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Deborah Knowles

Westminster Business School

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Claiming the Streets: Feminist Implications of Psychogeography as a Business Research Method

Deborah Knowles

University of Westminster, London UK

d.s.knowles@wmin.ac.uk

Abstract: This paper is intended to establish a claim that the techniques of psychogeography may be advantageously employed in business and management research in order to provide a new perspective on how organisations are experienced. It examines this practice for its possibilities as a research approach for women and its compatibility with feminist research methods. Psychogeography offers an approach to gaining an understanding of the ways that human behaviour is shaped by the geographical environment (Coverley, 2006). It constitutes a style of collecting a variety of qualitative data using complementary methods, which gives a textured view of the real world in a particular environment. Psychogeography is primarily a literary tradition. However, its constituent parts are academic disciplines rooted in real world experience. The attraction of psychogeography to a business researcher is many layered. It invites the researcher to observe the environment slowly and painstakingly, whilst “strolling”, and to construct meanings in a number of ways. Walking is celebrated by psychogeographers as a cultural act and an important way to understand the world, yet the male-as-norm character of psychogeographers is well established (Solnit, 2001). The masculine tradition of psychogeography may operate to challenge woman researchers to examine the possibility of using this approach in conjunction with feminist perspective research methods as a way of exploring and questioning women’s place in a patriarchal culture (Acker et al, 1983). Feminist research methods seek to address the “invisibility” of women’s experience in academic studies (Roberts, 1990:7), to overturn the male-as-norm perspective, and to highlight the possibilities for women to engage in ‘male-preserve’ activities. In the case of the male preserve of psychogeography these intentions would apply not only to the subject of the study but also to the practice of the research method itself.

Keywords: psychogeography, feminist research methods, qualitative research, safety in the field, London, organisations

1. Introduction

This paper is intended to establish a claim that the techniques of psychogeography may be advantageously employed in business research in order to provide a new perspective on how organisations are experienced. It examines this practice for its possibilities as a research approach for women and its compatibility with feminist research methods.

Psychogeography takes an interpretivist stance to collecting a variety of data using complementary methods. It offers an approach to gaining an understanding of the ways that human behaviour is shaped by the geographical environment (Coverley, 2006), constituting a style of collecting qualitative data which gives a textured or layered view of the real world in a particular environment.

The psychogeographic tradition is centred on London (and also Paris) and although this seems an unnecessary limitation for many reasons, this city’s evident foundation on commerce invites a psychogeographic interpretation from an organisational perspective. The view of the city as a “site of mystery” of which the truth may be discovered beneath the uppermost layers of the most visible aspects (Coverley, 2006:13) chimes with business research aims to understand how organisations are experienced and why people behave as they do. The notion of psychogeography as a male preserve will be explored in terms of whether feminist perspective methods might be an appropriate way of bringing women into this practice and it also raises the issue of personal safety.

In investigating the possibilities of psychogeography for the business researcher this paper takes Marylebone Lane in central London as an example.

2. Psychogeography

Lexically psychogeography seems to operate at a point where the two disciplines of psychology and geography “collide” (Coverley 2006). It is primarily a literary tradition – many of today’s psychogeographers are writers of fiction (notably Will Self and Iain Sinclair) and the antecedents of their psychogeographic work include novels (such as Robinson Crusoe). However, its constituent parts are academic disciplines rooted in real world experience. Psychology provides explanations of the workings of the mind and the geographical element encompasses the environment, geology, and

economics. Debord's oft-cited description of it as "charmingly vague" permits the discovery within it of a number of related fields, especially those which might engender a similar "spirit of discovery" (Debord, 1955:8).

What psychogeographers do whilst studying how behaviour and emotions are effected by environmental features – which may or may not be "consciously organised" (Debord, 1955:8), is walk around: they stroll; in the French term which is often used, they are "flâneurs" (Coverley, 2006:12).

Psychogeography offers an attractive and many-layered invitation to the business researcher. The "stroller" may observe the environment slowly and painstakingly and may construct meanings in a number of ways, such as watching people act, reading texts, evaluating artwork, engaging people in dialogue, and building up histories from earlier experience in the locality and previously written commentaries. The practice explicitly includes the search for new methods of "apprehending our urban environment" (Coverley, 2006:13). Iain Sinclair (2003b) demonstrates all of these in a psychogeographic walk in East London.

3. How is psychogeography practised?

This question recalls contributions at a 2008 public discussion on psychogeography from both Self (2008) and Sinclair (2008) on Transport for London's literature on walking, which they jokingly referred to as "How to Walk". The term "strolling" implies purposelessness in direction and timing, yet in their writing psychogeographers describe carefully planned routes – Will Self's walk from London to Manhattan clearly required him to board a pre-booked flight from Heathrow to JFK airport at the correct time (2007); Sinclair's account of a walk in East London includes his dogged attempts to arrange a view of a piece of installation art at the University of Greenwich and an interview with its creator, whilst claiming that "time should be allowed to unravel at its own speed, that's the whole point of the exercise" (2003b:7).

The epic nature of some of these walks – Self's (2007) to Manhattan, Sinclair's (2002) around the M25 motorway ringing London – suggests that they are one-off experiences, that one may walk this way only once to gather legitimately serendipitous data. Sinclair (2007b:44) claims to know a person who tears out the pages of her A-Z of London as she (unusually, it is a woman) covers the territory for she intends never to re-visit sites. However, in walking London psychogeographers are often visiting areas with which they seem familiar and on which they have evidently conducted background research. Sinclair's (2002) orbital walk of London around the turn of the millennium was conducted in a number of stages, including revisits to sites to gather additional data.

4. Is psychogeography a suitable framework for the study of businesses?

Any casual stroller would perceive that London is a city founded on commerce. The psychogeographer's "study of the effects of the geographical environment, consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behaviour of people" (Debord, 1955:8) indicates very strongly that psychogeography may operate in organisational research as well as on the margins of society. The central topic areas listed by Baker (2003:323): [Debord's, 1955] emotional and behavioural effects of the environment, and also its ambience, "cognitive mapping" which is the "city in our heads", and local history, all have relevance in the study of organisations. The emphasis of psychogeography is on walking, which is, as Sinclair (2003b:4) notes, "the best way to explore and exploit the city". Other techniques employed by psychogeographers – reading relevant literature, observing environments and engaging key actors within those settings in dialogue are well recognised within mainstream qualitative business research. History's action upon an area's ambience, creating "chronological resonance" (Ackroyd, 2000:661; Baker, 2003), is particularly evident in organisational settings: businesses succeed each other in a given location or a single firm remains lending an area stability.

The techniques of reading texts, consulting current organisational websites, strolling in the street, observing the exterior of the business - not just its bricks and mortar, but also the signs that are displayed, the interactions of passers-by with its appearance in a particular site; entrance into the premises as a member of the public, as a possible or actual client, and as a psychogeographer/researcher, all serve to mine successive seams of data in this geological or many-layered approach (Chtcheglov, 1953). Layering of the research may also be seen in the data that is gathered, the history of the site and of the organisation itself, present-day growth and changes – whether "consciously organised" (Debord, 1955:8) or not.

This is slow-speed research – it is done at a stroll. It will take time to get to know the area and to collect data from a number of different sources. Psychogeography offers ways of understanding organisations that are not all available at once to other approaches.

5. Marylebone Lane

Iain Sinclair (2008) described the “key to psychogeography” as the search for the “north-west passage” out of London, evoking the sixteenth-century quest for a route to Asia via the Arctic. The less frequented, diagonal street of Marylebone Lane seems to suggest a psychogeographical approach, especially as it happens to offer a “north-west passage” away from the much more commercialised Oxford Street. It is a narrow street in the west end of London, its S-bend curves contrasting with the grid-like pattern of the streets around it (see Figure 1). Seemingly a back water, yet it links the shoppers’ paradise of Oxford Street with the bustling Marylebone High Street. It seems also to connect with a more distant past than its neighbouring streets as its winding configuration follows the course of the Tyburn stream, now hidden underground.

At its southern, Oxford Street end is the original location of the village of Marylebone or Tyburn (Howard de Walden Estate, 2006). Almost every one of its buildings houses a business, these include cafes, restaurants, pubs and a large four-star hotel; clothes and shoe shops, a solicitor’s office, two haberdashers, a grocery store “established in 1900”; and a nightclub offering “totally nude table-dancing”. There are no “chain” businesses, - or, apparently, the ubiquitous franchise operations - apart from the Radisson Berkshire hotel and the NCP car park at the Oxford Street end (“...the ugly 1960’s car park ... is the one blot on the landscape”); the majority of the businesses in Marylebone Lane are unique, suiting and adding to its own “quirky” character (McConnell, 2007.). In contrast to its brash neighbour of Oxford Street, Marylebone Lane seems to invite strollers, not necessarily for window shopping but to breathe in the atmosphere and to seek to understand how its ambiance affects the behaviour and emotions of fellow visitors and those who inhabit this lane by living there and/or working in its businesses.

An intriguing aspect of Marylebone Lane is that although it is quiet and seems “secret” (Baker, 2003:328) many of its businesses are very visible in their virtual existence on the internet.



Figure 1: Location of Marylebone Lane (at the centre of this map and containing the featured shop, from whose website the map is taken) source: Saltwater, 2008

6. Is organisational research a suitable topic for psychogeography?

The psychogeography of London has businesses at its heart. The suitability of organisational research to psychogeography is very much founded on its city locations, to which may be added the possibility of public access to these premises. A large proportion of organisations are open to the public – shops, restaurants, places of entertainment and leisure, transport facilities, churches and so on - and are therefore legitimately on the route of the psychogeographer's stroll or within the researcher's (strangely rural-sounding in the context of this discussion) "field". It is clear that as a research approach psychogeography would be much less appropriate for research into closed business premises such as offices or factories.

Sinclair spends a good deal of his walk in – or discussing - organisations of various types: City institutions, the Barbican theatre, the historical Temple of Mithras, various churches (2003c). One of his landmarking methods is the line of organisations: "Railway to pub to hospital: trace the line on the map" (2003b:1). He introduces the "psychogeography of retail" (the business of many of the Marylebone Lane organisations), concerning the hierarchy of the pricing of second-hand books depending on where they are sold (p. 21). Self (2007) lists shops at Heathrow Airport as a demonstration of the "England of prosperity" (p.39).

Sinclair's stated aim for his first walk is written messages, graffiti, "the spites and spasms of an increasingly deranged populace" (2003b). Organisational signage has a great deal in common with graffiti as data. Businesses in Marylebone Lane declare what is important to them: "Established 1900", for example, sets a claim on history and substance. The sign on a pub showed that it was called, in reference to an earlier historical layer, "The Conduit" [of Tyburn]. In March 2009, the pub's name has changed to "The Coach Makers" [Arms]: at first sight an irrelevant choice, yet it is a return to the building's original name which is fixed into the wall high above the door. A bronze plaque fixed to the restaurant wall at 108 Marylebone Lane explains the design of the stained glass window there. "Light in the Darkness" by Julian Stocks, illustrates partly the Tyburn stream which flows beneath the lane (Jurys Clifton Ford Hotel in conjunction with the Howard de Walden Estate, 2006)

7. Is it worthwhile research?

In order to weigh the worth of psychogeography as an approach to researching organisations it is necessary to consider its methodological contribution. It is clear that this is a strategy within the interpretivist tradition as it seeks to understand the human behaviour which is observed using one or a number of methods (Bryman & Bell, 2007). The techniques of psychogeography are eminently suitable for the collection of qualitative data: descriptions, perceptions, memories and explanations, sights and sounds. Data that are collected – "by suspending ... 'common-sense'" (London Psychogeographical Association, undated) - may be unexpected but may be ordered by the researcher using a recognizable epistemology into an analytical framework (Bryman & Bell, 2007). The scientific or positivist stance on research reliability is that the results should be repeatable (see e.g. Easterby-Smith et al, 2004). The London Psychogeographical Association (undated) seem quite gleeful in their repudiation of scientific methods as psychogeography lacks replicability. However, the position on replicability or reliability varies if one takes a relativist stance as it seems reasonable that "similar observations [would be] reached by other observers". In this regard, a reflexive, constructionist approach, such as that of feminist research, would require only "transparency" in the techniques for data analysis (Easterby-Smith et al, 2004:53).

Validity in psychogeography may be its great strength. The relativist inclusion of sufficient perspectives would be satisfied by the layered approach. Triangulation is an important aspect of qualitative research as it allows findings to be viewed from more than one perspective. It may be divided into methodological triangulation – in Marylebone Lane the various layers are uncovered using different methods: reading, watching, listening, consulting, interviewing, all of which might form a pattern of corroboration; and data triangulation which may be practised by comparing different sources of information collected at different times (Denscombe, 2007). The term "triangulation" calls to mind the actual (rather than metaphorical) theodolites used to survey landscapes and is therefore an apposite concern as the literal research landscape may be viewed from numerous perspectives.

The constructionist "access to the experiences of those in the research setting" is also well-attempted. Generalisability to the population at large – even to the London population - is clearly not achieved by using the data collected by psychogeographers. However, constructionist issues about the relevance

of the concepts to other environments (Easterby-Smith et al, 2004) may usefully be applied to ensure the holistic approach to sense-making.

8. Is psychogeography dangerous?

The various types of potentially dangerous situation in conducting social research listed by Craig et al (2000) include the vulnerability of women researchers working alone. They suggest planning the research design to reduce danger, such as interviewing in public places rather than participants' homes, appropriate dress, setting appropriate social distance and taking precautions to ensure that assistance may be called. In a section entitled "Setting up Fieldwork" (p. 5) they describe activities which are recognisable elements of psychogeography. These include collecting advance information about participants and their environment and gaining an idea of the character of an area.

London is presented as populated by murderous criminals. Sinclair describes a gangland funeral (2003a) and if the title of Jenks' (2006) chapter, "Watching your Step" were not enough to convince the walker to be careful where they stray, his descriptions of the bloody fates awaiting gang members who breach territorial boundaries leave one in no doubt as to the danger of being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Sinclair's description of his intentions to collect 'the messages on walls, lampposts, doorjamb: the spites and spasms of an increasingly deranged populace' (2003b:1) suggests a dangerous field of study and the threat contained in the possibility of meeting a vicious native.

Solnit discovers that, "companions have been women's best guarantee of public safety" (2001:244). Indeed, Sinclair and Self, who are both men, often take a companion on their psychographic walks. On the walk which includes the University of Greenwich, Sinclair (2003a) takes the photographer, Marc Atkins; Self (2007) mentions a number of male companions on his walk to Manhattan. The companion often also contributes to the text – and to the practice of triangulation in research terms - as the author comments on his reactions to the environment.

9. May psychogeography be practised by women?

Coverley (2006) lists seventy-two works in his "Bibliography and Further Reading"; of these only six are authored or co-authored by women. Will Self (2008) agreed with a questioner at a 2008 Psychogeography event that this practice is a male preserve. He has previously described psychogeographers as a "fraternity" of "middle-aged men" (2007:12). He commented that Jacqui Smith, the Home Secretary was "unjustly pilloried" for saying that she felt unsafe walking in London at night (see Oakeshott, 2008). The Psychogeographical Association (undated) suggests that individuals are "constrained" to particular places, a notion which becomes rather alarming when the category of people whose presence might "transform a place" is women. This view echoes the representation of woman flâneur (that is flâneuse) to the early French psychogeographers as a prostitute (Coverley, 2006). The Association may be attempting to express a view that women and men experience places differently but their tone seems to present a challenge to mount a new campaign to (re)claim the streets or at least to attempt a feminist interpretation. Male privilege is extended in psychogeographical accounts as not only are the psychogeographers men but the great majority of the people they meet in the course of their observations are also men. Early French psychogeographers operated in an "erotic" Paris conducting seemingly Freudian walks which were mainly concerned with "the pursuit of beautiful women" (Coverley, 2006:21). From this perspective women are not to be the actors in the outside world: they "do not look, they are looked at" (Jenks, 2006:150). In Marylebone High Street the advertising for the Sophisticats nightclub offering "totally nude table dancing" constitutes an outdoor invitation to the male gaze in an indoor setting (see Figure 2). On the poster photographed in March 2009 the graffito, "Whore" is clearly seen on the woman's face. Historically women were vilified and even punished merely for walking, either alone or with a man. Their reasons for walking were sexualised even when those of their male companions were not. The explicit understanding to be taken from this is that women need a good reason to be outside – such as shopping or collecting their children: "women cannot simply walk" (Jenks, 2006:150; Solnit, 2001).

In the City of London Sinclair traces the history of one of the church-sites to the ancient cult of Mithras. He notes that "women were not permitted to attend the ceremonies", yet in the next sentence one of these ceremonies (cutting a bull's throat) is depicted as "crucial" in "understanding the psychogeography of the city" (Sinclair, 2003c:115). Two pages later, lest any woman still foolhardily imagine herself at the heart of this narrative, Sinclair's account of his experience at a seven a.m. Ascension Day church service contains inappropriate, explicitly sexual imagery in a description of a

woman worshipper. Walking is celebrated by psychogeographers as a cultural act and an important way to understand the world, yet it seems to be denied to women (Solnit, 2001). Rebecca Solnit discovered from a particularly extreme experience when her intentions were misconstrued that she "... had no real right to life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness out-of-doors ..." (2001:241). It seems that not only is the woman psychogeographer vulnerable to attack from the brutal indigenous population, but the male-as-norm character of psychogeographers and their interest in male-dominated society have been established since time immemorial.



Figure 2: Poster outside Sophisticats nightclub, 28 Marylebone Lane

10. Is psychogeography compatible with feminist research approaches?

The prospect of integrating features of feminist perspective research practice with psychogeography, including the non-exploitative relationship between the researcher and researched, sharing of subjectivity, and an intention to study women's place in society in order to improve women's lot is one which would repay investigation, both theoretically and in practice. The notion of psychogeography as a masculine activity touches on two areas of interest to feminist researchers: essentialist beliefs that the 'traditional' place of women is in the domestic sphere, while men go about in the outside world; and the issue of personal safety. Women's place in the home is often explained by the identity of the male with culture and the female with nature (Ortner, 1982). The culture of the outside world may be seen as dangerous to women, especially if they are seen as deviants just for being there ('asking for it').

The clash between the subjects of interest to male psychogeographers and feminist researchers serves to introduce the obstacles to such a consideration and to highlight its fascination. The masculine tradition of psychogeographical practice may operate to challenge woman researchers to examine the possibility of using this approach in conjunction with feminist perspective research methods as a way of exploring and questioning women's place in a patriarchal culture (Acker et al, 1983). Feminist research seeks to address the "invisibility" of women's experience in academic studies (Roberts, 1990:7), to overturn the male-as-norm perspective, and to highlight the possibilities for women to engage in 'male-preserve' activities.

The charming vagueness of psychogeography and its explicit search for new ways to understand the city environment are compatible with the non-existence of a particular feminist method, which encourages feminist researchers to “use any and every means available for investigating the condition of women in sexist society” in order to combat exclusion (Coverley, 2006; Debord, 1955, Letherby, 2003; Stanley, 1990, cited by Watts, 2006:386). In the case of the male preserve of psychogeography these feminist intentions would apply not only to the subject of the study but also to the practice of the research method itself. The psychogeographical multiplicity of data collection methods chimes well, moreover, with the “messiness” of feminist research processes and the knowledge they generate (Letherby, 2003:6).

Watts (2006) discusses her discomfort at disguising the feminist perspective of her research as her women participants were not in sympathy with her views. She also implies that the participants in feminist research should be exclusively female. However, these two considerations are less important in the context of psychogeography. Firstly, feminist research methods are not necessarily recognizable to a layperson and therefore are unlikely to be rejected by unsympathetic participants. Secondly, the intention to improve the lot of women may be achieved by studying men as well as women (Letherby, 2003). It is important to note also that many of the features of feminist perspective research, such as the emphasis on “ethics of care”, are now considered to constitute “good practice” within mainstream qualitative research. (Watts, 2006:387,385).

Hegde (2009:279) terms the recognisable features of feminist perspective research as “methodological dilemmas” as she finds the fulfilment of aims concerning “voice, speech, silence, the politics of location, and the recuperation of experience” very difficult in an ethnographic study of women in India, yet due to the differences between her methods and those of the “stroller” these aims could much more easily be integrated into research using a psychogeographic approach. The foregrounding of organisation members’ own understanding of their situation would be achieved with more difficulty as the psychogeographer operates as an outsider, literally passing through. Inter-subjectivity (or self-disclosure) is more relevant as the researcher experiences the layering of the study, although full inter-subjectivity (in terms of offering participants editing rights) would present difficulties in the ordering of multi-layered analysis (Reinharz, 1992; Shields & Dervin, 1993). First-person narratives within feminist research are similar to the self-consciousness psychogeographical writings about experiences “on the road”.

11. Conclusions

The intention of this paper has been to explore the possibilities of applying a psychogeographic approach to feminist perspective organisational research. Various aspects of established methodological concerns have been compared with psychogeographic practice in testing for suitability in the business field. An obstacle to the psychogeographic approach is that it is not suitable for research in all types of organisation. The “stroller” must have access to the premises – they must be on the route of the stroll. Safety is a very important issue: it has been seen that Self and Sinclair, two of the most well-known practitioners, always walk with at least one companion.

An important barrier to undertaking organisational research as a woman psychogeographer that must be considered is that of the practice’s apparent masculinity, which results partly from safety concerns, but also from its avowed interest in male-dominated society as well as traditional anti-feminist views about suitable activities for women and appropriate locations for their activities. These obstacles presents a great attraction as it seems that this is a territory ripe for a feminist re-interpretation. It is therefore contended that psychogeography would be a welcome addition to feminist perspective, organisational research methodological toolkit.

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