

Fashion Tales Conference

Milan Catholic University

8th June 2012

Filming Shoes, Exploring Identity

The Everyday

I would like to pick up on some of the issues that Vicki has raised in relation to studying the everyday. This can seem like a nebulous term, even within sociology. As the word suggests the everyday is about things that happen, what we do and how we behave in our day-to-day lives. So does that mean it includes just about everything? Not necessarily, many scholars use it in a specific way to refer to the mundane, habitual, less noticeable, routine practices and processes that go on – the things that most of us tend not to think about much, if at all.

Other theorists, such as Moran (2005), argue the everyday includes not only the mundane; for them it goes beyond the routine and habitual. This is certainly the case in our research as we use the concept of the everyday to explore people's lives and the place of shoes in the on-going processes of identity formation. I have observed through ethnographic fieldwork and our participants tell us about the transitions that go on in their daily lives between the mundane and more extreme, exciting or unusual aspects of their identities. Examples include transforming from an office-worker to performing as a burlesque DJ; another participant is an office worker and a climber; and another is a customer services assistant and performance artist. So in our work we are paying particularly attention to the mundane aspects of our daily lives, but not to the exclusion of other things that we do day-to-day.

Methodology and Video Technology in the Social Sciences

So how do we study the everyday?

What methods can we use and why?

Text and language have dominated sociological theory and methodology. They have made an invaluable contribution to sociological understanding. Interviews can show us how people classify experience and are a useful way of understanding the meaning making processes that go on in everyday life. However, as Mason (2006: 104) points out, the

dominance of talk and text is a 'one-dimensional... foray into, or construction of, what most would agree is a multi-dimensional, multi-sensory 'reality''. In recent years the social sciences have seen a marked growth of interest in using video methods as a way to better understand the complexity of the everyday. This methodological development chimes with theoretical 'turns' towards mobilities, materiality, bodies, the senses and affect, which are some of the themes at the heart of our study.

Our methods include year-long case studies in the shoe lives of 15 participants. So why are we using ethnographic video methods alongside other methods, to develop our understanding of identity and the everyday?

Video recordings give immediate access to the sounds and aesthetics of people and spaces; the timber of someone's voice, their style of dress, bodily movement, shape, size and mannerisms. In other words it can capture the 'character' of a person (Rosenstein, 2002) in a way that text cannot. With the visual we have an instant impression of a person that builds up as we get to know them through the film. This instant impression would take pages of written text to convey and is an invaluable data source. Through using ethnographic video methods we can see people's everyday practices, along with the materiality of our worlds and how our bodies interact with the materiality of things. Things become more tangible in the seeing of them. So for us, this is about seeing the handling and wearing of shoes in certain spaces and places.

Video enables us to record everyday practice in far more detail than would be possible by observation and fieldnotes alone. Through viewing the recording together the researcher can draw the participant's attention to these aspects of daily life and elicit reflection on the detail of apparently simple and mundane happenings.

Here's some footage of one of our participants, Martin, who works at a local cinema, which illustrates some of these points:

Clip 1: Martin talking about his work shoes

Pause: For those of you unfamiliar with *This is England*, it's a film and mini-serial about a group of friends growing up in 1980s Britain amid mass unemployment. They dress in particular way, akin to the punk image, including wearing skinny jeans, Dr Martens boots s

and some of the characters have shaved heads: This look is often associated with far-right politics in the UK. Other older participants who were politically active on the left during this period won't wear Doctor Martin's at all, illustrating a strong association between a particular brand of shoe and style of dress with a particular identity. For others who do not recall this era, the political poignancy is not felt - the image is one among many to choose from and play with, as Martin says he wanted to 'have a go at that' image, Although Martin is aware of its associations, this is OK for him as he goes on to say "As soon as anybody talks to me they're going to be quite aware of the fact that I'm not a skinhead".

There is also a functional side to Martin's choice of footwear for work as it is the materiality of the shoe and its technology which makes them appropriate for his work. Here's a short clip of him at work:

Clip 2: Martin at work

Pause: Here we very quickly get an impression of the environment Martin works in and what it's like during a day-shift. We're also starting build up an idea of who Martin is.

In this next clip Martin is talking about a very different kind of footwear, clogs – he associates their sound with both identity and local history.

Clip 3: Martin talking about clogs

In many respects our work falls into Pink's (2012: 34) definition of doing a sensory ethnography. This "attends to the multisensoriality of the ways in which ethnographers and research participants experience their lives and worlds, and to the tacit and unspoken as well as the verbal actions and categories they use to classify and represent these to others."

It is for this reason that we have combined interviews and video ethnography. In the first interview the two mesh as each participant takes me through their shoes. The shoes themselves prompt the stories, definitions, utilities, activities, places, relationships and memories associated with them, as well as sensory experiences. Video representations can communicate beyond the purely visual to imply or invoke other sensory experience. In our research the materials shoes are made of, the technology and design of the shoes and how

different people's feet interact with these materials, how they feel on the foot but also how they make the person feel about themselves are recurring themes.

In this next clip another participant, Karen, talks about her associations and memories in relation to a sound made by a particular pair of sandals:

Clip 4: Karen talking about the clip clop sound

So we can see here the role shoes play in the transition to becoming a teenager and sexually aware, in relation to relationships and the emotional investment pertained in a particular pair. Karen's on-going foot problems and the limits our bodies place on our desire to transform ourselves is evident in this clip. Seeing the aesthetic of the delicate sandal on her bunioned feet, along with her explanation helps us understand that her desire to wear these shoes is far more than a simple desire to conform to a gender stereotype. Here the relationality and connectedness that Vicki discussed earlier is central to our understanding of Karen's desire and the visual representation helps draw us in to Karen's world.

As Pink (2012) has discussed, when we attentively watch and listen to another person we are seeking to learn about their experiences. We use our own biographical embodied experience to empathetically imagine what that experience is. This implies a process of non-verbal embodied learning.

Visual methods can enable researchers to comprehend the detail of practice, the biographical and collective memories and meanings associated with certain objects. Using video methods enables us to see the wearing and handling of shoes, in conjunction with talking about them we are able to build fuller picture of the role shoes play in people's everyday lives and identities.