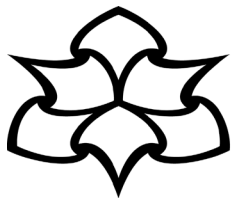


# *Ethical challenges of co-production*

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**Manchester  
Metropolitan  
University**



Economic  
and Social  
Research Council



Arts and  
Humanities  
Research Council

# In this talk I will:

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- Explain the methodologies I used to co-produce with community partners.
- Describe some of the ethical challenges I faced in my projects,
- Provide some suggestions for good practice.

*Photo credit Steve Pool.*





## About my work:

- The context for work is interdisciplinary.
- Much of my work attempts to listen to voices of children and young people.
- I will draw on three case studies to explain my ideas.

*Photo credit Zoey Ashcroft*



# Projects I will describe:

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- *‘Imagine’* (ESRC) 2012-2017. Focus on the cultural context of civic engagement. Worked with community partners in Rotherham to co-produce a book.
- *‘Odd: Feeling Different in the world of education’* (AHRC) 2019-2022. Focus on children’s feelings of feeling Odd in school. Made films with small groups of children to explore their feelings of Oddness.
- *‘Voices of the Future’* (NERC) 2021-2024. Exploring children and young people’s engagement with Treescapes. Working with tree scientists to measure below-ground tree roots together with co-creating new treescapes.

# Connected Communities Programme Aim

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*To research 'community' with, by and for communities*

- Understanding the changing nature of communities in their contexts, and the role of communities in sustaining and enhancing our quality of life

Through...

- Interdisciplinary research with a strong arts & humanities element
- Collaborative research with communities at all stages of the research process

# Ethical challenge 1:

- How to involve all of the community partners in writing.
- Working to explore the cultural context of civic engagement with one community, Rotherham.
- Focused on people who were working with young people across a range of communities.
- 'Imagine' project, funded by ESRC, ran from 2012-2017.

# THE OTHER SIDE MIDDLETOWN

Exploring Muncie's African American Community



EDITED BY

## Collaborative ethnography

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In that ethnographers work with local communities to construct their texts, the approach to ethnography, as a method is essentially collaborative. But what makes ethnographic writing collaborative is closely involving consultants in the actual writing of the text (Lassiter et al 2004:19)

*Lassiter, L.E. Goodall H. Campbell, E and Johnson, M.N. (Eds) The Other Side Of Middletown: Exploring Muncie's African American Community. Walnut Creek: Altamira Press.*

# Reciprocal analysis

An ethnography that makes collaboration an explicit and deliberate part of both fieldwork and the broader processes of research, interpretation, and writing is not just about producing more dialogically centered and multivocal texts ...Because it also seeks to encourage more ethically responsible practices, verifications of findings, and reciprocal analysis...(Campbell and Lassiter 2010 p.377)



# Re-imagining contested communities

CONNECTED COMMUNITIES  
Creating a new knowledge landscape

Connecting Rotherham  
through research

edited by

Elizabeth Campbell, Kate Pahl, Elizabeth Ponte  
and Zanib Rasool



## The 'Imagine' project

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- Community partners came together to plan the 'Imagine' project in 2011.
- They came up with the ideas, eg 'Silk and Steel' 'Re-imagining the future' 'Portraits of British Muslims'.
- People were given the same financial support as academics and their knowledge was treated seriously.
- Time for writing was set aside. Meetings were held to set up the discussion.

# Co-writing practices

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- Horizontal writing structure – all voices were important.
- Artists and poets (Shahin Shah, Zahir Rafiq, Cassie Limb, Nathan Gibson, Ray Hearne, Ryan Bramley) also had equal weight.
- Historians listened to local history experts.
- Parents co-wrote their chapter on parenting.
- Young people involved in poetry and writing and photography.
- Multiple re-presentations – visual, poetic, artistic.

# Re-thinking knowledge production practices in communities

After 30 years of working in the community, I advocate the view that everybody holds the key to knowledge. It can be found in every community and every house in the land, although we put different value on that knowledge.

People in our communities have life experiences and cultural experiences. Through these they acquire their own knowledge base, and we should not disregard this when we work with communities. Through this project we were able to celebrate 'funds of knowledge' in our community.  
(Rasool 2017: 314)

# Theory/Living knowledge

The mission of collaborative ethnography is to bring the academic research endeavour closer to communities, and to generate knowledge together, which is more authentic, representative and negotiated with communities. The questions of 'Whose knowledge?' and 'Who speaks for whom?' is an issue that should be asked of all research – and indeed all knowledge claims. In this book, we can see an emerging parity in the status of the different voices and knowledge presented.

*(Robert Rutherford and Maria O'Beirne, Department of Communities and Local Government)*



# Take-aways

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- Building relationships take time.
- Go where people are – don't expect them to come to you.
- Always provide snacks that are appropriate.
- Recognize that writing is not always what people do – record conversations, work with other modalities.
- Do not assume that academics know everything but recognize that some academics know something.
- Build communities within a model of horizontal knowledge production.

## Ethical challenge 2: How to deal with 'no':

- How to respect young people's wishes in terms of saying 'no' to research.
- Based in a school, it was an interdisciplinary 3-year project to explore with children and young people the experience of feeling Odd.
- I worked with an artist, Steve Pool, to co-produce the research with year 4-6 children using film and research-creation as a methodology.
- Drawing on an AHRC project called 'Odd: feeling different in the world of Education' PI Rachel Holmes, with Steve Pool, Becky Shaw, Amanda Ravetz and Jo Ray (2018-2021)

## What we did ....

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The project was from 2018-2021. The last piece of work was done just after lock-down (2021). We worked with the same group of children over 3 years, from years 4-6.

- We asked the children what they might perceive as odd and different.
- The children made short films in self-directed small groups.
- In the first set of film-making activities, (when the children were year 4) Steve did the filming with the children producing and directing.
- In the second round of film making, the children made the films as well as devised them. From this the work developed into conference presentations and a set of group discussions about the films.

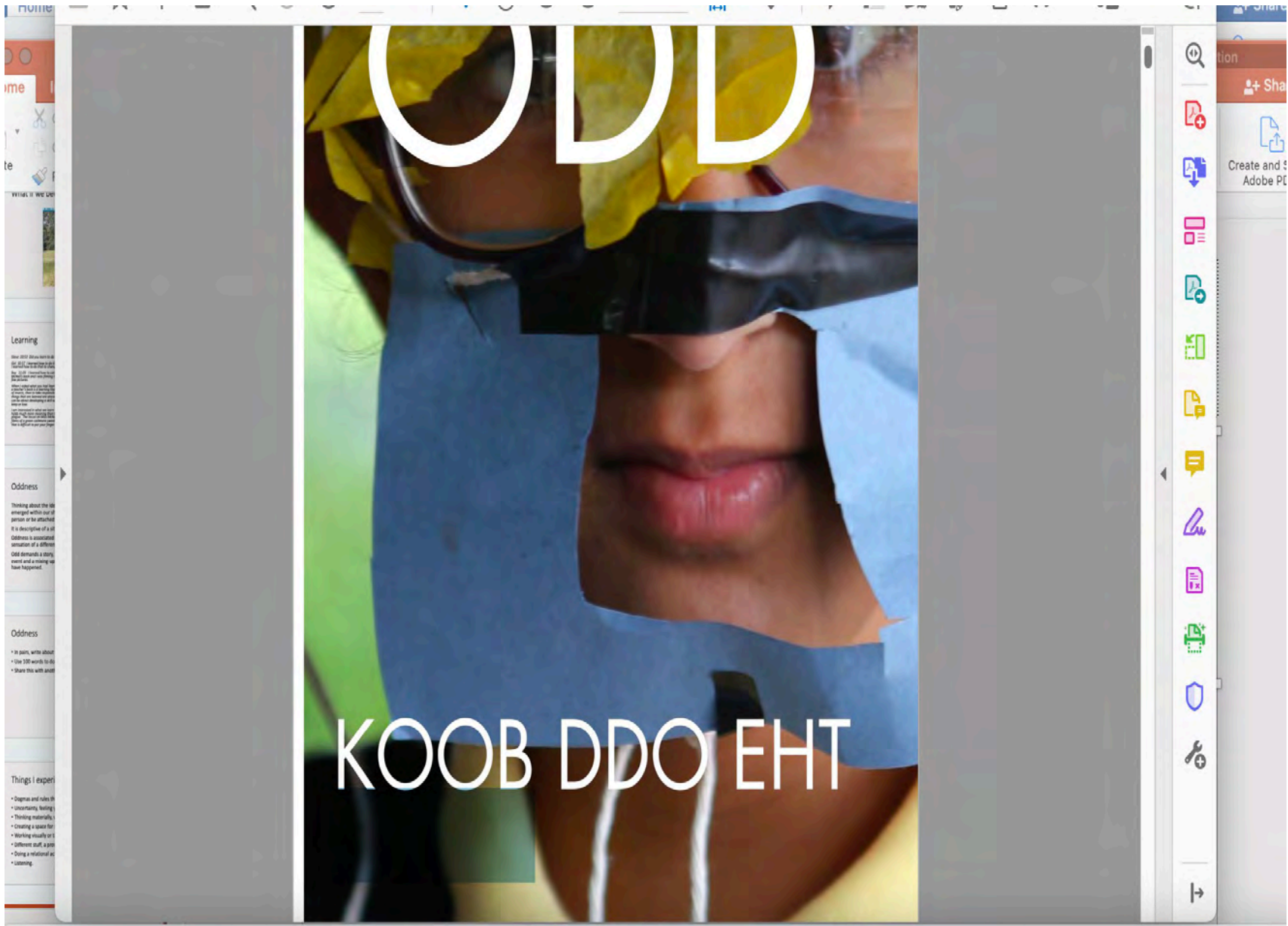
# July 2021

- We returned to the school. The children were now in year 6.
- We spent a week with them making a series of short films.
- We asked them for permission to do the film making with them at the beginning of the week.
- At the end of the week we asked again, but this time if we could show the films (there were 6 films) to the outside world.
- In each group there was one young person who said 'no'.
- So... we made a book for the young people instead.



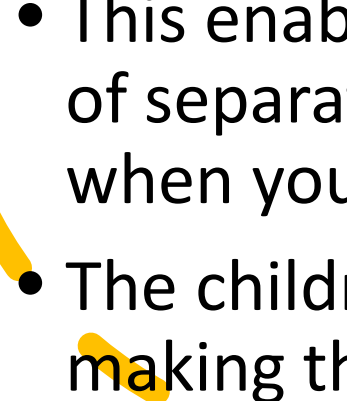
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# How we solved this:

- When we wrote the project up, we recorded our own reflections and the process. We drew on a methodology called ‘Research-creation’.
  - Research-creation is a process driven mode, from arts practice, of recognizing the moment of making in research. It is a way of recognizing the work, not focusing on the children.
  - This enables us to think about how ‘data’ is constructed, and instead of separating out the people and the data, consider what happens when you bring them together.
  - The children then ‘own’ the data in a new way – and they decided on making the book.
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# Takeaways

- Recognise that 'no' is a really good word – especially for particular groups (women and girls).
- Work with consent particularly with older children, assent is not enough to recognize their work.
- Consider how you work with data from children - try and bring the data together with the children. This might include bringing them to conferences to co-present and co-writing with children and young people.
- Make ethics the focus of your project, not an awkward milestone.
- Do not take pictures of children, ever, without explicit consent.

## Ethical challenge 3: the good research child

- The 'Voices of the Future' NERC project is concerned with children as inheritors of a world at risk of collapse through climate change.
- It is about children and young people as co-planters and designers of treescapes as well as scientists, measuring carbon sequestration in urban trees.
- However, it rests on a 'willing group' of citizen scientists to do this work. Public engagement projects often rest on this idea – of the keen interested citizen.
- We realised this was creating an ethical dilemma – that of the 'good research child'. So we asked the question, how are Good Research Children produced, what work do they do and how can we resist their pull?



# 'Good' children produce certain kinds of data

- How can we acknowledge the full range of children's experiences of the world?
- The construction of the Good Research Child can silence other modes, stories and ways of being.
- Notions of childhood that emphasise agency, competence, individualised lived experience, rational perspectives and self-determined subjects, validate particular versions of being human (McKittrick, 2015).
- We rarely encounter unlikable or unrelatable children in childhood research; this works to continue to over-represent Good Research Children as normal or natural.

# Take aways...

- Consider the practices you want to do and be prepared to change them.
- Place your gaze onto everyone – don't have children who are 'good answerers' and put their hands up as the focus.
- Work with children's capacities and timescales.
- Do not rely solely on language as a form of communication.
- Do not 'use' children as a way of making your project more attractive e.g. the compliant tree-planting child.





# General take aways...

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- Think about what your data is reproducing. Reflect on the assumptions lying behind your data.
- Enable and support people who say no to being in research.
- Consider whose voice counts and why.
- Multilingual, multimodal knowledge tends to be less visible to people. Knowledge is not always encoded in reports- films and images might be better.
- Recognize practices within the real world, and de-centre the sites and spaces of the thinking – hold more meetings in playgrounds.



# My publications

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# Any questions?

- [K.pahl@mmu.ac.uk](mailto:K.pahl@mmu.ac.uk)
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- The 'Voices of the Future' research team especially Samyia Ambreen, Simon Carr, Peter Kraftl, Caitlin Nunn, Steve Pool, Zoey Ashcroft and Blackrod Primary School.
- 'Good research child' writing team Mel Hall and Abi Hackett.
- Steve Pool, artist.