



BREXIT BRITS ABROAD

Brexit Brits Abroad Podcast Episode 35: Narrative, storytelling, and a social science research project...

First broadcast Friday 30th November 2018.

About the episode

This episode focusses on narrative and storytelling, focussing on the question of how we do justice to the what people have told us in the way we write and communicate the findings of the project. We focus on the importance, for us, of locating accounts of Brexit within the context of people's lives, a concern that is at once about the ethics and politics of representation. As we discuss, these reflections are all the more important on a project that has used multiple methods, where people have written their own narratives, and provided alternative, creative accounts of their lives. And in closing the episode, we discuss why narrative and storytelling are important for qualitative research.

You can download this episode of the podcast at
<http://brexitbritsabroad.libsyn.com/narrative-storytelling-and-a-social-science-research-project-on-brexit-and-britons-living-in-the-eu-27>

Transcript

MB Welcome back to the Brexit Brits Abroad podcast. I'm Dr Michaela Benson, a reader in sociology at Goldsmith's University of London and the research lead for a UK in a Changing Europe funded project that's all about what Brexit means for British citizens living in the EU 27. Over the coming weeks and months you'll be hearing me in conversation with the rest of the team, with Karen O'Reilly, Catherine Collins and Chantelle Lewis. Today we're going to focus on another aspect of method that we haven't yet addressed, and that's the use of narratives and story-telling within social science research and again I am joined by the whole project team, so we're going to talk about narrative and story-telling and this is going to be led by Katie and partly because Katie's got some really interesting things to say about this topic. I wanted to start Katie by asking you about this difference that you've introduced us to, about the difference between the facts of someone's life and their story, what d'you mean by that?

Katie OK well we've talked a lot in these methods podcasts about the type of research that we're doing and how we might collect the data and how we might care about the sample and who's represented but we haven't said very much about how we might

write about these people and about their views and really the way that we turn all of these stories and recordings and emails and photographs into something that comes out of the project is by writing about it. So this question that you've asked me about the difference between the facts of someone's life and their story is for me a question about how do you represent, how d'you do justice to what someone's told you about their experiences in writing. And one way to do that is to straightforwardly describe who they are and what they've said, and whether we, or how we might do justice to the variety of stories that have been told, for example if you wanted to talk about an interesting person that you'd met who told you something that you thought was really important, you probably wouldn't read out their CV or copy their CV.

MB I hope not!

Katie And then send it around. You would want to give a sense of who that person was, perhaps where you met them, how they were dressed, you know the kind of impression that they gave you about the sort of person that they are. And to illustrate that with our, the stories from our data, people have told us in response to questions like well what do you, how did you feel about the referendum, people will tell us things like what they did that morning when they woke up, how they felt, who they called you know, that they spoke to someone, they went down to the, their local shop and there was a character there who they knew really well, who had voted Brexit and the conversation that they'd had with that person. And the facts are the same but the way that it's represented is so much more engaging and gives so much more the, what you might say is the truth of that.

MB A bit more of a feel of the situation.

Chantelle Just to come in on that Katie, I would say the majority of people that I spoke to about Brexit in regards to how they experienced it, they spoke about crying, and they told me about that, not in that moment they cried over Skype but they cried when they found out about it. I had one person who didn't believe it that much that they restarted their phone and the way they tell you about that, they reset their phone to see if it was actually true, so it's like looking at how people narrate that is really interesting, I'd not thought about that until you had explained the importance of this type of analysis of data.

MB I think it's about how they communicate through those stories, particular sentiments of disbelief or shock or upset or sometimes joy, I mean joy can come across too which you wouldn't necessarily get in just a purely factual oh yes I voted to remain if that was the case of the person that you were speaking to. I think that that really does highlight some of the strength of the stories and being able to give you a picture of what was happening in that person's life at that moment.

Katie And one of the stories that made quite an impact on me was someone responding to the likely impact of Brexit on her life, chose to talk about how much of a community she had in her small village and how, when she'd been unwell her neighbours had looked after her and when there'd been a house fire her neighbours went and collected up food and new furniture and it's not really got anything to do with Brexit as such but that conveys the sense of what she might lose and what she'd gained by moving to this community in rural France, that you wouldn't necessarily be able to get, either to understand as a researcher or then to reflect back out to other people who are interested without staying true to the idea of the narrative.

Karen Can I come in here Katie because you've really made me feel something quite strongly actually, listening to you, because one thing that I, that I find very difficult when we're turning people's stories, as you say, we interview people and we very often ask about their whole lives, I mean I've made an absolute point, I'm sure you all have, to ask people about themselves, not just about Brexit, and I've sometimes even said hold off telling me about Brexit because I know once we get onto Brexit the conversation will only be about Brexit, so I've tried to get them to tell me about themselves because I want to know about themselves and also because how they feel about Brexit and what Brexit means to them is about who they are as whole people. But then you write a report or papers or whatever we're going to write and we end up with just a few quotes. And I have to say that always feels somewhat dishonest or difficult, I don't know if you have any thoughts about whether there are better ways we could deal with that or what we're doing when we do that?

Katie Yes you kind of shatter it up like you had originally a beautiful stained glass window that was a person's life and their experience and then you'd smash it on the ground and pick up one or two shards and put them into something else, it doesn't reflect the full picture does it of their life, I mean I have, I have experimented with other ways of writing stories, there's an ethical dimension as well that's really important to bring up, the first consideration is obviously people need to be kept anonymous or may wish to be kept anonymous and so telling their full story can be an unethical thing to do. The second question, or the second ethical issue is this, this question about how to represent someone truthfully and accurately and what that actually means to do that. Something that I wrote fairly recently was, used a method where what I call the narrative structures of the different types of stories, I use those as a way of analysing lots and lots of different stories and came up with four or five typical structures, so sort of points of the shape if you like, if you can imagine the story drawn as a wavy line with ups and downs, you know, this typical story, and then use some of the details to add colour and depth and interest and retell them as fictionalised, not fiction as in completely made up out of nowhere but fictionalised versions of true stories, so that I think can be one way to try and get more of the whole story back in to writing about research.

MB I think that there's often an assumption isn't there that if you tell the whole story then there's something more ethical about it so it's really useful to think about when there might be challenges to that. Chantelle and I have been writing over the course of the last few weeks a paper that draws on the research that she's been doing, the interviews that she's been doing with British people of colour, and certainly trying to communicate enough about those people to really understand the context within which their stories emerge has been, I felt that it's been a bit of a tightrope at times, I don't know about you Chantelle.

Chantelle Yes definitely, like it was wrong for us to try and shorten quotations, something that I think we concluded, we've had to have in this research paper long quotations from people. I think it's quite radical and quite important and particularly with a topic like this, where there's so much emotionality and with the interviews that I was doing with British people of colour where they're talking about incidences of racism to just shorten those incidences to small quotations was not right, it's not OK.

Karen Do you anonymise everything?

Chantelle Yes.

Karen You're always using pseudonyms or, because this also raises that question because there's always an assumption in qualitative research and quantitative actually, that we anonymise, and I remember I think it was qualitative data archive on their ethical guidelines many years ago, they said don't assume that everyone has to be anonymous.

MB That's really interesting.

Karen Well it was, I thought it was a really interesting point because in a way it's a strange thing that we do, that we're trying to protect people, you know, we hope that they can be more honest with us, more open and that it won't come back and ever bite them that they said something that they maybe later regretted but you know they say that perhaps people do want to be heard and to have their voice heard but also if you don't have to be anonymous then you can tell much more of the person's story and this does take me back to those early relationships with the citizens panel where they were sending in their own stories and their own photographs so those people are not actually anonymous.

MB On the point around anonymity it is really interesting because there are all sorts of ways of thinking, because the idea behind anonymity and pseudonyms which are, you know, giving people different names for who they are, was always to protect them as you say but actually that makes all sorts of assumptions about your relationship with those people and their reasons for participating in research, but it also, it privileges, it has the potential to actually privilege the researcher within that relationship so it doesn't necessarily break down those, you know those power relations between people, or doesn't necessarily do that more participatory model or dialogic model of engagement with the people that you're doing research with. That's what I wanted to come in and say but there has been a taken for granted assumption, if you go to an ethics committee now with a piece of research they will nine times out of ten tell you that you have to anonymise your data. Or, you know, or something like that, you'd have to make a very strong case not to anonymise it, which shows that, showed that you'd thought through all of those power relations and the power implications of what you were doing, that's all I wanted to come in and say.

Karen No I think, I just wanted to quickly get in my question to Katie before I forgot because as I was talking it got, it really got me thinking about the fact that those people who sent in their stories in the early days and we have them on our website, and they have photographs of themselves and we've used their real names because they are not anonymous so they've chosen not to be anonymous and I think earlier you were saying something Katie about how they told their stories about themselves is interesting. They presented a certain side of themselves with Brexit in mind perhaps or ...

Katie Well certainly they would have and they gave, obviously gave permission to be on our site with their name and photographs, and some people are anonymous and some people aren't, but I think the point I was making in the earlier recording was about the difference between writing and speech, and the way that the differences in many ways that are quite obvious aren't they, the fact that when you speak you can't go back and rewind time and edit it and say it again in a different way whereas you can do that with text, but also the way that we use languages different in writing to text, I mean the stories themselves are all, some people have very strong voices and strong uses of punctuation, other people write in a much more essay style or, so again the style of their writing reflects things about them and as you say do, I wouldn't want to, I wouldn't

want to copy and paste that into a research report because that should be with their name shouldn't it, they've submitted it in that way and they knew that that's what's going to happen to it, a bit like story collection websites, you know like Humans of New York and those kind of things where people, it's very popular for people to submit their stories in that way.

MB **Is there, d'you think that there is something going on there which is that for some people writing and the editing of writing, because I think that's a kind of the, what you're pointing to, it has the potential I suppose to erase some of the reflexivity that you might see in a longer account when you're talking, but the reflexivity's there because it's written into the entire process of writing, like when we, I'm thinking about us writing as well, whereas when you're talking with people you see a lot more of the thinking that's gone into their construction of that story. You know, yes there's a crafting to the writing isn't there. Speech offers a different alternative.**

Katie Yes I think that's the case. When you, you'll know as well as I do when you have a transcript, and you listen to a recording, there's a great many more words there, writing is a lot more labour for people than simply having a conversation as a tape records on the table between you so you could make some assumptions about, like the editing and the amount of effort that's gone into the production of a couple of paragraphs of written work, there's also a confidence question, not everyone is happy to have their words written and would prefer to talk. Fewer people feel concerned about talking, they would be concerned about being recorded or videoed in a similar sort of way but not just about having a conversation with another person.

Karen You've really made me think about the function of the different types of data we've got, and I think we take it for granted that we can, correct me if I'm wrong, but I think we take it for granted that when people have been recorded in an interview and we told them clearly what that's for and what's going on, we feel confident to take their quotes or even their stories as well because we'll often tell about them as well as use their quotes, in our research reports or in our academic writing or whatever, but I think where people have sent us an email, we're having an ongoing conversation with someone, maybe when we've, and when they've sent in their stories for the citizens panel or whatever or certain responses to questions for the citizens panel, I think that's making us think again about how we use that material because was it intended in the same way or was it given in the same way with the same intention.

Katie Well for me I would say that the stories that have been submitted, the crafted pieces of writing are more similar to the creative methods that people, where people might ask somebody to create collage or make a video or create something in that way that represents whatever it is they've been asked to think about in their life, the written stories that have been sent to us are more like that than they are the transcripts that we are used to working with.

Karen That's very interesting.

MB **It is really interesting and I think it's also about thinking, again it goes back to some of the points about how we've approached doing the research and why we approached it in the way we did and what our responsibilities are to the people who we've been working with in consequence of approaching the project in that way. I just wanted to, before we end, wanted to go on to the question of us writing stories, because I know that's something you've been reflecting on a lot**

Katie because you've been working predominantly with the citizens panel which has produced these alternative modes of engagement, and I was particularly struck by something that you told me when we were having a phone conversation one day, around how tricky you'd found it to write from that so I wondered if you wanted to reflect on that a little bit.

Katie I did say that and then you very kindly sent me to Cyprus so I could do some real face to face work. And I think, it's quite a personal reflection I suppose on my own writing but when I write I like to include a lot of detail, a lot of information around where I am and what it looks like there and little details I've noticed in the environment, I was going through my field notes from Cyprus the other day and noticing how I'd written down that someone was practising their violin in the evening and the wrong notes, how I found the wrong notes charming, and the smells, smell of hot pavement and the jasmine flowers that seem to scramble everywhere so details like that weren't there in the citizens panel I had was interesting information but very flat and devoid of that three-dimensional experience that I personally like to put in my writing.

MB I don't think there's, well obviously in your case it's a personal thing but I think it is something that we take a little bit for granted. Obviously Karen and I have been in France and Spain respectively and there is something about being in a place that helps you to get a much more profound understanding actually of what people, well that's what I feel anyway I haven't been an ethnographer.

Karen It's so fascinating, as you're talking I'm thinking of course you know because the places people talk about, you've seen them, the smells in the street, you've smelled them and yes, I have taken it for granted because I've started with ethnography and started with being in places and then spoken to people. You've made me think about why I find face to face interviews where you extract someone from their normal surroundings and put them somewhere different, difficult, and why I really hate disembodied quotes and it's just one of my hates.

MB What do you mean by a disembodied quote Karen?

Karen It's one of my passions in my life, I hate it when people write a report and they say, one of the themes that came up is, and then they just put a series of quotes that kind of back up this theme, without the people, they're disembodied, and it just, because I want the real people there so ...

MB That's interesting.

Karen ... just want to say thank you for making me really think about those things Katie.

MB Yes, that's people and place coming together in a way that the stories that we want to tell I think need that, it seems that that's something that we share between us is that we want to be able to locate them in that way, I suppose that's not that surprising, we show them several local locations, local locations what a silly phrase but you know where people live is really fundamentally important to some of the questions that, well to some of the things that come out when they speak to us, you know, there is a lot going on around place and belonging and being settled or unsettled, I mean these are ways of talking about place so perhaps that, it's a really important reflection and yeah it's definitely one worth thinking about. I've been thinking about it as well in relation to the Skype interviews, I think you get a little bit of a sense of that but you never entirely get that, I don't know if you've had any thoughts about that Chantelle.

Chantelle Yeah I think it's been really difficult not having that emphasis on place in my interviews, but how I've tried to combat that has been through having conversations outside of the Skype interview so building up more of a picture of that person through phone conversations and email conversations. And also because I have quite a few people from various places and because part of the methodology has been snowballing so meeting people through people there has been sort of a, I've managed to gather information about a particular place through the relationships with people, if that makes sense.

Karen I quite like Skype interviews, but maybe I've usually done them with people that I've met before or in places that I've met before, but when we've done Skype interviews they usually pick up the laptop and walk around their house.

Chantelle Yeah they do, yeah they put their headphones it's just about going about their lives like yeah ---

Karen They love to show me the views and say look at this view that I've got here, and then I show them out my office window, drizzly rain usually. Then we'll get a cup of coffee and cheers with a cup of coffee. At least Skype interviews are, you can be in people's homes, I like that.

MB I suppose a final kind of question before we do close, because I realise that we've probably, it's just fascinating actually just to have the opportunity to sit down and talk about it, is why is it important, why are these narratives, why are these stories important, why is it important to tell stories?

Katie I think that for quantitative researchers they have various things like calculations that they perform and processes they go through to make sure that their research is rigorous and I think for qualitative research these are the things that we do, we are constantly reflecting on who we are and where we are and who the people are that we're talking to and where they are and the significance of the stories of their lives and getting as much understanding of that as we possibly can in order to know that what we're doing is as rigorous as it can possibly be, on its terms, on its own terms, and this is the type of research that it is, so that's why I think it's important in a counterpoint about the disembodied quotes, you know, the sad ghostly words floating with no place and no life is a really good way, a really good image of illustrating why it's important to pay attention to all of these different factors.

Chantelle I was going to say to me as well it's quite political, telling people's stories, because it's actively trying to undo stereotypes and labels that we associate with certain groups so as we are constantly contesting the stereotypes that British people living abroad are old and retired, a way of challenging that and proving that it's wrong, is by telling these stories so to me it's quite political as well.

MB So bringing out those less vocal stories or those less familiar stories, is really important in that context. Well thank you very much for yet another fascinating conversation.

All three Thank you.

MB You've been listening to the Brexit Brits Abroad podcast, hosted by me, Dr Michaela Benson, and produced by Emma Houlton at art of podcast. The series is part of a UK in a Changing Europe funded research project, Brexit Brits Abroad, that's all about what Brexit means for UK citizens living in the EU 27.

We're really keen to hear from you about the issues and concerns we address in the programme, so please do get in touch with any thoughts, queries and questions. You can find our contact details on our web page [brexitbritsabroad](#), or get in touch via social media, we're on Twitter @brexpatseu and we have a Facebook page Brexitbritsabroad. Finally, in case you're not already subscribed to the podcast, you can do so on both iTunes and Google podcasts. Thank you for listening, and I'll be back in a couple of weeks with the next episode.