Recovery as a Minor Practice

Abstract
This article investigates the methodological potential of interdisciplinary research to generate collective, rather than interpretive or reflective knowledge practices for the study of recovery from addiction to drugs and alcohol. The question that informs this investigation of knowledge practices is how researchers participate in knowledge production and the possibility of building alternative interdisciplinary methods that connect experts to treatment services and service-users in new ways. In the first part we trace and evaluate methodological debates on research methods in academic, professional and treatment service settings. In so doing we consider the role sociologists have played in engaging qualitative, quantitative and deconstructive methods for researching recovery from addiction, and the strengths and limitations of empirical and critical research methodologies in responding to drug policy on recovery. In the second part of the article, describing a research collaboration with the sociologists Nicole Vitellone and Lena Theodoropoulou, the visual artist and filmmaker Melanie Manchot, and research participants from creative recovery services in Liverpool, we outline the possibilities offered by the concept of recovery as a minor practice to reconfigure the role of experts, methods, and participants in new collaborative lines of inquiry. Turning to empirical observations of a set of cinema-based pilot workshops from 2019 and 2020 with people in recovery, we describe the effects and consequences of our interdisciplinary methodology for enabling a different way of thinking about recovery as a minor practice. In rethinking and reimagining recovery as a minor practice, the article outlines the stakes of fostering interdisciplinarity and its impact for future directions of recovery-oriented practice and policy.

Key words: recovery, sociology, methods, interdisciplinarity, film, cameras, minor practice

Introduction
This article evaluates the contributions of empirical and critical studies of recovery, and addresses what interdisciplinary research methods offer for understanding the methodological issues, problems and controversies of researching recovery. In so doing, our aim is to consider the possibilities for stimulating alternative methodological approaches for researching and practicing recovery. In seeking to open debate about the role of methods in fostering new kinds of interdisciplinary engagements, we pose the following questions: What can we do with methods and the concept of recovery? And what role can researchers play in producing alternative research methods and concepts that re-orientate ways of thinking and researching recovery? In addressing these questions, the article draws attention to two kinds of academic responses: the sociology of recovery, and the sociological critique of the policy and research on new recovery. In the first part of the paper we describe these contrasting and competing methodologies, and the role of the social scientist and critical sociologist in assessing and contributing to the development of knowledge practices, and ask whether this methodological division is as neat as it appears? And should we settle for either of them? Our concern is not to adjudicate between the expert knowledge claims of academics as to which methodology is more professionally adept to get to grips with the complexity of the meaning of concepts and problematisations at play in the policy and practice of recovery, but to suggest that both the sociology of recovery and sociological critique of recovery and new recovery involve the authoritative academic as interpreter in the use and evaluation of research methods and processes of change. In the second part of the article, turning to our interdisciplinary research collaboration between the sociologists Nicole Vitellone and Lena Theodoropoulou, and the visual artist and filmmaker Melanie Manchot, we outline how it is possible to produce collaborative exchanges outside of the academy that involve rethinking and reimagining the
policy, methods, concept and practices of recovery. Drawing on empirical observations of a set of cinema-based pilot workshops conducted in 2019 and 2020 with people in recovery, we discuss how our interdisciplinary research collaboration between academics, artists, the third sector, cultural institutions and service users produced new knowledge practices that hold new possibilities for recovery-oriented practice and policy.

**Recovery and methods**

In a number of linked articles over the past two decades, sociologists have drawn attention to the uses of social scientific research methods as methodologically relevant for engaging the challenges of researching recovery in the contemporary context (McIntosh & McKeganey, 2000; McKeganey et al., 2004; Nettleton, Neale & Pickering, 2011, 2012, 2013; Neale, Nettleton & Pickering, 2011; Neale et al., 2014, 2015, 2016). Drawing attention to the politics of qualitative, quantitative and interpretive methods as methodologically relevant for intervening in debates on the concept, meaning, practice and policy of recovery, these empirical studies highlight the uses of social research methods and role of the sociologist as involving the production and disruption of expert knowledge practices. While the articles are based on presenting research findings from separate and interlinked empirical studies, they pose important questions about what is involved in understanding the possibilities of social inquiry for researching recovery and drug policy. Together, these studies initiate debate and invite further reflection on the relations between academics, experts, people who use drugs, drug policies and treatment services in producing and transforming knowledge practices for understanding recovery. In demonstrating the capacity of social research to engage the policy and practice of recovery as a process that involves multiple relations, actors and stakeholders, we seek to highlight what is distinctive about the role of methods and the role of social scientists in recovery research.

The methodological and epistemological implications of social studies of recovery for drugs research and policy are foregrounded in a series of interlinked empirical projects and research articles published by McKeganey et al. (2004), Neale, Nettleton & Pickering (2011) and Neale et al. (2014, 2015, 2016). These studies sought to initiate debate about the effects of established research methods and concepts for evaluating drug outcomes in relation to drug treatment and drug services. Following the publication of McKeganey et al.’s (2004) survey, which found 56% of the respondents (N=1007) cited abstinence as the only change they hoped to achieve from drug agencies, Neale, Nettleton and Pickering (2011) respond to the difficulties of analysing active drug users’ hopes and aspirations of what they want from treatment services using statistical methods. Addressing the specifics of deploying certain concepts and techniques for engaging users’ desires in treatment, these academics sought to evaluate the uses of qualitative methods alongside more traditional statistical techniques. In so doing Neale, Nettleton and Pickering (2011) and Neale et al. (2014, 2015, 2016) experimented with what social science has to offer drug policy, demonstrating how social inquiry can contribute to debates about the policy, practice and meaning of recovery. What characterises these empirical studies is not adjudicating between objective and subjective methods of inquiry, but a consideration of what research methods can do and their impact in responding to debates about the concept and meaning of recovery in drug policy and treatment services.

Responding to the methodological problem of describing recovery from the drug user’s perspective, Neale, Nettleton and Pickering (2011) and Neale et al. (2015, 2016) invent a mixed method approach for measuring the contested interpretation and meaning of recovery. Reclaiming the findings posed by McKeganey et al.’s (2004) survey research which showed a prioritisation of abstinence in drug users treatment aspirations, and the subsequent shift from harm reduction to abstinence in British Drugs Policy (Duke, 2013), Neale, Nettleton and Pickering (2011) and Neale et al. (2015, 2016) seek to address struggles over the meaning of
abstinence and recovery from an empirical standpoint. Research methods they argue are ‘not interchangeable but they can often beneficially be used together to clarify, elaborate’ (Neale, Nettleton & Pickering, 2011, p. 192). By drawing into focus the complexity of engaging the concept of recovery and its uses in research, Neale et al. (2015, 2016) show how qualitative and quantitative researchers can intervene in policy debates on recovery by developing methods to measure and evaluate the concept’s meaning. On the one hand, they conduct a series of focus groups with service users in residential detox and rehabilitation facilities to measure the relevance of the concept of recovery in their lives (Neale et al., 2015). On the other, they deploy the Delphi methodology, a shared interactive method used to arrive at a group decision on the meaning of the recovery concept. Through three rounds of questionnaires delivered to a panel of experts, including addiction psychiatrists, senior staff from treatment services, and service providers, Neale et al. (2016) show how this survey technique is useful to examine the extent to which individuals agree or disagree with interpretations of the concept of recovery as relevant or irrelevant indicators in the professional practice of stakeholder groups. By inviting both service users and service providers to communicate their knowledge, experience and understanding of the meaning of recovery, Neale et al. (2015, 2016) highlight the uses of statistical methods as relevant empirical devices to engage experts and non-experts in the methodological problem of describing and measuring the concept of recovery in ways that call into question the authority of professional expertise and policy makers.

**Methods of recovery**

Whilst these empirical studies reveal the impact of different research methods for challenging and expanding our understandings of drug users’ experience of recovery, McIntosh and McKeganey’s (2000) use of social research methods provide an opportunity to engage recovery as a process that effects drug users within research practice. What matters from McIntosh and McKeganey’s (2000) perspective, is not a critical engagement with the concept of recovery, but knowledge of how recovery is practiced from the standpoint of recovering addicts. In switching the focus of social inquiry from investigating the contested conceptualisation of recovery, to the description of recovery by their research participants, McIntosh and McKeganey’s (2000) methodological approach draws attention to the significance of meaning making practices in the everyday language of recovery, and what an interpretative sociological perspective has to offer service providers for understanding the value attached to the concept of recovery by service users. By reimagining recovery as a re-interpretive narrative process, McIntosh and McKeganey’s (2000) methodological intervention calls for greater attention to the discursive methods deployed by recovering drug users as a central activity of recovery. Highlighting the uses and benefits of their constructivist approach to empirically engage the concept of recovery as a collectively achieved meaningful making activity, McIntosh and McKeganey (2000) recommend professional drug treatment services and drug workers take seriously the practical implications and benefits of their research practice in their recovery work with service users.

The methodological implications of McIntosh and McKeganey’s (2000, 2002) sociological study of recovery for drug policy and treatment is taken up and further addressed in Nettleton, Neale and Pickering’s (2011, 2012, 2013) research on the everyday lives of recovering heroin users. What’s involved in the conduct of Nettleton, Neale and Pickering’s empirical enquiry is a commitment to a methodological orientation which privileges the everyday knowledge practices of their participants. Calling attention to the distinctiveness of qualitative research methods of description and discursive analysis as aligning empirical accounts of everyday life with a sociology of recovery, Nettleton, Neale and Pickering (2011, 2012) highlight the importance of practices of normality talk, as well as mundane practices of embodiment, as crucial elements of the process of recovering from heroin. In listening to, and
interpreting the voices and experiences of their participants, Nettleton, Neale and Pickering’s (2011, 2012) sociological research expands the project of recovery beyond public narrative accounts to include a fuller appreciation of the practical creative strategies of bodily reproduction without drugs. By inviting non-experts to contribute their knowledge and understanding of the lived experience of doing recovery in everyday life, Nettleton, Neale and Pickering (2011, 2012) call for greater attention to the mundane methods deployed by people who use drugs to develop new bodily skills, techniques and activities. Becoming attuned to relational practices of embodied action, rooted in the materiality of the body, they argue, is necessary to develop an appreciation of the process of transformation (Nettleton, Neale & Pickering, 2011).

Reflection and recovery

Whilst the accomplishments and contributions of sociological studies of recovery (McIntosh & McKeganey’s, 2000, 2002; Nettleton, Neale & Pickering, 2011, 2012, 2013; Neale, Nettleton & Pickering, 2012) are understood to have policy implications that impact the process and practice of recovery in a range of settings, the uses and perceived benefits of research methodologies for drug policy and treatment interventions have also been called into question by critical drug researchers. Applying Bacchi’s (2009, 2012) poststructural methodology to recovery discourse in policy documents, Lancaster (2016), and Lancaster, Duke and Ritter (2015) engage in a critical intellectual practice in which the meaning, use and representation of recovery in governmental and professional knowledge practices is scrutinised. Following Bacchi’s poststructuralist critique of interpreting ‘the meaning of “recovery” and how it could be realised in policy and practice’ (Lancaster, Duke & Ritter, 2015: 624, our emphasis), Lancaster (2016) highlights the role of the critical academic to reflect, resist, challenge and contest the stereotyping of people who use drugs as problematic in recovery discourse and drug treatment policies and practices. The uses of Bacchi’s interpretive conception of critique for studies of new recovery are further highlighted by Fomiatti (2020) in relation to new recovery discourse and policy. Combining qualitative social science with critical methods of analysis, Fomiatti’s research practice seeks to consider ‘how problematisations are taken up, experienced, reproblematised and disrupted by the targets of such policy’ (2020, p. 3). The rationale for exploring empirically the lived effects of policy problematisations is to generate alternative accounts of treatment, social relationships, community and recovery that challenge stigmatising statements enacted in recovery policy and ‘compose alternative problematisations to those constituted in authorative sites’ (Fomiatti, 2020, p. 8).

Whilst the critical methodological practice of scrutinising problematisations in new recovery policy aims to transform ‘how we imagine the problem’ of recovery in our research practice (Fomiatti, 2020, p. 9; our emphasis), we want to further consider the role of this intellectual activity to challenge knowledge production. ‘Is it possible’ Fomiatti, Moore and Fraser (2019) ask ‘to think beyond the individualising, responsibilising, normalising and stigmatising tendencies of new recovery science?’. ‘Is the concept of recovery salvageable or should we abandon it?’. ‘What we need’, they suggest, is ‘to embrace concepts and methods capable of generating new empirical objects and of envisioning practices of living well’ (2019, p. 536, our emphases). In calling attention to the deficit of the recovery concept and empirical research methods to reveal the underlying problems of the science of new recovery for reproducing problematising ideas of stigma and deviance, Fomiatti, Moore and Fraser (2017, 2019) and Fomiatti (2020) question whether existing research practices can survive the intensifying scrutinisation of the critical academic by delivering non-stigmatising ways of thinking about people who use drugs, addiction and recovery. What this requires in practice, they argue, are ‘more ethical research methods that lead us away from responsibilisation,
normalisation and stigmatisation’ (Fomiatti, Moore & Fraser, 2019, p. 536), and are capable of generating new empirical objects. While sympathetic to these aims, our concern is that framing studies of new recovery research via a critical methodological practice ‘of reading, reflection and writing’ (Fomiatti, 2020, p.4) privileges an academic model of interpretive intellectual inquiry which loses sight of the development of alternative research methods and concepts and their empirical evaluation. The envisioning of ethical research methods and new empirical objects beyond critical methodological practices of interrogating policy problematisations is thinly detailed.

**Interdisciplinary collaborative research and mediation**

In what follows we describe the methodological potential of interdisciplinary research to generate collective, rather than interpretive or reflective knowledge practices, that enable a different way of thinking about the role of methods, practice of experts, and concept of recovery; which open up new collaborative lines of inquiry and offer future directions for recovery-oriented practice and policy. Drawing on our collaboration between academics and non-academics in spaces inside and outside of academia, we reimagine the role of the academic in recovery research not as an interpreter of knowledge, concepts and ideas, but what Osborne (2004) describes following Deleuze as an ‘enabler’, whose role is to mediate ideas out of nothing in relation to others in public, collective interactions. Following Osborne’s (2004) historicisation of intellectual work in the contemporary context as an activity that is not restricted to the production of knowledge through narrowly focused disciplinary expertise, but increasingly includes the visibility of the mediator as ‘enabler, fixer, catalyst and broker of ideas’ (2004, p. 440), we seek to make visible an alternative interdisciplinary methodology for researching recovery, one that shifts the focus of intellectual activity from an ‘oracular’ model, involving the interpretation of meaning making practices, or the critique of texts and expert knowledge practices, to the ‘vehicular’, requiring the mediation of knowledge and ideas created in the production of collaborative interactions and collective processes. Our aim is to explore possibilities for the accomplishment of collaborative recovery research as an interdisciplinary practice, as it emerges in the development and use of interdisciplinary methods in professional, lay, academic and non-academic practices (Lury, 2018).

The research involves the pilot of a collaboration between the sociologists of harm reduction (Vitellone, 2017, 2021) and recovery (Theodoropoulou, 2020, 2021), filmmaker and visual artist Melanie Manchot, film producer Elena Hill, the art organisation Liverpool Biennial, and creative services Fallen Angels and First Take, working with people in recovery in Liverpool. The starting point of this collaboration is the engagement of people in recovery in the production of ‘STEPHEN’, a feature film conceived and directed by Melanie Manchot, produced by Elena Hill, and commissioned by Liverpool Biennial 2023. ‘STEPHEN’ speaks to the complications of addiction and recovery through nuanced visual and textual proposals, that neither vilify nor glorify people who use drugs and alcohol. The film pertains to many commingled and entangled dialogues that put the device of the camera centre stage. Through the development of an interdisciplinary collaboration that extends outside of the academy, the project proposes an innovative rethinking and extension of socially engaged, participatory and collaborative methods for recovery research and practice.

Existing interdisciplinary research in the addictions field has involved a range of collaborative exchanges between ethnographers, visual artists, photographers and filmmakers (Bourgois & Schonberg, 2009; Boyd, 2017; Silkland, 2015). These collaborations have produced critical methodological interventions including participatory forms of filmmaking and co-authorship (Manchot, 2015; epopee.me; Grannan, 2015), dialogues between film producers and ethnographers (Garcia, 2017), the use of photo-diaries (MacIndoe, 2014) and video-diaries as ethical methods of knowledge production (Lilleberg, 2015). In collaborations
between visual artists and social scientists the use of visual methodologies is understood to extend what social scientists can do to oppose dominant discourses of addiction and recovery, raise awareness of harm and suffering, and develop new approaches for research practice. Visual methods provide both a critical and pedagogic tool to represent the voice and face of the marginalised (Boyd, 2017; Bourgois & Schonberg, 2009; Ray-Night, 2015), and engage the community of persons who use drugs in dialogue and recovery (Manley, Roy & Froggett, 2014, 2015a, 2015b) in order to motivate social change. Analysing the ethical outcomes of the use of visual methods in social research to de-stigmatis e people who use drugs and engage participation in visual reflection on recovery, has involved social scientists reflecting on the use of visual methods in drug use settings (Boyd, 2017; Bourgois & Schonberg, 2009; Ray-Night, 2015) and recovery settings (Manley, Roy & Froggett, 2014, 2015a, 2015b) and evaluating their impact on drug policy and treatment.

While the collaborations between social scientists and visual artists discussed above, have primarily deployed visual methods as a way to transform representations and facilitate dialogue on addiction and recovery, the central question that informs our interdisciplinary collaboration is enquiring into the camera’s presence not as a reflective tool that facilitates dialogue, but as a methodological device that mediates the emergence of collective, and connective processes and encounters (Deleuze, 1997). Our collaboration also differs in that our aims are not to investigate how art therapy can improve current policy, and its practice in recovery services, but offer an alternative approach to how recovery is understood and practised. While creative practices are widely deployed as therapeutic tools that accompany the practice of recovery as an abstinence-focused process, our interest lies in the exploration of filmmaking as an intervention that shifts the focus of recovery from the consumption or abstinence of substances, to the novel possibilities that collective experiences and new connections can open. The project engages the camera as an object that mediates and enhances connections emerging from the activities that the presence of the camera renders possible. In this process, the camera becomes a methodological device which opens opportunities to invent and test embodied versions of self, within spaces delineated by collective creativity. The goal of the pilot study is to test whether the method of filmmaking can inform practices of recovery that shift the focus from abstinence to the enhancement of connections that expand life possibilities.

These methodological choices derived from a meeting at the beginning of the project with potential participants. The meeting, held at the University of Liverpool, was attended by service-users and the manager of First Take, and the co-authors of this paper. Inviting people in recovery involved with a filmmaking service ensured that participants had an interest in creative practices. But this shared interest was not enough to guarantee the negotiation of the pilot with all stakeholders would be successful. While being clear about the practical aspects of the research project, the meeting caused confusion and debate. For the participants it was important to understand whether we were inviting them to recovery or filmmaking workshops. Although they were open and interested in participating in the production of the film ‘STEPHEN’, our proposal to recruit participants for interdisciplinary research on recovery was questioned. The words ‘research’ and ‘recovery’ raised suspicion. Participants talked about recovery induced boredom, and the repetitive process of reproducing the same recovery talk. As one participant put it, ‘I know I’m an alcoholic, don’t need a reminder’, reflecting the group’s desire to resist the categorisation of ‘recovering subjectivities’, and the need for creative activities to not just be another way to talk about recovery, but a practice that opens up new possibilities. They were also particularly sceptical of empirical research to address these problems. Whilst participants were reluctant to ‘hand out’ data on their lives, and turn people in recovery into guinea pigs whose ‘actions’ are ‘observed’, ‘studied’ and made public, they expressed a desire to become ‘actors’ in the filmmaking process and contribute to a pilot
Taking the service-users’ points seriously, led to the project’s ethical and methodological decisions to refrain from asking questions that reproduce recovery as a major structure, what the participants described as ‘recovery-induced boredom’, and to act as mediators rather than data collectors. Instead of assuming that the desire for recovery is present, and interpreting the participants’ actions under this prism, we focused on mediating connections and observing whether these connections would allow for recovery to emerge as a collective process. In so doing, we consider how interdisciplinarity and the interactions between visual artists, social scientists and Deleuze’s (1997) philosophy of mediation produces alternative minor practices of recovery.

Following our first meeting, we organised and conducted a series of cinema-based pilot workshops in December 2019 and January 2020 in Liverpool, to establish how social scientists, filmmakers and visual artists, arts organisations, treatment services and service-users might develop, negotiate and mediate filming practices with people in recovery as an interdisciplinary method, adding new insights into the use of cameras, acting, storytelling and reenactment for recovery research. The aim of the pilot workshops was to trial the method of filmmaking, focusing on the role of cameras and performance-to-camera as a methodological device, and to test new methods, empirical objects and concepts in recovery research and art practice. The camera in Manchot’s methodological practice is employed as a structural device to form a sustained enquiry into how we are constantly evolving relationally. This method of filmmaking questions notions of individual and collective subjectivity, proposing that these are not stable or fixed constructs but ongoing processes of becoming and transformation that are always relational, situated and collective. In Manchot’s practice cameras mediate these processes of becoming.

In our interdisciplinary collaboration cameras follow and document the collective becoming of people in recovery as an ongoing process; one that does not attempt to impose dominant forms of expression and settle identities, but open up fields to be explored, and looks for the connections that create new life possibilities. Employing both observational and documentary strategies alongside narrative fiction, our goal is to mediate processes of becoming where fact, fiction and notions of truth are continually problematised. Setting up an interdisciplinary research project with these aims in mind required a methodological shift from the major to minor practices of filmmaking, social scientific research and recovery: from a major cinema that celebrates authorship, aura and stardom to a minor form of filmmaking that creates horizon engagement and decision-making; from an intellectual academic critique of what is wrong with recovery as a major structure, to the mediation of assemblages where minor acts of resistance are enabled, opening up new ways of becoming with recovery and art. The minor for Deleuze and Guattari emerges from within larger molar structures, as a force of resistance to the territorialisations that these structures impose (Sholtz, 2015). The characteristics of minor practices are described in three ways: minor practices deterritorialise major discourses, the minor is always political, and every aspect of minor practice takes on a collective value (Deleuze & Guattari, 1986).

In what follows we describe how the pilot workshops opened up a space for recovery to emerge as a minor practice. In order to do so we return to the first part of our article where we discussed the contributions and limitations of empirical and critical research methods in sociological studies of addiction and recovery. These analyses, we pointed out, derive from asking people to talk about addiction and recovery, and critically reflect on the effects of the methods, policy and concept of recovery. Researching recovery as a minor practice differs from these empirical and reflective perspectives, as it does not look for direct answers to direct

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1 Deleuze uses the French word ‘intercesseur’, which has been translated in English as ‘mediator’. While potentially this is not the most accurate English translation, it has been deployed by Grusin and Osborne, and is consistent with the concept of mediation we are presenting here.
questions through interpretive practices of inquiry but focuses instead on mediating the conditions that allow for recovery to emerge. Researching recovery as a minor practice deterritorialises recovery as a major discourse by side-lining dominant concepts and methods, and rendering visible how recovery practices emerge beyond recovery settings, wherever new connections are enabled. By inviting service users to meetings and cinema-based workshops, and respecting their desire not to be asked questions about addiction and recovery, the participants’ relationship to, and collective experience of recovery emerged through small gestures of talking about creative practices, including watching and discussing films about addiction, and filming each other telling stories, where the boundaries between fiction and reality became blurred. Through the mediation of collective creative practices, and the privileging of minor voices, our pilot study sought to investigate how recovery can be redesigned as a minor practice, and what the reconceptualisation of recovery as a minor practice can accomplish.

**Inventing a minor practice**

Across all its modes of production and throughout all its stages, the invention of minor practices involves a rigorous attempt to establish collective forms of co-authorship. One of the main characteristics of minor practices is that everything within them takes on a collective value (Deleuze & Guattari, 1986). The policy of recovery, practices of art and filmmaking, and discipline of sociology, can all be described as major structures that privilege certain voices, methods, concepts and practices, whilst marginalising others. Drug policy does so by rendering the production of the ‘recovered subject’ as its main purpose. In artistic practice the artist occupies the position of the main author of the artwork, whilst in social research, epistemological breakthroughs belong to the interventions of the critical analyst. In these major structures, policy makers, artists and social scientists act as authors, interpreters and evaluators. Our aim in researching recovery as a minor practice is to challenge these major structures. Through our meetings and cinema-based workshops with people in recovery our goal was to deterritorialise the larger molar structures of artistic, social scientific, and recovery practices by demonstrating how these major systems can be practised collectively. By refraining from becoming interpreters and evaluators, and positioning ourselves instead as mediators, we explore what it takes to practise minority. In so doing we examine the consequences of a methodological shift from an interest in grand narratives of recovery, art and social science, to a care for the transformations and forms of becoming through minor practices of participation.

The first phase of the research focused on the importance of becoming a group, creating shared references and language, trust, and a system of care and responsibility. It was also an important period to test how to undermine the often-hierarchical nature of filmmaking and social science and create horizontal structures. In this early stage of becoming a group, we experimented with how cameras participate in the production and transformation of subjectivities, as they create a frame within which acts of becoming can be tested, recorded and reviewed. Cameras are never neutral in this process. Once they enter the scene, they shape its form, and become an organising principle around which actions unfold. In major cinema and in our predominantly scopic (western) regimes, cameras are often positioned as the dominant technical tool or filmic device, precisely because they produce images. In our interdisciplinary research, cameras are used not only as image-machines but also as enablers and mediators of collaborative interactions and collective processes. The camera’s presence mediates pre-production workshops and meetings, the production of the film ‘STEPHEN’, and later stages of post-production.

The implications of enabling the camera’s presence as a methodological device are foregrounded by Grusin (2015) in his essay ‘Radical Mediation’. Although media and media technologies operate epistemologically as modes of knowledge production, Grusin argues they
also ‘function technically, bodily and materially to generate and modulate individual and collective affective moods or structures of feeling among assemblages of humans and nonhumans’ (2015, p. 125). Building upon Latour’s (1994) definition of mediators as ‘actively involved in transforming whatever they mediate’, Grusin insists ‘mediation operates not by neutrally reproducing meaning or information but by actively transforming human and nonhuman actants…’ (2015, p. 130). Cameras, we argue, following Grusin are not neutral in this process of ontological transformation. The camera actively mediates the very situations that they observe and record, with each of these stages impacting on the situation in a feedback loop. At the most direct level, the camera confirms that there is something (a thing, a being) to look at, and this in turn becomes a validation of both the act of paying attention, and of what is being paid attention to. This intervention challenges the concept of the gaze as a major structure, and the camera gaze in particular as objectifying or voyeuristic, opening the possibility for the camera to actively mediate assemblages of becoming as generative, productive and transformative. It speaks to the notion that collective looking does not occur ‘all at once’ but unfolds over time and in repetition, with one look challenging, corroborating, undoing, or exceeding what other looks have seen before (Silverman, 2000).

**Becoming a group**

In order to investigate how the process of mediation might increase people’s capacity to form collective and transformative connections we conducted two sets of pilot workshops from December 2019 to March 2020, each consisting of four sessions. The aim of these workshops was to assemble people from the local Liverpool recovery community who had an interest in creative practices, filmmaking, performance and visual art. To do so, we formed a dialogue with Fallen Angels Dance Theatre Company and First Take Film Productions, two Liverpool based creative organisations who work with people in recovery. The process entailed different stages: forming a loose group that shared an interest in filmmaking, inviting members of the group to consider participating in the film ‘STEPHEN’, and defining the participants’ potential role in the project to become a member of either cast or crew. The cinema-based workshops provided a space for the privileging of minor voices and the experience of people outside of expert discourses. The first set of four preparatory workshops invited twenty-five participants into an open scenario that was purposefully free of commitment and expectations. We began the workshops by watching films that were specifically chosen to form a common language. One of the first films we watched, *Caesar Must Die* (2012) by the Taviani Brothers, relates closely to our research project in form and content. A hybrid fiction documentary, the film is set in a high security Italian prison, where it follows the production of a theatre play and where all roles are played by inmates. The film is structured around the process of creative production, from the initial auditions through rehearsals, to the opening night of the play. Other films watched included: Kitty Green’s *Casting JonBenet* (2017) and Moshen Makhmalbaf’s *Salam Cinema* (1995). These films have elements of a minor cinema in how they deterritorialise the conditions of major cinema language from within. Each has a strongly political tenor and works predominantly with non-actors.

During each workshop we watched one film, discussed its content and form, and then set a short exercise for participants that reflected ideas from the movie we had watched. In each case, the exercise involved using iPad cameras given to participants in small groups of three to five people filming each other. These practical exercises were designed to familiarise participants with different aspects of filming in a performative and collaborative way, where each person would over time take on different roles: devise a short text, act a role, use the camera, direct the action, record sound. Participants often used lived experiences to devise short scenarios that they then chose to perform to camera – and by extension to the group. By collectively watching and filming narrative fiction, the becoming of a group as a connected and collective imagination assembled. Whilst Bogue points out ‘all genuine art is a collective
enterprise, though one that goes beyond anything either the artist or the collectivity can do alone’ (2010, p. 19), we do not take for granted the achievement of collective practices, or assume they are inherently positive, and seek to acknowledge who is excluded from the collective and how these exclusions might be addressed. In our mediation of the becoming of a group, continuous attention was paid to keeping the borders of the group open so that collective transformations remained possible. What was crucial in these early stages was to make joint decisions on how to mediate these assemblages in ways that support both the individuals’ multiple and different recovery processes and increase their power to act, while simultaneously enabling the process of making a film together. The awareness of the group as a collective force, and a sensibility towards the collective production of work, rather than an emphasis on individual authors and talents, is one of the main characteristics of a minor practice (Sullivan, 2006).

**Mirroring as a minor practice**

In mediating the becoming of a group, the camera allowed each person to enter the frame and affect it in their own way. During the first workshop, participants collectively engaged in a mirroring filming exercise based on Manchot’s adaptation of *The Empty Space* (1968). In groups of three, participants were asked to share a story. One person engaged in filming, another narrated the story, and the third listened. For the second take, the narrator and listener exchanged roles; the listener re-told the story, or another version of it, and the first narrator became the listener. The initial narrators were not asked to tell if their story was real or fictional, and all groups approached the exercise differently. While the first narrator ‘owned’ the story, its mirroring was not an exact repetition but a response to the original narration. After observing the first narrator, the second one brought their own fiction, or reality to the story by offering an alternative narration. Through this process, what started out as the story of an individual, gradually became a collective story. Without diminishing the significance of the first narration, the story became shared within the groups of three conducting the exercise. The presence of the camera enabled the production of shared stories within the wider group. At the end of each workshop, these short video recordings were compiled, reviewed and discussed. Transposing the exercise from the context of acting coaching to a recovery group, proposes that stories evolve in their telling, and that through their presentation and exchange the teller might find meaning. Mirroring and reflecting each other’s experiences, enables each person a space to listen, hear and see their stories through the embodiment of another, recorded by the camera allowing distance to offer both performers moments of clarity, reflection and connection. While personal fictions, according to Deleuze, are on the side of the ‘masters’, story-telling he argues is a speech-act through which the boundaries between the personal and the political are crossed, producing collective utterances (Deleuze, 2013, p. 228). In conventional cinematic practices, the story is the development of two images: an objective (what the camera sees), and a subjective (what the character sees) (ibid, p. 153). In the mirroring exercise, the camera shifts between narrators, contaminating the two images (ibid, p. 154), producing a minor practice of story-telling that challenges major truths. What is being grasped by the camera in this process is not identities in formation but collective becomings.

By highlighting the edges of where performances begin and end, and where different levels of ‘reality’ might rub against each other, the pilot workshops foreground the process of filmmaking as a minor practice. The mirroring group exercise enabled the observation of multiple roles involved in the production of stories. The story, fictional or not, becomes real when someone listens to it, or records it; and it becomes collective once shared through a different angle. Whilst there are certain similarities between this mirroring exercise and the structure of recovery groups, where one person shares a story and the others listen, performing recovery in an institutional setting like a structured recovery group is different to participating
in a filmmaking workshop exercise, where stories are often fictional. It is different not just because of the actual content of the activity, but also because of the different expectations that these two activities enforce. Recovery as a major structure has a specific aim: abstinence. People in recovery are very much aware of this goal, and that their narratives are expected to conform to this aim. Experiences of drug and alcohol use are described as negative, and abstinence as positive. The collective stories emerging in recovery groups are often reflections of the limitations that recovery as a major structure imposes, rather than expressions of the group’s collective desire. The major discourse – drug and alcohol use: bad – abstinence: good – limits the possibilities of recovery groups by encouraging a repetition and reproduction of this dichotomy. The problem with repetition in the recovery group is that collective stories are created through homogenisation. Rather than exploring the complexity of drug use and recovery, people in recovery are expected to reproduce stories that prove their commitment to abstinence (see also Fomiatti, Moore & Fraser, 2017; 2019). This major and repetitive discourse of drug and alcohol use leads to what our participants described in our first meeting as recovery induced boredom.

The mirroring exercise in our pilot workshops produced a description of recovery as a series of small transformations that expand life possibilities. In this process, the participants experience recovery not as a commitment to abstinence but as a way of building connections. Minor practices resist major discourses of recovery where the aim is the absence of the substance, not the enhancement of relations that can potentially take the space that the substance occupies. The participants’ minor voices call into question the dominant concepts and methods of researching recovery as an ontological state that leads to abstinence, and reveal it instead as an ongoing shifting process of developing connections with others. While in new recovery creative and socially engaged practices are deployed as a way to maintain abstinence, the importance of creative practices for the people involved in our research pilot was the production of something together with others, and the small shifts and transformations that become possible through new connections, whether these happen while being abstinent or not (see Theodoropoulou, 2020, 2021).

The minor practice of mirroring in our pilot workshops enabled participants to engage with each other’s stories, by taking them in, and rendering them a shared group story. By mirroring each other’s stories, and shifting them to reflect their own experiences, the participants formed what Deleuze and Guattari (2004) call a ‘good group’; they created a collective story, composed of heterogeneous parts. While the majoritarian is a constant and homogeneous system, expressed in recovery through the reproduction of discourses that present abstinence as the only desirable outcome, the minoritarian is a potential, creative and created, becoming (Deleuze & Guattari, 2004, p. 117). Mirroring as a minor practice creates the conditions for recovery practices to emerge outside the major structure of recovery; it deterritorialises recovery by practising repetition as a way to tell stories collectively. Unlike recovery groups, where repetition leads to homogenisation, repetition through mirroring does not block but enhances modification; it ‘changes nothing in the object repeated but does change something in the mind which contemplates it’ (Deleuze, 1994, p. 70). Unlike structured recovery groups, where major recovery discourses block modifications, in the mirroring exercise the participants’ stories do not conform to a recovery discourse, allowing for modifications to emerge as they shift from an individual narration to a collective matter of concern.

Conclusion

The example of mirroring drawn from our performance to camera workshops with people in recovery is telling of what a shift from a major to a minor recovery practice can achieve. While major discourses foreground abstinence and the production of recovered
subjects as the aim of recovery, our interdisciplinary methodology unfolds recovery as a process that enables the emergence of connections. These small transformations, which become possible through collective practices, constitute the backbone of what we have described in this article as the minor practice of recovery. Recovery as a minor topic emerged in our first pilot workshop, when we asked participants to talk about their previous engagement with creative practices. The participants had all been part of various creative projects in the past, initiated by recovery services. Although not specifically asked to do so, they responded by describing the relationship between creativity and recovery as practices enabling connections to evolve. As a member of the group put it, ‘recovery does not start with abstinence, but with connections’. This point was further emphasised by another participant who said their time of abstinence ‘does not count as time in recovery’. Everyone in the group supported this way of thinking explaining how ‘creative practices expand the platform of recovery’.

Throughout our interdisciplinary research collaboration, the commitment to act as mediators in the enabling of a minor practice of recovery operated on two levels: within our respective disciplines, and between our participants and cameras. The collaboration between a visual artist and filmmaker, sociologists and service-users formed a sustained enquiry into how recovery, artistic and research practices can be deterritorialised. In the process of challenging major discourses, methods, and concepts that dominate knowledge production, our interdisciplinary methodology enabled us to reflect on the possibilities of our research practices together, and with others. By resisting the roles of the social scientist as interpreter, and of the filmmaker as the main author of a visual output, and positioning ourselves instead as mediators, minor practices of recovery came into existence. The camera became an important empirical object in this set of interdisciplinary connections and transformations. Cameras were deployed not as tools to represent and facilitate recovery, but as devices that mediate minor practices of recovery. The participants' desire to take on roles in front of and behind the cameras in their telling of real and fictional stories, together with the filmmaker's desire to hand over the camera to the participants, and the social scientists' desire to observe and describe this process, mediated a collaborative space for a different interdisciplinary method to practice recovery to emerge. Whilst our collaborative research has taken place outside institutional spaces of recovery, there is no limit to where and when minority can be practised. In the discussion of our observations of cinema based and performance to camera pilot workshops we highlighted the distinctive uses and benefits of our interdisciplinary methodological practice for future directions and discussions of recovery oriented practice and policy. Moving away from major discourses, towards approaches that derive from the service-users’ desires, involves a methodological choice that remains to be widely explored inside, as well as beyond institutions.

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**Film References**

*Film* References


