

## Research Less Violent? Or the Ethics of Performative Social Science

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**Abstract:** In this paper I construct an argument which positions research as an inherently violent activity in which the strange is made to appear familiar thereby forcing the otherness of the other into some kind of order, and transforming the unknown into the knowable. Through organising data and imposing an order—which is arguably the point of any analysis and representation—the wild profusion of things is tamed (to use a Foucauldian metaphor). Thus ambiguity and difference are flattened out, and indeterminacy is overlaid with "findings". Furthermore, research can also be seen as an activity in which the moral choices, ethical and analytical decisions, and personal investments of the researcher are secreted away and so are made to appear natural and innocent. I argue that there is an opportunity for performative social science research to remember the ethical consequences of analysis and representation and to take responsibility for the violence of taming the wild profusion of data. This opportunity resides in its potential to show, not tell; to be open to the future, another happening, another event rather than to settle for one final conclusion and close down other possibilities; and to provoke critique, resistance and political action rather than appeal for agreement, conformity and indifference.

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## 1. Introduction

I wish to put forward the rather uncomfortable idea that research as a human activity is inherently violent. It is violent despite any intention to do good, to solve problems, to improve the lot of the weak, the poor, the sick, or to contribute to knowledge which might bring about positive change in the world. The use of the word "violence" in relation to research activity may appear unreasonable because its gravity does not seem to be in proportion to the relatively small harm that may come to participants in qualitative social science research. Yet violence is woven into the fabric of human relations and works at many levels and in different forms. Whether physical, psychological, verbal, sexual, direct or indirect, structural or interpersonal, it threatens human existence in complex ways. Judith BUTLER (2004) suggests that we are exposed to it as much as we are complicit in it; we are also vulnerable to the loss and the mourning that follow. It may seem that by talking about violence in relation to research, I trivialise forms of violence which damage, injure, hurt, rape, torture, terrorise, infringe, and desecrate bodies,

beings and precious things. In this context, the word violence would sound more appropriate in relation to some research studies carried out in the poorest communities of developing countries or regions of political and military unrest. These communities are sometimes targeted by pharmaceutical companies for clinical trials which would not have cleared the regulatory hurdles in the United States or the European Union, for example, countries which insist on voluntary consent and the protection of research subjects from harm. The use of the word "violence" also seems more appropriate in relation to the murder and mutilation of thousands of human beings which took place in the concentration camps during the Hitler's National-Socialist regime in the name of medical science and eugenics. [1]

Qualitative research in the social sciences is far removed from such practices and these comparisons may appear contrived and unhelpful. I am not suggesting that there is some kind of continuum of violence ranging from physical to psychological and social harm, on which we can place a particular research study or a particular method. I am also not suggesting that we need to consider the term as a kind of sensitising notion to raise awareness of the various, though highly improbable harms research participants might come to as a result of taking part in a study. In particular, I don't propose that this concept of violence should be considered as part of the discourse of "emotional vulnerability" (FUREDÌ, 2004, 2008) which constructs people as unable to cope with the consequences of possibly distressing emotional experiences and which offers a vocabulary through which researchers are often asked by ethical review committees to work from an assumption of participants' emotional deficit and lack of coping skills. The violence I am evoking here works at a more symbolic or "meta-physical" level (DERRIDA, 1978). Yet, I will argue, it has tangible effects in the world, on people and on their relationships. [2]

## **2. Violent Pasts**

The years after the Second World War witnessed a proliferation of biomedical research. The use of human experimentation to develop medical treatments became established practice. Researchers and scientists were the heroes of the laboratory similar to the way soldiers were described as heroes of the battlefield (ROTHMAN, 1991). These war metaphors were indicative of the still utilitarian thinking prominent during the war years, which favoured utilitarian norms, namely producing the greatest good for the greatest number of people, disregarding the "casualties". Infectious diseases such as malaria, dysentery and influenza were seen as the enemy against which medical science had gone into combat. The dominant discourse at the time stipulated that at both fronts, the battlefield and the laboratory, sacrifices had to be made. Thus there were few dissenting voices questioning the methods and techniques applied by these heroes who saw developing antidotes against these diseases as extremely important while notions about consent and voluntary participation seemed less relevant. Research subjects were drawn from groups marginal to society and were often institutionalised such as orphans, the chronically physically and mentally ill, the disabled, black people and prisoners. They were, to continue with the war metaphor, the cannon

fodder for the battles in the war against disease and included the subjects of the Tuskegee syphilis study which, for four decades, tracked the course of the disease untreated in several hundred African-American men and their families even after treatment had become available. They also included the children with severe learning disabilities at Willowbrook School in New York who were injected with the hepatitis virus in order to develop a vaccine against hepatitis while parents were told that the infection was due to their child's personal habits. [3]

Research practices such as these are brutal and immoral, and appear continuous with the atrocities committed by Nazi doctors and scientists in concentration camps. Yet the heroes of the laboratory assumed self-righteously that, as they were carrying out human experimentation in a liberal democracy with the virtuous aim to promote medical treatment and care, their own ethical decision-making was different to that of morally bankrupt scientists working in the service of Hitler's totalitarian criminal state (ROTHMAN, 1991). There was an inclination to dismiss the atrocities exposed at the Doctors' Trials at Nuremberg in 1947 as isolated acts of crazy scientists which could never again be repeated (HANAUSSKE-ABEL, 1996) and to portray them as part of "a grim cautionary tale, but no more than that" (LEANING, 1996, p.1414). Thus the notion that the circumstances that led to the atrocities in the name of science in Nazi Germany were unique and unlikely to be repeated was reinforced while at the same time "making safe" the inhumane human experimentation of the past insofar as it was staged as if it could not infect the present. This may be a dangerous closure to the narrative of Nazi human experimentation and the subsequent Nuremberg trials, firstly, because it closes off further questions and, secondly, because the answers it provides are probably questionable. [4]

In her book *The Nazi Conscience*, the historian Claudia KOONZ (2003) tells the story of a modern state made powerful through the collaboration between the National-Socialist bureaucracy and academia. The role of academia and a broad range of intellectuals in supporting hereditary determinism and eugenics through recourse to biomedical research has been explored by, for example, Horst FREYHOFER (2004) and Christine ROSEN (2004) who articulate the emergence of a powerful link between biology, medical science and ideology which in turn shaped the discourse of public policy in 1930's Germany. KOONZ highlights the role of the humanities and social sciences, especially anthropology, ethnology and history, in the racist Nazi revisionism and scholarly anti-Semitism which were then translated into popular culture through film, photographs, magazine articles and school textbooks. Popular representations, legitimised by academia, portrayed Jewish people as fundamentally different from ethnic Germans. She suggests that "gradually, the idea took hold that although Jews did not deserve physical mistreatment, their participation in civil society ought to be curtailed" (p.218). Large parts of the German public, she argues, learnt to accept the social segregation and legal elimination of Jewish people until it was prepared to relinquish any notion of moral obligation, respect, and, ultimately, compassion for all those banished from the ethnic majority. The scale of the carefully orchestrated organisation of Hitler's anti-Semitism and the eventual death industry he instigated render this example of the de-humanisation of the "Other"

monstrous and grotesque. Yet unspoken exclusionary practices continue to operate today, using the media to circulate constructions of the "Other". In Rwanda, Hutus used the radio to provoke anger and incite violence against their ethnically different neighbours; politicians in Western liberal democracies rely on images of, for example, women wearing a Hijab or dark-skinned, bearded men who might be carrying a concealed bomb; Slavoy ZIZEK (2008) reminds us that the Christian motto of universal inclusion "All men are brothers" also means that those who do not accept the brotherhood of Christianity are not men, and if some do not belong to this shared humanity it becomes possible to regard them as mere objects of otherness. The exclusion of women in the motto might be a function of a language which collapses humankind into the word "men". However, such a trusting interpretation may be misplaced given the inhumane treatment of women across time and space. [5]

These reflections may seem far removed from the subject of research ethics and from my claim that research is an inherently violent activity despite any virtuous intent and purpose. However, I argue that language does not innocently and neutrally reflect or report on reality. This argument has, of course, already been well rehearsed by researchers and thinkers working in the postmodern. Language is freighted with what people have said before us and with the meaning with which they have already imbued it. It echoes in many tongues. It is also complicit in the hostility towards otherness and injustice because it constructs and imposes a particular symbolic field. Slavoy ZIZEK (2008) has termed this the "symbolic" violence of language (p.1). This point has also been made in relation to research practice by Jim SCHEURICH (1997), for example, who suggests that researchers as people who produce knowledge need to be mindful that the way they put the world they research into language and represent it is not complicit in the maintenance of such injustice. Similarly, I suggest that visual media are neither natural nor neutral and that they, too, operate within a social and cultural context, or "symbolic field". The images I mentioned earlier of the headscarf-wearing woman and the dark-skinned, bearded man flicker across this field. There isn't a message that is conveyed in a violent medium; rather, the message is the medium. Reflecting on Muslims' response to the caricatures of Muhammad in Denmark in September 2005, ZIZEK (2008, p.51) writes: "What exploded in violence was a web of symbols, images and attitudes, including Western imperialism, godless materialism, hedonism, and the suffering of Palestinians, which became attached to the Danish cartoons". [6]

### **3. Violent Research**

Working with some of the ideas put forward by the philosophers Emmanuel LEVINAS and Jacques DERRIDA, I suggest that metaphysical violence works through our attempts to reduce the other to a "thinkable thing", to an instance of a category, an abstraction, or construction in thought. The other is seen as something which can be made subject to instrumental manipulation and then dissolved into items in our consciousness, in our plans and in our projects. Pushing this idea a little further, the project of research could also be understood as violence insofar as it grasps hold of the other and manoeuvres it in a particular

ways in order to satisfy a desire for knowledge. The strange is made to appear familiar thereby forcing the otherness of the other into some kind of order, and transforming the unknown into the knowable. The researcher/author of the research text often withdraws from the other's gaze by becoming invisible in the text, reporting on the research from a privileged, third-person vantage point, imposing meaning and coherence. Similarly, understanding happens when we compare that which is different (or the unknown) to that which we already know. Thus the other is seized and inserted into the economy of the same. The play of ambiguity is called to a halt like children who are called in the evening to stop their favourite game outside and return home so that their weary parent can put them to bed. This rush to tame "the wild profusion of things" (to use a Foucauldian metaphor) closes down further play and further possibilities. Of course, we live in the world where decisions must be made, often with urgency; where action is required now; where in many circumstances passivity is an impossible choice. In such a world, scruples over metaphysical violence may be seen as a luxury for the middle-class academic who has the privilege of a full stomach, of not being persecuted or at risk of physical violence. I acknowledge this charge. For now though I wish to develop my argument. [7]

Violence involves the power to include and to exclude. For example, by writing this text I include some meanings, discourses and stories while others do not even enter this textual space. Furthermore, a textual production is also a knowledge production and thus is part of the Foucauldian power/knowledge nexus insofar as writing produces and reproduces the criteria which are used to legitimise and authorise knowledge claims and define knowledge in particular ways. John BERGIN and Robert WESTWOOD (2003) suggest: "Textual practices are thus the violence done to the possibilities of meaning; they are a violent inscription, a carving out of a space amongst the infinite array of possibilities—fixing on meaning, and excluding others" (p.212). The point of the practices of inclusion and exclusion of which the processes of analysis and representation are part, is to impose an order which serves the purposes of—in the case of research—the authors/researchers and the discourses and social structures in which they are implicated. Thus violence is also intrinsic to the processes of ordering the disorder of the "wild profusion" of data. Order is displaced anxiety against disorder. Yet there is a dark paradox at play: violence invites order, yet order exerts violence because order can only be kept by coercion (BERGIN & WESTWOOD, 2003). Organising data is a reduction from the infinite possibilities of disorganisation. Robert COOPER (1990) conceives of disorganisation as the excess to order; it is a "more than" (p.182). This disorder has to be kept outside as it threatens order, but it also constitutes the inside so that the outside becomes the unwanted supplement which frames the inside. As a result, the boundary between organisation/disorder, and inside/outside become ambiguous and undecidable, and violence becomes necessary in order to impose order. This violence or imposition of order is not self-evident or "natural" and it is never complete. It is a reduction, a "less than" so that "organisation is the forcible transformation of undecidability into decidability" (PELZER, 2003, p.232). In relation to research practice, this reduction takes place through analysis and representation, the processes by which order is imposed at the boundary

between inside and outside, and justified by reasoning. It seeks to reduce ambiguity and uncertainty. Thus undecidables are flattened out by the violence of ordering, and indeterminacy is overlaid with the "determinacy of our meaning-making, replacing ambiguities with findings or constructions" (SCHEURICH, 1997, p.73). By explaining, writes Gayatri SPIVAK (1988), "we exclude the possibility of the *radically* heterogeneous" (p.105, original emphasis). I am not arguing that researchers dispense with these processes, but I am arguing against the forgetting of the ethical consequences of analysis and representation. I am critical of the moves which create the illusion that we have unmediated access to the world and present our representation as if it were the best and only, overlooking the crucial role of the boundary between what is singled out to be inside, and what is left outside. [8]

There are other parts of the research process which are seen as natural to qualitative social science such as the selection of research participants on the basis of belonging to the group or category of people required to explore the researcher's topic. Here, the other is metamorphosed into a research subject/participant who is, more likely than not, asked to be interviewed with the interview functioning as instrumental strategy to furnish the researcher with the required material. As David SILVERMAN (2001), and Paul ATKINSON and David SILVERMAN (1997) have observed, interviewing has become a common feature of life in the Western world. It is based on the premise (or promise) that by asking people to talk about their lives we can simply and easily generate data about the social world. Steinar KVALE (1996) in his well known text "Inter Views" sums up this position: "If you want to know how people understand their world and their life, why not talk with them?" (p.1) He claims that "the very strength of the interview is its privileged access to the common understanding of subjects, the understanding that provides their worldview and the basis for their actions" (p.291).<sup>1</sup> The interview as technology to gather data about the social world is predicated on a particular understanding of subjectivity, rooted in Greco-Roman thinking, namely the self as bounded and unique, and as the centre of awareness, emotion, judgement and action. This view suggests that it is possible to access the other person's reality and to "mine" for the facts, feelings, views and particularities of experience residing within the respondent. This model of understanding interview research locates valued information within the participant which the researcher has to extract with technical expertise through interviewing (HOLSTEIN & GUBRIUM, 2003). Elliot MISHLER (1986) suggests that many researchers view interview data as behaviour that can be analysed using stimulus-response models associated with experimental research in psychology. The information obtained in this manner is then seen as a set of stable facts that have an objective existence independent of the social and linguistic context in which the data were spoken. The interviewer's role is to release that which is already there within the respondent and to extract from it an essential truth. Maggie MACLURE (2003) plays with metaphors which she surfaces through a deconstructive reading of qualitative research texts. Researchers are miners at the quarry, mining depths through drawing out rich data from interviewees'

<sup>1</sup> KVALE has revised his position since the publication of "Inter Views". I use his text here as it exemplifies the position I wish to critique.

unconscious, unearthing their memories and penetrating their defences. Data analysis is a chemical process through which the researcher purifies, distils, refines and catalyses. Researchers become engineers who triangulate, correct imbalances and right distortion. The technology of the research interview works by making something (the phenomenon under investigation) present without compromising its integrity. How much intervention and manipulation does it take to arrive at the unadulterated truth? [9]

Research based on qualitative interviews has been regarded as a "progressive dialogical form of research that provided a personal alternative to the objectifying positivist quantification of questionnaires and the harsh manipulation of behaviourist experiments" (KVALE, 2006, p.481). In contrast to these alienating methods which strictly delimit the relationship between researcher and research participant, dialogic qualitative interviews (or unstructured, open-ended interviews) suggest the possibility of equality, reciprocity, human interaction and warmth. In health related social science research, this type of interview is represented as a coming together of the researcher and the research participant in a shared experience to create a context of conversational intimacy in which participants are comfortable to talk about their experience, for example (RAMOS, 1989; MUNHALL, 1988; CORBIN & MORSE, 2003). Linda FINLAY (2006) offers a romantic account of the research interview: "Researcher and participant thus engage in a dance, moving in and out of experiencing and reflection while simultaneously moving through the shared intersubjective space that is the research encounter" (p.2). This view of interview accounts as representing authentic and direct contact with interviewees' realities has been questioned and critiqued because it appears to forget that interviewing is an asymmetrical encounter in which the researcher seeks information from the participant who responds to the interviewer's questions. Feminist interviewing, for example, makes the power relationship and the position of the interviewer in relation to the interviewee a central issue of concern (for example STANLEY, 1990; REINHARZ & CHASE, 2003; MAUTHNER, 1998). However, as Jean DUNCOMBE and Julie JESSOP (2002) point out, the feminist research relationship may be subverted by pressures to "do rapport" and "fake friendship" in an attempt to persuade participants to tell the researcher more about their experiences and emotions than they might have preferred. These authors warn that "the skills of doing rapport are becoming commodified" (p.120). Judith STACEY (1988) surfaces the apparent paradox in feminist research which, while working to create reciprocity and empowerment, also opens up possibilities for exploitation:

"... the irony I now perceive is that [the feminist] ethnographic method exposes subjects to far greater danger and exploitation than do more positivist, abstract, and 'masculinist' research methods. The greater the intimacy, the apparent mutuality of the researcher/re-searched relationship, the greater is the danger" (p.21). [10]

Interviews in their many guises in journalism, market research and consumer surveys, in opinion polls, and in professional and public settings, play a key part in the political technologies of modern systems of power, "being central to the power of the state to enumerate and imagine its citizens, of physicians to

medicalize their patients' ills, of psychiatrists to illuminate madness and define sanity, of lawyers and courts to construct criminals and invent crimes" (BRIGGS, 2003, p.504). And, I would add, of researchers to write qualitative research findings and newly minted knowledge into existence. Charles BRIGGS also urges researchers to devote critical attention to the effects that interview practices not only produce but also legitimise. Passively accepting them as a methodological device to gain access to peoples' experiences and views amounts to not only an abdication of researcher responsibility, but also an act of violence. What makes research violent is the way that moral choices, ethical and analytical decisions, representational practices and personal investments of the researcher are secreted away and so are made to appear natural and innocent. [11]

#### 4. Research Less Violent?

I am not going to suggest that Performative Social Science (PSS) will appear on the horizon like the cavalry to rescue us from ourselves. The project of knowledge generation and research requires decisions to be made on what is included and excluded in any piece of research work. Even though PSS researchers use creative and non-traditional means to communicate with their audiences, choices about who to invite to work with us are still necessary; data still need to be collected and analysed; research still has to be paid for and deadlines continue to loom calling for completion and some kind of conclusion. The charge I articulated earlier that concern over metaphysical violence is a luxury of the privileged academic is maybe not entirely justified because, of course, there is always an urgency to make a decision. Ethical decision-making, understood as a struggle between generalised knowledge and the particulars of a situation that do not necessarily fit into the categories of the generalised knowledge, is an integral part of research, not just at the data collection and representational stages as biomedical ethics would have us believe. However, existentially and as researchers, we are called upon to respond here and now. This gives rise to what DERRIDA following KIERKEGAARD calls "the madness of the decision" (DERRIDA, 1978, p.36). We are trapped between the particularity of our experience and the universality of language, but we must make a leap, and in the madness of that leap, according to LEVINAS, we become responsible (EDGOOSE, 2001). Yet there will always be a failure of fluency at that moment of hesitation, that instant of the decision, that mad leap of faith. I suggest that there is an opportunity for PSS researchers to acknowledge that mad leap of faith, to remember the ethical consequences of analysis and representation and to take responsibility for the violence of taming the wild profusion of data. This opportunity resides in its potential to show, not tell; to be open to the future, another happening, another event rather than to settle for one final interpretation and close down other possibilities; and to provoke critique, resistance and political action rather than appeal for agreement, conformity and indifference. This opportunity cannot bear fruit through recourse to reflexivity when it is entered into merely as an intervention for self-surveillance and confession, and ultimately as an excuse and substitute for social and political action (BURMAN, 2006). Nor can it be realised if we view research ethics as *technology* which suggests that there are answers to every problematic situation if only we think about it hard

enough and apply our knowledge of principles and rules. I do not mean to propose that we can simply forget about research ethics in the hope that if we are warm and respectful enough towards each other and research participants all will be well. Working from a commitment towards non-violent research practice does not prevent us from misusing others. As Jackie LEACH SCULLY (2002) suggests: "ethical principles, guidelines and legally binding regulations are necessary and need to be developed, because they keep me from falling short when I'm tired or afraid or have simply run out of time" (p.13). However, what we need to remember is that ethics regulation is maybe not where we should begin, or even finish. The mad leap of faith cannot be made safe by knowledge of a codified ethics. Maybe by submitting to a loss of understanding and fluency, we honour the uniqueness of the other, or honour, as Edith WYSCHOGROD (2002) writes: "an otherness that cannot be configured as a content of consciousness but that issues an imperative that obliges me to assume responsibility to the other" (p.188). Such a responsibility is not one that is borne by researchers like a box carries its load, finding in the content of their thinking adequate representations of their relations with others and the ethical norms that regulate those relations which reduce the other's face to a mask—a mere representation of "someone-to-whom-I-am-obligated" (WOLCHER, 2003, p.96). Instead, I argue that ethical responsibility, with regard to PSS in particular, must find its ground in an experience that cannot be integrated into the logics of control, prediction, or manipulation. [12]

The violence of research, I have suggested, lies in the abdication of responsibility by researchers for the judgements and decisions they make, often hiding behind the demands of method which prescribes certain ways of managing the research process on the basis of specific assumptions. As Maggie MACLURE (2003) argues, these assumptions position the researcher as the technician who removes the impediments to discovering the *relevant* data, the *true* story and the *incontestable* knowledge by applying special treatments and procedures. Method in this view is the tool for conquering uncertainty and gaining access to truth. PSS, of course, is not a method, but seeks to blend the arts and the social sciences in order to restore the role of the audience in the production of social science knowledge. Representations of data and analysis are not fixed and then "disseminated" to the passive reader, but remain ambiguous and leave space for the audience to participate in the process of interpretation. As Kip JONES writes, PSS "offers up opportunities for us to move beyond imitation of 'scientific' reports in dissemination of our work and looks towards means of representation that embrace the humanness of social science pursuits" (JONES, 2005, p.7). As such, the mad leap of faith I outlined above can become more like a shared adventure in interpretation. Yet does this make research in PSS less violent? Not obviously so, although its claims may turn out to be a little more modest insofar as research is understood more like a craft in which the researcher works creatively with data and generates research products that may resonate more widely than publication in academic journals. The act of representation, instead of being hidden within the safe, respectable though violent language of objectivist science, is declared openly as something that is created through being spoken, painted or written into existence. Yet despite being softened somewhat through

such creative practices, the violence of research and representation continues. It continues inevitably because the move from the uniquely singular to the shared world in which knowledge can be communicated is a violent move. In other words, as researchers we are involved in the transformation of the data—which is singular insofar as it is produced in a unique research encounter—into something more general that can be brought into a public arena where it can be shared, judged and evaluated. In that movement the singular is reduced and excluded in order to enable abstraction and generalisation which turns it into an instance of a concept or category. I suggest that PSS has the opportunity to remember the singular other through a critical vigilance with regard to that movement which must be constantly reminded of its inherent violence. Creative practices such as performance, visual art, sound and music are a source of "transgressive energy" (MACLURE, 2006, p.229) which keeps interpretation open. Such energy also resists the move to tame the wild and entangled profusion of what happens in research encounters and to reduce and distil it in order to arrive at a single, coherent point of view, or a unified image. As such ethical responsibility works not only at the level of obligation and codified ethics, but also challenges the researcher to work with the impossibility of true and faithful representation. [13]

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