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Flexible Methodologies: A Case for Approaching Research with Fluidity

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Undertaking qualitative research requires flexibility in academics, because researching peoples' lifeworlds is an inherently messy process because the lived realities of those being researched can be convoluted and changing. Academics make structured research designs with the implicit knowledge that the research will not happen in a linear way. This knowledge takes time and experience to achieve. In this article I propose flexible methodologies to describe researchers' adaptability in terms of their methods, techniques, positionalities, roles, and changes in the research plan. For my PhD research looking at a range of urban places and spaces in Dublin, by being fluid in my research from the beginning, I was able to gain a deeper understanding of the lifeworlds of my participants, and I demonstrate this with three vignettes from my own research. Rather than adjusting my research plan as problems occurred, I instead began with a flexible approach. I argue that beginning with flexibility can aid graduate students in understanding changes and developments in research as a positive, necessary shift in the research plan and is helpful to beginner researchers but also their supervisors. Flexible methodologies are a pragmatic approach for PhD students and early career researchers to achieve their research aims. **Key Words: academics, empirical, flexibility, methodology, research.**

Inspired by feminist qualitative approaches, I advocate focusing on the marginal and everyday aspects of cities, to better understand the lived realities of people from their lifeworlds, at local and embodied scales. I agree with Hall (2020), who argued that "the everyday can be understood as both a geographical and a feminist project" (812). As for many qualitative researchers, the research design for my PhD project changed significantly from the initial plan. Rather than lament or try to stick steadfastly to the original proposal, from the beginning of my research I adopted a fluid approach and flexible methodologies, advocating for remaining "methodologically becoming" (Houston et al. 2010, 61). I argue that approaching research with this flexibility enables academics to be open and adaptable to the process of research, and for PhD students and early career researchers in particular, this open-mindedness is initially difficult. I demonstrate how I used flexible methodologies through vignettes from my research and conclude with an argument that graduate training in geography can benefit by using flexible methodologies. Academics needs to encourage a flexible approach, cognizant of the changeable circumstances of the research context. This article attempts to aid graduate training by recognizing flexibility as a necessary and productive tool for research.

Through an iterative process of open coding, I researched ten projects, which grew to fourteen during the research. As a researcher working with artist and activist groups, events are based on groups' access, resources, and work schedules, and I had to match that fluidity in my plan and expectations. There are multiple people, perspectives, practices, relationships, and lives involved. When possible, I became involved with the project, as an ethical attempt to contribute to local experts rather than take knowledge (Fuller and Kitchin 2004; Askins 2018). Due to the variety within the fourteen case studies and because some had closed by the time I researched them, this was not always possible. Therefore, my role varied depending on the case study itself. I was a facilitator, visitor, observer, activist, and researcher, depending on the group and situation. I was flexible in these roles and my positionality. This is what I define as *flexible methodologies*—in terms of research design, research methods, the groups' temporalities, and my role.

My research began with a pop-up park, a use that falls under the label of "temporary uses" (Till and McArdle 2015), and from that first project I learned about other short-term projects that were labeled as temporary use or related terms such as DIY urbanism (Finn 2014) but had nuances that were not accounted for when described using these terms. I wanted to find a way to talk about gardens, pop-up parks, festivals, squats, direct actions, and autonomous social centers together. I described these projects as "liquid" (McArdle 2019, 2021) as a way to discuss the provisionality of these places and spaces. These projects were connected, as people meet before collaborating, separate, rejoin in the future, or introduce new members or groups. They have alternative temporalities to other processes in the urban realm, which are often presumed to be permanent. Due to the liquid nature of the projects I was researching, a flexible approach was required. I was working with artists and activists, and I had to be adaptable to their temporalities, time frames, and

other commitments. This was pronounced in my case due to the fluid nature of the projects I was researching, yet I argue that scholars can benefit by adopting flexible methodologies from the beginning of their research. Latham (2020) claimed that more attention needs to be paid to how geographers "think with method" (666) and that thinking through methodologies is one of the key facets of human geography. Not only were flexible methodologies necessary for my project but they were also beneficial, as I demonstrate. First, I describe the concept of flexible methodologies in the next section. Through three vignettes I demonstrate this concept, advocating for its increased use in geography. Finally, I conclude with a call for more flexible methodologies.

Flexible Methodologies

Feminist scholars understand theory through practice and vice versa, thus enriching both (Askins 2018). Feminist methodologies have long recognized that all knowledge is multiple and our understandings can only be partial (see Hiemstra and Billo [2017] for a discussion of debates to date). Feminist knowledge production, therefore, has not focused on finding one absolute truth but uses different methods to understand the many truths that can coexist. "Beyond the concern with gender, then, the feminist project is about diversifying geographical knowledge production" (Schurr, Müller, and Imhof 2020, 327). Moving away from "masculinist, neoliberal edifices" (Askins 2018, 1291) and, I would add, masculinist forms of knowledge and ways of knowing requires embracing feminist theories and epistemologies. Reflexivity is one of the tenets of feminist research (Gustafson 2000), which I draw on later. Speaking about participatory action research in particular, Askins (2018) described the fluidities of this methodology, as a "messy and contested" process (1283). As a method, participatory action research cannot be easily bound or known, but it is within this openness and situatedness that multiple opportunities can occur (Askins 2018). Williams and Drew (2020) also highlighted ethnographic methods as a processual approach rather than a prescriptive set of methods. Yu (2020) similarly described the in-betweenness of being in and out of place when doing ethnographic fieldwork as "the relationship between in-place and out-of-place is neither linear nor binary" (280). Approaches inspired by feminist ways of thinking support fluid approaches to empirical data, and I argue that there is potential in this multiplicity if we embrace flexible methodologies.

Chambers (2020) explored the idea of flexible positionalities and adaptative methodologies. His research took place in a context that became politically uncertain, but even though his focus was on

technology, the emerging context affected his research in ways he could not have foreseen, thus having an adaptive methodology and being flexible can be useful in all research, to deal with unforeseen events that might take place. Kohl and McCutcheon (2015, 747) similarly explored the "fluid, ever-changing positionalities" of researchers. Research is messy (Law 2004; Jones and Evans 2011; Harrowell, Davies, and Disney 2018), and flexibility can and should be extended to how we think of ourselves as researchers and the ability to bring forth what is most useful in that situation. Koro-Ljungberg (2016) usefully described fluid methodological spaces as spaces "where multiple things and methods occur simultaneously and where frameworks and methodological foci are diverse and constantly changing" (2). Koro-Ljungberg (2016) agreed with me that when beginning research, it is useful to have a linear plan, but an acknowledgment from the beginning that this is changeable would be helpful for researchers, allowing us to challenge ourselves as scholars, our positionings, theories, framings, and knowledges. Taking a fluid approach, as Koro-Ljungberg described, is useful to integrate into the concept of flexible methodologies I am proposing.

In addition, Billo and Hiemstra (2013) contrasted the simple, linear nature of a proposal versus the real, complicated reality of a lived research project. The authors advocated a messy understanding of research and added that researchers could benefit by viewing flexibility as a tool from the beginning, as a "malleable, fluid extension of one's initial vision" (Billo and Hiemstra 2013, 324). Lacey and Underhill-Sem (2018) also called for more attention to be paid to the results of methodological uncertainty. Although failure as a process is increasingly recognized in academia (Harrowell, Davies, and Disney 2018; Laliberté and Bain 2018), I propose flexible methodologies to avoid failure as the end result. I agree with Harrowell, Davies, and Disney (2018) that a sanitizing approach to research belies the messiness of research, but I argue that cementing openness and fluidity in the research process from the beginning would avoid the feelings of failure, frustration, and insecurity that often accompany it.

I argue that having a fluid approach to the research process overall and having flexible methodologies inspired by this perspective allows researchers to be open and adaptable to changes within the research. Flexible methodologies are already happening and will be familiar to many researchers. We need to consider the position of PhD students, candidates, and even early career researchers and how having flexible methodologies as an approach would allow them to grow and develop without being fearful of doing research incorrectly. Graduate school "often feels personally and politically stunting" (Smyth, Linz, and Hudson 2020, 854), and there is a "longing for academia to be a more hospitable

place" (853). If we embed flexible methodologies into graduate student training, this can help these feelings. Boyle, Foote, and Gilmartin (2015) acknowledged that the PhD program reproduces systems of privilege and elitism, which is echoed by others (Jokinen and Caretta 2016; Caretta and Jokinen 2017). The anxiety of the university as a neoliberal institution is evident (Mountz et al. 2015; Berg, Huijbens, and Larsen 2016), but so are resistances to this, through movements like the coven (Smyth, Linz, and Hudson 2020) and the appeal for a slow scholarship (Mountz et al. 2015). Katz's (1996, 2017) long-standing call for minor theory, as "a way of doing theory differently, of working inside out, of fugitive moves and emergent practices" (Katz 2017, 598), is apt here. As she described, "Thinking in a minor key opens many spaces of betweenness from which to imagine, act, and live things differently" (Katz 2017, 597). By resisting certainty (Secor and Linz 2017), flexible methodologies allow researchers to move away from the rigidity of the doctoral program or research plan and open new opportunities for unforeseen, dynamic research developments.

I next use three vignettes to describe how I used flexible methodologies. The first is from my research with Bloom Fringe Festival (BFF). BFF was an annual gardening festival with the ethos of "making the gritty city pretty" (BFF 2018). BFF organizers wanted to bring people back into the urban realm and to reintroduce greenery into the gray city. It ran on the June bank holiday weekend from 2014 and ended in 2017, rebranding in 2018 as Green Edge. The second vignette relates to The Barricade Inn (TBI), which was an autonomous social center in Dublin, open for several months in 2015 before being threatened with eviction and closing. TBI was an open space for activists and community groups to use for free, and the collective of organizers embodied many characteristics of anarchist practices, such as mutual aid, anticapitalism, and autonomy. The final vignette discusses Apollo House (AH). AH was an unauthorized occupation of a building to house homeless people from December 2016 to January 2017. The Irish Housing Network (IHN), working with trade unions and celebrities, took over the building for four weeks in a political statement against the housing crisis.

Bloom Fringe Festival: A Fluid Festival

Overall, for BFF, I completed social media analysis, ethnographic work as a facilitator and participant at their events over three years (2015–2017), and an in-depth interview with the two organizers (2016). Ethnography is a well-established methodological tool, and the role of ethnography is not to produce one universal truth but to uncover the multiple truths that can exist in other people's lives and the everyday geographies of those people (Emerson,

Fretz, and Shaw 2011). Within feminist geography, the importance of ethnographic (Billo 2020) and other participatory methods has been noted, including institutional ethnography (Billo 2020), ethnographic fieldwork (Williams and Drew 2020), autoethnography (Scriven 2019; Smyth, Linz, and Hudson 2020), walking sensory ethnography (Clement and Waitt 2017), and performative ethnography (Mann 2015). Ethnography challenges power relations and the production of knowledge (Till 2009). One of the main ways ethnography is carried out is through participant observation (PO), which allows the researcher to begin to capture events, activities, online and offline interactions, meetings, informal conversations, individual and group responses and emotions, age, gender, and other dynamics, aspects not immediately visible to an outside researcher.

For BFF, over three years, I immersed myself in every aspect of the festival for the weekend it took place. I was constantly presented with new data and I had to ensure that I was taking the time to fully note everything before the next day. Key to this practice were fieldnotes and learning how to write fieldnotes flexibly. Fieldnotes are a fundamental aspect of PO (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 2011), providing a noncritical venue to consider personal feelings and thoughts about the research as it is ongoing. Given that BFF occurred for one weekend a year, the PO I completed was limited in time and scope. Yet I contend that PO suited the research design of my project, given its focus on liquid or provisional projects in the city. I concentrated on intense data collection while also working with the organizers and building the relationship between us. At BFF 2016, I was a facilitator, participant, and researcher, and this very quick turnaround of roles gave me insight into the different aspects of BFF. This fluctuation and the uncertainty it caused is noted here: "Yet because of my role as an observer as well as a participant, I felt uneasy or like I had a job to do, and this juxtaposition between the two is hard to deal with" (personal fieldnotes 3 June 2016). Another example: "Similar to yesterday … I was unsure of how to mediate my role as both an outsider and an insider. It was hard to go between the role of participant and observer" (personal fieldnotes 4 June 2016). I had to be flexible in my role as a note-taker and consider when the appropriate times to take notes were. As a facilitator tasked with making people feel at ease, this was an inappropriate time to take notes, an issue I also faced in the third vignette later.

In addition, I completed an in-depth interview with the BFF organizers. The period of PO allowed me insight into what I wanted to learn more about and push further in the interviews (Wellington and Szczerbiński 2007). For BFF, I contend that volunteering (2015 and 2016) made the organizers

receptive to a later interview with me (in 2016). BFF organizers themselves were very flexible in their approach. They were connected to many of the other groups I worked with, and the two creators met through Dublin's Park(ing) Day in 2015, which was initiated by artistic collective REBAR and imitated worldwide. Throughout the interview, they mentioned other people and events several times: "We started talking to people at that [event] and we suddenly found that the huge amount of energy from artists"; "It's all about identifying who the change-makers are and getting their ear"; "Nobody stood in our way and everybody facilitated us"; "The way things happen in Ireland is by somebody introducing you to somebody" (all from interview with author 2016).

Through being flexible in my role and methods, I learned about BFF and began to sketch the ecology of liquid places in Dublin. BFF was not one of my case studies when I began in September 2014 but ended up being a pivotal way that I learned about liquid places in Dublin, the main focus of my research. Through not having a preconceived idea of what the case studies should be, I was open to this development, which ended up being an essential component of my research process. This is not an uncommon experience, and often researchers respond to the flexibility of participants, with this leading to fruitful outcomes. What is uncommon, however, is the attitude of beginning the research with flexible methodologies. I contend that if we began our research process with a flexible approach as a positive trajectory, rather than as a negative response to something going wrong, we would be receptive to what flexible methodologies teach us.

The Barricade Inn: Flexible Use of Online Methods

TBI was closed when I began my field research, so I needed to be flexible and use other methods to approach TBI participants. To access participants who were no longer in the physical TBI space, I used social media, Facebook specifically, both to access participants and as a means of inquiry itself, through conducting a social media analysis of TBI's social media platforms. Social media analysis allows for ways of knowing that are not perceptible through traditional means (De Jong 2015) but also allowed me to access a community I might not have been able to contact otherwise. This relatively newer technique provides geographers a means to access online spaces and I endorse the "potential contribution online research tools can make to qualitative research" (De Jong 2015, 219), and my research supports this work. Given the current COVID-19 pandemic and the effects it is having on close-knit interactions, online research is a valuable tool that could be used more in the future.

Although Mosca (2014) recommended using your institutional e-mail, I sensed this would not work. I contacted TBI using my personal Gmail account, and I did not receive a reply. Rather than stick to the approach of formal access means, I was flexible and found them on social media. I contacted them via Facebook, and I had a reply the same day. I used my own personal Facebook page, rather than creating one specifically for academic purposes. This was an attempt to minimize the power relationship between me as the academic and them as the researched and an attempt to create a more intimate interaction, emulating the offline interaction I had in person with other participants. Consent was thus dualistic; my participants gave consent to me to look at their pages, but I also allowed them to look at my personal page. For TBI, as well as two other case studies, I messaged the main group's Facebook and was later contacted separately by the administrator's private page, taking the conversation to a more confidential realm. Through Facebook, I arranged an online interview with this participant because they were not available for an in-person meeting. Again, I needed to be flexible in going forward with this interview even if it was online. Interviewing a participant online can make building rapport and trust more difficult (Hine 2000). Yet online interviewing also provides interviewees additional time to reflect on their answers, so they can give more insightful responses (Mosca 2014). This is particularly helpful if the project had ended a long time ago, as is the case with TBI, because it enables the participants to have some critical distance. For this interview, consent was given online, as the participant signed and uploaded the form with their signature. Even though I was adopting flexible methodologies, I still needed to follow ethical protocols. Discussions need to be had about how the rigidity of ethical research structures can work with a flexible approach, particularly when considering the growth of online methods (Lo Iacono, Symonds, and Brown 2016).

Being flexible to an online interview allowed me to use this productive interview in my research. When the interviewee sent the interview to me, they apologized in case it was "overkill" as they "got carried away" (personal Facebook correspondence with author 2016). In the interview itself, even though I was not present, the participant went into detail about their answers and asked further questions. Examples include: "Do I prefer squatting? There are pros and cons," and "Why anarchist principles? That's a product of the people involved" (online interview with author 2016). This mimics the way that a traditional semistructured interview would go, where the set questions are added to spontaneously by the researcher, depending on the responses. A more in-depth example is given here:

Now look at the entire basis of the project. Why was that building abandoned for thirteen years, and why could no one use it? Because of capitalism and the state. These are systems based on hierarchy; i.e., relationships of power. (Online interview with author 2016)

From this excerpt, the participant is weaving a story for me as the interviewer. I was not present with the participant at the time of the interview, yet I argue that this was still a rich interview that gave me many insights into understanding TBI. TBI was a closed social center at the time of my fieldwork. If I had insisted on using the same methodologies across my case studies, TBI would have had to be excluded because it was not open, and the only person available for an interview was available online. Yet by being flexible to using various online methods and approaches, contacting them through e-mail and social media, and using diverse methods across my fourteen case studies, I was able to use TBI as a case study, an important part of understanding the development of autonomous spaces in Dublin. Heyes (2017) agreed that virtual communities can often replicate offline communities. Again, this vignette supports my argument that flexible methodologies can be advantageous for researchers.

Apollo House: Fluid Boundaries

Research is not out there somewhere (Till 2001), and we can have conflict between the researcher part of ourselves and the other parts (Chambers 2020) and need to reconsider boundaries (Cuomo and Massaro 2016). Having a more fluid understanding of what and where the field should be allows for a better idea of what the fieldwork process will be like and is a step toward flexible methodologies. Positionality is a key component of feminist research (England 1994; Ali 2015). Ali argued that reflecting on her identity within the fieldwork and writing stages allowed a more in-depth understanding of her participants' worlds, through moments of reflection and negotiation within the field, a claim I would agree with.

AH was a direct action, and the realities of undertaking PO there were difficult and required flexibility. I was involved with AH as a volunteer and as a researcher and, similar to BFF, I had to mediate between these two roles. I was there as a researcher and I tried to always conduct overt PO, but this was not always possible. My roles as a volunteer and researcher came into conflict often. Not every person I spoke to in AH was aware I was there as a researcher. My role was ambiguous: I would be an activist, volunteer, or researcher. Rather than panic, I was open and flexible from the beginning and able to see this as an opportunity to get a different insight—more insider knowledge.

One of the situations I encountered where it was useful for me to be "only" a volunteer was in interacting with the residents of AH, who were previously homeless people. Often the volunteers at AH knew these people from other volunteer organizations they were involved in at the time of AH, such as soup kitchens and food runs. Through this, there was a preestablished connection between some of the volunteers and residents that I lacked. I was having lunch one day, and during an informal conversation, one of the residents discussed one of the volunteers, a long-standing member of the IHN. Of course, I cannot be sure, but I think it is safe to assume that that same interaction would not have happened if I had been demarcated as a researcher in some specific way. The differentiation of different roles was done through clothing, via the wearing of different high vis colors:

Blue [high vis] for support and yellow [high vis] for volunteers. This meant that you could generally tell who worked there and who was a resident. (Personal fieldnotes 24 December 2016)

Of course, there was no separate "researcher" high vis, so I wore a yellow one most days, although sometimes I wore a blue high vis when working with the support team.

Even though I had always wanted to undertake overt PO, this demarcation of the high vis and what that meant was beyond my control. I often went between a few different roles: "The place was manic at times and as this day shows I ended up doing a couple of different jobs in one day alone" (personal fieldnotes 24 December 2016).

This detailed excerpt illustrates my typical role as a volunteer but how I integrated my researcher role with this:

My job was to sign people in and sign them out. … I also think my point of view from where I'm sitting is really interesting, and it's perfect for creating fieldnotes. I got to write these notes in the field, which is rare. I also was enabled by this job to blend into the background and concentrate on reflecting. I could hear nearly everything going on in the kitchen and sitting room area, and I could see the interactions of the support staff as well as the comings and goings of volunteers and residents … which was amazing. … Yet in my role as observer I also felt awkward. These people didn't know I was taking notes, so it felt like I was invading their privacy somehow. There was no head authority to ask permission from, due to the horizontal power structure, so I felt like I didn't have permission to be doing this research. I felt like I had to hide the fact that I was taking notes … the messiness of being an activist/academic. … There is a clumsy, blurry line of participant observation. (Personal fieldnotes 7 January 2017)

This piece demonstrates that being flexible from the beginning was useful because it allowed me to think about the process of research. We often need to balance, consider, and reconsider multiple roles in the field (Bachmann 2011), and there is a need to reflect on identity within the fieldwork process (Nyantakyi-Frimpong 2021). Yet even though I had planned this flexible approach, I acknowledge that I still worried during its execution. I "felt this weird division between being part of the team and also being separate to the team" (personal fieldnotes 8 January 2017). On the same day, I also noted, "I really felt a part of the team" (personal fieldnotes 8 January 2017). This dual role of belonging and not belonging, being a volunteer and an activist, and being both part of the team and observing the team is an integral part of how I understood AH and the IHN (the main organizers of AH). Although this might seem like a binary division between these roles, it instead is an opportunity, because being methodologically and ontologically flexible in my role aided my understanding of the project and allowed me to be both part of the team and separate from it and to learn about AH from both of those positionalities.

Conclusion

In this article I have presented three vignettes from my research to support my argument for using flexible methodologies in multiple ways. Building on other research, this fluid approach to methodologies enables academics to have confidence in approaching research in a flexible way, especially important for newer researchers. In the first vignette, I was flexible in my role and methods, as were the participants; in the second vignette I approached the participants flexibly and was flexible in my methods; finally, in the third vignette, I was flexible in my role and identity in the field. Overall, I argue that graduate student training can be enhanced by recognizing the benefits of flexible methodologies, as has been acknowledged elsewhere concerning spatial data (Feeney and Williamson 2000) and mobile interviews (Finlay and Bowman 2017).

As others have argued (Billo and Hiemstra 2013; Koro-Ljungberg 2016; Chambers 2020), often research requires adaptability that we do not account for when beginning the research. Even though we know that research does not go the way we had planned in the research proposal stage, we still create these detailed plans, including GANTT charts with deadlines, dates, and planned conferences. As I am in the postdoctoral phase of my career, I realize even the most seasoned academics do not expect their research to follow this linear structure. These plans are of value, and I am not requesting academia move away from this planning phase, because I believe this is necessary to the process of the research; through creating these plans we begin the cognitive processes needed for research. PhD students and early career researchers, as well as other non-tenure-track researchers, however, can be helped to have a more fluid and adaptable approach, and they would find completing the research easier. Some students fall through the cracks when seemingly insurmountable challenges happen and they cannot bend to go around these challenges. If we broadened our conceptualization of the research process and included this in our teaching and supervision of students, more students might be able to complete their degrees and with greater ease.

In the article, I discuss the many different roles I had during the research process and argue that this "messiness" can be a strength if we consider it as one. To use different methodologies and be adaptable to changing your research approach based on the object, people, or project being studied is an opportunity for researchers. This is not a loss or a narrowing of ideas but an opening up, using an alternative lens. For seasoned researchers, much of this might seem like preaching to the converted. Questions remain, though, about how academia can become more flexible. Indeed, this is most difficult for those already in vulnerable positions in academia; for PhD students, early career researchers, independent geographers, adjuncts, and other non-tenure-track researchers, the ability to be flexible might be constrained by funding or other aspects. I conclude by asking academics to approach research with fluidity and to use and encourage the use of flexible methodologies with graduate students and researchers and to support an environment that allows flexible methodologies. The COVID-19 pandemic has made it clearer than ever how quickly the world can change. How can we create more equitable systems of research? How can we teach our students to be more open to the many random and useful unfoldings that can occur as part of the research process? These are not easily answered questions, nor within the scope of this article, but advocating for flexible methodologies is a good step in the right direction. ∎

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