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Phoenix rising? Minding the gaps? Learning lessons from intimate publics

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Abstract

In November 2008 I started a blog. I called myself 'phoenixrising' and my blog 'mindingthegaps'. My first post set out my aims, which were firstly to provide 'a window on what I am willing to share/make public and what I want to keep private', secondly a way to 'trouble the academic habit of presenting a clever front' and thirdly a test of my willingness to 'ramble publicly'. These aims arose out of my experience. I felt that being a PhD student had started to involve silencing other aspects of my life which were nevertheless, I believed, part of my PhD student 'self'. They thus connected with some age old feminist concerns and with debates around reflexivity, voice and self (here, specifically, 'the academic self'), particularly as they pertain to auto/biographical productions. My blog was intended to be both academic production and cultural artefact (I am also producing a quilt) and a way for me to address limiting beliefs I had about my technical and technological competency.

Seven months later I posted the following

When I started this blog I wanted to explore the borders of public and private. It seemed like quite an adventure. However, what I have learned in the past days is that there is a serious side to this. As is my wont, I set out full of hope and excitement and in joyful expectation of the learning that lay ahead, little imagining the mischief some may make of this. I wish wisdom would join me as a travelling companion. Or even common sense. I was aware that 'putting myself out there' would expose me to critical scrutiny but I did not anticipate it would also expose me to personal scrutiny and attack. This has been salutary.

This paper is an auto/biographical account of the months between these two posts.

1ST SLIDE

I am Yvonne Downs from the Department of Education at the University of Sheffield. What I am about to do is give a performed auto/biographical account of my experience of creating and keeping a blog (www.phoenixrising-mindingthegaps.blogspot.com).

2ND SLIDE

This is a challenge and it's going to take up a great deal of my time but I think I have to do it. I know I have my reflexive journal in which to think through ideas but I need to do something that connects with other people. I hope some people will read what I put and maybe even leave a comment, even though the thought of that also

makes me feel uncomfortable. One of the things I hated about teaching and still hate about presenting is being on display. I think this tells me something about beliefs which are embedded in the concepts of public and private, which in turn connect to wider issues of class and agency and their translation into social practices. It is particularly relevant to Amartya Sen's concept of 'appearing in public without shame' (Sen 1985 and 1999). I'll put 'recording parts of my research journey other methods cannot reach' somewhere in the title though.

I think I'll position my blog as one of the 'cultural artefacts' that I'm creating for my thesis, like the patchwork sample I am sewing. Now what will I call myself? I think phoenixising is a good name because it alludes to what I see as the role of myth in the accomplishment of distinctions between 'separate spheres', such as public and private. Powerful as it is, 'the personal is political' cannot convey the actual work that has gone in to creating those separations in the first place. What are the mechanisms by which it is achieved? Miriam David (2003) makes a start by turning the statement on its head so it reads 'the political is personal' and Charles Wright Mills (1959) says we have to engage the sociological imagination in order to understand the connections between private troubles and public issues. Mills, in 1959, also pointed to the transformation of 'publics' into 'masses' which is in stark contrast to the idea of publics being intimate. That notwithstanding, paying attention to the mythologizing of separate spheres is my contribution to the debate so I'll re-iterate the importance of myth by including an old photograph of myself at the top of Scafell Pike in my profile. How long is it since I did that? But I do need to be upfront as well otherwise instating my aims could slip into deception. So I'll just do a straightforward outline of what I'm doing for my PhD to accompany the picture. That will also serve to juxtapose aspects of my academic and private self. I'll also put in some of my favourite films and books. I won't include any 'academic' books but I'll choose those works of fiction that have influenced my thinking. Sometimes there are no clear lines between what I do as a student and what I do outside that role and at other times the miles in between Sheffield and my home town are symbolic of the distance between my academic and domestic self. And what shall I call this blog? Mindingthegaps I think. This touches on my desire to avoid St. Pierre's 'vicious binaries' (1998, p.176) and to engage in what Melanie Walker (2003, 2006) calls 'bivalent theorising' that is taking a 'both and' rather than an 'either or' approach.

Because I am using a life history approach in my research on older women graduates who were born into working class families and am assembling a thesis

around nine life stories, one of which is mine, and because I use a range of written and visual techniques to re-present my research, I take Bev Skeggs' (2002, p.349) criticism of reflexivity as self-telling very seriously. I am very interested in her argument that a reflexive 'self' is made known through what she calls 'particular methodological techniques', such as 'confessions, autobiographies, experimental writing, autoethnography etc'. She is scathing about all of these which she sees as 'authorial exhibitionism for the middle classes'. Skeggs develops her argument that self-narration is also a classed practice by drawing on the work of Steedman (2000), who sets out how the poor and the working classes were obligated to tell their stories (and to tell them in certain way to 'prove' for example that they were 'deserving poor'). Skeggs thus contends that 'the techniques of telling also rely on accruing the stories of others in order to make them property for oneself' and concludes that '(i)t is therefore the method that is constitutive of the self, not the self of the researcher that always/already exists and can be assumed in research'. Like Skeggs I want to redefine reflexivity. I want to get away from a concept of reflexivity as self-telling, as 'confession, catharsis or cure' as Pillow (2003) would say and move towards an understanding of it as a set of disruptive practices. In other words reflexivity not as telling but as doing, something I sometimes refer to as reflexing. I'm also going to use this blog to explore ways of doing this.

So I've got a name, my blog has one, I've done my profile and, after much frustration, I have imported a background which alludes to my interest in quilting. All I have to do now is my first post and let people know what my aims are.

I'm doing doctoral research and am constantly jotting things down on scraps of paper - which get lost, are never where I want them etc. This will be a place I know I can access what I set down relatively quickly and easily. It also gives me a window on what I am willing to share/make public and what I want to keep private. Am I willing to ramble publicly? I say I want to trouble the academic habit of presenting a clever front - am I really? Last but not least - I want to prove to myself that I can do it.

I'll also put in that I'm helping to put shopping away just in case no one gets the public/private/academic/domestic thing.

3RD SLIDE

It's taken me quite a while to get going as a blogger. Between my first post in November 2008 and this one in March 2009 I have only posted six times. Now I have

taken part in a project that uses videonarratives to promote doctoral students' reflexivity on their doctoral journeys (see <http://escalate.ac.uk/downloads/6857.pdf> and Taylor, Downs, Chikwa and Baker 2010) because it addresses Skeggs' critique of reflexivity as self-telling head on. Including a video of me talking about myself is of course narcissistic, self-indulgent, and vain as Van Maanen (1988), Maynard (1993), Patai (1994) and Pile and Thrift (1995) would contend, although I think this criticism applies to any researcher. I wonder if any of the aforementioned wore their research as a hair shirt? But I also see inclusion of this short video clip as a disruptive practice because it is not a polished production as my presented written work usually is, as my thesis will be. This blog, rambling as my thoughts may be, is also presented to the best of my abilities. But this videonarrative was an unscripted, unrehearsed recording and if I intended it to be (in Skeggs' words) a method 'mobilized for the display of cleverness' (p.351)' used to 'shore up the composite of the academic self' (p.361), I think I fail to meet my aim here. I cringe at the faces I pull, my deep sighs and strange intonation but I use my embarrassment as an opportunity for reflection nonetheless.

I also want to challenge Stanley's (2000) argument here that emphasis on the self leads to the social being collapsed into interior processes. It can do of course but I agree with Skeggs that 'it is precisely through the telling of the self that 'social processes (of positioning, of value, of moral attribution) are put into effect' (p.350). Here Skeggs cites Lauren Berlant's ideas that self-telling is enabling the (re)formation of US citizenship to support her arguments. Berlant herself (1997, p.9) maintains that the distinction between the 'merely personal and the profoundly structural' is a false one. Including this video, where I look out to connect to an imaginary audience, instantiates Skeggs' argument that self-telling reaches out rather than in, although she would clearly see this as more problematic than I do.

4TH SLIDE

I am posting this video of Roger Davies singing about my home town for several reasons; because it connects with issues of class and ethnicity that I have been hearing in the stories of my co-participants; because it foregrounds the situatedness of my blog in a wider 'virtual' community (click on the title and you are taken to Roger Davies' website) and because it is a further instance of reflexivity as disruptive practice because we don't expect song in text. I think my approach here is like that of

German playwright Berthold Brecht (I studied German as an undergrad). Brecht uses 'Verfremdungseffekte', (alienation techniques), such as actors stepping out of their role, and slogans projected on to the stage, songs and loudspeaker interruptions of the action, to remind actors and audiences to hang on to their disbelief, to remember what they see is not real life or even a facsimile of it.

I am starting to get excited about the possibilities of blogging. Maybe I could submit my thesis in the form of a blog?

5TH SLIDE

When I began blogging I did consider that some people may take issue with my aims, that they may vehemently disagree with the mixing of my academic and my other lives, that they may see this as not scholarly at all and that they may let me know all this in no uncertain terms. However, I reasoned, isn't all this part of being public? And it's not like I've said anything at all controversial or particularly revealing or confessional, like in Bochner and Ellis' (1992) and Ellis and Bochner's (1992) co-constructed abortion papers or Ronai's (1997) account of sexual abuse, or Yallop's (2009) of being with a dying parent or Jago's (2002) of suffering with depression, although like Anne Tyler whom I mention in my list of reads, I did try to make the mundane interesting. But what I know now is that what you think you've written and how that is actually read can diverge substantially. I am not referring now to differing interpretations but to an entirely different construal of one's words. I did not anticipate or prepare for that or for the personal abuse that followed this misconstrual.

My experience is not of the order of the storm that raged when Pat Sikes research paper was misrepresented in the press (Sikes 2008) and whilst this has been an upsetting time I agree with Nussbaum (2000) who, referencing the Stoics, argues for the unity of emotions and cognition. In Nussbaum's view, emotions are 'intelligent responses to the perceptions of value' (p.1), and are themselves 'forms of evaluative judgement (p.22), with a narrative structure (p.236) and a history that is narratively constructed (p.173). Thus I can take this opportunity to read these events through the lens of my emotional response to them. Whilst I have decided on ethical grounds not to say more, I became aware that, in Berlant's terms, in the intimate public sphere 'intimate things flash in people's faces' (1997, p.1). My blog had in effect served as a conduit for intimate public communication and represented, on a

micro level, the proscription (the over-organisation as said by Berlant) of public discussions about power and ethics (and, Berlant maintains, the nation).

I still have concerns that my interest in the public and the private was hijacked and sent in a different direction. But, over thirty years since Oakley highlighted hidden political forces that operate in the ostensibly private and personal spheres of housework (1974, 1976) and postnatal depression (1979, 1980) my blogging experience animated for me Berlant's claim that 'intimacy has been transformed from a private relation to a structuring aspect' (1997, p.131).

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