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Rethinking Research

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**Davies, B and Gannon, S (Eds) (2006) Doing Collective Biography,
Maidenhead, Open University Press, ISBN-10 0 335 33044 4**

**Hammersley, M (2006) Media Bias in Reporting Social Research? The case
of reviewing ethnic inequalities in education, London, Routledge, ISBN 10 0
415 37274 7**

**Lather, P (2007) Getting Lost: Feminist Efforts toward a Double(d) Science,
New York, SUNY Press ISBN13: 978-0-7914-7057-2**

From the linguistic turn to the theological, Lather (2007a: 2) charts the various fluxes and flows of epistemological phases in the social sciences in terms of fifteen moves over the last five decades. She is correct when she states that we need to understand these turns not as linear but as multiple and interruptive. It is the case, also, that these epistemological, ethical and representational challenges have effected something of a loss of confidence in the ability of the social sciences to know.

With a stronger concern with the grounds of qualitative approaches, Denzin and Lincoln (2005) also chart the changing landscape of how we can understand the nature of knowledge and the issues that we bring to how we do research. They describe this changing landscape in terms of nine moments, moving from the first moment of positivism (1900-1950) to the contemporary ninth moment where representational issues are of greater concern. Whilst Denzin and Lincoln's delineation of moments encourage a sense of linearity, their analysis keeps in play how research operates in a complex historical field where the concerns of each 'moment' simultaneously operate in the present. Thus the spectre of positivism, where research aims to reflect the principles of (natural) scientific enquiry, can be found in the experimental method and in the essence of the evidence based movement.

If, for Lather, there is a real sense of 'getting lost' in terms of what are adequate ways, not simply to know, but how to represent knowledges, central to Denzin and Lincoln's analysis is that we are currently in a 'methodologically contested present'. Whilst this

conflictual and tense period may, of itself, generate senses of loss and lost-ness, Denzin and Lincoln also point to the potential for a reassertion (actually, if we ever left them) of paradigm wars that would, inevitably, lead to what they term a fractured future. Here, researchers of different persuasions patrol what it means, not only to adequately know but also to be counted as doing proper research. One of the implications of this fractured future can be found in how funding for research is much more closely related to the state's and capital's interests. As Davies and Gannon (2006) point out, the United States government has recently legislated that what counts as fundable research is that conducted within realist and positivist paradigms.

Nonetheless, it is the case, as Hammersley (2007) points out, that there can be a real ambivalence by researchers to issues of methodology. Thus he indicates, through his two-fold schema, that those who focus on 'methodology-as-technique' are criticized for obstructing creativity whilst those who focus on 'methodology-as-philosophy' are often viewed as self-indulgent and offering unnecessary distractions from getting on with doing real research. Hammersley indicates that whilst he shares many of these ambivalent views, a focus on methodology plays a key role in the development and improvement of research. And, as Denzin and Lincoln and Lather indicate, there is a growing sense that the dilemmas we confront mark this out as an appropriate time to rethink some of the central issues confronting us as researchers. Not to do so risks becoming, or staying, lost in a morass of conceptual turns and/or, rather than getting on with research, finding that we are spending our time fighting each other in our status claims of knowing best.

The Three Texts

The three texts central to this essay offers us important ways in which we might begin this task. I begin with Lather's (2007a: 2) work where she asks us to rethink 'not the end of science, but the end of a narrow scientificity'. Overall, *Getting Lost* offers a review of contemporary debates that arise from, but seek to go beyond, the poststructural. Lather explores the major concepts delineating changes in how we think about methodology, the various turns of past decades that herald new directions and new challenges. She explores the problems of scientism and the possibilities for an expanded sense of scientificity. And she offers a reflexive account of her own engagement and tribulations in attempting to produce socially responsible, and responsive, research.

I then turn to Davies and Gannon's *Doing Collective Biography*. Davies and Gannon share, with Lather, a concern with the poststructural and the requirement to find alternative ways to engage with the epistemological and ontological challenges that have arisen from post-critiques. Their approach is based upon a deepening exploration of the poststructural in order to much more fully explore its potentialities. Through a methodological focus on autoethnography, which attempts to close the gap between memory and interpretation, Davies and Gannon offer us a set of tools for the conduct of this research and they raise questions about its epistemological and ethical dilemmas. They also provide both theoretical explorations of Foucauldian power-knowledge and the nature of the subject in poststructuralist theory. In substantive terms, their concern is to analyse the limitations and possibilities of agency. Chapters also include the particular

situated subjectivities of schoolgirls, schoolgirl fiction readers, women at work and the difficulties of collaborative writing.

Working from a different set of epistemological parameters and concerns, Hammersley's *Media Bias in Reporting Social Research? The case of reviewing ethnic inequalities in education* provides the final case through which we can consider how we might rethink research. Hammersley is not so concerned with the limits of the unknowable but rather with the opposite. His work indicates a certainty of methodological approach that provides a counterbalance to Lather's exploration and yet shares something of Davies and Gannon's quest to close a gap. In short, his text asks us to stop for a moment and consider 'How *actually* are research findings represented in the media?' Hammersley responds to this question through the case of mass media reporting of the findings of Gillborn and Gipps' (1996) research on educational achievement of ethnic groups in Britain. Hammersley compares Gillborn and Gipp's review and their subsequent press release with the content of radio, television and newspaper reports. Accordingly, the text proceeds through five chapters to analyse whether, or not, there was a case of media distortion in reporting the Gillborn and Gipps' study. Whilst these are Hammersley's substantive concerns, his text also asks us to rethink the relationship between 'facts' and values as, through his Weberian frame, he brackets out the issue of values until the final chapter. Thus, in the Epilogue, Hammersley explores the underlying value framework guiding his research.

Getting Lost

Getting Lost is centrally concerned with recognizing and accepting 'not knowing'. In this Lather (2007a: viii) asks how 'research-based knowledge remains possible after so much questioning of the very ground of science'. In so doing, she asks us to rethink how we might gesture 'toward the science possible after the critique of science' (p ix). Lather undertakes her analysis in *Getting Lost* through the issues, dilemmas and underpinning framework that guided an empirical study *Troubling the Angels: women living with HIV/AIDS* (Lather and Smithies, 1997). Her intention in *Getting Lost* is to explore the limits of not knowing as both a critique of more predominant notions of science as offering 'impossible certainty' (p x) and as a way of rethinking the possibilities of feminist methodology in terms that it would produce a 'non-dogmatic feminism that relishes conflicting interpretations without domesticating them' (Lather 2007b).

Lather (2007a) refers to the processes through which this might be achieved as 'double(d) movement'. This approach 'uses and troubles a category simultaneously' (p 73). Thus, as in many previous intellectual revolutions, this postrevolutionary phase is not simply a return to the past. Rather, it is a removal of the innocence of that past usage. One example would be how we respond to critiques that have arisen about concerns around representation. Here, Lather comments that practices of 'double(d) movement' could be helpful in 'negotiating the tensions between the political imperative of feminism to make visible women's experiences and post-structural critiques of representation' (p 135). Thus, as Lather points out the concern is not simply with letting the subaltern speak (Spivak, 1988) but also to enable a textual exploration of multi-subjectivities.

Of course, Lather's epistemological framework around representational issues is not shared by all. For those working within more critical realist frames, such a post-revolutionary phase can actually be a more confident return to a type of realist reporting that is methodologically self-aware without being excruciatingly so. As Seale (1999), for example, indicates evidence can now figure more powerfully in support of conclusions and authors are back in fashion. Hammersley (2007) similarly indicates how the turn to reflexivity can limit the space available for reporting of research findings. Lather does not take this position. Rather, she still wants to hold the ground of critique illustrated through concerns about representational issues in research but she does not want this to be so disabling that one cannot re-present at all.

One example offered in *Getting Lost* is that of the representational issues associated with authorial presence. Here, Lather argues that when writing *Living with Angels* the aim was to be both in and out of the text. This can be understood in terms of a political and ethical framework that is committed to multi-layered meanings through the use of alternative forms of representation. How might this be achieved? Lather offers us the example of her text *Troubling the Angels* where devices such as horizontally splitting the page are used. Here, around two-thirds is devoted to what 'appears to be an unmediated interview transcript' (2007a: 137). The bottom part of the page, however, is reminiscent of Richardson's (1992: 131) reminder that 'no matter how we stage the text, we – the authors – are doing the staging'. And so, the bottom part of the page is a 'site of deliberate imposition to signal the inevitable weight of researcher interpretation on the story to be told' (2007a: 137). Similarly, Lather aims for a textual polyphonic,

multivoiced text in *Getting Lost*. Each chapter therefore concludes with an ‘Interlude’ containing interviews, letters sent and unsent and updates from two of the women who participated in the HIV/AIDS study as a method of complicating some aspects of the preceding chapter.

Yet perhaps the most controversial aspects of the text are the invocation of ‘angels’, clearly central to her empirical research on women with HIV/AIDS and part of what Lather indicates as the ‘theological turn’. This is a turn to the salience of the spiritual in contemporary social and cultural change. At one level, the invocation of ‘angels’ provides a counterbalance to the weight of scientism that the text seeks to critique. It provides an alternative space through which we might know to not know. However, the mysticism of ‘angels’ is a step too far for this reader. This was mostly because such invocations were far too literal for my sensibilities. Perhaps that’s the point, as it highlights the limits to which we might, as individuals, be willing to follow Lather in her explorations of, not only what counts as unknowable but also how far we are willing to take an expanded sense of scientificity.

Doing Collective Biography

Davies and Gannon share some of the ground occupied by Lather in recognizing the problems of authoritative truths and the precarious claims to knowledge that might now be made in this post-era. However, their interest is exploring how, ‘By taking oneself and one’s own ongoing experiences as the data, in autoethnography the gap between memories and the interpretive analytic work of research is closed’ (p 3).

Davies and Gannon set out the principles and procedures for undertaking their work on collective biographies. This involves selecting the group who could attend a week long residential workshop and who were willing to commit to the preparation and reading prior to attendance as well as the labour of collective work. In workshops, researchers work together on a predetermined topic through explorations of the memories relevant to that topic. They do this through telling, listening and writing. Davies and Gannon comment that their work is not designed to make memory work more reliable in order to produce unquestioned facts. Their purpose is to ‘take the talk around our memories, the listening to the detail of each other’s memories, as a technology for enabling us to produce, through attention to the embodied sense of being in the remembered moment, a truth in relation to what cannot actually be recovered – the moment as it was lived. This is not a naïve, naturalistic truth, but a truth that is worked on through a technology of telling, listening and writing. In this sense it is the very *unreliability* [their emphasis] of memory that enables this close discursive work. (p 3)

Davies and Gannon indicate how this methodology builds upon, but differs from, the work of Haug and her colleagues who were interested in the memory work and analysis of researchers themselves. Whilst Haug’s work was located in the interstices of feminist concerns with Marxism, Davies and Gannon are using this approach to explore the openings offered by poststructuralism to not only developing understandings of how we develop a fixed sense of self but also ‘in showing the details of our own collective

enmeshment in that fixed world, set out to make it more fluid, more open to other possibilities' (p 5).

Davies and Gannon's work also differs from Haug in terms of the place of therapeutic outcomes arising from intense work of this kind. For Haug, Davies and Gannon report, the aim was to develop a sense of greater resistance to oppressive versions of femininity in those taking part in this work. However, for Davies and Gannon, 'we have consistently maintained that we are not 'doing therapy' – we are doing research' (p 6). This is not to deny the potential for therapeutic effects arising from such biographical work. Rather, it is an ethical statement which indicates the boundaries of their collective engagement and to avoid shifting the focus 'towards individuals and their problems and away from the collective task of interrupting the taken-for-grantedness of everyday discourses and practices' (p 7).

Engagement in these processes appears to develop high levels of trust and openness in participants. Evidence of this can be found in the chapter detailing the processes, and struggles, of collective writing. This chapter also details how writing about writing can act as prompts for the development of ideas and understanding. The chapter is comprised of a series of letters written by the editors to each other. These letters were then sent out to other workshop members for comment and engagement. The early letters include extensive quotes from texts, as if to get the process started, yet the later letters begin to outline the vulnerabilities and anxieties of the writerly self. Here, also, issues of power are raised and the distance between the idealization of a mutually supportive space and

the demands and competencies that arise from working in the academy are reflected upon. These words from Eileen, one of the workshop participants, will register with those of us who have been involved in collaborative writing in time poor environments:

I think the time issue has a big impact on the writing, but also the commitment. I think there is always a different level of commitment to the writing, expressed as ambivalence or silence. I know sometimes after 8 or so drafts, I couldn't care less any more (and usually said so!!). So why didn't it become part of the process that you could 'drop out' but still have your name on the final draft? I know Bronwyn has written about her reading of silence, but usually my silence was because I had nothing to say! OK I could probably go on and on, but my window has closed and I've got to move on to more pragmatic writing (Unit guides yippee!).

Media Bias in Reporting Social Research?

Although the media is a site of contradictory knowledge, Hammersley's (2006) focus draws on those elements of social science craft knowledge that urge us to be wary of this form of dissemination. This is because of fears over distortion, over-simplification and, indeed, vilification. Thus, it is not unusual to hear of, and read, salutary tales where disseminated research was thought to be inaccurately or unfairly represented.

This desire to be heard within the terms of our sense of intention accords with what Hammersley (2000) has referred to as the correspondence view. In part, this desire to ensure correspondence of meaning arises because of epistemological commitments to

post-positivist and, more recently, evidence based views of social reality (see for example Hargreaves, 1999). However, even in those cases where social constructivist views are argued, proponents do not give up on the idea of producing shared meanings (see for example Huberman, 1994). In general, therefore, the extant literature on dissemination does not fully subscribe to the implications of a strong poststructuralist view that, because of the incessantly slippery, unfixed and unstable nature of meaning, correspondence is an impossibility. Indeed, as Moi (1999:44) points out, ‘even concepts such as “slippage” and “instability” have fairly stable meanings in most contexts’.

Thus, central to Hammersley’s critique is that complaints about distortion or bias in media reporting operate within a social reproduction model. In this respect, media coverage portrays ‘the mass media as purveying ideological messages that reproduce existing inequalities, and thereby serve powerful groups within the society’ (p 7). For example, David Gillborn, whose research with Gipps is central to Hammersley’s analysis, had commented that ‘Much of the coverage [of their research] bears only passing resemblance to the review: some is misleading, some is nothing more than an excuse to repeat chosen racist myths’ (Gillborn, 1998, quoted in Hammersley, 2006: 136).

In undertaking this research, Hammersley uses a Weberian approach ‘that treats social research as properly guided by the principle of value neutrality, though also as necessarily framed by value relevancies’ (p 10). Generally, this means that the procedures for conducting and interpreting research are executed in such a way that even if one does not share the researcher’s values, one can still accept that the findings and interpretations are warranted by the evidence. As Hammersley argues ‘From this point of

view, research should not claim to produce value judgements as conclusions' (p 156).

Accordingly, Hammersley seeks 'to avoid any implication that identifying factual inaccuracies automatically involves negative evaluation of them, or of those responsible for the accounts concerned' (p 157). Notwithstanding, he explores, in an Epilogue, some of the complexities that arise from making evaluative judgements about issues of racism.

So, did Martyn Hammersley find media bias or not? Well, as he elaborates, the question is not as simple as this. In the concluding chapter, Hammersley sets out two questions for making a judgement. These are, first 'Was reportage of the research accurate?' And second, if not, 'Was there a systematic bias towards a particular perspective presented in the reports?' In terms of the first question, Hammersley raises here the issue of media communication and notes that this inevitably has to be reformulated for a different audience. He notes that the list style character of the Gillborn and Gipps' research review presented its own sets of issues in terms of communication of results as it placed limits on how these could be organized into a single overall theme. And Hammersley suggests that the main message of the report was ambiguous and left the way open for different interpretations by the media. Overall, therefore, in terms of inaccurate reporting, Hammersley indicates that despite selectivity and reformulation of the research in media reports 'most of them involved what could probably be judged a low level of significant inaccuracy' (p 154). However, in terms of one of the central messages of the research that 'colour-blind' policies had failed, Hammersley reports that 'the inaccuracy was much more substantial' (p 154).

In respect of the second question of whether any media bias was systematic in reinforcing or generating negative views of some minority ethnic groups, Hammersley concluded that any differences of reportage ‘did not constitute strong evidence of racist bias’ (p 154) but was more likely to be a consequence of local features of journalistic news production. Nonetheless, Hammersley does point out ‘that it was probably true that the reporting would reinforce the view, on the part of some audiences, that ethnic minorities achieving lower than average educational qualifications possessed lower levels of academic ability and/or motivation’ (p 154).

In this separation of research reportage from underlying values, it is not until the Epilogue that Hammersley more fully explores ‘the assumptions underlying the value relevance framework’ (p 157) he employed. This framework is that of the relationship between social science and the nature of democracy and particularly the issues surrounding the development, or otherwise, of a discursive democracy. Overall, Hammersley’s concern here is to explore the terrain of competing values surrounding research and media reportage. He notes, in an echo of Lather, Davies and Gannon, that social scientists neither have a monopoly on knowledge nor is social science knowledge infallible. In this, Hammersley reasserts the relevance of a Weberian paradigm that asks us to distinguish between factual and value claims. In terms of the former, Hammersley indicates it is imperative social science research ‘can be properly assessed when they contradict information from other sources’ (p 164) in order that social scientists can claim that their knowledge claims are less likely to be false when compared to knowledge claims from other sources. For Hammersley, unfortunately, ‘some social science

research communities do not currently operate in ways that closely approximate to what would be required to make this claim about reliability convincing' (p 165).

Conclusion

This essay has explored some of the ways in which we might begin to rethink research. It has drawn on the work of Lather, Davies and Gannon and Hammersley to illustrate how significant questions of what counts as knowledge and how we should proceed methodologically are being addressed. Each offers us substantial issues to reflect upon. Thus, Lather asks us to rethink how we can reconcile ourselves to a sense of loss of mastery over knowledge but yet avoid becoming lost in our sense of purpose and in how we might do research. Davies and Gannon offer us the tools and insights drawn from intense biographical work in order to understand, more fully, processes of selving. They therefore offer us an opportunity to rethink about how research can reconnect to issues for social transformation. For Lather, Davies and Gannon, there are no concerns about the place of the reflexive author in the text. Hammersley, however, seeks to maintain a separation between facts and values. In so doing, he asks us to rethink the place of the reflexive self in research reports and, in so doing, the purposes of research writing. In this 'methodologically contested present' (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005) we might therefore return to Lather's concern that we rethink the limits of scientificity as each of the texts discussed here provide us with a way of doing so.

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