

Qualitative research and creative approaches to public engagement

Katherine Davies, July 2010

Transcript of video clip on Morgan Centre website at

www.manchester.ac.uk/morgancentre/realities/resources/av/public_engagement

In a lot of research projects public engagement is more focussed on educating people about what you've found out in your research but in a qualitative project like the 'Living Resemblances' study we wanted to think of public engagement as a process which begins right from the start, whilst you are trying to recruitment participants in your research and the developing interesting ways to engage them into qualitative interviews right through engaging at the end of the project with the things you discovered in your study. It was the recruitment process for participants in the 'Living Resemblances' project which sparked our imaginations about taking forward other methods of public engagement. So I went door knocking in Manchester to try and recruit other participants for the project and one the things which was really noticeable was how fascinated people were by the study, when I knocked on a door people were interested, even if they did not want to take part, and often made a contribution about their own family resemblances, so we wanted people to engage with our study in a way that was more about being creative and helping people to spark their imaginations and less about giving people the facts about family resemblances.

One of the main things that we did was an exhibition at a local community centre and this was an important decision because a lot of the research that we do gets fed back into a very specific group of middle aged, middle class people on Radio four and other such programmes and although that is wonderful, we wanted to engage people of different ages, from different kinds of social backgrounds. The display included educating notice boards explaining what we did and the sorts of things that were coming out of our project but one of the things that we wanted to do with those was help people to understand that there is more to a social science project than just doing a survey or getting numbers and statistics and that what people say and think is valid data too.

The exhibition contained a whole room where we got a family's photograph album and we reordered the photos so we found people from different generations who we thought we saw a resemblance between and displayed their pictures together in this exhibition. This was designed to help people to look at the photographs and then go home and look at their own family photographs in a different light. We made elements of the exhibition quite participatory and one of the main things we did was a photo competition where we invited members of the public to send in photographs which meant something to them in terms of family resemblances. We received lots of photographs sent in and these were displayed in the exhibition, we also gave people the opportunity to write their thoughts and feelings and share resemblances stories on little postcards. We hoped that those people attending the exhibition went home with a slightly different idea about social science research and what it can entail and would also be imaginatively engaged with the ideas of resemblances and their own family.

I think that public engagement is something that is particularly challenging for qualitative research in some ways it can be difficult to put forward a 'sound bite' or 'media-friendly' finding from qualitative research, because more often than not the finding from research like this is that it's complicated and not simple to explain and this represents a challenge. However, I think it is a great challenge because it forces us to be creative in how we engaged with the public and that was the strength of what we did with the exhibition in the 'Family Resemblances' project.