

Representation and The Text – Re-Framing The Narrative Voice.

William G. Tierney & Yvonna S. Lincoln (Eds) (1997). State University of New York Press, Albany.

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”Representation And The Text – Re-Framing The Narrative Voice” consists of a collection of twelve chapters written by Norman K. Denzin, Patti Lather, Yvonna S. Lincoln, Donald E. Polkinghorne, William G. Tierney and seven other authors. The book covers important mainstream theoretical and practical issues relating to the development of postmodern narrative theory, research, method and analysis. In the introduction, the editors state that their main purpose is to ”focus specifically on authorial representations of contested reality in qualitative research”. The intention is to show and discuss how qualitative researchers in our times have tackled the old problem of the position of the researcher toward the research subject being studied. Important questions are asked: what constitutes the truth of observations in qualitative research, how can research results best be presented, and which focus groups of readers are the researchers addressing. Each author examines two basic themes: 1) to provide a critique of how authors use voice in narrative research, 2) to suggest ways to develop experimental voices that expand narrative strategies.

The book contains two parts. The first part has the subtitle ”Mapping the Conceptual Terrain”. It is concerned with presenting main concepts and issues faced by researchers using a narrative approach. The second part has the subtitle ”Experiments in Voice, Frame, Time, and Text” and is focused on how research strategies are influenced by the choice and use of concepts and issues presented in the first part of the book. Both parts have in common that a postmodern background of an ”ideology of doubt” is prevalent, which questions any scientific method to obtain authoritative knowledge.

Reading this book, I felt that the old times of comfort and certainty are over in the social sciences. There is a surging feeling of hope and excitement about the possibilities of social science research in postmodern times. The postmodern challenge is already far too strong to be ignored, and this book has important messages. Although the authors are occupied with the narrative method and its implications as a main theme, they also write about the state of qualitative inquiry from a general point of view. They ask serious and relevant questions about the consequences of using new research methods, new ways of thinking about social research and the responsibility of the researcher to his audience.

The need for revolution and a radical re-evaluation of methods, writing practices and communication is at the heart of this book. Coming from a background of a traditional positivist approach to research and social science, I feel the postmodern voice of the authors to be like a

fresh breath of wind on a hot summer's day, gradually gaining force and momentum. Postmodernism is already destroying old values and will force us to redefine our basic beliefs – not only in science but also in everyday life. This may be painful for some, but I am certain that it is for the best in the long run. Especially in psychology, postmodern thought has an important message.

One of the themes in this book is that a postmodern revolution in the social sciences is not a one-for-all revolution, with one state of affairs today and another one tomorrow. A postmodern revolution means a continuous process of redefining purpose, the development of social science as a practice and a discourse that generates meaning, and the interpretation of meaning. In my opinion, one basic message of the postmodern approach is that we must learn to live with uncertainty and to respect the ongoing questioning more than the final answers. The challenge to social scientists is to survive and participate in the postmodern change and emerge stronger than before.

It is not possible to do justice to the contributions of the twelve authors to this book in a short article. I will therefore focus on a few themes that I feel are especially important. In the book's first chapter, D. Polkinghorne sets the theme that researchers should abandon their traditional role as experts and authorities and take on the role of storytellers. He points out that researchers are social practitioners, and that a narrative form is best suited for reporting the practice of research that, like a story, always has a beginning, a middle and an end. A basic position here is that knowledge statements should not be "considered to be mirrored reflections of reality as it is in itself; rather, they are human constructions of models or maps of reality" (p. 7). It follows from this that "the narrative research is a history of the research project" (p. 15). Polkinghorne writes in a style that I find truly enjoyable to read, full of sharp comments and convincing arguments.

Greg Tanaka presents a lucid analysis of problematic racial and minority group situations in the context of a "core program" about different cultures in a U.S. college "in the search for a language of race and equality". His text focuses on tensions between minority and majority groups in the college. Tanaka presents his texts in an unusual way, he writes in two columns on each page, one column dealing with the "story" or the narrative, the second with "sidenotes"; i.e. with reflections concerning the narrative. The sidenotes contain the theoretical and literary sources the author finds relevant for his project. This way of writing creates multiple "voices" and directly invites and engages the reader in a hermeneutic circle where meaning is generated in a "conversation" between the reader and the "story" and the sidenotes. This way of presenting the narrative method is engaging and illustrates well some of its potential.

Patti Lather's chapter is titled "Creating a multilayered text: women, AIDS, and angels." Lather's aim in this chapter is to present the "textual practices" in the interview study that she is well known for, about women living with and dying from HIV/AIDS. She speaks of her method as a "multi-layered weaving" where a researcher has to make many choices about the politics of interpretation, data, text and analysis. There is a feeling here of great responsibility in telling the stories of other people in a crisis, of compassion and of a humble approach to un-

derstanding. Lather wants to move away from the "reductiveness of the restricted economies of interpretation" that characterizes much of modern social research. Her method to do so is to create and use a "mosaic" text that breaks with tradition and authority, and challenges the reader by confronting him or her with things that to some may be quite shocking in places. The interview fragments and descriptions of women living with HIV/AIDS presented in this chapter are touching, to the point and make fascinating reading. Lather states that she refuses "textual innocence and an untroubling realism" and has moved to ethnography as a "site of doubt" with all the consequences this entails for interpretation. After reading this chapter I felt greatly motivated to read more of Lather's work.

Denzin's chapter on performance texts is well written. His project in this chapter is ambitious and unorthodox: to use texts as theatrical performances, where the "subjects" and the researcher both have an active role in textual interpretation. It makes a fascinating challenge to work directly with live audiences in the way proposed here by Denzin, but it definitely requires some talents of researchers that are perhaps not commonly met with.

It was great fun to read Carolyn Ellis' chapter about "Evocative autoethnography: writing emotionally about our lives." Ellis experiments with writing texts in different ways, and shows clearly how the "voice" will change by using each style. She shows how a researcher must make choices with regard to the voice of the authors, the academic discourse and the "crisis of representation". I underlined one sentence in her chapter: "Why did social science have to be written in such a way that detailed lived experience was secondary to abstraction?" (p. 124). This question applies well to much mainstream writing in psychology, and should be taken very seriously. When obscure abstractions become the aim of social science, while the individual's feelings and experiences are forgotten or at best become secondary, then we risk alienating science from the people who have the most use for it. It is precisely the realization of this dilemma that has made qualitative research so important.

William G. Tierney's chapter is titled "Lost in translation: Time and voice in qualitative research." The focus here is on how reality – out of many possible realities - is created and presented in a text. Here, the question of the position of the author, who cannot escape the influence of his or her historical existence on his or her research, becomes important. Tierney writes about problems of style, time, voice, purpose and audience in an exceptionally clear and useful way, and I would without hesitation use his chapter if I were to plan a university course on qualitative interviewing as a research method in psychology.

The chapter by Yvonna S. Lincoln concerns the problem of partiality in texts: they are written by men or women, they are local and historical, temporal and contingent upon culture. She proposes an interesting solution of using multiple texts for communicating with multiple readers, and discusses some of the possible causes and consequences that this would entail for academic research and writing in the social sciences.

The last chapter in this book is written by Thomas Schwandt and is an attempt to synthesize the arguments and positions of the other authors. Schwandt states that "Ethnography's encounter

with postmodernism has yielded new wisdom but greater anxiety about the authority of the ethnographic enterprise." The reason for this is that postmodernism "undermines the traditional authority of ethnographic scholarship" (p. 305). Much of the tension that is felt between the lines in this book is precisely this dilemma. Where does the scientist stand when he or she loses authority? Postmodernism demands that people engaged in research put a question mark next to their own authority which may never be taken for granted. Authority is from this angle an obstruction to vision and a hindrance to discovery. Schwandt underlines the fact that there are existential and social problems where we do not see any solution at the present, and maybe never will. We must simply accept this. Is this pessimism, or is it a statement about the condition of reality faced by many of us? We should not forget that realizing and accepting the existence of a problem is the first step to its solution. Postmodernism does not, in my view, encourage us to give up but to face and accept the uncertainty and the irrationality of life as a challenge. The narrative method, using storytelling as a strategy, can be seen as one possible way out of the social dilemma facing all of us, every day, in a world that is unpredictable and full of chaos. The narrative method is a unique way of communication and also probably mankind's oldest one.

We should not forget that our western world is only a small part of the totality of the cultures and peoples of this planet. This book is written by a panel of U.S. writers and one writer from Australia. Contributions from writers in other countries would have made the book more international in scope, but not necessarily better.

This book is a good buy and can easily be recommended for students and researchers alike because it contains material that is highly relevant for narrative qualitative research and for the question about how theory affects practice. Many of the chapters contain a historical overview of the development of some aspect of qualitative research and the narrative mode of representation. It offers literally hundreds of useful ideas regarding narrative qualitative enquiry and postmodern thought.