**Montage Ethnography**

The past twenty years have been exciting ones for ethnographers and we can look forward to a bright and variegated future. Just as innovation becomes a major theme in studies of corporations, of public agencies and of economic activity, ethnographers are innovating at a pace. We have seen experiments with photographic and other visual methods, the use of smell to prompt memory and reflection and ventures into the virtual worlds of netnography and autonetnography. There is no shortage of innovative methods to explore the ways in which others understand and make sense of their worlds and to open up aspects of daily life that have proven hard to observe in a more traditional fashion.

The innovations in technique and technology help us, as ethnographers, as we engage in discussions with our collaborators/informants. But we confront dilemmas when we wish to represent this raw material, the images and smells, to other audiences. There are very real ethical issues, perhaps particularly ones of consent and anonymity. But there are also artistic/aesthetic questions. That is, the photos taken by our participants may not in themselves communicate much in the way of meaning. They do not easily convey to a third party, the distant reader, what they might to the researcher and, more particularly, their subject. We glean deeper insights in discussion with informants about the meanings they associate with images and smells. But we are left with the questions of translation, selection and authenticity.

As we reflect upon our fieldnotes, interviews and, perhaps, photos and other materials, we seek to represent, to translate and to interpret in ways that, we hope, will convey some insight, some fragment of our informant’s truth. But in that process, we are always aware that we, as researcher and author, stand between the reader and the field. Morten Arnfred doesn’t offer a way out of this perennial dilemma. Instead, after that process, of editing and selecting, looking for items that will hold the attention of the audience while not offering a false image, montages and specifically polyphonic sound montages still convey the voice, the sounds of the original and offers it directly to another audience. We all know of the story, told to us alone, full of emotion and meaning. We can repeat that, offering it up with our own interpretations taken as authorised readings. What would others make of the story as told, with inflection and emotion, with imagery, with pauses and hesitations? I tell one story that I cannot complete without tears, but my audience all too often looks uncomfortable and embarrassed. How would they respond were they to hear the story as told to me? Where my emotion might feel inauthentic, the original recording would convey something more directly affecting.

In this chapter, Morten Arnfred is not only concerned with one more innovation in method. He is also concerned with the way this innovation offers insights into the very process of innovation in a health service setting. Representing the experience of users, consumers, clients or customers to those with the power to make changes that will affect that experience is fraught with methodological and ethical challenges. The shortcomings of approaches that employ mystery shoppers, surveys or citizens’ panels have become familiar. Each, in different ways, struggles with questions of veracity, legitimacy, authority, authenticity and representativeness. There are also serious questions of power, perhaps particularly in a health setting. Given these difficulties, how might we, as ethnographers, present the client perspective to those with professional and institutional power in ways they will hear?

The polyphonic sound montage offers a way of allowing users to speak and be heard by professionals while allowing for some of the issues of power to be neutralised. It allows for more than the few voices that can be heard in more traditional consultation formats. And it allows the voices to convey the depth of feeling and authenticity that is often lost in extracts and text. The technique still requires an intense process of editing and analysis, a process that is also in part an aesthetic one, creating a sound montage that is more than a cacophony of contradictory voices. But in that montage, some of the tendency to impose order and structure on our data is tempered by the more nuanced ways in which informants actually express themselves.

There are perhaps contexts in which the polyphonic sound montage is more appropriate than others. Morten Arnfred discusses its value in the process of innovation in a health setting. This is very explicitly action research. As a collaborative process used, in this context, to inform professionals, there would be potential for harm in a total institution. Voices could not be anonymous in the way they might be for out-patients. And in other contexts, perhaps where the audience is not genuinely prepared to listen, the potential for challenge, destabilization and rupture become less innovative and more dangerous.

We might also ask what the value of polyphonic sound montages might be outside of an action research context? As an editor of a journal, one who always encourages authors to experiment with the way they present their fieldwork, it does strike me that there is further potential for montages to convey some of the sound and emotions of the field. As printed output declines and as articles are increasingly accessed and read in electronic formats, should we be incorporating sound clips embedded in articles? Might we replace indented bodies of text, lengthy quotes and tales told by ethnographers with the voices of the field?