

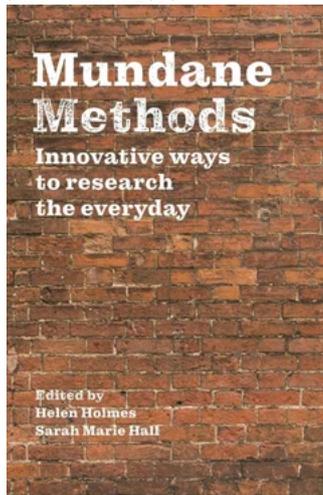
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Mundane Methods edited by Helen Holmes & Sarah Marie Hall

Reviewed by Kevin Judge
5th November 2020



Helen Holmes and Sarah Marie Hall (Editors)
Mundane Methods: Innovative ways to research the everyday
Manchester University Press
2020

Researchers with the courage to evolve and innovate traditional data collection methods are arguably best equipped to capture the embodied and sensorial aspects of contemporary life. This edited collection is transformative as a robust methodological toolkit for researchers seeking to clarify and demystify the 'everyday'. Each account demonstrates the limitations of traditional research methods and introduces alternative approaches for detailing the fleeting moments and immediacies that make up contemporary life. Where possible, opportunities are seized by researchers to embrace technological advancements and developments in order to better document elusive feelings and meanings as they are constructed and to access ephemeral zones. Meaning making and access are central to the overarching themes of *Mundane Methods* and are explored through three sections: *materials and memories*; *senses and emotions*; and, *mobilities and motion*.

Beginning with *materials and memories*, Woodward investigates the meanings behind collections, and by drawing upon archaeology, museology and social sciences, the shift from the individual to the object is achieved. As sites of accumulation, meaning is generated from a range of datasets, including verbal, visual, and observational. Similarly, Slater seeks to unlock collective memory through the entwining of history and fabric. By listening to the dress, the emotions and perceptions of previous generations are woven, sometimes hidden, into history that is localised and precious. Techniques for developing memory work are shared by Widerberg, highlighting generational and gender influences on the retelling of stories. This research speaks of the empowerment and liberation that can be experienced by participants' interpretations when a less personal and well-prepared approach is undertaken. Object interviews allowed Holmes to understand how materials structure our everyday lives and relationships. The use of physical or photographed objects helped to trigger memories and thicken accounts, however the meaningful biographies of things may challenge the neutrality of the confused or curious researcher. Bringing this section to a close, Hall, Pottinger, Blake, Mills, Reynolds and Wrieden reimagine the cultural and social practice of cooking that allowed researchers and participants to coproduce food for thought and make research more widely accessible, with a focus on supporting community, as well as individual, wellbeing. This section unravels the secret lives of ordinary objects and well-trodden recollections and furnishes the researcher with the skills to explore materials and memories with new purpose and beyond their static histories.

Within *senses and emotions*, Heath and Chapman describe the transformational effect of collaborative artwork to produce powerful and exciting results. The use of 'sketchcrawls' for understanding depictions of everyday things came with the sole condition that contributions were 'visually interesting and communicative'. For Lyon, rhythm analysis is the tool implemented to understand the life, and decay, of the time-sensitive industry of a fish market. Caught within the bustle of these routines, Lyon describes how the sights, sounds and smells of the market clash with the broader cityscape. Celebrating the local, Tipper's ethnographic contribution combines human and animal encounters to learn about meaning making and relationships. Used to enrich research questions with a strong awareness of the ethical complexities, locality-based ethnographies draw upon the jokes, tangents, casual talk and asides that are overheard in everyday life. Perkins and McLean share the importance of smells through big data, mobile devices and digital mapping. This augmentation uses 'smellwalks' as an active, embodied methodology to translate the unexpected, localised and background scents to contextualise social and political life. An auto-ethnographic approach is adopted by Collins to initiate a dialogue on the geographies of the body away from the dominance of nudity, sexuality and intimacy. Wrestling with positionality, this research exposes the multiple identities that researchers possess and offers strategies for coping with the emotional burdens of 'being' part of the study. These contributions share the importance of positioning the personal within research and how best to communicate our interpretations of 'natural reactions'. By working collaboratively, senses and emotions enrich the wider context of research and provide an invigorated sense of locality.

From tarmac to tide, the final section of *mobilities and motion*, ranges from creative walking to nightclubbing. Cook experiments with go-along interviews and mobile video-ethnography to reproduce the broader understanding of 'jographies'. It is a research method that requires a full fitness training plan, a loose interview schedule, and the use of video playback that allows participants to return to their run afresh. A common sub-theme of this entire section is the issue of recording passers-by and each submission addresses ethical concerns with thoughtful discussion. At a slightly slower pace, Rose showcases an examination of walking as an embodied and sensual experience for producing meaning and uncovering the mysteries of the rural and urban alike. The promotion of walking as a feature of data collection can trigger natural conversations that explore the past, present and future, and a range of advice is provided for accommodating different group sizes for research contributions. Alternatively, Birtchell, Harada and Waitt demonstrates how ride-along ethnographies can observe the daily improvisations required by mobility scooter users to maintain a sense of freedom, identity and independence. The mapping of these lifeworlds provides glimpses into physical needs and dispositions of people who are regularly required to reinterpret life's commute. Pursuing balance, Stoodley researches the hugely social experience, but ultimately individual pursuit, of surfing. Challenging the imagery associated with Californian or Australian coasts, research conducted in waters of South Wales attempted to

get into the littoral zone via the use of waterproof camera and self-interview schedule. Participants contributed while immersed in the sound, smell, temperature, movement and, even, taste of the sea. Finally, go-along participant observations were used by Wilkinson to understand the micro-geographies of young people's nightlives. Mobile phones enabled an ethnography by proxy to provide insight into the social and spatial experiences of young people as they succeeded, and failed, to participate in nightlife. Infusing technology with the habitual, these chapters of mobilities and motion suggest that research has effectively mobilised towards capturing the details of when life is experienced. Accumulatively, all these contributions are less about reinventing the wheel for conducting social research, and more about developing an understanding that the correct tyre should be fitted for a specific terrain.

There is a refreshing rawness captured within each account that creates a greater feeling of inclusiveness rather than ownership, with readers being taken on an array of fascinating, albeit 'mundane', explorations. The purpose of this volume is to generate a wider dialogue around innovation in social science research that is firmly based on reimagination rather than replication. Good practice is keenly promoted, as are opportunities and potentials for further adaptations in data collection and for participant wellbeing, and generous consideration is provided to the ethical and practical implications experienced during, and beyond, each study. At times, this edited collection can feel slightly like a textbook, and each chapter attempts to accommodate a wide range of criteria that can feel reduced to a series of glimpses and snapshots into a larger, but captivating, research project. Any concerns over the fleetingness of these projects, however, are consistently alleviated with the inclusion of further reading lists and key resources for training, tools, and equipment that are both extensive and methodical. Understandably, readers might be drawn to this text with a focus towards a specific chapter or method. Such efforts would only replicate the 'taken for granted' attitudes these authors seek to address. It is a collection that wonderfully demonstrates that innovation and versatility are key for inspiring the sociological imagination.

About the editors

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Helen Holmes is a Lecturer in Sociology at the University of Manchester and a member of the Morgan Centre for Research into Everyday Lives and also the Sustainable Consumption Institute. Her research explores materiality, consumption and diverse forms of economics, using creative qualitative methods. She tweets [@DrHEHolmes](#).

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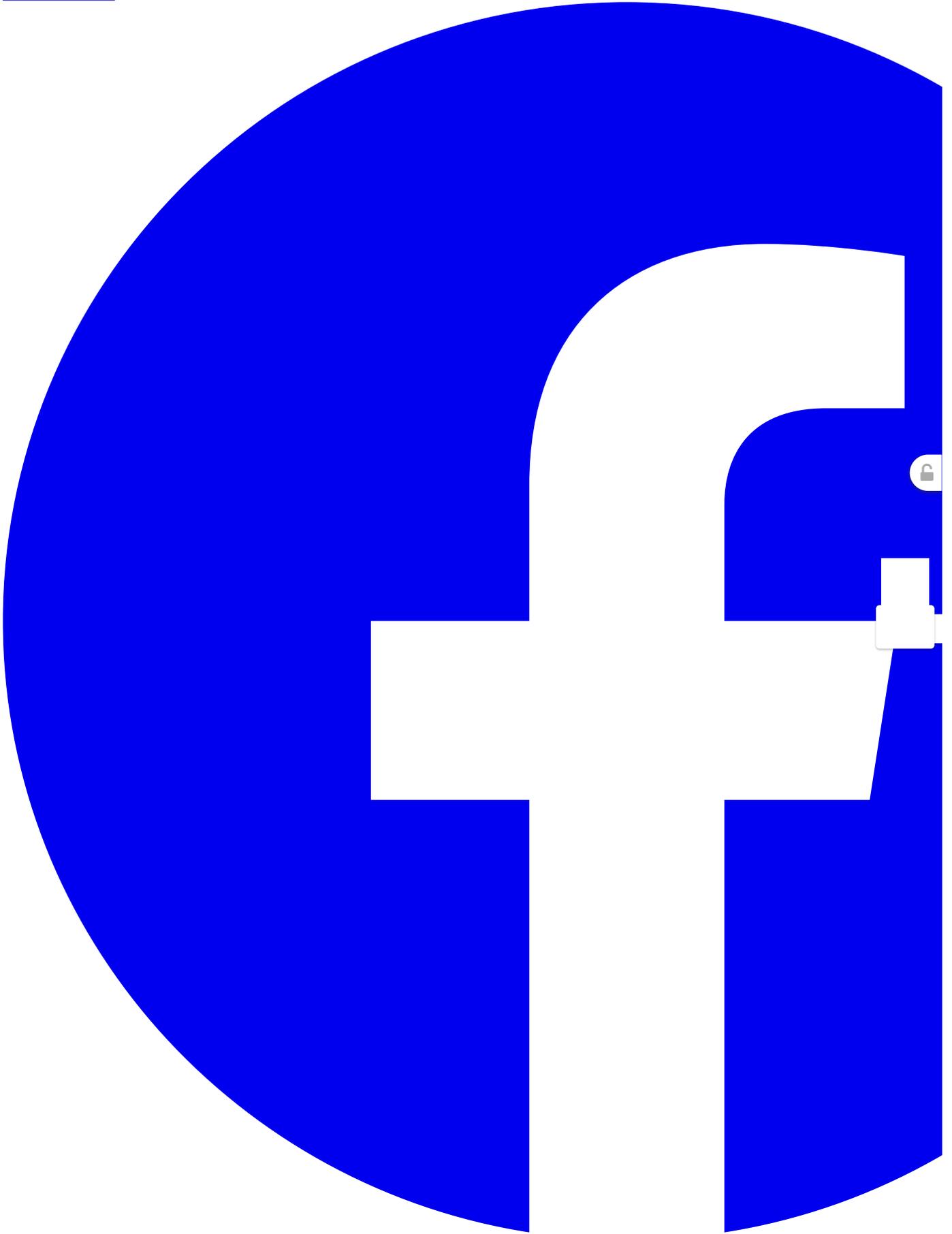
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