

THE BUSINESS OF UNFINISHED BUSINESS: REFLECTIONS ON CO-CONSTRUCTION OF MEANINGS IN RESEARCH ENCOUNTERS

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Abstract

My concern in this commentary is the discrepancy between cultural psychologists' theoretical claims that meanings are co-constructed by, with and for individuals in on-going social interaction, and their research practices where researcher's and research participant's meaning-making processes are separated in time into sequential turns. I argue for the need to live up to these theoretical assumptions, by making both the initial research encounter and the researcher's later interpretation process more co-constructive. I suggest making the initial research encounter more co-constructive by paying attention to these moments when the negotiated flow of interaction between researcher and research participant breaks down, for it allows the research participant's meaning-making to be traced and makes the researcher's efforts towards meaning more explicit. I propose to make the later interpretation process more co-constructive by adopting a more open-ended and dialogical way of writing that is specifically addressed to research participants and invites them to actively engage with researcher's meaning-making.

“[This text] tries to convey the sense of fluidity, of unfinishedness, of an inexhaustible work in progress, which is inherent to the fascination and frustration of oral history – floating as it does in time between the present and an ever-changing past, oscillating in the dialogue between narrator and the interviewer, and melting and coalescing in the no-man's-land from orality to writing and back”.

Alessandro Portelli, *The death of Luigi Trastulli and other stories. Form and meaning in oral history*. (1991, p. vii)

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Let us start with a personal memory. Some time ago I faced the unnerving situation of having to defend my doctoral dissertation in front of a committee. A very wise man, who there and then acted as my external examiner, asked me why I had decided to write myself out of the analysis of my participants' meaning-making. That is, why I had not explicitly considered how my presence and my participants' perspective of me had influenced their sense-making, and how if at all I had sought their feedback to my interpretation. As far as I can remember my answer was somewhat vague and insufficient, yet somehow it got me through the rest of the defence hurdle. Nevertheless, my examiner's question about the researcher's role in someone else's meaning-making has never really left me, and was again brought strongly to the surface by my reading of the two target articles by Bietti (2010) and Wagoner (2010).

The co-construction of meanings in the social interaction between researcher and researched is therefore my focus in this commentary. While my reflections are triggered by two articles which talk about memories and remembering, in my discussion I move beyond this focus and towards a general discussion about meaning-making. In particular, I want to discuss two interrelated issues. First, by drawing on the data presented in Bietti's target article I want to suggest that analysing the moments when the negotiated flow of interaction between researcher and researched breaks down and has to be repaired, can contribute to our understanding of interviewees' meaning-making, as well as make the researcher's efforts towards meaning (Wagoner, 2010) more explicit. Second, I want to consider how we can make the meaning-making of the researcher part of the research process, not simply as a one-sided act of interpretation, but as an active and participant-involving process of dialogue.

Broken dance of perspectives

The idea that memories (and in my view meanings in general) are co-constructed in the continuous dialogue between researcher and researched, is implicitly assumed in both Bietti and Wagoner's work. Yet neither of them makes this aspect explicit and central to their analysis. The focus is instead on the available collective meaning suggestions, cultural models or narrative templates, that research participants draw upon in their act of remembering. The researcher thus appears as a 'stage director', explaining the research participant's meaning-making processes from a kind of neutral perspective, as if from above (Portelli, 1991). Yet the research interview is a dialogical encounter between two individuals, who are equally involved in meaning-making. As Shotter (2008) writes: "Our words have no meaning in themselves, nor is it a matter of them occurring in a context, nor is it a matter of a speaker's intentions. Meaning is created by, with, and for people in their collaborative meetings with each other" (p. 2). From this perspective then, the stories we tell ourselves and others emerge in that interaction as temporary stabilizations of the continuous oscillation between the perspectives of me and other(s). That is, they are co-constructed within the real or imagined presence of someone and are addressed to someone within and beyond the ongoing interaction (Bakhtin, 1986; Shotter, 2003). They are produced as affirmations of one perspec-

tive while being negations of another (Billig, 1996), and it matters how the dialogue partners perceive each other's social positions, each other's rights and duties and orient themselves to these (Harré et al., 2009). Thus, the construction of memories (or meanings in general) does not only require the work of utilizing the collectively available meaning suggestions, but also the work of understanding how the person I am talking to has internalized these suggestions and uses them to make sense of me and us.

Portelli (1991) writes: "Field work is meaningful as the encounter of two subjects who recognize each other as subjects, and therefore separate, and seek to build their equality upon their difference in order to work together" (p. 43). Researcher and researched are thus never really on the same 'side', but build a bridge between their separate perspectives in the research encounter. To build that bridge, both sides need to engage in the work of studying the other. The researcher's work of studying is explicit and woven clearly into the fabric of research activity. Yet, albeit more implicitly the researched is also studying the researcher. That is, the narrator needs to understand who the listener is to be able to respond adequately to his callings. Portelli, for example, talks about the ways how his local informants from an industrial town in central Italy used various 'counter-interviewing' techniques, such as name-dropping or making allusions to understand who he really was – an outsider or a 'native intellectual'.

There are thus two parallel studies taking place in the research encounter. The two perspectives become mutually negotiated through these studies – this is the relationship we have here, this is what each of us is supposed to do. The two studies feed into each other, evolve in relation to each other and thus establish a mutually responsive dance of perspectives. In my view, the most fascinating and informative moments to trace and analyse in this dance are those where the two studies collide, where one partner takes a step that the other one does not expect and therefore does not immediately know how to or does not want to follow. For me, these are the moments when the meanings of events suddenly come to the surface of the negotiated sequence and order of interaction, in order to disappear under the flow of negotiated relative stability and ordinariness again.

Yet how should one recognize these moments of collision? In my view, the moments are noticeable when one steps out from the role as a neutral researcher and back into the ordinary role of being a dialogue partner. The moments of surprise, confusion, being lost for words, not knowing how to proceed with the discussion then become clues to understanding that something is going 'wrong' in the flow of interaction. The case of Paco as presented in Bietti's article, offers some examples of this breaking up of the dance of perspectives. For me, the first instance of this breakage, which seems to be left out of Bietti's analysis, is the fact that Paco suggested having an interview. In my view, it would have made more sense, if Paco had just refused to take part in the focus group. Full stop. Yet, he suggested having an interview. Why was it important for Paco to tell his story to the researcher? What was at stake for him here?

The next moment of surprise, which again did not come across as a significant incident from Bietti's analysis, was Paco's decision to take on another identity in the interview. To be precise, taking notice of the researcher's surprise about Paco's decision has nothing to do with recognition and acceptance of his choices. It is however significant as another instance where the ordinary flow of interaction between researcher

and researched breaks down. Thus it is another chance to get a glimpse into Paco's meaning-making: why is it important for him to define himself as someone else? And why is it important for him to tell the researcher that he is doing so? What does this say about his perspective of the researcher?

And then the interview itself which offers yet another opportunity to explore the broken dance of perspectives. Describing the examples of Paco's neglect and rejection of personal responsibility Bietti (2010) writes: "During my four second silence, Paco noticed that something was going wrong with my interpretation process, therefore he winked at me to make clear that he was lying" (p. 267). As presented here the breakage is a temporary freezing of time, where the partners can check each other out – what goes here? where are we with this interaction? Many questions seem relevant in analysing this instance. Who breaks up the flow and why? Or rather, who perceives the break and how? And who makes an effort to repair it? What is at stake in making the breakage visible? And what is at stake in repairing it as quickly as possible?

In this instance a silence and a wink are needed to break up and to repair the dance. It happens automatically in the ongoing interaction, yet the moment is full of meanings that shine through the temporarily broken surface. Paco knows that the researcher knows. He knows that the researcher is one of 'them', just like he knows that the researcher thinks he is one of 'them'. Yet he navigates around these perspectives and meta-perspectives and invites the researcher to do the same. Because what is at stake in revealing the 'factual truth' is more than Paco can handle. And so he offers a story, which while being factually 'wrong' is psychologically 'true' for him (Portelli, 1991). That is, it allows him to talk about events which cannot be talked about, yet need to be talked about (remember Paco wanted to have an interview), in a manner that is personally meaningful, possible and perhaps even enabling for Paco.

Researcher in writing

Bringing the researcher's perceptions of the ongoing interaction more explicitly into the analysis of meaning-making is thus one way of making the processes of co-construction more visible. Yet the researcher's meaning-making is not only taking place during the research encounter, but importantly also during the later process of analysis and writing. It seems to me that inviting the research participant to actively contribute to that process is as important as allowing the researcher to take part in the sense-making efforts of the research participant during the interview.

One of the pioneers of contemporary dialogical research, Michael Billig (2010) has recently raised a question whether dialogical researchers should also write in a specifically dialogical manner, instead of using the ordinary monological style of present-day academic writing. He suggests that while the ordinary 'nominal style', where processes are turned into things, the use of passive verbs is favoured and 'fictional things' are ascribed with agency, is suitable for confirming one's belonging to a certain disciplinary circle and for talking to like-minded audiences, it may not be the most dialogue-opening way of writing (note for example my use of passive verbs in this sentence). Instead,

he suggests, continuously maintained relationship with other non-friendly audiences may hold the key to dialogical writing.

Billig is obviously talking about academic writing to academic audiences. This is the arena where researchers take the role of a 'stage director' and explain to fellow stage directors what things in the field look like. As Billig argues, this audience expects to be given coherent, thought-through, nicely packaged end-products of someone else's thinking. My discussion here concerns another audience that researchers, who assume that meanings are co-constructed by, with and for people, need to address before and perhaps above the academic audience – the research participants. I suggest that while the open-ended, self-reflective and incoherent way of writing may not sit well within the academic debates, it might be required for engaging with research participants.

Asking for participants' feedback on the researcher's interpretation is a relatively common practice in modern social sciences. The terms used to describe this practice – 'member checking' or 'respondent validation' – indicate the underlying rationale of its usage (see for example Mays & Pope, 2000; Whittemore, Chase & Mandle, 2001). While in general this practice should be applauded, I am interested in examining how well it sits within the theoretical tradition that assumes the co-construction of meanings. My concern is with the practice of asking research participants' for feedback on the researcher's interpretation as if it was a finished and completed result of their interaction. My own experience with this kind of 'participant-engagement' is that it may not be easy for participants to engage with a story that is presented to them as a nicely packaged and polished product. If presented as such it remains a story of a stage director that the actors can agree with or reject altogether, but cannot contribute to in a way that allows the cycle of meaning-making and co-construction to continue. Thus it seems to me that if we want to live up to our aspirations of studying meaning-making as an unfinished process of co-construction, as researchers we need to give up our comfortable stage director seats and step on to the stage as actors among other actors.

But what should writing addressed to research participants look like? As already indicated it is a different kind of writing from ordinary academic writing, for the product needs to be unfinished, to allow the other to step in. One way of achieving this, in my view, is to bring our own reflections, our own questions and our own efforts towards meaning (Wagoner, 2010) into the writing: why did this seem important to me? Why did I think this was meaningful to you? What were my own reasons for ascribing meaning to this aspect of our talk, over and above the others? Why did you say this? And why did you not mention that? Paying attention to researcher's surprises, confusions, her being lost for words and not being able to understand the other's logic seem to me to be good starting points for making the researcher's efforts towards meaning explicit and in this way, encouraging the other's further contribution.

One of the most interesting attempts that I have seen in that direction was presented by Hristina Keranova (in preparation). Based on the data collected through repeated interviews, Keranova wrote a quasi-direct narrative – a semi-fictional story – of her research participant's life. It was written as a story of a fictional character, where the researcher's interpretations were woven into the story as the protagonist's internal dialogues. Thus, the researcher's meaning-making was explicitly present in the narrative as her way of trying to see the world from her protagonist's point of view. Present-

ing the researcher's reflections as protagonist's internal dialogues was thus a vehicle through which to invite the participant to step back into his perspective and reflect upon researcher's sense-making. This narrative was exchanged between researcher and researched and later became a part of an academic article, yet its initial purpose was to see whether the researcher's efforts at living in the research participant's perspective were successful.

Engaging in this kind of cyclic interaction which also requires an additional writing effort is obviously laborious and one could thus ask what this kind of cyclic interaction between researcher and researched is going to add to our theorizing about meaning-making. What is it about co-construction of meanings that we do not or cannot know if we do not engage in this kind of research practice? In my view, the issue at stake here is living up to one's theoretical claims, and substantiating these not through one-sided interpretations of the two-sided interaction, but through actual oscillation between different perspectives. That is, most of the research that assumes the co-construction of meanings, my own work to date included, uses methodologies where the co-construction of meanings as it happens in unfolding interaction is not part of the research exercise. Instead, the research interview is meant for collecting instances of the other's sense-making and then fixing these into a story through the researcher's interpretation. And although both parties appear in that interpretation through the use of such concepts as addressivity or positioning, the interpretation still remains one-sided. In that sense my suggestion here is a kind of round-about way of achieving something that could be achieved by changing the ways of data collection. But it is also more than that. If, as indicated above, the practice of asking for participants' feedback is a recommended practice anyway, then why not make it also theoretically fruitful. For the reason of using this additional sense-making cycle is not to validate the researcher's interpretation, but substantiating the claims that meanings are essentially an unfinished business.

End of a never-ending story

Let us return to where we started – to my memory of my examination. By placing this memory to the starting point of the current discussion I have made it significant, I have turned an ordinary event of interaction into something fairly extraordinary. There are many possible reasons why I thought it was a good idea. Perhaps it was a moment that created tension there and then and I needed to release that tension by turning it into a something more enabling – a trigger of my theoretical reflections. Or perhaps I just chose this memory because it was the only one I could more or less clearly remember that had anything to do with researcher/researched relationship, and I wanted to make this discussion somewhat more personal. One way or another, by taking that incident out of my flow of being and placing it into another story, written to a specific audience, I have reconstructed it and thus continued an old story.

The open-ended nature of meaning-making has been my concern in this commentary. The target articles, while very insightful, left me with a feeling that although

as cultural psychologists we claim that meaning-making happens through oscillation between different perspectives, we tend to study it in a one-sided manner, where researcher's and research participant's meaning-making are separated in time into sequential turns. In my effort to find a way out of this quandary, I have suggested that by bringing researcher's efforts towards meaning more explicitly into the analysis and by continuing the cycle of sense-making by giving an unfinished product of researcher's interpretation back to the research participant for their further sense-making we can better live up to our theoretical claims and aspirations.

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Biosketch

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