



Living Resemblances Project

October 2005 to September 2008

About the project

How do people make sense of, live with and theorise about family resemblances? Why do ideas and assumptions about resemblances seem to matter so much, and what role do they play in family life and outside it? This project has been investigating family resemblances in temperament, character, physical appearance and mannerisms, so that we can better understand what it means to be related in contemporary society. We are interested in the societal fascination with family resemblance, and our research is exploring how this is played out and what it says about contemporary understandings of kinship, genetic inheritance, and identity.



Our methods

- Creative ethnographic interviews
- Qualitative experiments and focus groups
- Psychological testing to 'measure' perceptions of resemblance
- Expert interviews
- Photographic studies of resemblances in public, and in family albums
- Secondary analysis of British Social Attitudes survey data
- A range of analytic approaches including thematic, case study, psychoanalytic and metaphor-led discourse.
- An exhibition and photo competition held in Manchester, 2008 and online:
- Visual methods including photo elicitation, video and photography

Findings and highlights

- Resemblances matter quite profoundly in personal life, but in different ways. For example they can help people feel as though they are 'kindred spirits'

or that they have an ongoing connection with someone who has died. A lack of resemblance can make people feel excluded.

- People have different levels of 'investment' in spotting resemblances, especially at different stages of life but also as a result of their personal history and experience of family and kin relationships.
- Family politics and disagreements are often connected with whether and how someone resembles or 'takes after' someone else. Resemblances are not just 'given' facts. They are often contested and sometimes cultivated or coveted. There is a politics of who is 'good at' seeing resemblances and who isn't, as well as a cultural assumption that women are the best resemblance spotters.
- There is a high level of consensus that family resemblances cannot simply be explained by genetics, nor by the nature/nurture distinction.
- To explain how family resemblances 'work' we need to understand that they transcend the social, biological, sensory and spiritual or magical domains. This provides a significant challenge to conventional social science wisdom.

See the Living Resemblances and Publications pages of our website for outputs and publications.



Research Team

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