The Practices and Politics of Description

A workshop brought to you by Centre for Humanities and Social Sciences of Health, Technology and Medicine, the Publics and Practices Research Cluster and engage@liverpool at The University of Liverpool, and the North West Social Science Doctoral Training Partnership.

Date Tuesday 14th May 2019 9.30-18.00, Venue: Rendall Building, Seminar Room 10 University of Liverpool (Building number 432, Grid reference D2)

The recent call for a descriptive (re)turn from Heather Love (2010, 2013, 2015, 2016) is the product of a meeting between, and so a coming together of, literary criticism, cultural studies, philosophy, sociology, anthropology, history and STS research. Following Love, methods of description are key methodological practices and, insofar as they are also social and collaborative in all manner of ways, descriptions express meetings by virtue of what they bring together when and where they do. But descriptions are not neutral precisely because they are forms of social (and technical) practice. They do different kinds of things depending on how they are pursued and put together. While they bring things together, they can also produce points of theoretical, methodological and indeed political divergence, even exclusion and, from there, realignments of many kinds. This is true whether descriptions arise from engagements with people, texts, objects and events, whether they are concentrated in places and times where consensus is built or forged, where instructions, objectives or rules are handed down or, in more antagonistic terms, where consensus is critiqued or instructions, objectives and rules opposed. Some of the most overt antagonisms descriptive practice fosters includes climate change denialism and political economic conflict but there are also battlegrounds within academic disciplines and workplaces. In this workshop we consider the practices and politics of description from an empirical standpoint, treating it as both a practical concern in as well as the intellectual ground for drawing together different contributions to sense-making work. Our aim is to explore the spaces descriptive practices open up, and the importance of description as a meeting point, site, ground and point of politics. The contributors ask, how precisely do descriptions do things, for whom and under what conditions?

09.30-10.00	Registration

10.00-10.15	**Welcome and Introduction** Nicole Vitellone (University of Liverpool), Ciara Kierans (University of Liverpool), Michael Mair (University of Liverpool)
10.15-11.15	*'Care, concern and the ethics of description'* Heather Love (English, University of Pennsylvania)
11.15-11.30	Refreshments
11.30- 13.00	*'In between silence and re-describing matters of care: An attempt at ethnography of cognitive dis/ability'* Dana Hradcová (Centre of Expertise in Longevity and Long-term Care, Faculty of Humanities, Charles University, Prague) Michal Synek (Center for Theoretical Study, Joint Research Institute of Charles University and the Czech Academy of Sciences) *'How do we know failure? Exploring the role of descriptions in establishing failures in healthcare'* Dawn Goodwin (Social Science, Medical School, Lancaster University)
13.00-14.00	Lunch
14.00-15.30	*'Just what are we doing when we're describing AI? Harvey Sacks, the commentator machine and the descriptive turn in artificial intelligence'* Philippe Sormani (Science and Technologies Studies Lab, University of Lausanne) Phillip Brooker (Sociology, University of Liverpool) Michael Mair (Sociology, University of Liverpool) *'The corrupting text: Reading, interpreting, and exchanging ancient manuscripts'* Roberta Mazza (Classics and Ancient History, University of Manchester)
15.30-15.45	Refreshments
15.45-17.15	*'Making Residual Categories: Describing Chronic Kidney Disease of Unknown Origin'* Ciara Kierans (Medical Anthropology, University of Liverpool) *'Thinking with the Problem: Sociology and the Craft of Description'* Nicole Vitellone (Sociology, University of Liverpool)
17.15-18.00	Closing remarks

Registration is free but numbers are limited. Please register your attendance. Please complete all question prompts. Lunch and refreshments will be provided.
For queries related to this event contact Rachel Barrett – slsjmret@liverpool.ac.uk

Abstracts

Heather Love, '*Care, Concern, and the Ethics of Description'.*

This paper assesses the utility of Bruno Latour's scholarship for work in the interpretive humanities. I consider the way that his emphasis on "matters of concern" has been taken up in the context of debates about reading methods and critique in literary studies. I argue that although Latour relies rhetorically on the feminist ethics of care to extend the reach of Actor-Network-Theory, concern is better understood in an epistemological and methodological framework than in an ethical framework. Returning to Latour's early work in STS demonstrates the value of a method that attends to the values in things, and that relies on attention rather than empathy as a critical tool.

Dana Hradcová, and Michael Synek, '*In between silence and re-describing matters of care: An attempt at ethnography of cognitive dis/ability'.*

Our writing is never without unintended consequences – in our descriptions we are capable of harm, and we may trespass and even hurt – our texts are not innocent (Love 2010). While engaging with people living with dementia – at home, in community services, in health care centre – we encountered multiple ways of staying with trouble (Haraway 2016) and together with our partners weaved (Star 2009) little narratives capturing the idiosyncratic dignity of multiple patterns of living with dementia. We followed the actors (Latour 2005) and tried to make sure that we speak (to them) well about the things that they value (Latour 2013). Nevertheless, in ensuing consultations, we have realized that while our stories acknowledged the complexity of caring efforts dedicated to maintaining the coherence of living and dying, the moments when actions and accounts of people identified as cognitively impaired were displaced into the realm of the untranslatable by reference to their disability were not convincingly articulated. Did the somewhat "modern" aesthetics of the caring efforts and of the "baroque" text which describes them concealed "non-rational" everyday realities? In this paper, we are responding to this question by exploring how – in care and in STS research – is the silence surrounding cognitive dis/ability created, maintained and dispelled. And while making the shift from composition towards critique, we want to diffract it as well – we ask if the silence over the ruins of disabling discourses left after the attack of critique (Latour 2004) could be dispelled by co-formulating critical matters of care (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017).

Dawn Goodwin '*How do we know failure? Exploring the role of descriptions in establishing failures in healthcare'.*

In 2008, 5 'serious untoward incidents' occurred on the maternity unit of Furness General Hospital in the UK. The prevailing view, held by clinical staff, hospital managers and executives, was that these events were unconnected and did not signal serious failures in care. Multiple investigations were conducted but the events were never examined together until the Morecambe Bay Investigation was commissioned in 2015. The consensus, that these events were unconnected, was maintained by the testimony of staff and governance procedures conducted by managers and executives, and prevented the incidents from being considered together. Drawing on the report of this investigation, I examine how the prevailing view was built and dismantled, eventually being replaced with a very different description. I explore how mortality statistics were disputed, harm was remade as 'risk management' through governance procedures that might have detected harm but instead were employed to control and contain 'scandal'. Overturning this view required affected

parents to become activists, engaging with governing bodies and legal processes, challenging clinicians, lobbying for inquests, mobilising social media and engaging with the national press. Through these descriptive meetings I trace how descriptions weaken or gather force as they travel through different forums and processes, and are presented to different audiences – all pivotal to whether a description may hold as a reliable account of events. Thus, I examine the knowledge-making practices around failure; the claims that are made – their positionality, weighting, authority and mobility – as different descriptions of events circulate.

Michael Mair , Phillip Brooker, Philippe Sormani , '*Just What Are We Doing When We're Describing AI? Harvey Sacks, the Commentator Machine and the Descriptive Turn in Artificial Intelligence*'.

Heather Love and colleagues, in a series of much discussed papers, advocate an approach to analytical work that would focus on surface rather than hidden orders and 'build better descriptions' by drawing on particular kinds of sociological research as a source of proximate inspiration. Reflecting on Love and colleagues' proposals, we return to the work of one of those they cite, Harvey Sacks, to ask 'which surfaces?' and 'better for what?' as a way of contributing to the debate they sought to initiate. We use a peculiar 'descriptive assemblage' proposed by Sacks to explore the 'descriptive politics' of contemporary AI. In 'Sociological Description', Sacks imagines a 'commentator machine' composed of two parts: a doing part and a describing part. This machinery does things while providing simultaneous commentaries on those doings. We are interested in the kind of commentator machine contemporary AI might be, i.e., in what the saying and doing parts are and how their relations can be resolved, and in exploring the problems different kinds of observer of AI have in describing it. AI and machine learning technologies are often said to speak for themselves, the proof of their efficacy displayed in what they do. Reviewing two examples involving 'higher' and 'lower' profile AI - the gameplay of Google's AlphaGo and the work of a commercial NLP algorithm - we examine the descriptive 'meetings' involved, the troubles they reveal and what we can learn from them when it comes to describing what AI does and how.

Robert Mazza, '*The corrupting text: Reading, interpreting, and exchanging ancient manuscripts*'.

In Thick Description, Geertz writes that "doing ethnography is like trying to read (in the sense of 'constructing a reading of') a manuscript - foreign, faded, full of ellipses, incoherencies, suspicious emendations, and tendentious commentaries, but written not in conventionalized graphs of sound but in transient examples of shaped behaviours" (1973: 10). The aim of this paper is to apply ethnographic methodologies in order to read (in the sense of deconstructing "transient examples of shaped behaviours") what I am doing when I decipher ancient manuscripts, and to study the nature of texts. Through the description of my profession, papyrology, I will describe the meeting between academics (papyrologists), the objects they study (ancient manuscripts) and their owners (institutions or private collectors). What is it that is going on when papyrologists accept to decipher a manuscript assigned to them by its owner? What shaped behaviours take place and what cultural meanings do they produce and re-produce? (Geertz 1973; Love 2013). As my description will show, ancient manuscripts' reading generates complex exchanges (Mauss 1925; Kopytoff 1986) that I propose to read as guided by the "corrupting" essence of manuscripts. Manuscripts are constantly in the process of material corruption induced by aging and manipulation, and of textual, philological corruption generated by the scribes; finally, manuscripts have the power to corrupt those who want to possess them as interpreters or collectors. By revealing manuscripts' corrupting

essence, my description questions current politics and ethics in cultural heritage preservation, and academic professional practices.

Ciara Kierans, 'Making Residual Categories: Describing Chronic Kidney Disease of Unknown Origin'.

Working with the residual category of 'Chronic Kidney Disease of Unknown Origin', this paper examines the methodological value of 'thin' and 'thick' descriptions when accounting for unexplained phenomena. In recent years, across countries in the global south, e.g. Central America, Southeast Asia and parts of Mexico, there has been an unexplained increase in Chronic Kidney Disease, newly categorised as Chronic Kidney Disease of Unknown Origin (CKDu). CKDu has been described as a 'medical enigma' because it cannot be accounted for in conventional aetiological terms, i.e., it is not directly attributable to increases in diabetes or hypertension, but variously linked to social, cultural and environmental concerns. CKDu affects a comparatively younger demographic, is linked to informal, precarious work, (e.g. agri-industries and mining), as well as to long-term environmental harm. Those affected by it tend to be from poor communities, often working with pesticides, and/or in the context of heavy metals and contaminated water supplies. However, despite growing efforts among different scientific communities, the search for single causes and the reliance on conventional analysis has made little progress. CKDu, as its classification suggests, resists standard explanations and approaches across both the biosciences and the social sciences. As a consequence, no one discipline can claim epistemic authority on the issue. Taking CKDu as a contemporary empirical case, I ask, when ontology is itself at stake, are we faced with a descriptive challenge or an interpretive one? On finding new virtue in 'flat' readings and 'thin' description, I engage Heather Love's orientation to the descriptive turn as a provocative extension of the turn to practice, to examine what we are pragmatically confronting in the enigma of CKDu.

Nicole Vitellone, 'Thinking with the Problem: Sociology and the Craft of Description'.

Howard Becker's methodological practice of description has been debated, critiqued and renewed in a range of fields including sociology, anthropology, cultural studies, STS, drug policy and research and more recently Heather Love's (2015) appraisal of deviance studies. Much of this debate concerns the uses of social research methods and their political effects. Taking up these concerns with the construction of social scientific knowledge this paper returns to the problem of description in Becker's work. Focusing on his research on drug use and deviance (Becker 1953, 1963, 1967, 1998) it addresses the methodological problem of description in the research process and the effects of the descriptive method for situating knowledge of the problem. In reviewing the methodological relevance of problems as a tool for thinking sociologically the paper evaluates the contribution of Becker's pragmatic methodology for a politics of knowledge production. In so doing it demonstrates how problems are transformative meetings of methods, objects, publics and disciplinary practices.