

Who Cares? We're going on a bear-hunt...

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Abstract

This paper is an invitation to reflect with us on the ethical and practical challenges of representation when presenting research. As systemic therapists and doctoral researchers, we have developed a shared interest in researching the narratives of families affected by addiction and first episode psychosis. In this paper we describe our exploration of a theoretical framework for presenting research in a format that promotes immersive learning and an embodied process of meaning making within a workshop with a multimedia installation. We experiment with ways of bringing in the words and experiences of people in ways that are ethically coherent with systemic practice and include audio soundbites and video clips from the installation.

We are two systemic family therapists who work with marginalised and often silenced communities of people affected by alcohol addiction (in Monica's case) and first episode psychosis (in Paula's case).

In this paper, we describe how we designed and hosted a workshop with a multimedia installation showing our research into our work as systemic practitioners with families living with a family member who is addicted to alcohol or living with severe mental health issues. The installation was designed to invite reflective learning for workshop participants. Our research has brought up many important questions about how we represent the experience of participants lives and stories when presenting our research.

We share an interest in exploring, through research, the subaltern narratives of the people we meet in our daily practice, their first person accounts of their experiences and their reflections on their interactions with services (Spivak, 2010). As systemic therapists, conference participants and presenters and now, researchers, we have paid particular attention to how other trainers and presenters address questions of consent to show, exhibit or quote parts the narratives and experience of

people we meet with. Our workshop involved critical consideration of the ethics of representation, working out the how and why we needed to look at doing things in ways which were coherent with our practice ethics. Through our research with families living with a family member who is addicted to alcohol or experiences severe mental health issues, we have experimented with how the voice of *experts by experience* can be articulated in our research. This paper is a small offering in considering how the training of future generations of therapists, researchers and leaders can be enhanced by using creative and ethical approaches to presenting participants in research and practice.

The workshop and its context

The Bedfordshire International Systemic Practice and Research School held in Brathay Hall in Cumbria, is hosted by the University of Bedfordshire's Professional Doctorate in Systemic Practice (PDSP). Workshops are delivered by leading international presenters and PDSP doctoral researchers on something specific to our research themes. In 2018, Bedfordshire International Systemic Practice and Research School encouraged presenters to move away from traditional forms of presentation to perturb the status quo of positivist ways of knowing, being and doing research. The conference theme encouraged presenters to make a "*NewSense*" of practice and research through the dialogical nature of live interaction within and outside of the workshop contexts.

The aim of the workshop was to create an immersive environment taking our participants on a journey of illumination in which we amplify the subaltern family narratives central to our practice research. T. S. Eliot (1944) in his *Four Quartets* portrays a cycle of learning and meaning making through experience and suggested "we had an experience but missed the meaning..."

So, in thinking about how we capture meaning making we asked ourselves two further questions. How can research be heard by others in a way that evokes an embodied process of 'meaning making'? How might the "meaning making" of workshop participants inform our practice research and its presentation in the future?

Setting the scene for the workshop

Presenting any workshop brings a level of anxiety and challenge (Mills, 2006), planning the anticipated outcomes, method of delivery and all the ancillary decisions that come because of this can often lead presenters to remain within their comfort zone and stick with the types of workshops that we as attendees have come to expect to be delivered to us at conferences (Chung, 2018). Deciding to do something different in a workshop involves a level of risk and adventure on the part of the presenters but also on the part of the attendees, who sign up for something that is going to be done differently. We knew that as members of the PDSP programme we were being encouraged to think creatively about how we do research, it was therefore not too big a leap to think creatively about how to present differently. Pitching to the conference scientific committee to facilitate a workshop that was part installation and part experiential in a log cabin bedroom was perhaps the most difficult challenge of all. Our title "Who cares? We're going on a bear hunt..." connects with the popular childhood story book by Rosen & Oxenbury (1989) and the nervous excitement of being taken on a journey into the unknown for both facilitators and participants. Given the title we had chosen, the risk for us was that this may be viewed as "entertainment" and not a serious attempt at presenting a powerfully emotive workshop. We had to balance the experiential element with critical analysis and participant reflection whilst presenting a robust theoretical framework around what we were proposing to do.

Our time on the [PDSP programme](#) gave us an indication that we may be able to develop something unique together in the form of a workshop. This would allow us to collectively focus a wider lens on the synergies related to our practice and research. As well as the work that we do and the passion we share for enabling subjugated and marginalised voices to be heard, we noticed many other synergies that connected us. One that may be less evident to you if you should meet us is our shared Irish cultural heritage. Monica living and working in Ireland and Paula born in Ireland but now living and working in England. The “crack”, clear to all, was ever present in our dialogue with each other and provided a platform for us to explore, have fun and be creative in our thinking about how we might bring our research to life in workshop form. “Crack” or “Craic” is an Irish colloquialism, present in Hiberno-English, refers to “entertaining and enjoyable conversation” where fun and entertainment is at the heart (Wikipedia, 2019). People may say “what is the crack?” Meaning what is happening or what is the news?

Deciding to do things differently

So how did we decide to do things differently in this workshop? One trigger was a group visit for systemic doctoral researchers to the Tate Modern Art Gallery, London. The aim of the visit was to encourage us to consider the connections and influence of the creativity in research (Leavy, 2015). This helped us to shift from a dominant traditional research writing approach (use of words and written text alone) to more creative, illustrative methods of presenting our research to others (Dixson, Chapman & Hill, 2005; Day, 2014). Our task on the day was to be aware of and note how art spoke to us in the context of our research as we explored the gallery (Sullivan, 2006).

Blinded, we suppose, by years of presenting and reading research articles that, to be published, must conform to the conventional formulae of written “academic style” text We were struggling to understand how to match the two paradigms of creativity and written research texts.

Despite these struggles, we were prepared to have an open mind and hope that the trip would spark something for us.

For me, Monica, my turning point or lightbulb moment was the installation by Ilya Kabakov entitled “The Man Who Flew Into Space From His Apartment”. It was part of an [exhibition at the Tate Modern in 2018 by artists Ilya & Emilia Kabakov: “Not everyone will be taken into the future”](#). In this small room installation, that you view through a hole in the door, made me think about how it might be for a family member looking into the room their son or daughter, brother or sister who is drinking. The artists captured the oppression and desperation for a different way of life that people I work with often articulate and the distress and concern that affected family members describe when they are witnessing the impact of alcohol addiction in their home.



Ilya Kabakov. *The Man Who Flew Into Space From His Apartment* 1985 (© Ilya & Emilia Kabakov)



SUPERFLEX: *One Two Three Swing!* 2018. (© Tate Photography)

I, Paula, on the other hand have always struggled to see myself as creative, despite the many things I do that could be described as inherently creative. Challenging as it was to be given the task of viewing art in the context of my research, I decided to embrace the visit to the Tate Modern (my first in fact) as an opportunity to experience creativity in its many unique forms. I had no idea what was to be expected on the day and avoided the use of google to “check out” what I might experience. Just going with it alongside my group felt like the best way for me to embrace what was to come. Like a six-year-old child, I immediately ran to the [“One Two Three Swing!”](#) by the Danish artists’ collective SUPERFLEX in the Turbine Hall.

The sheer vastness of space meant that I could just swing with freedom and feel the experience of the wind rushing through my hair. Noticing my bodily sensations, the higher I got, I recognised that feeling of being both nervous and excited at the same time (“nervo-cited” as my little girl says). As I reflect now, I can also see that something about that moment took me out of my adult intellectualising frame of reference (Siebert & Walsh, 2013) and into the “mind wide open” childhood frame of reference (Fox & Schirrmacher, 2014; Clark, 2017). This importantly helped me to immerse myself in what I would see, hear and feel in the moment, and allow the thinking to come later when we came together as a group at the end of the day.

Another piece that stood out for me, Paula, was the installation [“Babel” 2001](#) by [Cildo Meireles](#), a tower of second hand analogue radios, referred to as a “tower of incomprehension” (Barson, 2011). It reminded me of the many voices I hear when working with families with a member who has experienced a first episode of psychosis.

Our question to each other at this point, in the planning of the workshop, was how do we get those voices we hear from people we work with over to the participants in a meaningful and impactful way?



Cildo Meireles: 'Babel' (© Cildo Meireles)

For us both this visit to the Tate was a real turning point. We realised after that day we were interacting with the exhibits in an embodied, active, sense making frame. The spark to look at how to present our research at the Bedfordshire International Systemic Spring School and the question of how to illicit a similar embodied response to the ones we had when connecting art to practice research? What if our participants were invited to “walk through” our practice research with us? 4 dimensional installation environments are interactive and engaging, they have potential to shift participants from a passive position of receiving knowledge to becoming “embodied” within the environment itself. By moving through a 4D installation we had the potential to engage sensory participation (sight, smell, touch, sound) and evoke active sense making (reflection in action, Kolb, 1984) within participants (Madison, 2018).

Making new sense: approaching workshops as an installation

Our title “Who cares? We’re going on a bear hunt...” connects with the popular childhood story book by Rosen & Oxenbury (1989) and the nervous excitement of being taken on a journey into the unknown for both facilitators and participants.

For the workshop, we asked ourselves how we could create a simulacrum of a bedroom that our participants could explore; Could we create a perceived reality, a landscape for our participants to interact with? The concept of using simulated environments within the gaming industry where participants can interact and learn was one that we were attempting to use in the workshop. Baudrillard describes these created environments as simulacra, a simulation, using the concepts of seduction and simulation within a manufactured environment to stimulate participants and enhance learning and experience (Hauskeller, Philbeck, & Carbonell, 2016)

The second question related to concepts of human perception. We particularly focused the ability of the body to structure our experience of the world. What if we got our participants to move towards, through and away from this landscape based on the enactive theory of perception? Would that engage their active sense-making and aid the participants engagement with the first person narratives of the people we work with (Merleau-Ponty, 1964; Varela, Thompson & Rosch, 1993; Watzlawick, 1984; Merleau-Ponty, 2004; Merleau-Ponty & Landes, 2013)? This led us to looking at the research being done on 4D learning environments. The growing use of immersive learning environments and situated learning has been an area of interest for me, Paula, in my work as a senior lecturer training mental health nurses. We hypothesised that combining movement with symbolic/narrative and sensory immersion would provide our participants with an ethically safe way of experiencing our practice research. In a way we would invite them to become immersed in our research as a learning opportunity (Graham & Fabricius, 2017). Ethically, we were mindful that not all of our workshop participants would be therapists and that, in any case, some of the narratives that we were presenting may have personal resonances for some people. We were conscious of not trying to portray people in ways that would be objectifying of their experiences (Swauger, 2011).

For me, Monica, it was an important stance and I began to look at the idea of curating, presenting our clients narratives as a curated body of work that our workshop participants would interact with, facilitating the narratives to emerge raw and without too much mediation from us the presenters. The codes of ethics of our professions (for example, AFT, 2019) often do not address the concepts of representational ethics present in much of what we produce in our research writing or workshop presentations of other people’s lives. In our preparation for the workshop we examined museum studies to see how much thought they put into examining how exhibits represent different cultures and the ways that they examine whether this is ethical. This has been called the “politics of exhibiting” and is necessary to consider when disseminating information about people’s lives/stories/identities (Lidici, 1997). We hoped that our workshop would demonstrate social construction in action whilst also maintaining a strong ethical position encapsulated in the words of Imelda McCarthy who says, “To imagine the life of another is to embrace an ethical stance towards the other” (McCarthy, 2002 p.10).

This led to the next question. Within the design of the workshop we explored and researched the use of audio within museum contexts. We had moved our approach and now were very far from the information centric approach of a traditional workshop. We were now looking at the physical sensorial and social dimensions of being there. Interestingly, for me, Paula, my experience, described earlier, of the swings was reflected in the development, delivery and participant experience of our workshop at

the spring school, my thought at this point was “how might people receive our research during this workshop”?

Drawing on the concepts of Deleuze & Guattari (1987) and Bakhtin (1981), we wondered what if we created a layered polyphony of multiple voices all playing at the same time within the bedroom space that we were going to use. Workshop participants would move through a soundscape, voices getting louder as you approach, then moving away and towards another one. Using the storytelling power of the human voice, our participants would listen to “voices” in four areas around the cabin that would also have a sensory artefact linked to the narrative e.g. a bicycle, a coffee cup, empty bottles inside the wardrobe and a broken door poster on the door of the cabin. The work of Siobhan McHugh was a key insight for us in her use of the theory of affective sound.

The affective power of sound and voice, combined with the intimacy of the listening process, means we can be moved by listening to oral history; this in turn affects how we absorb and retain its content, as well as how we judge that content

McHugh, 2012, p.195

We hoped that this method of sound within a sensory space would provoke responses that “moved” participants creating an opportunity for reflexive thinking within the workshop group. In our constructed pieces we are drawing on the concepts of ghost-writing and ventriloquation (Rhodes, 2000; Simon, 2016) to illustrate our practice.

So finally, we had the concepts grounded within our philosophical and theoretical frame. One more *what if* emerged, what if we created a document, a brochure, akin to an artist’s statements that we had seen in the Tate Modern. These artists statements gave in a precise format the context and background to the pieces that we were viewing. Would that give our participants anchor points to focus their reflections when we returned from the immersive space?

Audio Recordings

The recordings themselves centred on stories told and heard within the context of our individual systemic family psychotherapy practice. We developed the audio recordings using “actors” (our colleagues and friends) prior to the workshop. Siobhan McHugh writes how audio storytelling is “imaginative audio works that blended ‘actuality’ (ambient sound, recorded outside the studio) with narrated information usually delivered by actors” (2016 p.67). She highlights the extreme power of audio to evoke emotion in the listener referring to “audio’s capacity for empathy and intimacy” (McHugh, 2018, p.105).

An example of the type of audio depiction of the types of conversations we hear about. These audio extracts are fictional in content. However, they characterise the ways in which families experience living with psychosis or alcohol addiction. Families often refer to confusion, pain, trauma and loss amongst other things (Bucci et al. 2016; Daley et al, 2018; Onwumere et al, 2018).

One of the most common themes in working with parents of adult children who have moved back to the family home is how they experience the emotional rollercoaster of hope and despair. The hope that things will be different and the despair when the drinking returns. Within this audio, you will hear Audrey an addiction counsellor voicing one of these fictional narratives.

Video Recordings

Early on we decided to present two videos as part of the installation, in doing this the consideration of anonymity of the participants was paramount. We had also been organised by the impact of judgement and distraction that can be elicited when watching people rather than hearing with limited visual emphasis (Tsay, 2013).

We decided to use a format of “close video” of the participants showing just the mouth while they are speaking. This decision was influenced by viewing parts of the 1973 performance of Samuel Beckett’s play “Not I” taken from a BBC documentary on the first time it was performed interspersed with reflections of the actress Billie Whitelaw on the experience of working with Beckett and performing the play for the first time (Whitelaw in Powell’s documentary 1977). She describes Beckett’s minute concentration on how every phrase was articulated, its pitch and volume and exactly how the play was staged. All sets were designed by Beckett to increase the emotional impact of the piece. Particularly the phrase that resonated for us was when Billie Whitelaw stated, “*in witnessing this I recognised the inner scream... there was no escaping it*” (in Powell’s documentary 1977).

In the fictional narration here, voiced by a family therapist, we feature a mother’s conversation with her mother from the car. Her daughter is recently diagnosed with psychosis and is accessing Early Intervention Psychosis services (EIP). The conversation highlights the despair and feelings of powerlessness that some parents describe. It emphasises the dilemmas that families face in supporting their loved ones and in having to communicate with professional services.

Inside the workshop

In the workshop the intensity that we experience with our clients was presented from an emic (insider’s) view (Kottak, 2017; Hoffman, 2007; Xia, 2011). We wanted to bring participants “with us”, into our practice space, in an impactful and safe way that also supported situated learning (Dawley & Dede, 2014). So, we invited participants into an immersive themed installation space in which some of the overarching narratives of family members were symbolically deployed.

On the day of the workshop room was like most others, a rectangular presentation/group work enabled space. In this room we began by building the momentum of growing anticipation for participants. We were playful to start with presenting many colourfully, character inspired, PowerPoint slides. As the presentation went on (around 15 minutes) the emphasis shifted in and out of the social constructionist and arts-based perspectives that had led to our inspiration and creation.

A warning slide was projected encouraging participants to take care of themselves during the installation, shifting the participants focus into a position of active interest in what may be coming... in a “not knowing” position (Anderson & Goolishian, 1992) they had to “just go with it”. Monica disappears and at this point and I am left alone, feeling anxious I have to say, I begin reading the bear hunt books first chapter, “were going on a bear hunt, were going to catch a big one... uh oh, we can’t go over it, we can’t go under it. Oh no we have to go through it” (Rosen & Oxenbury, 1989, p.1). My anxiety peaks, the anxiety speaking in my head “what if this doesn’t work... what if they don’t get it... what if it is too much or not enough...”. Meanwhile over in the cabin Monica is setting up the equipment to ensure maximum sensory impact upon entering the room. The cabin is a single story large open room with a sleeping area and small seating area looking out onto the rambling Cumbrian countryside. A tranquil space filled with only the sounds of nature until Monica strategically conceals a range of MP3 players and speakers around the cabin.

Back in the workshop room we all stand up and I exit through these huge picture frame type French doors, the sun is like a huge blast of light in my eyes, I squint to adjust and then walk on. We quietly walk towards one of the Brathay Hall log cabins, interestingly we are walking in straight line behind each other like an army of ants on a quest to find something. As we arrive, I stop - I tell the audience what they need to do when entering the room and remind them of “keeping safe”. They are asked to enter the room and move around the space listening to the audio stories as they go, once they have finished listening to the stories, they are asked to stand in front of the laptop screen near the wall. At this point I knock on the door and Monica invites people in. Slowly and purposefully the participants enter the room navigating between the many obstacles that exist.

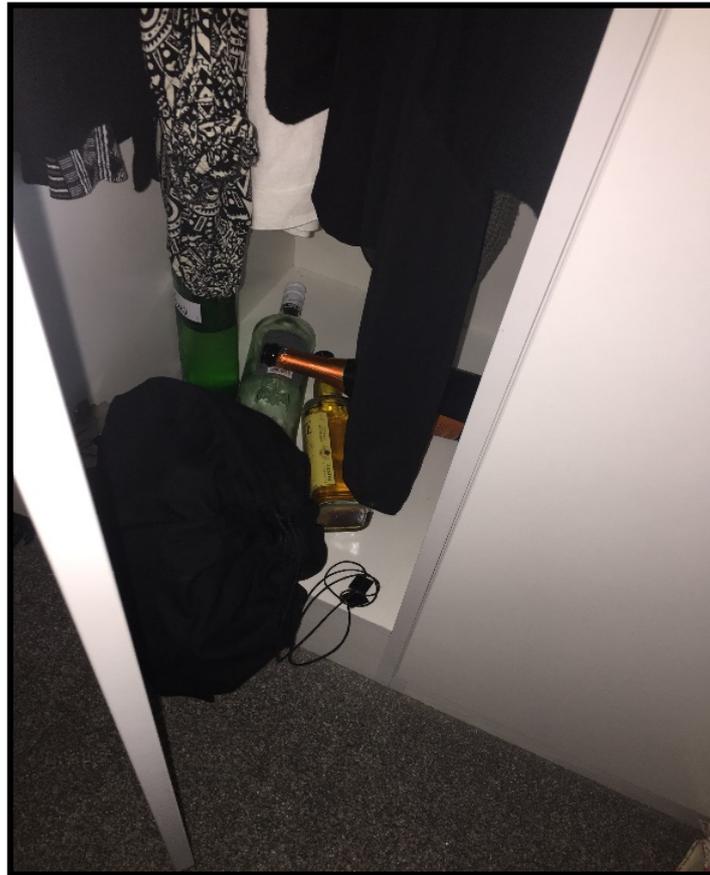
Moving individually at first and then landing in twos or threes at certain points around the room. At these points are concealed audio recordings of barely audible sounds of family members talking about they are experiencing a family members psychosis or alcohol addiction. With recordings dotted around the cabin, participants are bending down and stretching in to listen to their stories, this lasts around 16 minutes.

Click the photo below to start the audio



Calling Mum

Click the photo below to start the audio



Bottles in the wardrobe

As instructed the participants then shift the focus onto a small laptop set up against the wall in the cabin. I, Paula, am looking at Monica and as we both nod she stops the audio recordings and I have the okay to hit the play button on the laptop... silence descends in the room... then noise bursts in through the laptop which shows a pixelated image of a lady's mouth and she begins to talk about her experiences of having a sister diagnosed with psychosis. We could all feel, for different reasons, the "weight/wait" at this point, now completely submerged in the stories being told in the immersive installation space we have created. 3.45 minutes later silence falls again, and the experience ends.

After-effects of the workshop

With nobody speaking or focusing on others we walk slowly back to the workshop room, We look at each other. Our senses felt greatly heightened at this point. Machon refers to intimate immersive spaces where "all the senses are engaged and manipulated" as being hugely impactful on those experiencing it (2013, p.22), as one participant put it "*it was like I could feel the rhythm of pain from beginning to end*".

When we arrive back in the room people sat quietly providing some space for people to "take a moment". We move to reorientation, bringing people back into a different part of the workshop.

All participants were invited to reflect on the experience after the event using the questions box, to consider the “impact” that this experience had had on them. Our thinking was to capture the experiences of participants in a number of areas.

We had developed a feedback exercise that could be done in small groups and concentrated on the headings as seen in the diagram below. We invited them to share the impact of the experience on them.

The task

“Working dialogically in 2s or 3s, consider the below reflections on your experience...”

- **What stood out for you?**
- **How does this connect with you and your practice?**
- **What connects you together - what are your synergies?**
- **What difference might this make for you and for your practice?**



For me, Monica, developing this workshop enabled the exploration how I might bring the voices of the experts by experience who are my research participants clearly into view. Diving into the areas of the politics representation within museums and galleries has had a major impact on how I conceptualise and present my research. The intersectionality of my position as an insider researcher is one that in the past I would not have articulated so clearly as I do since the workshop. The shift in my theoretical position about how we use video and sound within the systemic therapy field to represent our work has also had an impact on way that we have written this article and the types of images and sound clips that we have included to provoke your social construction of our work.

Reflection

In this paper we have explored our differing work contexts, the themes that have connected our practices and the context to our developing research practices. More specifically we have offered a reflection on a workshop that we co-facilitated based on immersive audio and visual narratives of the lives of families we work with. We have offered some theoretical framework to our methodology and offered some of our personal reflections on presenting in this way. In particular we note the intimate impact on us as presenters and on those who took part in the workshop as participants. In this context our participants were: the families who consented to share their stories; our colleagues who lent their voices to some of those stories; and the people from the conference who came on the journey with us and offered us their feedback.

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