

"Big Science or The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even"

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Review Essay:

Wendy Hollway & Tony Jefferson (2000). Doing Qualitative Research Differently. Free Association, Narrative and the Interview Method.

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Your fear is contagious
Your anger spread like weeds
Your joy moves with the speed of good news.
As you speak with me you create the world.

Kenneth GERGEN

Dr. Elliott Kupferberg:
*Okay. We spoke last time about childhood
fascinations with danger.*

Dr. Jennifer Melfi:
*I think seeing him again will be very
therapeutic for me.*

Dr. Elliott Kupferberg:
*It's not supposed to be therapeutic for you.
This is your therapy.*

Terrence WINTER, *The Sopranos*, Episode
#18

1. Fictive

Lunch was good yesterday. Frances had given a seminar on phenomenology the day before and I wanted to discuss it further with her, so we met for lunch at the research centre. We began by talking of hermeneutics, HUSSERL and HEIDEGGER, descriptive and interpretative phenomenology. Frances sees a clear division between the two; I sense the latter as a development of the former. [1]

Frances and I both have worked in fine art as practitioners. Now, as social health researchers, we bring our idiosyncratic backgrounds to our current research. With this in mind, I asked Frances to consider the parallel of the descriptive vs. the interpretative in art history. I made a case that in art history the interpretative surely grew out of the purely descriptive and was a way of moving the field forward, enriching our abilities to comprehend works of art differently. [2]

We then returned to talk of HEIDEGGER and his concept of *Dasein* (being there/human "being"). HEIDEGGER wrote, "*Dasein ist bei der Welt*", meaning "dasein inhabits or dwells in the world" (BLATTNER 2000, [5]). We contrasted this with HUSSERL's earlier counter concept of bracketing or suspension of all belief in the outer world. I had brought a copy of Friedrich RUCKERT's (1788-1866) poem, [Ich bin der Welt abhanden gekommen](#) (*I am lost to the world*), to share with Frances. I explained how influential his work had been on the generation following his own in Germany, particularly the generation of HUSSERL (1859-1938) and MAHLER (1860-1911) who set the poem to music. We talked of that German concept of being in the world and withdrawing from it and how the concept moves from philosophy to art and back again in the second half of the nineteenth century. [3]

It was a good lunch, an engaging conversation. How far removed from our daily work then were we really? [4]

2. Polyvocal

In the afterword to their book, *Doing Qualitative Research Differently*, Wendy HOLLWAY and Tony JEFFERSON (2000), advocate for a method of qualitative research that makes a difference to the knowledge that social science is capable of producing (p.155). They ask researchers to begin to see the subjects of research represented with the complexity we currently associate with literature and works of art more generally (p.156). This paradigm shift in social science is profoundly intertwined with the current wave of narrative and the use of narrative as both a research method and a presentational device for social scientists. No longer safe behind neutral language, many social scientists have begun to peer from behind the rocks of scientism. By first telling us who they are they are also starting to tell us why they are doing what they are doing and by this process, beginning to make a difference in the way that science is done. For me, the humanities hold the keys to unlocking these complexities for social scientists. The dialogue that I as a reader always sensed was going on in any written discourse is now finally coming out of the closet. Its liberation is penned in the first person. [5]

HOLLWAY and JEFFERSON's work is based in the theories of psychoanalyst Melanie KLEIN about how the self is forged out of unconscious defences against anxiety (p.19). These defences are intersubjective, that is, they come into play in relations between people (p.20). The authors incorporated this idea of the defended subject within a narrative method that is loosely adopted and adapted from earlier work by Fritz SCHÜTZE, Gabriele ROSENTHAL, and Daniel BARON in Germany (p.34) and further developed here in Britain by Prue CHAMBERLAYNE, Joanna BORNAT, Tom WENGRAF (2000) and others. [6]

In extending the work of their predecessors HOLLWAY and JEFFERSON make use of free associations in order to elicit hidden meanings and incorporate the defended subject within a biographical interpretative method. Thus ultimately, the authors remain indebted to psychoanalysis, both theoretically and methodologically. Their subjects are not only positioned within the surrounding social discourses, but are also seen as motivated by unconscious investments and defences against anxiety. The data production is based upon the principle of free association and data analysis is dependent upon interpretation (p.77). HOLLWAY and JEFFERSON seem in agreement with psychoanalysis when it largely concedes that interpretation is an art and not a science (p.78). [7]

It is not surprising that a turn to subjectivity has meant a turn to the particular model of subjectivity presented by psychoanalysis (CHAMBERLAYNE et al. 2000, p.8). HOLLWAY and JEFFERSON's work is clearly a new orientation in that direction. What needs never to be lost in the transition, however, is the centrality of the researcher—both her/his own social history and individual personality. "To understand oneself and others, we need to understand our own histories and how we have come to be what we are" (p.7). [8]

HOLLWAY and JEFFERSON introduced *Doing Qualitative Research Differently* by making a case for the relationship between people's ambiguous representations and their experiences, or "critical realism" (p.3). The inner and outer worlds of their subjects make up what the author's termed the "psychosocial" (p.4) and it was from this standpoint that the book made its arguments. The authors supported their thesis by giving me accounts of individuals' responses to crime and fear of crime. They told me about people's largely unconscious ways of coping with external threats to safety (pp.138-39) and, in doing so, they informed me how individuals create their identities and position themselves within systems of meaning. [9]

The authors' richly detailed search for a method for their project on response to/fear of crime was painstakingly documented, including some of their false steps along the way. This chapter will be particularly useful to beginning researchers or those making the shift from more traditional approaches to more innovative work. It was through this narration of the researchers' labours in method seeking that a real sense of the authors as individuals began to be uncovered. They revealed to me how they fortuitously stumbled across the biographical-interpretive method and decided to creatively incorporate their concept of the "defended subject" within it. [10]

In their chapter on data production the authors championed a method that includes a common sense approach, reflexivity and utilisation of theory. Methodological tools are championed that parallel psychoanalysis, including the unconscious intersubjective dynamics of the interview relationship and therapeutic concepts such as countertransference, recognition and containment. In the following data analysis chapter the authors made a case for using "a method based on the principle of working with the whole data and paying attention to links and contradictions with that whole" (p.5), in contrast to the widespread tendency in qualitative research to fragment data by using code and retrieve methods. [11]

HOLLWAY and JEFFERSON then presented an alternative approach to ethical guidelines for the conduct of social science research reduced to basic principles of honesty, sympathy and respect. The authors' following chapter demonstrated the weakness involved in coding and clustering, through an analysis of 37 of their cases for the purpose of generalisation. They concluded that generalisations about fear of crime need to be based on biography as well as demographic factors. [12]

Throughout the book, a series of pen portraits (and one longer and more detailed case study that rounded off the book as its conclusion) enabled HOLLWAY and JEFFERSON to skilfully present their subjects, breathing vitality and individuality into their narratives. In fact, often while reading I came away from a descriptive section wanting to know more about the subject. This is not meant as a criticism of the presentation, but rather an indication of how well the stories were told. The portraits came to life and I wanted more, wanted the story to continue on, much the same way I would feel when finishing a good novel. [13]

Rich and evocative accounts peppered *Doing Qualitative Research Differently*, supporting HOLLWAY and JEFFERSON's arguments. These accounts were stories of people living on an estate somewhere in the North of England (I am never sure exactly where and through this the authors maintain their subjects' anonymity). These peoples' narrations, nonetheless, were represented in a Northern dialect, strong and subtle and unimpeachably real, and I had a better sense of who these people were because of it. The fact, however, that HOLLWAY and JEFFERSON did not often use the same device in portraying their own "voices" created disappointment for me. Conceivably, if they had spoken to me more informally and more often in their individual quotidian voices, I may have had even better chances to hear the dialogue—between the authors, between the authors and their subjects and finally, between the authors and myself, the reader. [14]

3. Self-Reflexive

In the best narrative work, descriptive/interpretive analysis is a story about stories. When it veers from this basic concept, it goes off course. When I, as a narrative researcher, look for stories to tell there is another overarching story to tell in how I came to be in this particular landscape in the first place. What was it about me (my peculiar interface with society, policy, trends, and conventions) that led me on the particular path I took? If I disclose this half of the circle then the second half makes sense. It is within the fullness of this circle that the hermeneutic process becomes complete. Only when I can find myself in an "other" can I begin to understand what is unique and individual about an "other" and ultimately what is distinctive about myself. [15]

HOLLWAY and JEFFERSON agreed that the research subject (they made a conscious decision to use the term "subject" to refer to interviewees [p.6]) cannot be known except through another subject—the researcher (p.4). They reminded me that the role of the interviewer is a central mediation in the making of meaning (p.11), including the questions the interviewer asks as well as how subjects are invited to tell their stories (p.10). [16]

The use of an editorial "we" initially enticed me into HOLLWAY or JEFFERSON's work. The frequent shifts into the use of first person singular then back again to the plural, however, created awkwardness and confusion; although I was told who was talking at me, I sometimes did not have a good sense of who was talking with me. I looked for clues, I tried to dig them out, analysing their language as I went, but this at times produced dissatisfaction. [17]

What, then, do I know about HOLLWAY and JEFFERSON after reading this book? When I was reading I wanted to know about the authors who were narrating; I needed to be able to sense them and begin to know them. I yearned to be on familiar terms with the weavers of these tales, understand the persons who guided my journey. Entwining these things together was not an easy task and there were times in the book when it was really working and the script flew off the page, enabling the ensuing stories to soar. An example of this is found in JEFFERSON's rationalisation:

A big reason for this good rapport (*with the interviewee*), I felt, stemmed from our both being members of big families. He never knew that about me, but listening to him talking about his family produced points of identification ... His clean, tidy, well-kept house (unlike some we entered), his active involvement in community affairs, ... and his apparent fitness ... also facilitated my identification with him (my past includes a spell as a PE teacher). I enjoyed interviewing Tommy because I liked him; and I liked him because we had things in common. (p.65) [18]

The possibilities of the "quiet dialogue" of a pure biographical narrative approach came to life in the interview passages that followed these self-revelations by JEFFERSON. I was getting to *know*, simultaneously, both the interviewer and the interviewee through their textual dialogic juxtapositioning on the page. [19]

Between the two authors, however, I seemed to be getting more acquainted with JEFFERSON than with HOLLWAY. Was that because JEFFERSON gave me more clues to his background, told me more of his personal relationship to the stories that he was hearing?

It might be objected that my memories are no more reliable than Tommy's and that I am projecting on to him my own feelings about unpleasant aspects of my childhood. This possibility can be tested against Tommy's text: am I providing the negative aspects or are they present? Our judgement is that they are present in the detail but shorn of the emotion which would naturally accompany them. It is that accompaniment that I feel I know and can use empathetically here. We also made use of our different subjectivities as a way of triangulating on the data we interpreted: did Wendy, from a very different family background, agree that this interpretation applied to Tommy, rather than belonging in part to me? (p.66) [20]

Perhaps just because of JEFFERSON's forthrightness, I was left wanting to know more about HOLLWAY as well—her "very different family background," her motives and more of her reflections too. For example, within one interview relationship, HOLLWAY positioned herself vis-à-vis the subject as "mother" in a mother-daughter relationship, producing what HOLLWAY called a "co-production" of narrative (pp.51-52). Although this was helpful to my understanding of the interview dynamic, as a reader I would have welcomed more subjective background on the researcher herself and how she came to this pivotal role, based in more candidness around her own personal background narrative. [21]

4. Poetic

What does it mean when we know a person? In truth seeking are we merely comparing and contrasting our own everyday world with the worlds of others? Within the individual's world and his/her tendency of "revealing/concealing", "knowing/not knowing" (HEIDEGGER in KRELL 1993), by exploring the terrain, are we simply only portraying the process itself, its dialectical underpinnings—its thesis and antithesis? Or, in fact, do we, in our attempts at some sort of a truth (Verismo) stumble onto a synthesis after all, a moment of revelation that truly is wrenched by the individual in his/her self-knowing and revealed to us? [22]

Asking a person to tell us about his/her life is just a beginning. By doing this, in a less than perfect way, we are at least starting by knowing the person in his/her world, his/her expectations, successes, failures, and dreams. The swirl of a remembered past is (re) constructed by just such illusive characteristics. A narration of a life is, after all is said, a story, an illusion. "Any and all stories we might tell *about* ourselves are essentially fictitious; they are vehicles for warding off the flux and meeting our need for order—illusory though it may be to suppose that this order exists anywhere but in our own minds" (FREEMAN 1997, p.379). Veracity, therefore, must remain secondary. What remains primary is that this is how one individual sees him/herself when asked to recount him/herself today. "Reflecting on one's life is fundamentally a metaphorical one, giving form to one's previous and present experience" (FREEMAN 1993, p.30). [23]

As much as we try to elevate this metaphor to a discussion of objects, concepts, thoughts, and the like, to a higher plane, perhaps by exploring meaning within meanings of the language used to describe such things, we all still "bump into the furniture" (*op cit*, p.13). Perhaps the most any approach to knowing of others can produce in sensing the lives of others—that very *otherness*—is a fleeting consciousness of what it is like to bump into their furniture, their own *selves* through the stories that they construct via the illusory imagination of narrative. These are the illusions like the shapes, forms, monsters that one envisions—momentarily—in a passing cloud. They reform back into a cloud again, and then pass from view, as we remain always expectant of another to appear. The trick is to "get it down"—this illusion, this configuration of momentary meaningfulness—before it escapes from memory. Such it is in an illusion, so too in the telling of stories of lives. [24]

HOLLWAY and JEFFERSON's *Doing Qualitative Research Differently* makes a major contribution to extending and enriching the ways in which we do research within a narrative methodology. I would have liked even more of the liberation of self-reflexivity revealed within their accounts. If a narrative work is a story about stories, then the fruition of it is found in its re-telling through its writing. Self-reflection requires the self stripped bare and revealed in order for our ruminations to be truly meaningful and for them to ultimately reach our audience. The myriad possibilities that extend and enrich our palette are unlocked through the art of exposition. By doing so we finally carve our niche in Big Science and embrace the potential of our own Art. [25]

Kenneth GERGEN (2000) reminds us that there are good reasons for a pluralist psychology (p.25). He also reminds us that theory is a kind of societal practise and is best expressed through alternate forms of writing—polyvocal, self-reflexive, fictional, poetic, and so on (p.27). Ultimately, it is through these shifts in writing that we open up the possibilities of different relationships with our readers as well as with Big Science—the bride that social science has pursued so doggedly and for so long. [26]

5. Fictive Redux (*Four weeks later*)

Frances and I met for lunch again today. We chatted about a friend's presentation that we had attended just the day before. Frances remarked how well he had put forward his material. I replied that maybe we felt that because he was so easy to look at. We both agreed that he was built like a Rugby player and most probably a real heartbreaker. He had presented a fairly straightforward qualitative survey project and subsequently the two of us had retreated into another world—the visual. We acknowledged this about ourselves and delighted in sharing our secret of this crime against proper audience attentiveness. [27]

I told Frances that more and more I am finding it difficult to return to old ways of doing research and even older ways of writing about it. The narrative pulls me forward into new territories, into finding different approaches to doing research

and, ultimately, new means of reporting it, injecting life and a sense of purpose into my efforts. This is good news, just as my fear of it is contagious. [28]

Frances and I left lunch with a renewed resolution of courage and then scurried individually to the safety our own recreated worlds. [29]

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