

On the Subject of Interpretive Reviews¹

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When Beth Graue asked me to consider “what kind of tool an interpretive review might be,” I thought I was doomed. I appreciated that Graue, as the associate editor of *Review of Educational Research (RER)*, wanted to rethink the purposes of review articles in light of non-experimental, non-survey approaches to educational research. I thought it was admirable that she hoped to expand the importance, credibility, and usefulness of reviews by referencing the defining ideas of different research traditions, including interpretivism. Her intentions seemed worthwhile and laudable. After all, how would educational research get better if people didn’t produce or read reviews of previous work? How could readers make good sense of studies under review if those readers weren’t familiar with the scholarly tradition in which the studies were done? But beyond thinking of summaries or meta-analyses of interpretive studies, I wasn’t at all sure I knew what it meant to produce an interpretivist-oriented review, nor what I might write about such a thing that wouldn’t put readers to sleep. As if review articles themselves weren’t dull enough, what could I do with a ‘review of reviews’?

Cautiously, I began with the idea that an interpretive review should be consistent with the spirit of interpretive scholarship. Of course, this meant clearly defining that spirit and thinking through its implications for a research review. About this time, I remembered that Graue also told me to keep my discussion short. I had my challenge.

At the same time, I happened to be reading practice interviews done by student ethnographers in my Ethnographic Research Methods class. One of the interviews was conducted with a young graffiti writer, whom I’ll call “O”. His statements startled and intrigued me; in my reaction to them, I saw a way to represent the spirit of interpretivism. Let me quote briefly from the interview.

Interviewer²: What are the positive aspects of graffiti?

O responds: I need a voice, you know what I’m saying. If I go to scream it, yell it or whatever, I’m gonna be heard, you know. And that’s the positive, you know; kids taking their voice into their own hands. And besides that... [it’s] kids with artistic talents, developing their artistic talents, and taking something—their passion, and really caring about something. I think [the positive] is definitely voice and artistic value.

[Later] Interviewer: What are all the negative aspects of graffiti writing?

O responds: I mean, just like the pollution factor and being less of a problem for environmentalism... The cans; I’m sure that does a considerable amount of

damage. Kids I know don't recycle cans, stuff like that you know. I guess that's pretty much it: The *only* [problem] I see in it is: it's not being sustainable. You know, it really isn't sustainable.

Here is a young African American man saying that the wonderful thing about graffiti is the opportunity to have a voice, and the only really bad thing about it is that artists don't practice sustainable resource use. Although I am not particularly upset by graffiti, I must say that *never* would I have thought that its greatest drawback was its contribution to depleting nonrenewable resources! This young man's statements surprised and fascinated me, and they made me want to learn more from him and his friends. I wanted to hear them say more. I wanted to see how they produced their art. I wanted to understand their logic for it in the context of their social worlds, and someday I thought I might want to write about it so others who are strangers to graffiti artists might understand them in a new way.

My reaction to O's statements exemplifies some of what is distinctive and valuable about interpretive scholarship.³ One feature is the power of interpretive research to reveal something surprising, startling, or new; that is, to present information that disrupts conventional thinking or, in the vocabulary of ethnography, that "makes the familiar strange" (Erickson, 1986, p. 121). As I read O's words, my way of thinking about graffiti was made problematic and challenged; what had seemed obvious to me—that graffiti is a social problem primarily because it spoils surfaces meant to be clean—was viewed differently by this young man. What I had uncritically assumed about graffiti was not shared by him. What I would do about the 'graffiti problem' would not be what he would do. In fact, without knowledge of our different views, each of us would be unlikely to understand any actions taken by the other to reduce the graffiti problem. The intent to surprise—by challenging conventional or taken-for-granted thinking about 'what's happening here' or 'what's going wrong,' and what might be done about it—is one hallmark of interpretive research.

A second important feature of interpretive scholarship is its commitment to the idea that a difference in views arises from the way people learn to think about and work on things in the socially and culturally organized context of their lives. Put another way, "meaning varies according to the pattern of life by which it is informed" (Geertz, 1973, p. 14). Linking the power of surprise with the commitment to understand context, Clifford Geertz writes:

The famous anthropological absorption with the (to us) exotic ... is thus essentially a device for displacing the dulling sense of familiarity [which conceals] ... our own ability to relate perceptively to one another... Looking at the ordinary in places where it takes unaccustomed forms brings out not, as has so often been claimed, the arbitrariness of human behavior..., but the degree to which its meaning varies according to the pattern of life by which it is informed. Understanding a people's culture [i.e., their meaning-making] exposes their normalness without reducing their particularity. (1973, p. 14)

I, a middle-aged, conformist, white professional woman, have learned about graffiti in the abstract—from media accounts, most of them written and funded by other professional conformists. O, in contrast, produces graffiti himself; he has learned about it by participating in it—by finding the necessary tools and spaces, and using them to communicate meaningfully with others in his social environ-

ment. With knowledge of these differences, few would be surprised that our views of graffiti differ, but the interpretive point is more profound: O's view may be just as rational, sensible, and conventional in his environment as my view is in my environment. In addition, his view may provide a way of thinking about graffiti that has more power than my view does for positive change in the environment we share. At the least, his view offers me an alternative view, and in so doing, it forces me to recognize the cultural arbitrariness of my taken-for-granted view.

If I were conducting an interpretive study of graffiti, I would want to learn about the contexts of O's life well enough to grasp the logic of his view and consider it alongside mine. Exposing different logics, or "multiple ways of understanding the world," that arise from different circumstances is another hallmark of interpretive research.

A third feature of interpretive scholarship, and the final one I will discuss here, is the commitment to use research findings to improve communication and understanding across human groups. About this, Geertz writes:

... the aim of [interpretive ethnography] is the enlargement of the universe of human discourse... The claim to attention of an ethnographic account does not rest on its author's ability to capture primitive facts in faraway places and carry them home like a mask or a carving, but on the degree to which he is able to clarify what goes on in such places, to reduce the puzzlement--what manner of [people] are these?--to which unfamiliar acts emerging out of unknown backgrounds naturally give rise... It is not against a body of uninterpreted data, radically thinned descriptions, that we must measure the cogency of our explanations, but against the power of the scientific imagination to bring us into touch with the lives of strangers. It is not worth it, as Thoreau said, to go round the world to count the cats in Zanzibar. (pp. 14, 16)

My interpretive interest in the graffiti artist is piqued not merely because he exists nor because he is exotic, but because my ability to grasp the logic of his view might open my thinking to new possibilities for action and more constructive contact between O and people like me.

If my reaction to the graffiti artist can serve as an adequate representation of the spirit of interpretive research, then I was ready to face the second crucial question implied by Graue's request. How could this spirit be translated into the form of a research review?

Being an academic, I decided I should probably read what someone else thought about research reviews. I looked first at Frank Murray and James Rath's (1994, 1996) discussions in *RER* of their editorial position and experiences. In their 1994 article, they specify the "forms and standards" for *RER* articles and at the end conclude: "The successful *RER* article is, after all, a good story" (1994, p. 199); that is, "'a good story' ... about a mature body of literature" (1996, p. 417). But as their introduction to the forms and standards of reviews attests, their call was for good stories of stone walls.

The scholarly literature in education ... is like a wall that is built one stone at a time, each stone filling a hole previously unfilled, each one mortared and connected to those that came before and after it, each one providing a support for the subsequent ones, and each one being supported by those that came before. The review article attempts to describe the wall itself and to discover its mortar, its architecture and design; the wall's place in the architecture of the

larger structure; its relation to the other elements in the structure; its significance, purpose, and meaning in the larger structure. (Murray & Rath, 1994, p. 197)

Murray and Rath use the analogy of stone walls to make an important distinction between literature reviews that provide the justification for single studies (stones that fill holes in a wall; not usually appropriate for *RER*) and literature reviews of fields (stone walls; appropriate for *RER*). Put another way, literature reviews of fields should collect and organize the results of numerous previous studies so that we know "what we have already learned" (LeCompte & Preissle, 1992, p. 816) about a topic. There are many fine examples of this kind of review in the pages of *RER*. (For an excellent example of such a review of ethnographic studies about children's life in schools, see LeCompte & Preissle, 1992.)

Although I find Murray and Rath's metaphor of the stone wall helpful for making a distinction between reviews for single studies and reviews of a field, their imagery of 'stories of stone walls' didn't help me envision reviews that could surprise, reveal how meaning varies by context, and enlarge human discourse (this is not the stuff of which stone walls are made).

Although 'telling good stories' (that surprise or startle a reader out of cultural complacency) seemed consistent with the spirit of interpretive reviews, telling good stories about stone walls did not.

Another feature of stone walls that makes the analogy helpful for Murray and Rath but not for me is their 'settling capacity.' For Murray and Rath, reviews (like walls) should settle things: They should "resolve things that matter in education. ... [They] should be authoritative and of a caliber and sophistication that can reliably guide educational practice ... so that reasonably firm conclusions can be advanced" (1994, p. 198). Two meanings of "settling" might be applied to Murray and Rath's position: Good reviews (like good walls) compact, so that gaps in the field (holes in the wall) are smaller or eliminated, and good reviews (like good walls) establish dimensions, so that the width and breadth of the field are defined.

Although this is certainly a reasonable way to think about reviews, I knew this was not what I hoped *interpretive* reviews would be. Reviews that offer surprising and enriching perspectives on meanings and circumstances would have to shake things up, break down boundaries, and cause things (or thinking) to expand. Borrowing from Robert Frost⁴, interpretive reviews would have to be like the "frozen-ground-swell under [a wall that] spills the upper boulders in the sun; and makes gaps even two can pass abreast" (Frost, 1969, p. 33). Good interpretive reviews (like good ground swells) would heave up "what we have already learned" (the wall), not settle it; they would reveal previously hidden or unexpected possibilities (i.e., lay bare the wall's supports and components or transform its shape). They would create a new but temporary order (stasis) for those things which were disrupted. For example, a heaved wall might later be described as a gap, a weakened wall, or a pile of stones. If we move away from a close analogy and add the possibility of human intervention (certainly fundamental to interpretivism), then what was once a wall may be further transformed into a cairn marking a trail, a ring outlining a garden, a fireplace for a home, a display of geological forms, or innumerable other things. What is made of the once-wall will depend on the purposes and ingenuity of the person who finds it and puts it to

some use in the context of his or her life. Reviews-as-groundswells wouldn't give readers stories of walls; they would give us stories that startle us with what we have failed to notice about a wall and the possibilities for new thinking that arise from different ways of viewing or using it and its parts.

I could not think of good models among reviews of educational research, although they may exist. Some education-related books came more readily to mind. They include Sara Lawrence Lightfoot's *The Good High School: Portraits in Character and Culture* (1983), Jonathan Kozol's *Savage Inequalities: Children in America's Schools* (1991), Mike Rose's *Possible Lives: The Promise of Public Education in America* (1995), and the many books by Robert Coles. These books don't review other researchers' studies to achieve their purposes, but they have story lines that provide alternatives to conventional thinking about schools or young people. The story lines seem to be based on close, first-hand experiences of authors with "others;" that is, they seem to encapsulate information obtained by authors who participated directly in the lives and experiences of people who were unfamiliar to them and probably to most mainstream Americans. The authors use their story lines and examples to startle or shock mainstream readers into recognizing how little they understand about the lives and thinking of strangers among them. The authors write with the intent to increase the chances that their stories will inspire empathy, interest, and understanding (rather than dislike, dismissal, or distrust) in readers. They also write with conspicuous morals or politics; they take positions on public affairs and hope to influence public thinking and action. As they present diverse viewpoints and circumstances, contrast them with conventional thinking, and couch them in a moral or political orientation, the authors raise more questions than they answer and they expose more contradictions than they resolve about the educational issues we face in this country.

The qualities that commend these books contrast sharply with those that ordinarily commend reviews of research, even reviews of interpretive research. For example, although the books are widely praised and read, they are not known for their epistemological purity or methodological rigor. This is to say that the authors give little attention to justifying their claims by the criteria of conventional research. Theoretical summaries, proper techniques, researcher biases, and so forth are not the gold standard here; provocative, empirically rich, and politically situated interpretations are. The strengths of stone walls and groundswells are not the same, nor should they be judged by the same criteria. The implication for research reviews is that there should be room for reviews that expose forces that stress walls, just as there is room for reviews that build them.

One final illustration will help to make this last point. Here I use a fictional story about an ethnographic study in hopes that interpretive researchers will be able to see a bit of themselves in this tale. The story is from Gloria Naylor's novel *Mama Day* (1988), which Lous Heshusius used to open her 1994 *Educational Researcher* article, "Freeing Ourselves from Objectivity." Heshusius tells the story this way, quoting extensively from Naylor:

Mama Day is a descendent of the slave woman Sapphira Wade, who, in 1823, [according to legend,] married her Norwegian master, [bore him seven sons,] and persuaded him to [free] his slaves [and deed them] the [sea] island where they lived. In recent years developers have been wanting to buy the island, but the independent-minded islanders decline. For the islanders the phrase "18 &

23" has become a symbol of vitality and independence. Various versions of what happened in 1823 exist, but no one will ever know the exact events...

Also in recent years, some islanders have left to go to college on the mainland, including Reema's son, who recently:

... [came] back from one of those fancy college mainland, dragging his notebooks and tape recorder... And then when he went around asking us about 18 & 23, there weren't nothing to do but take pity on him as he rattled on about "ethnography," "unique speech patterns," "cultural preservation," and whatever else he seemed to be getting so much pleasure out of... He was all over the place—What 18 & 23 mean? What 18 & 23 mean? And we all told him the God-honest truth: it was just our way of saying something... And then he sent everybody he'd talked to copies of the book he wrote... None of us made it much through the introduction, but that said it all: you see, he had come to the conclusion after "extensive fieldwork"... that 18 & 23 wasn't 18 & 23 at all—was really 81 & 32, which just so happened to be the lines of longitude and latitude marking off where [our island] sits on the map. And we were just so damned dumb that we turned the whole thing around. Not that he called it being dumb, mind you, called it "asserting our cultural identity," "inverting hostile social and political parameters." 'Cause, see, being we was brought here as slaves [he explained] we had no choice but to look at everything upside down. And then being that we was isolated off here on this island, everybody else in the country went on learning good English and calling things what they really was—in the dictionary and all that—while we kept on calling things assbackwards. And he thought that was just so wonderful and marvelous, etcetera, etcetera (Naylor, 1988, pp. 7-8) (excerpt from Heshusius, 1994, p. 15)

Naylor's point in telling the story is that Reema's son was so affected by his new theoretical vocabulary and knowledge of research methods that he couldn't grasp what the islanders, in their own distinctive way, were doing and saying. Naylor writes: "Reema's boy couldn't listen ... or he woulda left here with quite a story" (1988, p. 10). Heshusius uses the story to suggest that no matter how much attention Reema's son gave to perfecting his so-called objective ethnographic research methods, they would never enable him to get an insider's understanding of 18 & 23.

My point is that Reema's son contributed more to a stone wall, while Naylor wanted to make space for new interpretations. (So did Heshusius but her discussion of this was only hypothetical.) Regardless of what we think of Reema's son's methods, they led him to findings and conclusions that are quite predictable: They are consistent with current thinking in much research on identity politics⁶ and with well-known stereotypes of rural blacks. In this sense, his methods and results become like one stone, "Mortared and connected to those that came before," used to build a wall. Were his account real and valid, it would add to a large body of research literature demonstrating the cultural deficiencies of rural black people in the United States. Were it to be included in a conventional review of life among rural U.S. African Americans, his findings would add strength to theories of cultural deficiency that have been developed and promoted by researchers much farther removed from their subjects than Reema's son was. As an insider's account, it would add special strength to a wall that marks difference and status between educated and uneducated, urban and rural, black and white. Many such

accounts might even "settle" the issue.

Nonetheless, it seems to me that researchers have a responsibility to take Naylor's different perspective seriously. She presents herself as a better interpreter of the islanders than Reema's son. She proceeds to tell "quite the story" of what the islanders mean by 18 & 23 in her book. Coming from a different perspective and using methods of storytelling (not social science), Naylor develops a different conclusion than Reema's son. Is it wise to dismiss her account because it is unorthodox in its approach and unsettling in its conclusion, because it doesn't fit with the wall of previous research?

I don't believe an interpretivist reviewer would think so. Isn't it conceivable, were we to take the two accounts of 18 & 23 and consider each of them with respect to their logic, contexts of production and use, and potential for improving communication across social boundaries, that we might be pleasantly surprised to find that both have something important to contribute to a new understanding of the islanders, ourselves, and our interrelationships? We might also be surprised to find that *together* they enable us to grasp many more possibilities—for thought, action, and change—than either one alone.

In reviews of research studies, it can certainly be important to evaluate the findings in light of established theories and methods. However, it also seems important to ask how well the studies disrupt conventional assumptions and help us to reconfigure new, more inclusive, and more promising perspectives on human views and actions. From an interpretivist perspective, it would be most important to review how well methods and findings permit readers to grasp the sense of unfamiliar perspectives and actions; it would be less important how well methods and findings could be "mortared [to what] came before."

As Signithia Fordham (1996) has pointed out, perceptions of entire generations, huge social groups, or neighboring communities can be shaped, altered, and frozen by the writing and imagery of those who claim knowledge of them. Interpretivist-oriented reviews of educational research can serve a worthwhile purpose by capturing insights that startle readers out of mainstream complacency about educational issues, suggest how and why various educational contexts and circumstances inform particular meanings, and reveal alternative ways of making sense of educational phenomena. These reviews could be written to tell good stories with empathy for the various actors who grapple with educational issues and with respect for their circumstances and the progressive potential in their views and actions. Unlike stories of stone walls, these good stories would disrupt, rather than establish, definitions and boundaries. In so doing, they would make space for the logic and actions of the graffiti artist and the sea coast islanders; they would aim to expand, rather than settle, the possibilities for human understanding and educational practice. Near the end of Mike Rose's *Possible Lives*, he captures on one page what I have struggled to say in seven:

If we situate ourselves in classrooms [or other places where people actually live].... find a seat and [really] settle in, what might happen to the way we hear current debates and proposals about education, to the way we understand the issues and talk about schools? What kinds of questions would we ask, what kind of discussion might we desire? My hope is that we would begin to feel uncomfortable with, limited by, the rhetoric of decline and despair that characterizes so much of our public talk about the schools. What also might happen

is that we would see current remedies in a different, or at least more nuanced way. We might ask ourselves how a particular proposal would advance or constrain the work we saw in a classroom that had special meaning for us, that caught us up in its intelligence and decency.... We might well continue to raise questions about school-work relationships or about standards, achievement, and accountability, but such questions would come from a broader network of experience, imagery, observation, and expression. What we imagine for our public schools would itself change. (1995, p. 431)

If reviews of research could do things like this, they would serve the spirit of interpretivism well.

Notes

¹Thanks to Hilda Borko, Maureen Flory, Evelyn Jacob, Margaret LeCompte, and the *RER* editors for their helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper.

²This interview was conducted by Beth Krensky in March, 1997, as part of a class assignment.

³For purposes of this short article, I have tried to summarize key features of interpretive scholarship as I understand them. However, interpretive scholarship has a long history; it consists of a variety of theoretical approaches and research techniques; and scholars disagree among themselves about specific theoretical and technical issues. For more extended discussion of these issues, see Bredo & Feinberg, 1982; Erickson, 1986; Geertz, 1973; Schwandt, 1994; Smith, 1992; and the Commentary section of *Reading Research Quarterly*, volume 30, no. 3, July-September 1995 (including articles by Anderson & West, Mosenthal, Heap, Myers, and Eisenhart).

⁴I am indebted to Margaret LeCompte for reminding me of Frost's poem, "Mending Wall."

⁵I say "seem to be" because although I believe that these accounts are empirically-based, it is not possible, from the books alone, to check the empirical warrant of the stories told.

⁶I am not implying that Reema's son's study (as depicted in the story) is a good example of research on identity politics or of ethnographic methodology. It is a caricature of both that serves my purposes here.

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