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SRHE Final Project Report: Exploring embodied academic identity

Executive summary

I was funded to explore how academics reconcile an embodied practice with their academic practice and identity, and whether it contributed to their wellbeing. In other words, does their embodied practice help them make sense of their academic work, and does it make them feel better about it? The project used methods designed to interrogate and explore the participants' own expressions of embodiment.

The findings showed that all academics with an embodied practice felt that it contributed to their personal sense of wellbeing- though that sense of wellbeing was separate from a corporate one that could be given to them through institutional initiatives. Some of the academics felt that there was a clear connection between their embodied practice and academic work, whereas others initially thought they kept them separate. Through reflection most came to the conclusion that their practice did impact on their work directly or indirectly. There seemed to be a connection between how much an individual felt that their embodied practice was integral to their identity, and the kinds of data they produced with the creative research methods. The project resulted in more questions around the ethics of research, and the boundaries between research and therapy, and research and art.

Summary of project aims and objectives

Embodiment can be thought of as the fundamental and integral connection between the mind and body, though it is a contested term (Sheets-Johnstone, 2015). Embodied awareness is a fundamental aspect of yoga, other movement forms (Bainbridge-Cohen, 1993; Hartley, 1989; Olsen, 1998), types of martial arts, modern dance and movement awareness (Da'Oud, 1995).

Learning an embodied way of being in, looking at and reflecting on the world could fall within Brighthouse's (2005) idea of developing 'flourishing lives'. Personal flourishing is "largely created within cultures" (White, 2007:27). Academic identity, and the way in which we as academics construct our working and out-of-work lives has impact on career, health and well-being (Ennals, Fortune, Williams, & D'Cruz, 2015; Freedman & Stoddard Holmes, 2003; Malcolm & Zukas, 2009).

Academia has been described as an unpleasant place, (Bloch, 2012) primarily because emotional and embodied feelings are repressed. Employers should be promoting the psychological well-being of their employees (NICE, 2009), but need to find out what helps first (Darabi, Macaskill, & Reidy, 2016).

Many academics enjoy an embodied practice of some kind outside of work, in addition to those who explicitly engage in one as part of their academic practice. This project aimed to use discipline crossing creative qualitative methodological approaches (Xenitidou & Gilbert, 2012) that draw on embodied practices to address issues of academic identity.

Outline of methodology and project timetable

It is vital that methodology is congruent with the focus of research. Due to its rejection of mind-body dualism and the importance of the 'lived body', phenomenology (Bain, 1995) was particularly relevant, as the description of experience is its fundamental concern (Sheets-Johnstone, 2010). Phenomenological, (Leder, 1990; Merleau-Ponty, 2002) participatory, (Smith, 2008) and an adapted mosaic approach (Clark & Moss, 2001) were used to gather a variety of data as the participants explored the research questions through dialogue, movement, mark-making, drawing, and the use of film or photographic images. I took a reflexive and participatory ethnographic role (Pink, 2009) role throughout, in which my voice was heard alongside that of the other participants. This allowed the co-construction of meaning and ensured that all participant voices were heard as we made sense of the data, building up a mosaic of evidence that included visual and textual data.

I recruited participants initially by contacting academics I had met who I knew had an embodied practice of some kind, and then through recommendation. I did not specify that participants had a certain practice, and instead asked them to self-identify as being suitable to participate in the study. I met with 11 academics who self-identified as having an embodied practice, and who represented a range of seniority levels and disciplinary areas from PhD students to Professors, and dance, anthropology, sociology and STEM. These meetings were not traditional interviews, in that although the participants were invited to talk, they were also invited to move, to draw, to mark make, and on one occasion to make music. One participant described the meeting as more of a 'play date' than an interview, and this captures the playful nature of the interactions. The meetings were very much a dialogue, with myself and each participant working to make sense of the ideas discussed. I had a very loose structure to the meetings in order to explore ideas of identity, academic work, individual embodied practices and the connections (if any) the participants saw between them. The participants have included 4 men, and 7 women. Each play date has been filmed and digitally recorded, and transcribed, and the data includes the transcriptions, mark-making and art work, my reflective journal and the video footage.

When it came to analysis, I was inspired by Maggie MacLure's approach to data analysis (MacLure, 2003) in which she explicitly states that as researchers we are drawn to those themes and moments that resonate with us, that excite us. As such, we do not have to feel that we have to be 'fair' or 'do justice' to all the data equally, and instead should feel free to follow the stories that we are inspired to tell. I took an autoethnographic stance, as I was very aware that my own understanding and positionality were very much a part of the stories I would see and tell in the data. Participants were invited to be part of a participatory approach to analysis, which contributes to the self-formation of ideas through authentic dialogue (Gadamer, 2004).

October 2016	submitted ethics application, recruited participants
December 2016- June 2017	collected data—met with each participant for between 2-4 hours (in one visit or over two separate visits) to talk, move, mark-make and film
June –November2017	analysed data through a participatory process

November 2017- present produced video essay, wrote papers and chapters and disseminated research findings through seminars, publications and conference attendance

Analysis of results

The data are very interesting, with participants having a range of self-identified embodied practices including yoga, meditation, martial arts, and movement forms including Alexander Technique, Authentic Movement and Contact Improvisation. The academics reflected on the meanings they attributed to their embodied practices, how these practices shaped their identity, how they converged and diverged with their academic identity, and how they reconciled any tensions between them. The use of the creative research methods proved helpful to allow individuals to make sense of their experiences, and the differences in how they perceived things and how they thought they perceived things. There were conversations about the ways in which embodied practices have more or less impact on identity due to contributing factors such as illness or injury, and how embodied practices can contribute to well-being and identity formation.

There have been three main themes. The first considers the language around and identification of and with embodied practices and academic identity. Some of the academics I spoke to identified strongly with their embodied practice or academic work which was expected, particularly in disciplines such as dance or drama where there was a strong overlap between the nature of the work and practice. However, what was unexpected was that those who felt that they kept the two things separate initially, changed their mind through the process of the study. Many saw connections between the different aspects of their identity, and recognised how one fed into the other. These realisations came as the participants reflected on their own work, the skills they valued, and the ways in which they constructed their identity as both academic and practitioner. The second theme is the tension between the pressures of producing academic work and existing within the academy and how they reconcile that with their embodied practice, and how these fit within the idea of 'wellbeing'. The third theme is methodological, and was not anticipated. It concerns the ways in which academics creatively engaged (or not) with the research methods, whether there were correlations between relationship to embodied practice and willingness to experiment with the creative methods on offer, and the kinds of data and insights that using creative methods allowed. These themes are explored more fully in the publications that will follow this report.

Project conclusions / outcomes

One of the interesting aspects of this study was the way in which the participants interacted with the creative research methods, and the multimodal data that was produced. As an academic it is challenging to allow data to be seen as outputs of research without a written narrative, a more conventional research output. An embodied or posthuman approach to research is inevitably messy, as it echoes the messiness of life. It invites us as researchers to challenge and question the ethics around participation and co-production of knowledge. Are we equipped to support and enable our participants to deal with the raw, honest and vulnerable emotions and feelings these approaches may generate? Are we skilled enough to hold the space for them to do this, and supported enough to seek the supervision we need to process it? The 'messy' data that this research generates again invites us to question around how we go about analysis, how honest and

open and vulnerable we want to be within the research and in the telling of the stories of the research. The analytic process and frame is not clear cut and simple. It transgresses boundaries of what is research, what is therapy, what is process work, and what is art. Using creative methods can lead to questions of rigour and validity of the research. These approaches require a high degree of reflexivity and an awareness of the literature in order to frame the context, content and methodological choices.



As a methodology it has evoked honesty and openness with strangers, and created a fertile ground for expression of experience, feeling, and constructions of identity. However, it has challenged traditional ideas of what counts as rigorous methodology and practice within higher education.

Summary of next steps

Presentation of work

'An embodied approach in a cognitive discipline' at Educational Futures and Fractures at Strathclyde University in February 2017.

A lightening talk on 'exploring embodied academic identity' at the CSHE Research Festival in October 2017.

An individual paper with the same title at SRHE's main conference December 2017.

I convened a round table at SRHE's main conference 'embodied perspectives on research in higher education' with Lou Harvey, Jess Bradley (Leeds) and Nicole Brown (UCL IoE).

A seminar as part of the CSHE Research Series on 'exploring embodied academic identity' screening the video essay <https://vimeo.com/245602322>.

A blog for the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education 'being hefty'.

I gave a talk on embodied academic identity and leadership at Hertfordshire University.

I presented at Disrupting Research Practices at Coventry with Nicole Brown and Catriona Blackburn <https://vimeo.com/250364867>

I have been invited to talk at:

The Qualitative Research Symposium 2018 at Bath in January 2018 'exploring academic identity: the boundaries of research'.

A symposium on embodied practice and performance in the performing arts at Canterbury Christ Church University in April 2018 screening 'exploring embodied academic identity through creative research methods'.

The Qualitative Research Conference 2018 in May at Banff, Canada 'the boundaries of research'

Creative Art / Anthropology Praxis as Revelation and Resistance at The Royal Anthropological Institute in June 2018 'being an embodied practitioner and researcher'.

I am convening a session at the NCRM Research Methods Festival 2018 'Embodied perspectives on innovative research methodology' again with Lou Harvey, Jess Bradley and Nicole Brown.

I have submitted to:

The 6th International Academic Identities Conference, the International Association for Visual Culture Conference and the Ethnography and Qualitative Research Conference.

Publication of work

Leigh, J. Embodiment, credibility and higher education research. *Submitted to Teaching in Higher Education*.

Leigh, J. Ed. Conversations on embodiment across higher education. *To be published 2018 by Routledge. Including:*

Leigh, J. Embodied practice and embodied identity. *To be published 2018 by Routledge*

Leigh, J. Embodied approach to a cognitive discipline. In *Time and Space in the Neoliberal University* Ed M. Breeze, to be published by Palgrave in 2018.

Brown, N. & Leigh, J. Creativity and playfulness in HE research. *To be published in Theory and Method in Higher Education Research Volume 4.*

Leigh, J. & Brown, N. Make and Do: Applying creative methods in HE research. *To be submitted to Educational Researcher*

Leigh, J. & Blackburn, C. Exploring embodied academic identity. *Video article to be submitted to Journal of Embodied Research*

Brown, N. & Leigh, J. Academics, illness and biographical disruption. *To be submitted to British Journal of Sociological Education*

Leigh, J. & Brown, N. Ethics in participatory and creative research. *To be submitted to Qualitative Research*

[Any plans to continue work or proposals for further research which might compliment this project](#)

Nicole Brown, Phaedra Petsalis (Rambert) and I were awarded £2000 to explore reflective practice in stage students, and this project will use an anthropological film maker, and creative approaches to research similar to those used within this project.

Lou Harvey, Jess Bradley, Nicole Brown and I are planning a bid to the Leverhulme Foundation to continue the work we have been doing together on creative research methods and approaches.

Amana Perry-Kessasis, Nicole Brown and I are developing an open access edited book proposal 'approaching messy data: what now?'

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