

Vital Signs

ESRC Real Life Methods Conference
University of Manchester
9th – 11th Sept 2008

Shifting Horizons

Carol Smart
The Morgan Centre
for the Study of Relationships and Personal Life

<http://www.manchester.ac.uk/morgancentre/>

Shifting horizons?

- ◆ My focus is on sociology
- ◆ A broad methodological church
- ◆ A relatively permissive approach to experimentation
- ◆ But a tendency for 'experiments' to spin off and come to rest in other disciplines or on the margins

Methodological excitement

- ◆ The discipline has experienced several waves of excitement over methodological developments - so this is not new
- ◆ A real excitement over developing new approaches which are more expansive, more imaginative and more able to capture complexity.
- ◆ Some of these were prefigured in feminist work of the 1970s and 1980s`
- ◆ Methods have been seen as the mere 'handmaiden' but increasingly they are being seen as ways of unlocking or creating more complex knowledges

2 Strands in Qualitative Work

- ◆ The first strand of interest has been on developing new or different methods of data capture
- ◆ The second strand – equally important – has been on more experimental approaches to the analysis of data

Examples of the 1st strand

- ◆ Visual methods
- ◆ Photo elicitation
- ◆ Memory work
- ◆ Auto/biography
- ◆ Mapping and cartography
- ◆ Qualitative longitudinal
- ◆ Mixed methods
- ◆ Plus 'borrowing' methods from other disciplines

Examples of the 2nd strand

- ◆ Different forms of data (e.g. people's photographs) require different skills of analysis
- ◆ Computer assisted methods which are becoming more sophisticated (e.g. handling video material)
- ◆ Analysing data collected over different periods of time (rather than snap shots) raises the issue of theorising change within one's analysis
- ◆ Group analysis and shared analysis – especially where different members of a team have interviewed different family members etc
- ◆ And all this assumes we know what we are doing with 'simple' interview transcripts!!!

But there is a 3rd strand

- ◆ Having used experimental methods of data capture, and collective or innovatory modes of analysis ...
- ◆ We have to write the story
- ◆ What is the point of all the innovation if the text we create falls flat on the page?
- ◆ In what ways should we attend to sociological writing to carry through these innovations – but without becoming naff or embarrassing

Focus on empirical, qualitative research

- ◆ I shall not focus on highly theoretical work because I think the problems of writing are more acute when dealing with data derived from fieldwork
- ◆ But we can learn from this work
- ◆ We can also learn from other disciplines
- ◆ But it is important to envisage modes of writing which relate to the sociological enterprise (e.g. dropping a poem into a chapter does not change sociological writing per se)
- ◆ Otherwise it is easily marginalised again

Writing differently?

- ◆ The growth in using verbatim quotations – sometimes at length
- ◆ Research by Corden and Sainsbury (2006) – bringing real people into the text
- ◆ A reaction against writing in ways that flatten out and homogenise people's lives
- ◆ Against one-dimensionality and in favour of mess (Law) and disruption
- ◆ Or is it simply that the quotation can say more than the sociological narrative?

Foregrounding the author

- ◆ In this way the creator of the text becomes visible
- ◆ Sometimes this is just by way of expressing their motivation for doing the research
- ◆ Sometimes the text can become autobiographical or can draw on the author's own experiences/knowledge (e.g. in understanding class location, ethnicity, place, migration experiences and so on)

Rich descriptions

- ◆ This style of writing has become more associated with anthropology
- ◆ However, it was a part of the repertoire of early post-war sociology
- ◆ Take Young and Willmott *Family and Kinship in East London*
- ◆ A mixture of anthropology, sociology and literature?

Snippet

- ◆ Less than 20 miles away from Bethnal Green, the automatic doors of the tube train open on to the new land of Greenleigh. On one side of the railway are cows at pasture. On the other, the new housing estate. Instead of the shops of Bethnal Green there is the shopping centre at the Parade; instead of the street barrows piled high with fruit, fish, and dresses, instead of the cries of the costermongers from Spitalfields to Old Ford, there are orderly self-service stores in the marble halls of the great combines. In place of the gaunt buildings rising above narrow streets of narrow houses, there are up-to-date semi-detached residences. Bethnal Green encases the history of 300 years. Cottages built for the descendants of Huguenot refugees, with their wide weavers' windows and peeling plaster, stand next to Victorian red-brick on the one side and massive blocks of Edwardian charity on the other. (1987:121)

Family & Kinship in E. London

- ◆ Originally published 1957
- ◆ Highly evocative literary style e.g. 'narrow streets of narrow houses'
- ◆ Conveys a sense of noise and bustle – almost of smell
- ◆ History is also captured (e.g. ref to the Huguenots etc)
- ◆ Power of stark comparisons of old and new places

Family & Kinship in E. London

- ◆ They also use lots of passages of quotation
- ◆ They address the reader frequently
- ◆ They do not seem to address the discipline itself (i.e. not concerned much with internal debate or reference)
- ◆ It is also irritatingly patronising – but nothing is perfect!

A photograph works too – but differently



Contemporary conventions

- ◆ Sociology it seems must always address itself as the primary 'reader'
- ◆ We seem to write for ourselves/the discipline or occasionally for students
- ◆ Should we imagine a different readership?
- ◆ If so should we engage differently?

Sociologists as story tellers?

- ◆ Sociology, in particular, has an extraordinary mandate as far as academic disciplines go: to conjure up social life. [...] As a mode of apprehension and reformation, conjuring merges the analytical, the procedural, the imaginative, and the effervescent. But we have more to learn about how to conjure in an evocative and compelling way. (Gordon: 2008: 22)

Much more to learn ...

- ◆ Recognition of being story-tellers
- ◆ Discursive construction of the real world
- ◆ What responsibilities flow from this?
- ◆ If we are story-tellers, how should we tell the story?
- ◆ Gordon argues we have much to learn to write stories rather better

Key terms

- ◆ Evocative
- ◆ Compelling
- ◆ Imaginative
- ◆ Effervescent

Artful description

- ◆ Conceptual and theoretical work should not climb to a level where the voices of the people concerned become inaudible. Rather, theoretical ideas and concepts hover above the ethnographic ground in order to provide a vocabulary for its explication. This is a kind of description that is committed and dialogic but not just a matter of 'letting the research subjects speak'. (Back, 2007:21)

Concluding Remarks

- ◆ A responsibility to make lives come alive in our stories?
- ◆ A responsibility to tell stories well?
- ◆ A recognition that our stories are not, of course, fiction
- ◆ A greater consideration for the 'reader' / different readers
- ◆ An ability to mix styles to create impact
- ◆ A need to tackle some sociological conventions (and journal editors?)

END