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Experiencing the New Orleans Sniping Forty Years Later: A Review of the Phenomenological Case Study of Constituting the Other

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Abstract

In this book review I explore the published work of Frances Chaput Waksler entitled *The New Orleans Sniper: A Phenomenological Case Study of Constituting the Other*. The author examines how the second New Orleans sniper was constituted and then later unconstituted, while following the recommendations of Edmund Husserl's on exploring the how, in a known situation, the Other was constituted; how people constitute an Other in a particular situation with the use of "their general procedures and resources," where the existence of the Other is problematic (Waksler, 2012).

Keywords

New Orleans, Sniper, the Other, Phenomenology

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Experiencing the New Orleans Sniping Forty Years Later: A Review of the Phenomenological Case Study of Constituting the Other

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*In this book review I explore the published work of Frances Chaput Waksler entitled *The New Orleans Sniper: A Phenomenological Case Study of Constituting the Other*. The author examines how the second New Orleans sniper was constituted and then later unconstituted, while following the recommendations of Edmund Husserl's on exploring the how, in a known situation, the Other was constituted; how people constitute an Other in a particular situation with the use of "their general procedures and resources," where the existence of the Other is problematic (Waksler, 2012). Keywords: New Orleans, Sniper, the Other, Phenomenology*

While attempting to fulfill a course requirement in my current doctoral studies, I was given the task of selecting from a list of qualitative research methods in which I was to choose one and do further study in. As I read through the list that included thirteen different methods used in qualitative research, I came across one that I was not too familiar with, phenomenology. I have heard it once or twice before, but never did look much into it. I did a quick search in various search engines and began to read various journal articles and websites explaining more in detail what this research method was about. And I as thought about what my plans are for my fast approaching dissertation, I had decided that this method may actually be one that I may need to look into as possibly using when that day arrived.

I came across Frances Chaput Waksler's 2012 book, *The New Orleans Sniper: A Phenomenological Case Study of Constituting the Other*, when browsing on a popular book store site for other references I could use to further my studies in this research method. The four words within the title are what caught my eye, "The New Orleans Sniper." This is the first that I have ever heard of this particular incident, but then I reminded myself that this took place eight years before I was born. As I turned through the pages, with the feelings of as if I was standing in the midst of the action, Waksler portrayed how it was possible that the authorities and the citizens may have materialized this "other," that was later dissipated after further investigation proved that it was one individual who carried this horrible event out. Within his writings, he shows how in instances people can, with the use of "their general procedures and resources (p. 13)," can constitute the Other who in turn is problematic.

In this book Frances Chaput Waksler places the reader in the midst of 1973 sniper attack that took place at the Downtown New Orleans Howard Johnson Motel. He attempts to provide first person accounts with the use of police statements provided by witnesses, newspaper articles printed in *The Times-Picayune* and *The States-Item*, as well as the 889-page *New Orleans Police Department Report* dated August 31, 1973, and other methods of communication of that time which showed how the constitution of the Other came about, and was then unconstituted. By definition, phenomenology is concerned with the phenomena or better explained as the way we view our experiences and how they take shape within our experience. So more plainly put--the meanings things have within our experiences.

Waksler's intended purpose was to show how an Other can come about and can pose as problematic in an horrific experience as such. Waksler's purpose was to provide the resources for identifying the arguments in regard to the claim about Others so that there is a

better understanding them. As the reader travels through the pages of Waksler's book, they could see why the use of phenomenology was warranted when depicting how this problematic other came to be during the New Orleans sniping event.

Waksler was nearing the completion of his dissertation, *The Essential Structures of Face-to-Face Interaction: A Phenomenological Analysis*, when following the television broadcast of the event taking place in New Orleans in 1973, he realized this story would be a basis for a case study on the topic of face-to-face interaction. His primary concern was with how this second sniper was first developed and then later proven to not exist. As he work on other writing projects and consulting while referencing with those works of Husserl, he began to see more relevance of Husserl's analysis to that of the sniping incident. Waksler chose to conduct a case study in depict how the experience of the sniping incident had on others involved and to show how those involved viewed their experience.

Waksler (2012) began the case study by providing two examples of Others: fantasy others and supernatural others (p. 11). Here, he was depicting how in one instance the Other is not harmful, where as in the other instance the Other could be. It was defined that fantasy others are similar to that of dolls being real to children. Supernatural others were defined as someone seeing an apparition of saintly figures, similar to that of ghosts of those that have passed.

Waksler (2012), stated that in "everyday life, the Other is problematic, face-to-face interaction is compromised, for interaction can only occur when each participant takes the Other for an Other" (p. 13). This proved to be so in his case study. Multiple witnesses reported to authorities that there was more than one sniper during the attack. Even providing different descriptions of what the attacker look like, from skin color, height, facial hair, hair style, and clothing.

This particular case study had in fact provided an prime example of the Other being problematic in nature. The road map Waksler drawn outlining the events that unfolded, gave life as to how the Other was erected. He begins the journey by retelling the reports of multiple fires and shootings on multiple floors of the motel at the Downtown Howard Johnson Motel on Sunday, January 7, 1973 at 10:52 a.m. as obtained from *The Times Picayune* dated February 20, 1973. With the final result of seven innocent people being slain and ten other wounded.

Even after the death of the New Orleans sniper, Mark James Essex, the authorities continued to search for this "other sniper," not ever finding him or even identifying a potential suspect. The author relied on the reports of the newspapers for the descriptions in the constitution of the "other sniper," and utilized the police report when unconstituting the "other." Waksler also supplemented his work with that of Peter Hernon's *A Terrible Thunder: The Story of the New Orleans Sniper* to illuminate various points, particularly those points that relate to the information that was made accessible post-sniping.

Waksler mentioned that it was stated by a witness that the sniper, Mark Essex, true intended targets were "white people." It is not known why they were his targets, but Essex was reported to have been mumbling and repeating "I'm going to keep killing all of the white people. You all go ahead, I ain't killing you black people" (p. 33). It was brought to light that, if in fact there was not a second sniper then the police officers were actually firing at one another. And the existence of this second sniper made more sense than that of there only being one sniper having the ability to cause as much damage as Essex did, but investigations proved this to be untrue and a second sniper did not exist.

According to the author, these are the signs that must be present in order for the other to exist: "they are seeable, capable of sound and thus hearable, and capable of movement and action. Sights, sounds, and indications of actions can thereby "stand for" an Other" (Waksler, 2012, p. 31). It is believed that those who gave close descriptions of the sniper, were actually

describing Essex, and were able to identify him as the sniper when shown his photograph after his death.

Even more, after Essex's death a helicopter continued to fly over the hotel firing at the roof because of this belief of another sniper. Not only that, the police even reported seeing this second sniper, directing the helicopter in the direction in which to fire. It was not until the following afternoon, after the police commenced to clear the roof and searched the air conditioning ducts of the hotel, the second sniper was never found.

Waksler did a great job at depicting each way that an "other" must be in to be materialized and founded. He provided a multitude of information that supported how this "other" could not have existed, however it felt as though he was writing in circles. He would go from one topic to the next, then back to the previous topic or a topic before that. It gives the reader the hamster in a wheel feel when reading at times.

His writing however was written in common language that anyone of any discipline is able to read. Waksler could have condensed a lot of the repetitive information down a little more, with some of the parts that were wordy. It was an interesting read. The author did a great job of adding a table to outline the events that lead up to, during, and after the incident. This would be a great book for someone to read if they needed an example of how to do a detailed case study. I can see where further research in this particular incident and others like this would be beneficial for law enforcement, other legal systems, and the behavioral sciences.

Reference

Waksler, F. C. (2012). *The New Orleans Sniper: A phenomenological case study of constituting the other*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America.

Author Note

Natasha Dominguez is currently working towards her PhD in Marriage and Family Therapy at Amridge University in Montgomery, Alabama where she also received her M.A. Professional Counseling. She is an Addiction Therapist providing group and individual therapy to veterans in the Central Texas area. Her areas of research include military sexual trauma and substance abuse amongst the veteran population and active duty personnel.

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