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# ***It's not what I expected: Encountering the serendipitous in qualitative research fieldwork***

**Karen Weiss**

Western Sydney University

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### **Abstract**

As a researcher, when I go out to do my fieldwork, it is inevitable that I carry with me a certain mindset of what I expect or hope to encounter. While remaining conscious of the research question when conducting fieldwork, there is also a necessity to cultivate an awareness of the serendipitous, that happy encounter with the unexpected which can offer alternate paths or different insights into the research questions.

I find that opening myself to all my senses, grounding myself in where I am, increases my intuitive awareness and the possibility of encountering the serendipitous in my fieldwork. As I foreground sensory interconnection in the field, I may find myself being guided to insights by the unexpected. In this paper, I explore the possibility of a causal connection between a grounded, sensory and experiential approach to my fieldwork and the serendipitous occurrence.

My methodology is hermeneutic phenomenology which requires 'an awareness of life as an interpretive experience' (Laverty 2003). I would argue that this requires the researcher to be cognizant of being sensorily embodied in this world. Sarah Pink (2015) writes: 'the idea of a sensory ethnography ... is based on an understanding of the senses as interconnected and interrelated' (p.xiii).

I will be illustrating my paper with short narratives and images from my fieldwork in Japan and Central Australia.

## **Serendipity and Self-Awareness**

I arrive at Tokyo airport, tired, anxious and disoriented, my body clock locked into alarm mode. In addition, an unfamiliar language, script and culture present challenges for the tasks I need to carry out – to pass through immigration and customs, find the luggage, change money, get a taxi, our hotel, the check-in – all requiring a certain dogged singlemindedness to accomplish, before achieving the simple nirvana of a shower and bed.

But how helpful is this single-minded focus in achieving my research fieldwork goals? I would argue that while the underlying goal is undoubtedly one of working toward answering the research question, the most useful means by which this can be achieved is one which involves a grounded self-awareness of my body as a whole – the physical, the sensual and the intuitive as well as the intellect, a recognition of the embodied mind. This grounded self-awareness may potentially in turn lead to encounters with the serendipitous, those happy connections which can reveal new insights about the research.

There has been a considerable amount of research dedicated to better understanding the phenomenon of serendipity, especially in the sciences (Stoskopf, 2005; Yaqub, 2018; Copeland, 2017). The history of scientific and technological discovery in particular is scattered throughout with examples of serendipity: Daguerre and the fumes from a spilled jar of mercury creating a photographic image; Goodyear accidentally discovering vulcanisation by allowing a mixture of sulphur and rubber to touch a hot stove, Fleming and the contamination of a Petri dish (he sneezed on it) leading to the discovery of anti-bacterial agents (Yaqub, 2018). The list goes on. Rosenman (1988) noted 30 years ago that when writing papers for journals about their discoveries, researchers were often reluctant to admit to the role that serendipity had played in their research process. Today, the role of serendipity in research is becoming more widely acknowledged, with former biologist now social scientist, Ohid Yaqub, being awarded a US\$1.7 million grant by the European Research Council to research the frequency, significance and nature of serendipity in biomedicine (Editorial Nature, 2018). Interest in serendipity has spread from the quantitative to qualitative research (Fine & Deegan, 2006; Rivoal & Salazar, 2013; McCay-Peet, Toms, Kelloway, 2014; Åkerström. 2013). Rivoal and Salazar (2013) state:

In anthropology, serendipity, together with reflexivity and openness, is widely accepted as a key characteristic (and strength) of the ethnographic method... (it) is also deemed to shape the ethnographic process. (p.178).

There have been many attempts to define serendipity. These range from the simplicity of the 'happy accident' (McCay-Peet, Toms & Kelloway, 2015, p.392), to definitions which include process – 'an ability to apply sagacity to chance observation and thereby find something other than what one was looking for' (Campbell, as cited in Stoskopf, 2005 p.333). Or those that include context:

... microenvironments that make for unanticipated sociocognitive interactions between those [with] prepared minds (Merton & Barber, as cited in McCay-Peet, Toms & Kelloway, 2015, p.392).

My preference is for Makri and Blandford's (2012) definition – 'a mix of *unexpectedness* and *insight* [that lead] to a *valuable, unanticipated* outcome' (p.684) – as I find this closest to my personal experience.

Sarah Pink (2012) in *Doing Sensory Ethnography*, writes the following:

I would urge contemporary ethnographers, artists and designers who engage with the senses to be more explicit about the ways of experiencing and knowing that become central to their ethnographies, to share with others the senses of place they felt as they sought to occupy similar places to those of their research participants, and to acknowledge the processes through which their sensory knowing has become part of their scholarship or practice (p.xii).

As Pink argues, to more fully explore my research question which involves understanding perceptions by myself and others of the medium of clay, I felt the need to be open to my senses, to recognise the unexpected as integral to my research process.

## **Listening to other voices**

My research question asks: 'What can we learn about the perceived differences of ceramic art, craft and design in the West, in comparison with other than Western cultures, via a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to ceramics practice?'. I am endeavouring to explore this question employing face-to-face interviews with ceramics practitioners from both Western and non-Western cultures, as well as immersing myself in an experience of the cultures of my interviewees.

I have travelled to Japan, Central Australia and southwestern USA and held interviews with a range of practitioners. These include: four Japanese potters; an Indonesian ceramic artist studying in Japan; two Aboriginal potters from the Hermannsburg-Ntaria community in Central Australia; five Pueblo potters and a Hopi potter from New Mexico and Arizona, USA respectively; a Sydney-based Italian/Australian ceramic artist, a Melbourne-based potter and a Sydney-based ceramics designer.

By opening myself, as fully as I can to a sensory awareness of my physical and social context, I open myself to different voices, allowing me to better situate myself within the participant's world, adding extra dimension to my experience of the fieldwork. I create opportunities for experiencing these

multiple voices by requesting that the interview takes place in the interviewee's workplace, if possible. The interview is therefore taking place in their familiar territory, which, I believe, may serve to ameliorate the unfamiliarity of the interview experience for the interviewee, leaving them more clearly in control of the interview situation. It also provides a place for social interaction and building rapport as the interviewee shows me around their workshop/studio and allows me to ground myself in their space, to physically connect with their life-world.



Fig. 1. Emi Yano showing her old workshop. Photographer B.Weiss

For example, when visiting old workshops occasionally used by Japanese potter Emi Yano (Fig.1) – the smell of clay, a mixture of mould and earth, dampness and dust, the sprawl of workshops partitioned off from sunlight, dimly lit by a single bulb, an earthen floor, further back in the dimness huge industrial kilns, now abandoned, and behind the workshops, the rank growth of spring covering

piles of shards, the potters' midden heap. I can contrast this with her tiny home studio, barely 3m x 3m, shoehorned into the side of her recently built home, varnished chipboard walls, two lined with shelving, clean, bright with natural light, tools and equipment lovingly ordered, enough room so that all is at arm's length when she is seated at her pottery wheel. These two contrasting environments add their voices to that of the potter as she speaks to me in the interview. Ian Brady (2005) in his essay *Poetics for a Planet*, speaks of 'multivocality' and 'a sea of shifting landscapes...the intertextualities of life' (p. 981).

One challenge to myself as researcher in these face-to-face interviews is the phenomenon of selective perception. This is well demonstrated by the famous selective attention test 'The Invisible Gorilla' devised by Daniel Simons and Christopher Chabris (1999). Using the term 'inattentional blindness', Simons and Chabris (1999) write, 'without attention, visual features of our environment are not perceived at all (or at least not consciously perceived)' (p.981).

I find that during the actual interview, I am so intensely focussed on the person whom I am interviewing, their responses, both oral and physical, during the interplay of interviewer and interviewee, that literally a gorilla could be dancing in the background, and I doubt that I would notice. Therefore, during the time before and after the interview, which are times for casual interaction with the interviewee, I take as full an advantage as possible of these times and any breaks during the interview, to be as grounded in my body and bodily senses as I can be.

In fieldwork, as in everyday life, there are decisions which need to be made – often split-second decisions – which can influence the outcome favorably or unfavourably. When immersed in a different culture, the understandings and rationales we have accumulated through life experiences of our natal cultures may not apply. Assumptions we have derived from our culture may not only be invalid in a differing context but may actively work against achieving a positive outcome. An example would be one of the Japanese potters who had agreed to participate in my project, decided to drop out after receiving the invitation email that I had sent. In the email I referred to 'Western and non-Western', which she understood as anti-Western, a sentiment with which she could not agree. In response to this, I later exchanged the term 'non-Western' for 'other-than-Western' to, hopefully, avoid future misunderstandings.

Dr. Geoff Hyde in his workshop on Argumentation in 2017, warned of the dangers of cognitive bias in research. He spoke of confirmation bias where 'we prefer evidence that supports our existing belief'; of a 'biased search for information', 'biased interpretation of evidence' and of 'biased memory'. It is tempting to cherry-pick that which supports the preferred outcomes of our research and exclude those which challenge it. Likewise, in fieldwork, the temptation exists to approach the research task with a fixed mindset in which certain things are considered relevant and need to be included and that which we consider irrelevant must be excluded. I would argue that by opening up the

experience of the interview situation to include an awareness of the interviewer's state of mind and physical being, the weather, the time, the physical, social and cultural surroundings – factors which could appear peripheral, even irrelevant, can, when included, create a valuable contribution to the overall experience and eventual interpretation of the interview.

But how does this discussion relate to serendipity? Dogen Zenji (1998), a 13th century Zen Buddhist patriarch says: 'That the self-advances and confirms the ten thousand things is called delusion. That the ten thousand things advance and confirm the self is called enlightenment'. The 'ten thousand things' is a metaphor for the world. In Buddhist thinking, similarly to Heidegger's *Dasein*, the world we live in, that we are aware of, is an image of the world that we have created for ourselves. As such, my world is different to your world. As a self-created world, the Buddhists ask, what is the reality of this world? Is it any more or less real than the world of the person that you are sitting next to? When as a researcher, I go out to do fieldwork with the mindset of confirming that my world is the only real world, I am, as Dogen Zenji points out, deluding myself. However, when I open myself up to the existence of other worlds, and my interconnection with all otherness (other beings) something will occur which manifests that interconnection. I would argue that serendipity may not a coincidence but a direct result.

## **Hermannsburg, Central Australia**

As an example of serendipity from my fieldwork, I would like to take you to the community of Hermannsburg, a predominantly Aboriginal community located 600,127 kilometres southwest of Alice Springs. Hermannsburg was named after a small town in Germany from which sprang a Lutheran missionary movement in the 1860s intent on spreading the message of Jesus to heathen souls in the far corners of the earth (Klaassen 2018). Hermannsburg is best known as the home of the celebrated Aboriginal painter Albert Namatjira, and is now the home of the Hermannsburg Potters, an Aboriginal potters' group, two of whom I was intending to interview for my research. My connection with the Potters was as the member of the organising committee of the Australian Ceramics Triennale Sydney 2009 responsible for the Aboriginal component of the Triennale. I had invited two senior women, Judith Pungkarta Inkamala and Rahel Kngwarreye Ungwanaka to give demonstrations of their work to the Triennale audience and several Aboriginal organisations in Sydney.

But that was nine years ago. The Arts Coordinator of the Potters with whom I had interacted in 2009 had left. I contacted the current Arts Coordinator, Gabrielle Wallington, with an outline of my project and request to interview Judith and Rahel. Her initial response was quite positive. Then on follow up phone calls and emails, I learnt that Judith was in W.A. on 'sorry business' and Rahel, whose health had been problematic in 2009, was in hospital. After receiving my ethics review approval for my project, I emailed the invitation to participate to Judith and Rahel via Gabrielle. Then I received an email from Gabrielle saying she needed to talk with Arts Law. She was concerned about the 'legalities around recording the ladies' voices and using their images'. This threw me into a bit of a panic. It was now only a few weeks until my trip to Japan, which I was still organising, and then I would go more or less directly to

Hermannsburg on my return to Australia. I contacted Arts Law via email (I received no reply), calmed down, spoke to Gabrielle, obtained approval for a fee for the interview with the ladies and shortly after, left for Japan.

So, here I am in Hermannsburg, pink sand, red rock country, after a chilly night in our campervan (3°C), arriving at the Hermannsburg Potters studio, a low breeze block building mosaicked around the entrance, with a steel picket fence and a large Land Cruiser parked outside. At this point I have no idea whether Judith and Rahel will be there, what my reception will be from Gabrielle, from the ladies, how I will spend my time at Hermannsburg. All I can do is approach with an open mind. I pop my head into the studio. Gabrielle is not there, she is teaching at the school. Come back in an hour. On my way out, we meet with a tall, white-haired man who introduces himself as Neville, 'Neville the devil' he says jokingly. He is one of the Lutheran clergy, *Inkaata* Neville, (*Inkaata* being the Aranda word for holy man) and he points at the manse where he lives, another breeze block building adjoining the church. In our conversation he drops a gentle hint about the need for helpers. Though I don't know it at the time, this is my moment of serendipity. When Gabrielle returns to the studio, I introduce myself and then find myself saying, 'How can I help?'. This simple offer, inspired by my encounter with Neville, is to prove the key to my visit to Hermannsburg. (Fig. 2.) Gabrielle sets me to work, making small coil pots for the Potters to decorate to sell at upcoming festivals. It gives me permission to be with them, to interact with them, to be accepted to some degree, to participate in the rhythm of their working. Serendipity indeed.



Fig. 2. Judith Inkamala explaining her work. Photographer B.Weiss

## **Mashiko, Japan**



The second example of serendipity which I would like to give occurred during my trip to Japan. Euan Craig, an Australian potter who has lived and worked in Japan for many years, had very kindly helped me by contacting four Japanese potters of his acquaintance who spoke English and who were willing to be interviewed for my project. Euan suggested that I meet up with him at the Mashiko Pottery Festival, when he himself would be there and would be able to introduce me to all four participants whom he knew personally. As an aside note, I had been told several times by those better acquainted with Japanese culture, that a personal introduction was essential. A personal introduction is taken as tantamount to a personal recommendation and therefore not necessarily straightforward to obtain, as the person introducing you is seen as in some sense being responsible for what transpires as a result of their introduction. An inappropriate introduction could result in both the person who introduced and the person who allowed the introduction, losing face, face being an important component of Japanese social interaction.

It was a cold, wet day. We travelled to Mashiko by bus, passing through hectares of rice fields, some planted, some as yet bare, with traditional farm houses, white walls, dark grey tile roofs sited on peninsulas seeming to float in the rice fields. Mashiko is renowned for its pottery mainly through the influence of Shoji Hamada, a 20th century potter famous in both the Japanese and Western ceramics world. It was in Mashiko that he chose to live, teach and establish his pottery, a pilgrimage site for many potters from across the world.

Mashiko in Tochigi Prefecture is a town stretched out along a road and the Mashiko Pottery Festival was in full swing when we arrived, undeterred by the weather, to see hundreds of pottery stalls lining the road through Mashiko,. After all, pottery doesn't melt when wet. We located Euan's stall and after exchanging greetings, he told me that one of the potters had decided not to participate. Unfortunately, the potters he had contacted for me were the only Japanese potters he knew at the Festival who spoke English. I was uncertain as to what to do. Euan said, 'Go and have a look at the Festival and meet some people' – the best suggestion possible.

I strolled off, grounding myself in Mashiko, looking at pots and potters, savouring the market atmosphere of hope and uncertainty, of those seeking to find and buy and those wanting to sell. Wandering up a little side alley, I stopped in front of a stall, admiring the work before noticing that the potter was European, or rather, English. We chatted, I told her about my project and that I was looking for a Japanese potter who spoke English to interview. 'Oh, speak to Pia', she said, pointing at a small coffee stall at the end of the alley. 'Her husband's a potter, and he speaks English.' Pia was happy to help. Her husband was located a short distance away making soba noodles, I'd best talk to him after 3 pm when things slowed down. At 3 pm I dropped by and introduced myself, mentioning Pia and Zoe, the Englishwoman. It turned out that Kobayashi san had visited Australia last year as an invited demonstrator at a woodfire conference. He agreed to being interviewed (Fig. 3). Serendipity.



Fig. 3. Shirobey and Pia Kobayashi. Photographer B.Weiss

## Reflections

As I reflect on these examples of serendipity encountered in my fieldwork, two questions arise: how has my fieldwork experience been affected by these moments of serendipity? And further, how did these serendipitous moments contribute to answering my research question?

Each moment of serendipity has opened up new ground for me to consider – with Emi Yano, I was given the opportunity to speak with a woman practitioner in a field, which in Japan, is dominated by male practitioners; in Hermannsburg, being accepted as a fellow practitioner who was there to assist, led to a far deeper and richer contact with the Potters and an understanding of the diverse voices within their community, than I could have ever anticipated; meeting with Shirobey Kobayashi, widely travelled and a well-known personality on the international ceramics circuit, introduced me to someone who had been extensively exposed to Western ideas concerning art, yet still retained and valued much of Japanese ceramic culture.

Although it is still early days in my research process, I can assert, without hesitation, that these, and other experiences of serendipity in my fieldwork, have provided specific phenomenological insights into my research question concerning the role of non-institutional ceramics training, and the way that Japanese potters and Aboriginal potters balance their traditional other than Western cultures and values, with Western culture and its values concerning ideas of ceramic art, craft and design.

In this paper, I have presented examples of how my practice of grounded self-awareness as part of my hermeneutic phenomenological methodology encouraged me to be open to the unexpected, potentially leading to the

serendipitous encounter in my fieldwork. While I have described in detail three narratives, there are many more examples in my research process. This paper demonstrates the need for the researcher to cultivate an awareness of interconnections and the many living voices which can contribute a greater depth and value to the data.

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#### About the author

Karen Weiss is a practicing ceramist, community artist and ceramics journalist with an Associate Diploma in Vis. Arts (Ceramics) and an M.A. in Creative Writing. She is also currently a PhD candidate in the School of Humanities and Communication Arts at Western Sydney University being supervised by Dr. Abbey Mellick Lopes, Dr. Alison Gill and Dr. Michelle Catanzaro. Her love of travelling and ceramics, coupled with an insatiable curiosity about her own Australian and other cultures, has led to her visiting 32 countries, as well as travelling extensively in Australia. She has taught ceramics to teachers, people with a disability, children and adults. She was part of the committee of the Australian Ceramics Triennale Sydney 2009, organising panels and exhibitions for the Aboriginal and Disability speakers, demonstrators and exhibitors, and co-organising the Renegade Clay ephemeral events in the Sydney CBD. She has been an active committee member of the Australian Ceramics Association as Vice President and Education Officer and looks forward to giving a paper at the upcoming Australian Ceramics Triennale in Hobart, May 2019.

Email: [19043223@student.westernsydney.edu.au](mailto:19043223@student.westernsydney.edu.au)