

Introduction to qualitative methods in migration studies

This handout contains a basic introduction to qualitative research. This approach to research can be applied to any field of social science. Qualitative research applied to migration studies is not therefore essentially particular in its basic methods. However, there are issues particular to migration which require a deeper and more nuanced investigation which qualitative research can apply.

Un-referenced examples are taken from Holliday (2016). This handout can be found at <https://adrianholliday.com/handouts/>

The readings for presentations - Amadasi & Ballestri (2024), Baraldi & Iervese (2017), Mahmud (2025)

The myth of objectivity

Eyes survey - to calculate the proportion of brown to blue eyes within a particular nationality. The occurrence of each is counted within a statistically valid sample.

Eyes questionnaire - within the population in the eyes survey to find out what people mean by, and what their attitudes are to 'brown' and 'blue', and what sort of social values underlie these meanings and attitudes.

Eyes study - An exploration of what people mean by, and what their attitudes are to 'brown' and 'blue' eye colour, and of what sort of social values underlie these meanings and attitudes. The residents of three households of different class and ethnicity in a provincial town are studied. They are interviewed in groups on topics related to human attractiveness as displayed in their daily life, in advertising and in the media. The interviews are open-ended, allowing relevant topics and themes to be developed. They are followed up with further interviews to which the residents are invited to bring photographs of family and friends, advertising and the media as props, and with observation of interaction in settings that emerge as significant, e.g. wedding parties.

Getting to the bottom of things

A broad ethnographic approach that enables us to explore social phenomena to work out what might be going on and **to find new meanings**

The difference between ethnography and qualitative research is increasingly blurred

Instances of social behaviour that build pictures and **make us think again**

Thick description - demonstrating thoughtful interconnections than enable unexpected meanings to emerge (Geertz 1993/1973)

Direct observation - beginning with the small (Stuart Hall 1991)

Basic researcher equipment in all stages - **research diary**

Initial inspiration

Iranian students talking among themselves about how better to learn when the teacher thought they were not interested - MA dissertation

Egyptian academic being interviewed by an American researcher

Slowed-down film of primary school classroom interaction in Alaska (Collier 1979)

Description of three students talking in cafés (Kubota 2003)

A postmodern paradigm

Qualitative research is **not a paradigm choice** in contrast with a quantitative paradigm

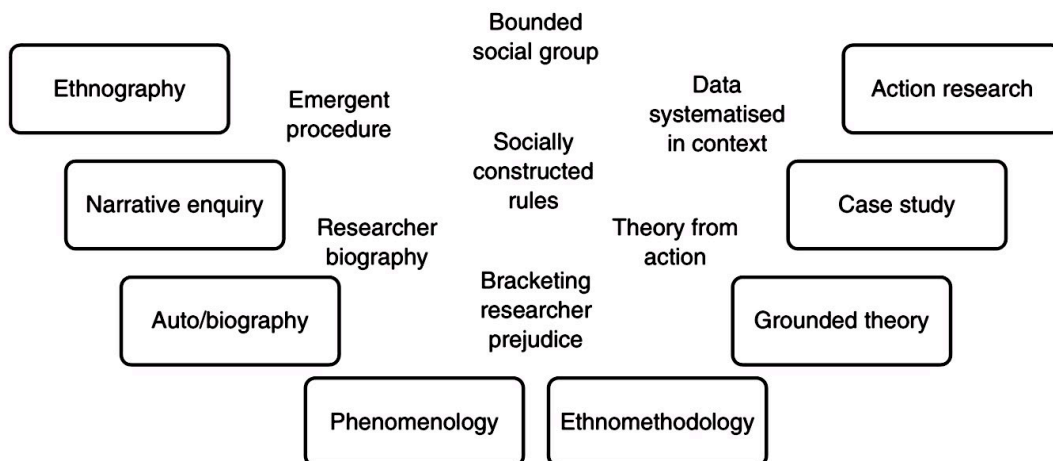
Paradigm revolution in social science, where an old and a new paradigm are irreconcilable - no going back (Holliday & MacDonald 2020; Kuhn 1970)

Liberation from imagined, colonising realities - that justify empire, cultural Otherness, the false image of rational researchers looking at irrational cultures (Aníbal Quijano 2007)

Positivism	Postpositivist	Postmodern
Objective reality can be measured	To minimise subjectivity	Reality and science are socially constructed
Researchers are separate from the object of study (rational coloniser)	... qualitative methods are 'mixed' with quantitative	Uncertain, multiple realities
Hard data - interview transcripts	... or methodically sequenced (e.g. IPA)	Researchers acknowledge and manage intersubjectivity
Validity: representative samples, triangulation		... are part of research settings and data
Ask the questions, report the results		Development of methods (including quantitative) responds to emerging understandings of settings
Tightly controlling variables		Rigour - managing researcher positionality - the quality of the thick description
		As many variables as possible

Is this statement postpositivist or postmodern? **What's the problem?**

'Due to the complex nature of ... leading scholars agree that a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods is the best way to assess it.' (Wang & Kulich 2015: 43)



A family of research designs

Any can incorporate the others - potential for innovation

'Walk along' ethnography (Badwan & Hall 2020)

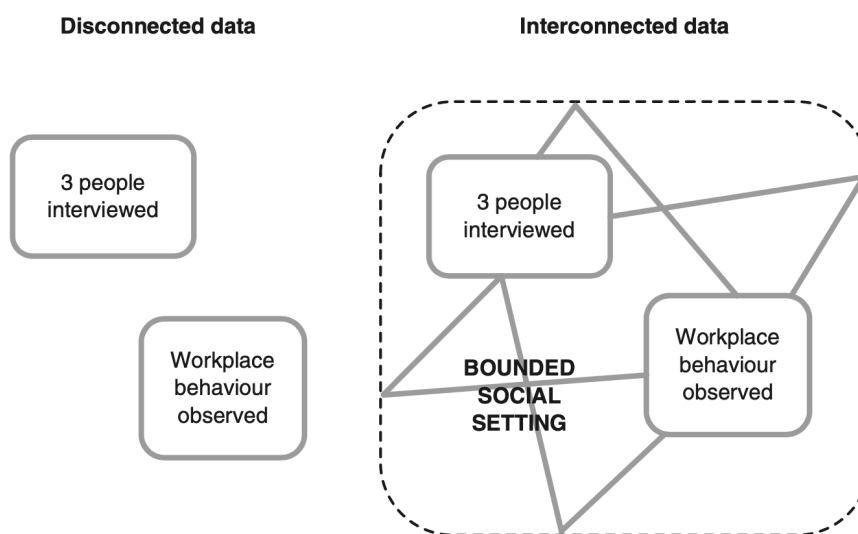
Steps - a developing research design

1. **Preliminary exploration** of what you wish to investigate
2. Research question(s) which **can also change**
3. Finding a rich and accessible **setting** to enable **thick description**
4. **Looking around** to see what sort of data is best to collect - descriptions, interviews - photos, drawings - personal experience - counting
5. **Ethics**, gate-keepers, researcher-relations, approaching participants
6. **Collecting data** - already analysing
7. **Analysis** - finding themes or events - allowing meanings to emerge - temporarily leaving behind research questions
8. **Writing** - continuing to analyse and discuss - creating thick description

Settings

Mahmud - a Kurdish community in London - but how to access it - familiar shops and personal contacts. She eventually discovers that they like to talk about photographs

Amadasi - a school where there are migrant children - focus groups - but begins to notice other things going on with the teachers



Criteria for selection

Access, convenience, sufficient richness of potential data - i.e. **opening up rather than limiting** variables

One beginning ethnographer began observing on a specific bus that ran along Grand Avenue in St. Paul Minnesota. However, **it soon became clear** that she could not do all her research on that specific bus, so she treated all the 'Grand Avenue busses' as **a single kind of place**. She could have enlarged this category to 'city busses' and treated them all as a kind of place, a social situation with various actors and activities. (Spradley 1980: 40)

Monsey's ethnography of how people interact with vending machines (Spradley 1980: 54)

As a participant observer she made frequent purchases from Coke machines. To all outward appearances, she did what others did, but she approached each vending machine with an additional purpose: **to watch her own actions, the behaviour of others, and everything she could see** about the social situation.

What can be seen from key locations

Staffroom behaviour may also occur in other parts of the school ... or even in the bar of a public house. (Hammersley & Atkinson 1995: 54)

Deciding where to look from

A young Egyptian woman was living in the capital for the first time. She had never been to a restaurant before. **In order to work out how to do this** she first watched customers coming and going from across the street. As she gained confidence she went and stood just inside the door of the restaurant, which was sufficiently large and crowded for her not to be noticed. Here she watched and listened to how customers sat down and ordered. Eventually she learnt enough to sit down and order herself - to try out the hypotheses she had formulated as a result of her observations.

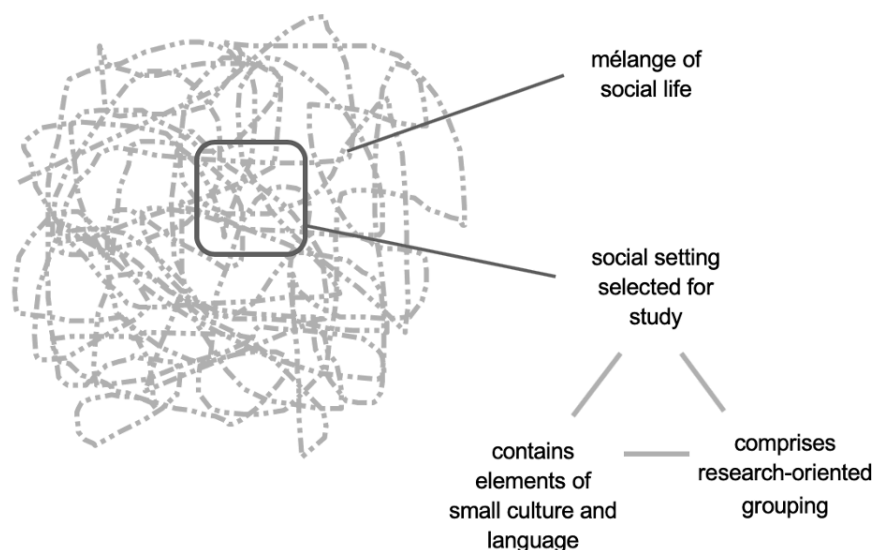
Approaching and being in the setting

Gatekeepers - people who let you in - Shamim had to be the daughter of a friend who needed to get good grades

Always looking around - for every available clue about what is going on

Being sensitive, polite and **flexible with your plans** - having to sit at the front of the class with the teacher but then seeing more

Sometimes being used by **existing agendas** - the department head letting me into classes if he could also come in and watch.



A setting (culture) is **an arbitrary slice** of human life, even if two people or one person in an environment

As down a microscope

Research = **small culture formation on the go**

Settings **might mean different things** to the researcher and the participants

As interworked systems of construable signs ... **culture is not a power**, something to which social events, behaviours, institutions, or processes can causally be attributed; **it is a context**, something within which they can be intelligibly – that is **thickly – described**. (Geertz 1993: 14)

Disciplines

Making the familiar strange

Allowing unexpected meaning to emerge

Bracketing researcher prejudice

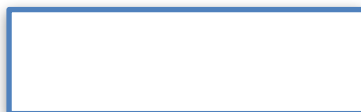
'A Southallian Sikh is a Southallian', and whether or not I have to refer to their 'Sikhness' or their caste to understand what they did would be **a matter of finding out, rather than knowing in advance** (Baumann 1996: 2).

Detail - allowing the data to speak

The customer approached the point at the till, where there are fewer people in the line. He stayed a few paces back from the till and looked up at the big board menu. His chin was up, thinking, and then he dropped his head, taking a step towards the till. It results from his typical customer's behaviour that the customer does not step to the till at once. ... Most of the customers in McDonald's did this. ... For others there was a kind of invisible line. ... At slower times it was just two or three paces back from the counter. At busy times, especially in the rush hour, it was seven or nine paces back. ... Sometimes their legs crossed or went stiff in front of me. And then I asked the well-known server's greeting slot 'May I help you?' or 'What would you like?' With a grinning face. After a certain period, you did this as a matter of routine. Sometimes I felt really tired of this superficial game, so that I just said 'Yes please' with a forced smile. (Celik 1999)

What does the detail do?

What does the researcher need to then do with this 'data'?



Data - description or picture or transcript



What the researcher thinks it **might mean** - what is going on, how it connects

Example 1: Interviewing an 'international student' (Amadasi & Holliday 2018: 247–248)

The participant is describing an argument with the owner of her accommodation about her breaking her contract.

S: She was all the time saying that ... 'I've been refusing students all this time because of you; and now you are leaving simply because you don't like the house', and, she said, 'because you are leaving let me tell you that you've been so rude with us. And it was like a shock for me, because **in my country**, I mean all people who know me, they used to, to I don't know, to give me, to to, cite let's say my behaviour as an example of politeness and being kind and so on. It was like terrible to to think, to thing to hear. And I was like, **I kept silent** and she started saying a lot of things, and, she said the thing that I really wanted to [incomprehensible] she said, '**you will never be part of this culture**'

R2: **Ooh.**

S: [laughing] I really wanted to tell her that that who told you that I'm that I want to be a part of this culture. **I already have a culture. I don't need to belong.** I already belong to a culture. I don't need to belong.

R2: Were you saying this because you were angry with what she was saying?

S: **Aah.**

R2: She she she is building a barrier.

R1: **Mmm.**

R2: So you're also responding to this barrier.

S's statement **suggests a conflict** between personal and grand narratives. **On the one hand is what seems** to be her host mother's grand narrative that foreigners should be 'assimilated' into the 'host' national culture. **This can be** associated with a dominant, essentialist, West as steward discourse of culture in which ... S has not learnt the 'this culture' lesson of being able to engage with and take responsibility for the rules of the accommodation contract because of 'her culture'.

We are not disclosing whether or not S is herself 'non-Western'. ... Neither do we know if S's interpretation of what happened is correct. This is not important. What is important is that S's account represents a personal narrative of independent resistance ... against being categorised as not belonging.

... It is important to acknowledge here that **our analysis indeed favours the possibility** of narratives which promote the alternative, non-essentialist critical cosmopolitan discourse of culture, and that this preference also **influences how we interact with S** about the event she is reporting. That we researchers speak this discourse is a major factor in **our methodological implicatedness** in the interview. **It encourages a particular outcome** and contributes to the narrative development of the whole interview. This is evident in R2's comment, 'she is building a barrier' and then 'so you're also responding to this barrier' in which he is encouraging S to confirm and rationalise her strategy. **It is not possible** to know how far S would have continued to talk in this way without this intervention; and one might question whether there is enough evidence to support the interpretation that S is engaging in an act of resistance at all. We also had some other data regarding S from my **research diary**, plus what she told us about her social life **later in the interview**

Her resilient use of resources is further evidenced by her calling friends, other study abroad students on her course, one of whom is able to join with her resilient action by getting a taxi to come for her:

R2: **So where did you go** that time of night?

S: Fortunately I had credit on my mobile phone. I got [my friend...]; and, she was in the here in the town. She was in the in the restaurant with friends. She took a taxi, and she, she came to, yeah.

The impression here of students who are capable of looking after themselves in a new cultural environment is developed by S then explaining that she deals with this sort of conflict all the time in her own country but that here she is less certain of her resources. (p.250)

S: Yeah, and I really I, I mean, words, what hurted me most is that, if I, if I were in, if it's happened to me that I, I mean, such accident in my country, I would do, I would do other things. I don't know. For example I may report that to police or something like that. Because I'm not that kind of people that argue on such stuff, but, I cannot let my, let my, I mean, let my rights like this. You see, I used to report this stuff directly. So, the bad thing about it is that I couldn't do anything because **I'm not in my country**. The thing that I could do is that I reported that to the police.

This shows that her choice to remain silent is based on a strategy of social skills developed from both her prior life experience and her experience of being a student in her new cultural environment. **It confirms** that the difficulties S faces are not because of an essentialist cultural difference in values, but due to a more practical matter of being in an unfamiliar place where she is unsure of the resources available to her.

In the next sequence, **R1 supports this** non-essentialist stance by drawing **a thread** to her own similar experience through a personal narrative of travel ('I can, I am with you because I mean you are abroad so it's very hard to know what to do, yeah.'). **However, R1 then quickly moves on**, with 'but did you', to ask a question that invites a deeper consideration of cultural difference.

Why did we choose not to reveal her nationality?

Why do we think she is not just constructing an essentialist cultural block?

Is our intervention influencing what she says?

Example 2: Working with migrant children in a school (Holliday & Amadasi 2020: 38–40)

Here Amadasi is revisiting what she learns from her research diary

On some occasions, a small question from me, concerning clothing or other details, was taken by the children as **an opportunity to begin a narrative** about themselves and their families and thus as an occasion to let me know something more about them. An example of this is in the following entry from my research diary:

This morning the teacher asks me to help Shahlyla and Arham with their homework. Shahlyla wears a Salwar Kameez that I had never seen on her. It is beautiful. So, I tell her that it is lovely. Working with them is nice: they are brother and sister and **she keeps interrupting** him while talking to me. I have always seen her very silent, **but now, with me**, she is prepared to share her thoughts. ...

As in the workshops that eventually took place, during the introductory meetings, **considerable positioning took place** between me and the

children. The following sequence is taken from the 30-minute introductory meeting with Parmesh, Umar, Qasim, Ajeet and Saeed:

Sequence 1

- [1] Sara: well, I was asking (.) who remembers the reason why I'm here? ((all rise hands up)) Everybody- ((addressing Parmesh)) go ahead
- [2] Parmesh: eh?
- [3] Sara: tell me Parmesh, what you were saying (.) why am I here (.) because?
- [4] Parmesh: because: because you make work children (0.2) children
- [5] Sara: yes I'm a researcher- Who knows what a researcher is?
- [6] Umar: ah mm like err they look for things
- [7] Sara: they look for things and they study things ((Qasim rises his hand up to say something)) tell me
- [8] Qasim: and you make work foreign children?
- [9] Sara: and I work with children (.) that have err travelled let's say (0.2) that have travelled- why? Because I'm interested in knowing (.) firstly because few researchers work with children (0.3) and I'm interested a lot in knowing what children think ((teacher's interruption))

...

In the first part of this extract, Qasim positions himself, and in doing this, he also positions the whole group: in turn 8, Qasim asks me whether I normally work with *foreign children*. **As a response, I do not confirm** this positioning and reply to Qasim by introducing a new one: that I work with children *who travelled* (turn 9). By purposefully not defining the nature of the travel and by not referring thus to 'migration' movement, **my aim is** to avoid introducing information that might affect the development of the interaction and its content.

My intention here is to focus on the act of travelling *per se*, as an experience. This is of course difficult because I am trying to get the children to discuss beyond framing and categories that might have been common and imposed on them inside school regarding their travel. **It is by** introducing new positionings related to the children, which are alternative to the set of established positionings the educational system has given them, **that I tried to** stimulate, together with the children, the production of alternative narratives (Baraldi 2014a).

Example 3: working with teenage migrants in a reception centre (Amadasi & Holliday in process)

This involves a fictionalised ethnographic account in which a female external facilitator, Nadia, feels attacked when a male teenage migrant, Jahan, questions her morality because she inadvertently reveals that she has a child with her 'partner' while not being married.

She discusses this with her colleague, Marta.

Then, in another meeting, Marta ... described how she had met a young migrant, Shahin, who's name she remembered because it was said it to her with such a clear energy. Shahin had asked her if she realised what huge 'power' the various agencies that helped them 'wielded'. Shahin had gone on to say something that even Marta found startling - that most of them in the sessions didn't in any way agree with the patriarchal discourse that Jahan expressed, and felt it gave a very bad and inaccurate image of where they came from. However, they also felt drawn to

support him because he was using this discourse as 'a source of capital' to oppose this power. Marta said that she was so impressed at the depth of thinking these young people engaged with to make sense of the awful shifting realities of their lives.

Nadia left the conversation quite inspired - with completely renewed ideas. It was a disruption - something she hadn't thought of. That Jahan could be using his attack on her as a source of capital was at the same time astonishing and opening up a deeper understanding of what might have been going on. That it might be to do with her own power required a deep resetting of how she was going about her work. It also made her feel that she could be far more courageous in her work. It certainly didn't mean that she should patronise Jahan by somehow excusing what he had said 'because of his culture', but that these kind of events can provide professional insights on how narratives can impact the interactional process.

Here, Marta's and Shahin's broader contextualisation reveals a deeper complexity in Jahan's positionality than the dominant blocking narrative expressed by Henrik. This also resonates with what Nadia already knows about the contradicting discourses in her own personal cultural trajectory and leads her to a degree of resolution regarding her professional response to Jahan.

The use of **creative non-fiction** is discussed in Holliday (2022) and Agar (1990)

Epilogue

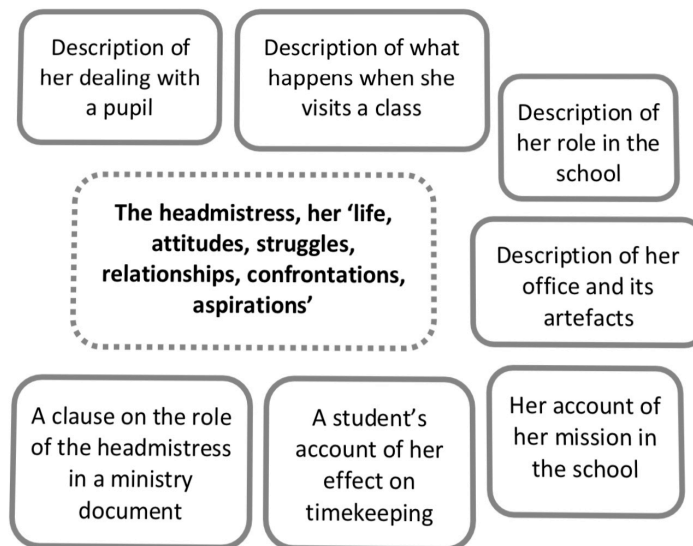
How to dress and behave

During these weeks, I waited in lobbies and secretaries' offices for hours, for just moments of interaction fulfilling the procedures required by the study. However, I do not believe that those long hours and days waiting behind doors were wasted, exhausting though they were. They provided a process of socialisation and initiation into the field. It is probable that I consciously and subconsciously renewed and regulated my use of language, analysed degrees of formality as well as informality in social behaviour, familiarised myself with political and social discourses, and formed a deeper understanding of dress codes. I managed to work out an appropriate and personal dress code as I sat or stood in various spaces.

... The process of collecting data depends on meticulous time keeping and constant planning and re-planning, always looking ahead in order to be ready for diversions. ... The fact was that I felt privileged to be a researching artist, and since I had been given the permission to be at these institutions I wished to adopt strategies that would enable me to use my time in the best possible way. Making sure that I would arrive a few minutes earlier and leave when they [the teaching staff and students] did helped my status as a colleague, and a co-worker. (Honarbin-Holliday 2005: 46-48)

The interview took place at my house. The setting was quite a private terrace. Our usual terrace table and chairs. There is a neighbour's house facing the terrace across the street but they have to come and sit on their balcony to be able to hear what was being spoken and during the interview nobody came out. The respondent could see that too. This rather private setting gave such an immense 'freedom' to R10 that he had no worries that somebody would be eavesdropping. (Research diary) (Holliday 2016: 165, citing Delikurt)

Herrera's (1992) final decision about what her collected data means and where next to go

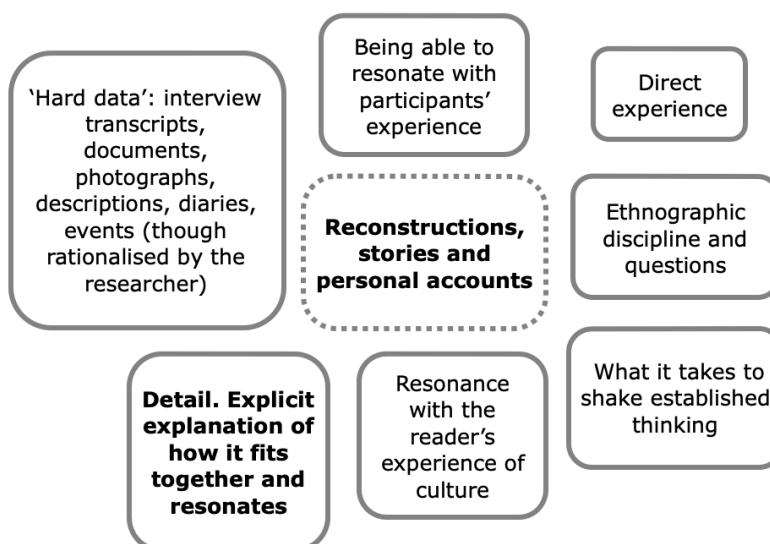


How Ovenden manages not being able to directly interview children about touching museum objects. She recalls her own experience.

Measuring just over seven centimetres high and standing in all its nakedness - was the most innocent little doll I had ever seen. ... I felt clumsy as the frailty of its limbs brushed against my fingers ... four thousand years after its original crafting its gentle fibres tugged at my heart strings with phenomenal strength. ... Who had cherished this little plaything so long ago? Had they felt as protective and caring as I? (Ovenden 2003: 42–43)

Then writing a whole fictional chapter about taking children to the museum to help understand further - interconnecting a memory of being a teacher with interview data

Convincing networks of intersubjectivity



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