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Institute of Public Policy and Management Symposium on  
Current Developments in Ethnographic Research in the Social and Management Sciences**

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**Stream: Ethnography and practice based research**

**“Is this ethnography? A critical evaluation of methodological choices and their  
consequences in a piece of practice-based research.”**

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This paper speaks to the symposium themes of ethnographic work in a social policy context and addresses some of the issues raised by ‘ethnography and practice based research’. The context was one of a youth inclusion programme in the UK. The practice in question was that of participatory evaluation. Between 2004-2006, with colleagues at a UK University I was involved in evaluating a government programme called Play On (a pseudonym) aimed at at-risk, marginalised and excluded youngsters, aged 10-19, in the most deprived areas of England. The programme used leisure and cultural activities in order to engage these youngsters, build relationships with them and support them in (re)-establishing themselves in employment, education, and/or training. Our team was commissioned to research young people’s views and experiences of the programme in four local areas. The values and aspirations of the Play On programme can be described as wanting to support young people in overcoming ‘limit situations’ (Freire, 1970). Likewise, our evaluation was inspired by a tradition of raising critical consciousness through participatory research (Freire, 1970).

At the same time as working on the evaluation I was undertaking my doctoral research at the same University. The doctoral study was designed to respond to the question of ‘what happens when we say we are working in a participatory way?’ and the youth inclusion programme and our participatory evaluation became my case study. The study explored traditional approaches to critical consciousness raising (e.g. Freire, 1970), re-examining these studies through a ‘practice’ lens (de Certeau, 1984). I used an ethnographic approach (Van Maanen, 1988) to create a meta-narrative of my own and others’ practice. My aim was to explore the gap between formal and informal accounts of participatory practice and in doing so provide a more nuanced and contextualised understanding of the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion.

The current paper critically reflects on my decision to frame the research as a piece of ‘ethnography’ in order to achieve the research aims. Since completing the research my attempts to write up those aspects of the project pertaining to my own participatory practice have proved

a challenge. This has led me to reflect on the ethnographic framing of my research. In this paper I ask whether ethnography was the most appropriate genre for 'stepping back and questioning assumptions' in practice-based research. I explore this through an analysis of the decisions I made in my research, why I made those decisions, and under what conditions.

The paper begins by situating the reader in the study context. I introduce youth inclusion policy in the UK under the New Labour government and describe the specific youth inclusion programme and its evaluation that are the focus on this paper. The main body of the paper analyses the decisions to frame the study ethnographically. My decision was governed by a number of concerns, most notable of which was a strong *desire to be critical* of what I saw as the limitations of 'emancipatory' practice, at least as this had so far been dealt with in my own discipline of social psychology. As such, throughout the study there is a strong emphasis on *resistance*; indeed, the title of the thesis was 'disrupting the emancipatory narrative'.

At the time of the research the ethnographic approach helped me to be critical. In retrospect however, I have come to realise that through my choice of framing I have inadvertently, and quite ironically given the research topic, excluded myself from the very things I wanted to be a part of and hence, my difficulties in writing about participatory practice. From the vantage point of two years hence, there is something frustratingly artificial about my choice of ethnography. In this paper I explore these tensions and the reasons that I have retrospectively found 'ethnography' constraining. My analysis draws on a feminist social psychology and theory (Hollway, 1989; Gallop, 2002) that 'insinuated' itself (de Certeau, 1984) in my research at the time but was never fully realised. The paper concludes by reflecting on the possibilities and limitations of ethnography for practice-based research, it looks at the insights that feminist theory adds to the praxis of inclusion, as well as how it might be used to generate creative resistance (de Certeau, 1984) in practice-based research.

## References

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