Exploring Meaningfully and Creatively the Tensions Arising out of Collaborations:

An Anthropological Perspective

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Abstract

The issue of working with a set agenda, designed by a larger collaborative project, is core to this article. By using my own experience, I will consider the ways in which established project themes can influence and shape the open-ended method of anthropological research and the final outcome. Additionally, this article will contemplate upon dilemmas of being a young anthropologist while seeking to gain ethnographic authority within a collaborative scenario outside the discipline of anthropology.

The conditions under which ethnographies are produced and theorised, nowadays, have changed. The pull of collaborations across disciplines and between academia and stakeholders seems to be a condition of our time, and such alliances are often supported by requirements of funding bodies (e.g. ESRC). This article will be mainly concerned with the discipline of anthropology and its practice. It will explore the way collaborations, like other social factors such as the world of social networking (Facebook and Twitter), may influence the way anthropology is practiced and the type of knowledge that is produced. The issue of working with a set agenda, designed by a larger collaborative project, is core to this article. By using my own experience, I will consider the ways in which established themes can influence and shape the open-ended method of anthropological research and the final outcome. Additionally, this article will also contemplate dilemmas of being a young anthropologist while seeking to gain ethnographic authority within a collaborative scenario outside the discipline of anthropology. Such dilemmas are real and often exacerbated by the lack of (permanent) academic posts in the discipline, but also by the few anthropology departments, at least in the UK.[1]

The narrative of this article is unique, but real and common in so many ways, as it sheds light on contemporary working scenarios of many young researchers who end up working within existing projects and have to research themes set by a larger project (Holmes and Marcus 2008). Although the tone of the article may come across as gloomy, my message is of a positive nature. I illustrate through my own examples how such challenges can be

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1 Some anthropology departments have recently become merged with the humanities and other social sciences (e.g. the University of Exeter, where anthropology is taught in the Sociology, Philosophy and Anthropology department and also draws on expertise from other departments, in particular, Archaeology).

turned into creative insights without jeopardising the open-ended, non-linear method of anthropological practice. The story that follows may resonate with other researchers' experiences of working with already established themes besides those of anthropologists, despite the fact that some of the theoretical underpinnings are directly related to the discipline of anthropology.

Contemporary Anthropological Practice and Collaboration

It is worth noting at the outset that more often than not, anthropological field research is understood to be a solo enterprise where one person typically gathers and analyses the data (Smith and Kornblumn 1996; Okely 2012). Nowadays, reliance on individual effort may be quite uncommon as funding bodies and large-scale bureaucratic research programmes tend to privilege collaborations across disciplines, especially in medical and policy oriented research. In fact, according to Moritz (2013), the past decade has witnessed an increase in the documentation of the expansion of interdisciplinarity, mainly in the US through teaching and training, across the social sciences, humanities, science and technology. Frodeman *et al.* (2010) suggest that this shift towards integrating disciplines, such as the humanities and social sciences, arose out of the need to help organise the fast-growing amounts of knowledge being produced, both within research and at all levels of education. As Marcus (2008) states, collaboration as a method has not been developed explicitly as a norm in the professional culture of fieldwork practice and writing, but is visible and certainly discussed. In her article, 'Resources for Interdisciplinary Studies,' Klein agrees with Marcus as she

states that collaborations only appear in 'the "fugitive" or "gray" literature of conference papers, reports and curriculum material' (2006: 52). This collaborative 'turn' requires that we reflect on the ways in which such pulls are shaping the professional and intellectual identity of anthropology, and in turn influencing anthropological methods and production of knowledge.

Here, the terms collaboration and interdisciplinarity are used inter-changeably. I am interested in looking at the ways disciplines work together, both through consensus and disagreement. Tension is not necessarily perceived as negative, as it is what often unshackles our mode of creative thinking. Also, I am aware that there are other debates on the differences between: 'interdisciplinarity', which brings multiple disciplines together to address a specific issue or project; 'multi-disciplinarity', which brings multiple disciplines together, but uses them separately to shed light on a specific issue; while 'cross-disciplinarity' is about dialogue across disciplines. In this article, my ultimate aim is to look at the collaborative aspect of interdisciplinary projects and the way boundaries get shifted through such endeavours. I argue that the exchanges between disciplines should not blur the boundaries, but make their borders more porous (on temporality and disciplinarity, see Boellstorff 2007: 30–34). Inasmuch as Klein (2006) claims that a multitude of interdisciplinary work has been published over the past decade, I contend that little is known about the tensions and challenges that younger and established anthropologists may face when working in collaborative projects.

This proposition may seem like an ambitious quest, and I am aware that it is difficult to achieve in such a short writing space. I contend that this is a theme which demands our attention and consideration, especially in relation to what collaborative relations mean – are they mutual, symbiotic or perilous? They

may be neither one nor the other, but may be a combination of all and appear at different stages during the life course of the project. However, these types of collaborative relationships do leave an impact on the knowledge being generated. This also indicates that the methodology is adapting to these new pulls, which raises questions about the future of the discipline, but also to the kind of knowledge that anthropologists are producing through collaborations. For example, what happens when fieldnotes and data are shared with other researchers who were not in the field? Perhaps such concerns fit in with those of Rivoal and Salazar, in their European Association of Social Anthropologists (EASA) Young Scholar Forum titled 'Contemporary ethnographic practice and the value of serendipity' (2013: 180). Here, the authors question the changes of ethnographic research in the current socio-political and economic context in which science and knowledge production is embedded. They argue that this often leads to undesired transformations in how academics have to work, but also to how quickly knowledge and innovation can be produced. There is no doubt that the lack of time, resources, objectives and rules set by funding bodies, universities, and other external agencies leave an impact on the fieldwork experience – and I would also add its practice. As Rivoal and Salazar rightly state, what is at stake is the serendipitous future of anthropology, which they see to be key, especially in attaining a successful ethnography through a 'slow but methodological and thoughtful process, an ongoing quest for serendipity…' (2013: 183).

The focus of this forum is on the role of serendipity, which is understood as the readiness to seize unforeseen opportunities, and to be willing to move away from research plans and research designs and move towards other destinations, even if this requires a change of topic. Serendipity, which is part of the flesh and blood of good ethnography and often offers a great

potential for thick description is by far a question of temporality, one which allows the unforeseen to unfold over time. Temporality is also core to participant observation, which, as Boellstorff argues, demands 'flexibility, humour, and patience through the misunderstandings, missteps, incorrect replies, and accidental offenses' (2007: 12). This perspective and call for action to move away from set agendas may not be applicable to all research scenarios, especially when a researcher enters an established collaborative project. But what if we consider opening up the role of serendipity to all the stages of research, including the stage at which the anthropologist responds to calls for research and creates a network, or set of relationships, with other academics or stakeholders? The created network may be innovative and can also be seen as a serendipitous encounter. Before I address this question through my own experience, I will discuss the issue of porous boundaries and the impact such endeavours may have on the production of knowledge.

Porous Boundaries and Knowledge

This aspect of plurality comes out in the term 'collaboration' as it simultaneously evokes images of openness and boundaries. Within the context of my argument, the term openness does not solely refer to the open-ended method of anthropology, which I discuss later. Instead, it addresses the porosity brought about by exchanges between disciplines, both at the abstract and practical level, and the impact such engagements have on the way anthropology is practiced and on the type of knowledge produced. In this section, I argue that one cannot think of anthropological inquiry and practice in the singular, but more along the lines of *modalities* of anthropological inquiry and practice.

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EXPLORING THE TENSIONS OF COLLABORATIONS

As I mentioned above, the notion of openness has featured widely in debates on the holistic approach of anthropological practice. The notion of the field as bounded is quite paradoxical. For instance, Malinowski's (1984) fieldwork method of following the Kula ring, which is a system of exchange that involved annual inter-island visits between trading partners exchanging highly valued shell ornaments, was already multi-sited way before the term was coined. Yet, as Melhuus *et al.* (2010) argue, the fetish of the field as bounded still lingers on. In fact, the issue of boundaries has been extensively discussed, especially in relation to the field as geographical, temporal, and social (Clifford and Marcus 1986; Gupta and Ferguson 1997), while the notion of the field as detached or distant from the people we study comes out in Johannes Fabian's work, *Time and the Other* (1983).

However, recent research from the US shows that there has been a steady rise in collaborations and partnerships in university settings ranging from applied programmes, workshops, networking to internships since the 1990s (Briody 2015). According to Briody (2015), it is clear that emphasis on collaboration is all around us and has grown dramatically in wider culture (see Graph 1).[2] This can also be seen in the gradual shift towards 'multi-temporal fieldwork' (Dalsgaard 2013: 214). Despite such critiques on the notion of the field 'site' as bounded and a shift towards partnerships, the impact of collaborations on the rhythm of the field has featured less in anthropological reflections.

The social sciences, including anthropology, are susceptible to change like any other institution, which is highly involved in wider social and cultural

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2 Briody (2015) conducted a Google Search between 2010-2012, which included 1) Business, Administration, Finance and Economics and 2) Social Sciences, Arts and Humanities. The results show that there is a rise in the use of the term 'collaboration' as it appears in Google Search, which indicates that partnerships and collaborations are part of our culture today.

issues. As I mentioned above, such changes are inherently bureaucratic, but they are also attributable to shifts within the discipline itself (see Clifford and Marcus 1986, on the shift towards ethnographic writing). Such changes, despite causing some form of tension or disagreements, are critical for a discipline to continue growing while accommodating new perspectives and circumstances. Marcus (2013) highlights that the creativity and flexibility inbuilt in the holistic approach is what enables its design practices to be re-thought through technology and collaborations. As Marcus states, 'the question of method (or, rather, metamethod, since I don't think the reinvention should be done, only or most importantly, at the level of literal technique) and its distinctive modes of pedagogy are the most important issues and topics of theoretical interest in anthropology today' (2008: 5).

Such changes should not be perceived as diminishing the discipline's function as a critical discipline and a social science deeply engaged with the world. While I believe that it is important to have dialogues across disciplines, I contend that the type of porousness required for a dialogue needs to be reflected upon. For instance, this comes out in the way certain terms such as 'ethnography' and 'qualitative research' are used in research proposals almost interchangeably (Ingold 2014). As Ingold contends, the way 'ethnographic' is used by other disciplines from fields such as social psychology, social policy, sociology, and education 'appears to be a modish substitute for qualitative' (2014: 384). For Ingold, this conflation 'offends every principle of proper, rigorous anthropological inquiry – including long-term and open-ended commitment, generous attentiveness, relational depth, and sensitivity to context – and we are right to protest against it' (2014: 384).

The overuse of such terms tends to become a means to an end. When this happens, there is the danger of the terms becoming empty vessels. The

slipperiness of terms can have a huge impact on the identity of the discipline. This echoes the concerns of Ingold (2014), and others (Boellstorff 2007; Okely 2012), where they argue that terms like 'ethnography' become so overused that they end up devoid of context and lose meaning. Boellstorff (2007) expresses such concerns as he states that the meaning of 'ethnography' is greatly misunderstood in the humanities, and in the social sciences. In fact he states,

> Many researchers say they do work in ethnography, but in actuality they employ methods that would not be recognised as ethnographic by most anthropologists (for instance, conducting interviews in isolation from other activity, then transcribing and coding them according to predetermined variables). Ethnography is both an epistemological approach and a linked series of methods, with "participant observation" as the key practice. The oxymoronic term refers to spending extended periods of time with the communities being studied, participating in the flow of daily life as much as possible (Boellstorff 2007: 11).

I contend that it is important to pause and question the status quo of the discipline one belongs to, especially the type of field techniques we use in order to gain knowledge, despite the fact that the increasing external pressures of funding and time constraints on length of fieldwork do not leave much time for contemplation. The aspect of temporality cannot be seen as separate from this debate about the field and the production of knowledge across disciplines. Rivoal and Salazar (2013) note that such limits and criteria generate anxieties and present challenges, especially to young researchers. The challenges of time constraints have profound impacts on the way we conduct fieldwork, how we analyse data, and what we write. In turn, this

cannot be understood without taking into consideration the circumstances that form the context of the chosen field, as well as the concerns of the discipline as a whole. Ironically, as Rivoal and Salazar (2013) point out, anthropology is expected to be a slow science.

Set Agendas and the Open-Ended Method

Ethnographers need to construct models of fieldwork as collaboration for themselves, models that let them operate with their own research agendas inside the pervasive collaboratories that define social space today (Holmes and Marcus 2008: 85).

Having to start with an already established topic of inquiry may take the anthropologist beyond their comfort zone, as this goes against the flexibility and serendipitous nature so characteristic of the discipline's open-ended method. The issue of flexibility, which is embedded within anthropological practice, is intimately linked to the construction of knowledge at the level of practice, interpretation and writing – aspects, which inform each other and cannot be seen as separate entities (Aull Davies 1998). Change of topic is not uncommon among anthropologists. All the established and younger anthropologists that feature in Okely's excellent book, *Anthropological Practice*, explained that, 'their focus changed during or even at the outset of fieldwork' (2012: 49). This is a key element to the open-ended method of anthropological research, and one which finds its roots in the legacies of holism (Okely 1996, 2012). It is such flexibility and openness that generate unique material, and by now it is widely accepted as a key characteristic and strength of the ethnographic method (Rivoal and Salazar 2013). In fact, Miller suggests, that 'a thesis should never be that which is set out to be, because

that would reveal failure of the young scholar to be sufficiently opportunistic' (2013: 228). Miller's statement indicates that there should be a certain flexibility and openness to the field and an ability to switch topic, if the need arises.

This type of openness to being '*disponible*, and open to *objets trouvés,* after arriving in the field'[3] (Okely 1996: 19) is a concern of this article, one which perhaps takes forward the aim of a special edition titled 'Expanding Boundaries' that appeared in *Anthropology Matters* in 2010. There, the focus was on the theoretical and practical complexities of research methods. In the introduction to that special issue, McKenzie and Mohsini pose a very important question, 'How do we, as researchers, come to know – through the application of research methodology – our topic of study?' (2010: 3). The implicit storyline on which this question is built takes as its axiom that methodology will lead the researcher to their topic. The inchoate characters of this storyline are openness, methodology, and topic of study, which evoke a certain kind of intimacy gained by spending long periods of time in the field and by following the concerns of the people under study. This is how anthropologists come to know - by 'being there' (Geertz 1988; Borneman and Hammoudi 2009). But what happens when this type of intimacy with the field cannot be practiced and, instead, the anthropologist is presented with a set agenda designed by a larger project where the principal investigators are not anthropologists? During such scenarios, switching topic is not possible as restrictions are often posed by funding bodies/agencies. This may also be misunderstood and perceived as chaotic by other disciplines, like sociology,

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3 That is, to be flexible and open to objects found in the field.

which sometimes seek solace in the clarity of neat linear methods and categorical classifications.

This resonates with Holmes' and Marcus' (2008) concerns in their essay titled 'Collaboration Today and the Re-Imagination of the Classic Scene of Fieldwork Encounter'. They build their argument on a collaborative project they were involved in with a corporate lawyer and a scholar of corporations, who they refer to as 'Bert'. As the authors put it, Bert adopted an 'appropriation of anthropology' where he reflected on the power of 'mere' conversations and the relationships they create as 'the contemporary form in which important collective intellectual work could be done' (Holmes and Marcus 2008: 91). This is an ideal scenario and both Holmes and Marcus are aware that this type of collaboration may be too rare to justify it as a norm within the contemporary scenes of fieldwork. They argue that for the fieldwork to prosper, the ethnographer must 'defer to this appropriation before his or her own pursuits move ahead. This act of deferral requires a different sort of imaginary of collaboration in fieldwork to achieve the core desideratum of ethnography in many research projects today' (Holmes and Marcus 2008: 93).

In their essay, they distinguish three types of collaboration. One is the collaboration found in anthropological fieldwork (including traditional fieldwork), concerning the asymmetrical power relations of the anthropologist in relation to the *other* in traditional ethnography. The second is to see collaborations as the environment of research where they emphasise that anthropologists should remain in control of their research by constructing 'models of fieldwork as collaborations *for themselves*, models that let them operate with their own research agendas inside the pervasive collaboratories that define social spaces today' (Holmes and Marcus 2008: 85, emphasis in

original). Against these two senses of collaboration, the authors propose a third understanding of collaboration, which remakes classic fieldwork. Holmes and Marcus are not interested in collaboration as a 'division of labour' among principal investigators or in creating a canonical interdisciplinarity. Instead, they are interested in collaboration as 'an emerging mode within the ethnographic tradition of inquiry' (Holmes and Marcus 2008: 99). With this, Holmes and Marcus mean that collaboration should reflect both the contemporary imperative to collaborate with organisations and the participation of ethnographers in internal efforts to re-function key aspects of institutional cultures. The key is to create 'reflexive knowledge practices' inside the organisation the ethnographers have been invited to participate within. Although Holmes and Marcus do not spell this out in their paper, I gather that they are calling for anthropologists to be treated as equal partners and for their practices to be accepted as authoritative. This is where collaboration as method could be successful.

In this article, I am more concerned with the 'act of deferral' that young scholars often have to engage in, especially in a climate where funding and permanent posts are few and far between. What kind of anthropology can be practiced in light of these collaborations, where relationships are never as egalitarian as the term tends to suggest? Does it always mean that set agendas restrict the open-ended and non-linear process of anthropology? The obvious answer is in the affirmative, as change of topic in such cases is not possible. However, I contend that there are ways in which windows of flexibility can be carved out and also encountered.

I will now turn to my own experience of working within a larger project where I seek to address some of the issues I raise here, especially in relation to the aspect of working with already established themes. Here, I will reflect on the

uncertainty brought about by set themes in relation to the open-ended method of anthropology, which tends to yield voluminous material, as one never knows what will be of importance as the research progresses. This is what Strathern terms 'anticipation by default' (quoted in Boellstorff 2007: 13).

Contextualising the Scene of My Fieldwork

My doctoral research was partly attached to a two-year project titled 'Transitions in Kitchen Living' (TiKL), which was led by a group of social gerontologists and ergonomists whose main objectives were to investigate historically and contemporarily the experience of the kitchen for people currently in their 60s, 70s, 80s, and 90s living in a variety of mainstream and supportive housing in England (Peace *et al.* 2012). Another of TiKL's foci was to identify simple and practical solutions for improving the kitchen to meet individuals' needs and hence provide user requirements for inclusive kitchen design (see Peace and Maguire 2013).

Upon encountering this project, I recall taking the risk of writing a proposal, which was not fully *deferential* to the call of this doctorate. Instead, I engaged critically with their proposal and offered to explore the themes of the domestic kitchen and older people through the voices of a sexual minority – the domestic experiences of older lesbians living in London.[4]

4 At the time, the original proposal of the larger project intended to look at older women only. Men were eventually included as the research progressed. In my proposal, I stated that, 'I strongly believe that the examination of housing transitions (and kitchen space) for older lesbians differs from that of their heterosexual counterparts. This is important especially in gaining social visibility and awareness. This will also sustain the fact that older people in general are not a homogenous group, but are dynamic, fluid and diverse'.

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Through this critical engagement, I sought to carve out an academic space for myself. The combination of sexuality and kitchen space through the domestic experiences of older lesbians sought to contribute to the diversity of gendered and sexual experience within the home across time and space. The objective was to include these women's 'kitchen stories' in the history of the domestic, while addressing a call from lesbian and gay studies to shift our attention from community queer places to the domestic (Gabb 2005; Cook 2014). These 'kitchen stories' enabled me to see what lies *beyond* the dominant ideology of heteronormativity which as the literature suggests tends to 'otherise' any form of alternative living arrangements (Oerton 1997; Cook 2014; Wilkinson 2014; Pilkey *et al.* forthcoming). Although this opened up a separate academic space for my research, I was still limited by the set categories of the 'kitchen' and 'older' individuals, which were prescribed in the main research proposal of the larger project.

Initially, I was also expected to follow the same methodology of TiKL, which was steeped in the positivist tradition, where structured interviews were used for all the older people interviewed by the research team. I found being in this position difficult, as this would have an impact on the openness of ethnographic fieldwork and the collaboration itself. I did not have the possibility of switching topic, if the need arose (Miller 2013; Okely 2012). The flexibility that is so inherent to the open-ended method of anthropological practice was not sidelined, but it took a different form. As my time in the field progressed, the predetermined theme of the kitchen morphed into a dynamic one. It became a heuristic tool, 'good to think' with, across the life course of older lesbians. This perception was influenced by what I encountered in the field.

When I started my fieldwork, I had already been part of a registered charity called Opening Doors London, which offers services to the older lesbian community. I spent four years volunteering as a Film Event Co-ordinator. My research was conducted over a period of thirteen months between November 2010 and December 2011. This volunteering space offered me the opportunity to do long-term participant observation which I combined with other creative methods such as: semi-structured interviews/biographical narratives, discussion groups through formal lesbian networks and with older lesbians I had already interviewed, and participatory visual methods such as photo elicitation and photos taken by participants of kitchen spaces and domestic objects.

The topic of the kitchen as my starting point placed me in a position, which usually the fieldworker ends up with after sharing her life with the people. In this context, there is a contradiction, since the kitchen as both space and idea is often perceived as an intimate social space. It is close in proximity to the person's life from a psychological and emotional perspective and it is often associated with family cohesion, and close kin and friends. Hence, I found myself working back to front, instead of front to back, as is the usual practice. For instance, in her influential biography *Translated Women: Crossing the Border with Esperanza's Story*, the anthropologist Ruth Behar (1993) describes the kitchen as a site for 'narration and language', and as a safe space where *over time* Behar slowly entered Esperanza's life. Here, I stress temporality as an important aspect often contributing to trust and friendship between anthropologist and participant. Also, it is in retrospect that Behar (1993) came to see the kitchen as an *emerging* theme, a symbolic space where they both contemplated and resolved issues about life and the world. In my own research, the theme of the kitchen did not emerge out of my collected data. I was already alerted to contemplate upon this space.

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In order to bring out the experiential aspect of the kitchen during individual semi-structured interviews, I asked participants to take a kitchen-perspective of their lives, that is, to narrate their life story through kitchens from their earliest childhood memories to the present.[5] This field technique elicited many hidden connections which they had not thought of before, especially in the way they related to family members and significant others, including their own attitude to how they use the kitchen nowadays. For instance, Jessica, a retired academic and practising psychotherapist, recounted how she was brought up in an upper-middle class home where the kitchen was the space of the servants. Hence, she explained that for this reason, the kitchen was never central in her life. She also recalled that when her parents stopped having a cook and employed a nanny, Jessica formed a very strong bond with her and they would spend a long time together in the kitchen. She recounted,

> She [the nanny] took over the cooking, and then we moved to another house, which was a lot more modern, I was eating a lot with her. And she taught me how to cook. And it wasn't a very nice, this other house it wasn't a nice kitchen, it was quite dark and small, but she was in there a lot and I used to go and sit in there with her. So that is quite a good memory of the kitchen. She took over the cooking from then so, hmm, there was a dining room just next to it and […] but my parents would never be in the kitchen really, except on Saturdays when she had a day off. Yeah it is kind of mixed atmosphere because we were in

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the dark room, but on the other hand a lot of good things happened there.

Towards the end of our conversation, Jessica expressed, 'I was actually surprised by the family, the connections with the family upbringing, it was quite good to understand'. In that moment, Jessica had made some links, which clearly she had not thought of before. It seemed that there was some form of psychological understanding, an insight that emerged out of the narration of her kitchen stories across her life course. Due to class, the kitchen also emerges as a space of ambivalent emotions; it is a forbidden family space and the space of the *other*. On the other hand, the affective bond she had with the nanny went against the rigid division of class boundaries from her childhood. Jessica's kitchen story was rather common of how other participants made connections with the past while making sense of their current relationships they had with their children, parents or significant others. In what follows, I seek to illustrate how through the flexible approach of the holistic method, I still managed to find a way of using the kitchen in order to connect these kitchen stories to a wider set of social relationships.

The Kitchen as an Intellectual Topic of Anthropological Inquiry

In this section, I will discuss how the kitchen emerged as an intellectual topic of anthropological inquiry, that is, how it became an analytical tool good to think with about the lives of older lesbians. I argue that the imagery and meaning of the kitchen in London has moved to 'an oral state,' – a system of communication, a message (Barthes 2000). The relationship between image

and meaning is an important aspect contributing to my theoretical framework of the kitchen as a space for theorising. During my fieldwork, the domestic kitchen appeared in various forms, from commercial adverts such as street billboards, London Underground advertising space, train adverts to design exhibitions, magazines, newspapers, radio and TV programmes (Images 1 and 2).
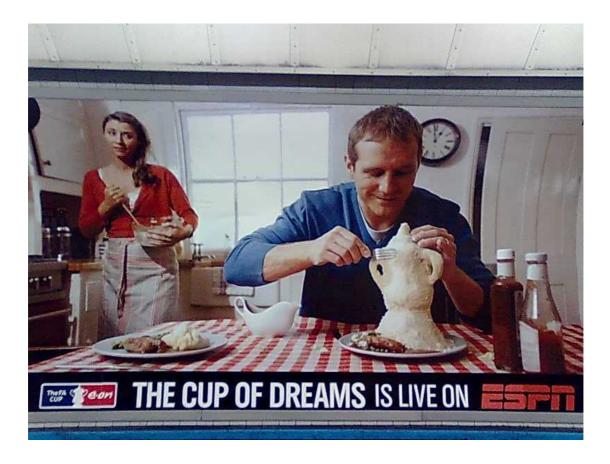

Image 1: Underground Tube Station January 2011 © Author

Image 2: Underground Tube Station January 2011 © Author

As Ortner (1973) explains in her article 'On Key Symbols', when the researcher observes something that seems to be an object of cultural interest and features in many different contexts, whether in conversation or in symbolic domains, it could be a reliable indicator for cultural meaning and analyses. Moreover, Kaplan and Stowell (2004) argue that the idea of the domestic is also created through affects that circulate between different locales and are dependent upon the production of artefacts, such as photographs, stories, posters and advertisements, which can join the house with other institutions that can be called home (see also Das *et al.* 2008). Here, I am not implying that the symbolic image of the kitchen is the epitome of understanding English culture. But, my intention is to show how the set theme of the kitchen, along with the slowness of finding participants willing to talk about their domestic experiences, alerted my attention to how the

kitchen was cropping up in various conversations and events in the everyday life of Londoners, besides that of older lesbians. Additionally, this led me to use this advertising material creatively, especially when conducting semi-structured interviews and discussion groups, in order to trigger conversation. These observations enabled me to make theoretical creative connections despite having to work with established themes. The streets offered me the possibility to observe and contemplate the millions of media adverts displayed everywhere. This became an important time in my fieldwork, as I realised that the domestic kitchen had gained some form of cultural interest and symbolic meaning in London (Ortner 1973).

Inasmuch as various aspects of the kitchen have been explored (e.g. Hayden 1978; Dubisch 1986; Goodall 1991; Hand and Shove 2003; Freeman 2004), the focus has been mainly on the kitchen as a material and social space. The normative discourse on the kitchen has been more of a critique of how society has created a space for female oppression. This literature points out that the kitchen is no longer a back region devoted to food preparation or servitude. Kitchens are now represented and promoted as places of sociability. The 'postmodern kitchen' (Putnam 1999) further embodies patterns of demand, which rest on at least a socio-technical dimension, as much as a new social practice based on desire (Shove *et al.* 2007). The postmodern kitchen has shifted to the front region of the domestic landscape, and this demands further attention and analysis.

I turn momentarily to the work of the historian Peter Ackroyd (2001), who compared London to a vast kitchen during the Victorian period. To some extent, my observations fit in with his, especially as he traced the etymology of Cockney and explains that, 'one of the most cheerful origins of 'Cockney' is *coquina*, the Latin term for cookery. London was once seen as a vast

kitchen and 'the place of plenty and good fare'. Thus, as has already been observed, it became 'Cockaigne' or the fabled land of good living' (Ackroyd 2001: 311).

This association between the kitchen, abundance and good living standards is not an issue of the past, but resonates with the way London as a city still functions as a cosmopolitan vast kitchen. In fact, the street-ground level is mainly dedicated to commercial kitchens of restaurants, cafes, and kiosks. London is still that 'place of plenty and good fare', as it offers a variety of food from different cultures. An individual can be transported to different parts of the world through taste. When in the field, it also struck me how the image of the kitchen featured constantly in commercial advertisements such as street billboards, London underground advertising space, trains, magazines, television food programmes, and food competitions (e.g. Master Chef and The Great British Bake Off). I also observed how some commercial advertisements used the kitchen as an intimate and homely space as a backdrop in order to advertise football, faster railways, holiday destinations, food companies, and radio programmes (see Images 1 and 2). As time passed, I realised that coffee shops and restaurants in London were using a specific language to create homely adverts, such as:

> Homemade tasting meals and puddings made in our *kitchen* in Kent using exactly the same ingredients and techniques that you would use at home (my emphasis).

> Heaven Sent. Ready meals that taste as though you've made them *yourself*, better even (my emphasis).

Such scenarios made me reflect on the general meaning of the kitchen, not only in the lives of older lesbians, but also in wider society. Popular media is

a powerful way of communicating messages about life and it has the ability to inculcate moral and idealised models of relationships. Miller illustrates this phenomenon by making reference to US shows and series on television such as the Simpsons, Rosanne, and the Cosby show, where he states that,

> all of them share a basic message which is that although the actual persons may be commonly dysfunctional, difficult and wrong, there is an underlying warmth and compassion that is based around a shared ideology about how, in the end, there is love and support based around the idealised normative roles expected of family relationships (2007: 548).

This above understanding fits very well in the way the kitchen is presented in the attached advertisements. The shared basic message, which also comes out in the popular phrase 'the kitchen is the heart of the home', is underlying warmth. From various informal conversations I had, I realised that most people's descriptions of their ideal kitchen fitted with the ones I came across in adverts displayed in the streets of London and TV programmes. When I enquired where the images they described are coming from, one participant in her early forties told me, 'They come from somewhere in France or Italy … I don't know'. Her descriptive imagery was very similar to some of the advertisement I had come across. Eventually, this led me to use this advertising material when conducting semi-structured interviews and discussion groups, in order to elicit conversation. For instance, when I showed Image 1 in discussion groups and during individual semi-structured interviews,[6] many reflected on their education at school where learning how

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6 I used interviews in order to get specific information about their kitchen experiences, especially as I was interested in their memories from childhood. Here, I would like to stress that these repeated interviews were not conducted in isolation, but were incorporated and interpreted against my other activities in the field (e.g. volunteering) and my larger body of collected data.

to cook was compulsory for girls but not for boys. This was something I had not considered enquiring about, but emerged out of the images I presented them with. Many recalled the asymmetric gender roles between their brothers and themselves at their parental home, where they were expected to do domestic duties like cleaning, cooking, and shopping. Through such observations, I was able to contemplate the meaning of the kitchen in a holistic way.

The creative approach to my fieldwork emerged as a very important aspect within my research, interpretation, and writing. Firstly, the use of current images served as a mediator between the larger field of the metropolis and the small sub-group of older lesbians. Through this link, I found out how older lesbians felt about current social and political issues (Scicluna 2013, forthcoming). Secondly, my strategy of using images, especially during discussion groups, evoked an excellent response to general domestic issues, including those of gender and sexual division of labour, kinship bonds, and financial concerns (including food waste). Also, it brought out commonalities and contrasts between the group members. The tension bound to these responses was also of utmost importance as through such emotive and multi-layered narratives I started to see how the domestic kitchen might be used as a topic of anthropological inquiry. Although I had to work with established themes, the creative approach of ethnographic research and its openness to the field enabled me to go *beyond* the kitchen's functional and utilitarian value, and to see it as a space of cultural knowledge and inquiry.[7]

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7 This approach further complements the debate in the edited collection, *At Home: the Anthropology of Domestic Space* (Cieraad 1999). Here, the authors argue that 'home is a central element in our socialisation into the world' (Cieraad 1999: ix), and it is where meaning can be made out of the trivial. It is where the familiar can be turned into the exotic.

Mutual Collaborations?

At the beginning of this article, I set out by asking how collaborations may influence anthropological practice and the final outcome. My experience of a young anthropologist indicates that collaborations are not as mutual or egalitarian as the term itself suggests. The porous boundaries between disciplines may impinge on the way knowledge is created, when one has to work with a predetermined agenda and research design. My role as a young anthropologist also played a part in how much I could influence this collaboration, due to hierarchical relations. This situation posed serious dilemmas over how to develop an appropriate anthropological approach to researching the domestic experiences of older lesbians without deviating from the set agenda. The answer to this question ultimately depends on whom one is collaborating with, as was the case for Holmes and Marcus (2008), where Bert saw anthropology as that place where 'mere' conversations take on a different meaning when put within a wider set of relationships.

Besides using the kitchen as a trigger for conversation during semi-structured interviews, I was also open to see how the domestic kitchen was being represented in popular discourse, and how in turn this was interpreted by older lesbians. Through this, I was able to understand the *social meaning* of the kitchen in the metropolis as it appeared in various contexts related to the idea of the 'domestic' through advertisements and the media. In observing how the theme of the kitchen was being used within different levels of society, I came to understand that both the *term* and *image* of the kitchen had symbolic meaning attached to a specific lifestyle and class, which is grounded, family-oriented, successful, emotionally secure, and financially stable. My emphasis on the words 'term' and 'image' are deliberate as this

reality lives in popular discourse, but it is not something which I encountered continuously when in the field. Most of the older lesbians I spent time with lived in a very different way. For instance, most did not have a kitchen big enough to accommodate a table. Some expressed that having a kitchen with a table is a 'proper' way of living. So, the way the kitchen is imagined created a form of aspiration and a specific lifestyle which one measured one's life against. This ideal image of the kitchen has a specific signification, where its functional meaning is not unimportant, but has moved to the background. The imagery is quite symbolic. It instantly communicates an ideal state of living. Thus, it falls within a *conceptual system* where its tangible form stands for something else besides function. In turn, its symbolic meaning has the power to influence lived experience. This latter understanding emerges from social encounters in the field, ethnographic observations, and the kitchen stories older lesbians narrated.

Perhaps the flexible approach of holism is the solution to creating a mutual relation between set agendas and the field. The role of serendipity remains crucial, but I contend that it should not necessarily be bound to the fieldwork phase. As Miller argues, the key is in 'the way young scholars should respond to chance' (2013: 228). I contend that my examples illustrate the way I 'responded to chance' at the point of writing my initial proposal to the call of the larger project. It is here that I sought the opportunity to create an academic space by proposing my own research that still engaged with the project's already established themes of the kitchen and older people. As I mentioned earlier, the role of serendipity shifted to a different level, that is, of making intellectual links, which I would not have done, if I were not restricted with set themes. In a way, restriction became central to my creativity. Finally, I contend that the tensions arising out of collaborations should be openly debated, in order to understand how this is influencing and

shaping the production of knowledge. I believe that this is a timely debate as it taps into one of the challenges of contemporary research calling for interdisciplinary collaborations, which often define the final outcome through a prescriptive agenda that has the power to sideline serendipity and the flexibility of anthropological practice.

About the Author

Rachael M. Scicluna is a social anthropologist based at the University of Manchester and is conducting her post-doctorate on an ESRC funded project titled *Under the Same Roof*. Rachael was awarded her doctorate in 2013, where she took an anthropological approach to domestic space, mainly that of the kitchen, through the experiences of a group of older lesbians living in London. She has been awarded a book contract by Palgrave Macmillan to turn her doctoral thesis into a monograph titled *Home, Domestic Space and Sexuality.*

Acknowledgements

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