How to do social research with...

Methods Lab

Series editors: Rebecca Coleman and Kat Jungnickel

The *Methods Lab* series is committed to leading-edge critical and creative research practices in and beyond academia. It aims to be a publishing platform that supports a wide range of approaches to studying and intervening in the social world. Through repurposing and borrowing from inside and outside the academy, it stretches the walls of disciplinary scholarship.

How to do social research with...

Edited by
Rebecca Coleman, Kat Jungnickel and Nirmal Puwar

Goldsmiths
Press

First published in 2024 by Goldsmiths Press
Goldsmiths, University of London, New Cross
London SE14 6NW

Printed and bound by Short Run Press Limited, UK
Distribution by the MIT Press
Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA and London, England

A CIP record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-913380-42-7 (pbk)
ISBN 978-1-913380-40-3 (ebk)

www.gold.ac.uk/goldsmiths-press

Goldsmiths
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

This book is dedicated to the administrative and professional staff who are no longer in the Sociology Department at Goldsmiths but supported the infrastructure of learning and research before the restructure of Goldsmiths, which began in 2019. Their sound professionalism and kindness are missed daily. Here we would like to name especially Violet Fearon, Chloe Nast and Clare Lewis.

Contents

Figures

24

How to do social research with... sewing

Kat Jungnickel

Stitch. Thread. Unpick. Unravel. Seam. Interface. Piece. Cut. Fold. Pin. Press. Gather.

We use a surprising number of sewing terms in everyday language. They are particularly present in the doing of social research. We unpick concepts, thread ideas through arguments and stitch theory together with methods. We combine materials, and fold and press data into shape. We are trained to look for patterns, find holes in arguments and try to mend them. Language matters as much as the clothes that cover our bodies. Both are cultural, social, gendered and political. They hold memories and make meaning. They shape how we interact, respond, know each other and ourselves. They materialise class, race, gender and environmental norms and beliefs as well as offering means to protest and resist them. Yet, these words, and the many methods they describe, can become so familiar in their underpinning of everyday practice that we cease to notice them. As many researchers in sociology and science and technology studies (STS) have pointed out, paying attention to mundane and everyday objects and practices can cast new light on conventional or accepted socio-political norms and beliefs and raise questions about things we take for granted.

This chapter is not about paying closer attention to linguistic practice. It's also not just about clothing studies, though they are both implicit in the following sections. Instead, I focus on the doing of social research on, with and through sewing. Because of the nature of this book, I attempt to convey in words the potential of sewing as a method for getting up close to lives lived in the past and discuss what happens when we make and wear research. I have previously discussed this in terms of 'making things to make sense of things' (Jungnickel, 2018), whereby the use of practice research enables close ethnographic encounters with the past and helps

to surface overlooked or hidden things into rich, embodied and affectual presents. Here I focus on what I call 'speculative sewing', which is the stitching together of data, theory, methods and fabric into three-dimensional arguments (Jungnickel, 2023b). I aim to describe how the process thickens data by rendering lesser-known research stories visible and knowable. If methods, as Law and Urry (2011) argue, don't just describe reality, they also make it, then clothes too can be investigated for their world-making potential. After all, as Haraway reminds us, it 'matters what matters we use to think other matters with' (2016, p. 12).

Getting Inventive with the Study of Inventions

My mother taught me to sew, and I developed these skills over time for personal use. I was initially nervous about bringing sewing into my social research. I was already known as a cycling sociologist, having merged my love of bicycles into my PhD and post-doctoral studies. Would I kill my passions if I brought (all of) my interests to work? Fortunately, the desire to sew was strong and I have since found that the stitching of my research and sewing skills have greatly benefited both and forged something altogether new.

For over a decade I have been exploring the critical and creative practice of speculative sewing in several projects about the socio-histories of wearable technology inventions. I have led teams of sewing social scientists on 'Bikes and Bloomers' about the history of inventive women's convertible cycle wear in late Victorian Britain and on 'Politics of Patents' which explores 200 years of inventors' attempts to disrupt, subvert or resist hegemonic norms via radical new forms of clothing. Both projects involve taking an inventive approach to the study of clothing inventions in global patent archives.

Patents are ideas in the form of legal documents (Figure 24.1). But they are much more. I think of them as ways of doing experimental time-travelling interviews. We can learn a lot about historic inventors, their concerns, skills and creative imaginings from their patent texts and images. They reveal some things easily and hold back on others, requiring us to take new approaches or ask different questions. Clothing patents not only include text and images, but they also provide step-by-step

Figure 24.1 Drawings from an 1895 clothing patent for a convertible cycling skirt (European Patent Office Espacenet).

instructions for future users to re-construct items of dress. As such, they invite us into the process of translating ideas (back) into matter. Of course, while not every great idea made its way into patent archives and there are many colonial, race, class and gendered biases that shape these records, they still provide insights into lesser-known inventors and socio-political issues of the time. Khan argues, for instance, that they 'provide a consistent source of objective information about the market-related activities of women during a period for which only limited data are available' (1996, p. 358).

Speculative sewing, or what I describe as the combination of researching, re-constructing and re-imagining clothing inventions, is a way of entering into multidimensional dialogues. It combines theoretical engagement with ethnographic analysis and hands-on object-oriented practice. It is a method that challenges assumptions, expands skills and forces researchers to question what is and isn't included in inventors' detailed instructions. We render gaps visible, make sense of the mess, make decisions as we go along and reflect on these choices. Along with other feminist, queer and decolonial archive researchers, Swaby and Frank encourage

'experimentation as a form of dwelling and lingering in the archive to subvert linear notions of time and place' (2020, p. 124). They view it as a 'means to read, experience, feel and touch archives' (Swaby and Frank, 2020, p. 124). In the process of translating clothing inventions into interactive storytelling devices, we get up close and literally inside historic archive data.

Studying Clothing as a Social Scientist

Clothing of some kind touches *every* single body. It directly connects social life, technological change and the political world, and as such can be seen as central to ideas around the politics of identity and belonging, private and public space and agency. Bari writes evocatively about the intimacy of clothing: 'In clothes, we are connected to other people, and other places in complicated and unyielding ways' (2019, pp. 9–10).

There are many ways of studying clothing. Some use the lens of fashion, design and textiles to focus closely on the artefacts themselves, while others expand out to issues of sustainability and labour inequalities. I apply my 'sociological imagination' to explore clothing as a barometer of socio-political change: linking past problems to present issues, and personal lives to political systems and infrastructures. I look specifically to STS, sociology and cultural studies to frame a study of what we wear. Crane, for instance, argues that '[c]hanges in clothing, and the discourses surrounding clothing indicate shifts in social relationships and tensions between different social groups that present themselves in different ways in public space' (2000, p. 3). Parkins similarly argues that clothes 'either contest or reinforce existing arrangements of power and "flesh out" the meanings of citizenship' (2002, p. 2).

I study social change *in* and *through* clothing. This means I view clothing as a device, or a wearable technology, that enables, constrains and organises wearers in different ways in relation to socio-technical happenings and relations. Doing this involves making and wearing the clothes of others while researching their lives, influences and socio-cultural contexts. It's a perspective oriented to clothing's role in the public sphere. So, rather than looking at the surface of clothes, I get into the design embedded in its seams and stitches to better understand not only how and why

someone invented it in the first place, but also how and where it might have been worn and how it worked. The latter is critical when studying convertible, multiple and hidden inventions that shift from one form into another (Jungnickel, 2023a).

This approach emphasises the role of bodies. Some researchers claim that clothes do not yield much information on their own. Entwistle (2015), for example, argues that clothes are not lifeless 'shells'. They hold traces of the people that made, lived in and shaped them. 'When dress is pulled apart from the body/self,' she writes, 'as it is in the costume museum, we grasp only a fragment, a partial snapshot of dress, and our understanding is thus limited' (2015, p. 10). Without bodies, clothes can only tell us so much. What they 'cannot tell us is how the garment was worn, how the garment moved when on a body, what it sounded like when it moved and how it felt to the wearer' (Entwistle, 2015, p. 10). In a similar vein, Miller reminds us that clothes 'are among our most personal possessions' and 'the main medium between our sense of our bodies and our sense of the external world' (2010, p. 23). He argues against investigating clothing only as a representation because it is also experienced; it mediates physical, socio-political and cultural interactions. 'A study of clothing,' he writes, 'should not be *cold*; it has to invoke the tactile, emotional, intimate world of feelings' (2010, p. 41, emphasis in original).

Making and Wearing Your Research

Clothes often make more sense on than off the body. This is especially important when historic clothing texts are more often written by critics than by wearers. Bendall (2019) discovered this in her research about 16th-century women's undergarments. Little data could be found, and what were available were 'notoriously prone to exaggeration and even malice' and revealed 'much more about male anxieties than information about what it was actually like to wear these garments' (2019, p. 366). Analysing text and images, and then making and wearing clothes adds extra textures and layers to the data. Bendall argues that 'materially reconstructing artifacts produces knowledge that cannot be gained by other means' (2019, p. 364).

Some research subjects demand this kind of engagement. Sometimes, the only way to understand data is in context. This is especially critical for

clothing inventions like 1890s cycling costumes which convert from one form into another, such as a walking skirt into a cycling cape. There were occasions when my research teams could not make sense of an invention using text and line drawings alone. It wasn't until the patent was sewn into a full-sized garment, put on a body and various cord and button mechanisms were activated that we were able to grasp the inventor's intention. Similarly, I have experimented with demonstrating clothing inventions on hangers or laid out on tables, rather than getting dressed in them. It rarely works as well. Mechanisms get stuck or fail to work at all. Pieces slide off tables. Cords and ribbons tangle. Explaining an invention, with and on the body, using arms, hands, hips and legs, amplifies the liveliness of the ideas, thickens the dialogue between the present and the past and sparks engagement with different audiences.

Other researchers have found similar themes in their work. Connell and Nicosia cook with archival data in the process of updating recipes from 17th- and 18th-century recipe books. They argue that 'historical recipes belong in the modern kitchen – that they can and should be read and enacted as instructions, as well as studied as archival texts from a specific historical period' (2015, n.p.). 'After all', they argue, 'what are recipes if not primarily instructions for cooking?' (Connell and Nicosia, 2015, n.p.). Clothing patents are in many ways like recipes or historical manuals. They invite readers to try out the ideas, by making and wearing the inventions.

Critically, the aim of speculative sewing is not to create perfect historical replicas. This was neither my skill set nor interest. Similarly, Connell and Nicosia in their historical cooking project were not committed to 'recreating the experience of early modern cooking' and focused instead on a 'desire to taste the past' (2015, n.p.). In my experience, re-constructing historic clothing offers new ways into the research, a chance to spend time with the inventor through their invention, reflect on the making process and experience their dynamic artefacts in multisensory, hands-on bodily practice.

An Example: Appreciating a Boring Buttonhole

Buttonholes are pretty boring. They are easy to overlook and underappreciated in everyday life. Most commonly we know them as small, reinforced

holes in fabric that allow a button to be passed through and secure two or more layers together. Buttonholes, and their accompanying buttons, are a fastening technique that has been around since at least the 13th century and most likely before. Unlike hems or zippers (or even buttons), buttonholes rarely malfunction. Yet, their apparent simplicity belies the critical importance they bring to clothes and offer to social researchers. I suggest by way of an example of speculative sewing in practice that boring buttonholes, and sewing more generally, can offer time-travelling portals to fascinating socio-political worlds.

Chances are you rarely look at buttonholes carefully unless there's something wrong with them (or you are attempting to mend or make one). STS scholars have argued that it is only when things break down or need repair that we come to recognise and appreciate the critical role they play in our lives. Star (1999) has done much to advocate the study of mundane things by pointing out that it is not the things themselves that are 'boring,' but how we tend to look at them. Doors, sewers, seatbelts, onions, Velcro and water pumps are just a few examples of things studied by STS researchers that attend to the idea that seemingly unremarkable artefacts and systems make explicit the familiar and taken-for-granted ways in which people make sense of and operate in everyday life (see, for example, Hawkins, 2005; Michael, 2006).

Buttonholes can be added to this list. They are easy to ignore when getting dressed, yet they can lead to embarrassing incidents when they fail or buttons get fastened in the wrong order. They can also be tricky to make and mend. Buttonholes are technically specific. They must be sewn in the right place, and evenly stitched at a certain width to secure the hole in the fabric and at just the right length to match a button. They're even more interesting when the reason for including them in clothing doesn't involve a button at all. As we discovered, buttonholes can be hacked to do something altogether different. In one 1890s convertible cycling skirt, buttonholes formed part of a larger infrastructural system of waxed cords, stitched channels and weights. Together, these elements made up a pulley system concealed in seams and hems that hoisted heavy layered skirts safely up and out of the way of the bicycle wheels. It enabled the wearer to secretly switch from socially acceptable fashions to safe and comfortable sportswear as needed.

Figure 24.2 Speculatively sewing historical clothing inventions (photograph by author).

Figure 24.2 documents this experience. A camera affixed to the ceiling of the office took images every 30 seconds for weeks as part of an ethnographic experiment. This image serendipitously captures my delight, and relief, at the end of a long day when I had finally worked out the point and purpose of hidden buttonholes in the invention. What was quick to read in the patent text took far longer to reproduce. It was more complex than initially expected. I had never spent this long thinking about a buttonhole before. I was forced to see it afresh and to answer questions about its use that I had not even thought to ask at the start. As I toiled, I reflected on how the inventor might have been thinking similar things, and possibly experiencing many of the same failures, in the process of inventing a convertible cycling skirt. What emerged in the process of this example of speculative sewing was a newfound appreciation of a boring buttonhole. I came to understand it as part of a complex socio-technical system for early women cyclists to claim active and independent public lives. I appreciated how the inventor worked with all the materials and skills she had to hand,

Figure 24.3 A reconstructed 1895 convertible cycle skirt with material raised up and out of the way of the wheels (photograph by author).

expanding and re-configuring even the humble buttonhole in her attempt to work around restrictions to women's freedom of movement in Victorian society (Figure 24.3).

Conclusion

Central to ethnographic research is the desire to gain a deep and thick understanding of the cultures and practices of a specific group. This is even more important, and challenging, when your subjects of study lived over a century ago and there are few traces of them in conventional records. Data on early inventors, especially women and marginalised people, tend to be fragmented and sparse. This requires us to become inventive with our methods. Historic patent archives are one source of data where we can learn about what interested, restricted or concerned (some) people enough to tackle a problem with their own hands and sewing skills. Speculative sewing renders these socio-political issues in multidimensional material forms that we can analyse from different perspectives. In this way it offers a multisensory glimpse of the many struggles early

inventors faced and some of the ingenious methods they used to overcome them. Doing social research with sewing may not be appropriate for everyone or for all research subjects. What I hope to have conveyed is how applying a social science lens to existing skills and interests can add value to the craft of research. Also, by paying attention to boring and mundane things we might ask new questions about things we take for granted.

Acknowledgements

'Politics of Patents' (POP) is funded by a Horizon 2020 European Research Council consolidator grant (#819458). 'Bikes and Bloomers' was supported by an Economic and Social Research Council Knowledge Exchange grant (ES/K008048/1).

References

Bari, S. (2019) *Dressed: The Secret Life of Clothes*. London: Jonathan Cape.

Bendall, S. (2019) 'The case of the "French Vardinggale": A methodological approach to reconstructing and understanding ephemeral garments', *Fashion Theory*, 23(3), pp. 363–399.

Connell, A. and Nicosia, M. (2015) 'Cooking in the archives: Bringing early modern manuscript recipes into a twenty-first-century kitchen', *Archive Journal*. Available at: www.archivejournal.net/notes/cooking-in-the-archives-bringing-early-modern-manuscript-recipes-into-a-twenty-first-century-kitchen/

Crane, D. (2000) *Fashion and Its Social Agendas: Class, Gender and Identity in Clothing*. Chicago, IL, London: University of Chicago Press.

Entwistle, J. (2015) *The Fashioned Body: Fashion, Dress and Modern Social Theory*. 2nd edition. Cambridge: Polity.

Haraway, D. (2016) *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Hawkins, G. (2005) *The Ethics of Waste*. Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc.

Jungnickel, K. (2018) 'Making things to make sense of things: DIY as practice and research', in Sayers, J. (ed.) *The Routledge Companion to Media Studies and Digital Humanities*. London, New York: Routledge, pp. 491–502.

Jungnickel, K. (2023a) 'Convertible, multiple and hidden: The inventive lives of women's sport and activewear 1890–1940', *The Sociological Review*, Online First 1 March.

Jungnickel, K. (2023b) 'Speculative sewing: Researching, reconstructing and re-imagining clothing as technoscience', *Social Studies of Science*, 53(1), pp. 146–162.

Khan, Z.B. (1996) 'Married women's property laws and female commercial activity: Evidence from United States patent records, 1790–1895', *The Journal of Economic History*, 56(2), pp. 356–388.

Law, J. and Urry, J. (2011) 'Enacting the social', *Economy and Society*, 33(3), pp. 390–410.

Michael, M. (2006) *Technoscience and Everyday Life: The Complex Simplicities of the Mundane*. London: Open University Press.

Miller, D. (2010) *Stuff*. Cambridge: Polity.

Parkins, W. (ed.) (2002) *Fashioning the Body Politic: Dress, Gender, Citizenship*. Oxford, New York: Berg.

Star, S.L. (1999) 'The ethnography of infrastructure', *American Behavioral Scientist,* 43(3), pp. 377–391.

Swaby, N.A. and Frank, F. (2020) 'Archival experiments, notes and (dis)orientations', *Feminist Review*, 125, pp. 4–16.