researcher a visual and sometimes intimate picture of the participants' life, without the researcher influencing the results by their physical presence. Through photovoice, participants are free to represent their personal space on their own terms. The researcher is then able to interpret their representation through questions of curation, composition, and contextual information provided by participants. However, this method has its own organisational disadvantages, as the researcher may have to spend time collecting, categorising and storing photographs. In some cases the researcher can also be required to provide cameras. Beyond this, photovoice interviews may cross a line from inviting participants into the research process, to allowing them to produce data themselves. Photovoice interviews in particular have to deal with contested ownership over the resulting data, and to what extent participants retain copyright over work they produce.(Woodgate, Zurba, and Tennent 2016, p. 15) For this reason one study preferred to refer to photovoice subjects as 'co-researchers' in order to "acknowledge the contributions made and the power that has been divested [to the participants]"(Woodgate, Zurba, and Tennent 2017, p. 6). Again, these are not issues with walking interviews, as while participants can request that their contribution be retracted, they cannot exert ownership of their words in a legal sense.

5 Conclusion

In conclusion, decisions over research method are determined by the projected research outcome. The kind of data the researcher seeks is in turn determined by their research approach. The way they balance or bring together the closeness-distance dilemma can be a question of philosophical preference.

Much of the literature around methods also deals with technical issues, and these have considerable weight in determining the

suitability of a method. Practical factors such as travel, time, cost, should not be under-estimated when evaluating the conduct of research.

Lipman's example, of relying heavily on a small sample of in-depth and participant-led interviews results from the desire to understand the participant in their totality. By getting close to their participants, the researcher can get a valuable personal perspective, but pushing at those personal boundaries can leave both the researcher and participant vulnerable. A distant approach can be more comfortable for all sides, yet a researcher who is too detached might lose the opportunity to capture granular, intimate observations.

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