

## **Capturing the conversational space at home: Participants as friends and collaborators**

### **Abstract**

Capturing and documenting data from the field can be a major challenge when the research subjects are friends or family, or where an interview results in a couple airing personal disagreements. With a heightened sensitivity to the gestures, intonations, home environment and biographies of people we know, we need to consider how to document or reference what is known and relevant but not actually said. These informal interviews question our perspective on familiar relationships built on trust and challenge how we convey what we understand from subtle body movements, idiosyncratic figures of speech, habits and rituals as well as fragmented reflections on past events. This paper will explore some of the issues arising from capturing the 'conversational space' when the participants are known to the interviewer, frequently to each other and selected as an interconnected web of contributors to a study.

**Key words:** Ethnographic *with* autoethnographic practices, conversational interviews, participant listening, reciprocity, home renovation.

### **Introduction**

The research framing this paper explores why and how people engage with their home environment in order to modify it, and how the process of either conceptual or actual renewal frequently modifies them in return; transforming their skills and competence, their social interaction, their values and their day-to-day ways of living.

Gathering ethnographic data on the domestic realm brings with it issues of privacy, ethics and legitimacy (de Jong 2007), together with the more practical problems such as the timing and duration of access, the intrusion of recording, facilitating discretion and the orchestration of events in a participant home, such as controlling noise disturbance or unplanned interruptions. The home is not normally a neutral space for interviews, and yet becomes the most appropriate setting when it is both the site of the subject of study, and a place where both parties feel relaxed, welcoming the opportunity to share hospitality and conversation.

This paper will explore the conversational space between participant and researcher as friend(s), relation(s) or close family member(s) within the context of informal or 'social' interviews, and the struggle to capture this more deeply embedded empirical and intuitive data for analysis. Filling this space is both spoken and unspoken communication integral to relationships of familiarity, and assumptions built up over time (Goffman 1969). With an awareness of invisible personal histories intertwining even as the interview progresses, the researcher needs to be mindful of the interior narration parallel to, and supplementing, the outward conversation.

With reference to my ongoing cross-disciplinary study, the significance and sensitivities concerning enquiry that touches on known private lives has been one of the data collecting challenges I have faced in the simultaneous roles of researcher and friend. The mutual trust and openness that allowed access into the private homes and thoughts of my participants also brought with it issues of vulnerability and selectivity about the limits to my role as researcher and the information gathered. I found myself questioning the validity of my own knowledge about their lives, and what future impact this process of enquiry might have on our future relationship(s).

This paper touches on aspects of my study bridging autoethnographic and ethnographic practices in order to extend concepts of anthropological reciprocity, ethnographic 'ways of seeing' and 'participant listening' applied within our immediate social context (Wolcott 1999; Forsey 2010).

### **Ethnographic lens**

Both cultural and social anthropology have a long tradition of studying the ways people view their world, chiefly through experiencing the everyday lives of participants, observing relationships within family groups, and exploring issues such as social structure, marriage, kinship and the exchange of gifts. In order to observe, interpret and document a culture in a more holistic way (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007), many anthropology and ethnography texts support the traditional role of fieldwork as a way of gaining a "deep immersion in the life of a people" (Keesing 1971, 6), placing emphasis on engaging with an entire neighbourhood, group or contained community rather than undertaking selective sample studies. In reflecting

on the outdated notions of fieldwork in remote locations, Wolcott emphasizes the sustained relevance of working on site in the contemporary context enabling the study of subjects “intensively, intimately and interactively” (1999, 288).

The challenge for many ethnographers seeking to penetrate deeply into the lives of their participants is to find a way of engaging closely with individuals, their rituals and the rhythms of their daily lives while also maintaining a professional and ethical distance. In any study where the researcher has known participants for many years (perhaps since childhood), the disconnection of roles can become problematic. The very trust that has built up between two (or more) people becomes a door through which the transfer and exchange of thoughts, views and feelings can take place. To place an artificial distance between the parties for the purpose of temporarily attaining information during the research period fundamentally alters the relationship, possibly into the long term. Gaining access to private lives is challenging in this regard, however, Roger Keesing highlights the importance of conducting research into such close networks of social relations:

Far too little is known about the way friendship and informal partnerships in gardening, trade or other enterprises are woven into the fabric of every day social life... With the organization of complex societies... one must pay attention to the ways individual bonds of friendship, economic strategy, and political alliance operate. (Keesing 1971, 280)

While the depth of knowledge increases with long-term immersion, so too does the complexity of dealing with data. When a lifetime of knowledge about a person and their environment underlies the capture and delivery of interview material the interpretation of gestures, words and meanings is loaded with assumptions and preconceptions. With many sites of possible ethical and personal conflict, what is the value of knowing your participants and their homes?

### **A life in the field**

One of the benefits of locating aspects of my study in a site (or sites) known to both the researcher - myself - and one (or more) of the participants, is that the embodied and often hidden history relating to the modification of the home may be made visible through shared memory and collaborative reflections. A single visit to a house captures only the current presentation, just as a single interview captures conversation

as a snapshot of time and place. Where home improvement is usually sporadic, disruptive and ongoing, time constrained research enquiry may only capture a part of this experience, such as the aspects a participant remembers most clearly or has documented most thoroughly.

Exploring the relationship between families and their changing home through traditional ethnographic methods leaves the data unbalanced; once the action has ceased and mess cleared away there is no observable activity to record, or process to document, no movement to trace. The value of autoethnographic reflection here connects past with present (and future) and communication with understanding. Personal knowledge of a house has enabled me to more authentically connect participant's photographs of past projects, isolated and static images, with the current home as a place of interview and observation. Additionally, my knowledge of similar experiences has also helped to retrace the lives of domestic buildings as they age and morph and intertwine with the changing lives of their inhabitants.

Conversations with participants frequently touched on tasks and shared recognition of problematic issues and the exchange of advice on tools or techniques learned through trial and error. Such reflective exchanges focusing on the narration of past situations were commonplace during interviews, as if the storytelling is a necessary by-product of living through renovation event(s).

During the course of conversation the inevitable recounting of recent home projects and current problems triggered episodes of storytelling and reflection, then enquiry and sketching. Spoken words were offered together with unspoken understandings, with gestures or performances and demonstrations using objects close to hand such as cutlery, crockery, condiment containers and sugar packets. I witnessed silent reflections and long pauses digging deeply into the memory of projects long past frequently resulted in bursts of sketching activity (Figure 1).

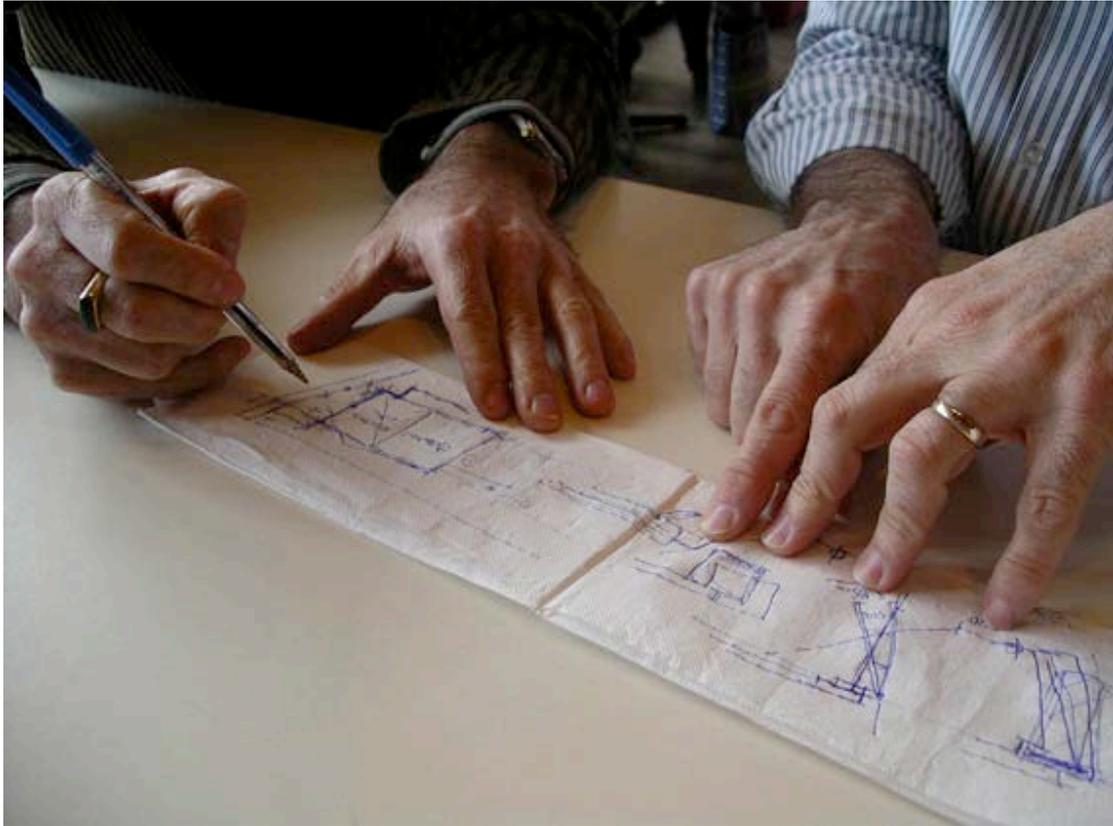


Figure 1: Talking hands, silent heads; problem sharing during a social café meeting.

The image above shows the hands of two friends (both participants) actively sketching on café napkins, busy fingers and minds yet in soundless resolution of a construction issue at a site known to both (the home of one) without needing to be there. The context and history of the home is familiar, so too the professional skills and limitations of each known to the other. So much intuitive, so little spoken; some observed, the rest already quietly understood by all parties. The friends, one an engineer and the other a designer but both competent with construction and Do-It-Yourself (DIY) practices were meeting for a casual coffee with their partners.

### **Ethnographic imaginary and engaged listening**

Wolcott reminds us that the traditional view of the ethnographer is to act “only as a catalyst or facilitator” to people’s stories, disappearing “as soon as the narration begins” (1999, 144). But it is worthwhile taking the role of facilitator forward to help uncover the known and experienced but unsaid. This acknowledges there is value in utilising background knowledge to aid the resurrection of events forgotten or overlooked by the participant. According to Forsey in his paper ‘Ethnography as

participant listening’, we may witness “a shift in focus towards themes and processes as ‘objects of study’ that are not always amenable to observation” (Forsey 2010, 567), requiring instead the development of techniques that help a researcher explore the real lives of participants beyond the use of direct interview questioning techniques:

The best way to capture what people do is to ... [conduct] interviews with an *ethnographic imaginary*, aimed at revealing the cultural context of individual lives... [They] ask questions beyond the immediate concerns of the research question. They probe biography, seeking to locate the cultural influences on a person’s life. (Forsey 2010, 567-8, emphasis in original)

In this research study on DIY practices within the home, background knowledge of both place and people helped probe what was said in interviews and observed during my fieldwork, placing it in a wider cultural context. Forsey supports a move beyond relying on participant observation to compare what people say they do and what they actually do, to a position where the researcher uses all senses to pursue the multiplicity of field-based knowledge, such as smell, touch and taste, and most particularly using ‘engaged listening’ techniques:

The aim... is to listen deeply to and/or observe as closely as possible the beliefs, the values, the material conditions and structural forces that underwrite the socially patterned behaviours of all human beings and the meanings people attached to these conditions and forces... with an ethnographic imaginary these are some of the aspects of human existence we aim to uncover. (2010, 567)

In order to facilitate ‘engaged listening’ and gain deep immersion in the subject of study, I found myself turning back to stories of the participants and their homes and to my own experiences with renovation in order to ‘hear’ things left unsaid. Engaging in similar projects cannot mirror another person’s direct lived experience, however it has provided me with a sensory context for the material conditions of others’ lives mentioned by Forsey, and an intuitive relationship with the intensely physical and personal nature of DIY. An approach to enquiry located between the ethnographic and autoethnographic helped me create an informed and generative space *for* conversation and for the exchange of understanding.

### **Being a player**

In terms of placing oneself or one’s own experiences within the research frame to gain a better understanding of the unspoken influences on participant behaviour, David

Hayano's investigation into card players perhaps best illustrates an approach advocating lengthy engagement with the local field to focus on one's own group or subject of interest; "My attempt to present an insider's view of the work of professional poker players could only be accomplished by prolonged immersion and, most important, *by being a player*" (Hayano 1982, 155, emphasis in the original). While this enthusiasm for embodied experience has validity in the context of my study, as a DIY 'player', it appears to advocate an intense familiarity with the participants and the context of research to a point where perhaps "there is no distinction between doing research and living a life" (Muncey 2010, 3).

Muncey acknowledges that relationships between stakeholders in research may become unclear, and that study of fields familiar to us may yield issues of bias and oversight, however also reinforces the valuable knowledge of background history and opportunities for insider research to 'see' new connections:

An individual insider does not necessarily contain an unchallengeable 'truth', as there [are] many different interpretations of events and behaviours among individuals in the same group which may be contradictory (2010, 33).

With an awareness of the potential blurring of roles, being both researcher and friend (or relation) to the participants, my investigation was consciously directed toward aspects of experiences that had not been discussed in detail in each other's company before. Pre-empting the interviews with a survey and making highly visible the recording and note-taking equipment taken to meetings helped to provide a degree of formality and indicative separation of roles. I was, however, careful not to disrupt the casual and relaxed nature of the occasions in order to keep the conversations open ended and flowing. Michael Angrosino indicates that the ethnographic interview "takes place between people who have grown to be friends" (2007, 42), here assuming the ethnographer has been a participant observer in the participant's community for some time, and requires a degree of familiarity between the parties in order to facilitate the yielding of personal information and insight.

My own back-story encompasses both immersion in the social context surrounding home improvement practices and interaction with the artifacts of DIY, the tools, materials and buildings. Relatives and friends have been exchanging and recounting

DIY stories for decades, and more frequently emailing digital photos as evidence of progress and change. Parents have been issuing advice, children seeking it, friends lending equipment and others asking for help. The gift of food and drink at the end of a long day of labour as thanks for time, ingenuity and muscle, and the reciprocal exchange of assistance at a later date were acknowledgement of the shared lived experiences.

The role of a participant observer in ethnographic research can extend across time and place to the point where defining separate sites of fieldwork becomes difficult, as it has done for me. Reflecting back, I see myself as the unknowing participant observer in multiple communities across several decades and several countries, constantly engaging in conversations and exchanges with those who have become participants of my research enquiry. The subsequent shift into research has revealed how what is known is difficult to capture for investigation, and what is understood is mostly unseen and unheard.

### **A way of seeing**

To open his chapter 'Ethnography as a Way of Seeing', Wolcott quotes from John Berger's 'Ways of Seeing' (1973, 8) with a pertinent statement on the difference between *looking* and *seeing*: "the way we see things is affected by what we know or believe" (Wolcott 1999, 65). When our understanding evolves, so does how we observe and what we see. An anthropological slant on the shifting position may be the move from being native and not seeing, to being ethnographic and seeing native.

In terms of achieving a separation from the field of study whilst simultaneously remaining immersed, and selectively interviewing participants while also socially active among them, Wolcott emphasizes the need to "distinguish the doing of ethnography from the anthropology of experience" (1999, 177). He suggests erring in favour of retaining some element of "essential strangeness" (1999, 194) when undertaking research and reporting data:

There must always remain some part held back, some social and intellectual "distance". For it is in the "space" created by this distance that the analytic work of the ethnographer gets done. (Hammersley and Atkinson 1983, 102 in Wolcott 1999, 194)

Distance in this study has been achieved by taking a broad focus encompassing home renovation as a manifestation of personal disharmony heavily influenced by our aspiration and consumption driven culture and through learning disciplined ethnographic methods. Critical observation and reflection have enabled separation from the already familiar and lived to reveal unexplored meanings and influences on 'people like us' or 'a society like this' a contemporary cultural context. I was required to live within my social village, while also being intellectually separated from it.

### **Participants as collaborators**

Traditional ethnographic practice emphasizes importance of time in the field, developing 'face-to-face' trust relations and depth of understanding through long-term engagement with subjects, the people supplying information about themselves and their lives. In a more current slant on power relations, participant informants have become collaborators and the researcher no longer needs to learn a language and live in remote settlements to undertake fieldwork (Hendry 2008).

Contemporary ethnography is experiencing a re-interpretation of Margaret Mead's village, which according to Wolcott is already an outdated "nostalgic and fictive" approach, with our global contacts creating our own social, professional and academic blend of community:

It is not the details, as such, that matter but the relationships among them. That is why... the life of a small primitive village, studies intensively, so that one comes to know every individual from the newest baby to the oldest grandparents, provides the perfect backgrounds for thinking about the problems of our complicated world. (Margaret Mead 1961, xi in Wolcott 1999, 288)

In this study the experiences and opinions of others in relation to how they live in their homes has contributed person-centered material to the data collected. The initial intention was simply to locate people of varying backgrounds, both professional designers and non-designers and different levels of home renovation experiences from novice to expert. Inevitably asked by friends and family about the nature of my research, the accessibility of the topic (decorating, do-it-yourself and home improvement) resulted in offers of photographs and stories of collaboration between people I knew.

A connective web emerged from the growing list of participants, indicating the social importance of this leisure activity; neighbours, colleagues, friends and relations helped each other 'do' things around the home, co-operating, working together, sharing advice and lived experience. Accepting this social group as a source of known collaborators meant that it was relatively straight forward to pre-screen using existing knowledge of people's backgrounds and professions and likely contribution to a broad picture of home modification. This did not preclude participants from outside the group and a small number of people not previously known to me were also interviewed.

In most instances the interviews were social meetings with informal conversations in familiar surroundings, sometimes myself with an individual or a couple. Frequently the meetings were between two couples when the participant(s), a further demonstration of the open and social nature of the occasions, would frequently invite my partner. As Kvale and Brinkman propose (2009, 2):

The research interview is based on the conversations of daily life... where knowledge is constructed in the interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee. An interview is literally an *inter view*, an interchange of views between two persons conversing about a theme of mutual interest.

With the pressure of busy lives, the necessity to meet for the purpose of an interview provided a welcome excuse to catch up and generally became an occasion for relaxed collaborative entertaining and exchanging thoughts. On nearly all of these occasions it was appropriate for me to take a gift of appreciation to the participant's home or provide a meal at my home as a later gesture of thanks for their contribution to my research, whether it proved relevant to my study or not. This notion of reciprocity is can be another problematic feature of the 'unspoken' conversation space with known participants.

### **Reciprocity**

According to Joy Hendry, most forms of social interaction require some degree of consideration or exchange in order to maintain patterns of communication. Hendry makes reference to Marshall Sahlins' well-known diagram (Figure 3) that "maps the spectrum of types of reciprocity onto a series of concentric spheres moving out from home, through to unrelated people from other tribes" (Hendry 2008, 65). Sahlins

proposes three main types of reciprocity in a tribal society as extreme examples of behavioral patterns evident in other cultures and societies, ranging from unquestioned generosity with no obligation to return in closest social relations to a situation where strangers may attempt to gain something without intention of any return. In between the two one-way exchanges is a situation where the expectation is more balanced, and offerings of equal perceived value are exchanged (2008).

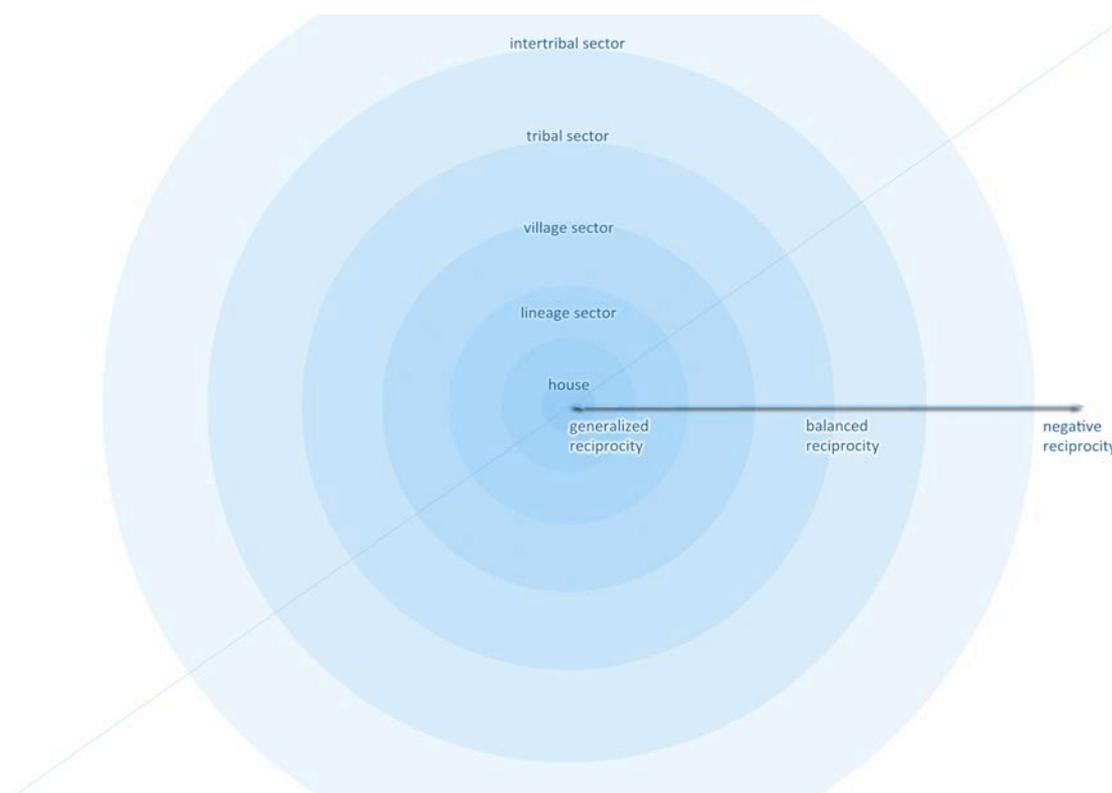


Figure 3: Spectrum of reciprocity based on adaptation of Sahlins’s diagram in ‘*An introduction to social anthropology*’ by Joy Hendry (2008), page 66 Figure 3.1.

The notion that degrees of reciprocity vary in relation to the social distance from the researcher is fundamental to the experience of collaboration with people in our own social group for the purpose of research. Mutual trust and respect shared by people known well to each other can permit access to private space that may otherwise be difficult to achieve, both in terms of the physical home and also personal thoughts and opinions. However, as a researcher, my task was to gather memories, opinions, experiences and photographs, and of course access to their homes in a formal context. Should I offer something in return for the material in my new role as researcher, or something towards being entertained as an old friend?

The conversational interview as a method of enquiry in my study frequently became a social event revolving around entertainment, and the closer to the centre of Sahlins model this person or couple might be located, where 'house' represents immediate family, the easier it was to select a suitable form of exchange. If my participants were hosting the 'event' then the gift taken would be in keeping with the my knowledge about the persons wine or food preferences, or nature of the proposed gathering. Hendry indicates that within the family, the closest of social relations, there is no expectation of obligation for returning a favour, gesture of help or a material object, if one is given:

Within the home, village or even lineage, generalized reciprocity is expected... outside the tribe, with 'other' tribe or peoples, anything goes" (Hendry 2008, 65).

However, the further from the centre of the model the more difficult the negotiation of exchange for my intrusion on scarce spare leisure time, and the more unknown the nature of an appropriate gift of thanks. Certainly within this study, the generosity and interest of participants taking part in the research has followed Sahlins' model, where family and close friends that I call 'my kind' (refer Figure 4), have been very forthcoming (generalised reciprocity). Engagement with the wider friendship group that I see as 'our kind' have been more a situation of equal trade (balanced reciprocity), and others introduced as acquaintances or suggested by participants, clearly 'other kinds', have been difficult to contact or communicate with and have exhibited a definite reluctance to commit any time for even a brief chat (negative reciprocity).

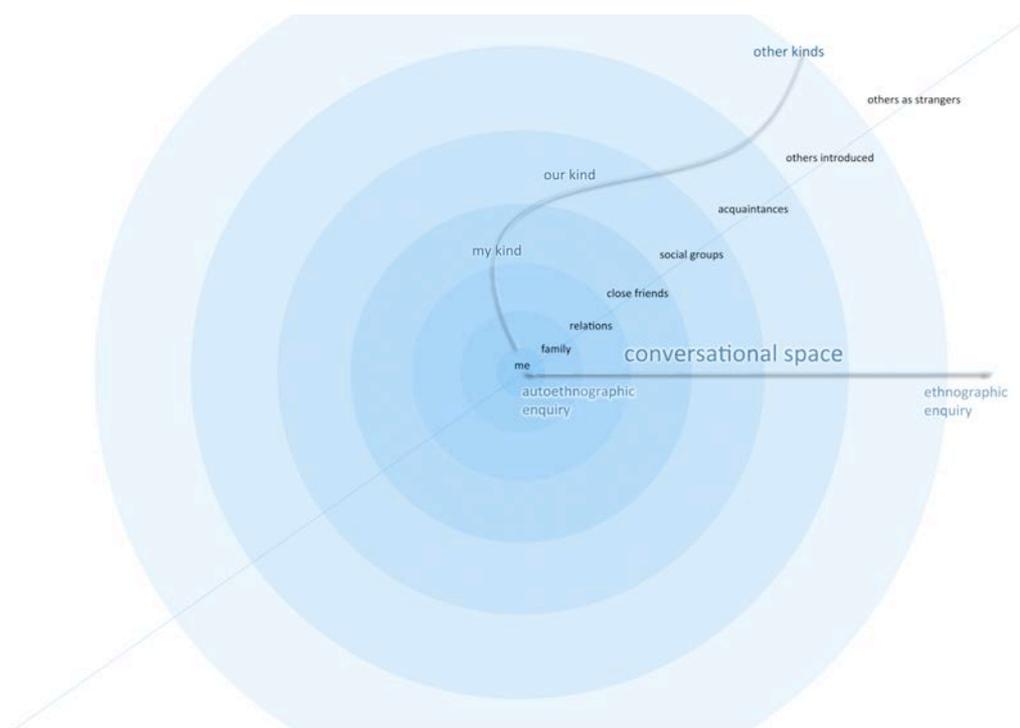


Figure 4: Range of participants in conversational space. Composite image based on diagram in Figure 3.

The diagram above illustrates the range of relationships across which the conversational space for this research has extended. The collection of interview data occupies the space between the central autoethnographic reflections of self and on the outer circle the ethnographic observation of strangers. Interviews located within that range had varying degrees of success revealing personal insights depending upon the social distance from the centre where I have located myself, and also the degree of control I feel able to exert over the direction of the interview.

### **Passive or active enquiry**

An importance difference between being a passive observer and actively asking about what is happening is sometimes a difficult role to negotiate with friends and family, with whom you sometimes feel unable to exert control. Wolcott (1999, 47) suggests that:

It poses a dilemma for a field researcher: whether to intrude by interjecting one's own agenda into a research setting, or to remain silent in the hope that what one wants to know may (eventually) be revealed in some naturally occurring way.

Sensitivity to interrupting a conversation is heightened in a social situation of familiarity, where the researcher knows the characteristics and temperaments of the individuals involved, the pressures on their time, the care taken on organizing the gathering as host, or considerable effort taken to sort through old photographs for my study. Being able to intuitively ‘read’ the situation through a tone of voice or the ‘talking’ hands, or a shift of the eyebrows in a familiar way will assist in deciding whether or not to interject. Attempts to re-guide the topic of the interview are best done in a way that does not interrupt the flow of thought:

... in those sequences of interpersonal behaviour which for the greater part of our daily lives, speech and action supplement each other and do each other’s work in a web of unbroken patterns (Edward Sapir 1933, in Farnell 1995)

Familiar body language and facial expressions might communicate that this friend needs a listening ear and sometimes may seek advice using gestures and glances that a stranger might miss. With people we know we are conscious of taking advantage of the friendship to gain access to private worlds, to probe into their minds and emotions. However Woolcott reminds us it can work both ways, and can be “unsettling” when we become aware that our “informants use us” (1999, 145) as well, as I found with one participant.

### **Camilla’s story**

I had known one of my participants, Camilla (pseudonym), for a number of years but was unaware that she had been feeling suffocated and restricted by the unsuitable layout of her house. The first interview with her and her husband became an opportunity for her to finally table the issue to an interested (her friends, trained designers) and uninterested (her husband) audience:

It’s the fact that it doesn’t flow properly, it’s the fact that I can’t sit without getting a sore neck, physically I don’t feel well, in it; you know it’s *that* sort of stuff. So I think if we fix the house... We’ve been here all these years and we’ve been paralysed because, and it’s not just money, because I mean, you know, potentially we could have done something. It’s because we don’t know where to go, what to do, who to approach, who to phone...

Lack of access to inexpensive design advice had been something troubling Camilla a long time and yet she felt it might help break the stalemate with her husband about

spending money and time on their house, and her anxiety about feeling “paralysed” about the inability to know what changes to make. This revelation created both ethical and reciprocity issues with regard to the space between us as close friends.

Firstly, should Camilla’s emotional distress and a subsequent dispute she had with her husband about the situation be part of the interview, as it may be something she later regrets happening? “Charles! Do you realize this is being recorded!”, she scolds him later. Secondly, it became apparent she had forgotten the tape recorder was running and I felt awkward being the one drawing this issue into the open and meanwhile documenting it. Thirdly, there were significant and relevant pressures on the layout and available space in the house in relation to the three adult children still living at home. From previous visits I knew this was another site of contention but felt it was inappropriate to introduce the topic that day. Camilla did not volunteer the information either; so how appropriate is it to include what is known but not explicitly revealed while the tape recorder was running?

Additionally, design problems had been revealed through enquiry so was there an expectation of reciprocity? Camilla knew both my partner and myself are design professionals by training, yet nothing had been mentioned of the need for design help on previous social occasions. Did Camilla’s offer of information contain the expectation of possible design solutions in exchange knowing this visit was not simply a social call? Using the concept of generalised reciprocity by Sahlins, this situation may suggest the participant has given hospitality, time and personal insight (Camilla’s story), and in exchange expects (or hopes for) design advice from the friend turned researcher once the conversation space had become more formalised.

Involving relatives and friends in research thus bring to light ethical issues about how much to ask and document when much of interest has in fact remained unspoken, and what reciprocal exchange is implicated when inviting people you know to take part in a study. Equally valued exchange transactions may contribute to the conversation space and interview experience for the participant as well as the researcher, but the issue of including what is known but unspoken remains a difficult area to negotiate:

Is it ever ethical to probe into other people's lives?... I regard the underlying issue as one of balancing risks and benefits. My initial premise is that the individual with the most to benefit is always the ethnographer, and the most to risk are always those among whom the ethnographer studies (Wolcott 1999, 284).

In relation to the above, Wolcott points out that "practices of openness and disclosure" are important in trying to close the gap between risk and gain. This gap can become difficult to negotiate where roles of researcher and friend are blurred, and what is known is not said and yet remains essential to a deeper understanding of the conversation. Gaining approval for use of prior knowledge, and reinforcing the balance of exchange and reciprocity surrounding these social situations within which data collection has occurred, may move somewhat to reduce uneven power relations. I have found it vital to acknowledge the formal recording of what might otherwise pass as a casual and informal conversation with friends over drinks and nibbles before dinner, and make the research process visible and accountable to the participants, my collaborators. Ultimately, recognition (through exchange) and respect (through revealing the periodic role as researcher) for the 'private space' of others made accessible to me, has helped to create a sensitive but clearer 'research space' within the conversation.

### **Conclusion**

The collaborative longitudinal and contextual journey of home making has given me unique depth of familiarity with my own home(s), and also with the houses of friends and family, frequently a witness to periods of change in their lives and their homes. In my role as researcher, dealing with this accumulated knowledge of other people's lives has surfaced as an issue on many occasions, especially when interviews do not yield sufficient historical or experiential context. This can be seen as an example of 'conversational space' that evades capture; the gap between what the participant says and what they assume the researcher (their friend) to know and thus does not require verbalizing (perhaps simply exchanging a 'knowing look'), or the gap between what is discussed on that occasion and what has been mentioned in previous social situations, or a gap between the voice recording and what the researcher knows about that person or their life that has a bearing on the interpretation of the spoken words.

Combining interviews with social meetings or casual entertaining offers an opportunity for the participant as host to control the event, relax in their home environment, and feel confident in sharing thoughts about the order or disorder of their lives. While not imperative within immediate family, the giving of personalised gifts is an important acknowledgement of intimate trust, becoming more difficult to negotiate when seeking research input from more friends, acquaintances or even strangers, where a sense of equal reciprocity becomes the focus of exchange.

In terms of weaving together what is known by a researcher about the homes and private lives of participants but not spoken about during interviews, and what has been observed and experienced firsthand, texts on auto ethnography have helped me reflect my own knowledge gained through direct participation in home improvement and what I know of my participants. Likewise, overlaying of the anthropology concepts of kin relations and reciprocity (as proposed by Sahlins model) on my study has revealed a spread of commitment to exchange from the very basic understanding that a conversation is a two-way flow, to providing a more tangible form of acknowledgement in return for time and information volunteered.

Finally, for ethnographic study within and on the social village, face-to-face contact offers the best opportunity to reveal greater depths of understanding about the data captured in conversation, especially when we are familiar with the personal history, current home life and body language of the participants, our collaborators in the field.

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