

Revisiting Ethnographies from Sociology's Past: A Research Note on 'Other Voices' in Pearl Jephcott's Work



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Introduction

Ethnographic immersion has been a fundamental research practice in sociology and anthropology, two disciplines with shared and overlapping concerns. Such an involved research practice and approach to immersive data collection implies co-location within the space, locality, community, or area of interest. However, despite many meaningful, insightful, and even definitive ethnographic studies providing significant data on a broad range of social phenomena, immersive ethnography has become particularly challenging. For example, ethnographic immersion faces several obstacles in the UK research landscape, where I am based. Firstly, research funding regimes make it markedly more difficult to secure the resources needed for extended periods of fieldwork, living and working within the community of analytical focus. The funding required to relocate and fully immerse oneself in an area, along with the financial backing necessary to 'buy out' from university teaching and academic administrative duties, renders ethnographic immersion often unattainable for those beyond the doctoral or immediate post-doctoral phases of their careers; it has become prohibitively expensive. Secondly, in sociology particularly, the push for impact or the translation of research findings into immediate social benefits, alongside the necessity for research that can influence public policy, has resulted in a narrower research horizon, favouring relatively shorter data collection periods and the swift dissemination of findings. National research quality initiatives, such as the UK's *Research Excellence Framework* or *Excellence in Research* in Australia, seemingly prioritize high quality while simultaneously demanding 'speedy' and 'impactful' research. This acceleration exacerbates what Elias [1] refers to as the retreat of the sociologist to the present, limiting our perspective to a constricted understanding of the contemporary and research that is 'policy relevant'. Thirdly, there is a challenge to concentrating on the local or specific community, underpinned by concerns regarding relevance, reliability, validity, generalisability, or, perhaps more troublingly, calls to prioritize

'loftier', more global social issues. Indeed, numerous cautionary tales, such as Charlesworth's [2,3] richly detailed phenomenology of working-class experience in a northern English community or Goffman's [4] study of crime and violence in Philadelphia, abound in this context. Despite its depth and quality, the relevance of Charlesworth's research focus was questioned and dismissed by peers at an elite university for advocating the need for reality-congruent data that corresponds with working-class experiences over issues of more global significance. Regarding reliability and integrity, and perhaps more infamously, Goffman's [4] *On the Run* has been simultaneously praised as one of the 'best ethnographies' and condemned as inaccurate, disingenuous, naïve, unbelievable, and unethical. Finally, there is also the rise of virtual or 'netnography', ethnographic immersions of a different order but perhaps somewhat dislocated from spatial and temporal concerns. A co-presence of sorts, yet also remote and absent? So, given these challenges, we could rightly ask, who is now conducting the immersive ethnographic studies once so common in the last century?

The second set of attendant debates to reflect on here also builds on Elias's [1] concerns relating to the retreat to the present, alongside a narrowing of our gaze to contemporary problems. Not only is our focus limited to the contemporary in a practical sense, but it is also limited by the fact that still very few researchers ever return to the sites of previous research, restudy or revisit past research projects or evaluate 'old' data to reassess what substantive or methodological lessons can be gained or applied [5]. While there are notable and important exceptions (Author A), there remains a pervasive view in sociology that books, empirical work, community studies and immersive ethnographies that are 'chronologically old' are deemed to have retained little if any analytical utility [5]. What can possibly be learned from an immersive ethnographic study from 1920s Indiana, 1930s Ireland or 1950s London? Yet such assumptions position the past, present

and possible futures as disconnected and somehow the current epoch being hermetically sealed from what has gone before. Any historically oriented social science understanding understands that such an idea is epistemologically and ontologically fallacious, yet we don't return [5]. Within constrained research funding frameworks, relegating past research simply 'to the past' is inefficient and not cost-effective. Indeed, we should maximize the benefits and insights derived from past researchers and generations of anthropologists, sociologists and ethnographers. Return to where we have already established insights and to peoples and communities about whom and which something is 'already known' [5].

In an attempt to address, or at least navigate, these intertwined trends of 'retreating to the present', limited resources, and time pressures, I have spent the last twenty-five years revisiting past research studies and repurposing them through re-analysis, restudy, or reimagining to (re)discover what can be learned [5]. It is a deliberate strategy of reusing existing immersive data. What began with an accidental but serendipitous discovery of a 'lost' study of young people in the 1960s has transformed into a passion for revitalizing past immersive research [5]. It is beyond the scope of this discussion to provide a full review of this work to highlight the potential such an approach offers. Instead, I want to focus briefly on one revelatory aspect of this research orientation regarding my ongoing engagement with the long-forgotten sociologist Pearl Jephcott (1900-1980) [5]. This is perhaps instructive and indicates future research possibilities, revealing what can be done and what materials may be made reusable.

Pearl Jephcott Sociologists and Immersive Ethnographer

Before 2000, I knew nothing about the British sociologist Pearl Jephcott. However, while reconstructing a lost youth studies project, I came across a brief reference to her work. The reference included images and charts that immediately struck me as different. Jephcott had dispensed with the usual X and Y axis and boring indicators of the typical line graph to capture youth leisure time, replacing them with images of sports equipment and balls. I wondered about the imagination behind this work. There began what became an obsession of uncovering Jephcott's forgotten research. What emerged was imaginative, creative and substantive contributions to our understandings of youth, gender, housing, community, work, childhood and social class. A prolific writer, fieldworker, and true innovator in autobiographical, ethnographic and visual sociology, Jephcott disappeared due to her gender and lack of an established, permanent university position [5,6].

Born in 1900, Pearl Jephcott gained a degree from the University of Aberystwyth in 1922 and later a master's from the same university in 1948. Until age fifty, Jephcott worked as a youth worker in some of northeast England's most challenging, demanding, poverty-stricken working-class areas. She then pursued academic research at the London School of Economics and the Universities of Nottingham and Glasgow. She undertook

research in the UK, the Caribbean, Czechoslovakia, Hong Kong and Australia. Her surviving field notebooks and her personal journals testify to immersive practices underscored by the constant recording of observations, experiences and reflections core to the ethnographer's craft [5]. Her output was prolific, including *Girls Growing Up* (1942), *Clubs for Girls* (1942), *Rising Twenty: Notes on Ordinary Girls* (1948), and *The Social Background of Delinquency* [7]. *Some Young People* (1954), *Married Women Working* [8], *A Troubled Area* [9], *Time of One's Own* (1967) and *Homes in High Flats* [10]. All her books and reports detail the lived realities of working-class life, the lives of women at work, children, children's play and the experiences of ethnic minority groups during troubled periods of migration to the UK.

A key feature of Jephcott's these books is her full immersion into the communities we studied. Not a detached or distant observer, Pearl Jephcott always lived and worked (in second jobs) in the areas of concern. For example, in her two studies of living in high-rise tower blocks, Pearl moved into some of the toughest, even notorious, housing estates in Glasgow and Birmingham. When researching the impact of the race riots in London of the 1950s, Pearl made sure she lived within a certain radius of the key locations, and she determined this by walking the field in every direction to map out the zone of her enquiry. In her earlier work, *The Social Background to Delinquency*, she lived and worked in 'Radby', where she was employed in a factory and a children's nursery whilst immersed in data collection [5].

'Other Voices' in Pearl Jephcott's Ethnographies

While employed at the University of Glasgow, Pearl conducted two significant projects - *Homes in Flats* [10,11] and *Time of One's Own* (1967). Materials relating to these projects are housed at the University of Glasgow archive, and indeed, this archive holds the single largest archived deposit of Pearl Jephcott's work and is central to the retelling of Jephcott's story and the resurgence in interest in her work. As I have written elsewhere, these archive materials are:

... exceptional and astonishing. Exceptional in that they were extensive and as complete a record of her Glasgow research as one could wish for. Astonishing in terms of their scale and detail, Pearl had retained everything in these archives, going way beyond what most retain, including an eclectic mix of extensive correspondence, rich methodological notes, particulars of procedures, details of sampling, response/none response rates, extensive photographs and drawings. An evocative collection of materials and research ephemera that underscored Pearl's abilities and creativity as a researcher. (Author A).

The analytic potential of these archived materials is very far from exhausted, and the papers retain a rich vein of source material still to be examined. For me, one aspect worthy of further consideration, and which illustrates the value of returning to past projects, was Pearl's ability, whilst immersed in the field, to enlist and mobilize research collaborations with a wide range of

individuals and organizations (students, artists, photographers, independent researchers, children, etc.). Indeed, when piecing together the origin stories of these past studies, one is struck by the 'other voices' that can be 'heard' coming forth from the archived materials. This points to research and fieldwork endeavors, data collection, writing, and analysis as seldom being 'individual activities'. Instead, research is often a collaborative and iterative process between the researcher or fieldworker, colleagues, co-researchers, key informants, and participants. Research is co-produced even if 'co-production' is not a stated research aim of the researcher or a guiding methodological principle.

In Jephcott's case, archives and fieldnotes for *Homes in Flats* and *A Time of One's Own* are instructive as they reveal Pearl's effectiveness in gaining 'buy-in' to her ideas and research orientation. In turn, her collaborative approach led to very creative research designs and outcomes. Indeed, the fact that she could readily enlist a wide range of 'others' to her innovative research designs and outcomes makes these voices even more intriguing. These voices can be read, viewed and interpreted to derive meaning from the silent and largely hidden actors in the research process. From my work so far, I have identified four different groups of 'other voices' in Pearl's immersive ethnographies that would be worthy of further exploration. These are:

i. Collaborative researchers. Her research is often collaborative research, and the archive materials offer glimpses to Pearl's inclusive research practice via the small additional 'side' projects she commissioned. For example, Pearl extended the research in *Homes in High Flats* to cover graffiti, lift breakdown and waiting times. The design and operation of these additional projects further illuminate Pearl's research practices, offering additional detail into the genesis and operationalization of the research as well as her thinking and relating to materials published as part of her books.

ii. Students. Pearl involved students in her research, and their archive contains student essays relevant to her research. For example, there are details of Danish students taking on walk-in tours of the flats and engaging in ethnographic immersion in Glasgow. The voices of students in the archive point to Pearl's active role in research training, her practice-based approach to teaching sociology in the field and a concern for ensuring students gained real-life experience of research in authentic settings.

iii. Children. Pearl had a long-standing interest in children, particularly children's leisure time and play spaces. These are key motifs throughout her work and stem back to her earlier career as a youth worker in northeast of England. The archive contains a range of documentary sources relating to this aspect of the work, in particular, a short survey of children as well as other research ephemera. Pearl adopted a child-centred research approach, giving children a voice and agency in a way that many researchers did not at that time.

iv. 'Non-respondents'. Unusually, the 'other voices' in the archive of Pearl's work also include extensive records relating to

those reluctant to participate directly in her research. For example, from an initial review of this data, Pearl was exceptionally skilled in engaging residents on the doorstep, and she captured in detail not only reasons for refusal but also a significant amount of data relating to the *Homes in High Flats* research not explored in the book. Indeed, the status of non-respondents in this research is particularly interesting in that the prefix 'non' suggests absence, not being involved or aspects of research that have not taken place and data collection that have not occurred. It indicates a refusal, and non-responses are typically reported in a somewhat perfunctory manner. Yet here, these voices are in rich and evocative detail.

Analytical Potentials: Why Go Back?

Without returning to these past studies and reconsidering what remains in immersive ethnographies, these 'other voices' would remain lost, ignored and silenced. In times of financial constraints and all the other limitations on immersive research, by not going back, we lose so much. The 'other voices' deserve to be heard and understood, so revisiting this data promises additional insights and offers the potential for extra analytical value. As well as hearing these voices again, we can also derive additional substantive findings (Author A) and gain a better, more reality-congruent understanding of research practices, relationships, collaborations, and the day-to-day life in the field. Jephcott's research is but one example where time spent combing the archives and notebooks has revealed so much. Yet how many other past studies remain out there waiting to be rediscovered, reanimated or reimagined that still have the potential to add so much? My view is that we should make the best of what we have and go back to do full justice to these forgotten works.

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