


10-8-2012

Connecting Research with Communities through Performative Social Science

Kip Jones
Bournemouth University, kipworld@gmail.com

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Recommended APA Citation

Jones, K. (2012). Connecting Research with Communities through Performative Social Science . *The Qualitative Report*, 17(41), 1-8. Retrieved from <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol17/iss41/3>

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Abstract

A pioneer in Performative Social Science, Kip Jones makes a case for the potential of arts-based social science to reach audiences and engage communities. Jones contextualises both the use of the arts in Social Science, as well as the utility of Social Science in the Arts and Humanities. The discussion turns next to examples from his own work and what happens when Art talks to Social Science and Social Science responds to Art. The benefits of such interaction and interdisciplinarity are outlined in relation to a recently completed project using multi-methods, which resulted in the production of a professional short film. In conclusion, Performative Social Science is redefined in terms of synthesis that can break down old boundaries, open up channels of communication and empower communities through engagement.

Keywords

"Performative Social Science," Arts and Humanities, Community, Communication

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Connecting Research with Communities through Performative Social Science

Kip Jones

Bournemouth University, United Kingdom

A pioneer in Performative Social Science, Kip Jones makes a case for the potential of arts-based social science to reach audiences and engage communities. Jones contextualises both the use of the arts in Social Science, as well as the utility of Social Science in the Arts and Humanities. The discussion turns next to examples from his own work and what happens when Art talks to Social Science and Social Science responds to Art. The benefits of such interaction and interdisciplinarity are outlined in relation to a recently completed project using multi-methods, which resulted in the production of a professional short film. In conclusion, Performative Social Science is redefined in terms of synthesis that can break down old boundaries, open up channels of communication and empower communities through engagement. Keywords: "Performative Social Science," Arts and Humanities, Community, Communication

Contextualising the use of the Arts in Social Science/Social Science in the Arts

"Aesthetics as much as economics guides the interpretation of social life"

(Smith, 1997, p. 502)

It is a historical fact that the major upheavals and transformations in Western art and science occurred during periods of cross-pollination from discipline to discipline (The Enlightenment or Age of Reason, Truth and Beauty in the 18th Century, is one example, or Paris at the beginning of the 20th Century and the cross-fertilization between art, music, literature, dance and design, and so forth). Forward-looking Arts and Humanities academics are currently directly involved in such cross-disciplinary communication with contemporary practitioners from other disciplines, including the Social Sciences. Some have reached an impasse when re-exploring historical concepts such as the death of the author (Barthes, 1967) in literary criticism and the utility of silence (Sontag, 1967) in fiction. These conundrums, when complicated by contemporary questions in art criticism such as the direct involvement of audience in producing relationships with the world through signs, forms, actions and objects (Bourriaud, 2002) contribute to this contemporary unease. All of these questions challenge the traditional means of production and diffusion in the Arts and Humanities and their respective scholarships.

From a different viewpoint, questions of wider dissemination and methodology itself have begun to convince social scientists to look beyond their own philosophical groundings to aesthetics for solutions (Jones, 2006). They have found that text is often only linear and, therefore, temporal; in science the meaning must be precise or risk disbelief. Narrated stories turned into written text (the vast majority of the outputs of the Social Science interview culture) now require a fresh approach. The constructed memories that are the building blocks of narrated accounts, like dreams, are simultaneous

layers of past and present—the visual and the spatial—and these added dimensions, beyond the purely temporal, now demand attention.

At the same time, practitioners in the Arts and Humanities are looking for a fresh framework within which to base their scholarship and more recently have turned to social scientists for possible suggestions for alternative methodologies and philosophies. There is a desire amongst Arts and Humanities practitioners (photographers and filmmakers, choreographers, poets, composers, creators of new media, etc.) to connect somehow in a relational way to a science of social beings inhabiting space, place and time (communities?), and to investigate scholarly foundations for these explorations.

A seminar at [The Sixth Annual Conference of the Graduate School of Arts and Humanities](#), University of Glasgow (Oct 2007), for example, asked the following questions:

Can Art change the world? Can the Arts and Humanities produce radical new knowledge? How can the effects of material and ideological change be traced? How do traditional research fields or areas approach changes in research theory and methodology? Can interdisciplinary methods in research better record innovation and change?

What happens when Art talks to Social Science and Social Science responds to Art?

“These days academics are all supposed to be interested in impact, but (film) will reach a much larger audience than any academic paper.”

(Film Director, Josh Appignanesi, cited in Guttenplan, 2011)

A not so quiet revolution is currently taking place in the application of research in the Arts and Social Sciences. The use of tools from the Arts and Humanities, in both investigation of concerns and dissemination of data, is gaining critical mass amongst social scientists (Jones, 2006, 2012; Gergen & Jones, 2008). Photography, music, dance, poetry, video installations, dramatic monologues and theatrical performances have recently been added to the researcher's toolbox, under the umbrella paradigm of “*Performative Social Science*” (PSS). In turn, those in the Arts and Humanities are turning to PSS in order to establish a methodological base and explore ways of engaging with and reaching diverse communities with their own creative outputs. Because of its natural requirement for community, *Performative Social Science* provides the overarching intellectual prowess, strategies and methodological and theoretical bases to engage and unite scholars across disciplines and, in turn, connect researchers' endeavours with communities and stakeholders.

In the initial stages of pioneering the development of PSS, a series of five workshops, “Social Science in Search of its Muse: Exploratory Workshops in Arts-related Production and Dissemination of Social Science Data,” were held at Bournemouth University from November, 2006 through June, 2007, supported by the Arts & Humanities Research Council (AHRC), and funded under its Nature of Creativity Scheme. These efforts were put forward in order to indicate means with which social scientists could benefit by identifying areas of possible connections with each other as well as with practitioners from the Arts. Participants were able to return from these encounters across disciplines to more traditional fields of endeavour with renewed

possibilities for creative and innovative exploration of knowledge production and diffusion. Since this seminal effort in PSS, the impact of these explorations has been measurable, including several completed PhDs utilizing principles of PSS, many journal articles, films and conference presentations nationally and internationally and further funding by Research Councils UK of research based in *Performative Social Science* methods.

At the end of the initial four workshops, a short film was made which acted as a record of the events as well as an audio/visual evaluation tool. The film ("[Social Science finding its muse](#)") was premiered at "Qualitative research and arts practice: The potential for research capacity building," ESRC National Centre for Research Methods, University of Wales—Cardiff, September, 2007. It has been shown to colleagues at Bournemouth many times and was an invited presentation at Bristol University's Postgraduate School of Education as an exemplar of "Facilitated Learning." It was also entered into the Learning on Screen Awards 2008 competition. The film has been available on the Internet since September, 2007 and has had many thousands of viewings globally since that time.

A [Special Issue on Performative Social Science](#) for the online, qualitative journal, *Forum: Qualitative Social Research* (Jones et al., May, 2008), provided a wide range of examples and manifestations of PSS, with contributions from various disciplines/subject areas, and realized through a wide variety of approaches to research practice. The Special Issue contained over 100 photographs and almost 50 illustrations, as well as 36 videos and two audio-recordings. Forty-two articles were produced by contributors from 13 countries (Australia, Austria, Canada, Chile, Columbia, Denmark, Finland, Germany, New Zealand, Spain, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and the United States of America) and written in three languages.

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. This is good news, not only for participants in research studies, who can often be involved in producing subsequent performative outputs, but also for the larger community to whom these findings should be not only directed, but also connected.

Relational Aesthetics (Bourriaud, 2002) offers a theoretical ground for the complexities of connections across seemingly disparate disciplines such as the Arts and Social 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 framework 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

(Johannsen, 2000, p. 2). In fact, Bourriaud believes that art is made of the same material as social exchanges. If social exchanges are the same as art, how can we portray them?

Performative Social Science challenges the traditional binary between research and (re)presentation, that is, between acts of observing or “gathering data” and subsequent reports on this process (Gergen & Gergen, 2003). Text is often only linear and, therefore, temporal; in text the meaning must be precise or risk disbelief. Conversely, “working visually involves a significant shift away from the often oddly lifeless and mechanical accounts of everyday life in textual representation, towards ... engagements that are contextual, kinaesthetic and sensual: that live” (Halford & Knowles, 2005, p. 1), the realisation, perhaps, of what Denzin forecast as “the cinematic-interview society” (Denzin, 2001, p. 23).

How does such an effort contribute to traditional academic values? “This will be uncomfortable. Novelty is always uncomfortable. We shall need to alter academic habits and develop sensibilities appropriate to a methodological decentring” (Law & Urry, 2004, p. 404). Is *Performative Social Science* Art or Social Science? It isn’t either. It is a fusion of both, creating a new model where tools from the Arts and Humanities are explored for their utility in enriching the ways in which we research Social Science subjects and/or disseminate or communicate our research to communities. Ideally, our audiences should be almost unaware of the seams where we have cobbled together in-depth, substantial scholarship with artistic endeavor.

The intuitive aspects of shared culture, coupled with a more universal response to life’s tribulations and injustices (and, therefore, artistic expressions of these emotive components), compete for resolution with the more rigid academic ethical frameworks and methodological constraints. By developing a trust in instinct and intuition and the naturally expressive and moral potential of these personal resources, research involving communities can become richer and more human, if we only are willing to jettison some of the baggage of the old academic rigor and dry procedural ethics (Jones, 2012).

An ethical position in terms of a relational humanism in dissemination means that personal autonomy, dignity, liberty and responsibility are considered values for consideration throughout the connections to community created by the research itself, its dissemination and in affecting meaningful change in that very community. Humanising research methodology means consideration of any community’s part in the overall process and building community participation into the overall plan. A relational humanism urges us as theorists, artists, human scientists and practitioners to seek ways – multiple ways – of generating integrative conversations. “How might these research narratives reach beyond the boundaries of the scholarly community to serve the needs of those who do not research, of those who have not yet seen or heard?” (Gergen & Gergen, 2011, draft).

How does the community benefit when Art talks to Social Science, Social Science responds to Art?

“To achieve modest connections, open up (one or two) obstructed passages, and connect levels of reality kept apart from one another.”
(Bourriaud, 2002)

A recent three-year project that took place as part of the *New Dynamics of Ageing Programme* (a unique collaboration between five UK Research Councils—*ESRC*, *EPSRC*, *BBSRC*, *MRC* and *AHRC*) on ageing in 21st Century Britain provides an example of the use of PSS and connectivity to community. The project was entitled, “Gay and Pleasant Land?—a study about positioning, ageing and gay life in rural South West England and Wales” (Jones, K. Project Lead). Through an exploration of the recollections, perceptions and storied biographies of older lesbians and gay men and their rural experiences, the project focused on connectivity and the intersections between place, space, age and identity. Connectivity and identity were central concepts within the project, developing an understanding of how sense of belonging may be negotiated within a rural context. Connectivity can be understood as the ways in which individuals identify and connect themselves with others and the ways in which this may be filtered by aspects of their age and sexuality. Identity and the ways in which older lesbians and gay men choose to disclose their sexuality as part of their identity exerts an influence on the ways in which individuals make connections within the wider community.

The biographies of older lesbians and gay men and their rural experiences formed the bulk of the data studied and the basis for the story and characterisation of a short professionally made film, *Rufus Stone*, directed by Josh Appignanesi (*The Infidel; Ex Memoria*), Kip Jones, Executive Producer and Author. This project would have been impossible without the active participation of community partners as advisors and participants over the period of the study, many who continue to actively engage in the dissemination phase of the film. The project aimed to empower older lesbians and gay men in rural areas through a collaborative multi-method participatory action research design that continues to embrace the principles of PSS in its dissemination plan. The projected impact of the film is to begin to change minds, change attitudes and help to build communities where tolerance and understanding are keys to connectivity and to increasing the value of the social capital of all citizenry in rural settings. By using film and the facility of “entertainment” to suspend disbelief, the potential to change hearts and minds becomes possible.

A founding principle of *Performative Social Science* is a desire to reach wider audiences with research efforts. We look beyond academic journals or narrow academic subject groups for new audiences where the benefits of our scholarly activities will encourage meaningful communication and dialogue within communities of ordinary citizens. Our goals are:

1. To dramatically demonstrate through meaningful community impact, the value and worth of in-depth, well-financed Social Science research interpreted and/or disseminated through use of tools from the Arts and Humanities;
2. To further substantiate the theory 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).

We return to our earlier question: Is *Performative Social Science* Art or Social Science? It isn't either. We remind ourselves that it is a fusion of the Arts and Social Sciences, creating a new paradigm where tools from the Arts and Humanities are explored for their utility in enriching the ways in which we investigate Social Science subjects and involve communities in our research efforts and diffusion of our collaborative endeavours. 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 diffusing research. Indeed, scholars in the Arts and Humanities now look to social scientists for alternatives. Both disciplines are encouraged to find ways to reach wider audiences by funders and subsequently have begun to look beyond journals or conferences of narrow academic subject groups. Funders now want to know the benefits to society of our research and how it might affect society—substantially.

Performative Social Science is a synthesis that provides solutions to many of these very requirements. Part of “doing” PSS is the breaking down of the old boundaries and previous expectations such as what research is supposed to resemble after it is “finished.” Employing techniques from the Arts and Humanities, opportunities are presented to work in traditional Social Science arenas and expand the means of production and dissemination to novel and creative levels. Artists are encouraged to work across boundaries and explore Social Science territories. This requires the fusion mentioned earlier. This necessitates co-operation and collaboration. Communication, celebrating differences and seeking common ground are key to successful relationships and connectivity.

We envisage the continuation of an exploration of the potential of *Performative Social Science* in order to encourage researchers and citizen groups in the creative exploration of communities and their changing values. Research and dissemination processes using innovative and participatory methods to creatively connect with the public are key to future development of PSS. Performative Social Science or a fusion of the arts and sciences are central to both community engagements and as catalysts for change.

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Author Note

Kip Jones (BA, MSc, PhD) is Reader in Performative Social Science at Bournemouth University in the UK. His post straddles both The Media School and the School of Health & Social Care and involves the use of tools from the arts in culture, community and communication. Postal: Dr K Jones, Royal London House, Christchurch Rd. Bournemouth BH13LT UK; Email: kipworld@gmail.com; Blog: <http://kipworldblog.blogspot.co.uk/>

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Article Citation

Jones, K. (2012). Connecting research with communities through performative social science. *The Qualitative Report*, 17(Rev. 18), 1-8. Retrieved from <http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR17/jones.pdf>
