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Charles Darwin University

**The generative role of narrative in ethnographies of disconcertment  
Social scientists participating in the public problems of North Australia**

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# **Learning Communities**

## **International Journal of Learning in Social Contexts**

**Number 12 – April 2013**

**Special Edition: Ethnographic Stories of Disconcertment**

**Guest Editors: Michael Christie and Helen Verran**



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# Learning Communities

## International Journal of Learning in Social Contexts

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### Special Edition: Ethnographic Stories of Disconcertment

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# The generative role of narrative in ethnographies of disconcertment: Social scientists participating in the public problems of North Australia

Helen Verran and Michael Christie

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## Introduction

In this volume we have presented a collection of nine ethnographic narratives of disconcertment. In this concluding paper we as editors pause to reflect upon the work these stories do in the learning community of Northern Australian social scientists that emerged out of the workshop which gave rise to the stories. There we focussed on both ethnographic writing and the changing work of social scientists in the differing policy regimes that have played out in Australia's Northern Territory over the past thirty to forty years. We discussed together the ways we as social scientists, autoethnographers in the flesh in the exercise posed in the workshop, reveal new possible worlds when we (re)write ourselves as ethnographers in the text. Before we turn to considering that process we tease out a little of our theoretical background: the public problem and its participants.

## Public problems in northern Australia

When we refer to public problems, we are thinking in terms conceptualised by philosopher John Dewey in *The Public and its Problems*, first published in 1927 and his only book on political theory. Dewey troubles the notion of a direct relation between publics and problems within the political sphere. By the beginning of the twentieth century, when managing complex technological problems became the role of the state, it began to seem that the roles of the public—the *demos*, the common people—had been overtaken by the technological reach of the state. Instead of directly participating in public problems, publics seemed instead to become *subject* to public problems named and defined by professionals—experts. Technocracy it seemed would inevitably replace democracy. Dewey set out to reconceptualise democratic politics to show that it can very well cope with and respond to the complex public issues that emerge in technologically sophisticated polities.

Imagining a generative relation between publics and problems, Dewey complicates the conventional understanding of causation between them. Publics, Dewey argued, are called into being by issues,

as much as issues are called into being by publics. It is not the case that in their social processes of normalising, political subjects identify problems that they demand politicians attend to. Nor is it the case that the ruling elites produce technological solutions to problems that then subject the public, forcing compliance through normalising procedures. While both those normalising forces are relevant, the relations between publics and problems is less direct than either account implies. Publics and problems co-produce each other in an 'other space'. Dewey suggested this 'other space' as a politically sensitised community which moils often inchoately around a public affair; he sees a public emergent in a sense of public crisis or tension, and on-going challenge and counter challenge in articulating the issue (Dewey, 1991, pp. 27-29). In proposing the notion of a political community Dewey was developing a notion of community as almost inadvertently clotting amongst those affected by the issue, often with disparate interests, often irreconcilably different.

Kathryn Pyne Addelson extended and elaborated Dewey's argument concerning the political community, naming his imagined 'other' space of public problems as collective public performance or enactment. In her 2002 paper (set as a reading for our workshop) she proposes public problems as the workings of an ensemble cast: 'It is the ensemble casts that determine the nature of public problems and frame the question how should we live?' (2002, p. 130). The ensemble cast of a public problem consists of subjects as much as objects: humans (professionals and activists participating alongside those who are neither), and non-humans (rules and regulations and technological objects). Raucous and quiet subjects, and virulently normalising and benign objects must mix up together with us in emergent enactment.

Our stories of disconcertment reveal the mutual emergence of both particular problems and particular publics in small fleeting moments of our everyday work as social scientists in north Australia. Our question is how to understand the agency a social scientist who has a professional engagement in this work might (or might not) have. In attending to this question we turned to the social science methodology of autoethnography, and set ourselves the task of writing ethnographies of disconcertment. We take the disconcertments which beset us as emergent from a particular sort of public problem, one in which experts (social scientists) and Aboriginal people come together and work in good faith to address Addelson's problem of How Should We Live?

What can we say about the public problems of our concern? We have picked up the theme of normalisation as a public problem from an insightful paper examining the policy shift expressed in Australia's 2008 'National Indigenous Reform Agreement' (Sullivan, 2011). Sullivan sees the new policy era as characterised by 'the intention to re-engage the state and its Indigenous peoples, and normalise their relations within their communities and with the wider population' (2011, p. 3). Noting that the current policy is not officially called normalisation, (and that the present government prefers 'closing the gap'), Sullivan insists on the term since he intuits the intention of the reform agenda as 'that Aboriginal people are [now] required to reflect socially, culturally and individually an idealised profile of the normal citizen established by the remote processes of bureaucratic public policy making' (2011, p. 3). There, in a general sense, is the underlying public problem: normalisation. We find it not only in government policy, but also all around us in our

work as social scientists. This sort of policy change implies social scientists need to be sensitised to the forces of normalisation—and how they participate in the normalisation process.

In assembling these texts as a collection for publication in the *Learning Communities Journal* our suggestion has been that one way to understand the texts as a set, is to see them as auto-ethnographic stories portraying social scientists struggling within and against particular regimes of normalisation associated with a wide range of public problems, and in the process suffering disconcertment.

### **Ethnographers in flesh and text**

The ethnographers in the flesh, the postgraduate students, the academic teachers, and the researchers, who are all paid to do social knowledge work can, in our view, all be seen as struggling within and against particular regimes of normalisation associated with a wide range of public problems. In the processes of story telling, of making narratives about the work they do as social scientists caught up in this or that policy response to this or that problem in Indigenous communities, they emerge different, as ethnographers in the text. Unlike the actual social scientist (the disconcerted ethnographer in the flesh who in her thoughtful participation in collective action is a very specific ‘observing/observatory unit’), the ethnographer in the text is a generalised figure. The ethnographer in the text is a generalisation generated in the practices of narrative. What sort of a generalisation is this ethnographer in the text? And, as a generalised figure can she/he change anything? Does she have any potential to intervene? We suggest first and foremost that this generalised figure of the ethnographer in the text can change the ‘observatory unit’ of the actual ethnographer, the learning social scientist. The ethnographer in the flesh can learn from the ethnographer in the text. Secondly we suggest that by revealing the collective workings of public problems the ethnographer in the text also has the potential to intervene in the public problem, perhaps to loosen the ontological knot, perhaps to enlarge its ensemble cast.

In our collection of stories, what links ethnographers in the flesh and in the text? We suggest disconcertment. Through storytelling of disconcertment, the ethnographer in the flesh might be imagined as being everted to become ethnographer in the text. What is this disconcertment that we propose is inevitably experienced by the democratically inclined social scientist, especially those working in Northern Australia where involvement with Aboriginal Australian communities is common? Disconcertment is experienced as a moment of existential panic—being suddenly caused to doubt what you know. The metaphysical commitments that lurk unacknowledged in your very person as a modern knower of the social come suddenly into the foreground revealing themselves as assumptions with no possibility of warrant.

In the ethnographic writing workshop in which the pieces assembled here originate we struggled to sensitise participants to disconcertment of this sort. It can be identified as epistemic disconcertment (Verran, 2013). Verran has been noting and describing such moments of epistemic disaggregation since she first experienced it in Nigerian classrooms in the 1980s (Verran, 1999, 2001) and then later in her work with Aboriginal Australians (Verran, 1998, 2002, 2004), and has

previously suggested that its cultivation is crucial for postcolonial knowledge work (Verran, 2001, 2009, 2011). Others, too, recognise its significance in more ordinary situations (Gregory 2009, p. 265; Instone, 2010, p. 99; Law & Lin, 2011; l'Anson & Jasper, 2011).

Let us see how this works in this present collection. In our commentary below we point to the tensions created between the ethnographer in the flesh—necessarily an absent presence in the text—and the ethnographer in the text, a figure that is a very immediate presence in all the stories. Disconcertment can be construed as the name for the tension constituted in the story between the absent presence of the ethnographer in the flesh and the present presence of the ethnographer in the text. In pointing to this process in the stories collected here we emphasise the potential for learning that the storytelling has enabled, and briefly articulate what we see as having been revealed about the public problem the social scientists found themselves participating in.

Kathy McMahon and Helen Verran's stories both tell of life in a previous policy era, working within what Sullivan (2011, p. 3) describes as a 'vision of a semi-autonomous, decolonised and modernised discrete realm for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, where they would largely manage themselves in culturally appropriate ways'. Both were working, collaboratively with Aboriginal people on the local but public problem of developing 'culturally appropriate' curriculum. Both delighted in a normalising imperative coming from the elders of the Aboriginal people who had adopted them into their kinship network. Appearing as ethnographers in the text many years later, they speak of how graciously and firmly they were guided through the unthought-of processes of becoming a learner-social scientist in place. Nicholls and Campbell are (in the flesh) working in a more recent era, and now within regimes in which the normal is inscribed in the rules and processes of internet banking, and the delivery of vocational education (respectively). As ethnographers in the text, they too reveal the complex moral dilemmas which arise working in collective action between the ancestral agendas of the Aboriginal people with whom they share the public problem of remote Aboriginal community sustainability, and the banal practices by which the normalising institutions of our new governmentalities operate. Christie's humiliation at the gently admonishing hands of his adopting relation in the flesh, gives rise to a reflection in the text on collaborative research possibilities, developing a revision of the normalising drive of government-Indigenous negotiations around remote housing. The community members are all on side but clearly resist the normalising effects of the social science methodology he prosecutes through his phone interviews. He has a lot of catching up work to do at his old home community before he can help to build good collaborative ways to get (new) government and (old) community to work together. All these writers have their 'observatory unit' radically expanded (to include among other things, themselves), as (in the flesh) they struggle to write the effects of disconcertment into their texts.

Also reflecting upon her academic research in an Aboriginal context, Rachael McMahon struggles in the flesh with a seemingly innocent diagnostic tool which sets people scurrying in various directions, and we find her in the text reflecting upon the normative potentials of a generalising instrument and its attendant practices—even of one designed to legitimise distinctive Aboriginal life ways. Munro-Harrison on the other hand, *arrived in search of* such a legitimising instrument—

'hybridity'—and found it, not out there somewhere, but coming to life in her faltering fingers and clumsy movements, embodied and emergent. And later, the generative ethnographer in the text also emerges embodied as an effect of the tiring day-to-day helping out in a remote Aboriginal Arts Centre and its community. Hazard and Harper both entered their fleshy ethnographic scenes as experts—Hazard implementing and accrediting a new national learning framework for 0-5 year olds in a remote Aboriginal community, and Harper as a member of a large research team investigating the life of digital technologies in Northern Territory primary school classrooms. Both were distracted, disconcerted and (in the text) impressed by an Aboriginal world obviously revising this new normalisation. Small engagements (or disengagements) with silent young Aboriginal children who spoke no English made these ethnographers wonder what they themselves were becoming, and how they needed to rethink the work they do. The disconcertments of these four authors moved instruments, ideas, methodologies and policies (respectively) from the background into the ensemble cast, intimating to the ethnographer in the text a changing world to understand and to handle, carefully and generatively.

### **Why narrative?**

We see our stories revealing new ideas and ways to do difference collectively as they emerge from collective action. We see how new ways of going forward together depend upon the coming together of diverse and unusual subjects, objects, and settings. We focus upon how these new energetics disconcert, contradict and transform our thoughtless assumptions. Stories have a special ability to clarify the character of their participants (ourselves, we hope, especially), their histories, desires, imaginations, their psychological and emotional states, their aesthetics and their entrenchedness, as well as their searches for the new and the different. Through narratives, the ethnographer introduces and engages unusual and nonhuman participants.

Narratives allow us to work with the generative power of diversity and difference, the unpredictability of the world as it unfolds, and the ways in which new predictabilities emerge and solidify through the faltering looping processes of gestures and responses. A focus on disconcertment allows our autoethnography to address quite specifically and empirically on a new vision of a particular public problem (although as we have seen, public problems in the Aboriginal worlds of northern Australia are often subject to radical redefinition). Narratives reveal how in particular moments grand theories and ossified practices can be broken down by small disconcertments, disagreements and accidents, which in turn may reveal the very beginnings of new orthodoxies and obdurate practices.

And yet our narratives also make clear that not just anything can happen. Disconcertment is not random. The action in each story is bounded by where we find ourselves, who we are, why here, what for, and the (mostly invisible) rules—physical, psychological, linguistic, social, ideological, legal—which constrain us. The unfolding world is not planned, pre-determined or directed, but neither is it random. The disconcertments which we describe are strangely constitutive of the relation between the ethnographers in flesh and text, and they have their generative effects on us, and hopefully our readers. They actively constrain the rules and the settings which we first saw as



constraining them. Our ethnographic stories turn the conventional analysis inside out. The action does not so much take place within a context of a (reified) organisational culture; the action *is* the culture. Self-organising patterns of meaning and power are consistently created and recreated in the living present, the ethnographer included. It is these eversions we seek to uncover in our ethnographic stories of disconcertment.

### **Ethnography of disconcertment as tension between flesh and text**

This then brings us back to our beginning and the relation between the textual and fleshy figures of ethnographic analysis. Our odd suggestion is that the ethnographer in the flesh can and should learn from the ethnographer in the text, who comes into focus when we work up narratives of disconcertment. Recognition that the good faith ethnographer is an *outcome* of collective-action comes starkly into focus in such stories and leads us to ask about the ethical dispositions of the fleshy analyst. How to position oneself as ethnographer in a particular time and place, one sensitised to disconcertment, in order to be open to becoming a generalised ethnographer in the text who proceeds in good faith? Disposition to openness in collective action re-emerges and evolves as networks of articulation, commitment and engagement as we struggle on together.

Openness sometimes leads us to spill open feelings, to bring up difficult questions, to become suddenly anxious, silent, or angry. Reflecting on these bodily felt disconcerting moments as ontological disconcertment we can no longer see ourselves as a step away from the action, judging observers of a world 'out there'. We ourselves change, as do the settings where we work, and the practices of ethnography. We are not working towards a grand theory or with a grand hope but towards a clearer, agreed understanding of the moments of effectiveness (and futility) in keeping things open enough and solid enough in our work together.

The democratic social scientist imagined by Addelson following Dewey is the professional who actively works against the normalising of technocracy (politics through objects) but also against the normalising of a simplistic politics dominated only by subjects unmediated by objects. This social scientist recognises that he/she participates as part of an ensemble cast in which he/she is primarily outcome, not direct author. The democratic social scientist imagined by Addelson sees her/himself as simultaneously both author of and subject to an emergent normalising that is the outcome of participating in collective action. Addelson's normalising is then quite different to the technocratic normalising that Sullivan identifies as a virulent force within the new Australian Indigenous policy era. And this difference explains our diversion through the figure of the ethnographer in the text.

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