

Putting Shoes on Show

A review of the exhibition
process.

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'If the Shoe Fits: Footwear,
Identity & Transition'
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www.sheffield.ac.uk/iftheshoefits/

When we set about putting on an exhibition about the If the Shoe Fits project the following source was helpful: 'Putting on an Exhibition about your Research', a Real Life Methods toolkit (University of Manchester):

<http://www.socialsciences.manchester.ac.uk/morgancentre/realities/toolkits/exhibition/2008-07-toolkit-exhibition.pdf>.

It suggests asking yourself three questions before starting:

1. What is the purpose of the exhibition?
2. Who is it for?
3. What resources are available?

The second question was easily answered; the venue was Sheffield University's Interdisciplinary Centre of the Social Sciences (ICOSS) and the audience was primarily members of our own Faculty. That said, staff from departments such as Law, Landscape Architecture or East Asian Studies might use other methods and employ different language, so the exhibition had to be accessible outside of Sociology and Anthropology.

At the beginning of the project, just over a year ago, we had made a commitment to put on an exhibition showing our work in progress. This is perhaps the short answer to the 'purpose' question: we needed to fulfil this commitment. However we soon realised that this was a very worthwhile purpose. The process of explaining how we arrived at a fund-able research question and showcasing our innovative research methods helped us to take stock of our journey so far while getting viewers involved in the project, not as participants, but as additional sources of ideas and insight.

The exhibition comprised seven features, each leading to the next in a progression around the exhibition space. To sensitise people to the idea that something as potentially mundane as footwear and walking might be worthy of investigation we displayed two films made at street level in Carnaby Street in London by Alexandra Sherlock. These ran in loops on large and

prominent video screens placed opposite the entrance to the building. One showed feet walking away from the camera, the other showed them walking past it. Both videos were mesmerising and hooked interest effectively by showing the diversity of types of shoes and walking styles. On the foyer's exposed girders we hung pairs of trainers by their laces, attracting the attention of inquisitive visitors while raising questions that perhaps had no agreed answers.

To show the project's timeline we started with the wealth of magazine and newspaper articles and shoe ephemera that first got us thinking. On this we super-imposed the questions they led us to ask. For example, whose shoes don't get a mention in all this publicity? Whose shoes are unlikely to decorate a piece of wrapping paper? Viewers could then follow the direction of the research and read a non-specialist summary of the project and a description of the methods we are using. Although it would be premature to disseminate any findings, there is still an awful lot to say and we displayed some of the very rich data already gathered, both as text and as images of shoes in the home.

To get viewers thinking actively about the relationship between shoes and identity, we posted photos of faces and footwear and invited people to match them. What they discovered was that shoe choices are complex and personal. Once we stop and look properly, stereotypes of who wears what are confounded by the evidence on the street.



Can You Identify These People by Their Shoes?

How easy is it to identify people by their shoes? How much can someone's shoes really say about them? Match the people below with their shoes, then follow the lines to see if you were correct.

Rebekah, 20, Student

Joel, 19, Student & Bicycle Mechanic

Sebastian, 43, Designer

Umair, 21, Student

Jude, 56, Church Administrator

Karley, 30, Mortgage Underwriter

Muriel, 82, Retired

Andy, 33, IT Manager

Terry, 58, Picture Framer



And if anyone was left in any doubt that shoes carry an enormous potential impact, we completed the timeline with a poster of the shoes discovered after the Holocaust, one of the most potent images of all those who died.

The resources we used to create this very successful exhibition included time, mainly at the computer, putting together text and images; examples of press cuttings and ephemera which we'd been collecting for several years; trainers borrowed from a postgrad; and films made prior to the start of the project. The Faculty turned our text and images into large posters – and sponsored a well-attended launch event.

We were new to this kind of work – and something had to be in place very quickly. Realising how much material we already had available and recognising that the process as well as the products of research is important made this a do-able, rewarding and enjoyable piece of work.