

This is the text of a talk given by Les Back (Goldsmiths) at the Morgan Centre 'Summer Spectacular' event on 6 July 2016, Friends Meeting House, Manchester.

## **A Qualitative Research Renaissance**

*Ten Years of the Morgan Centre*

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Deep thanks and appreciation to the Morgan Centre for all that it does. It is wonderful to be invited to be part of this celebration of ten glorious years of work. My talk is really in the festive spirit offering an appreciation the centre's work as an incubator of imagination and research craft. My talk is organised around three questions collected from conversations – sometimes fleeting, other times staged - in a researcherly life.

So, to my first one.

### **1. Laurie's Question**

Earlier this year I was invited to participate in BBC Radio 4's *Thinking Allowed* edition on studying everyday life. It's my favourite radio show and Laurie Taylor – the show's host – has a special talent for bringing the best out of his guests. Not that the conversations are easy or without challenge because Laurie also has an equal flair for the deceptively simple question. That is, a question that seems straightforward on first hearing, but then the more you think about it the more elusive an adequate answer becomes. Laurie asked me: "given everyday life is all around us why don't more sociologists study it?" Mmm...

I want start here because I think my answer chimes with today's event. Is one reason why sociologists are hesitant to train their minds on the everyday or quotidian trivialities because we run the risk of being made fun of? "You are writing an article about Christmas lights or the social behaviour in café or capps? That's like being paid for sunbathing!" I have a sneaking suspicion that some of you have been subject to similar indignities. But as anthropologist Clifford Geertz once commented, one of the "psychological fringe benefits" of anthropological research is that

it teaches us what it feels like to “be thought of as a fool... and how to endure it” (Geertz 2000: 30). Maybe we shy away from the banal to avoid the accusation of seeming trivial or commonplace.

Strangely, it is the humdrum nature of our subject matter that makes it so difficult to study. The second reason why everyday life is not studied more is because it is incredibly hard to do. Social scientists depend on the specular aspects of society and its problems to justifying the significances of our mission. Focusing on society’s bad news gives us a sense of purpose and importance somehow. George Perec, the eccentric bard of the infra-ordinary, sums this up so well when he writes: “railway trains only begin to exist when they are derailed, and the more passengers that are killed, the more they exist” (Perec 1997: 209).

Perec had an extraordinary life. A Polish Jew, and part of French literary culture, his father was killed fighting the Nazis and his mother was taken and murdered in Auschwitz. He was orphaned by the spectacular murderous power of the fascist machine. His uncle and aunt took the place of his parents and raised him. I wonder in a way if his ear for, what he referred to as “banal facts, passed over in silence” provided an anchor for him through those dark times (Perec 1997: 174).

He never finished his degree in history at the Sorbonne but worked as an archivist in a science laboratory up until just before the end of his life. He characterised his writing as part “*sociological*... looking at the ordinary and the everyday” part *autobiographical*, part *ludic* or playful and part *novelistic* (Perec 2009: 3-4). He had an extraordinary attentiveness to things. He manages to enchant the mundane through noticing detail and its significance. I see the same quality in Erving Goffman (1956) or the brilliantly attentive Rachel Hurdley (2015) or your very own Sophie Woodward (2015).

Perec wrote a little book *An Attempt at Exhausting a Place in Paris*, which I think is the best realization of Clifford Geertz’s notion of thick description (Geertz 1973). In the beginning of the book Perec introduces *Place Saint Sulpice*, the subject for his weekend study, and lists the existing public knowledge about it. Then comments: “My intention in the pages that follow was to describe the rest... that which has no importance: *that which happens when nothing happens* other than the

weather, people, cars, and clouds.” (Perec 210: 3). What a brilliant invitation to the study of everyday life but equally what a difficult challenge. Made me think of Jennifer Mason’s wonderful project on the weather in Hebden Bridge that states with tender confidence that “weather is woven into every aspect of social life” (Mason 2016: 2).

Perec doesn’t really give us many clues with regard to how he does his work. How do we write something interesting when nothing seems to be happening? “I find my direction by following my nose” he comments (Perec 2009: 5). Andy Balmer’s olfactory experiments reminded me of this comments. It is hard, very hard to practice imaginatively endotic sociology – spectacular social problems somehow seem to offer us better clues. It makes us think though about attentiveness as a vocation – a matter of training our senses and then sifting imaginatively what we find for significance, like panning for gold on the surface of life.

For fifty years the qualitative research imagination was held hostage by the tape recorder. To do qualitative research meant to conduct interviews, transcribe them and present the idiomatic voices of our participants in anonymous block quotations. I have written elsewhere about my own love affair with the tape recorder as a both a research companion and device. In the digital age this has all changed: we are thinking, working and inquiring in a very different informational environment. We are encountering unprecedented opportunities to work differently as a result and communicate and circulate the fruits of our work in new ways combined with the old established conventions. (Indeed, it seems that some of our old conventions are being made new again in this environment from drawing to Polaroid photographs to fieldnotes).

In this talk, I want to review some the ways that we might think about the ways we think and talk about review some of these opportunities drawing on examples of contemporary qualitative research. I want to argue that, despite the constraints placed on our research environment by the institutional structures for measuring value in an increasingly commercialized university environment, we are on the cusp of a renaissance in qualitative research. In fact I want to argue that it has already arrived in large part due to the work of the Morgan Centre.

I examine a lot of PhD theses. I almost want to make the claim that I have examined more PhDs than anyone in UK Higher education. I have a problem with that boast though. Truth is I have done so many – well over a hundred now that is in excess of 10 million thesis words - that I have actually have lost count of how many I read and probably lost the desire to also!!! This is not to brag – I am not sure being a popular examiner is something necessarily to put on your CV these days - but I just wanted to share with you what I think are recurrent things that I have heard and said in PhD viva with regard to critical feedback offered to PhD authors of qualitative research. In their different ways I think they all come back to our dependence on the tape recorder for what we do and what we work with as data. Three ghosts of the tape recorder age.

According to David Silverman we have had an almost Pavlovian tendency to think of qualitative research as necessarily involving interviews (Silverman 2013). These interviews committed to tape or digital sound files are then transcribed into text. In the old days through foot switch operated mechanical devices or now through the magic of F5 or other such software facilitated improvements.

So here's the thing that I have noticed about that procedure and the way we think of data as involving mechanical procedures.

a) ***Transcription is not description.***

The forms of vivid description we might want to convey cannot be captured by transcription. The transcription will not set the scene of the social context in which important things are said. I want to offer you this wonderful description offered by Marek Korczynski (2014) in his brilliant ethnography *Songs of the Factory*. The book is about the ways in which music makes deadening factory work endurable in the context of McTell's blind factory where he did ethnography. He describes what he calls a "staying alive culture" where the Bee Gees afford a momentary sensory refuge from the deadening feelings of factory work. Music allows for "surplus rhythmic movements" momentary solidarity in "sing alongs" where cultural instigators (otherwise known as workmates) lead the workers in moment where employees "take their senses back."

I want to play you a staging of that description on my favourite radio programme mentioned earlier. Marek's description conveys brilliantly the usefulness of description. What is going outside of language in gesture, rhythm and sound. He describes the moment in the factory when the music stops.

"At around four o'clock there was a sudden silence: the radio stopped for about a minute... There was an empty space, and people were strange, almost as if some of their clothes had been taken off. And then the radio came back on. What came on was rather beautiful; it was 'Walk on By,' sung by Dionne Warwick, which has a gorgeous subtle introduction. From the silence came this subtle wonderfully arranged song, and for about thirty seconds I could see at least six people quietly either moving their lips or gently moving their bodies with the music while they kept on working" (Korczynski 2014: 99).

*Thinking Allowed's* rendering included both an actor reading of this passage mixed with Dionne Warwick's music. The re-staging was really evocative and portrayed this factory scene filtered through a sociological imagining of its significance. It suggests some of the possibilities to combine drama and data in the service of social analysis and communication that I also want to come back to later.

#### **b) *Transcription is not portraiture.***

Another of the tape recorder's ghosts is that our confidence in capturing words means we are often reluctant to draw a social portrait of who has uttered them. The problem is that reading those transcriptions can often seem like disembodied quotations. We need to have a feel for the people who say things as much as what is actually said.

This is a complex business because we necessarily have to pick up the burden of representation and navigate the boundary between eavesdropping and violating surveillance and figuring human likeness. Or, to put it another way between what Bourdieu would call portrayal and betrayal (see Back 2009). As Bourdieu points out this is particularly acute in the context of colonial setting or we might also say securitized environment of racialised cities like Manchester, Birmingham or

London. How do we avoid the plight of the white professor portrayed in this photograph?

Let me offer another scene from Emma Jackson's wonderful study of young homelessness in London (Jackson 2015). This is another tape recorder story but of a different kind. Here a young homeless man said in passing he's used to being recorded interviews with the police and that they have "bigger tape recorders." What Emma does so skillfully is make us think of the implication of our methods in the techniques of surveillance and power the 'demanded accounts' required of the young displaced people, in our cities.

c) ***Automation is not interpretation – or what Nvivo won't do for you!***

I am a fan of the capacity of programmes like Nvivo or MAX QDA to help us see our data whole, to prepare and assist our analysis to think about the themes that might be in that data. Wouldn't it be great if we could just input our transcribed word based data into piece of software and interpretations of it could be somehow outputted?

Brian Alleyne has written recently about the potential to develop NVivo or Writer's Café for analysing narrative networks (Alleyne 2015). Even a self-professed geek like Brian concedes that automation cannot make judgments for us: imagination cannot ultimately be computer generated. So I think we should always be suspicious of the impulse that there is a technical fix for an interpretative problem or analytical judgment. There is not technological fix for authoring a PhD, research paper or journal article.

## **2. The Question of Craft**

I think the skills we need to practice endotic sociology in the digital age are perhaps different. But I am struggling to find a better metaphor than C Wright Mills' suggestion that social research is a craft. But the problem with Mills is that he is still quite a muscular thinker. He reviewed Simone De Beauvoir's *Second Sex* when many of his male peers ignored it. I was challenged recently when a colleague commented that she felt the idea of sociology as craft is a masculinist metaphor? So, in the old days I would have 'phoned a friend' – but of course all I needed to do is send some emails.

I want to share something that Carol Smart - co-editor of a beautiful book called *The Craft of Knowledge* (Smart, Hockey & James 2014) – sent a reply that helped:

“I think craft has strong feminine meanings. OK I know many crafts are/were male preserves but so were many associated with women e.g. sewing, knitting, cooking. My reading is that men abandoned the association with craft as more kudos and income was linked to professionalisation (eg medics versus midwives). Women were denied access to professions and so their association with 'mere' craft led to a diminution of the status of craft. Craft has been seen as rather humble and undervalued - hence feminine (or working class).”

Carol Smart (personal correspondence 21/07/2014)

Perhaps what is interesting about craft is that it emphasises the idea that knowledge is about doing and making things with words but not only with words. We are no longer hostage to the tape recorder – how could we be when people are generating accounts of themselves and their lives at an unprecedented frequency and quantity: the melding of lives on-screen and off-screen? What are the dimensions of that opportunity? Well I want to try and illustrate this with a final question.

### **3. Viva Question Twenty Years On**

So to my last question. On 17th May, 2016 Anamik Saha and Emma Jackson organized a day event *New Urban Multicultures* that took its cue from the twentieth anniversary of a book called *New Ethnicities and Urban Multiculture* that was based on my PhD thesis (Back 1996). The generous appreciation and imaginative reading of that old book was nothing short of a marvel. It was like listening to a life summed up in a posthumous tribute without having to go through the indignity of suffering one's own demise.

At the end after a very long but exhilarating day, a final question: “How would I have done the research differently or how would I advise a student doing a similar study today?” I had to smile to myself because later I realised it was a staple PhD viva question, one that I'd exasperated many a PhD candidate with myself. Looking down the list of speakers too, I realised that I had examined the PhDs of nine of them.

It served me right. It was perhaps a moment of collective revenge. I faltered spectacularly and said in response I'd "need to think about it" and indeed I have.

While *New Ethnicities and Urban Culture* contains nods to feminist, postmodern and postcolonial critiques of ethnography, it was written within a standard mode of anthropological realism: the lone ethnographer scribbling down what was seen and heard. I felt a deep tension between being part of those social worlds, while the act of writing about them set me apart at the same time.

I tried to stay in contact with many of the people but by the same token I lost connection with so many. That unevenness is still haunting because of the imbalances of power, control and ultimately reward within the process of writing. Perhaps that is why I have given the royalties away to the Pete Jones Fund and why I struggled to answer 'the viva question'.

I think one of the things I would do differently would be to have developed a deeper sense of ongoing dialogue, not just a live sociology but also a more sociable one. I am imagining an augmented ethnographic practice that would allow and facilitate a greater openness of representational space where the voices and understandings of participants can appear alongside the ethnographer's interpretations.

I am thinking of a mobile research craft too – where we get up on our feet as well as sit down and talk. I am inspired by Maggie O'Neill's fantastic work on the everyday landscapes of migrants that are mapped on foot and in motion (O'Neill & Perivolaris 2014).

Culture here would be written within, but also beyond, words. Texts collaged alongside pages that also become screens including moving images, still photography, drawing, soundscapes and music. I think there are just so many examples to today. I am thinking of Suzi Hall's wonderful fieldwork that plots the threads of globalised networks on a single south London street (Hall 2012). I am also thinking of the ways in which drawing here is not just representational device but also a mode of discovery and analysis. Rachel Hurdley, who writes brilliantly about design & office spaces and the things people bring to work to make

them habitable, using sketching as a way to discover to look closely and outline the shape of significance (Hurdley 2015). Watching Lynne Chapman draw today I was struck by the impression that this is exactly what she does as she sketches.

Also, the use of sociologically attentive film practice is another example and I am thinking particularly of the wonderful film made by Jennifer Mason & visual anthropologist Lorenzo Ferrarini on living the weather. Jennifer's work on social atmospheres I think is so much in the spirit of Perec at the same achieving something beyond it.

Another possibility is a kind of research practice that would make residents into the observers of their own lives, it would generate a mode of commentary on their own lives in their own voices. Curated digitally, this gallery of commentary might be linked across common questions or coded themes. I am thinking here of Sophie's website of course where dormant ordinary things become remarkable again and remarked upon.

We also have the potential now to curate those voices on-line, assembling and then reassembling them logarithmically through the variegated dimensions of their relatedness. I am thinking here of the Question Bridge Project in the US. This makes us perhaps think again about how we stage or show our research. There are lots of people like Yasmin Gunaratnam working with the live re-staging of research data in collaboration with actors. There is something about that which is so much more than the reading aloud of block quotations.

Teaching research methods is often the most unloved part of any social science degree programme. It is the orphaned part of the curriculum. Yet, it should be the most exciting part of what student learn and what we teach. Fieldwork Fable is a project I have been involved in that re-stages the experience of doing research that can be challenging. The actors are given a brief and they role play the scenario with different endings.

Others have used ethnographic comics or graphic ethnography to do similar things. Anja Schwanhauser's (2016) book *Sensing the City* is a book example. Working with artist Nele Bronner the authors in the text collaborated to produce a methodological comic strip that raised important dilemmas or questions beyond the time of the text. What is

so interesting about these graphic illustrations is they make us think about the relationship between research writing and time. But we can do so much more now. With all that troubles us in universities with the culture of audit and the crisis of Brexit and fiscal pressure these possibilities are not necessarily expensive.

To summarise, the qualities I find appealing include an attentiveness to endotic life, sociable methods of ongoing dialogue, mobile forms of research encounter, working with other crafts of showing and telling (drawing, film, moving image, sound), producing sensuous and atmospheric modes of live data dramatisation.

## Conclusion

I will end by arguing that, in order to embrace the opportunities that lie before us, we need to be bold and license experimentation of the kind being done here at the Morgan Centre for more than a decade using the new modes and methods that are now available. We all know we are struggling within the institutions in the academy where metrics and audit culture is tied to the hierarches of value. Even if you did well in REF 2014, success is followed quickly by an impending sense of falling and failing.

'Paywall sociology' is hostage to the prestige of journals that count status, measured and accumulated quantitatively and individually. More often than not, the 'impact agenda' puts us on the side of the powerful (see Back 2014, 2015).

The crisis of the academy has not dealt a fatal blow to the research imagination. Creativity endures and I go further to say we are in the midst of a qualitative research renaissance. There is so much brilliant work being done that can be celebrated and read with a sense of wonder. At the risk of you all laughing at me – and as I've already said it's good for intellectuals to be laughed at - how about building a research future out of foregrounding our best scholarly virtues... of sharing hunches, passing on leads and suggesting ideas. "You really have to read Rachel Hurdley ... you would love it." This will sound weak I am sure but I think one way to survive the current academic conjuncture is to cultivate a kind of *intellectual generosity*.

There are more opportunities for circulating social research through social media and online magazine and publications than ever before. There can be some unpleasant dimensions including the dark arts of academic impression management too, but I would still argue the possibilities are there in abundance. It draws us into the conversation with the non-specialist, school teachers, A2 students and sometimes people who are just plain curious (often in more ways than one). It isn't always comfortable but I think it is often vital.

Today, by contrast, the atmosphere on university campuses rewards and encourages competitive self-interest. As I said at the beginning, I am an avid listener to Laurie Taylor's Radio 4 programme *Thinking Allowed*. Laurie has cost me a fortune in buying books from a wide variety of fields that I wouldn't have otherwise known about. Many of them I have mentioned already.

After listening to the programme I often feel compelled to Google the email addresses of the featured researchers. I email them just to say how amazing their work is, or sometimes to beg a few .pdfs from esoteric journals not available in the Goldsmiths library. I think authors recognise sincere appreciation that isn't a 'networking opportunity'. They almost always reply favorably more often than not with emails loaded with bountiful attachments. It shows a small aspect of what I mean by a shared craft, or living by the best values of scholarship.

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