

## Re-Imagining Social Research in a Relational Key

By Scherto Gill

Guerrand-Hermès Foundation for Peace/University of Sussex

Ken asked us to be curious about the world and the multiplicity of perspectives and experiences of the world, and cautious and sensitive about how our language and the discursive ways that we talk about the world can shape our experiences and actions in the world. This is also an illustration of how we could research with people.

Kvale (1996) offered two metaphors to contrast possible conceptions of the social researcher, a miner and a traveller. The notion of a ‘miner’ suggests that the task of research be to dig or extract information from people and institutions for the ‘production’ of knowledge about their experiences and practices; whereas the notion of a ‘traveller’ evokes a number of different ways of talking about what social research means and how the social researcher might go about the inquiries.

In this presentation, I explore and expand on the metaphor of researcher as a ‘traveller’ through social construction lenses. I invite you to join in the play - playing with the imageries of the traveller, and the language and meanings we attach to the metaphor. Perhaps we could together highlight the relationship between the ‘traveller’, i.e. the researcher, the terrain she journeys across, the people she encounters, their shared learning and understanding of their experiences in the worlds inhabited, and the process of journeying as a whole:

A traveller journeys, but not just goes from A to B. ‘A good traveller has no fixed plans and is not intent upon arriving.’ (Lao Tzu, Tao Te Ching) In this sense, for a good traveller, the journey itself would matter more than the destination (Montaigne).

If the researcher is a traveller, then the research process would be a journey, and like all journeys, **the journeying or in the case of research, the inquiry itself, matters more than the destination or findings** (Montaigne). For the researcher, the language capturing and describing the purpose of her research would be – **to explore, to inquire, to question, to seek to learn, to understand...**

A traveller navigates in different terrains and landscapes. To have a sense of these terrains and negotiate within these varying landscapes, **the traveller encounters with people and invites them to share their perspectives about their experiences in situ**. In doing so, she further initiates several processes:

First, a traveller, through her interests and curiosity about people, places and experiences in diverse contexts, **engages in conversations, seeks narratives, explores histories, cultures and traditions, and therefore facilitates a process of dialogue, storying, re-storying, and above all, valuing. In doing so, she taps into the existing webs of relationship, and in the meantime, establish and re-establish new relationships.**

Whilst listening and dialoguing, a traveller knows that **no story can have a single unique construal, and any story’s putative meanings are always multiple** (Bruner). No rational nor empirical methods can verify the logical truths or right interpretations. **Instead, meaning-making is only mediated by and embedded in relationships – between the traveller, people encountered, and community at large in dialogue. Here is a process of fusion of horizons – broadening and expanding the traveller/researcher’s horizons** (Gadamer).

In inquiring into and exploring the meanings of life and experiences in the community, the traveller calls upon those she encounters to **join her in the journey and to become dialogue partners and fellow-travellers. They are effectively co-inquirers, co-investigators, co-interpretors, and co-creators of meaning (Gadamer). Thus such journeying can be mutually enriching and transforming.**

For the traveller, **relationships with her companions, together with the web of relationships each person is a part, become just as important as the journey itself. So the inquiry is no longer the traveller's own interest but a shared concern. This is the beginning of an emerging sense of 'we'.**

**In journeying together, the traveller and her companions develop a shift in their awareness of our selves and our actions in the world which in turn transform the way we act in the world.** This is a shift that moves from the strange, to the acquainted, then to a new form of the unfamiliar, thereby continuously **prompting novel ways of seeing, appreciating, valuing and acting** (Proust).

By now, the traveller is no longer a mere *voyageuse*, **she takes parts in the life of the community.** With different lenses of seeing, different words of talking, and different awareness of reflecting, **the journey is a process of community-making, journeying, a way of acting together** (Gergen).

When the traveller returns and shares the journey with her own and other communities, **the co-constructed narrative and the voices of the community further strengthen human relationships, enriches ongoing relatedness and reinforces the importance of the relational in our society** (Gergen).

Through engaging with the metaphor of the social researcher as the traveller, we can see that **all social research is a voyage, and a form of encounter and dialogue. Just as the purpose of the journey is not the destination, dialogue is not aimed at getting information from the research participants and instead, it is an ethical commitment to a relational way of being together, and to intersubjective approach to inquiring, learning and understanding.**

Now let's place this metaphor of researcher as traveller and research as journeying in the context of research practices, using my inquiry into young people's experiences of testing within British secondary education as an example.

The research was designed as an in-depth qualitative research, seeking to engage young people in exploring the life worlds of English secondary education. We identified three kinds of secondary school – a state school, an independent (private) school and an alternative school, eg. Steiner school. As researchers, we kept the research questions open – how do students perceive their experiences within English secondary schools? The plan included emersion in each of these schools, such as class observations, and student interviews, both informal and formal.

How does the metaphor of traveller shape our research design, experiences and learning? Here is a quick glance of it.

- A. We literally journeyed into the landscapes – by **spending one day a week at the school for one-term.** Imagine the journey from being a researcher, to a classroom participant? Often, we were asked to take part in of teaching assistant to help out in the class. From a

stranger, a someone from the university, we became a colleague to the teachers, a friend to the student, a sounding board to the principal, a listening ear to the parents.

- B. For the informal interview, conversations happened throughout the day when we were at the school. In the beginning, the school's leadership team was suspicious of the research purpose and intention – its open-endedness. This is not what they are used to – they kept asking us: “What are you looking for exactly?” or “What is it that you are trying to find in here?” **The openness and the not-knowing really troubled them.** As the days proceeded, and as they saw that we duly took part in all the classes, observing, taking notes, having conversations, the staff and students seemed **to drop their guard, and began to offer their help: “Why don't you look at how I get the class to be motivated in this class? I am never sure how I can do it.” Here is one from the student: “Have you been to Dr Manchino's class? We can also have fun doing biology with him.”** One more example from the Principal: **“We have been troubled by the endless need for testing, and are very sad to witness students' suffering from this. What could we do to meet the needs of standardisation and the needs of our students' well-being?”**
- C. For the formal, we selected 50 young people in total, 15 from each school, and 5 first year university undergraduate students. Instead of design a schedule of questions to put to the students, we asked each school to suggest 2 students who would form a core team to develop the research questions together. This is where we found out that researchers' questions are often meaningless for young people, despite their good intention. The language we use would make the world according to Ken. Here is an example. “Please describe yourself.” And my usual life that often threw an adult to the floor is “Tell me about you – why are you you?” The young people told us – what do you want? We can describe ourselves differently to different people – to our parents, our teachers, our friends, or strangers ... We can give you a facebook profile which is not close to anything, we can give you a one-liner that is just a lie ... So what is the point of your question? And so on, and so forth. So the team proposed that ‘To a stranger, who has never met you, who is the reader of our project, what would you say about yourself?’ The other unexpected is that we didn't realise that young people would talk to their friends in a very different way than the way they talk to a ‘researcher’, an outsider of their life. So the team volunteered to do the interviews for us, and we are amazed by the quality of their conversation.
- D. Meaning-making and reporting is a completely different affair for the travellers. We want to tell the stories to people within our communities, but if we choose the language and to meet the interests of our community, then they are other scholars, researchers, and educators. So what about the young people? What about the teachers we have worked with? What about the parents and others within the school community? For this, we formed a focus group – involving two persons from each of the above group for conversation. This focus group highlighted so much interesting insight.

Through this research and many other conversations, we had over the years, we've developed (mostly with young people) human-centred education.

**To close: The metaphor of the researcher as a traveller provides a new narrative about research.** Seeing from this perspective, and as illustrated by my own experience, **research inquiry is an unfolding relational process and is itself co-creation and transformation of our world and life.** I will repeat what Ken has said, our dialogue and social research becomes an action in itself. Our shared voices brought forward by the researcher's (written)

account continue to **prompt us to reflect upon the kind of life most desirable for the community and the kind of relating most pleasing as part of our mutual flourishing.**

Playing on the metaphor of traveller gives us the opportunity to re-imagine the social researcher and her myriads ways to go about social research. This exercise depends on the use of the word within the community who use it (Wittgenstein). In this case the community of social constructionists. We may wonder how the metaphor might play out with a group of feminists? Poststructuralists? Phenomenologists? Our understanding and even our being is language-bound, and language is 'the real mark of our finitude' and we are 'always already biased in our thinking and knowing by our language and our linguistic interpretation of the world'. The bias is our horizon determined by our community's histories, traditions and practices. In every round of conversation and meaning-making, we exposed to a new circle of the unexpressed or unsaid, or the new horizons or new language communities. These will continue to pose new questions and prompt us to seek corresponding language to keep the conversations going. Ken calls it a new way to coordinate with each other. This continued and sustained language enrichment enhanced our understanding and relationship.

This is not an example of how words can describe and represent the world. Instead, this is an illustration of how words can envision and create worlds and how words are actions in themselves that can propagate possibilities of transformation in the worlds.

As long as social research seeks to inquire into the life worlds of people-in-relations,  
As long as the social researcher is interested meanings of people's experiences in contexts,  
As long as the aims of research include most inspirational possibilities for our worlds,  
Then The dialogue has already begun,  
The research is already in a relational key.