SIDES AND EDGES

Tales from another place

Cultures and structures interplay to shape our lives, our politics, our expectations and so on but, at the same time, we remain unique identities operating as interacting sets of thoughts and feelings, constructing the worlds we operate in. Within a context that is already partly made for us, we rub up against each other's lives as thoughts, feelings, words and actions. For better or for worse.

This may require us to show different sides of ourselves at different times. Some of us slip into these various roles as easily as slipping on a new coat. For others negotiating a way forward that retains an integrity of self whilst meeting the varying expectations of others can be an overbearing and difficult task, with gaps showing as edges that no longer quite match together.

The interplay between structure and agency (whether put forward as economic/social; genetic/environmental; determinism/free will or any other such bipolarities) has fascinated thinkers and researchers throughout history. Much of what has passed for social research boiled down at its core to considerations of basics such as these.

People evolve and so do ways of thinking about, and describing, the world. At the personal level, the emergence of my own theorising about social issues has shifted under the influence of number of conceptual inputs from a range of sources. An early one was a passion for the notions gathered under the banner of Symbolic Interactionism[1]. This emphasised micro-scale social interactions and brought together thinking from urban sociology and social psychology, exploring how people act towards situations based on the meanings that things have for them. Within such frameworks, people derive meanings from their definitions of the situation, their social interactions being modified through interpretations and impression management. Their identities are thus fluid things that are constantly being constructed.

Key amongst other influences on my own thinking were views linked to notions of social ecology and systems thinking. One aspect of my unfolding understandings of social relations drew on the work of Bateson[2] who argued that there is neither individual nor society as distinctly separate units but a system that connects both organism and its environment, that puts agency and structural contexts in the same framework. Not 'either/or' but 'both/and'.

Going through the required adaptations and accommodations to the influences of structuralist and post-structuralist thinking led me on to a much stronger emphasis on notions of social construction. For a summary of this approach see Burr (2003)[3]. This then offered a framework within which knowledge, language, social processes, power and identity could be seen as interweaving in ways that were quite fragmentary, contingent and shifting.

[1] Blumer,H. (1969) Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and Method, Berkley:University of California Press

[2] Bateson, G. (1972) Steps to an Ecology of Mind, New York: Chandler; (1980) Mind and Nature, Bantam Books; (1991) A Sacred Unity, Harper Collins

[3] Burr, V. (2003) Social Constructionism . London: Routledge

'Individual action' in these terms became possible when people were able to understand the various discourses that define their lives and were able to act upon, or act against, such shared definitions.

Whilst language and power had a crucial place within all of this, there was always the danger that theory could outstrip people's lived experiences. There was a view that people's actions had become so theorised about by others that their own 'voice' had been lost (Krippendorff,1998)[4].

On the broader scale, social research has constantly shifted its focus in ongoing attempts at explaining the complexities of shifting social ideas and interrelationships – sometimes with factions taking sides for and against emerging notions, sometimes blurring previously well-defined edges. Social theory is itself transient and dependent.

At the practical level social research themes have, recently, been shaped by the mix of funding availability and the current policy concerns of national bodies. There are arguments that research has become limited in scope by these restrictions and that there is little opportunity for serendipity or for researchers to simply follow their own lines of thought just to see where it all leads.

In the first few years of the twenty-first century I was a lead researcher on one national substantial piece of such research. The main focus of that research programme need not concern us here. What it opened up, for me, however, was a number of additional opportunities that, as research director, I could ignore as irrelevancies or could follow up as an additional line of 'personal interest' research. In addition to the main 'prescribed' research I could do additional work on the side, just for fun.

Being fixed in that particular place, over a three year period in the first decade of the millennium, engaged in the main research activity, opened up the possibility for me to be an active participant[5] in the daily life of that one small town somewhere in England. I won't be any more precise than that as to its location because there are compulsive problem-solvers out there who will use such clues as there may be to track the place down and to leave the people, who acted as my research base, open to personal identification.

Suffice it to say that the area was not a large city; nor a rural village; that it had a large enough population to be able to be described as 'mixed' in terms of class, ethnicity and housing types. It had, in common with other areas, undergone changes in population; had had streets renovated as part of redevelopment schemes. It had its share of fast food outlets, retail units, and charity shops. It had students, old people, shopkeepers, manufacturers, unemployed people and ill people.

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[4] Krippendorff,K. (1998) Ecological Narratives:Reclaiming the Voice of the Other, at www.asc.upenn.edu/usr/krippendorff/ECONOLOGY

[5] For a discussion of the issues associated with participant observer research methodology see Robson,C. (2002) Real World Research, Oxford: Blackwell

It had its fair share of people who might be defined as criminal or odd or obscure. These slightly 'off-normal' people were far from being the subjects of my main research drive but increasingly became the focus of my attention as an observant resident of the places and activities that were their social context.

It was these people who were talked to, with the initial intention of possibly writing a novel at some stage in the future. Many people had interesting accounts to give of their lives and these people began providing character clues that were jotted down. The idea of using this material as the research for a novel was rapidly overtaken by an overwhelming interest in what these people had to say for themselves, and what this meant in terms of their views of what was happening in their community – which then spread from there to become a research activity to explore the interconnected richness of their varied accounts rather than to simply document specific individual eccentricities or extremes.

The bulk of the accounts came from people who could, on the surface, be described as 'seemingly quite ordinary' but who, in their own descriptions of their lives, had interesting facets to their lives. The examples that have been included in the research accounts represented only 20% of the total conversations held and were selected simply on the basis of being 'interesting'[6]. There were no clear criteria for defining this but it was usually only too clear when conversations fell well into the other 80%. The bulk of these other conversations were soul-destroyingly 'empty' and uninteresting. These haven't been totally discarded as, in themselves, they do provide some insights into small-town interactions, and may yet come to feature in some future account of what forms the bulk of English time-passing talk about weather, transport, TV, illnesses, relationships and so on.

There was an early decision to be made about the identification of the accounts that were selected. Simply issuing each with a reference number seemed to detract from the humanity of it all. What was needed was a phrase that captured something of the context of the person and which also reflected the fact that these situations were not fixed and static but were part of a journey that each person was in the middle of. Initially these were referenced as 'stories', to reflect this sense of narrative, but in English culture the term 'stories' can also carry the meaning of 'falsehoods/inventions'. These accounts were, so far as could be told, genuine reportings of residents' perceptions of themselves at one particular time. 'Stories' thus seemed an inappropriate label.

At the start of this research I was reading Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and it seemed appropriate for each of the research accounts to be seen as a tale told by one of a loosely-bound band of people who, whilst geographically relatively fixed by this specific small town location, were collectively journeying their way through lives that intersected or were in broad parallels. There was

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[6] 'Interesting' here is purely a subjective judgment, but one made in the light of what might count as really-useful research knowledge.

also a semantic fondness for the notion of the journey, with its connections back to the French 'jour' and the feeling that many of the respondents telling me their tales were taking things day by day; giving daily accounts of their existences with an insecure sense of what the next day might hold for them. Ultimately each account was given a title that reflected the person or their situation and referred to it as their 'tale' as told to me.

The tales arose out of conversations rather than structured questionnaires of guided interview schedules. These however, were not simply conversations on any topic just to pass the time. They were deeply personal, often quite revealing, conversations about the person's view of themselves and their place in the world. The accounts were sometimes consolidated from more fragmentary excerpts gathered through recurrent, fairly extensive conversations across a range of topics. In these cases, in compiling the accounts, attempts have been made to capture the respondent's own voice but at the end of the day the accounts have had to exist mediated through my own editing across several somewhat disjointed or rambling conversations, with the danger that some of my own phraseology may have been unintentionally inserted in the process. More often, what is presented here resulted from single, short, intense conversations which provided their own very memorable phrases and imagery.

On no occasions were the conversations recorded (ie were not 'interviews' in the popular sense) but were always written down immediately after the interaction, reliant on a memory that proved fairly reliable and which improved with use. Where natural breaks in the conversation occurred (visits to the toilet, going to the bar to order drinks etc), full use was made of these to discreetly scribble down rough notes, significant phrases, key facts etc in a pocket notebook. Certainly I became adept at spotting and recording significant constructions and 'killer phrases'. The words recorded in the accounts (in 'The Tales') are as faithful as possible, under these circumstances, to the ones used at the time but are not guaranteed as exact quotations. What this research made use of, then, were less than fully worked up case studies of people but were more than simple snapshots of isolated passing casual interactions.

Some tales carry the names of the respondents. Mostly, however, names were omitted, or changed, to further protect the identities of people who had agreed to give information about themselves only on condition of anonymity. Sometimes, and it will be obvious where this is the case, the content revealed things that bordered on criminal or illegal activities. The respondents did not offer this information immediately but reached this level of revelation only after a number of less exposing conversations. They were often clearly nervous about what they were saying or, alternatively, showed a guarded bravado about the whole thing. In either case they ultimately ended up, quite rightly, demanding anonymity. Often, a reluctance to be identified was because people were consciously offering up details of only one aspect of themselves and did not wish to be overdefined by these particular fragments.

At the whole-report level the title 'Sides and Edges' was selected. This was a relatively simplistic device for capturing the feeling that here was a set of people who were living at the edges/on the margins; who were constantly 'on edge'; who were edgy/had 'edgy' personalities. There was also, emerging from the accounts, a sense that they were unintentionally taking sides/being on different sides. There was, additionally, a more oblique sense in which a proportion of the residents were slowly toppling over onto their sides ie not totally upright, not securely standing tall. All of this may seem a bit speculative (or even far-fetched) but the title still appears to encapsulate the overall outcomes from the range of accounts.

As it progressed, this offshoot of my main studies increasingly connected across to the thinking from my main research – drawing, as this did, on systems thinking, the work of Bateson, links to theories of complexity[7] and psychogeography[8], and linkages to thinking I was doing at the time on pseudorealia ie things that are treated as objects/facets of everyday existence's realities but which 'in reality' are imaginary constructs of the person (and the role that words/language play in these processes of social construction). In light of this there may have been some unintentional bias in an attraction to respondents' accounts simply if they contained such linguistic aspects or linkages to other current thought processes.

This research had, for me at least, clear links back to the Mass Observation[9] movement at its peak throughout the 1940s. The recorded fragments from that work were initially seen as an important way of getting a sense of the state of the nation at a difficult time, from provided accounts of everyday activities; were later discounted as a disjointed jumble of relatively valueless subjective jottings; and finally came to be regarded as a valuable social history archive of academic interest. It is quite possible that this collection of tales and their subsequent analysis may be similarly viewed as being substantial or trivial.

The accounts were collected as simple 'tales' but an initial deeper exploration of the texts was immediately possible. A selected group of readers scanned several of the accounts and were able to easily identify a number of recurring issues which they listed as emerging puzzles or questions. The outline questions, emerging from these reflections on these accounts, began as relatively obvious ones:
   ➢ Can we ever fully understand what drives other people's everyday lives?
   ➢ Can one really know the extent of someone else's crankiness, phobias, prejudices, passions, levers etc – or do these things only exist in a

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[7] Goldreich, O. Complexity theory at www.wisdom.weizmann.ac.il/~oded/cc.html; Bovet, DP and Crescenzi, ,P (1994) Introduction to the Theory of Complexity. London;Prentice Hall: Taylor,,M.C. (2001) The Moment of Complexity. Chicago :Univ of Chicago Press
[8] Coverley,,M. (2006) Psychogeography, Pocket Essentials; Stein, H. F .(1987) Developmental Time, Cultural Space:Studies in Psychogeography. Univ of Oklahoma Press
[9] Hubble, N (2006) Mass Observation and Everyday Life, PalgraveMacmillan; See www.massobs.org.uk; see also wikipedia.org/wiki/Mass-Observation

distributed form throughout the personality of the other person and can only be merely glimpsed partially, from particular angles?

➢ Is it possible to get inside another person's viewpoint and, if so, would this be 'healthy' ie can one interact intensively with another and not be changed oneself? Do we have 'hard edges' as individuals or do we have 'fuzzy edges' that get exchanged with others as we interact?

➢ To what extent do individuals' senses of self arise from internal, psychological factors and to what extent do they arise from within the social constructions that occur via interactions with others and with structures of power?

Repeated readings of the accounts allowed a greater number of such recurring issues to consistently emerge. These then formed the beginnings of a number of possible analytical frameworks against which the accounts are currently being further explored and tentative conclusions reached.

From my initial analyses, one possible framework that emerged links together the following notions, in a web of overlapping interconnectivities:

o multiplicity, simplicity, complexity
o structure, agency, determination
o self, identity, relationships, interactions with other people
o power, authority, dominance, status
o fragmentation, consistency, unevenness, change, difference
o pattern, interconnections, linkages between things and events
o structurings, financial and social systems
o interactions with things or places, reference points
o evidence, conjecture, invention, imagination, 'what counts'
o time, sequence, space
o appearances, representation, imagery
o realities, authenticity, truth
o belief, prejudice, ideology
o language, meaning, metaphor, codes
o social construction, discourse
o essence, nature
o causality, linearity, circularity, oscillation

This was one of a number of possible such analytical webs which provided opportunities to position, and draw understandings from, the various accounts told as 'tales' by the various people encountered.

There is a sense in which each tale made little sense on its own and that it was only when the tales were reflected upon as an interacting set that they began to make more sense – paralleling the notion that it is only when individuals interact, using language as a powerful tool, that patterns of meanings get constructed and reinforced.

Any framework of meanings, drawn from reflecting on the accounts, became an accounting system through which it was possible to begin to glimpse the collective perspectives of the community of respondents. Connections were then made between individual 'tales', interpersonal understandings and

collective definitions of realities. This kind of ongoing analysis, through sifting over and over to uncover the interconnections, is a process similar to knowledge-archaeology. Similar constructions and reconstructions of common understandings of community have been researched elsewhere[10].

The outcome of this will, hopefully, be a better understanding of how a range of influences can emerge into prominence, inhibitions or encouragements within the varying structuring of people's understandings of themselves, their perceptions of others and their abilities to operate in non-linear webs of emerging potentials.

The data 'tales' from this on-the-side strand of research are simply presented on this site, however, as raw accounts with no attempt at this stage to describe the wider conclusions or undertake further substantial analysis.

Since the analysis has not been fully worked through, this interim publication is not easy to classify. It is not a research paper, in the traditional sense, written within the constraints of refining it down to a set of conclusions as a published piece of research. At the other extreme, however, nor is it a simple journalistic reporting of a set of "a day in the life of …" accounts meant to be read once and discarded.

The research recordings are presented here as accounts to be reflected upon appropriately by each individual reader. This opportunity is offered in a spirit of joint exploration, offering an invitation to readers: Make of it all what you will. In this way readers of the accounts are drawn in as 'co-researchers'. I shall, of course, continue with my own analyses and refinement of the web/framework outlined earlier and shall, in time, publish my own insights. Others may begin to do their own thinking and draw their own conclusions after a sustained reading of the accounts. These can be fed in via email to sidesandedges@thewordsthething.org.uk.

Others may end up reading these reports, knowing that others will also have read them, which opens up the potential for discussions 'out there' in the real world (however we choose to define that). Through those real-world conversations and discussions further analysis may be possible through ongoing reflections, attempting to see patterns of patterns. The way forward in all of this is far from clear.

It is also possible to imagine someone (albeit maybe with little else to do) setting up activities dedicated to discussing and analysing these Tales. It is also possible to imagine such reflections finding their way into seminars and content of various courses. In a number of ways the ongoing analysis could spread itself as a distributed activity, done day by day, with no certain ways forward.

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[10] Bateson G. (1996) The Social Construction and reconstruction of Community, PhD Thesis, University of Central England. Birmingham

This kind of ongoing interconnectedness of reflection on the tales, through linked systems of systems, gives a somewhat unique edge to the work. It is offered here in a spirit of adventure. Make of it what you will.

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