

Embodying Difference: Introducing ‘Contact Movement’ as an Ethnographic Method

Harshadha Balasubramanian

¹University College London, United Kingdom.

Abstract:

This contribution to the special issue advances an ethnographic method which directs the critical project of re-imagining diversity towards studies of how difference emerges in fieldwork encounters. Drawing on my experiences of researching without eyesight, I urge students and teachers of anthropology to acknowledge the value of embodied research methods for examining social and corporeal differences in researcher-participant relationships. Firstly, I call attention to moments when embodied fieldwork may be resisted and how these are expressed as naturalised differences between researchers and participants. To deconstruct such naturalisations, I devise contact movement as a method which allows researchers to embody how these ethnographic tensions, or indeed differences, are negotiated between researchers and their participants. Ultimately, contact movement eagerly re-imagines diversity through a methodological rethink that permits ethnographers to embody and explore the collaborative production of difference in their intersubjective relationships, within the field and beyond.

Keywords:

Embodiment; difference; ‘contact movement’

Introduction:

We walked the Richard II set at Shakespeare’s Globe, threading our course between drooping curtains, around a silent throne, and out onto the flat tongue of the stage which jutted into the audience seating. This touch tour, a familiarisation with the set and props, took place an hour or so before the show began, and it echoed tours I had taken of other theatre productions throughout my fieldwork. I was researching theatre Audio Description (AD), the practice of verbally describing the visual elements in a production for blind and partially-sighted audiences (Brawn, 2008). On this touch tour, I held the elbow of the audio describer walking with me as part of a technique called sighted guide which is predominantly used by blind and partially-sighted individuals when they would like support to navigate unfamiliar places. Identifying as someone who is blind, I thought I was well-acquainted with sighted guide. However, I newly discovered that, instead of aiding my navigation, the technique fulfilled my ethnographic desire to understand how describers perceived and navigated the world in my presence: I became sensitive to the rhythm of the describer’s stride, pauses and swerves and how these were jointly shaped as we had to traverse the environment in mutually-convenient ways.

In this article, I will argue that sighted guide has paved the way for a new embodied research method, that is, another approach where the researcher’s body is not a discrete object but entangled in the experiences co-produced with participants. As outlined below, there exist various justifications for embodied fieldwork, and yet, I add that an especially compelling argument arises when recognising the value of embodiment in foregrounding practices and epistemologies from non-normative body-minds (Hartblay, 2020). I call readers’ attention to moments of resistance in embodied fieldwork, where the ethnographer is restricted from mobilising their experiencing body due to tensions in the researcher-participant relationship. Rather than segregating these moments into footnotes and classroom anecdotes, I make a case for exploring these tensions as revealing how difference is made and negotiated between researchers and participants. I then propose contact movement, a method inspired by sighted guide and contact-based sports, to re-imagine how the production of difference can be embodied and hence analysed. It is crucial to note here that I do not interrogate the phenomenon of sighted guide itself, as this is outside the scope of the present article and has been considered elsewhere (see Chandler et al, 2019; Deshen, 1992).

The Promise of Embodiment

One of my most emboldening moments as an ethnographer came when I learned that, rather than appropriating a prescribed researcher's body, I could harness my own subjective, bodily experiences to conduct embodied fieldwork. This approach is a far cry from the treatment of the ethnographer's body at the dawn of anthropology, when it was regarded as a universal, objective entity with biological markers of difference, including sex, gender, disability, and race (Mascia-lees, 2011). With the waning confidence in modern social and political order in the 1980s, anthropologists recognised that their efforts to expose the workings of power necessarily involved attending to the body as a construct, which they argued was discursively shaped to facilitate the entrenchment of specific ideologies, practices, and ultimately, control (Wolputte, 2004, p. 254-255). These poststructural critiques drew attention to how the ethnographer's engagements during fieldwork are constructed through discourses of the body, such as the naturalisation of race and disability, which would influence what researchers perceived and represented in their findings. However, this theorisation presents the body as a physical site for enacting power and a result of such action, without deconstructing this unspecified physicality any further, and consequently, it upholds an objective conception of the body (Wolputte, 2004, p. 256). Embodied fieldwork arose in response to these developments, acknowledging the body as indeterminate and fragmented, due to how it may merge with mind, other bodies, and the environments through which ethnographers move (Ahmed & Stacey, 2001; Csordas, 1994, p. 276; Scheper-Hughes & Lock, 1987). Accordingly, embodiment transformed anthropological analysis, enabling ethnographers to go beyond considering how their bodies impeded the accuracy of their representations to valuing the use of somatic, subjective experiences to co-produce knowledge with participants (Coffey, 1999; Jackson, 1996; Nuttall, 2018).

Standing on the threshold of my debut fieldwork project, I felt relieved that embodied ethnography would legitimise my methodological attention to other sensory modalities instead of eyesight. This legitimisation seemed indispensable when considering that, in line with other social and natural sciences, Anthropology has historically emphasised the physiological capacity for eyesight as the primary tool for collecting, analysing, and comparing data. Through recommending observational techniques (Wright, 1991), written field notes (Sanjek, 2019), and reflexivity (Salzman, 2002), the discipline has required familiarity with the practices of watching from a distance, handling visually-inscribed texts, and staring into a mirror, all pedagogies which prioritise vision and sighted bodies. The sustenance for this epistemological privileging of vision has been argued to come from beyond physical anatomy, drawing substantially from the artistic realm.

Tim Ingold, for example, has identified that vision and image have been conflated, so that "it seems, vision has nothing to do with eyesight and everything to do with the perusal of images" (Ingold, 2010, p. 15). Attributes still assigned to vision, such as distance and objectivity, harken back to and become reinforced by characteristics of images, including how images are produced at a physical distance from the represented objects. As my present article and many other texts written in the English language will testify, writers' popular linguistic choices can be depended upon to perpetuate the associations between vision and knowledge, in such phrases as 'gaining insight', 'it appears / seems', 'being enlightened', to mention a few.

Yet, the rise of multisensory, embodied ethnography (Howes, 2019) has contributed to the deconstruction of vision. Anthropology methods courses have started exploring how the boundaries between sensory modalities are dissolving, featuring texts that invite students to appreciate a broader variety of influences on visual practices and even multiple ways of seeing. A striking example is Cristina Grasseni's ethnography of Italian cattle herders (Grasseni, 2007). Through adopting an ecological understanding of perception, Grasseni puts forward the concept of 'skilled vision', whereby seeing is learned as a social apprenticeship that requires contextual understanding as much as an appropriate level of eyesight. Visual practices are embodied here, for it is suggested that the entire body, including its social and sensory experiences, must be engaged to train one's use of their eyesight.

These attempts at embodying vision are continued through examining how existing visual methods can be accessed through other sensory modalities (Pink, 2011). For example, David MacDougall (2005) recognises how film is imbued with affective, corporeal elements which are perceivable when audiences consider each shot as expressing the film-maker's bodily experiences of shooting. Elizabeth Edwards (2012, p. 221) draws attention to the material, social practices and relations in which photographs are used, encouraging researchers to develop a multisensory engagement with the affective object world of photographs when seeking to study their visual

content. For experimental ethnographers, these methods arguably offer hope that eyesight is not the only criteria for accessing visual knowledge and that those with different methodological tools would be welcome.

For me, embracing participatory experience reduced the pressure I felt to follow the anthropological convention of making observations from a safe physical and emotional distance. This reassured me enough to foreground practices from my daily life as tools of analysis in fieldwork, such as physical contact with my interlocutors. The application of personal experience to understanding cultural experience makes the approach autoethnographic (Ellis et al, 2011, p. 273) and hence vulnerable to many of the criticisms facing autoethnography, including claims of bias (Anderson, 2006), non-scientific observations, and limited evidence (see Ellis, 2009). In my case, colleagues and teachers encouraged me to contribute to disability scholarship by leveraging the access, knowledge, and relationships I already maintained as a person who identifies as blind. Nevertheless, I was rarely invited to rethink the concepts and methodologies in the anthropological canon based on these personal experiences. Embodied fieldwork, therefore, was not only an impetus for employing my experiences in analysis, but it also became shaped by the demands of interrogating and defining the value of individual experiences in canonised anthropology.

Turning to embodiment literature, I was particularly inspired by the ethnographic understanding afforded when exploring the intersubjective experiences that the researcher had alongside, and with the support of, participants. These approaches assumed an unbounded, multifarious body: a body which escapes definition within discourse, spilling into shaping and being shaped by the other bodies and relationships that individuals encounter (Grosz, 1995; Weiss, 1999). Weiss clarified the distinction between body and self, arguing that the body's indeterminacy makes it possible for individuals to develop a sense of self that is informed by a variety of their bodily entanglements with others (Weiss, 1999, p. 83, pp. 166-167). In my case, my bodily entanglements with research participants became the focus of my analysis, contributing to an understanding of my researcher relationship with describers and of my overarching notion of self which extended beyond the field. It is arguably this awareness of how fieldwork interactions overlap with broader experiences and understandings that has provoked my investigation of what insight could be imparted to anthropology by personal experiences of disability.

Tensions in Embodied Fieldwork

It is worth noting that fluid intersubjectivity, considered fundamental for embodiment, can at times involve frictions in every ethnography. These moments of tension may arise when researchers cannot make sense of their shared encounters with participants in certain corporeal ways, and hence this disembodiment signifies that researchers' experiencing bodies have been reduced to bounded, predefined objects. The most prominent resistance to my own embodied fieldwork arose when I set out to experience visual practices without eyesight.

Audio describers verbalise the visual details in stage productions, artworks, film, and live events for sight-impaired audiences. For my first ethnography, I determined to explore understandings of vision amongst theatre audio describers in the West End and Edinburgh. Before I commenced research, I read the work of John Gwaltney, an African-American anthropologist and another ethnographer reflecting on the experiences of researching while identifying as sight-impaired. He seemed to echo my sighs at not being able to reproduce the rich visual descriptions that characterised many canonical ethnographic publications (Gwaltney, 1967, p. 1), and he offered a possible alternative approach, namely employing sonic sensitivity to understand the communities we study. Doing fieldwork more than 50 years later and armed now with embodied ethnography, I sought to uncover what would happen if a researcher proceeded into the field without being able to physically perceive the sensory modality at the heart of their research question.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, I avoided visual research methods, such as video ethnography or photo elicitation (Banks & Ruby, 2011), and I did not observe physical movements and interactions, facial expressions, aesthetic displays, or the visual theatre sets being described. While ethnographers may have various analytical or theoretical justifications for discarding visual lenses, a major reason for my decision was that my sensory toolkit did not include the eyesight which would allow me to interpret these media forms. Even with an ecological conception of vision, I discovered that vision could be reduced to only meaning physiological eyesight when the researcher does not bring eyesight to examining visual experiences. In other words, vision became a naturalised marker of my difference from those I studied, rather like the body had been naturalised before the inception of embodiment theories.

A frequent suggestion I received was to recruit research assistants who could put into words what I could not see. However, if I specifically selected methods which did not problematise the relationship between visual research and eyesight, this would mean implicitly endorsing an idea of vision as indelibly connected to eyesight, rather than experiencing how it could be a multimodal, socially-learned practice. I had begun my fieldwork feeling emboldened by the lack of a prescribed ethnographer body, only to find later that some characteristics of this body are indeed still set in stone.

The Case for Studying Tensions in Embodied Fieldwork

The struggle to implement embodied research methods is not unique to experiences of disability. Within autoethnographic scholarship, a growing contingent of anthropologists have revealed that their bodies can suddenly become constructed by rigid, predefining characteristics that foreclose possibilities for some intersubjective interactions. Judith Okely (2007, p. 68) shows how ongoing unease about colonial powers and related constructions of whiteness had restricted white researchers' access to certain communities. Researchers' bodies are exposed to the ethnographer's own and local gendering attempts, leading to reflections on the challenges and opportunities of being either male or female in different contexts (Ammann, 2019). With the emergence of digital media and remote ethnography, scholars have had to address concerns about the potential hindrance that physical separation could pose for multisensory, embodied methods (see Fors, 2015). Therefore, tensions in embodied fieldwork may involve the researcher's body being constrained from having specific intersubjective experiences, due to any trait that has been constructed as an objective marker of difference in that context. Instead of omitting reference to these moments of ethnographic tension, I argue that it would be productive to train anthropologists to treat such instances as opportunities for somatically recording how difference emerges and is negotiated in researcher-participant relationships.

Anthropological training increasingly offers autoethnographic methods to re-mobilise the researcher's subjective, experiencing body to investigate these moments of ethnographic tension and the differences underpinning them. By enquiring into feelings of anxiety and failure that occur during fieldwork, ethnographers can attend to their affective responses to frictions in their rapport with participants and hence make these tensions manifest for analysis. Jessica Fields, in a study among female prison inmates, reflects on the anxieties caused by trying to repress the attraction she felt for some interlocutors, out of concern for their welfare and being aware of her professional responsibilities as a researcher. Fields draws on a feminist queer understanding of participant action research to examine her feelings of angst as 'visceral experiences of social difference and affinity' between researchers and participants (Fields, 2016, p. 31). In place of reinforcing naturalised differences, Fields persuasively illustrates how diverting attention toward her bodily experiences could help to trace the intersubjective tensions and underlying differences which are unique to the chosen ethnographic context.

Dovetailing training in approaches like participatory walks (Ingold & Lee, 2008), the embodied method for studying intersubjective relationships could pay explicit attention to how bodily experiences are situated in time and space. Jerome Crowder (2017) bolsters this proposal by demonstrating how tensions in embodied fieldwork become pronounced when the distance between researchers and participants is noticeably reduced. He gazes back at his recording of a poultice (topical cure) in an Andean community, noting that he had acquired permission to take the camera into his participants' homes during a very private healing ritual. Crowder is attentive to his personal experiences through examining the 33 photographs taken over several minutes, asking what they reveal about his 'initial reaction and the decisions I made when tripping the shutter' (Crowder, 2017, p. 584). At the same time, he analyses how his participants position themselves, wary of Crowder and his camera, as well as how this then influences Crowder's own movements. By capturing these negotiations of space across 33 images, Crowder asserts that he is visualising the tensions in the researcher-participant relationship, as well as how these tensions are collaboratively and corporeally dealt with. Echoing Fields, Crowder makes clear that these tensions are not simply expressing differences in sensory perception, but they are revealing the social and cultural differences that emerged in Crowder's relationship with his participants. Therefore, rather than being ascribed in advance, Crowder and Fields argue that differences are co-produced within and specific to each researcher-participant relationship, which is steered by unbounded bodies leveraging a variety of sensory and social experiences.

In the remainder of this article, I will develop an approach to studying difference which encourages the current shift in methods courses towards collaborative techniques for analysing how situated bodies negotiate shared spaces. However, I will contend that a lack of physical contact in the field, such as the distance maintained when taking photographs or walking together, may limit a researcher's capacity to embody how participants perceive

and differentiate their ethnographer's body. As a solution, I will introduce contact movement, an autoethnographic, intersubjective method to maximise ways for participants and researchers to shape each other's bodily experiences, and hence, a means for re-embodiment how they all contribute to the co-production of difference.

Introducing Contact Movement

A key tension had arisen during my pursuit of embodied research in theatre, specifically my disembodied experiences of visual phenomenon which marked the lack of eyesight as a naturalised difference. Nonetheless, I sought to re-embodiment vision by experiencing how this difference was co-produced in my intersubjective relationship with participants. In doing so, I propose a method called contact movement, taking inspiration from my fieldwork among theatre audio describers and particularly the practice of sighted guide as referenced in the introduction.

As soon as I took the audio describer's elbow or arm, we were put in contact and required to consider how our bodies would relate as we sought to move together through our shared environment. Maintaining such contact while walking side by side not only forces walkers to learn and accommodate each other's rhythm, posture, and stride, but it becomes necessary to navigate changes in cooperative ways. If my guide tripped or was knocked, I felt the jerk and readjusted. If I swerved or sped up, my fellow walker would take note and must respond, so that we could keep walking.

The quality of a two-way corporeal exchange is unique to the sensory modality of touch, as when touching one is touched back (see Blake, 2011). This task of moving while in contact vastly increased our capacities to shape each other's bodily experiences and thereby specify how we perceived each other's bodies, especially how they differed from our own. In this way, it was possible to interpret our efforts to move in mutually-convenient ways as sites for negotiating varying understandings of our differences.

Conversing with describers as we walked, they revealed that their decisions about where and how we navigated inside and outside the theatre were based on how they imagined our bodies would physically and socially traverse these spaces together. For instance, one describer remarked that it was easier to watch out for potential obstacles I could walk into, since I was a similar height to them. As well as imagining and adapting to the physical space a describer's body occupies beside my own, I consciously decided to continue using my white cane while being guided. This was intended to maintain professionalism: I felt that the white cane would make it clear to passers-by that I sought guidance due to a visual impairment, rather than being out for a stroll with a close friend.

Tracking our bodily practices in this way helped me to explore how we each perceived the other's body to be emplaced and in relation to our own as we walked. I sought to experience how describers and I adapted our bodies during sighted guide, treating these adaptations as containing negotiated understandings of our bodies and their differences. Undoubtedly, one difference we were co-producing knowledge about may have been our differing capacities for eyesight, but this was grounded within wider efforts to jointly understand the many other similarities and differences marking our bodies, such as size, age, gender, race, to name a few. Thus, I attempted to re-embodiment vision, undoing its status as an abstract aspect of my fieldwork, through experiencing it as part of these co-produced understandings of difference.

It should be noted that these reflections are not only addressed at other researchers who are able to implement sighted guide, as I recognise that sighted guide may not be appropriate or necessary in most situations. More significantly, the methodological implications I wish to draw out include the technique of moving whilst in contact, what I am calling contact movement. The source for this terminology is 'Contact Improvisation', a form of dance in which pairs of dancers share weight, touch, and movement awareness to know their body in relation to their partner's body (Novack, 1990). Other examples in which ethnographers have moved while in contact with participants include tandem cycling (Hammer, 2015), boxing (Wacquant, 2006), and handshaking (Hillewaert, 2016). With an existing precedence for touching and being touched by participants while moving, I argue that it is a fruitful basis for introducing a method to analyse the tensions and negotiations that arise here, as an embodied way to explore the co-production of difference in researcher-participant relationships.

Conclusion

By way of conclusion, I insist upon positioning my experiences- of embracing embodiment and tackling resulting challenges- alongside various other researchers' similar encounters, in order to demonstrate a potential for allied problem-solving across divides within anthropology. I have argued that embodied research methods expand the

capacity to recognise a diverse range of ethnographers' bodies, mainly through accepting that, rather than being a neutral mediator, the body is a fragmented, shifting arrangement forming and disintegrating as part of knowledge produced by researchers and their participants. When the body seems reduced to marking social or corporeal difference, as during resistance to embodied techniques, it is essential to trace these tensions and how they are confronted. I put forward an embodied method, contact movement, for urging bodily contact and hence two-way corporeal exchanges in intersubjective relationships, creating opportunities for tensions to manifest viscerally and be addressed.

The incorporation of contact movement in methods courses would radically foreground participation and expertise from non-normative body-minds while supplementing existing efforts to introduce participatory, multisensory methods. A variety of possibilities for moving in contact also implies how this technique can be easily adapted, having no specific requirements for class size, space, or other resources. Writing this article during the COVID-19 pandemic and the enforcement of social distance, I anticipate that the inevitable management of physical proximity will become a significant site for embodied engagements with the co-production of intersubjective relationships, including understandings of difference which constitute them. Contact movement offers a method to make sense of such data, and it reminds us that, when it is safe again, face-to-face research will afford methods which cannot be substituted online.

Through this article, I have forced close contact between anthropology's methodological cannon and critical methods inspired by experiences of disability, curious to know what differences and affinities are produced in their intimacy. I maintain that this curiosity to scrutinise how the discipline negotiates tensions in its relationship with perspectives identified as diverse should underpin attempts to study diversity in anthropology. Anthropologists may find that contact movement is largely informed by specific ethnographic experiences and hence unlikely to hold relevance for much of the discipline, or they may acknowledge how the method exposes valuable lessons for using popular tools in anthropological fieldwork, namely embodiment. Either way, the ways in which anthropologists negotiate between such countering methods and the cannon could be read as signifying how Anthropology is transforming and what it could become.

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