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Author(s): Paul Atkinson and Sara Delamont

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Can the Silenced Speak?

A Dialogue for Two Unvoiced Actors

Paul Atkinson and Sara Delamont

Abstract This dialogue is a counter-narrative to Norman Denzin's one-act play *Apocalypse Now*. There Denzin engages with critics of postmodern qualitative inquiry, and in which Martyn Hammersley is the main target of criticism.

The protagonists are Paul Atkinson and Sara Delamont, who appeared as non-speaking characters in Denzin's one-act play (Denzin 2009), where they are named as part of a chorus of silent witnesses. The dialogue takes place in January 2010, in Cardiff, the capital city of Wales, UK.

Prologue

Paul enters the study he and Sara share. She is seated at her desk, writing up her fieldnotes from the previous evening's observations into an A4 notebook. He pulls a photocopy out of his briefcase.

Paul: Did you know Norm has published a play in which we are characters? David Silverman has just sent me a copy of it.

Sara: Published it where?

Paul: In his new Left Coast Press journal. I'd seen an advert for it, but not the journal itself. Have you?

Sara: Not me. What's the play about? Why are *we* in it?

Paul: We seem to be part of a chorus of 'social science and education superstars', along with Freud, Foucault and Barthes!

Sara: All *men*?

Paul: No. There are other living women in the chorus, but no founding mothers of qualitative research, and no anthropologists. The play is an attack on Martyn Hammersley and his 2008 book, *Questioning Qualitative Inquiry*. Neither of us speaks — at least I haven't been able to spot a line for either of us yet. I think we just sit there, as silent witnesses, while the quick — like Carolyn Ellis — and the dead — like Herbert Blumer — are given sound bites in a general attack on

Martyn. I'm not sure why we're there. And I'm certainly not sure whether we, Freud and other luminaries are supposed to be taking sides, or what's going on.

Sara: But neither of us speaks?

Paul: No. You'd better read it.

Sara: OK, I'll just finish writing up these notes from last night. Did I tell you that there was *heat* in the sports hall? For once I didn't have to wear four layers of sweatshirts and gloves. I could take notes without running back and forth to the cloakroom to put my hands under the hot tap every twenty minutes.

Paul: Good. I worry about you in that hall. You always look so chilled when you get home. I'll leave the play on top of the tango CDs, OK?

Scene

A few days later. Sara and Paul are in their office after dinner, drinking coffee.

Paul: Have you read Norm's play?

Sara: Yes. Do you want to do something about it?

Paul: What do you think?

Sara: Well I really hate being in that chorus, and I hate being silenced by Norm. But I haven't read Martyn's 2008 book, although I'm trying to organise a review symposium on it for *Qualitative Research*.

Paul: It's ironic that we are harnessed to Norm's dramatic purpose, but silenced. We should protest.

Sara: Isn't it a bit unethical to conscript us into a dispute without our permission, or even telling us? I wonder if the Adlers were asked if they minded being included, apparently on Martyn's side.

Paul: Appearing silenced is seriously strange. Especially as everybody knows we are perfectly capable of making a noisy contribution. But writing a reply is very time-consuming. Personally, I'd prefer to get on with setting up my fieldwork on masterclasses. There's the print-maker and the potter I want to watch teaching their apprentices and conducting masterclasses. That's much more satisfying than internecine disputes about epistemology, methods or textual genres.

Sara: At least you are a co-author of Martyn's. I've only ever written one thing with him and generally we disagree. He hated my pieces about the re-exclusion of women from the male accounts of qualitative sociology of education in Britain, and we hold entirely opposed views on women in the history of the Chicago School, feminist methods, and sexism in schools. So I don't think I have much in com-

mon with Martyn's epistemology, although I'm as unhappy about the vogue for autoethnography as he is. But I really dislike being in that chorus. I feel violated. I think Norm should have sent us pre-publication copies and checked what our views were.

Paul: The play is very ethnocentric. It is only about the USA. Norm cites our 'roiling smoke' paper in *QSE* but ignores most of its content, except for the comment about capitalist publishers, which is attributed to Yvonna Lincoln. When the European Science Foundation are spending about six hundred thousand euros on a European-wide programme to foster qualitative methods, it's maddening to find Norm still being so ethnocentric in his doom-mongering.

Sara: I find the whole play a bit confusing. Is the debate about how data are collected, or how they are analysed, or how they are presented and re-presented, or theory, or the standpoints from which research is conducted? After all, you *could* have a performance about a statistical study; you could write poems about the results of RCTs; or dance the outcomes of a quasi-experiment. How data are communicated to audiences can be independent of the epistemology or the techniques used on them.

Paul: What I find annoying is the insult to G.H. Mead and Blumer and the Second Chicago School, implying that they were all crude empiricists. All the arguments that Will Housley and I made, or that David Maines made seem to be ignored. I really don't like this rather dismissive othering of previous generations and of any intellectual critics as if they were all unreconstructed dinosaurs, with no sensitivity at all as to the nature of social research.

Sara: Me too. It's as if people like Ginnie Olesen or Blanche Geer were idiots. And as if innovators like Zora Neale Hurston and Ruth Landes never wrote unconventional texts..

Paul: I'm also thoroughly confused as to what I am supposed to be 'for' or 'against' in all this. Norm and his circle want to put me in the camp along with their opponents. I'm part of the old guard, one of the people that Art Bochner and Carolyn Ellis are 'against'. On the other hand, John Brewer's book on ethnography brands me as a dangerous postmodernist. I think *I* know what I have argued for, and I think I've been pretty consistent. But I sometimes can't make sense of how other people represent me. More to the point, I really don't believe that the messy world of real research is susceptible to too much methodological purism (or puritanism, maybe). I can't help but think that most of the really important and enduring works of social research escape the narrow confines of isms and paradigms in any case.

Sara: But you and Martyn Hammersley agree, I suppose?

Paul: Of course we do up to a point, but we don't agree about everything. In fact when I look at Martyn's book, I'm also a bit puzzled. Sometimes it isn't at all clear that you and I are especially well represented there either. For instance, the crux of recent 'apocalyptic' debate, which Norm's and Martyn's interventions address, is something we wrote about in our 'roiling smoke' paper. But I think they both get it wrong. They are both pessimistic, from diametrically opposed premises. Norm and his compatriots insist on extrapolating from recent issues in the United States, suggesting that there is an external, institutional assault on the legitimacy of qualitative research in the social sciences. Martyn, on the other hand, wants to suggest that there is a crisis of legitimacy that is being fuelled from within, by the 'postmodern' turns that undermine the status of qualitative work. Each contrives to be dismissive of the points we made.

Sara: But our point was entirely valid. The vast majority of qualitative researchers today are getting on with their research, they're not indulging in postmodern experimentation, and they're working in real field settings, not obsessively writing about themselves under the guise of autoethnography. In the UK and throughout Europe qualitative research is being pursued by doctoral students, and it is being funded by State agencies, national academies, charities and others. I think that that's actually true throughout the world, but sometimes it's getting drowned out by the white noise of epistemological dispute and textual experimentation.

Paul: Like this dialogue.

Sara: Of course. This is as self-referential as anything else.

Paul: Of course, we're not cock-eyed optimists, but there's really no justification for any talk of apocalypse or of crisis. The greatest methodological worry in the UK is the perceived lack of expertise in *quantitative* methods, and if there is any implicit desire to throttle back qualitative work, it is against that background. Qualitative work has become extraordinarily successful throughout the social sciences. It is flourishing in the European countries—but English-speaking sociologists are so damned ethnocentric they can't see beyond their national networks.

Sara: Isn't that one of the things that the Euroqual programme has thrown up—the amazing diversity of different national research traditions, the deep roots of some of them, and the fact that they are pursued in mutual isolation: the tradition of biographical research in Spain, the long history of life-history work in Poland, and the parallel tradition of oral history in Italy; the hermeneutic perspective in the German-speaking countries, and French discourse analysis.

Paul: Yes, and the vast majority of European social scientists are getting on with what

I regard as the real stuff of research—collecting data about people’s everyday lives, analysing those data methodically, and publishing straightforward research papers and monographs. Although most of them are aware of the more heated methodological debates, they are not unduly preoccupied with them. It’s easy for people like us, and Martyn, and Norm to assume that our preoccupations are shared by the majority of the world’s research community. My experience of Euroqual suggests that they’re not.

Sara: Isn’t it ironic that Norm, who values indigenous methods, should come over as ethnocentric and that despite his commitment to polyvocality he should silence so many people. Do you know how I feel about all this? In that famous poem about cricket in the 1870s by Francis Thomson, ‘the field is full of shades’ and ‘a ghostly batsman plays to the bowling of a ghost’ in front of ‘a soundless-clapping host,’ while ‘the run-stealers flicker to and fro.’ These debates are all taking place in another reality where no one has to teach students practical research methods, or supervise doctoral students who are doing real fieldwork. I’ve got two martial arts to study, you’ve got tango classes to write up, opera masterclasses, and you’ve got to negotiate access to your studio potter and the master lithographer. Why are we sitting here and fretting about these arcane disputes, when there’s a much more interesting world *out there*?

Paul: Yeah. Getting into this debate is colluding in a displacement activity. Let’s stop this, just as we would have walked off-stage in real life when Norm placed us in that silent chorus.

Sara: I agree. We’ve protested enough.

Exeunt