

Ethical Debates of Representation in Research

2018

TPOR

CONFERENCE REPORT

Introduction

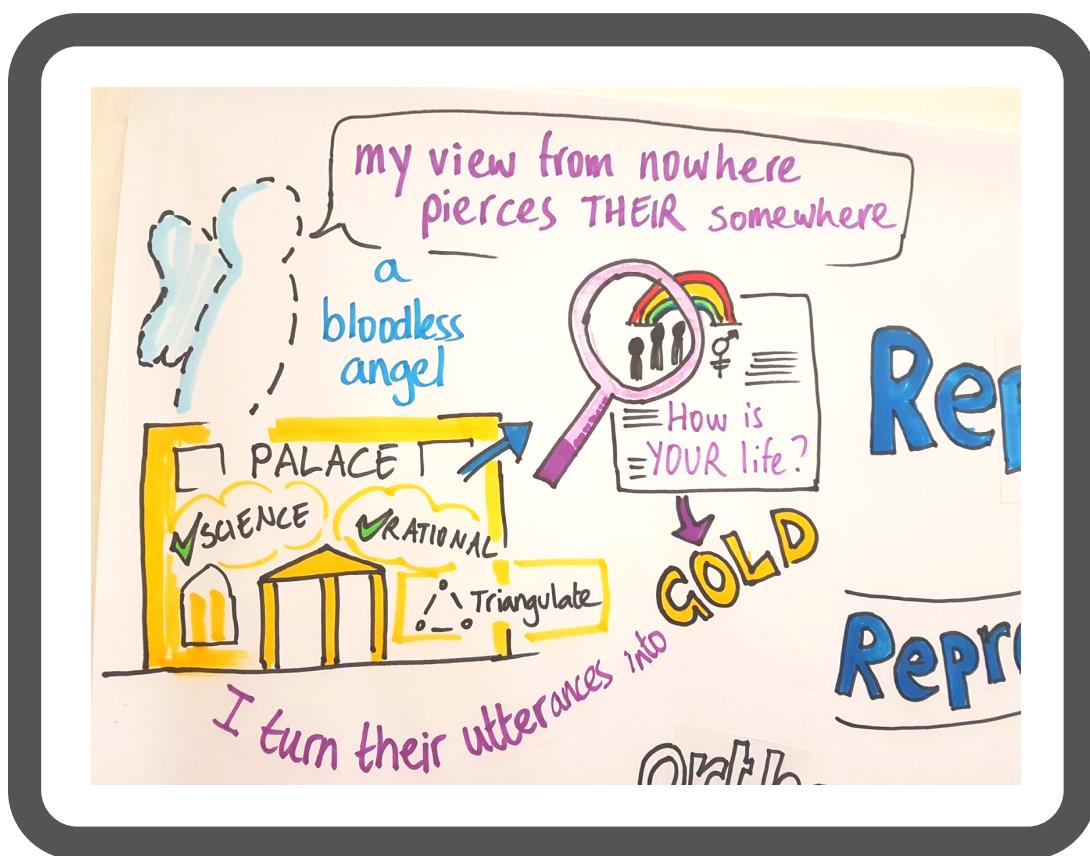
In November 2018, we held a conference on the Ethical Debates on Representation in Research (EDDR), which brought together leading academics from the University of Cambridge and across the UK to discuss the emerging, and existing debates on the theory and practice of representation. The conference aimed to engage students on the ‘grey areas’ of the ethics of representation, challenging them to re-conceptualise how we understand representation and its wider societal ramifications. Over 50 attendees joined us from the Faculty of Education, the wider university and beyond.

Panel 1: Representation in Theory

The first panel of the day, Representation in Theory, chaired by Sharon Walker, a PhD candidate at the Faculty of Education, aimed to answer the following framing questions:

- As researchers, do we strategically represent the 'other' such that we are viewed as experts?
- In representing 'the other', is there still a hidden sense of fascination with the 'variety of mankind'?
- How do we understand the connection between the vulnerability of the subject and its academic and visual representation?
- How does the act of representation reify or dismantle hierarchies of race, gender, class, and belonging?

Dr Hilary Cremin shared her poem, Bloodless Angel, shared in full on our blog, which tackled questions of who gets to do research, and why.



PhD student Afrodita Nikolova then provided a fascinating insight into her own arts-based research, and spoke poignantly about the ways in which she engaged with participants in her research to make masks together, in order to allow them to represent themselves within her research. She bravely spoke about the vulnerability a researcher experiences in interacting with how her participants represented themselves, explaining the need to understand the layers of context and meaning that are difficult to untangle when you are so close to the research. She spoke of her desire to strip back the layers, reaching out to the essence of humanity in this process, whilst honestly acknowledging the things she was able to do as a researcher, through the production of art.

Finally, Dr Manali Desai shed light on the ethical dilemmas that arise as part of the grant writing process. She spoke about the emotional and political investment that occurs with having to strategically represent the 'other' for the categories that one is going to employ in a way magical for others, to show 'value for money.' She stressed the need to reflect on why we 'strategically represent' and what happens in the research when we have to represent what we are doing. This opened up a wider discussion of metrics and funding and how they influence the way in which researchers are able to represent those involved in their research.

Panel 2: Representation in Practice

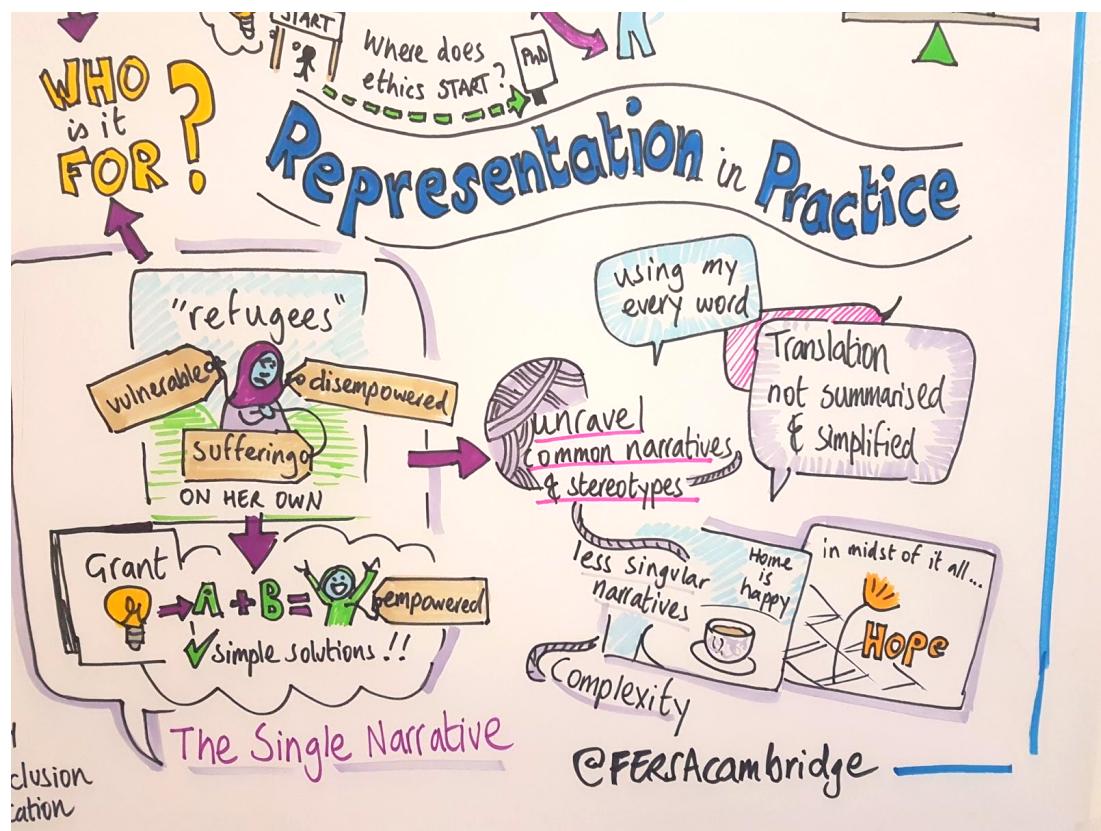
The second panel, Representation in Practice, chaired by a PhD candidate at the Faculty of Education Arif Naveed sought to reflect on the following framing questions:

- How does your own positionality as a researcher affect the ways in which you choose/chose to represent those involved in your research?
- To what extent do research ethics guidelines fall short in supporting researchers' ethical decision-making with regards to representation?
- What are the most important reflections/considerations for representation in the dissemination process of your work?
- What are your reflections on the tension between the requirement to meet research indicators, or to create 'exciting work' and the need to advance understandings of representation in practice?
- How do you think that the reflection on representation that has happened in the NGO community (*)/with National Geographic (**) could work within the academic community, or do you think it already has?

Dr Tyler Denmead shared a story of his experiences as part of an ethnographic research project, the led him to reflect on 'whiteness' and what this means for the politics of representation. He spoke of the circularity of white reflexivity, how white people can operate with privilege and position of power, whilst discussing power. His own research forced reflection on gentrification, and how trying to do something positive within a community, may have inadvertent implications for those you were directly trying to support. How can one work with the 'new creative underclass' to resist, challenge and oppose gentrification?

Dr Pallawi Sinha shared the story of her research journey, the understanding of how previous research has suppressed other epistemologies, such as indigenous ways of learning. She shared her own process of construction, de-construction and re-construction, in questioning, 'who is indigenous' 'who are you calling indigenous?' She stressed the fact that representation in terms of ethics cannot be limited just to the latter part, but has to start right at the beginning.

Finally Michelle Lokot engaged the room with her presentation on gendered refugee representations: challenging humanitarian narratives. She has gone on to write about this for our special section of *The Sociological Review*. Undepinned by a feminist approach to research, she tried to address the power dynamics and her own identity in the research process, using participatory photography as an entry point to connect with participants. She called into question humanitarian narratives, of women being 'disempowered' 'shackled' and 'vulnerable' noting that the use of photography in the research process allowed ideas of hope as a narrative to emerge. She called for the need to try and unravel common representations, and to explore what is happening beneath the surface.



Exhibition: Historical Trends in Visual Representation

Over lunch, attendees had the opportunity to view our pop-up exhibition on 'Historical Trends in Visual Representation' curated by MPhil Film Studies student Marie Puyessegur, Lakshmi Bose, and Rebecca Gordon. The stills and photographs displayed, taken from ethnographic sources, artists, photographers, and filmmakers, spanned various continents and decades, from the beginnings of photography to the present day. From turn-of-the-century depictions of Native Americans to contemporary global publications, they represented a multifaceted approach to debates that occupy us to this day, and interrogated the grey area at the nexus of artistic expression and ethnographic representation. Through them, we hoped to shed light upon the complexities and changing nature of the ethics and practices of representation. Rather than provide a firm answer, we hoped that the displays would provide the grounds for reflection on the use and ethics of visual media, and chart innovative and creative paths for visual representation and its use in research.



As participants passed through the exhibit we asked them to reflect upon discuss some of the following questions :

- 1) Are the ethics of the image defined by who is behind the camera ?
- 2) How do we know when we are caught in a cycle of voyeurism?
- 3) When, and for how long does the subject have agency in their own representation?
- 4) How might we seek to document each other's lives without constructing feelings of otherness?
- 5) What 'truths' or narratives, if any, can be understood from the visual taken out of its temporal and spatial context?



Workshop: Visual Research Methods

After lunch, Hannah Ware, PhD candidate at the Faculty of Education, led an interactive session, focusing on the potential of arts-based methods to stimulate new forms of representation which reflected on her own work with children with disabilities. We each created a collage from magazine clippings that would represent ourselves, and were able to pick a pseudonym to accompany it. One attendee noted “I really enjoyed the self-portrait workshop, and it’s now on my wall.” This workshop emphasised the importance of including tactile and interactive elements within the conference in order to both keep attendees fresh, and give space to the researcher to be the ‘participant in order to better understand the other side of these processes of inquiry.



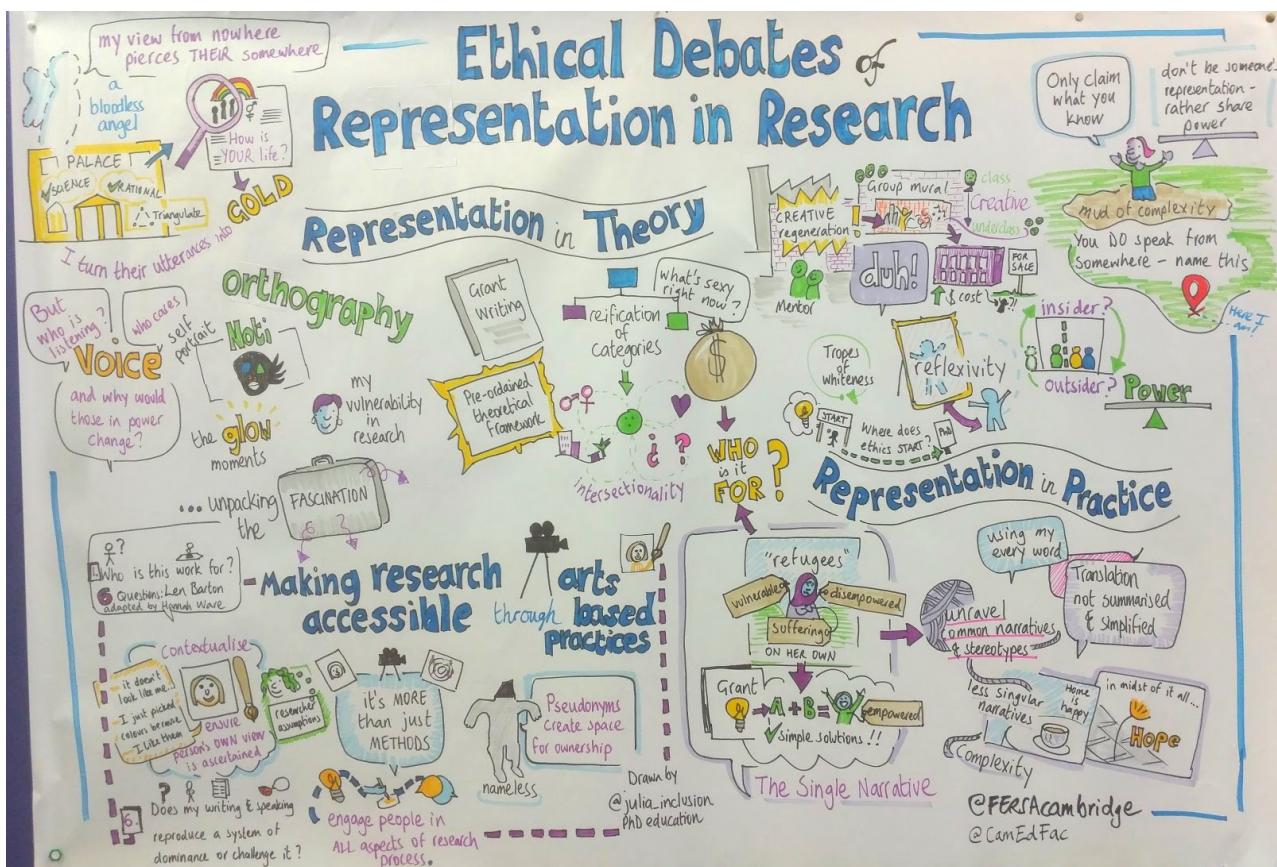
PhD Panel: Getting Representation 'Right'

The day concluded with an interdisciplinary panel of four PhD students, Seema Nath (Education), Charlotte Allen (Education) , Caroline Souza (Development Studies) and Thandeka Cochrane (Anthropology), chaired by Pat Kwok (Education), who shared their own experiences of the complexities of representation as part of their research. Emerging themes included the unfinished nature of the 'insider/outsider' debate, the lack of interdisciplinary conversation, the gendered researcher experience, and rising complexities around positionality that correlate to the widening of access to HE.

Although we only scratched the surface in terms of debating and understanding representation in research, one attendee, Patricia Kwok noted that "these presentations highlight the overlooked or hidden points. It expands ethics to a way that is not just about guidelines or what you should do in a normative way... I learned a lot about this from other people's reflections, which cannot always be found in the literature.".

Documentation: Graphic Representation

Throughout the conference, PhD candidate Ju Hayes, recorded the key ideas, themes, and conversations as a graphic map or illustration that traces the contours of the day. This is part of a wider scheme of methods known as 'graphic social science' that we aim to continue to explore.



Conference Outcomes

- Initiation of the ‘Politics of Representation Collective’ and associated blog
<https://politicsofrepresentationcollective.org/>
- Curation of a special collection for The Sociological Review titled ‘The Politics of Representation’
<https://www.thesociologicalreview.com/tag/politics-of-representation/>
- Conference proposal for 2020 to further develop these conversations across the UK

Concluding Reflections

- The reception to the conference was overwhelmingly positive resulting in the development of inter-departmental and cross-institutional networks. Subsequent feedback reflected high levels of interest in mapping out existing working groups across the UK as there was a general consensus that such projects and conversations often occur in isolation and would benefit from greater connectivity.
- While the conference was well attended, participants generally came from areas of research or critical frameworks that are already thinking about such issues including, but not limited to postcolonial discourse, gender studies, disability studies, and anthropology. Resulting conversations addressed how these events can be more relevant for students outside of these fields.
- There was a heavy emphasis on qualitative research, which while illuminating, would be further enhanced if key quantitative research and associated concerns with representation were addressed.
- Key areas for future discussion include the role of researcher training in HE, building strategic interdisciplinary and inter-departmental connections, the impact of REF culture on the prioritisation of the ethics of representation, ethics as a process of reflection as opposed to a ‘box-checking exercise’, alternative methods, and the need to further develop ‘safe-spaces’ to explore sensitive and emotionally-charged issues surrounding representation.