



2-16-2015

A Report on an Arts-Led, Emotive Experiment in Interviewing and Storytelling

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Recommended APA Citation

Jones, K. (2015). A Report on an Arts-Led, Emotive Experiment in Interviewing and Storytelling. *The Qualitative Report*, 20(2), 86-92. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2015.2098>

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Abstract

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Keywords

Arts-Led Research, Biography, Creativity, Ephemera, Interviewing Technique, Narrative, Neo Emotivism, Performative Social Science, Relational Aesthetics

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A Report on an Arts-Led, Emotive Experiment in Interviewing and Storytelling

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This paper reports on a two-day experimental workshop in arts-led interviewing technique using ephemera to illicit life stories and then reporting narrative accounts back using creative means of presentation. Academics and students from across Schools at Bournemouth University told each other stories from their pasts based in objects that they presented to each other as gifts. Each partner then reported the shared story to the group using arts-led presentation methods. Narrative research and the qualitative interview are discussed. The conclusion is drawn that academics yearn to express the more emotive connections generated by listening to the stories of strangers. The procedures followed for the two-day workshop are outlined in order that other academics may also organize their own experiments in eliciting story using personal objects and retelling stories creatively. Keywords: Arts-Led Research, Biography, Creativity, Ephemera, Interviewing Technique, Narrative, Neo Emotivism, Performative Social Science, Relational Aesthetics

In *Blue Nights*, Joan Didion (2012) wrote:

“Memory fades, memory adjusts, memory conforms to what we think we remember.”

The early waves of renewed interest in the narrative paradigm (or the narrative “turn” in qualitative research as it developed in the late 1970s, 1980s and early 1990s) and the onset of the ‘post-modern era’ in qualitative approaches established protocols, procedures, and language that, by now, are repeated habitually. By 2000 Denzin could tell us:

We live in narrative’s moment. The narrative turn in the social sciences has been taken. The linguistic and textual basis of knowledge about society is now privileged. Culture is seen as performance.

Everything we study is contained within a storied, or narrative, representation. Indeed, as scholars we are storytellers, telling stories about other people’s stories. We call our stories theories. (Denzin, 2000, p. xi)

As our skills at in-depth interviewing continued to develop, we became better and better at acting as but “silent witnesses” to the lives of others. Ethical considerations and sensitivities became ethical procedures and limitations over time. As the subtleties of the interview environment became more familiar, at the same time, our encounters with strangers became more constrained by committees and the management culture pervading academia. These drove narrative researchers further into taking the position of the “neutral observer” and the disengaged participant.

In addition, we began to routinely repeat what are by now shop-worn words in our academic outputs such as *rigour*, *robust*, *thick*, *embodied* and *evocative* to support (or deny?) our emotive tendencies. Most of those words have been repeated *ad infinitum* for more than 20 years now, degenerating into no more than code words signaling membership in a particular

scholarly community. They have become words without force. Perhaps it time now to look both inward and elsewhere (to culture, to the arts, to literature, and so forth) to find fresh inspiration and vocabulary to support a new “emotive” participatory approach to our encounters with others.

What is this new “emotivity”? In spite of constraints and time & time again when given the opportunity, scholars long to connect emotionally with the people whom they are investigating. Indeed, scholars realising the soundness of their emotional connectivity yearn for a language to express these feelings—a new language not simply justified by the idiom preceding them. The difficulty encountered for academics wishing to write emotively and creatively is that we are programmed to repeat (endlessly) what we've read to establish “validity”. Rather than repeat words that have preceded us in the literature, Neo Emotivism (Jones, 2014) asks us to choose unique words that bring-to-life our unique interactions with others by beginning with ourselves. Perhaps if we return to C. Wright Mills and *The Sociological Imagination*:

The emotions of fear and hatred and love and rage, in all their varieties, must be understood in close and continual reference to the social biography and the social context in which they are experienced and expressed. ...The biography and the character of the individual cannot be understood merely in terms of milieu, and certainly not entirely in terms of the early environments ... When we understand social structure and structural changes as they bear upon more intimate scenes and experiences wear able to understand the causes of individual conduct and feelings of which men (*sic*) in specific milieu are themselves unaware. (Mills, 1959, 2000, pp. 161-162)

Performative Social Science: A Methodological and Theoretical Base

The workshop under discussion is an example of the continuing and on-going development of a *Performative Social Science* (Jones, 2012), or the use of tools from the arts in researching and/or disseminating social science studies. Many social scientists have begun to turn to the Arts for both inspiration and practical assistance in answer to frustrations with more standard ways of carrying out and/or diffusing research. What “performative” refers and relates to in these contributions and elsewhere is the communicative powers of research and the natural involvement of an “audience,” whether that be connecting with groups of citizens, peers or students, a physical audience or a cyber audience, even a solitary reader of a journal or a book.

Relational Aesthetics (Bourriaud, 2002) offers a theoretical ground for the complexities of connections across seemingly disparate disciplines such as the Arts and Sciences and for further exploration of the synergies between both disciplines as well as communities beyond the academy. Nicolas Bourriaud’s *Relational Aesthetics* is suggested as a starting point because it offers a post-modern, contemporary philosophy that allows academics to think about aesthetics and the use of platforms from the Arts across disciplines in refreshing ways.

Relational Art is located in human interactions and their social contexts. Central to it are inter-subjectivity, being-together, the encounter and the collective elaboration of meaning, based in models of sociability, meetings, events, collaborations, games, festivals and places of conviviality. By using the word “conviviality,” the emphasis is placed on commonality, equal status and relationship (Hewitt & Jordan, 2004, p. 1). *Relational Aesthetics* or “socializing art” often comprises elements of interactivity, but its most noticeable characteristic is its socializing effect. Through such efforts, it aims to bring people together and to increase understanding.

The goals of a *Performative Social Science* based in *Relational Aesthetics* are:

1. To dramatically demonstrate through meaningful impact, the value and worth of in-depth Social Science research carried out, interpreted and/or disseminated through use of tools from the Arts and Humanities;
2. To further substantiate the methods of *Performative Social Science* in which community is central to (re)discovering meaning and utility through a Relational Art (Bourriaud, 2002), located in human interactions and their social contexts. Central to Relational Art are inter-subjectivity, being-together, the encounter and the social construction of meaning; and
3. Through relational artistic activity, to strive “to achieve modest connections, open up (one or two) obstructed passages, and connect levels of reality kept apart from one another.” (Bourriaud, 2002, p. 8)

Perhaps then, there is a “New Emotivity” emergent in academia worth exploring.

Experimentation

The penny began to drop for me when the Bournemouth University ARTS in Research (AiR) Collaborative met up recently for two days of experimentation. I am familiar with health and social care academics having a proclivity towards sensitivity to the often-emotional stories of others gleaned through their investigative encounters. What surprised and encouraged me were faculty and students attending the workshop from Media, Design, Engineering and Computing and Tourism with the same ache to connect emotionally with their subjects and to acknowledge the “first person” in their dialogues.

There was a sweet nostalgia present in my informal biographic encounters with fellow academics on this occasion, wistful for the days of the likes of David Bowie and Kate Bush. Their recollections were often about how we used to be before we were led to believe that we needed to behave (differently). It was life in the British academy pre-RAE and REF—the “preREFaelites,” to coin a phrase. It was often dialogue reminiscent of a time in our shared lives of both emotional conflict and emotional connect.

What does this tell us? Indeed, scholars often find their own narratives in the stories that participants tell them for their research. A big part of Neo Emotivism is embracing this phenomenon instead of backing away from it. The relationships that can be established through such connections are potent and ripe with possibilities for innovation and change in academic connectivity.

The Experiment Redux

The newly-formed and loosely organised, ARTS in Research (Air) Collaborative at Bournemouth University was called together for two days for the purpose of a workshop on biography, narrative and arts-based approaches to collecting and disseminating the personal stories of others by using our own.

The instructions were deceptively simple: The ARTS in Research (AiR) Collaborative would like you to contribute to an experiment. Please bring your past as a present to a workshop. You will give it to someone else. They get to keep it.

Look through that box at the back of the wardrobe or in the loft—the one with bits and pieces that you have been unable to throw away because they represent you and your past. You are going to give some of them away now.

Find some of those precious objects to include in a small packet. Objects might include a paperback novel, pamphlets, railroad tickets, stamps, old letters or photographs (from when photographs used to be physical things), a mix-tape cassette (still have any?) or a 45 record, a food stained recipe card, a small piece of clothing, an accessory like a ribbon or a badge, sheet music, keys, post cards, used concert or theatre tickets, a self-penned poem or a song, or a drawing. Select a few of the objects that tell a particular story from a particular time in your life. Finally, find a box or something else to put them in or wrap them in. Wrap them lovingly, using beautiful materials, perhaps ones that you also have collected. No more than could fill a cigar box or a shoebox at most.

Bring your gift to the workshop. You will agree to exchange presents with one person, a stranger, someone chosen for you by random. You will talk to each other, telling each other stories about the contents. You might make some notes, but be a good listener/observer. After eating lunch with your partner, we will gather to begin to create individual projects around the earlier exchanges.

Day Two: will be “Show & Tell” –more show than tell. You will present your partner’s story in five minutes using any media of your choosing that is convenient. You may want to have your phone, your iPad, or your laptop with you. You will be creating “narrative postcards” of the stories that you have experienced on Day One.

Participants were then reminded of advice from one of my favourite characters, Little Edie, from *Grey Gardens* (Maysles & Maysles, 1975): “*It’s difficult to draw a line between the past and the present –awfully difficult.*”

Potential participants were asked to consider:

- Other than listening, how do we gather life stories?
- How do we involve participants in “gifting” us with their stories?
- Other than dry academic reports, how can we retell these stories in sensitive and ethical way to wider audiences?
- How do the stories themselves inspire creativity in retelling them?
- How can we involve participants in the retelling of their stories?
- How much of their story is also our story?
- When is the gathering of the story itself, itself the story?
- How willing are we to let go of our selves?

Promised benefits of participating included:

- Form new relationships with colleagues across disciplines and Schools.
- Experiment with arts-based methods to gather data and represent/disseminate research findings.
- Develop more participatory relationships/collaborations with research participants.
- Explore visual and tactile methods of gathering data using all of the senses.

Ephemera

Ephemera can be defined as things that exist or are used or enjoyed for only a short time. These are sometimes collectable items that were originally expected to have only short- term usefulness or popularity. Such objects can have added value for the researcher willing to move into interpretation of the visual, the physical, the auditory and the sensual. In my audio/visual production for “*The One about Princess Margaret*” (Jones, 2007), for example, the presentation

relied upon auto-ethnography/auto-biography/auto-ephemera to describe its author as a member of a culture at a specific time and place. As my first foray as the “Reluctant Auto-ethnographer,” the production used tools from the arts as a powerful way to recover yet interrogate the meanings of lived experiences. As auto-ephemera, it documented minor transient personal moments of everyday life: something transitory, lasting a day.

I mention this early experiment because they sometimes stay with us and take on a life of their own. I am now developing the treatment and script for a full-length coming-of-age, gay rom-com feature film based on this earlier short piece’s story. There are files full of ephemera facilitating the development of this new project. Indeed, objects resuscitate memories and enrich the telling of them.

The Results

There was initial trepidation from the gathered workshop participants, particularly around sharing with a “stranger” and with the requirement to “give away” their objects to that stranger. Once they were informed on the day that the “gift” requirement would be up for negotiation between the partners, participants felt somewhat easier. Still, it was very much an adventure into the unknown, full of excitement, but also some nervousness. From the very start, both partners were aware that they would taking in turns identical roles with each other, first as the listener, then as the storyteller.

One of the most intense realizations from this experiment was recalling that many of our previous more usual interview experiences of asking a stranger to reveal intimate details about her/his life, we assumed our own neutrality and distance from the story and the storyteller her/himself. The experiment allowed those who usually would be on the receiving end of a stranger’s tale, to reverse roles. By doing this, we learned a great deal about what it feels like to reveal one’s often most private self to an unfamiliar person. I doubt any of us will go back to interviewing without having been profoundly changed by this experiment.

The assignment of producing a five-minute presentation for the second day also was not without some concerns for participants. It was a case of a quick turnaround, only having late afternoon and the evening of the first day to come up with the presentations for the next day. This, however, encouraged participants to think creatively about the task and use ingenuity.

After the pairs had shared their stories, I offered a few examples of working with data creatively to kick off a discussion and brainstorming for the five-minute presentations the following day. It was an exploration of finding ways and means of responding creatively to detailed data as well as dealing with time and material constraints. Copies of a few chapters from *Michael Kimball Writes Your Life Story (On a Postcard)* (Kimball, 2013) were shared. His compilation of the book’s life stories started in 2008 as a performance piece at an arts festival. I am a great fan of Kimball’s writing (I refer to his and the work of some of the other conceptual novelists as “the new writing”). I often recommend his books to fellow academics as a kind of intellectual colonic irrigation to improve their scholarly literary outpourings. Kimball is someone at whom Proust would have smiled. He constructs, through simple sentences, complex situations and ideas. He is particularly skilful at describing innermost thoughts and feelings and the meniscus that both separates and joins those two intertwining elements in lives. In *Postcards*, Kimball reduces a life to a *soupçon* of a story, usually entailing no more than a few hundred words.

I then turned to a story I recently had heard on *BBC Radio 3* during the Intermission discussion of a Met broadcast of Puccini’s *Manon Lescaut*. The opera is based on an early 18th Century French novel by Abbé Prévost, controversial at its time and banned in Paris. Puccini’s opera followed on the success of Massenet’s French opera of the story a few years earlier. The

story of Manon was a popular one in late 19th Century Europe. The tale of Manon's life, however, is a complicated one to tell. Puccini decided to portray Manon's life in four acts, each act representing a discrete time and occurrence in her life. Although cautioned that the audience would never grasp the plot of the whole story, Puccini insisted that each act was like a postcard sent from a life story and should be thought of in those creative terms.

Finally, I showed a short three-minute video, *I Can Remember the Night* (Jones, 2001), which I made years ago now that encapsulates the driving event in one woman's life story. It was produced from just one paragraph from her three-hour interview, transformed into an audio/visual production. In this clip "Polly," a 65-year-old woman from the Midlands in the UK, recalls the time as a child when her parents sat her down and asked her which of them she wanted to be with. Her story, re-narrated by three players, represents how this traumatic event became an enduring memory throughout the various stages of her life. This memory not only provided clues to her identity, but also represented an event that played a significant role in the way that she made decisions for the rest of her life.

Other than these few examples offered as inspiration rather than as instruction, participants engaged in a learning process through participation in the two days of workshop activities. Suffice it to say that the resulting presentations were far more illuminating, exciting and inventive than most PowerPoint lectures could be.

I will not go into the details of the first day's story telling or the second day's resulting performances here. The group decided that they would like to present their emotive responses to the two days fully, perhaps in an article or for a conference presentation that they will produce as a collaborative effort. At this writing, an audio/visual presentation is in the planning stages.

A few of the comments that followed the workshop, however, may whet your appetite for staging an experiment of your own and the development(s) from the AiR workshop to follow:

- Thank you all for the incredible willingness to be inventive, creative and think/be outside "the box."*
- An illuminating two days of deep sharing. I was honoured to be there and look forward to more creative adventures together.*
- Inspiring. An artful and generative suspension of "normal" activity.*
- I can't remember ever attending such an inspiring event "in house."*

Feel free to use this outline of the workshop for your own purposes. I will end by saying that it was also an experiment in organising and facilitating a two-day workshop without funding or charging for participation. The Media School's Narrative Group generously covered costs for coffees and teas for each day. I hustled room bookings, having to locate each day's activities in a different location. We paid for our own lunches and on the second day ate in a local Italian restaurant—all at one long table, having by then shared all of our stories as a group. There was no "teaching," no lecturing, and no "expert", no flipchart and no PowerPoint. We met up as a group of mostly strangers for our arts-led adventure and, after two days, left as friends. Bourriaud would be proud.

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Article Citation

Jones, K. (2015). A report on an arts-led, emotive experiment in interviewing and storytelling. *The Qualitative Report*, 20(2), 86-92. Retrieved from <http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR20/2/jones6.pdf>
