

“who am I and who are you and who are we?”: Navigating ABBA fan identities through collaborative ethnography

How have labels been used by academics to separate and signify certain social formations, for example, music listeners? What has been the impact of such labels – or alternatively, an aversion to labelling – on said groups? How would “ordinary” people react if they knew how scholars had described them: would they be angry, amused, indifferent – or none of the above? These are some of the questions I have been pondering on as part of my PhD studies. While I cannot promise concrete answers to be given by the end of my paper, I’d like to share with you how I have tried to begin grappling with these large questions, through using dialogic and collaborative ethnography in my own research.

My PhD is an ethnographic study of those I deemed ‘super-fans’ of the pop group, ABBA. (The word ‘super-fans’ is a loaded term – I’ll come back to that later.) I’m assuming you have heard of ABBA but as a brief reminder: ABBA were a Swedish pop quartet formed of two couples - Agnetha and Björn, Benny and Anni-Frid - who came to international attention when they won the Eurovision Song Contest in 1974. They released 8 studio albums between 1973 and 1981, achieving No. 1 hit singles across the five main continents; they also had 3 world tours.

The dream didn’t last, though: the two married couples divorced and in 1982, ABBA decided to go on what they called ‘a short break’. It was around 35 years before they recorded together again, in the summer of 2017; their so-called ‘comeback’ was announced on 27th April 2018. In the interim, ABBA’s music was kept alive through various means, including the *Gold: Greatest Hits* album; *Mamma Mia!* the musical and the subsequent films, and ABBA The Museum in Stockholm. You can see some key statistics regarding these on the accompanying slide.

ABBA super-fans are a fascinating group of people to consider, when looking at academic labels regarding social formations, due to the images of them that exist in public consciousness. Two Australian films – *Muriel’s Wedding* and *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*, both released in 1994 - portrayed ABBA fans in a caricatured manner. *Muriel’s Wedding* follows the trials and tribulations of lead character Muriel, a daggy (Australian slang for ‘uncool’) ABBA fan who is desperate to get married. Muriel’s misfit status is heavily intertwined with her ABBA fandom. The ‘cooler’ she becomes, the less ABBA features in her daily life. Muriel herself says, of her ABBA fandom: “[w]hen I lived in Porpoise Spit, I’d just stay in my room for hours and listen to ABBA songs. Sometimes I’d stay in there all day. But since I’ve met you and moved to Sydney, I haven’t listened to one ABBA song. It’s because now my life’s as good as an ABBA song. It’s as good as ‘Dancing Queen’”. In this way, it can be heavily implied that liking or listening to ABBA is synonymous with being uncool, hopeless, and even a social failure.

Similarly, the infamous ‘ABBA turd’ scene from *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* ridicules ABBA fandom. Ralph asks his friend Adam what is in a jar that forms part of his trinket collection: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KQgRNo7hMMw> . Fan studies scholar Mark Duffett said of this scene:

In a movie about cross-dressing stage performance as camp parody, the ABBA turd scene lambasts fandom as a tasteless pursuit. How many ways to degrade fandom can you spot in Adam’s explanation of his interest?... The choice of ABBA as a cultural interest is a comment on both the group’s place in the cultural hierarchy - as a *pop* (not rock) act subjected to endless parodies - and their particular role in relation to the more macho elements of Australian culture...

I will talk a little later in this presentation about ABBA fan reactions to these films but to me at least, Duffett makes a pertinent point.

Of course, ABBA fans are far from alone in being maligned. Whilst academia has barely spoken about ABBA fans specifically, it has had plenty to say about fandom of varying levels – often in a negatively stereotyped and pathological way. The most notable criticism, of course, came from Theodor W. Adorno, who believed that popular music listeners could not critique the music they liked, or even explain why they liked it. Equally, Donald Horton and Richard Wohl's 1950 article, 'Mass Communication and Para-social Interaction: Observations on Intimacy at a Distance' claimed that radio listeners were lulled into a false and one-sided sense of having an intimate relationship with the radio disc jockeys they listened to. Through use of words such as "illusion", "fantasy" and "occult", Horton and Wohl contributed significantly to the view of fandom as pathological.

There are also more recent examples of literature in which fandom is ridiculed, stereotyped and pathologised. In 1985, Fred Vermorel published *Starlust: The Secret Fantasies of Fans*. 'Starlust' proved controversial, as some felt it caricatured the fans depicted. Equally, Rebecca Williams' 2015 book *Post-Object Fandom: Television, Identity, and Self-Narrative* uses pathological terms such as 'ontological security' (borrowing from Giddens) and applies them to television fans.

What has often not been clear about the labels that academics have ascribed to certain social groups, is whether members of such groups have been consulted and collaborated with, to come up with such terminology. For example, one of the most celebrated scholars in fan studies academia, Henry Jenkins, entitled his 1993 monograph as *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*. To view or call a fan a 'textual poacher' is, according to Jenkins, "an alternative conception of fans as readers who appropriate popular texts and reread them in a fashion that serves different interests" (p.23). Yet I felt increasingly uncomfortable reading fans described as "poachers", due to its connotations of theft. My own feelings led me to wonder how the fans he discussed in *Textual Poachers* would have felt upon hearing this word used to describe them. Jenkins claims to have practised dialogic and collaborative editing in the process of writing *Textual Poachers*, yet the processes through which he did this are neither overt or even referred to at all in the final monograph.

Although he shuns the label of "Ethnographer", Jenkins does cite James Clifford's famous chapter, 'On Ethnographic Authority', in the Introduction to *Textual Poachers*. Clifford was a leading figure in the 1980s questioning of anthropological power dynamics. He described ethnography as "a garrulous, overdetermined cross-cultural encounter shot through with power relations and personal cross-purposes" but noted that it was moving towards dialogic and polyphonic paradigms. Dialogic ethnography, according to Luke Eric Lassiter (writing in 2001), is a movement from "authoritative monologue to involved dialogue between ethnographer and interlocutor"; in short, it involves those being studied by seeking their views on what has been said about them.

Meanwhile, collaborative ethnography is, according to Lassiter, the "next logical step" on from dialogic editing: that of "the collaborative reading and interpretation (between the ethnographer and his or her "informants") of the very ethnographic text itself". This seemed an important and natural step in my own research. I wanted to ensure a fair representation of ABBA fans and to produce rich, rounded and accurate emic categories to describe ABBA fandom, rather than what ABBA fans might deem irrelevant – and even inappropriate – etic categories. This was because, as a self-identifying ABBA fan at the start of my project, I strongly believed ABBA fans were somewhat maligned and misunderstood.

Consequently, I have attempted to engage ABBA fans in dialogic and collaborative ethnography as an ethical means of addressing the power of knowledge creation. You can see how I have done this on this slide.

To my knowledge, no one within fan studies academia has asked fans how they see themselves and which labels - or aspects of said labels - they feel are most suited to them. So, in 2016, I chose ten terms that had been used to describe fans or other social worlds:

1. Jitterbugs (Adorno, 1938/1941)
2. Public sphere (Habermas)
3. Subcultures (Hebdige, 1979)
4. Art worlds (Becker, 1983)
5. Imagined communities (Anderson, 1985)
6. Scenes (Straw, 1991)
7. Club cultures (Thornton, 1995)
8. Tribes and neo-tribes (Maffesoli, 1996)
9. Publics and counterpublics (Warner, 2002)
10. Cult fandom (Hills, 2002)

and decided to put them to the ABBA fan community. I was aware they would not be familiar with the ten theories these academic terms arose from, so I allocated three descriptive terms to each theoretical term, as a means of explanation. My plan was to ask ABBA fans which academic term they felt fitted ABBA fandom the most, and which 3-5 characteristics they felt to be most true of ABBA fandom; also, for them to suggest their own words to describe their ABBA fandom.

I wanted to gather answers from different sources: namely, from one of the ABBA fan Facebook groups I work with, as well as an ABBA-related email list. The Facebook group requested me not post links to external online questionnaires or take discussion outside of their group; so I had little choice but to make a long post on the group's page, detailing what I was asking people to do. With the email list, I opted to email out a questionnaire on a Word document. This was an extended version of my Facebook post, asking additional questions about people's individual fandom, as well as their interactions with fellow fans.

In mid-January 2016, I published my Facebook post on the Facebook group and sent my Word document questionnaire to two email lists: one international and one UK-based. There were of course inevitable limitations and self-selection amongst fans when responding, but I will dwell on the shortcomings of this experiment later in my paper.

Three people from the international email list filled in the questionnaire, as well as one from the UK list, whilst 10 people participated in the Facebook post discussion. Whilst these were miniscule numbers compared to the membership of these groups, their answers were enough to provide some initial ideas about how ABBA fans see themselves, as well as these academic terms.

When I revisited these academic terms and my 2016 research on them again, for the purpose of writing this 2019 paper, two things that hadn't occurred to me in 2016 suddenly struck me:

1. I had adopted the seemingly-neutral-and-accurate term 'super-fans' to describe the fans I am working alongside, in my PhD writing. But what would **they** think of **that** term?
2. Do fans think or care about the words used to describe them, as much as I do?

I also wanted to seek their opinion on whether they viewed *Muriel's Wedding* and *Priscilla* as having had a positive or negative impact on ABBA fandom, and specifically representations of ABBA fandom.

I took these questions to two Facebook groups, as well as my ABBA fan Facebook friends by posting a Facebook status asking some questions. As both Facebook groups had asked me not to cross-post across groups, I took separate questions with no overlap to each group. 4 people responded to my Facebook status about the word 'super-fan', whilst 10 members of one group responded to questions about *Muriel's Wedding* and *Priscilla*. 8 people from the other Facebook group responded to questions about the label 'fan'.

The main findings from my 2016 collaborative ethnographic research were that ABBA fans identify most with Hills' theorisation of cult fandom, then Thornton's club cultures, then Anderson's imagined communities. That said, no key word received zero votes overall: one characteristic for each key word received at least one vote, and a wide range of description words found favour with ABBA fans. Most identifiable to them were the description words "long-lasting", "knowledgeable",

“community-oriented”, “people linked by media”, “sense of unity” and “fanatics”. I was surprised by fans’ willingness to call themselves ‘fanatics’, as it is seen as a pejorative word within fan studies. ABBA fans appear to understand the word differently; indeed, some embrace it whole-heartedly and are proud of it.

Fan-proposed words that describe ABBA fandom and/or ABBA fans include:

- Passionate
- Loyal
- Joyous/Sparkle/Melody/Agnetha/Foreign sophistication/Gay
- Intimate/Resonant/Personal
- Diverse community; Age does not matter; Fan family only exists on superficial level; Timeless music; Keep ABBA/the good feeling alive

In the Word document questionnaire, I told ABBA fans the top five characteristics I would personally ascribe to ABBA fandom. It was interesting to note that whilst some ABBA Fans remained neutral or unsure on these statements, no one disagreed with me on any of them.

Major findings from my more recent 2019 attempt at collaborative ethnography were that some ABBA fans had a great aversion to words I had been using to describe them. 3 fan friends rejected the word ‘super-fan’ outright, feeling it had negative implications or connotations. Whilst one fan friend claimed there was nothing differentiating so-called ‘super-fans’ from ‘ordinary’ fans, others felt there was a difference but none of them agreed completely with each other on what the difference is. To my surprise, fans were overwhelmingly positive about *Priscilla* and especially *Muriel’s Wedding*, and their impact on representations of ABBA and ABBA fandom. Indeed, some were confused as to why I had thought they would think otherwise.

There is still a lot more research for me to do in this area... but what were the main learning points from these initial attempts at dialogic and collaborative ethnography? Like Nicole Beaudry’s description of her initial fieldwork attempts in *Shadows In The Field*, I had been rather naïve about many aspects of my ethnographic approach in my non-model fieldwork. I had felt confident in my ability to make my aims and research understood, that fans would be interested, and that many would participate.

In short, this first proper foray into dialogic and collaborative ethnographic work with ABBA fans was one that did not run smoothly. My questionnaires and posts were too long and the instructions were too unclear, for which I was criticised by fans. Some of the information given in the questionnaire was not in the Facebook post, which makes comparisons between the two, unequal. I also did not get as many respondents as I wanted. One fan was very quick to point out flaws in what I was setting out to do:

Many ABBA fans, myself included , reject the notion of any stereotype or being classified or studied as some disparate sub-group . We are all different people from diverse cultures & ethnicities . Propose this questionnaire to a group of indigenous kids who to this very day will sing & dance their feet off to an ABBA song . My theory is that any generalization or theoretical assumption will be corrupted by its limited parameters of classification. *[sic]*

Despite a tough first experience with collaborative ethnography, I believe that the lessons learnt from this venture can be put to good use, and that it is still worth trying to engage with ABBA fans (albeit in perhaps different and shorter ways) regarding how they wish to be represented as fans and what words they think are best in order to do this. At the end of the day, “if I had to do the same again, I would, my friend...”