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# Troubling Narratives: Using 'I poem' narratives as a reflective tool within an institutional ethnography of 'care' in teachers' work

SEPD Research Conference  
7<sup>th</sup> April 2016

Jim Reid

# Context

- Institutional Ethnography in a primary school during a period of notice to improve.
- Problematic – ‘How do teachers come to care?’
- Political argument for an ethic of care (Tronto 1993)
- The Listening Guide (Mauthner and Doucet 1998)

# Institutional Ethnography

- Dorothy Smith (2005; 2006)
- Textual mediation of people's everyday activities
- Draws on:
  - Marx 'historical materialism' and consciousness (objectivity and subjectivity entwined)
  - Bakhtin's (1981) dialogic process to posit discourse as social organisation

# Poetry – 'Digging'

Seamus Heaney, *Death of a Naturalist*. Faber & Faber, 1966.

Between my finger and my thumb  
The squat pen rests; snug as a gun

Under my window, a clean rasping sound  
When the spade sinks into gravelly ground:  
My father, digging. I look down

Till his strain rump among the flowerbeds  
Bends low, comes up twenty years away  
Stooping in rhythm through potato drills  
Where he was digging.

The coarse boot nestled on the lug, the shaft  
Against the inside knee was levered firmly.  
He rooted out tall tops, buried the bright edge  
deep  
To scatter new potatoes that we picked  
Loving their cool hardness in our hands.

By God, the old man could handle a spade.  
Just like his old man.

My grandfather cut more turf in a day  
Than any other man on Toner's bog.  
Once I carried him milk in a bottle  
Corked sloppily with paper. He straightened up  
To drink it, then fell to right away

Nicking and slicing neatly, heaved sods  
Over his shoulder, going down and down  
For the good Turf. Digging.

The cold smell of potato mould, the squelch and  
slap  
Of soggy peat, the curt cuts of an edge  
Through living roots awaken in my head  
But I have no spade to follow men like them

Between my finger and my thumb  
The squat pen rests.  
I'll dig with it.

**Hermeneutics: his life; family, work, history,  
place and materiality.**

**Poetics: stanzas, rhyme, alliteration, similes,  
enjambment, repetition, metaphor and the  
evocation of image.**

# Heaney's prose

- ***The Redress of Poetry*** (Heaney 2002, 260) - poets are in danger of slighting another imperative, namely, to redress poetry *as* poetry, to set it up as its own category, an eminence established and a pressure exercised by distinctly linguistic means... (Original emphasis).
- ***Place and Displacement*** (Heaney 1984/2002) - Affect to the particular exacerbations attendant on being a native of Northern Ireland, since this 'affect' means a disturbance, a warp in the emotional glass which is in danger of narrowing the range of the mind's responses to the terms of the disturbance itself (117).
- ***Government of the Tongue*** (Heaney 1986; 2002) - attends again to his themes of the poet's hermeneutic and poetic art, 'the 'poet's personal gift of utterance and the common resources of language itself' (180)
- Foucault - Governmentality

# 'I' Poems & Reflexivity

I would have liked acknowledging  
I wouldn't have half killed myself  
I had thought  
I partly did it

I know we did it for the kids  
I wouldn't have worked every bank holiday and  
up till 2o'clock in the morning  
I wouldn't have worked every day  
I won't next year  
I'll do as much as I can

I won't kill myself doing it  
I think you just get bitter and twisted

I was crapping myself as usual  
I was really quite scared  
I think the first observation  
I just thought, "Oh my god" ...

I just thought "thank god for that"  
I can't do any more than I am doing  
I can't give any more  
I can't possibly  
I haven't got the time  
I can't think of any more  
I could do

- The institutional ethnographer is aware of the need to understand the materiality of the poem
- The disjunctures that arise in consciousness of being reader (of the participants' data) and writer of the object of analysis.
- There is a commitment to praxis and reflexivity.
- Understands his/her standpoint
- Reads for relations of ruling

# So?

- **Protection**- normative, male dominated approaches to practice, including research, develop a form of privileged irresponsibility based on particular notions of justice and universalism.
- **(Narrative) Production** - takes account of the production of narratives or texts that persist in protecting that privilege
- **Caring for my own** - research that is overly protective of its own processes and methods develops the potential for an 'epistemology of ignorance' (Tronto 2002, 136).
- **Personal responsibility** - taking account of inequality and power in the research relationship.
- **Charity** - supporting the idea, for example of reflexivity in the research, rather than in any epistemological relation to knowledge creation (in the actuality of the research experience, what is being objectified and why?).

(Tronto 2002)