



Listening



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ABSTRACT

In this paper we reflect on the kind of listening that happens in research whilst taking part in a keep fit group and getting sweaty, that pushes us to ask an interviewee 'Are you alright?' and haunts us when the project is over. This is the kind of listening that weaves through, around and beyond what is immediately heard, including the unspoken, the articulateness of objects and the listening that comes through participating. The paper stems from a project concerned with how people live, experience and manage cultural diversity and ethnic difference in their everyday lives in urban England. Divided into two sections, the first part introduces our methods that included participant observation, interviews and repeat in-depth discussion group meetings. The second section reflects on our experiences of listening whilst doing, explores feelings that mediate listening and considers the time involved in listening.

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1. Introduction

Omar was eighteen years old and a student at Grafton College in Milton Keynes. He was one of the young people taking part in a discussion group for our research concerned with multiculturalism and how people live ethnic diversity. Outside of college Omar told us that he enjoyed spending time with his girlfriend, working to earn money and working out at the gym. His uncle liked body building too. He pulled his phone out of his pocket, found an image of his uncle's muscly, naked torso and passed it around for us to look at. Omar talked quickly, positively and hopefully, but how he talked sat uneasily with what he said about his life, the transience of his childhood, his absent mother, and how we experienced the group discussion. The phone was returned to Omar and placed on the table, contributing, somehow, to the group. Crisps, biscuits and drink fed into the unfolding discussion, adding something substantial, providing us with something to hold onto, bite into as we talked and listened to one another. We return to Omar later, but we begin with him to introduce the focus of this paper concerning the kind of listening that weaves through, around and beyond what is immediately heard, including the unspoken, the articulateness of

objects and the listening that comes through participating. Whilst what Omar said was important to our research, there was more than this to listen to. Textbooks on research methods are helpful regarding talk - who to talk to, how to ask questions, turning talk into transcripts and how to analyse them (Valentine, 2005; Longhurst, 2010; Crang and Cook, 2007), but are less helpful on listening (Bennett, 2002). This paper aims to fill that gap a little and is for students and researchers who want to think about their listening and how this shapes their understanding and research.

In this paper we draw upon our experiences of listening in our research on 'Living Multiculture'¹, one of our aims was to devise a methodology that involved trying to listen better to everyday, mundane practices and experiences of multiculturalism. Without marginalising everyday racism, exclusion and inequalities we wanted to explore the quieter micro narratives and routine encounters that are part of the lives of a growing majority of people living in urban England. In our 'Living Multiculture' project we took a different approach to 'the segregation-distrust-conflict model' that has underpinned and shaped UK public and policy debates about cultural difference (see Neal et al., 2013, 2015a, 2015b). Instead we were influenced by an alternative narrative of convivial

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encounter across difference (Back, 1996; Amin, 2002; Gilroy, 2004; Wise, 2009; Gidley, 2013; Thrift, 2005; Swanton, 2010; Wise and Velayutham, 2014; Wessendorf, 2014) that does not ignore tensions (Clayton, 2008; Rogaly and Qureshi, 2013) but recognises unpanicked, everyday, routine experiences of multiculturalism (Noble, 2009) and the developing skills and competencies that shape these (Wise, 2009; Neal and Vincent, 2013; Sennett, 2012; Wilson, 2011).

This means that our listening involved methods that asked questions and we were concerned about developing good research practices for listening to complex stories of hardship, loss, disorientation and exclusion. These practices involved repeated and sustained connection with people and places, reflection on our experiences of the research and recognizing that we were stitched into the possibilities and limits of our listening and understanding (Pratt, 2010; Kanngieser, 2012; Dreher, 2009). Our methods also involved attending to mundane practices that shape everyday lives and experiences of multiculturalism; the sometimes wordless encounters, small gestures, ambiguity and atmospheres that embody getting about, amongst and along with others. As we detail later, our research involved interviews, repeat in-depth group discussions and participant observation (Neal et al., 2013, 2015a, 2015b; Jones et al., 2015).

In this paper listening is broadly conceived. This is in part a reflection of our different disciplinary backgrounds and how individuals listen in unique ways (Forsey, 2010). It also reflects trends regarding ethnographic research, which involves a range of methods often including participant observation alongside other methods such as interviews (Crang and Cook, 2007). Some lament the demise of participant observation as a stand alone method and there is concern regarding the crowding of this method with others which demand talk under the label 'ethnographic' (Gans, 1999; see also Forsey, 2010). Interesting questions have been asked regarding what gets lost in 'verbal methodologies' (Crang, 2005; Back, 2003, 2007, 2012). Whilst this paper does not prioritise one method over another, it is interested in the kind of listening required in ethnographic research that involves not only attending to, and analysing talk, but, for example, acknowledging the context in which stories are told and how research interviews and group discussions are experienced. For us listening has a relational, intersubjective dynamic, decentring the researcher and illuminating the role of participants in the creative process of research and understanding. Participants include the non-human and in the paper we consider some of this vital matter, such as Omar's phone and a crisp packet, that substantiated our listening (Thrift, 1999; Conradson, 2005; Simpson, 2013). Finally, we consider the time involved in listening. Whilst projects and research contracts have end dates, listening does not and we live with, return to and listen to moments, conversations and memories of participants that won't leave us alone.

The paper is divided into two sections. In the first section we briefly introduce our methods, detailing our planning for listening. In the second we reflect on our listening, focusing on three issues in particular: listening whilst doing, the feelings that mediate listening and the time involved in listening. The paper draws upon a diverse literature to think about listening. To help us explore 'listening whilst doing' we explore an embodied approach to listening evoked in methods that include participant observation (Laurier and Philo, 2006; Swanton, 2010; Rogaly and Qureshi, 2013; Wise and Velayutham, 2014; Wessendorf, 2014; Crang, 1994), participatory action research (Askins and Pain, 2011) and non-verbal research techniques (Macpherson and Fox, 2014; Fox and Macpherson, 2015; Bingley, 2003). Different theoretical, disciplinary and political agendas motivate this various research, but common to all is not only listening to what participants might say,

but listening whilst doing and involved in happenings, evoking something of the experience of being there.

To consider feelings that mediate listening, the paper is indebted to the work of geographers with expertise in psychoanalysis and psychotherapy (Kingsbury and Pile 2014, Cullen et al 2014, Davidson and Parr, 2014; Kingsbury, 2009; Bondi, 2003, 2005, 2014a, 2014b). Especially helpful has been writing on empathy (Bondi, 2003, 2014a) and listening that involves 'tuning in' (Paterson, 2014) to our experiences and how they might connect to the experiences of participants and what they are trying to 'tell' us, whilst also mindful of our different subject positions that require reflection and shape what is heard.

Finally, a body of work in the field of education and arts based research concerning acousmatic texts is a source of inspiration regarding our reflection on the time involved in listening (Daignault, 2005; Aoki and Aoki, 2003; Leggo, 1999). Sometimes texts that make us tingle, the really inspirational ones that leave us buzzing, seem to be listening to us too as we read them. In this paper we explore work on acousmatic texts to consider the impact of time on our listening, research and transcripts.

2. Our methods and planning for listening

Our attempt to listen better in our research did not involve inventing new methods, but did involve weaving the work and ideas of researchers and writers regarding participating and embodied listening, empathy and acousmatic texts outlined above into our approach and planning. As this section begins to introduce, our methods involved participating and joining groups in case study areas that were home to at least one of us, repeat group meetings with time in between to reflect on our listening and a team of researchers shaped by individuals who brought different readings and interpretations to transcripts and field notes.

We situated our research project in three case study areas, chosen because of their particularly dynamic populations, urban geographies of diversity and multicultural formation. Our case study areas were the London Borough of Hackney, Milton Keynes, a new city near London established in the 1960s, and Oadby, a small suburban town on the edge of Leicester in the English midlands. These case study areas represent some of England's most dynamic and (super) diverse populations shaped by people with a wide range of ethnic backgrounds. Between 2001 and 2011 Hackney and Milton Keynes were amongst the UK's top ten fastest growing places with their populations increasing by 20% and 17% respectively (Milton Keynes Council, 2014; Hackney Borough Council, 2013). The ethnic composition of both places also changed between 2001 and 2011 with Hackney's long history of ethnic diversity intensifying (Neal et al., 2015a) and Milton Keynes' black and ethnic minority group doubling. Although Oadby's population growth was nothing like as dramatic, between 2001 and 2011 it was amongst England's fastest changing places in terms of its ethnic composition (Leicestershire County Council, 2013).

Each of our three case study areas was also home or very close to home for at least one of us and we saw ourselves as part of the social world we were studying. Our connections with these places also played a role in shaping what we did and knew and added an extra layer of responsibility regarding these places and our research participants. We imagined the research through specific sites that included a park, café, library, social and leisure clubs and a college in each of our case study areas where different and differently positioned people (around age, education, residency, gender, class and ethnicity) encounter and interact with one another in ways that feel comfortable and less so. Our way of getting involved in these sites included taking part in activities already happening inside them, joining, for example, a running or writing group.

Whilst our attempts to listen better involved decentring ourselves and taking part in selected sites, we are a group of mostly white social scientists which raises ethical issues around privilege (Skelton, 2001; Dwyer, 1999). In this paper 'we' is complicated. One layer of 'we' involves the paper's authors, but another layer of 'we' refers to our fieldwork which involved not only us, but also researchers and research consultants who were involved in different stages of the project. We are a diverse group of people in all sorts of ways but especially with regard to the ways in which people are typically identified around class, gender, age and ethnicity. Whilst 'we' describes a collective and collaborative approach, some of what we write about in this paper involves individual experiences fuelled by particular contributions to the project. So our use of 'we' is somewhat nuanced and we break out into individual experiences when this is necessary.

Undoubtedly how others identified and related to us shapes our particular findings and how they are read. Who we are and how people see us affect how we listen, what people tell us and what we hear (Dreher, 2009). That said, we attempted a biographical approach to identity, one that recognises its complexity and ways in which it is shaped through interaction with people and places through the course of lives (Swanton, 2010; Nayak, 2006). For example, one of us – Giles – is mostly identified as white and usually identifies himself as white, but is mixed ethnicity with an Indian father and a White British mother, living his infancy in Ghana and later moving to Sheffield where he tells people he is from. Many of our respondents had similarly complex and interesting stories to tell regarding their biography and processes of identification. As we have discussed elsewhere (Neal et al., 2015b), though, we found that when we were writing about our observations in our field notes we sometimes slid into seeing through an essentialising lens that highlighted people's physical and cultural characteristics to identify them and evoke difference while paradoxically writing about how difference might have been disrupted. We attempted to counter this objectifying way of seeing through the layering of methods that comprised joining in and taking part and listening to interviewees' experiences of everyday multiculturalism that evoked both multi-textured understandings of identity and belonging that reckon with essentialism, but also their experiences of objectification and racism (Clayton, 2012).

Our key methods included participant observation, interviews and repeat in-depth group discussions. The aim of our participant observation (Laurier, 2010; Cook, 2005; Crang and Cook, 2007) was to listen, watch, feel and be able to describe site worlds and the context, people, practices, etiquette, uses, rhythms, things and atmospheres that shaped them. We recorded our observations through writing, attempting to capture the minutiae of encounters and interactions happening around us and that we ourselves were involved in. We wrote about what happened in college canteens, parks, libraries and cafes and at events like world picnics in parks (Crang and Cook, 2007). We wrote about the keep fit group and writers group meetings that we joined. We returned to our sites at different times of the day and at different points of the year to get a sense of their daily and seasonal rhythms.

A second key method of the research was repeat in-depth discussion groups (Burgess et al., 1988a,b). We set up groups of people who used the park, attended the college or were a member of the selected social club. We used a number of strategies to meet potential participants. These involved going along to and taking part in group activities, such as a keep fit group, running club or a writing group, and events, for example a community fun day. Before we set up the first group meeting, we interviewed participants one-to-one to get a sense of their biography (Valentine, 2005; Longhurst, 2010). In total we interviewed 88 people.

Our repeat in-depth discussion groups were influenced by the

psychoanalytically informed group work of the geographers Burgess, Limb and Harrison who, in the 1980s, considered not only what people said, but also listened to group dynamics and how they themselves experienced the groups (Burgess et al., 1988a,b). We met with 12 groups three times over a six month period, stretching from Autumn 2012 to Spring 2013. Our groups ranged in size with between 5 and 11 members. Some of our groups (such as our park user groups) were made up of people who did not know each other whilst others were comprised of people who did. Our in-depth discussion group meetings often involved two researchers for practical reasons around hosting and organising groups, but also to explore how they experienced group meetings. Repeat meetings gave us time to step back and reflect on our listening and understanding with others (members of the research team and locally based advisory groups²) (Bondi, 2013, 2014a). The final group meeting embraced the intersubjective nature of research (Jervis, 2014), allowing us to explore issues that seemed pertinent to that particular group, our understanding of those issues and their reactions to what we had picked up on.

A final stage of the research involved iterative interviews with local and national policy makers. In each of our case study areas we shared some of our emerging findings with policy makers and community activists, prompting discussion and reflection around these. This stage of the research involved 22 interviewees working at a local level and four at a national level concerned with, for example, issues of race equality. Our aim was to listen to policy maker and activist responses to our research, whilst attempting to connect our research to their work.

3. Reflections on listening

3.1. Listening whilst doing

There are some methods in particular that involve listening whilst doing and these include participant observation, participatory action research and non-verbal research techniques (Phillips and Johns, 2012). Different research agendas and ambitions often underpin these various methods, but they do not usually involve asking questions, rather sliding into the worlds of others and creating space in which the research can unfold (Crang and Cook, 2007). Listening whilst doing is valuable because it concerns an active, sensuous, embodied approach to listening bringing experiences and feelings to the foreground of research as they weave through words said and happenings observed. Research practices at the interface of social science and psychotherapy involve embodied, or 'whole body listening' (Macpherson and Fox, 2014; Fox and Macpherson, 2015), that entails attending to gestures, textures, atmospheres, things and the context of happenings (Back, 2003, 2007, 2012; Mitchell and Back, 2006; Bissel, 2010; Kanngieser, 2012). Whole body listening involves ears, eyes, beating hearts, feelings, skin, pores, tingly, hair raising moments and more besides (Paterson, 2015). Some of our methods involved listening whilst doing as we joined groups to take part in their various activities, such as writing, running and keeping fit. None of these activities were set up for the purposes of our research, but concerned an involved, embodied and agile approach to listening. One of us, Katy, joined a keep fit group in Knighton Park, on the edge of Oadby:

15th October 2012

² In each case study area we set up an advisory group. Advisory groups involved local councillors, local government, community activists, members of community groups and an academic who met with us three times over the lifetime of the project, at the start, in the middle and at the end to discuss our approach, methods, sites and emerging findings.

It's 9.30, damp and cold and I'm taking part in a keep fit group. We're a mixed group of young to middle aged, white and British Asian women.We set off. Jogging, sprinting, dropping onto the wet ground to do press ups, crawling. Some of the exercises require us to work in pairs and so we're working with partners, using them as support to do leg exercises before we swap partners again. It feels a bit odd holding people I've only just met. The group runs into a woman doing her morning walk, we're difficult to avoid and Jake yells at us to give the walker space. I work with Maggie, Paula, Kay, Amita, Shivani and others, we introduce ourselves, laugh a lot because it's all a bit awkward and hard work. I'm crawling down a bank being yelled at by Jake for holding my bum too high. We're slipping and sliding in the mud (Knighton Park 15/10/12).

Three times a week a group of mostly women meet in the car park just before 9.30am to attend a keep fit group. Participation involves running and jogging through the park on paths and off track, using the ground and park furniture, such as park benches, for various exercises. The keep fit group is run by Jake, a black, male fitness instructor. Katy went to group sessions on Mondays, and sometimes Wednesdays, over a six month period. The size of the group varies depending on the weather, time of week or year. Group members are generally middle class, although not always, young to middle aged, ethnically mixed, comprising women who work part-time, are self-employed or full time mothers. Surprising to Katy was the physicality of her listening whilst sweating, sliding around in the mud and holding, touching and pressing upon others she had just met. The group involves people who wouldn't ordinarily cross paths, and involves encounters with others also using the park, for other activities, at the same time (Neal et al., 2015b). Dog walkers are the other main users of the park at 9.30am on a weekday. Dog walkers are generally white and older than the group of women and not always at ease with the bubble of chatter and Lycra clad bodies taking up paths accompanied by Jake loudly yelling instructions. There is little in the way of verbal exchange across the groups, but listening involved running past unsmiling faces and cold shoulders from the dog walkers, a change in pace and an altered atmosphere amongst us.

October 29th 2012

We're sliding around in the muddy wet grass, walking like bears, hands and feet on the ground, going up to each other, lifting one hand off the ground, then another, for a 'Hi 5'. We're grunting, groaning and giggling as we approach each other. The ground is slippery and Jake warns us about the wet leaves(Knighton Park 29/10/12).

Notable are the non-human things and beings that mediate social relations and substantiate listening (Askins and Pain, 2011). Things sparked and facilitated interactions between participants in ways barely noticed such as the wet leaves described in the extract above, but also water bottles, park benches, dog shit and dogs amongst many things and non-human beings that formed our field notes. In our field notebooks we wrote about things that mattered to us and were pointed out to us by others. Loose dogs unsettled the group, causing screams if they got too close, dog shit was irritably pointed out by a group member to others, reigniting tensions between dog walkers and keep fit group members, the offer of a water bottle soothing atmospheres experienced in the park, creating friendly relations amongst group members. All of this vital matter substantiated listening, shaping experiences of others and this place, making an impression, having an affect (Thrift, 1999; Conradson, 2005; Simpson, 2013). Interesting to the research

project was the dynamic, simultaneous interplay of tense and easy relations amongst ethnically diverse individuals and groups and the impact of these experiences on relationships with sites and places.

The kind of 'data' that listening whilst doing elicits is somewhat different compared to, say, interviewing in that it emerges around and through the shared activity, being with, but not generally sat opposite, and being amongst others – human and non-human. Listening whilst interviewing often involves building up information pixel by pixel, but listening whilst doing involves being confronted by a big, blurry screen and trying to bring this into focus. This analogy is too reliant on the visual, but explains the contrasting processes of understanding. Bringing a research site into focus is nicely exemplified in a researcher's field notes as he had lunch in a college six form area in Oadby:

The mood in the canteen was generally playful – as I filled my bottle up at the water tank, for example, an Asian group of boys and girls were messing around with a packet of crisps, with one trying to crunch the packet up and the other running away. Towards the end of our time in the canteen, a boy in a turban and another Asian girl sat next to us. The boy quietly got on with studying, but the girl was attracting the attention of a group of Asian lads, and some girls, on the comfy chairs next to us. I heard one of them lean over and say to the girl, 'sorry, we were just taking the piss out of you'. The girl smiled and the lad said, 'sorry, what was your name again?' (Uplands College, Oadby, 10/10/12)

Understanding produced through listening whilst doing is created through words said but also whilst, as exemplified above, experiencing a six form area unfold through an atmospheric mix of people and objects involving a crisp packet, messing around, laughter and wipe clean leather effect comfy chairs supporting more bodies than intended as students squeezed into them. Listening generated understanding about a college that, although very ethnically diverse, involves space and groups often organised around ethnicity (and gender), but also mixing on the edges of, and across, groups in ways that staff and students (less) consciously recognise.

3.2. Experiences and feelings that mediate listening

Throughout the previous section dealing with listening whilst doing there was reference to experience and feelings. In this section we bring feelings centre stage to consider how these mediated our listening. In our field notes we wrote about our experiences of interviews, group discussions and fieldwork, grappling with feelings and happenings that weaved around and through talk. A common thread in emotional geographies is the relationality of feelings and how what we experience is, in some way, connected to the feelings of others (Bondi, 2005). We drew upon this to listen to what was being communicated beyond and around what was immediately heard. To start this section we return to the college in Oadby to explore a third and final group discussion. In an earlier meeting this group had talked about 'mixing' and in our final meeting we asked what this involved. Ayo, who usually sat at a table in the six form area identified as where black African women sat, responded:

'It's like if I'm just talking randomly in my perspective like, mixing is just us interacting with other people of course, but it's not to an extent where I can engage with them on that level because obviously I haven't experience of what – how they see things in like in their perspective, so it's mixing – you understand them to an extent

but it's not like, you know diluting, if you know what I mean?' (Ayo, Group Meeting 3, Uplands College, Oadby 22/4/13)

Amelia, a white student with a British father and German mother, picked up the conversation, emphasising that she mixed with people with different ethnic backgrounds and that she and her friends did not have a regular table. Ayo responded that although she was associated with the Black African table that she also mixed with others, but said, *'I'm not comfortable with everyone that I sit with, so there's different levels of comfortability'*. Amelia picked up on the diluting idea, describing it as *'weird'* at which point Ayo withdrew from discussion. *'Are you alright?'* one of the researchers asked her. *'Yes'*, but she was much quieter. Silent for the time being. Whilst this conversation was on-going a researcher detailed in her field notes how a blue plastic cup was passed back and forth between two students, Amira and Tahir, who were silently and amusingly communicating their horror of lipstick marks on what should have been a clean cup. This was another exchange happening between students, who could have been opting out of what was being discussed and/or busy with their own relationship. Another researcher focused on her experiences of the group not feeling very relaxed, *'a bit of tension'*, *'giggly'* talk and the *'unhappy'* response of Ayo:

'We're a group of nine now (....). The group doesn't feel as relaxed as I expected (....) They help themselves to drinks and snacks, seem to enjoy us reiterating, repeating and pushing issues and phrases they've introduced in previous meetings. But there is definitely a bit of tension. Perhaps this has something to do with impending exams that all students seem to be sitting soon (...) But there are other things happening in the room, especially between Amira and Tahir. Amira is giggly and constantly looking across me to Tahir for reassurance, for him to agree with what she has said, to tease him about something he's been involved in, winding him up. Tahir is defensive, a little less open than in previous meetings. He's definitely much quieter. Amelia and Ayo keep the conversation going, keep the group on track, ease the tension or whatever's going on between Tahir and Amira. Ayo and Amelia are two of the chattier, more confident students and are forthright regarding their experiences and opinions. At one point Amelia says something that Ayo is unhappy about. I try to encourage Ayo to have her say, but she withdraws, still managing to make some kind of point in the process.' (Field notes, Uplands College, Oadby, 22/4/13)

On the one hand we have the recording and transcript of the group meeting that we listen to, read and analyse. Shaping our listening are our experiences of that group, which take us by surprise because this group has worked well in the previous two meetings. The dirty plastic cup is amusing the students, annoying us, with Amira seeking the attention of Tahir and getting nothing back apart from a dirty cup. What do participants mean by mixing? Ayo's response perhaps unravels the carefully constructed consensus that this is a very ethnically diverse school comfortable with its diversity. Amelia, a white student, holds Ayo to account, uses the word *weird* and the atmosphere feels worse. The thread of conversation between Ayo and Amelia had kept us (researchers) on track whilst others were distracted and amused by Tahir and Ayo. The word *weird* is said, ouch, oh hell. Ayo is silenced. We empathise with Ayo. *Are you alright?* Should we have asked this? She withdraws from the conversation, her silence, our experience of that silence, is now a rather different kind of silence, as punchy and informative as what is being said as others move the conversation on, smoothing over what has happened. Is this how students cope with tensions? How would Ayo and the group have coped had we

not acknowledged our feelings?

Liz Bondi (2003) described empathy as "a process in which one person imaginatively enters the experiential world of another" (Bondi, 2003: 71). For us this involved working with our feelings and a kind of imagining in (to the experiences of participants - *Are you alright (Ayo)?*) in an attempt to appreciate where they were coming from whilst mindful of differences (and connections) around ethnicity, age, gender, residency, class and more besides (Sennett, 2012; Cochrane, 2014). The importance of sustaining a sense of difference or 'alterity' in empathy is emphasised by Liz Bondi (2014a) through her use of the 'third position' which involves shifting between participating in a relationship and observing it, encouraging a 'stepping back' rather than stepping into the (metaphorical) shoes of the participant. Empathic listening involves engaging fully with the unfolding story being recounted, but does not involve shared experience or greater knowledge (Bondi, 2014a; see also Gair, 2012; Watson, 2009; Dreher, 2009; O'Donnell et al., 2009).

Sometimes listening to feelings seemed to involve more than us and our participants, but others – parents, uncles, grandparents and children. Writing about transference (and counter-transference) Bondi (2005) wrote that 'we carry the affective impress of our earliest patterns of relating into all of our subsequent relationships' (2005, 440). We sometimes felt and listened to the presence of these relationships in what was said and not said in our discussion groups, in the ways in which we experienced individuals and groups that we did not fully understand and are difficult to articulate. Relationships with significant others hovered on the edges of meetings, taking shape around a plate of homemade biscuits brought to a meeting or the image of an uncle's naked, muscly torso shown around. These relationships were sometimes far from straight forward, occasionally painful to listen to and difficult to follow. Mother-child relationships contributed to, we think, (our experiences of) the conversation with Omar, introduced at the start of the paper. Omar was 18, born in Afghanistan, moving to Milton Keynes in 2009. Also involved in the conversation was Salima, who was 24, born in Somalia, moving to Kenya and then Milton Keynes in 2006. Talk flowed; Omar was confident and jaunty, Salima poised and friendly. How they talked sat uncomfortably with our experiences of what they actually said. Omar remembered a loving mother who taught him at home, but his mother slid away from view when he talked about his life in Milton Keynes. When Salima talked about her mother, it turned out she was talking about her step mother, her own mother had 'left' when she was three, 'during the wars'. Omar focused on the transience of his life, travelling with his father, his impressive body building uncle, living in foster care when he moved to Milton Keynes, leaving that care and living in temporary accommodation, a room in a house with strangers. His talk was cheerful, fast, buoyant, fuelled by working out at the gym, working hard at College, working in a shop, a girlfriend he enjoyed spending time with, coping despite everything. He came across as self-reliant, hopeful and upbeat, although this is difficult to convey when confronted with the words (Back, 2012, 2007):

'Because the thing is, like, when I was living with my family I wasn't – I wasn't there with my family, to be honest. I was like all the time travelling around, with my dad. And being brought up like that. And then, I mean, at the moment for me – 'cause everybody's different. Everybody has different life situations. For me, it doesn't change anything. I'm just the only person I was. And I mean, I'm getting better but not worse. I mean, the life is being with my family. Sometimes I just remember I have a mum – I had a mum, yeah, and just don't go into it. I mean, I missed it but not much. Probably

sometimes when I'm alone or when I see an old lady, oh yeah, I have a mum. It reminds me of, like yeah, somebody that. But I don't remember anybody. Or I don't miss anybody. Because I mean, you miss people when you're free, you don't have a job, you're bored and suddenly like everything comes up and you're thinking of things. I have a very tight timetable, I get up at six o'clock in the morning (...) Go to – go to the college, come back from college, go to work, finish work. Go to straight away to the gym, do exercise, come back home, study, cook, eat, clean and sleep 12 or 1am in the morning, five, seven hours sleep. And that's what I do. I'm forever busy, like I don't really remember anybody or talk to anybody. If somebody wants to call me, call me and if I want to talk to them I will like try and speak with them. If they don't...' (Omar)

To some extent listening involves participants allowing researchers to listen and at the time it felt like Omar opened and closed down multiple channels of listening making our understanding messy, stilted and broken. At times he felt playful. He was hard to follow, opening up and then withdrawing, whilst talking all the while. He introduced us to the image of his uncle on his phone, and then placed this to one side, on the table. The screen went black, but the uncle somehow remained. The glossy, upbeat talk of survival and success reiterating pervasive neo-liberal talk in Britain was painful to listen to when juxtaposed with 'I have a Mum', 'I had a Mum', 'don't go into it', 'I don't miss anybody', 'you miss people when you're free'. What we experienced was caught up in Omar's incomplete stories, growing up quickly, maturity, coping, girlfriend, work and college alongside transience, loneliness, isolation, separation and missing his mother, amongst others. We were listening to fragments and a 'jumble of emotion' that defied conventional genres of narrative (Pratt, 2010). Perhaps our experiences were also caught up in what we brought to our listening, such as, for example, Katy's relationship with her son and her recently born daughter and an imagining in around what their loss might involve (Aitken, 2001). She found herself not only empathising with Omar and Salima, but with their mothers too. Katy was miserable after the meeting, packing up and going home. We have focused on this moment in our research to show that listening is an intersubjective experience, involving us, our participants and our relationships with others who shape our experience of research which can sit differently to participant expressions of emotion. Listening involves recognising the creative, fractured, intersubjective process of listening that underpins understanding that is 'imperfect' and 'faltering'. As Bondi (2014a,b) wrote:

'(E)mpathy does not generate direct or perfect apprehension of the subjective experience of another. Rather it requires effort and is always imperfect and faltering. However much of the experience of the other is accurately recognised, empathy also entails acknowledging that the effort to understand can only ever yield an imperfect grasp of what the other feels' (Bondi, 2014a, 50).

3.3. The time involved in listening..... (to) transcripts

Our final reflection is that listening takes time. Listening often continues long after research has supposedly finished. Feelings and conversations stay with us, live with us and we mull over research moments involving, for example, Omar and Salima (Bondi, 2014a; Bennett, 2009). Although this might be stretching his take on 'intimate distance' which unsettles the drive for intimacy and rapport, as Steve Pile (2010) wrote 'to see the emotional dynamics underlying any research situation, you'll need appropriate distance: a (conditional) balance of intimacy and distance'. We have certainly found that we need time (and space) that extends beyond end points of research contracts to allow our research to sink in.

Listening to (our experiences of) the transcripts also takes time. We are surprised by how different the transcripts can feel compared to what we experienced at the time. Some of this is not simply because of what they lack in terms of the buzz of the context (Back, 2012, 2007) but what they add. Transcripts can be provocative. What surprises us is how we are moved at different points and in unexpected parts of the transcript. Rachel Thomson et al. (2012) wrote evocatively about letting the text speak, listening after the event, allowing ourselves to be provoked by the text. When we return to our transcripts what we hear is shaped by identity, subjectivity and where we are in our lives. As Steve Pile (1991) wrote: 'reflection is profoundly intersubjective, operating not only within the relationship between the researcher and researched but also within wider social and personal relationships' (1991, 465). Listening over time involves the accumulation of (partial) understandings as relationships develop, texts, diaries and recordings materialise, as we provoke those texts and they us and we remember, reflect on and relive encounters.

Provocative transcripts and field notes stem not only from us listening to them, but them listening to us too. Explaining acoustic texts, Jacques Daignault (2005) wrote:

'The text, if we need to remind ourselves, is not the printed thing that the author publishes but each of the readings of the printed page and even the sum of all these readings which always contain a part added by the reader.' (Daignault, 2005, 6).

(Acousmatic) texts are the sum of our readings, dynamic and thought provoking, open to unexpected thoughts that mediate our reading of them, created through our reading, listening to what we bring to them. Although the printed words in our transcripts do not change, just the paper yellows, we bring to them developing, maturing selves and new experiences which the transcripts absorb as they listen to us whilst we read them. They absorb our individual reading and response to them and what we read is shaped by how other members of the team have read them.

Finally, although research projects and contracts have end points, some of the relationships we develop with participants and groups do not. Our field notes are read through the lens of on-going connections with people and places. One of us, for example, became a Friend of Knighton Park and involved in its activities, another joined a writing group long(er) term, writing the following in her field notes during the research:

'Larry said he'd really like for me to continue attending, as it was nice to have me in the group, but I should consider this before bringing in an object (for a community project) [...] I openly admitted to him that this was a funny position to be in – you get attached [...] and it's not easy or even appropriate to divide your engagement as a researcher from your engagement as a person' (28/5/13 Writing Group, Hackney).

'After we went around reading out our pieces, during which there was a lot of laughter and banter, the woman from the museum came by with a camera to take photos of us with our objects. I ended up bringing something in after all – a book of poetry entitled 'hackney, my hackney' from 2004 which includes one of my poems. I found it and it felt like it fit so perfectly into the whole thing that I had to bring it along, although I know perhaps committing to attending the group long-term is foolish'. (30/5/13 Writing Group, Hackney)

Sometimes listening can be complicated over time by our developing relationship with groups and places that extend well beyond the end dates of projects. Although projects end, listening never quite does.

4. Concluding thoughts

In this paper we have attempted to reflect on our listening in a way that we hope researchers and students find useful, drawing in particular upon three elements of listening that have especially resonated with us: listening whilst doing, the feelings that mediate it and the time involved in listening. In trying to listen better we did not invent new methods or prioritise one method over another, but we did draw upon the writing and ideas of others on embodied listening, empathy and acousmatic texts to plan and reflect on our listening. In this concluding section we finish with thoughts on the process of listening and the kind of insights that our listening might provide.

Our first strand of concluding thoughts broadly concerns the process of listening that shaped our participant observation, interviews and repeat, in-depth discussion groups. Our participant observation involved sliding into the worlds of others and taking part in their activities. Sometimes these activities involved little in the way of chat or conversation and so listening involved attending to much more than this. Our field notes and reflections in this paper reveal a pattern and process to our listening. We often drew upon the mechanics of an activity in which we were involved to initially anchor us in the field, detailing what we were doing, where, with whom and how this made us feel. We used our eyes, ears, feelings, beating hearts – and more besides – to gauge moods and atmospheres as we grappled with often unfamiliar sites and settings and people who we did not know that well. We described people, encounters, interactions and contexts and explored how we experienced these. Our methods involved channelling our listening through ourselves, feeling our way into situations and conversation, working with our feelings, imagining in, empathizing whilst mindful of differences around ethnicity, age, gender and class (Bondi, 2003). Sometimes we shared our feelings with our participants, emoting, for example, whilst running or in a less direct way – ‘Are you alright (Ayo)?’ Objects mattered even more than we expected, supporting our listening as we gripped our pens whilst jotting notes during group discussions or filled water bottles in six form canteens. Objects contributed texture to our listening but were sparkly in their own right too, hot-wiring social relations and interactions as, for example, a crisp packet was thrown around prompting movement, laughter and unsettling groups of students and the disciplined space of a six form canteen.

As individual members of a research team, we do listen differently and perhaps, as Forsey (2010) suggests, some of us are more aural whilst others are more visual in our listening, but this is too much of a simplification. Our listening was also shaped by our individual life experiences, our relationships and where we were in our lives, but also by more immediate experiences, such as our journey to the fieldwork site. Our listening involved our feelings as we tried to make sense of what we were experiencing, what was being communicated in the context, contours and conversation in which we were immersed.

The process of listening involves time that stretches well beyond the end dates of projects and research contracts. Our listening matures and evolves alongside our feelings and experiences of fieldwork. Transcripts listen to us and develop through our listening to them over the course of time and around our memories of fieldwork and the unfolding of our lives. Listening to transcripts involves attending to the understanding and experiences that other members of the research team bring to them.

Our second strand of concluding thoughts concern the insights that our listening brought to our research (see also MacKian, 2009). Sometimes these insights are more obvious, when, for example, we listen to feelings that are surprising because they do not seem to correspond with how someone is speaking. Returning to Omar

introduced at the start of the paper, his buoyant, happy talk, sat differently to the content of what he said which sat differently again to how one of us was feeling while he was talking. There was more than one story being told and listening to feelings was a way into the complexity of what was being communicated. Focus on feelings and a sensuous, embodied approach to listening decenters talk, without undermining it, knitting it into a mix of atmosphere, interaction, stuff, happenings, context, sensations – and more besides – requiring attention. For us the point of this kind of listening was to engage with the complexity of places, interactions and encounters that shape multicultural which research participants might not (want to) put into words in interviews and group discussions. Our listening might also bring insights about which we are less aware, but emerge in how we evoke people and places (see, for example, Rogaly and Qureshi, 2013). The kind of listening discussed in this paper encompassing doing, feelings and time creates insights that get under the skin of researchers shaping a less conscious, embodied, evolving knowing.

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