Kip Jones
Bournemouth University, UK

A Biographic Researcher in Pursuit of an Aesthetic: The use of arts-based (re)presentations in "performative" dissemination of life stories

Abstract

The (re)presentation of biographic narrative research benefits greatly from embracing the art of its craft. This requires a renewed interest in an aesthetic of storytelling. Where do we find an aesthetic in which to base our new "performative" social science? The 20th Century was not kind to 18th Century notions of what truth and beauty mean. The terms need to be re-examined from a local, quotidian vantage point, with concepts such as "aesthetic judgment" located within community. Social Constructionism asks us to participate in alterior systems of belief and value. The principles of Nicolas Bourriaud's Relational Aesthetics offer one possible set of convictions for further exploration. Relational Art is located in human interactions and their social contexts. Central to it 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, presentations and performances. Arts-based (re)presentation in knowledge diffusion in the post-modern era is explored as one theoretical grounding for thinking across epistemologies and supporting inter-disciplinary efforts. An example from my own published narrative biography work is described, adding credence to the concept of the research report/presentation as a "dynamic vehicle", pointing to ways in which biographic sociology can benefit from work outside sociology and, in turn, identifying areas of possible collaboration with the narrator in producing "performances" within published texts themselves.

Keywords
Biographic narrative research; arts-based (re)presentation; relational aesthetics; social constructionism; "performative" social science

Introduction

Exploring the possibilities of a "performative" social science, for me, grew directly out of dissatisfaction with limitations in publication and presentation of my own biographic narrative data. For instance, my reciting papers to audiences or, worse, reading text from PowerPoint presentations directly to them (audiences who were certainly capable of reading slides for themselves) contributed to my self-inflicted discontent. I began, therefore, to look to the arts and humanities for possible tools which might be transposed in order to better disseminate my narrative interview material at conference gatherings. In considering methods from the arts as a possibility, it seemed crucial to explore critical thinking in contemporary aesthetics in an attempt to find resonance with my efforts at crossing disciplinary boundaries in my reports of biographic investigations.

The currently 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 an aesthetic of knowledge transfer. The need for innovation in dissemination of detailed descriptive and interpretive information has, until recently, been largely neglected in the social sciences. As collage-makers, narrators of narrations, dream weavers, however, narrative researchers are natural allies of the arts and humanities. In practical terms, promising possibilities include, but are not limited to, performance, film, video, audio, graphic arts, new media (CD ROM, DVD, and web-based production), poetry and so forth.

For some time now, biographic work in social science has sought new ways of attaining greater "sensibility" to humanistic concerns. A central problem with a synthesis of the arts and social sciences within biographic production is epistemological; the status of new forms of production and dissemination as academic knowledge remains contested and ambiguous, and further development is required. I suggest that one way that this can be achieved is through an exploration of the aesthetic/performative principles proposed here. Such an attitude more fully celebrates and represents the humanistic concerns of social science pursuits, creating new spaces in which to expand our means of (re)presentation and offering possibilities for alternative means of evaluation of such academic work.

By rethinking our relationships within communities and across disciplines such as the arts and humanities, we are presented with opportunities to move beyond imitation of "scientistic" reports in dissemination of our work and look towards means of (re)presentation that embrace the humanness of social science pursuits. This creates a clearing in which meaningful dialogue with a wider audience is possible, and so 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. Even publications can become infused with a creative and visual spirit that reflects the nature of human interactions, inventiveness and relationships.

I contextualise my paper through an exploration of the use of tools from the arts and humanities within science, narrative research, and knowledge transfer; I then consider contemporary aesthetics, leading to a discussion about publication as a "performative" outlet. The reflective and dialogic approaches of contemporary biographic social science are "recast" through the concept of relational aesthetics,

placing an emphasis on improvisation/spontaneity as a feature of the "new" approach that is being offered.

In order to reach this conclusion, I first turn to science because, for some social scientists, a narrow concept of science itself as unchanging and inflexible remains commonplace. The traditional science of objective principles involving systematised observation and experiment (often mimicked in the social sciences, therefore, "scientistic") has recently made way for a more enlightened conception of science as opportunities for invention, discovery and creative endeavour, using methods which are counter-intuitive, unexpected and polyvocal. By visiting contemporary and innovative thinking emanating from the new physics and the like, we can return to social science refreshed and invigorated by a new conceptualisation of science, with possibilities translatable to the social sciences themselves.

I next look to narrative endeavours and report the call for interdisciplinary efforts that is beginning to build critical mass. I further explore the emerging synthesis of the arts and social sciences within models of knowledge transfer and the social dissemination of knowledge. I then consider French curator Nicolas Bourriaud's (2002) theory of Relational Aesthetics in order to find fresh and contemporary thinking in the arts and to begin to explore the possibility of Relational Aesthetics' fit within the social sciences more generally. I subsequently return to a discussion about publication—the most frequently utilised outlet for social science dissemination. Despite growing interest in arts-related diffusion of social science data, the vast majority of social science research continues to be disseminated textually. Taking up this challenge, I end by reporting on a particular use of web publication as an outlet for a "performative", art-based textual production of my own biographic interview data. I describe my published biography with well-known feminist, educator and writer, Mary Gergen, and how the process of creating that document itself became collaborative, "performative", relational and reflective of an arts-based approach to the diffusion of biographic narrative data.

Novelty, creativity, narrative and science

Physicist Gergely Zimanyi believes that "Science and art are complementary expressions of the same collective subconscious of society" (Morton, 1997: 1). In fact, Zimanyi predicts a new convergence of science and art with the latest technological changes made possible by computers: "When a modern scientist's program spews out a million data, in what sense is the problem solved? Only visualization can possibly help in comprehending such a massive output. This is why many scientists are using computers to better visualize their work" (Morton, 1997: 1). Richard Taylor, associate professor of physics at the University of Oregon finds similarities between producing scientific papers and painting pictures. "Art and science have a common thread—both are fuelled by creativity. Whether writing a paper based on my data or filling a canvas with paint, both processes tell a story" (Taylor, 2001).

According to sociologists, Law and Urry (2004):

> Social science has problems in understanding non-linear relationships and flows. Tools for understanding such complex connections have been developed within the 'new physics' of chaos and complexity theory, but have been applied only falteringly within social science. … A breakdown of the boundaries between natural and social science allows us to conceive of

nature as active and creative, making the laws of nature compatible with the idea of events, of novelty, and of creativity. … Complexity theory argues against reductionism, against reducing the whole to the parts; the methods necessary to capture complexity may well be unexpected and/or counter-intuitive. (p. 400-402)

In fact, since Mishler noted a surge of growth in the variety of narrative inquiries in 1995 (Mishler, 1995: 87), the excitement of possibilities for diversity in (re)presentations of qualitative data have continued to blossom exponentially. Thus, a convergence between the arts and the social sciences begins to build:

- Rorty (in Hiley, Bohman and Shusterman, 1991), posited that the objects of inquiry include recontextualising what is at hand - the desire to know essence - characteristically a human concern. Rorty continues that the desire to dream up as many new contexts as possible "… is manifested in art and literature more than in the natural sciences, and I find it tempting to think of our culture as an increasingly poeticized one, and to say that we are gradually emerging from scientism …into something else, something better" (Hiley et al, 1991: 80).
- Hollway and Jefferson (2000) have asked researchers to represent the subjects of narrative research with the complexity we associate with literature and works of art more generally.
- Denzin and Lincoln (1994; 2002) find that qualitative theoretical development is – increasingly - taking place at the intersection of science and the humanities.
- Clough (2004) reports that leading researchers are now frequently recommending designs of enquiry and dissemination which rest on processes of art rather than science.

These authors represent just a sample of thinkers who have begun to challenge traditional distinctions between research and (re)presentation, that is, between acts of observing or "gathering data" and subsequent reports on this process (Gergen and Gergen, 2003: 4). Nonetheless, text is often only linear and, therefore, temporal; in text the meaning must be precise or risk disbelief. Conversely, "working visually involves a significant shift away from the often oddly lifeless and mechanical accounts of everyday life in textual representation, towards sociological engagements that are contextual, kinaesthetic and sensual: that live" (Halford and Knowles, 2005: 1). A pluralistic approach to the use of tools from the arts and humanities, in both production of social science data and its dissemination, thus, begins to evolve. The distinction between gathering and reporting data begins to dissolve, progressing to something quite new and refreshing, adding to our capabilities. In this way, a visual "text-performance" begins to materialize - a welcome addition to our possibilities of (re)presentation of social science data, reflecting what Denzin forecast as "the cinematic-interview society" (Denzin, 2001: 23) to our potential audiences.

Narrated biographies and the constructed memories that are their building blocks, like dreams, are simultaneous layers of past and present - the visual *and* the spatial - and these added dimensions, beyond the purely temporal, demand our attention. As a description of a dream in words never quite captures the essence of the dream itself - its feeling/picture/space - so too narratives of lives need to be fleshed out through additional devices. Law and Urry caution that traditional "methods have difficulty dealing with the *sensory* - that which is subject to vision, sound, taste, smell; with the *emotional* - time-space compressed outbursts of anger, pain, rage, pleasure, desire, or the spiritual; and the *kinaesthetic* - the pleasures and pains that

follow the movement and displacement of people, objects, information, and ideas" (Law and Urry, 2004: 403-404).

Through consideration of such elements within biographic inquiry, we should be able to reconstruct our interviews themselves in Denzin's terms: "not as a method of gathering information, but as a vehicle for producing performance texts and performance ethnographies about self and society" (Denzin, 2001: 24) where "text and audience come together and inform one another" (Denzin, ibidem: 26) in a relational way. This leads us to a consideration of a "performative" social science. In Law and Urry's (2004) thinking, research methods in the social sciences do not simply describe the world as it is, but also enact it (Law and Urry, ibidem: 391). They are performative; they have effects; they make differences; they enact realities; and they can help to bring into being what they also discover (Law and Urry, ibidem: 392-93). Indeed, "to the extent social science conceals its performativity from itself it is pretending to an innocence that it cannot have" (Law and Urry, ibidem: 404).

These currently evolving principles are put forward in order to indicate means with which biographic sociology can benefit from work outside sociology, and in turn, identify areas of possible collaboration. The hope is that we will dig deeper and further to come up with ways to engage with our data and its dissemination that are contemporary and employ technologies that are becoming easier to master and more user-friendly. We then can return from encounters across disciplines to more traditional outlets for dissemination with renewed possibilities for creative and innovative exploration of knowledge production. My expectation is that these sorts of efforts will do two things:

1. honour the people who shared their biographies with us in the first place, and
2. help establish new audiences for these narratives, thus insuring that they are not just buried in academic journals.

Constructing dissemination socially

Social constructionism, as described by Kenneth Gergen (1985), maintains that knowledge, scientific or otherwise, is not obtained by objective means but is constructed through social discourse. It is founded upon the basic proposition that knowledge is never true per se, but true relative to a culture, a situation, a language, an ideology, or some other social condition (Bauerlein, 2001: 1). Social constructionism does not assume information or knowledge to be either subjective or objective. Rather, it understands knowledge formation contextually and dialogically. Knowledge is a negotiated discursive construct that is created between people. Constructionists are interested in the rhetorical methods by which knowledge is created and supported in different conversations and conversational traditions. Symmetrically, constructionist analyses also deal with the discursive means that are used to deconstruct the factuality of versions about the phenomena under discussion. Constructionism overcomes the authoritative worldview of the information transfer model (Tuominen, 2001: 1).

No single point of view is more valid than another in social constructionism, because all points of view are embedded in a social context that gives them meaning. "Such a view does not obliterate empirical science; it simply removes its privilege of claiming truth beyond community" (Gergen, 1997). "Film, books, magazines, radio, television, and the internet all foster communication links outside one's immediate social surrounds. They enable one to participate in alterior systems of belief and

value, in dialogues with novel and creative outcomes, and in projects that generate new interdependencies" (Gergen, 2002). One of the reasons that many social scientists turn to biography is the possibility that such investigations present for localised "truths"— one individual speaking her/his "truth" about a specific life to an audience of one (the interviewer) on a particular localised day. That biography, "performed" on a different day and to a wider audience, offers up that personal "truth" to a community that then decides on its legitimacy and relevance, but only for and within that particular community. This situation leads to the question of whether the initial individual "truth" was transferable (or not). Performing biographies holds great promise for biographers to propose these very questions to audiences in a dialogic way, encouraging realistic, situated feedback and then reporting on it; "The researcher's goal is not to put forth something that 'looks like the truth' but rather to contrast multiple verisimilitudes, multiple truths" (Denzin, 1997: 20).

French educator Pierre Lévy (1991; c. 1997) believes that profound changes are occurring in the way we acquire knowledge that support the potential collective intelligence of human groups through emerging spaces of knowledge that are continuous, evolving and non-linear. Lévy states that, since the end of the 19th Century, the cinema has given us a kinetic medium for representation (Lévy, 2003: 3). In fact, "we think by manipulating mental models which, most of the time, take the form of images. This does not mean the images resemble visible reality, they are more of a dynamic map-making" (Lévy, ibidem: 4). Lévy's book, *L'ideographie dynamique* (c. 1997), contains concepts germane to the discussion here. He moves to relational expressions: *inclusion, coincidence, separation* and *proximity*. Through kinetic representation, there are three types of mental icons: *images, diagrams* and *metaphors.* All of these are expressions and icons which resonate within the concept of the arts-based "performative" social science under discussion.

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. From a wider perspective, "performative" social science is conceptualised to include more possibilities than simply turning narratives into stage productions. A plethora of models and methods of production exist within the arts (facilitated increasingly through user-friendly technologies) which deserve to be explored further in order to enrich the dissemination of our data.

This is where collaboration becomes valuable. 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 (e.g., 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. In addition, revisiting the

collaboration between the narrator and researcher within our biographic investigations also deserves to be fore grounded in a "performative" way, to include involving research participants in the production and dissemination of their own stories. Thus, engagement in co-operation itself 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.

Relational Aesthetics

So, 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 20th Century was not kind to 18th Century notions of the aesthetic. With Social Constructionism's principles in mind, 21st 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 one theoretical grounding to the search at hand, basing theories of art in terms of co-operation, relationship, community and a broad definition of public spaces. I am suggesting Bourriaud's Relational Aesthetics as a starting point because I think he offers a post-modern, contemporary framework that allows social scientists to think about aesthetics and means of dissemination from the arts in our work in refreshing ways. Relational Aesthetics also forms a structure on which we can begin to think about a "performative" social science—a science that includes more emphasis on collaborations with our research participant co-authors, co-producers or co-performers themselves. It also provides a platform on which to base the production values of our dissemination efforts and gauge the effects that our fabrications have on our audiences as well, allowing for their own participation in a dialogical, creative social exchange.

As a young critic in the 90s, Nicholas Bourriaud used the term "relational art" to describe a set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical departure human interactions and their social contexts. Relational art bridges or blurs the differences between life and art and involves the public as co-creators of artworks; i.e., art becomes socially constructed (Ekholm, 2004: 3). 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. By using the word "conviviality", the emphasis is placed on commonality, equal status and relationship (Hewitt and Jordon, 2004: 1). Relational Aesthetics or "socializing art" often comprises elements of interactivity, but its most noticeable characteristic is its socializing effect. Through such efforts, it aims to bring people together and to increase understanding (Johannson, 2000: 2). In fact, 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?

Relational artistic activity, "strives to achieve modest connections, open up (one or two) obstructed passages, and connect levels of reality kept apart from one another" (Bourriaud, 2002: 8). Key to Relational Aesthetics is the guiding principle that *relational* art (an art taking as its theoretical horizon the realm of human interactions

and its social context, rather than the assertion of an independent and *private* symbolic space) points to a radical upheaval of the aesthetic, cultural and political goals introduced by modern art. Relational Aesthetics looks towards the possibility of reduction of the inter-personal distance by the development of sensibility for the intuitive and associative aspect of communication (Koljanin, 1999: 2), contributing to and expanding the reflective and dialogic approaches of contemporary biographic social science through concepts of improvisation and spontaneity within a renewed concept of participant-community.

Art, in Relational Aesthetics, is seen as a state of encounter and the essence of humankind, purely trans-individual and made up of bonds that link individuals together in social forms which are invariably historical (Bourriaud, 2002: 18).

- The small spaces of daily gestures determine the superstructure of "big" exchanges and are defined by it (Bourriaud, ibidem: 17).
- Art in post-modern times is concerned with occupying time, rather than occupying space (Bourriaud, ibidem: 32).
- Social exchanges consist of interactivity with the viewer, and as a tool serving to link individuals and human groups through a preference for contact and tactility (Bourriaud, ibidem: 43).

"Bourriaud emphasizes that we have the right to query every aesthetic production whether an art work allows us to take part in the dialogue, whether we can conceive our existence and in which way, within the semantic space which that work defines" (Koljanin, 1999: 1). Strategically for social scientists, relational aesthetics are present when inter-human exchanges become aesthetic objects in and of themselves (Yorke, 2004: 2). Co-operation, co-production and collaboration become things of aesthetic beauty. There is not necessarily an "object" in the traditional sense of art, but rather a time, a space and a gathering, creating a transitory, participant-community. Bourriaud concludes: "It seems more pressing to invent possible relations with our neighbours in the present than to bet on happier tomorrows" (Bourriaud, 2002: 45).

- Relational aesthetics see the everyday, or the quotidian, as a much more fertile terrain (Bourriaud, ibidem: 47).
- "We find in pride of place a project to rehabilitate the idea of Beauty" (Bourriaud, ibidem: 62).
- Our intentions need to consist of conveying the human sciences and the social sciences from "scientistic paradigms to ethical - aesthetic paradigms" (Guattari cited in Bourriaud, ibidem: 96).

Because relational art takes as its starting point human relations and their social context, as social scientists engaged in the (re)presentation of the storied nature of everyday events, we share a starting point with our artistic contemporaries. Relational aesthetics judges artworks in terms of the inter-human relations which they show, produce, or give rise to (Dezeuze, 2005: 18); this principle, therefore, locates our common ground. One place to begin, then, is in our (re)presentations of inter-human relations through our presentations and publications of biographic material.

And what of the published page?

The traditional and most widely available outlet for biographic narrative data is publication, particularly in academic journals. 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).

> These linguistic conventions evolve over time into codified symbols with the ability to compress large amounts of assumed knowledge and background information and deliver it for their intended audiences (and, by intention or coincidence, to withhold such information from others). The members of different groups of scientists, policymakers, campaigning communities and so on go through a lengthy socialisation process to enable them to produce and understand papers comprised of a kind of 'shop talk' that heightens participation in the language game, enabling them to ring-fence their areas of expertise. This professional 'codification' produces icons with the accumulated power to persuade, convince, establish authority and represent authenticity, but which through this very process carries the inevitability of skewing and/or stifling wider community discourse and input.
>
> Left out of the mix in the standard scientific report is a consideration by authors and publishers of their own participation in, and communication with, the larger community to which we all claim membership. The extreme restraints on exposing the personal that are self-imposed by and superimposed … (upon academic book and journal writers) are presumably intended to illuminate a particular scientific discovery. At the same time, their absence leaves the reader oddly dissatisfied. (Wu, Rapport, Jones & Greenhalgh, 2004: 40)

Such dissatisfaction often leads to explorations elsewhere. By extending our gaze beyond the usual journals and books when seeking venues for dispersion of findings, to new technologies and modes of presentation, we open the doors to new understandings and resources. This experience, in turn, leads us back to more traditional outlets such as journals and books with a renewed vision for extending the possibilities of traditional publication.

It is valuable, therefore, to reconsider publication as an outlet for the creative presentation of biographic data at this juncture. Sandelowski and Barosso (2002), in fact, argue for a "reconceptualization of the research report as a dynamic vehicle that mediates between researcher/writer and reviewer/reader, rather than as a factual account of events after the fact" (Sandelowski and Barosso, ibidem: 3). Such an approach resists the dominance of the researcher, recognizing that work is incomplete without readers' responses. This acknowledges an environment of "performer/audience" assembled through the mechanism of the printed page. Paraphrasing Bagley and Cancienne's (2002) imaginative title, *Dancing the Data*, publication becomes "Performing the Page". It is through such an expansive and inclusive attitude, in contrast to narrower approaches to diffusion of narrative data, that possibilities open up 'to cross' (or at least ignore) the traditional boundaries between academic disciplines and liberate the means of dissemination available to us through more formal mechanisms.

An example of relational "performative" biographic production

"Thoroughly Post-Modern Mary"
[A Biographic Narrative Interview with Mary Gergen]
by Kip Jones (Jones 2004a) and Mary Gergen

I now move to an example of production of biographic data which crosses the traditional boundary between art and social science. I have particularly chosen this example of my work in order to demonstrate the use of the arts in dissemination of biographic data, whilst remaining within the confines of the published report. (Examples of my work representative of collaborations with artists themselves in the production of performances for *in situ* audiences are reported elsewhere [Jones, 2005]). I present this particular example of biography to illustrate the production of data for publication within the relational aesthetic of a collaborative effort with the subject of the biography herself. This partnership is demonstrated through the establishment and reporting of the on-going dialogue with the subject during and after the production of the biographic report itself. In this way, a relational aesthetic that embraces the socializing effect of biographic interviewing - the very realm of human interaction - and represents social exchange through the art of production generation, is described. Through relationship, "inter-human exchanges become aesthetic objects in and of themselves" (Yorke, 2004: 2); the resulting graphic (re)presentation of the biographic narrative under discussion is a direct result of participating in such a relational aesthetic. The creation produced resists the assertion of the private symbolic space, reducing inter-personal distance between the interviewer and interviewee and links this partnership with its audience, reflective of discussions within Relational Art itself.

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 and Wengraf, 2000; Wengraf, 2001; Rosenthal, 2004; Jones, 2004b), but test its capacity to generate story under very different conditions. By using its mimimalist-passive 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, 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). Rosenthal defines the thematic field as "the sum of events or situations presented in connection with the themes that form the background or horizon against which the theme stands out as the central focus" (Rosenthal, ibidem: 64).

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 (the transcript is available at: http://www.qualitative-research.net/fqs-texte/3-04/04-3-18b-e.htm; the interview production is available at: http://www.qualitative-research.net/fqs-texte/3-04/04-3-18-e.pdf)) 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 that I noticed while listening to the tape recorded response to the life story question was Mary's use of films as metaphors for transitional moments in her life. It has been my experience with the Biographic Narrative Interpretive Method that, frequently, narrators establish an overarching metaphor for their story early on in their narration. Early In Mary's narration she states: "*I guess that I want you to remember the movie, "The Last Picture Show". I hope that you have seen that movie …*" (Figure 1). Two things appeared to be happening here: Mary was creating a device that she would employ throughout her story to represent specific periods in her life - the use of films as metaphors. Secondly, she is emphatic ("*I want you to remember ...*"), indicating the potentiality that this particular film forms the underlying gestalt of her life story. Following her lead, I found a short description of the film, "The Last Picture Show", and juxtaposed it in the published text with her initial statement: In part, the description reads, "*The center of the film and the major theme (is) –should you listen to your heart or your libido …*" (Habegger, 1999). In fact, this leitmotif continued as a question in many guises throughout the rest of Mary's story.

I guess that I want you to remember the movie,

"*The Last Picture Show*" I hope you have

seen that movie, but perhaps you will recall that there's a

Main Street

The Last Picture Show. Just as our lives are discontinuous, with jarring scene changes and ridiculous episodes of embarrassing events, so is life presented to us in this small town. The film's purposely jarring editing is transformed in our minds, as we watch, from a disjointed amalgam to a stream of consciousness effect that is very lifelike. One knows, then, that you are entering an alternative world just as real in its way as your own. This movie pulls you in.
The center of the film and the major theme – should you listen to your heart or your libido if the two don't combine in the same person? Perhaps the saddest comment in this film is that too often these two halves to a whole do not come together as a package and people are forced to choose.
Eric HABEGGER, 1999. The Last Picture Show (Review). Internet Movie Database.

Figure 1[i]

Mary referred to films frequently throughout the initial interview. Responding to my query of this in my follow-up questions by email, she states:

> Movies – they were my life. I think I may have mentioned that. Ken and I agree that one of the links between us is our ways of living out movies in our life –creating sets, striking sets, acting into a scene – our theoretical ideas about emotional scenarios – seeing ourselves as our favorite actors, funny stuff like that.
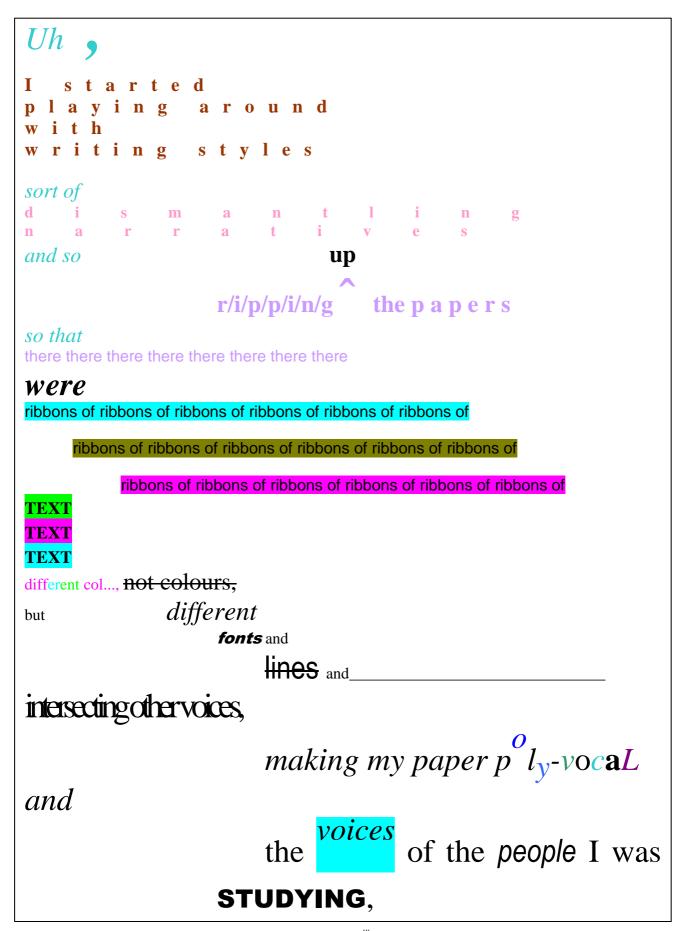
Mary then ends her message with:

> Its probably all related to the movies – love, affairs, sex, betrayal – and finally, because we grew up in the 50's – happy endings. (personal communication[ii])

My second initial response to her life story was that Mary's portrayal of her life 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 fonts and colours not usually available to us in hidebound 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 (cohort and historical effects) that abound in any life story's passage through time. In fact, it appears that much of Mary's journey reflects her decision-making style: to swim with the tide or against it?

Through initial immersion in the data and follow-up discussion, and in a collaborative spirit and intuitive way, an aesthetic for the presentation began to build. For example, I chose a colour palette for each historical period that she describes, reflective of the period itself (e.g., life as a small child on the Midwestern prairie: earth tones; the war years: red and black; the sixties: hot psychedelic colours). I also took a clue from Mary's narration where she described a particular writing style that she had developed (Figure 2).

I decided that, by graphically paraphrasing this kind of playful and interpretive production of text, I would be able to produce a visual metaphor for use throughout the interpretation of her life story. This visual/textual device pays tribute to Denzin's post-modern narrative collage, the shattering of the traditional narrative line, a montage or *pentimento* - like jazz, which is improvisation - creating the sense that images, sounds and understandings blend together, overlapping, forming a composite, a new creation. The images seem to shape and define one another and an emotional gestalt effect is produced. The images are seen as combined and running in swift sequence, producing a dizzily revolving collection of images around a central, or focused sequence, thus signifying the passage of time (c.f. Denzin, 2001: 29). It is documentary in style, creating an illusion that the viewer/reader has direct access to reality. Words become a means or method for evoking the character of the person and the time.

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and

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            STUDYING,

In most cases, the other interviews that appeared in the special issue of *FQS* could be labelled as "journalistic interviews". In fact, the editors, in introducing the special issue of FQS responded to the Mary Gergen interview presentation by stating:

> This particular interview presentation has been referred to as another option, presenting the interview translated into a composition (interpretation) by using citations and visualizing these with photographs and an experimental layout. At first this composition could be seen as the most edited kind of text, however, one must remember that most other published interviews are new texts that have little to do with the original conversation. Probably, this is the 'duography' Kenneth Gergen was talking about in his e-mail interview, which appears in the same issue of FQS. (Cisneros-Puebla, Faux and Mey, 2004)

A decision was made to present the "lived life" (the chronological chain of events) and the graphic interpretation of the "told story" as well as the transcript and follow-up correspondence online in the journal in a "raw" form with the further involvement/interpretation of the reader/viewer in mind. The story was not "academically analysed" by the interviewer or reflective teams, but left open to multiple and emergent interpretations, in order that the reader/viewer becomes part of the interpretive process. Still, the production of the story became 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 were often back-grounded by the narrator through the use of this method in favour of improvisation/spontaneity in the storytelling and the creation of meaningful life metaphors.

After the initial interview, follow-up email collaboration continued between the two of us, the results of this being incorporated into the final presentation. In this correspondence, Mary discussed her story and participation with her husband, Ken Gergen, and his input, although tertiary, makes its presence felt.

> Hi Kip. I think what you have done is create a work of art, with the humble beginnings of a story. Very lovely, colorful, fun - playful, as you said. I saw myself there, felt you had interpreted the outcomes in interesting ways - and what there was seemed justified. I showed it to Ken, who also found all of these things in it - we did talk about the politics of it - who I become in the world through this. Could you somehow indicate that this is a creative outcome of what we have done together, and it is selective, or just one possible story, something that emphasizes both the relational aspect and the spontaneity of it?? It's your baby, too, Kip and I don't want to spoil the lovely artistic creation you have made. I would say, my life became the opportunity for you to work your magic of color and space and style – Cheers!!, Mary. (personal communication[iv])

Permission[v] for use of all of the photographs and artwork in the final document was obtained through email correspondence. This process resulted at times in some interesting electronic conversations as well. I was, of course, in dialogue with the editors[vi] of *FQS,* and their input was extremely helpful. The transcript of the interview was compiled by the administrator[vii] at our research centre who also acted as a "captured audience" for early versions of the presentation and provided helpful feedback.

Asking a person to tell us about her/his life is just a beginning. By doing this, in a less than perfect way, we are at least starting by participating in the storytelling of the

person in her/his world, her/his expectations, successes, failures and dreams. By presenting a visual interpretation of Mary Gergen's story, I was able to emphasise the "performative" nature of her storytelling and her biography in general. I believe that the Biographic Narrative Interpretive interview with Mary Gergen is a success because it foregrounds the participant and her life as she recalls it today, thus providing insight into the social construction of her "identity", but leaving enough space for the interpretation of the final audience, the reader.

Finally, responding to an early draft of this paper for *Qualitative Sociology Review*, Mary Gergen commented: "Elegant and sophisticated, a thoughtful and provocative rendition of how narrative studies can enhance social science work and provide a bridge with humanities and the arts. Impressive. I'm glad I am part of your assemblage" (personal communication)[viii]. In the end, the final product of the Mary Gergen interview (but, as importantly, the process of creating it), certainly reflects Bourriaud's call for relational art (and, therefore, "performative" diffusion of biographic production) that is about inter-subjectivity, the encounter and the collective elaboration of meaning, reflecting the material of social exchanges within a spirit of conviviality and play.

Conclusions

Refusing to be limited by more traditional means of diffusion of biographic data also means that a modicum of humility and a state of "not knowing" is necessary in any potential 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.

"This will be uncomfortable. Novelty is always uncomfortable. We shall need to alter academic habits and develop sensibilities appropriate to a methodological dencentring" (Law and Urry, 2004: 404). I am, nonetheless, encouraged by my initial attempts to respond to Hollway and Jefferson's call for the representation of "human subjects of research" with "the complexity we currently associate with literature and works of art more generally" (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000: 156). I have attempted here to revisit the arts and humanities in search of lenses through which the intricacies of social science data might be disseminated. What needs to be recognized and acknowledged, then, is that, beyond the text of biographic material and its promise of personal revelation, the territory of a physical intimacy that is shared by the interviewee and the interviewer remains situated. Recoiling from this shared intimacy negates the potential for the cathartic, audience-like experience and the possibilities of a truly reflective knowing of another being. Embracing—a good word for it, too—the physicality of the interview relationship unlocks possibilities for deeper understanding and further opening up of possibilities for "performative" presentations of biographic data, whether through publication, on stage, in film or by some other means that we haven't even dreamt of yet.

Finally, within the reader/audience's interaction with our "performance", a third opportunity arises for meaningful communication through images conjured up in a kind of theatrical, magical dialogue. Emphasis is on shared cultural and societal

resources or the "habitus –our second nature, the mass of conventions, beliefs and attitudes which each member of a society shares with every other member" (Scheff, 1997: 219). It is in these moments of shared, extended reality that we connect to what it means to be human and, therefore, reached a higher plane of understanding and a blurring of individual differences. It may be, in fact, as geographer, Susan J. Smith says: "Aesthetics as much as economics guides the interpretation of social life" (Smith, 1997: 502).

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Endnotes

i Permission to reproduce *Figure 1* obtained from the editors of *Forum: Qualitative Social Research (FQS)*.
ii The complete interview transcript and follow-up email messages were published in *FQS* and are available at: http://www.qualitative-research.net/fqs-texte/3-04/04-3-18b-e.htm
iii Permission to reproduce *Figure 2* obtained from the editors of *FQS*.
iv Email correspondence with Mary Gergen quoted with her permission.
v Photographic reproductions in the *FQS* article, 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.*
vi Katja Mruck, Günter Mey, editors and founders of *FQS*
vii Sirron Norris-Hall
viii Email correspondence with Mary Gergen quoted with her permission.

Acknowledgements

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Citation

Author

Kip Jones (BA, MSc, PhD) is Reader in Health Related Social Science at the Centre for Qualitative Research, Bournemouth University, United Kingdom, where he is currently organising seminars and workshops on "Performative" Social Science. He is Associate Book Review Editor for the online

journal, *Forum: Qualitative Social Research* (*FQS*) and moderator of the online news group, *Performative Social Science:*
(http://www.jiscmail.ac.uk/cgi-bin/webadmin?SUBED1=performsocsci&A=1). An overview of his work is available on his website: http://kipworld.net
Contact: kipworld@gmail.com