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# 18 The Art of Collaborative Storytelling: A Discussion on Arts-based Representations of Narrative Contexts<sup>1</sup>

KIP JONES

The call has been sounded asking social scientists to develop designs of enquiry and dissemination which rest on processes of art rather than science and to represent the subjects of biographic research with the complexity we associate with literature and works of art more generally (Clough, 2004; Denzin and Lincoln, 1994, 2002; Hollway and Jefferson, 2000; Sandelowski, 1991; Rorty, in Hiley et al., 1991). The emerging synthesis of the arts and social sciences presents challenges to the methodological-philosophical foundations of knowledge. At the very heart of this matter is knowledge transfer. The need for innovation in dissemination of detailed descriptive information has, until recently, been neglected in the social sciences. As collage-makers, narrators of narrations, dream weavers - narrative researchers are natural allies of the arts and humanities. Possibilities include, but are not limited to, performance, film, video, audio, graphic arts, new media (CD ROM, web-based production), poetry and so forth.

The format of my presentation at the *Narrative & Memory Research Group 5<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference* at the University of Huddersfield (April 2005) was performative, collaborative and conversational. Through the use of three audio-visual PowerPoint presentations, an attempt was made to revisit the arts and humanities in search of lenses through which the intricacies of social science data might be represented. At the conference, I explored examples of (re)presentation from my own biographic narrative work and discussed the potential of use of various media (studio recording, audio/visuals, etc.); I then shared several examples of visual/arts-based production through the three short narrative sequences described below (audio/visual links available on my website: <http://www.kipworld.net>).

**1. “Fall River Boys” Narrative Photography by Richard Renaldi (re-narrated by Kip Jones)**

Since the spring of 2001 I have paid numerous visits to the small community of Fall River, Massachusetts. The town is situated on the Taunton River about 15 miles inland from the Atlantic Ocean and is home to a Portuguese community of considerable size. Fall River enjoyed prosperity as a manufacturing center for cotton textiles until the 1920s but has seen its economic lifeblood leach away in the intervening decades. As an impoverished working class New England community, I am drawn to this town for its bleakness and its beauty. My photographic focus here is on the teenage boys who are engaged fitfully, awkwardly in the search for manhood in this harsh and sometimes hopeless place.

(Richard Renaldi, <http://www.renaldi.com/portfolio/index.html>)

I discovered the photographs of Richard Renaldi on the Internet while creating a CD-ROM on lifelong learning for the *Department for Education and Skills* (UK). I invited Richard to include his photographs in our project because his pictures of individuals have a powerful ability to reach the viewer by visually representing the personality in front of the lens. Later, I discovered his Fall River Boys series on his website (<http://www.renaldi.com/portfolio/index.html>) and was struck by the capacity of this body of black and white photographs to tell a story. I decided to create a short PowerPoint presentation of his photographs for the Huddersfield conference because I believe that they demonstrate how a story can be narrated visually – minimising the use of words. Because Rinaldi’s photographs convincingly tell a story of teenage youth in a particular place, I decided to use a backing track to represent time, place and interpretation and chose the song, “*Everything Must Change*”.<sup>2</sup>

I particularly noticed that Richard’s photographs of the younger boys depicted happy, carefree children, but the older boys portrayed seemed to take on a burden and hardness that teens from more promising backgrounds might not. My first interpretation was, therefore, to represent this change – both through reordering the photographs and the use of the song. Secondly, I used the repetition of a few of his shots of buildings in Fall River to represent urban decay, hopelessness, the power of the environment on the psyche and the general lack of any kind of bright future in this post-industrial, manufacturing town in New England. The song repeats the line, ‘*Sun lights up the sky and humming birds do fly*’, several times, represented through the visual irony of crisp, bright sunlight on decaying buildings and streets. Nonetheless, these “humming birds” seemed unable to fly or flee their environment. I noticed that, in many of the pictures, the boys were associating themselves with a means of transport or “a way out” such as bikes, skate boards, scooters and cars. The song laments, ‘*Winter turns to spring, A wounded heart will heal, but never much too soon. Yes, everything must change*’. But will it for these teens caught up in circumstances beyond their control? The presentation ends with a shot of

two teens working behind the counter of a fast food outlet, then fades to shots of the timeless Taunton River – nature’s conduit, both to the town of Fall River and away from it.

## 2. “Thoroughly Post-Modern Mary” [A Biographic Narrative Interview with Mary Gergen] by Kip Jones (2004a) and Mary Gergen

In 2004, the editors of the online qualitative journal, *FQS* (<http://www.qualitative-research.net/fqs/fqs-eng.htm>), were creating a special issue devoted to interviews with prominent researchers in the field of qualitative research and asked me to interview the feminist, scholar and writer, Mary Gergen. I had met Mary and her husband, the social psychologist, Kenneth Gergen, on several occasions at conferences in the past and had been invited to brunch with them at their home in Wallingford, Pennsylvania on one occasion. Because of this ‘familiarity’ with the subject of the interview, I felt that an opportunity presented itself to make use of the open-ended, unstructured interview technique that I use in my primary research, the Biographic Narrative Interpretive Method (Chamberlayne, Bornat, Wengraf, eds, 2000; Wengraf, 2001; Rosenthal, 2004; Jones, 2004b), but test its capacity to generate story under very different conditions. By using its unstructured, interview method, the personal journey to “who the interviewee is today” is encouraged, rather than merely a list of accomplishments, typical of more journalistic interviews.

The Biographic Narrative Interpretive Method uses an interview technique in the form of a single, initial narrative-inducing question (minimalist-passive), for example, *‘Tell me the story of your life’*, to illicit an extensive, uninterrupted narration. This shift encompasses willingness on the part of the researcher to cede ‘control’ of the interview scene to the interviewee and assume the posture of active listener/audience participant. A follow-up sub-session can then be used to ask additional questions, but based only on what the interviewee has said in the first interview and using her/his words and phrases in the same order, thus maintaining the narrator’s gestalt.

In typical usage of the method, microanalysis of the narrative of the reconstructed life follows the interview stage, using a reflective team approach to the data, facilitating the introduction of multiple voices, unsettling and creating a mix of meaning and encouraging communication and collective means of deliberation (Gergen, 2000: 4). In brief, The ‘Lived Life’, or chronological chain of events as narrated, is constructed then analysed sequentially and separately. The ‘Told Story’, or thematic ordering of the narration, is then analysed using thematic field analysis, involving reconstructing the participants’ system of knowledge, their interpretations of their lives and their classification of experiences into thematic fields

(Rosenthal, 1993: 61). In the case of the Mary Gergen interview, however, a conscious decision was made not to interpret her life story in this typical manner.

I mailed Mary Gergen a cassette tape, blank except for the opening life story question. Mary took up the challenge and recorded her life story on the tape (transcript available at: <http://www.qualitative-research.net/fqs-texte/3-04/04-3-18b-e.htm>) and returned it to me through the post. This was followed up by several email question and answer messages back and forth (also included in the transcript). One of the first things I noticed (interpreted?) about the interview was Mary's use of films as metaphors for transitional moments in her life. The second was that Mary's story was quite "playful" and I wanted the presentation in *FQS* to reflect that. I decided to use illustrative photographs (often from film) and graphics to enhance the storytelling and to represent one possible interpretation of the story. By using typefaces and colours (not usually available to us in hardbound journals), I was able to portray the journey through time and its period effects so that Mary's narration was set against a visual background of the influences and cultural sea changes that abound in any life story's passage through time (Available at: <http://www.qualitative-research.net/fqs-texte/3-04/04-3-18-e.pdf>).

A decision was made to present the 'lived life' and 'told story' (as well as the transcript) online in the journal in a 'raw' form with the further involvement/interpretation of the reader/viewer in mind. The story has not been "academically analysed" by the interviewer or reflective teams, but left open and transparent, in order that the reader/viewer becomes part of the interpretive process. Still, the production of the story becomes the creative output and social construction of both the storyteller and the interviewer (the performer and the first audience) and, in this case particularly, one story of many stories that could have been told by the person interviewed. Routine facts are often back-grounded by the narrator through the use of this method in favour of spontaneity in the storytelling and the creation of meaningful life metaphors.

The Biographic Narrative *Interpretive* Method has much to say, in fact, about the formal interpretive process (see Wengraf, 2001; Jones, 2004b). Still, it is important to emphasize that interpretation on the part of the researcher begins early, even within the interview. During the initial encounter, the researcher is often making and dealing with subconscious observations whilst maintaining a position of active listener. Through the procedure of note taking in the first sub-session of the interview, the researcher begins a process of interpretation, making choices about which areas of the story should be explored further in the second sub-session. Subconscious thoughts are brought into the interpretive process through such note taking; post-interview debriefing (with oneself or others) follows the interview sessions and is inherently interpretive. Later, when the interviewer (preferably) types the transcript of the interview, further reflection and notation takes place. Further

hearings of the tape recorded interview produce additional insights and interpretations which are diared by the researcher as well. When constructing the Lived Life and selecting passages of the Told Story for team analysis, again, the interpretative skills of the researcher come into play. All of these interpretive processes were incorporated into the creation of the final product in the *FQS* Mary Gergen interview.

### 3. “I Can Remember the Night ...” by Kip Jones and Polly Humberston<sup>3</sup>

The final example presented at the Huddersfield conference was a presentation that resulted from a more traditional use of the Biographic Narrative Interpretive Method from my study of identity and the informal care role (Jones 2001). Through the use of the in-depth, minimalist-passive interview technique of the Method, I have discovered that when a particularly traumatic or life-defining event is being described in interviews, the expressed memory of it becomes more than a verbal *reportage*. Time becomes very precise in these dreamlike sequences as interviewees struggle to recall minute-by-minute details in a specifically detailed time-space. There is a great effort to describe a physical atmosphere, an ambience, a three-dimensional space and the physical relationships in this space (between people, objects, and so forth). I liken it to trying to describe a dream and how words cannot quite capture the ‘feeling’ that we have had in the dream. These revelations seemed to fit with the model that I have been developing, sometimes referred to as ‘flashbulb memories’ (Brewer, 1986: 36). That concept’s photographic analogy, however, excludes a sense of three-dimensional space as well as the passage of time – a memory with its cinemagraphic or theatrical qualities. For me, these narrators’ precise descriptions resonate more accurately with the ‘interior drama’ of theatre or film.

An example of these three-dimensional, atmospheric and hyper-detailed recollections is demonstrated in Polly’s story (Figure 1). Following the Second World War, when Polly was eight, her father returned from the army and her parents decided to divorce. Her parents sat her down and asked her whom she wanted to be with after their separation.

#### Figure 1 Polly Remembers

[Numbers in brackets (1) refer to pauses in seconds]

*I can remember the night that they did split up erm it was a wet night, I saw my mother go out I didn’t know where she was going I thought oh - I shouted after her, she said nothing she just walked out, my father then called me and he said we are going out I asked whether mother was and he said she went*

*be coming with us (1) again ever and that's (1) that was the night they finally split up before the divorce. I can so clearly .. and I .. my mmi er (1) I don't know I felt devastated and then there was a meeting in the house at my fathers house in the front room and I can remember it so clearly, he was sitting in the armchair (1) in the corner, my mother was on the settee near the window and (3) they was asking me who I wanted to be with (1) and I said but I want to be with both of you I can remember it so well (2) and I .. I was supposed to pick who I wanted to be with (1) I think that was awful of them now, in hindsight I think it was dreadful, and I couldn't pick I loved them both (1) oh yes I remember it very well !*

The reversed chronological order of events portrayed in Polly's description above (Figure 1) becomes first, a passage about her mother leaving and secondly, a report of the preceding conversation with her mother and father. In this passage, expressive passion overshadows chronological time. This was a very intense and detailed part of her life story: she depicts the atmosphere ('*wet night*'), movement (*mother walking out*), then the meeting in the front room, remembering who was sitting on which furniture, locating the players in three-dimensional space: '*in the corner*', '*near the window*', etc. She is describing it like one would describe a dream, clutching at details to make it more real. Yet, when she is stumbling, she is reflecting her inability to verbalise something, a feeling. These are important pauses, because she is trying to "paint" an exact picture: '*I can remember it so well*'. Her visualisation takes over from the verbal telling, whilst the verbal is trying inadequately to paint the picture that is so much stronger in the subconscious. The psyche does not always speak in complete sentences; Bakhtin refers to this as 'the border of the verbal and the non-verbal, the said and the unsaid' (Thorton, 1997: 4).

For audience clarity in the audio/visual conference presentation (the audio track is available at: <http://www.angelfire.com/zine/kipworld/Track-01.mp3>), I put the description in chronological order, setting the scene and bringing the audience into the physical space first, emphasising the crucial three-dimensionality of the story. Because Polly's memory (retold to me when she was 65 years old), seemed to be a memory that had resurfaced over a lifetime since the childhood event, I decided to present the story with three voices – one a youngster, one a middle-aged women and the third, an older woman in her mid-60s – representing Polly at three stages in her life. The three performers - all characterizing Polly's telling - come from three generations of the same family (for consistency in accent). Their performance of Polly's narration was studio recorded - the three voices signifying the passage of time and Polly's recurring memory. Lines were repeated by each of the performers, lending a poetic quality to the narrative. The visuals were made up of photographs of the

interior of a working class northern UK ‘front room’ in the late 1950s/early 1960s - with only the period furniture acting as symbols of the three characters. The photos were converted to black and white, with some sections filmed as movies in grainy Super-8 type style – a frequently used home movie film, introduced in 1965. Although the presentation only lasts for less than two minutes, it is a powerful representation of a narration of space/time and how the physical is part of our memories of life events.

## **Conclusions**

Where do we find an aesthetic in which to base our new ‘performative’ social science? ‘The criteria for evaluating qualitative work ... are moral and ethical. Blending aesthetics (theories of beauty), ethics (theories of ought and right) and epistemologies (theories of knowing), these criteria are fitted to the pragmatic, ethical and political contingencies of concrete situations’ (Denzin and Lincoln, 2002: 229). The 20<sup>th</sup> Century was not kind to 18<sup>th</sup> Century notions of the aesthetic. In the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, ideas of what “truth” and “beauty” mean need to be re-examined from a local, quotidian vantage point, with concepts such as “aesthetic judgment” located within community. The principles of Nicolas Bourriaud’s Relational Aesthetics (Bourriaud, 2002) offer a theoretical grounding to the search at hand. Relational Art is located in human interactions and their social contexts. Central to its principles 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. 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?

One place to start is in our (re)presentations of narrative stories, through publications and presentations. Ken Gergen argues that the words and stylistic conventions used in typical journals “derive their meaning from the attempt of people to coordinate their actions within various communities” (Gergen, 1997: 6). Rethinking our relationship within communities and across disciplines such as the arts and humanities offers up opportunities for us to move beyond imitation of “scientific” reports in dissemination of our work and look towards means of representation that embrace the humanness of social science pursuits. This creates a clearing in which meaningful dialogue with a wider audience is possible, feedback that is constructive and dialogical in its nature becomes feasible and dissemination of social science data transforms into something not only convivial, but also even playful. Presentations can then evolve into ways of creating meaningful local encounters and performances, in the best sense of these words.



### **A Final Note About Collaboration**

One of the joys of working with the Biographic Narrative Interpretive Method is its collaborative nature – first with participants in the interview process and, second, in the assemblage of reflecting teams to respond to the stories of narrators. These few examples of arts-based production of narrative data described here represent a third kind of alliance, the collaboration in the production of devices for dissemination of our findings. A danger exists, however, that, in our enthusiasm to embrace the arts as social scientists, we may both narrow our concepts of the possibilities available to us in the arts and humanities and also reach beyond our own grasp and capabilities. Too many of us have sat through somewhat embarrassing dramatisations comprised of well-meaning social scientists' attempts at becoming actors. I fear that Mickey Rooney's excited exclamation to Judy Garland: "*I know what we'll do! We'll put on a show!*" is sometimes taken too literally by some enthusiasts of the performative possibilities of narrative data.

This is where collaboration becomes crucial. Reaching across disciplines and finding co-producers for our presentations can go a long way in insuring that, rather than amateur productions, our presentations have polish and the ability to reach our intended audiences in an engaging way. Pushing the limitations of means of dissemination already available to us (print, web-based, PowerPoint) to new and creative levels, provides platforms for attention-grabbing, evocative diffusion of social science data. Indeed, taking inspiration for styles of presentation from other disciplines also broadens our canvass. 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. With this in mind, our collaborations offer us opportunities for meaningful dialogue between disparate communities, opening up unknown possibilities for future dialogues and associations. Co-operation itself, therefore, becomes a creative act, often stretching the boundaries of our understanding and prodding us to come up with fresh and innovative ways of overcoming practical obstacles in knowledge transfer.

Several collaborations took place in producing the presentations described in this paper. First, in *Fall River Boys*, I entered into collaboration with photographer, Richard Renaldi, as described earlier. This is not to say that a presentation of photographs that I took myself would not be appropriate, but by using a professional's work, the message became that much richer and stronger, creating a mix of voices and collective meaning. In the end, the "dialogue" created between the photographer and me, by working together to visually narrate through the use of his photos, enhanced and contributed to the final dialogue with the audience.

Secondly, in the Mary Gergen interview, a follow-up email dialogue developed between the two of us, the results of this being incorporated into the final presentation. After the interview, Mary discussed her story and participation with her husband, Ken Gergen, and his input, although tertiary, makes its presence felt. Permission<sup>4</sup> for use of all of the photographs and artwork used in the final document was obtained through email correspondence. This process resulted at times in some interesting electronic conversions as well. I was, of course, in dialogue with the editors<sup>5</sup> of *FQS*, and their input was extremely helpful. The transcript of the interview was compiled by the administrator<sup>6</sup> at our research centre who also acted as a “captured audience” for early versions of all three presentations and provided helpful feedback.

Finally, in the Polly Humberston sequence, more collaboration took place. The three amateur performers<sup>7</sup> all agreed to participate in the recording of the monologue. A composer/musician<sup>8</sup> friend donated his studio and his time to produce a professional recording of the narrative as well as compose the background music. *The National Trust*<sup>9</sup> agreed to the use of their photographs of the Liverpool house shown in the presentation.

Refusing to be limited by more traditional means of dissemination of social science data also means that a modicum of humility and a state of “not knowing” is necessary in our collaborations with others from far a field. Looking beyond the safety of our own discipline, with its protocols, procedures and ring-fenced areas of expertise to what Frances Rapport calls ‘the edgelands’ (Rapport, Wainwright and Elwyn, 2004), can be both daunting and liberating. The trick is, I believe, to remember that art and science are both ‘fuelled by creativity’ (Taylor, 2001) and that the potential for inventiveness resides within all of us. After all is said, creativity is that uncanny ability to work within rule boundaries while, at the same time, changing them.

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### Endnotes

1. An earlier version of this chapter appeared in the *International Sociological Association Research Committee on Biography and Society RC38 Newsletter*, October 2005.
2. "Everything Must Change"; music and lyrics by Bernard Ighner; lyrics available at:  
<http://www.sing365.com/music/lyric.nsf/PrintLyrics?OpenForm&ParentUmid=49216035299D6A9B482569A1002B9516>
3. Polly Humberston is a pseudonym for one of the participants in the study.
4. Photographic reproductions courtesy of the following: *Rolfe Alumni Group*; *True Catholic Organization*; *Tom Tierney*; *The Roy Rogers-Dale Evans Museum, Branson, MO*; *The Missouri Heritage Project, 1999 for educational use*; *Chuck Adams*; *Marilyn Monroe, LLC (CMG Worldwide)*; *B. Krist for Greater Philadelphia Tourism Marketing Corporation*; *Swarthmore College*; *Matson Navigation Company, Inc.*; *University of Pennsylvania*; *Vidisco Ltd.*; *Peter Kurth*; *Stephen Mifud (Malta)* - <http://www.marz-kreations.com/home.html>; *Diva Las Vegas*; *Tickety-boo Ltd*; *Paul Ivester*.  
Music: "Theme from *The Last Tango in Paris*" (Gato Barbieri, arr. by Gotan Project);  
"Happy Trails to You" (music and lyrics by Dale Evans Rogers, sung by Roy Rogers).
5. Katja Mruck, Günter Mey.
6. Sirron Norris-Hall.
7. The Players: Nicky Genders, Amy Genders, Glenda Flude.
8. Engineering and Music: Ross Hillard; recorded at *Magic Number Studios*, Leicester.

9. Photos courtesy of *The National Trust*: 251 Menlove Avenue, Liverpool, John Lennon's home with his Aunt Mimi until 1963, restored by *The National Trust*, with furnishings and interior decoration similar to the way the rooms looked when Lennon lived there.

