

Best Outstanding Output



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Research area: Sociology of Personal Life

Although I've always worked on relationships, intimacy and sexuality, I actually started off in Modern Languages a while ago. I have worked at UoM with Prof Brian Heaphy since 2018 on projects relating to same-sex relationships and we are in the final stages of writing up a study about same-sex divorce.

Broadly, I research relationships, whether that's in the context of intimacy, marriage, divorce, friendship, or fleeting connections with strangers. I am interested in how relationships are shaped by material circumstances, class, or by personal biography, so have mostly explored that aspect in a number of different contexts. I also find the intense relational work that gets done when relationships break down to be very interesting because it is often so complex. More recently, I have begun to explore the sensory side of relationships, how relationships can feel strange, magical, disturbing, or uncanny. This led me to develop a side project on retreat-going, which, after I read Jennifer Mason's *Affinities* (2018), led to my article on the subject.

In your own words, please describe your outstanding research whether that be an output, impact, contribution to the environment:

Reading the literature around retreats (and practices that are similar to retreats, like yoga, meditation, self-help groups, and so on) it struck me that so much of it viewed these practices suspiciously, as being all about 'the self'. Whether that means viewing the retreat as a sort of narcissistic and self-indulgent pursuit. Or viewing things like mindfulness meditation as corporate discipline in disguise.

I am a lot less suspicious. I was surprised by how often important relationships came up when I spoke to retreat-goers. Not relationships as you might normally imagine them (i.e. friends, family, colleagues). Instead my participants talked a lot about transient, fleeting connections with others that, despite lasting only a few days, a week at most, nevertheless made a profound impact on their time on retreat. There was *also* a sense in my data that, in part, people went on retreat intending to make connections, to 'be in community', or to generate bonds with other likeminded souls. They went on retreat to be linked to something bigger, something beyond them, that was hard to put into words. So the article claims that a) the importance of relationships on retreat has been overlooked and b) that magical, strange or enchanting connections can be in fact intentionally brought about through collective practices.

What motivated you to do this?

I have a close friend who told me about their retreat experience, which sparked my interest.

What are you planning to do next?

I have a couple more follow-up activities on the retreat-going project. I am working with a graphic artist to produce a comic book that translates my retreats paper into easy-to-access visual medium. This has been funded by an ESRC Impact Acceleration Account grant. I also have a second article nearly there that explores misbehaviour on retreat. This looks at how and why retreat-goers break rules, mess about, gossip, and refuse to take things as seriously as they should.

With Prof Heaphy I am writing up a study on same-sex divorce, and, all things going well, should be able to disseminate the findings very soon. I have a couple of papers on research methods underway. And in the medium term I am developing research into relationships in a few different key contexts – break-ups and singlehood, therapy culture, and everyday forms of mysticism.