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Michael Gard
Southern Cross University

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On the myth of the crisis of representation: a response to Gilbourne, Jones and Spencer

Michael Gard

First, my thanks go to the editor of *Sport, Education and Society* for this rare opportunity to engage in open debate about an important scholarly issue and also to David Gilbourne, Robyn Jones and Spencer Jordon for their willingness to participate.

From the outset, I want to at least register the point that we appear to be living through a period of much methodological innovation in the social sciences. The now well under way 'narrative turn', for example, has been joined more recently by a wide range of methodological off-shoots around which academic careers are being built. Anecdotally, my sense is that these developments are celebrated by some academics as inherently positive much in the same way as the idea of diversity is often assumed to be superior to uniformity in virtually any sphere of human life. However, the assumption that innovation is necessarily positive is surely unwise. One possibility is that the proliferation of ways of doing and writing about research represents a retreat from the difficult academic work of generating new and important things to do research about. Perhaps, also, the so-called 'exhaustion' that has been ascribed to more conventional ways of representing research is less a weakness in existing methods and more a signal that some researchers have run out of things to say about the world. In this case, methodological 'innovation' may simply be a case of old wine in new bottles.

In 'Applied utility and the auto-ethnographic short story: Persuasions for, and illustrations of, writing critical social science', Gilbourne, Jones and Spencer make a string of claims about why we might choose to represent auto-ethnographic data in a literary form such as short story and for the 'potential' or 'capacity' of this kind of writing to achieve certain things. They also claim that literary auto-ethnographic texts might 'potentially act as a catalyst for change' or 'change previously held views'.

It is striking how often social science work of this kind is justified in terms of its 'potential'; its potential to 'create debate' or 'encourage reflection' or 'transgress'. In the absence of any evidence, on the face of it this seems a very weak justification. Any piece of writing probably has this 'potential'; after all, we never know how a particular word, phrase, essay, academic paper or story might resonate with a reader. There is, for example, a serious website I know of that collects and studies found shopping lists and these stimulate very interesting reflections, debates and discussions. In other words, surely this 'potential' also resides in any form of social science, no matter what form it takes. Ideas about the ways we narrate and think about our lives, or the connections between different life events, or the complexities of interpretation, all of these have been and continue to be the stuff of 'normal' social science. What is missing from Gilbourne, Jones and Spencer's paper, and in this literature generally, is a reason to think that this form of social science writing addresses these matters in particularly compelling ways.

Out of the fairly lengthy list of claims made by Gilbourne, Jones and Spencer, I could see only one that begins to speak to the specificity of this kind of literary social

science; the idea that by juxtaposing different vignettes, taken from different time periods, we might see connections that were previously invisible. This seems plausible although hardly novel and not necessarily the exclusive domain of story telling. However, the authors write as if these insights were newly discovered when, in fact, social scientists have been talking about the complexity, interconnectedness and narrative-ness of social life for a long time. In this vein, I was, to say the least, surprised to read:

When laid open to discussion and critique, say, in a pedagogy situation (a post-graduate seminar for example) we believe that auto-ethnographical tales have the capacity to generate insightful and unasked questions about practice and so, to ask “why we behave as we do?”

Two possibilities present themselves here. First, the authors appear to be suggesting that the question ‘why do we behave as we do’ is one of their ‘insightful’ ‘unasked’ questions. However, in a discussion about social science this would seem so naïve and ahistorical an argument as to be scarcely conceivable. Leaving aside questions about which insightful and unasked questions they have in mind, a second possibility is that what the authors really mean to say is that stories like ‘Travel Writer’ produce insightful new answers to the ‘why we behave as do?’ question although what these answers might be is unclear.

One of the most unsatisfactory aspects of Gilbourne, Jones and Spencer’s argument is the way in which they cast their story as ‘unsettling’ and ‘a challenge to the status quo’. On the one hand, this is a peculiar claim when set alongside the authors’ account of the positive reception this work has received. Actually, I am not at all surprised that they have been well received in the various contexts in which they have read and used this story. Despite the rhetoric of transgression that permeates this paper, the narrative turn in social science is well established, if not fashionable.

On the other hand, in my experience social scientists tend to be a rather polite lot, particularly if someone goes to the trouble of writing and reading a story about their personal experiences. I have seen this many times in seminars; the writer reads their story, everyone smiles and makes supporting comments. However, the ‘warm fuzzy’ that academic experiences like this seem to generate is no substitute for fresh, interesting and truly transgressive insights.

In order to support their transgressive aspirations, the authors simply cite other auto-ethnographic writers who, rather than making the case for transgression, simply repeat the claim. I simply offer here that saying that one is transgressive is not the same as being transgressive. In my reading of their paper, the authors really do seem to be suggesting that we need new forms of social science writing in order to learn that mining is hard work or, more esoterically, that the storying of our lives is a complex, non-linear, unpredictable process. In fact, despite the constant claims of cutting against academic orthodoxies, my point here is that the account the authors give of the ‘critical social science’ dimensions of their story telling is conventional and familiar.

Moving in a slightly different direction, Gilbourne, Jones and Spencer are at pains to emphasise the literary sophistication of their project. The authors of the paper clearly

want us to see us this writing as subtle, suggestive, 'opaque' and open to multiple readings. After reading 'Travel Writer, however, I felt like I had sat through an academic seminar. The story ticks all the conventional boxes, wearing its academic and philosophical convictions firmly on its sleeve; life is complex (tick!), certain events can resonate through our lives (tick!), people can be cruel to each other (tick!).

The problem here is that far from being open-ended and subtle, this kind of story writing seems written to prove and exemplify the kinds philosophical and epistemological claims that are used to justify the story's existence in the first place. Subtlety is possible in the hands of accomplished story writers. When the short story is done well, the reader is sometimes left to guess at the motivation of the author. Sometimes this motivation remains elusive, or begins to reveal itself only as the story unfolds or after we've read it a few times. In my experience, this is seldom, if ever, the case in academic writing of the kind presented in this paper, where the reader is simply led by the nose, even though the use of literary paraphernalia seems intended to obscure this fact.

Inevitably, then, this takes us to the sensitive terrain of literary quality. If there really is pedagogical power in the auto-ethnographic story it is surely diminished by a) the repetition of the author's favourite adjectives (eg 'dirty') b) clunky turns of phrase (eg 'traffic fumed air',) and c) the use of clichés ('the sadness of it all'). This may seem uncharitable, but what choice, as the reader, do I have? Am I not being asked to take this writing seriously and not simply the work of would-be fiction writers? Is the reader being implicitly asked to ignore the rough edges? Is this reasonable?

I accept that story telling can be a powerful source for generating insight and reflection. I know also from long experience in writing groups and working with aspiring writers, though, that telling someone their writing is poor is difficult to do and most people will shy away from saying these words. I think this is partly why this sort of academic work has been so gently treated. In fact, I have very rarely heard the criticism that a certain piece of academic writing is 'clunky', even in cases where the writing has been utterly appalling. As I say, this situation probably arises in an overly polite academic community, where we are all trying to build our publishing records, and where to criticise would just feel mean. It's a story after all, which someone has probably put a lot of work into. This is part of the problem. Narrative writing deflects criticism in a way that 'normal' academic writing is less able to do. The writers of academic stories wrap themselves in the shield of literary pretence, effectively insulating them from criticism by making others less likely to give it. This point is confirmed, I think, in a subtle way in Gilbourne, Jones and Spencer's paper. They make reference to the criticism of self-indulgence that is sometimes levelled at this work, but seem completely unaware of the far more significant problem of literary quality. What standards of literary quality should apply here? Do they matter? Why? Why not? If they don't matter, then this is not an encouraging starting premise. If they do matter, why do they matter and what should they be? There is surely a self-evident point here that where the intentions of the author are explicitly literary - as opposed to, say, a story a research participant tells a researcher in the context of an interview - poor writing will detract from any pedagogical potential the story might have started with.

In my view, the literary and the social science poles pull writers in different directions and this is an extremely difficult tension to reconcile. The authors talk about the pedagogical intention of the story and the concepts that guided it. So, right from the start it seems obvious to me that the text has already died as a short story. The short story that we then read is faithful to the intention outlined by the authors. This is the problem. The story touches all the bases that the authors start off saying it would, which is why, as a short story (and I agree with everything that the authors say about the value of good short story writing), it does not work. The authors want to claim that this is both literary writing and social science writing. I accept, that in the abstract, such a synthesis may be possible. But what we have here is social science trying to be literature, with the result that it works as neither.

There is an unresolved, serious tension in the kind of social science Gilbourne, Jones and Spencer present in their paper. While fiction can be pedagogical, it is usually not intended to be explicitly so. This is why 'didacticism' is something many authors at least try to avoid. In a typically contrarian performance at this year's Sydney Writers' Festival, the Man-Booker Prize winning author Howard Jacobson announced that authors must believe in nothing and that belief was the death of fiction. In a less hyperbolic vein we might say that pedagogy is the opposite of literature. But the kind of fiction that has been produced in this paper, and in the narrative enquiry tradition generally, explicitly and openly sets out to be pedagogical. This is, the authors say, the reason for its existence. And it is this, the pedagogical intent, which renders it ineffective as fiction. This might not be such a problem except that the authors claim to be harnessing the power of fiction when, in fact, they are engaged in a corruption of it.

To come at the point from a slightly different direction, the American author Jonathan Franzen recently told Australian radio how amazed he was by the interpretations some of his readers drew from his books. While his work is intended to problematise certain aspects of modern life, some readers thanked him for confirming the correctness of behaviour he most wanted to reject. Out of this anecdote an interesting question emerges: how might Gilbourne, Jones and Spencer view what might be considered perverse, oppressive or pro-status quo readings of their story? Would this be a vindication of its pedagogical value or not? If the answer is yes, then it is difficult to see what would remain of the transgressive pedagogical credentials of academic story telling. If the answer is no, then the aspirations to literature are instantly extinguished.

I suspect that the authors will want to argue that the story is the beginning of conversation and reflection, not the end of it, and that convincing readers of anything is not part of their agenda. On the one hand, this argument would be very difficult to square with the transgressive 'potential' the authors claim for their story. On the other hand, assuming this potential actually exists, this reply would seem a miniscule return for the apparent time and energy that has gone into championing this kind of social science. We should expect much more from any form of social science than it being a conversation starter, shouldn't we?

If I might draw a wider conclusion, it is uncontroversial, I think, to observe that much of the methodological innovation that we are currently witnessing stems from the much heralded 'crisis of representation' (Sparkes 1995). I think it is now plainly

obvious that there was no crisis of representation; the capacity of connected non-fiction prose to describe and understand the world, something it had done well enough for centuries, did not suddenly run out in the closing decades of the 20th century. That a particular mode of representation is unreliable, contingent and partial is simply an enduring ontological truth about language and human life; it is not a signal that the edifice built by that mode of representation is about to come crashing down. In fact, it could surely only be opportunism, hubris or a lack of intellectual imagination that might lead one to the conclusion that new forms of representation were urgently needed. What the world needs is not new ways of representing research but more talented scholars who can ask penetrating questions and explain the complexities of the world with clarity. My fear is that some scholars have evacuated this space not because it is conventional and tired, but because it is difficult.

Standard descriptive, analytical prose shows no sign of dying out in Western culture and it will be the scholar's tool of choice when the methodological fads that surround us have passed. This is definitely not to say that nothing of value emerges from methodological experimentation. At the recent AISEP conference in Limerick, the social scientists Kimberly Oliver and Eimear Enright offered compelling accounts of the utility of visual research methodologies, both as a means of establishing rapport with research participants and as an alternative source of data. One message that I take from this, though, is that the job of the critical social scientist is and will always be to question, describe, explain and interpret. Yes, human life can be ambiguous and good literary fiction can help us to feel this complexity. However, it simply remains unclear what purpose is served by academic texts that seek to ape this complexity while, at the same time, purporting to have specific pedagogical goals in mind.

References

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