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## Disciplined Writing:

On the problem of writing sociologically

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January 2010

ESRC National Centre for Research Methods

NCRM Working Paper Series

02/10

# Realities

Part of the ESRC National Centre for Research Methods



## Working Paper #13

### Disciplined Writing: On the problem of writing sociologically

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## Starting out

In preparing this working paper I started by thinking about how we learn to write as sociologists; a process which of course starts at degree level. I learnt, and indeed teach my students, to plan an introduction (which I advise should normally be written last) which will briefly map out the issues and arguments that will follow, then the main section of an essay should demonstrate knowledge of the relevant reading which will have itself been selected for the light it throws on the essay question, followed by engaged comment or critique which leads the reader to a particular understanding of the issues at stake, and then a conclusion which may summarise the main points and returns the reader to the set essay question to explore how adequately it has been answered.

The key elements appear to be the ability in writing to convey knowledge of a field (i.e. competence), to structure an argument tightly (i.e. literary and intellectual skill), and to arrive at a position based on an evaluation of the material available (i.e. ability to adopt a defensible and well argued stance).

This is a model which is, I understand, much less rigid than more formal scientific styles of writing such as in psychology. In particular it does rely on a literary competence which can not only cover adequate amounts of material but which will form a convincing argument in an engaging way. This basic style, once mastered, can be sufficient for an entire career and a great deal of academic sociological writing spends its time providing expositions of work already in print (e.g. re-presenting the Greats) and then adding critically engaged comment or melding different writers together to form new syntheses and new insights. This then often encourages others to take issue with the interpretations offered and the appropriateness or otherwise of the original writer's enterprise. And on it goes.

Unfortunately, this basic training in how to write sociologically does not prepare the novice<sup>1</sup> sociologists for what is to come when they start to accumulate their own, original data based on empirical fieldwork. In saying this I am referring to qualitative data rather than quantitative because although I am sure that similar problems arise, my understanding of the problems concerns exclusively qualitative research. It would be true to say that almost every research student I have supervised has had some degree of crisis at the point at which they start trying to write *with* their qualitative data.

The problem is twofold.

1. The first is that data (e.g. interview transcripts based on real life encounters) cannot be treated exactly like other, more familiar sociological texts. This means that skills already acquired in reading and assimilating texts cannot easily or straightforwardly be transferred.
2. The second is that novice sociologists find themselves on moving terrain with no clear goals. They discover that from the data they have accumulated they could tell many different stories and that these stories don't seem automatically to shape themselves into answers to research questions – indeed they often seem quite formless and to be going nowhere in particular.

It is at this stage that doing sociology becomes a creative act which is frankly terrifying. And part of the terror lies in the knowledge that sociologists cannot tell just any story even though they are, in a sense, carving out stories from and with the data.

## Writing with data

I often think of data (no matter what form it takes) as a recalcitrant mound of wet clay which defies you to shape it into something recognisable. This can be deeply upsetting to novice sociologists who often think that their work is effectively completed once they finish the fieldwork stage of an empirical project. It is also endlessly challenging to more experienced researchers too because there is an inescapable sense that the data holds onto many more stories than one ever manages to bring forth into a written narrative.

One thing that can be done with the data of course is to form it into the shape(s) that the author anticipated at the start of the research project. Such instrumentalism is, in my view, somewhat antithetical to the ethics of the research process and it can be guaranteed to produce something rather dull and predictable which probably could have been written without all the time-consuming work of collecting the data in the first place. But even if this is what some of us may start to do (since we need to start somewhere and somehow with our wet clay) we find very quickly that the data squeezes itself out of the prescribed shape; other ideas impinge and the original imagined story can only be achieved at risk of doing considerable violence to the data.

Part of the problem faced by anyone doing qualitative empirical research is that one finds that the old rules and guidelines for writing sociologically no longer work while there do not exist a set of fresh rules to replace them. Moreover, many of the old constraints do actually still operate to some (ill-defined) degree. For example new research must be situated in relation to existing empirical and theoretical work, there must still be a (or several) sociological argument(s) woven through the body of the text, and a position or stance has to be achieved from which the thesis is written (so that readers can understand the situation from which this knowledge flows). But this stance cannot be imposed on the data nor known precisely in advance. In addition there are expectations that the writer deals 'properly' with the data and this entails, amongst other things, the possibility for contradictory accounts to emerge, for people to express complex views and feelings, for people to talk about or reveal things beyond the scope of the research and so on. Mason (2002) has written in detail about how this can be dealt with in the process of analysing data of course so I won't repeat it here. Rather I want to skip on to the next stage of sociological production which assumes that analysis is in process (although rarely at this point finished). This next stage is concerned with issues of creativity and storytelling.

## Storytelling and creativity

I only thought of sociologists as storytellers when I read Avery Gordon's (2008) book where she was being critical of sociology for failing to capture the complexities of life and for writing in a way that eliminated issues that were hard to express. Her argument is that sociology is impoverished if it is unable to represent the unseen and unsayable as well as the seen and spoken of. Further she suggests that sociology needs to be much more reflexive about its role as storyteller. I had not thought that sociology was about storytelling before but

of course once this proposition is stated it becomes rather obvious. No matter what kind of sociology we are presenting to the world, nor in what form (written or spoken) we are still storytellers. The stories we tell maybe science based, evidence based and so on but she argues they still are stories about the social world. Collectively we tell stories about social class, how gender works, patterns of migration, the influence of the media and so on. We are constantly telling stories about how societies work.

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)

It is of course important to stress that there is a difference between telling stories and telling fictions. Sociologists who write with data are not fiction writers even if they seek to conjure up a literary representation of a society or social interactions. The sociologist is not free to take their interviews or their observations and 'run away' with them so to speak. There are many reasons for this, but in relation to my argument here, the main reason is that it is our responsibility to listen to the lives of people around us and to work carefully with their stories and experiences. There are clear ethical and analytical codes of practice in how to interpret data and in describing sociologists as storytellers, I am not jettisoning those codes. We cannot simply start being novelists<sup>2</sup>. We do not have the same kinds of 'freedoms' as fiction writers and although as sociologists we can be seen as story tellers we do not write knowing, self-conscious fictions. Our work is anchored much more in ongoing lives to which we are accountable in a variety of ways.

Once we think of ourselves as storytellers as well as sociologists we can begin to think about the form and structure of the stories we tell. This requirement is at a different level to the basic problem of writing with data that I have outlined above. What I am suggesting is that we have to think about the quality, style, energy and fluency of our writing *in addition to* achieving the ability to write with data. So this is another order of activity which adds considerably to the challenges of writing sociologically. Perhaps then we need to start to reflect on whether we should deploy some of the sorts of literary and stylistic devices used by novelists. Should we write differently – better? Do we think enough about the use of metaphor, imagery, language and style in general?

### **A problem**

At this point many sociologists might be feeling anxious because to move towards embracing the idea that we are storytellers might seem to be a way of relinquishing the small respect that we have achieved as social scientists. Sociological accounts of the social world still struggle for recognition, being much less favoured than economic models or psychological explanations, or even the increasingly popular evolutionary biology approach.

This in turn reminds me of Foucault's work on science and its claim to truth (Gordon, 1980). For Foucault what was interesting was not whether the claims that science (e.g. psychology) made were actually true or not, but the fact that natural sciences had a much higher *claim to truth* than other knowledge

systems. So arguably sociology – which is pretty low on the hierarchy of sciences in its ability to make claims to truth – remains anxious about being demoted down the knowledge hierarchy to the level of literary work or religion. It is almost as if we need to be more rigid in the representation of our knowledge than the natural scientists lest we lose status and credibility.

Yet of course the natural sciences use literary devices extensively. Think only of the wide use of metaphor in biological texts for example. Emily Martin (1987) carried out a fascinating analysis of the metaphors of the body, especially women's bodies, in biological writings which showed the transition in metaphors across time. There is also an extensive body of writing on metaphor in science writing (e.g. Hoffman 1981) which has recently been reinvigorated by the work of Richard Dawkin – the 'Selfish Gene' being perhaps one of the most powerful scientific metaphors of recent times.

However, if we are charged with 'conjuring up social life' it does seem important to consider both how we are already doing this and then how we might do it differently while remaining in some senses true to the discipline of sociology and the constraints of writing with data.

But before moving onto this, it is important also to underline that Gordon is arguing that we, as sociologists, always already engage in acts of conjuring up social life. This is not a new thing, rather we have been doing it all along but either without a sufficient sensibility as to the impact of the activity or with a kind of assumption that writing according to disciplinary guidelines absolves us of responsibilities for the discursive consequences. In a way our writing – although not necessarily our analysis – seems to act as if it simply represents what is already there. For sure sociology is well beyond the old empiricist idea that we simply capture 'reality', condense it and represent it. We know that knowledge is always knowledge from somewhere and that different research questions create different realities. But this is not, I suggest, sufficiently reflected in how we then go on to compose what we write. This may be because writing within the discipline insists that at this final stage coherence is required and that boundaries (to what is being told) need to be erected. In particular there is an assumption that only one story is told and one stance adopted. This goes back to my starting point where the training we receive requires us to adopt a stance and to argue for it. Forms of writing which may adopt several stances are seen either as confused and substandard, or as failing the task of engaging in a proper dialogue (through writing) where each scholar adopts a clear stance in order that others can argue against him or her. If the initiating scholar seems already to be arguing for several versions or accounts then the rules of the academic game are simply spoilt.

This quandary is often made clear at the point at which qualitative sociologists are required to report on their 'findings'<sup>3</sup>. It is not unreasonable to expect a sociologist to have findings – at least it is not within the disciplinary constraints I am wishing to challenge – however it is often at this point that the full weight of the unstated rules of disciplined writing descend. It is also the point at which a kind of quasi-quantitative form of writing is adopted (or imposed) which may meet the requirements of a funding body but which once again can fall foul of Gordon's injunction that we strive to write differently.

It seems unlikely that qualitative sociologists can abandon all of the traditions of writing sociologically that have become established. I'm not even sure that it would be a good idea since it is important to be able to write for different audiences and for different purposes. But my argument against the over-determination of disciplined writing is that it squeezes out other ways of conjuring social life and certainly can be said to squeeze out the effervescence that Avery Gordon speaks about.

Effervescence = fizzy, vivacious, enthusiastic

Evocative = evoking strong images, memories, or feelings

## Struggling to write differently (my struggle that is!)

In *Personal Life* (Smart, 2007) I began an attempt to write 'differently' as a response to a number of factors. The first was quite simply because I'd already written many things in quite conventional ways and indeed my feeling was that it was all getting more and more conventional. This was because so much of my recent writing had been based on funded empirical projects and so I found myself on a kind of conveyor belt where the research had to be swiftly 'written up' and put into the public domain.

What aesthetic agonies are embodied in the term 'written up'? Why is it 'up'? It implies an 'easiness', like being engaged in simply describing an account of something. Somehow the very term denies the existence of all creativity and effort.

Indeed on one occasion I can recall a former colleague saying to me, "Well now your fieldwork is over the publications can just flow, they will almost write themselves". There, of course, spoke a person who had probably never dealt with an avalanche of qualitative data and who always wrote for a policy audience and always with a clear idea of what needed to be proposed before he started. Unfortunately at the time I didn't think this person was erroneous or short-sighted, I thought there was something wrong with me because I could not so easily find the tap that simply needed turning on.

But I want to separate out the difficulties of writing with data (which are manifold) from the difficulties of writing *differently* with data. This means that I want to revisit debates that have rumbled on for some time about the ways in which sociology is situated between literature and science (viz R. Nisbett 1976) (not least because I find such a polarisation rather problematic), but because it seems to me that the notable examples we have of blurring boundaries between for example poetry and social science, are rarely writing with data derived from firsthand fieldwork. So, for example, Jacobsen and Marshman (2008) write euphorically of Zygmunt Bauman's use of metaphor and his poetical imagery. They suggest that his mode of writing and sociological imaginings have made him extremely popular and readable but also a maverick, somewhat shunned by most of the discipline. Bauman himself of course now shuns conventional sociology, and he has also argued against the rigid rules of sociological/academic writing. So Bauman is revered for his style:

### Example:

As long as it lives, love hovers on the brink of defeat. It dissolves its past as it goes; it leaves no fortified trenches behind to which it



could retreat, running for shelter in case of trouble. And it knows not what lies ahead and what the future may bring. It will never gain confidence strong enough to disperse the clouds and stifle anxiety. Love is a mortgage loan drawn on an uncertain, and inscrutable, future. (Bauman 2003: 8)

This is powerful prose indeed. But my argument would be that it has little to do with sociology. It is certainly evocative but it does not evoke sociologically. It seems to me that there is little point in developing a splendid style of writing if that writing is quite outside the rules of the construction of knowledge which apply to the discipline. But then Bauman himself has argued that he has learnt more from Zola<sup>4</sup> (and other authors) than from sociologists (he gives the example of Talcott Parsons) (Jacobsen and Marshman, 2008: 802). In so doing he presupposes and then accepts the distinction between two different forms of storytelling – and then proceeds to adopt the literary style which owes little responsibility to sociological forms of knowledge creation. In becoming an evocative and even effervescent writer, Bauman abandons the discipline. He floats free from irritating constraints, uncomfortable ethical dilemmas and nagging responsibilities to research participants. Off he goes - conjuring up social life according to his own internal calculus of how impoverished modern sensibilities must be. He has become indeed the 'free-floating intellectual', but not, I suggest, in a good way.

So the question is not just how can we write differently but how can we write empirically derived sociological understandings of the social differently.

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In *Personal Life* I wrote about a wish to revisit some of the research data I had collected (with others) because of a feeling that much had been left out of the accounts that had been written. I spoke of those elements left on the 'cutting room floor'. This of course was an example of using metaphor to try to convey the idea that the story that was created was pruned and edited into a shape, but that by resurrecting the off-cuts, different stories or nuances could be created. So in the book I picked up some of the off-cuts but I also decided to weave together bits and pieces from other projects, either selecting aspects that I felt had not been told or using data that simply did not fit before. Against that I positioned, like a kind of mosaic, different forms of knowledge/writing. Thus there were sections of exposition and critique, sections of personal memory, and sections of theory building through meshing concepts. I also did not only seek to fill the gaps in previous projects, but the gaps that I (and others) could see in sociology more generally – particularly sociology of family life. It was too an opportunity to vent my frustrations at the constraints that the compartmentalisation of social life imposed by sociological categories like family and friends had created. The juxtapositions that I fashioned were also important since the chapters did not flow as they might through a typical monograph based on a single empirical study. The ordering of the chapters could have been different although I was conscious of how I wanted to 'lay down' ideas in the reader's imagination in a way that I could subsequently build on. But the same characters did not appear in different chapters and they were fairly diverse, ranging from my grandmother, to a group of same sex couples, to a selection of children, to a Yugoslavian migrant and onto a selection of Pakistani and Indian interviewees.

The process of selecting the characters who would occupy spaces in the book was complex. Some had become lodged in my memory (hauntings) like a little 6 year old boy who spoke of how unhappy he was in his (in my judgment) abusive family. Some coalesced through ideas I wanted to express cogently, but I did not use them instrumentally because the ideas I wanted to bring forward had been established through my engagement with the narratives of the people in our various research projects. It was truly an iterative process and also a strange experience as I found more and more voices in my head wanting a space in the book. Some people never made it into the book even though they deserved a place and indeed would have had a perfectly comfortable niche. Others found a place because they voiced issues which I wanted aired but which I simply felt would be extremely hard to fit into the conventions of a peer-reviewed journal article format. Quite simply, in such articles one spends so much time on the formalities (the research question, the methodology, citing other studies etc) that there is little room for working more creatively with data based conceptualisations. The book therefore offered a kind of freedom from these constraints since I was able (mostly) to refer the reader to other publications if they wanted the bread and butter accounts of the studies. This was a luxury of course. Yet it reveals the crucial importance of books to developing the wayward discipline of sociology and shows how the growing tyranny of journal articles may stultify creativity.

So the book was not planned as a linear narrative – even though it inevitably became one. Rather it was meant to be a way of mapping personal lives into social contexts which means that I envisaged chapters mainly as opportunities to start with lives, even individuals, and then taking accounts and reading them through aspects of the social context which prevailed. So the work of the sociologist was not to run off with someone's narrative but to locate the narrative in its situation, through relationships, in the context of power(s), at a moment in history and in a given place. The idea is not to have a flight of fancy but to go deeper into enquiry, but using a sociological imagination.

This can easily mean using literary skills and devices but they should be anchored. If an example is taken beyond the data (so to speak) it must be made clear that such a method is being employed. It is, for example, quite possible to address the reader in an engagement which runs parallel with the main text. An analogy would be the actor on stage who steps out of role to explain some element of stage craft. All texts may be said to operate on several levels, but my argument is about the extent to which sociological writing is actively aware of this and deploys these devices in engaging an audience. In consciously writing at several levels simultaneously it is possible to create (at least in one's imagination) a different kind of relationship with the reader as well as with the material that one is writing.

I found this particularly fascinating. I became aware that I was, for the first time perhaps, really engaged in a much more reflexive relationship with readers. I was not thinking of the requirements of a specific journal for example, rather I was actually imagining real people beyond the peer reviewers, the copy editors, or even my immediate colleagues. I did not just wish to write about multidimensional lives, I wanted to resonate with the multidimensional lives of potential readers. My thoughts quite simply were (addressing the reader):

- I want you to know certain things (tangibles)

- I want you to understand the different positions from which (this) knowledge is created
- I want you to understand things (intangibles).
- I want you to be left with feelings and musings, and possibly to think about how your own experiences fit or do not fit with some of the stories told
- I want you to enjoy reading this too
- I want you to know that there is a particular kind of person writing this book
- I also want you to think I'm accomplished/competent and
- I want this to be understood as a method of conceptualising and crafting sociologically

This writing was therefore a three way engagement between the people whose lives I discuss, the unknown readers, and the tentative author. Although I have always wanted what I write to be scholarly and clearly expressed, this time I wanted to reach the reader with a wider register of affect.

I am aware that this can sound manipulative which is worrying if it is taken to mean that I used calculated devices to make readers laugh, cry or be sad, just so that I could make an impact. I don't think I did use material or style in this way. I did knowingly put together words and quotations which attempted to create *atmospheres* of hurt or happiness, of love or indifference, of worry and contentment. But I did not want the reader to cry or become anxious; I wanted him/her to be able to appreciate the full depth of the experiences I was discussing. I think this is a very important distinction to make because sometimes, when I have spoken about writing evocatively, there is an assumption that one's aim might be directed at intervening in the reader's emotions and guiding them in a particular direction (e.g. to make the sorry for children whose parents divorce). Even assuming I could do this, it was not my intention. My intention was for emotions and experiences to be found in the text in an accessible way. This is quite different, I think, to trying to channel the reader's emotions towards a particular pre-determined goal.

## Conclusion

When I look at this book now it seems such a little thing. I think of course that many PhD students feel precisely this when they look at the bound version of their thesis at the point of submission. So much sweat and tears goes into producing such a neat and tidy package of words. The back story becomes invisible. *Personal Life* took up more than a year of my life to write and much of it was agony. It felt reckless and I really thought that people would laugh or worse be rather embarrassed by its existence. (This is of course a reflection of the self-delusional state one enters when enduring the purdah of writing. It could not have occurred to me that few would be the slightest bit interested). I joked while in the process of writing it that either it would be complete rubbish or a mistress piece. It is of course neither. What felt almost dangerous (e.g. bringing in my grandmother's story) now seems rather ordinary (and even before I did this I knew that others had worked much more effectively with their own family stories e.g. Kuhn, 1995; Steedman, 1986). But the point is that I wanted to work sociologically with this collage of 'data' and the value of it was meant to be between the lines as much as in the literal messages.

But there are also rules in the book. I did not want to (and I do not want others) to simply plunder family histories or old research projects to patch something together. I wanted desperately to avoid the 'my journey' of early feminist and much social work type of writing. This was not a journey into enlightenment, nor was it a sentimental re-connecting with people encountered in an academic life. But there is a tightrope to be walked if one wishes to acknowledge the personal dimensions of the writer and the sociologist, alongside the stories of the characters in the various studies I've conducted. I would argue that the sociological author is both a person (who needs therefore to be carefully reflexive) and a social construct made up from a specific intellectual and personal sociological career (a web of sociological relationships).

The author is not important, but the author's 'take' on things is worth considering, and as there cannot be an author's 'take' without an instigator, the two things become intertwined.

The other most important rule in all this was the one that requires attentiveness to 'real lives'. It is not grist to a mill; in particular it cannot become just an impetus to evocative prose or poetic writing. If writing is to be evocative or effervescent then it has to be grounded and defensible in the ideas it communicates.

## Epilogue

Really, I think that when one sits down to write a book - at least this is my experience - you do not start with the bigger issues. You start with some very tiny details which have been in a way haunting you, that you have been thinking about, brooding over. And those are really the big issues. You just put together all these little details of this world that you are imagining, and the characters you are imagining. And it is only when it is there on paper that you look down and you see that actually you have drawn a map of a political world as well. (*Interview with Anita Desai, June 2009*)

[C. Wright] Mills was also clear that sociological imagination meant being self-consciously committed to affecting argument and writing creatively for a variety of what he called 'reading publics'. The danger he foresaw was that the sociological work might develop a technical language that turns inward on itself. ... To avoid this we have to aspire to make sociology more literary. (Back, 2007: 164)

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> I am using the expression 'novice' sociologists simply to refer to colleagues and students who are embarking on writing seriously with data for the first time.

<sup>2</sup> Although this has often been attempted. Ken Plummer (2005) discusses the rise of 'the literature of fact' and the works of Carlos Castaneda and Truman Capote in the post-war era. He points out that this has recently taken other forms as well, such as the work of Tony Parsons and Bill Bryson.

<sup>3</sup> An example of this would be writing *Findings* for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. These short reports are designed for policy makers and media and core findings are reduced virtually to a brief list of bullet points. A house style was imposed because of the belief that this was the very best way to get the results of research across to the relevant bodies and constituencies.

<sup>4</sup> In this respect Bauman is quite close to Avery Gordon who also points to a number of renowned authors who she argues convey more about society and culture than does sociology. I'm sure in fact that most of us could think of prose and poetry which has done this. But this returns me to my earlier point about writing from within the sociological imagination rather than the literary imagination. If the discipline of sociology has any work to do in explaining social life then my argument is that we don't simply give our students a pile of novels to read but we train them in the methods of sociological enquiry and then inspire them to analyse and write imaginatively.

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