Voicing concerns: (re)considering modes of presentation

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Abstract

How do we use empirical data? How do we present it? And, what work does data do? These questions are particularly pertinent for researchers that use voices from participants, such as interview or focus group data. For scholars who explore the spatialities of the social world, we must ask, how can we make such data 'speak' for and about such complexities? The problem of data presentation persists -- particularly because the conventional outputs of choice such as the conference paper or the traditional academic journal article still restrict what can be achieved in allowing participant voices to be heard. This paper explores how scholars might use data in more experimental and creative ways, suggesting what work might such presentations methods do in helping our research 'speak'? It considers how one method, which is termed the 'data ensemble', may be used to effectively present qualitative material with breadth and depth to both demonstrate analysis and provoke thought.

Key words

Data, participant voices, presentation

There are many ways of knowing geographical knowledge and, in recent decades, the proliferation of 'experimental' and 'creative' geographies (see Last 2012 and Hawkins 2013, respectively) has prompted a consideration of innovative data collection methods, such as the use of video, art, poetry, sketching, participatory action research, and so on. Yet, there is still a need

to grapple with how we *present* data. The problem of data presentation persists, and in large part this is because the conventional outputs of choice, such as the conference paper or the traditional academic journal article, constrain what can be achieved in allowing, for example, participant voices to be heard. For an academic tasked with condensing their (particularly qualitative) wealth of data, a conference presentation, for example, encompasses a variety of restrictions. In this paper, I outline my own struggles with presenting participant voices from my research into new-build prisons, and proffer an approach that relies not on the in-depth contextualisation of quotes, but rather in invoking an affective atmosphere, via a performative assembling of the spoken word, that conveys something of these diverse voices and the emotional charges, sustained preoccupations, and anxieties that they conveyed to me.

Following fieldwork conducted as part of an RCUK project focussing upon the responses of prisoners and prison staff to the design of new-build prisons in the UK and Scandinavia, I had in my possession 70 interview and 28 focus group transcripts containing conversations ranging from 35 to 270 minutes in duration. Each one of these minutes I had meticulously coded using NVivo software. After a period of analysis, I had divided these transcripts into what were now 94 different nodes[1]. In one example, the associated node for "cleanliness" itself contained 62 references from 41 different sources (see Figure 1).

<Insert Figure 1 *about here>*

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[1] A node is like a container for qualitative data. It can be named according to themes or concepts, for example. Sources and data are assigned or 'tagged' to one or multiple nodes in order to find and analyse patterns and trends.

The inclusion in a conference presentation of even just two or three of the lengthier extracts illustrated in Figure 1 would be unusual. Notwithstanding that at such a wide-ranging conference such as the Annual Meeting of the American Association of Geographers (AAG), audience members would require a certain contextualisation of the empirical and theoretical agenda, data presentation must take place fairly rapidly within the 15-20 minute allotted timescale; a timescale that even the most seasoned academic will no doubt report as passing by unbelievably quickly. Inevitably this places a restriction upon what can be presented. Qualitative data presentation often finds itself restricted to three or four central themes demonstrated by or anchored to the same number of representative quotes from participants. Interview schedules are abbreviated to single questions, and ethnographic accounts segmented into manageable portions of time or discrete occurrences. The question becomes: How can we present data in more experimental and creative ways, and what work might this do in helping our research 'speak'? Here, I consider how one method, which I term the 'data ensemble', may be used to effectively present qualitative material with breadth and depth to both demonstrate analysis and provoke thought.

Using data differently

As Mitch Rose explains, "[t]he work of empirics is the work of evidence" (2016, 3). In their traditional manifestations, written scholarship and conferences papers have incorporated interview and focus group material via the inclusion of direct and/or paraphrased quotations in order to "support research claims, illustrate ideas, illuminate experience, evoke emotion, and provoke response" (Sandelowski 1994, 479). After all "…writing is the most important part of

the research: when all is said and done, the world is left with not else but the text" (Alasuutari 1995, 177).The writing up of participants' voices inevitably involves selection and editing. And Sandelowski acknowledges that this process involves a delicate balance "between the obligations of scientific reporting and the taking of artistic license" (1994, 479). This may involve arranging words or sentences together in the order that they appear in the original transcription. Yet, omissions or additions are often made using notation devices such as parentheses or ellipses in order to ensure a participant's meaning is fully conveyed (Sandelowski 1994, 481). Whilst choices about inclusion may be aesthetic or ethical ones, published works are also "constrained by journal specifications concerning style and length of presentation" (Sandelowski 1994, 480).

Notwithstanding the inclusion of lengthier excerpts from ethnographic field diaries (such as that demonstrated by Rose [2014]) or the presence of multiple scholarly citations (such as in Allan Pred's [1995] *montage*), quotes from participants are almost always displayed as single lines integrated into sentences, or as entirely separate indented paragraphs if they are approximately 40 words or more (as dictated by the author guidelines by publishers). Such a prescriptive nature of writing may well hamper the author's ability to fulfil Immy Holloway's requirements of a piece of qualitative research: that is, to "reconstruct a vivid picture of the world of the participants … and tell a compelling story" (2005, 270).

In my early consideration of a method for data presentation I experimented with the possibility of using Word Trees generated from nodes in the NVivo programme. These display the results as a tree with branches representing the various contexts in which a word or phrase occurs. Yet, as illustrated in Figure 2, with a frequently recurring word even a small segment of a Word Tree is

visually unwieldy for a reader and would be impossible to relay verbally to an audience. Furthermore, as Mattingley posits, "[s]uppose that some stories are not told so much as acted, embodied, played, even danced" (2000, 181). Interviews are "dynamic and aural performances … which we are researchers frequently turn into visual and static texts" (Wiles et al. 2005, 90). Having recently carried out the research, *I* remember the participants. *I* can visually and audio-recall the interviews. The audio recordings themselves archive the chaos of focus groups; the spluttered exasperations; the too-long pauses; and the casual, pondering, grammatically-disastrous sentences. To be sure, my reading out of these quotations can become an effort to convey the prosodic and temporal markers of sentences, such as intonation, pitch, pause and pace. But, how can this be consolidated into the format of a chapter, article or conference presentation? How can we capture the "textured worlds of research participants" (Canniford 2012, 394)?

<Insert Figure 2 *about here>*

In their appraisal of the technique of narrative analysis, Wiles et al. (2005) demonstrate how stanzas, commas, lines and pauses can all be used to piece together a presentation that stresses the participant's meaning, emphasis and interaction with the interviewer/wider research audience. In particular, "[t]his form of presentation also moves towards expressing the oral nature of interviews, bridging the gap between spoken narrative and the character of words on paper" (Wiles et al. 2005, 95). Other authors have appropriated the technique of poetic transcription, whereby interview scripts are transformed into poem-like compositions from the words of participants (Glesne 1997, 202). Once a taboo form of scholarly writing, poetry is now

acknowledged as a "means to embrace the experience and active presence of researchers within research procedures" (Canniford 2012, 391). These are often highly interpreted, with the researcher opting to 'illustrate' and 'sense' rather than recount the research evidence, with the aim of facilitating deeper immersion and an intense connectedness with the concept under study (Davidson et al. 2012, 121). Here, "[t]he poetic rendering of the interview transcript contains the key phrases with respect to those themes, yet binds them in an emotive, compelling and powerful bundle" (Canniford 2012, 394). Additionally, the oftentimes brief and rhythmic cadence of poetry may ensure that these words speak to individuals beyond the more traditional medium of academic writing (Davidson et al. 2012, 121).

Taking inspiration from these methods of narrative analysis and poetic transcription, I utilised the voices of multiple participants to develop a poetic narrative -- a data ensemble -- that aims to achieve two distinct aims. First, I want to convey the breadth of voices noted in my research. Second, I want to facilitate a more engaged, emotive and participatory response from the audience to whom the research is presented. The term ensemble may refer to a group of musicians, actors, or dancers who perform together, or to a piece of music or passage written for performance by a whole cast, choir, or group of instruments. It can also refer to the coordination between performers executing an ensemble passage. What this term brings to the fore, then, is a group of items viewed as a whole rather than individually: for my purposes, it denotes a series of quotations from a variety of participants that systematically address a particular theme or agenda. The composition may indeed be 'musical' or 'lyrical', with the different voices carrying different rhythms, keys and even words to generate that harmonious whole. Multiple participant quotes can also be juxtaposed to highlight anomalies and the nuances of spoken word. The author may

find merit in including variations of the same or similar words or phrases to highlight their significance (see ensemble 1). They may also demonstrate the disparity in opinions by quoting excerpts from different participants directly pro/preceding each other (see ensemble 2).

It must be acknowledged that many academic writers have indeed guarded against exactly this type of method. Indeed, scholars concerned with qualitative presentation have discouraged the common error of "gratuitous" (Sandelowski 1994, 480) over-quoting where multiple excerpts represent only one idea when one or two would be sufficient, under the guise of "thick description" (Geertz 1973). Yet, I would argue, such repetition provides a sense of the scale of a particular thematic: rather than be told that "most" or "some" participants responded in a particular way, the reader/listener is able to appreciate the variety of different means by which these aspects are expressed. It must also be acknowledged that strong guidance has been outlined surrounding the introduction and contextualisation of quotes. Sandelowski notes the common mistake of presenting a quote "with no guidance as to what the reader is to see (or the listener is to hear) in the quote" (1994, 481). Indeed, the style sheet for *GeoHumanities* (2016) submissions also advises that "[i]t is useful if the author provides some basic information about the interview subject -- i.e., their name or a pseudonym, their job or position, a date if pertinent, etc. -- at the point at which they are quoted, in the text, in a parenthetical note, or in an endnote". This is something that the ensemble technique does not explicitly outline. In many cases, participants' responses do not come with further explanation or context. Often, they are brief, staccato, gut reactions that remain undeveloped. In this case, we are in danger of 'writing in' too much context for such responses. Yet, their juxtaposition with lengthier excerpts can also demonstrate the bluntness, vagueness or simply the brevity of a participant's response, responding to Holloway's

(2005) assertion that 'good' stories are not always well-structured. By using a data ensemble, we can indeed be "mindful of the fact that academic and research work needs also be structured" whilst representing the regularly haphazard and chaotic 'real' world of research (Holloway 2005, 282). This is particularly effective when responses to a particular interview question are grouped together, as in the first example below.

Sandelowski further warns that "quotes should be properly interpreted" since they permit more than one interpretation (1994, 481). Indeed, as Mitch Rose explains, "[g]eography, after all, is not literature" (2016, 2). Qualitative data presentation must, as noted at the outset, do the work of evidencing. Yet, "Post-modernists, in any case, see the text as local and historical and ever changing through its reading, not as an authoritative account of the 'truth'" (Holloway 2005, 277). Although it is apparent that there are certain tensions within such an approach to data presentation, the strength of this poly-vocal transcriptive mode (Canniford 2012, 394) lies in its richness and intensity in conveying the voices of the participants involved. In the following section, I demonstrate two examples of a data ensemble.

The data ensemble: voicing data

The following ensembles are generated from recent fieldwork conducted at a newly-built prison in the UK. The research focused upon the impact of prison design, architecture and technology upon the lived experience of carceral space for prisoners and staff.

Ensemble 1

*"You've obviously talked a lot about hygiene and being **clean**. Is that something that worries you in this environment?"*

"Aye, because if I sit down at the dining table, hepatitis can be hanging around for six months."

"Have you been vaccinated?"

"Aye."

"So you should be alright?"

"No, you can still catch **Hep C** … did you not know that? You can't do anything against **Hep C**. So maybe *you* need to start getting a test, if *you've* been hanging in prison for that long!"

"You're never sure what you can catch. You get a little cut on your finger and bashed up against the wall and it's got hepatitis or HIV."

"**Hep C**."

"…**Hep C**."

"**Hep**atitis **C**."

"And it doesn't even help that you've got a co-pilot who has **Hep C**, know what I mean?"

"I'm **Hep C** positive … And if there's any blood spills you've got to get a hazardous waste trained cleaner to come up. They get an extra wage for it. It's absolutely worth your while getting slashed. As long as you're doing the slashing. Because if there's a blood spill or excrement, urine, whatever, we refuse to touch that it gets coned off and then the ICP guys with the suits and the masks on, spray it with powder, take it… unless you're trained to do that you don't have to do it. Why should we put ourselves at risk of disease of the other inmates, or screws, or whatever?"

"I remember [the mattress] used to have a cloth over it, but now they're all rubber, obviously because of germs and all that. They know about **Hep C** and all these things, so it can easily be washed down."

"Well, this prison definitely has the best toilets … but it's not got toilet seats. …You might have a bit of a splash over there and not realise it and then go to the toilet and sit down on it, it transfers to your legs and then next week you can get infections and stuff."

"…my gaff's *pristine*."

"So when you get to your cell the first thing you do is give it a good *clean* so it's set to your standard."

"I've twice mopped my floor today."

"[The prison in this photograph] looks *clean* so you would feel *clean*. No matter how many times you have a shower or whatever here, you'd still feel a lot *clean*er there."

"It's bogging. It's always bogging."

"They're never told to *clean* up … so the bare minimum gets done."

"I like a *clean* cell."

"I like a *clean* cell."

"The toilet's not really the best thing. There's no pan to sit on. You know, if you piss you've either got to be sitting on your own piss or you've got to keep it *clean*."

"It's *clean*."

"My cell's *clean* anyway."

"They've made it so it can be *clean*ed easily."

"I didn't like it for a start, it was rough like … vandalised and not *clean*, disgusting like."

"…I like the feeling of freshness and professionalism, I suppose it is an institution for punishment so as long as it's *clean* it's the main thing for me, it's *clean*, that's important to me that it's clean."

"Less risk of contamination, for sure, yeah. At home, your choice one or two, maybe three, including your son. Here, hundreds of feet."

"…well, the way I am, I try to keep it *clean*."

"Not sterile. *Clean*. Everything's *clean*."

"There should be carpet in the cells and not a lot of people like it being lino… After you have had your shower when you come back into your cell, your feet are dirty again within seconds. If you had carpet, that wouldn't happen."

"There is a guy two doors up from me, he is not the *clean*est person."

"This is definitely the best jail I've been in, out of all of them, the *clean*est anyway."

"…it's *clean*er."

"It is easy to *clean*."

"It just looked clinically *clean*. I knew the stuff in it would be good…"

"I need to *clean* it."

"It just needs to be *clean*."

"This is a small community. This is a community in here. And if somebody's not getting washed, somebody's not getting *clean*, somebody's not looking after their selves, it then impacts other people. It makes other people angry. Small problems turn into a big problem. If somebody's dirty, if someone's not getting out, it then creates problems."

Ensemble 2

What colour is prison?

"I don't know."

"That's the last thing on your head, know what I mean? The colour in the jail."

"You could paint my living room a different colour and **I probably wouldn't notice**!"

Can you tell me what colour is on the wall outside education?

"I think it is orange. Is it orange? Or is it green. **I can't remember** … I'm going to say I think it's green. …**I think** that PT is orange. Or is it blue**?** The health bit's blue, I think. And then everything's green. God, **I don't know**."

Education is green … But PT is purple.

"Purple? Jeez, **I would never have got that**."

If I asked you what colour is on the wall outside the gym would you be able to tell me?

"No. **Probably green** or something. …**I don't really care**. I'm in jail, so I've just got to get the head down and get on with my sentence."

"Magnolia **I think** that's it aye. That's the type of soothing colours you get … it's a colour that keeps you happy."

"Coming in you get used to it and after a while **you don't really notice** to be honest. Maybe subconsciously it would make a difference would it. **You don't know**."

"**It might all be blue** ... I hardly notice it … I'm going from A to B."

 "There's colour but it still feels colourless."

"…I feel like I am in a hospital it's just feel like down in here for some reason and the white because I feel like there maybe be colours but everywhere should just be white walls and everyone should be just strapped to a straightjacket, that's how."

"It just looks clean with those colours."

"That's too much. In here it's like the floor and all that, like you look up, it's red, it's patched. **I don't know.** I don't like it, but some people do so each to their own isn't it? But at the end of the day it still looks clean, it still looks well-run."

"I don't like the green. It's unlucky."

"What does green mean? It looks like a place they'd put people who need some special care. Does it make a difference? Have they made it that green because they're too wild or are they too calm? **Do you know?**"

 "It's too bright, it'd do your head in that green. I'd get sick of it. That would drive you mad, see because we're in here constantly. Like see it's not pastels or anything that they've put up it's actually warmer colours they've put up here. But see if we were to walk round in that colour of green **I think**, well I know it would put me more agitated."

"It looks cold. A very, very cold atmosphere. See if you go out and look at the colours we've got, how does that feel to you? **I think** that green and that purple is a calm and warming colour. It's more homely. You need colours that are more relaxing. But what kind of shitty colour is that? **I think** that walking about in that colour of green would send me loopy."

Complications with compilation

Whilst this type of data presentation results in a rich and insightful representation of the research field, it nevertheless raises some tensions, particularly if these ensembles are 'performed' through the medium of a conference paper, for example. First, it may be difficult for an audience to discern where one 'voice' ends and other begins. Quotes from a variety of individuals may appear amalgamated as 'one voice'. Indeed, as Howarth explains, traditionally quotes help to "individual (speakers) rather than blur them into data" (1990, 109). Additionally, without the use

of pseudonyms *per se* instances where the author has included more than one quote from one single individual may not be obvious as such. Second, due to the nature of the spoken presentation (and to some extent due to the narrative 'voice' generated by academic writing more generally) there is a difficulty in associating speech that is bound up in the identity of the author of the paper themselves. For example, it is clear that my female voice with its Yorkshire accent is not indicative of the predominantly male participants, generally hailing from the North East of Scotland with their strong Doric speech patterns. Where spoken word presents opportunities to demonstrate facets such as intonation, pace and pitch, it is still arguable that other elements of speech such as regional dialect remain unharnessed by the researcher voice (or, as in my case, poorly replicated by the speaker during their presentation).

Yet, as Wiles et al. explains, although the researcher "maintains voice" these narrative techniques also offer "the authority of the research participants based on their own experiences" (2005, 98). To its further benefit, it would be prudent to consider either gaining consent to use original audio from participants (which could be 'remixed' to create an audio ensemble) or co-opting an anonymous, non-participant voice to read/record the data ensemble. In doing so, the speech is either contextualised by the voice of the participant themselves, or rendered abstract from the positionality of the author of the paper. As one example, Klemmer and colleagues created *Books with Voices* whereby paper transcripts were "augmented" by the addition of bar-codes "enabling fast, random access to digital videos on a PDA" (2003, 89).

Despite these restrictions and transformations, I want to conclude, the data ensemble retains the ability to demonstrate richness in the content and juxtaposition of these quotes. It also affords an

opportunity for academics working in the social sciences to rethink their presentation of data both in the written and spoken form. In this way, we may produce research outputs that may interpolate a wider audience at a much more engaging level and further amplify the narrative voices of our research participants.

Acknowledgements

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Figure captions

Figure 1: An extract from the node for "cleanliness" (screenshot from NVivo)

Figure 2: An extract from a Word Tree for "clean" (screenshot from NVivo)