

## Changing the subject: Questioning the nature of ‘experience’ in empirical research

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### ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to address the question of what is meant by the ‘experience’ of groups of people who become research subjects in respect of that experience. In this paper I would like to survey the views of a range of significant writers who represent a continuum: from those who focus on sense perceptions to those who are more interested in cultural and linguistic elements, which might be thought to construct understandings of experience; and then move to consider the implications of Friedrich Nietzsche’s perhaps idiosyncratic view that experience is more a matter of purposeful forgetting than of constructed remembering. John Dewey offers a richer notion of research, which involves experience and change on the part of researcher as well as researched.

### Changing the subject

There have been a number of research projects interrogating the ‘experience’ of named subjects, with the unspoken implication that the nature of their experience, that is, the ‘lived experience’ of phenomenology, is worth knowing about; that it is not in fact known, and that it can be known; moreover that it can be known by the active research process of asking about it; and that the results of such inquiry might become the basis for new policy, which presumably will make the experiences of these people more positive and productive. Having been involved in two such projects (Bishop et al., 2003; Brown et al., 2005), I think all these assumptions are open to challenge.

The question I want to ask here is about what it is that we are doing when we relate ‘experience’. In this paper I would like to survey the views of a range of significant writers who represent the continuum of those who focus on sense perceptions to those who are more interested in cultural and linguistic elements, which might be thought to construct understandings of experience; and then move to consider Nietzsche’s perhaps idiosyncratic view that experience is more a matter of purposeful forgetting than of constructed remembering. Let me start with the two classic and apparently opposing views: one that there is a real world that we can describe as our experience, and the other that, although there may be a real world, we cannot know it immediately, but have to account for it—experience it—through some kind of intermediary process, such as perception or language.

## Sensation and perception.

F. A. Hayek, who is better known as a philosopher of neo-liberal thought, wrote a book (Hayek, 1952) in which he traces the development of thought from physical sensation. The person exists here as an atomised individual, whose sensations are entirely private to themselves, and whose generalisations from those sensations become the material of their personhood.

It would seem to me that, far from predicating an intimate relation with the real world, which is where Hayek wanted to go, such an account necessarily leads to the conception that 'experience' is simply the perception of individuals with no necessary connection to 'truth'. In such an account we all live separate and unconnected lives, with no common ground to speak of except perhaps complementary delusions. The uncompromising commitment to the reality of sense experience leads strangely enough to a more unreal world than that of the poststructuralists who regard the person as more an outcome of discourse than of sense perceptions. If everything is located in personal sensation, then there can be really very little purpose in research into individual experience, since generalisations would be difficult to make in view of the incommensurability of all experience.

Merleau-Ponty takes a very different position from Hayek; while insisting on the importance of the physical, he does not limit perception to the faculties of the body:

how can we ever have believed that we saw with our eyes what we in fact grasp through an inspection of the mind: how is it that the world does not present itself to us as perfectly explicit; why is it that it is displayed only gradually and never in its entirety? In short, how does it come about that we perceive? We shall understand this only if the empirical self and the body are not immediately objects, in fact only if they never quite become objects ... if I can never say 'I' absolutely, and if every act of reflection, every voluntary taking up of a position is based on the ground and the proposition of a life of pre-personal consciousness (Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 208).

The pre-personal consciousness, as I read it, is a reference to the social and cultural operational field predating the individual consciousness of the individual who lives within it. Semetsky (2007) makes a similar point drawn from the work of Pierce: "he considered consciousness to be a vague term and asserted that 'if it is to mean Thought it is more without us than within. It is we that are in it, rather than it in any of us'" (Semetsky, 2007: 40).

Yet, Merleau-Ponty (1962) insists on the primacy of the body as an agent of understanding. In his discussion of how a person experiences a cube, a three dimensional object, he points out that in order to make sense of the object, to see it as having six equal faces rather than, for instance, only the immediately visible faces, or conceiving of the effect of distance, that is perspective as an alteration of the shape, it is necessary to know how one's own embodiedness affects one's perception of shape and how one's physical perceptions actually work. Without the experience of the body, it would not be possible to conceptualise a physical object that exists in time and space. So the body is essential to experience and to theorising that experience.

The theory of the body image is, implicitly, a theory of perception. We have relearned to feel our body; we have found underneath the objective and detached knowledge of the body that other knowledge which we have of it in virtue of its always being with us and of the fact that we are our body. In the same way we shall need to reawaken our experience of the world as it appears to us in so far as we are in the world through our body, and in so far as we perceive the world with our body. But by thus remaking contact with the body and with the world, we shall also rediscover ourselves, since, perceiving as we do with our body, the body is a natural self and, as it were, the subject of perception (Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 203).

To consider the understanding of experience to be completely the effect of language, or even of language and culture, seems to overlook this point about the grounding of experience in the relation of the body to other elements of the natural world. The body, and physical sensation are by no means abandoned here, but neither does Merleau-Ponty subscribe to the view that sensation is an adequate or exclusive basis to an understanding of experience.

## The social and the 'epistemic unconscious'

A set of claims for the importance of the social in relation to experience comes from R.D. Laing, who represents here the 'phenomenological' tradition. 'Experience', for R.D. Laing seems to be a broad category, something at times analogous to memory, sometimes to thought and sometimes to the 'soul'. It is closely related to reality: "Our task is both to experience and to conceive the concrete, that is to say, reality in its fullness and wholeness" (Laing, 1967: 7); and yet, experience, he says, is invisible to the other (4). The imperative for writers and researchers is to make the experience of the other visible to the other others.

(T)he other person's behavior is an experience of mine. My behavior is an experience of the other. The task for social phenomenology is to relate my experience of the other's behavior to the other. A person is the me or you, he or she, whereby an object is experienced. Are these centers of experience and action living in entirely unrelated worlds of their own composition? Everyone must refer here to their own experience. My own experience as a center of experience and origin of action tells me that this is not so. My experience and my action occur in a social field of reciprocal influence and interaction (Laing, 1967: 9-10).

It does not seem clear to me that an appeal to one's own experience is a sufficient argument for the idea that centres of experience and action do not live in entirely unrelated worlds of their own composition. Because we 'naturally' assume the relationship does not amount to much of an argument. However, Laing has been very influential in research traditions, particularly for those who want to give 'voice' to the oppressed. It is precisely this tradition that Bishop and Glynn (1999) castigate as 'deficit' thinking, because the notion that the subjects of such research are not able to articulate their own thinking reinforces the assumptions of relative power positions between the researcher and subject/object of their research. Is Laing saved by his reference to "reciprocal influence"? Perhaps so, if this reciprocity is taken seriously: I will discuss Dewey's ideas on reciprocity later in this paper.

Michel Foucault, in contrast, does not derive the notion of experience from 'reality', but from the understandings, which are part of our cultural inheritance. Discussing Foucault's use of Canguilhem's work, Gutting (2002) says:

Concepts are not, as phenomenology would have it, abstractions that derive their meaning and power from the vividness of lived experience. Quite the contrary, we live our experiences as we do because we live in a 'conceptually structured environment.' It is precisely because of this environment (which is another way of referring to the epistemic unconscious that is the object of Foucault's archaeology) that we are 'mobile on a rather broadly defined territory' in which we are able to have a range of 'lived experiences' (Gutting, 2002: 79).

Gutting mentions Foucault's claims to interest in the limit-experience—the extreme, the transgressive. This kind of experience makes sense only within the context of a kind or series of regulations: it is not possible to transgress, or exceed the limit if there isn't one (Gutting, 2002: 75). So the process of selection of the salient feature is dependent on a set of social codes, which are common to all those who share a community of some kind, linguistic or otherwise. The noteworthy experience depends on a background of the mundane; and it is on the mundane and 'normal' that, according to Gutting, Foucault's work is actually focused. Foucault's motive is typically to de-privilege such experience by showing, in the manner of Nietzschean genealogy, its contingent and often disreputable origin, and, in this sense, his work may open doors to experiences beyond the limits normality tries to define. Foucault's writing restricts itself to the patient dissection of normal experience, at most providing distant glimpses of promised limit-experiences (Gutting, 2002: 77).

The Foucaultian position seems to be that experience is indicated by prior theory and/ or language—the "epistemic unconscious", which according to Gutting is the target of his "archaeology" (Gutting, 2002: 78). We select salient features from the mundane according to an existing schema of what counts in life. This would support the point Tony Brown makes from Lacan,

that, as individuals recounting our experience, we continually tell the same story (Brown et al, 2005) albeit with different actors. The features are different but the narrative remains the same. This would suggest that part at least of what constructs 'experience' is the range of theoretical positions, i.e. discourses, available to a person at any point in time.

Vygotsky (1987) might be seen to hold a similar position when he points out that language has a direct effect on thought and action, indeed that language internalised becomes thought itself (Vygotsky, 1987, vol 3: 72). He resists Piaget's notion that thought is a kind of independent, rational, interior activity unconnected to language, and demonstrates, empirically, the effect that language has on a child's thinking. From here it is not far to suggest that regardless of the physical event, the experience of the event is mediated through language.

However, my own experience, as mother and grandmother, suggests that children and animals who are 'pre-lingual' that is, do not yet have language, understood as words, can learn, i.e. have memory, and it would be hard to distinguish 'memory' from 'accumulated experience'. Therefore, it seems to me that, either one extends the notion of language, discourse, and theory to the point Jacques Derrida might be understood to take, quite possibly incorrectly, when he says there is nothing outside the text (Derrida, 1997: 158 cited in Callinocos, 2004), or one takes the position that there is a reason for accepting a notion of experience, which is not entirely dependent on the existence of language and therefore not entirely subject to the regulations of a particular shaping discourse. Just as Merleau-Ponty wants to maintain a distance between the empirical self and the body, I would argue for some distance between the physical self and the self-in-culture as represented by discourse. Again, I will come back to this point via Inna Semetsky's reading of Pierce and Deleuze. To consider the understanding of experience to be completely the effect of language, or even of language and culture, seems to overlook Merleau-Ponty's point about the grounding of experience in the relation of the body to other elements of the natural world.

### Decision making: remembering and forgetting experience

But whether experience reflects the body's history in language or the effect of language on the self's understanding of what has happened to its body, all of these views seem to depend to some extent on a concept of *memory* as essential to the processing of experience. Nietzsche turns the story of narrating experience on its head: the vital factor here is not the ability to remember, but the ability to forget. In order to make some sense of experience, whether in the construction of a narrative or not, it is necessary to cut out all the inessentials: if, in remembering the agony of an accident, or the death of a loved one, one's mind is preoccupied with the colour of the steel, the glint of sunshine on paint, the cut of clothes, the density of gravel, the types of roadside flowers, then the narrative may never be formed, may always be lost under detail preventing the narrative or any kind of understanding from forming.

Forgetting is no more *vis inertiae* as the superficial imagine; it is rather an active and in the strictest sense positive faculty of repression, that is responsible for the fact that what we experience and absorb enters our consciousness as little while we are digesting it (one might call the process 'in psychation') as does the thousandfold process, involved in physical nourishment—so-called 'incorporation.' To close the doors and windows of consciousness for a time; to remain undisturbed by the noise and struggle of our underworld of utility organs working with and against one another; a little quietness, a little *tabula rasa* of the consciousness, to make room for new things, above all for the nobler functions and functionaries, for regulation, foresight, premeditation ... that is the purpose of active forgetfulness, which is like a doorkeeper, a preserver of psychic order, repose, and etiquette: so that it will be immediately obvious how there could be no happiness, no cheerfulness, no hope, no pride, no *present*, without forgetfulness. The man in whom this apparatus of repression is damaged and ceases to function properly may be compared ... with a dyspeptic—he cannot 'have done' with anything (Nietzsche, 1989: 55-56).

But this account does not tell us how we know what we should forget, what is relevant to our story and what is not. Indeed, it may be that we do not actually forget: that we could bring out of memory the gravel and the flowers if they became relevant to a different story. Nietzsche suggests that remembering is a deliberate act of will, most evident in the formulation of promises.

This involves no mere passive inability to rid oneself of an impression, no mere indigestion through a once-pledge worked with which one cannot 'have done', but an active desire *not to rid oneself, a desire for the continuance of something desired once, a real memory of the will*: so that between the original 'I will', 'I shall do this' and the actual discharge of the will, its *act*, a world of strange new things, circumstances, even acts of will may be interposed without breaking this long chain of will (Nietzsche, 1989: 56).

It may not be too far-fetched to suggest a similar act of will in the creation of a narrative: some narratives, such as those of Holocaust survivors often contain some element of commitment to those who died, a promise, spoken or implicit, to keep the story alive. But the very questioning of a researcher—or a child, or a family member—may create a new value for a story, so that its continued existence becomes a shared promise, a 'social' communication in Dewey's terms. But in this case, the 'will' is not contemporaneous with the event, but with the act of recall. So it is not a *promise*, with the implication that the social event, the making of the promise is in the past, but a new social formation that is happening.

What Nietzsche suggests then, is that consciousness consists not in remembering, but in being able intelligently, that is consciously, in a sense deliberately, to select that which we choose to forget, which is at the same time not forgotten since under the right conditions we may well remember, or 'call to mind' things which we have thought we have 'forgotten'. Those 'right conditions' may be conceived as new 'stories'. When our stories change, elements of experience previously not relevant become suddenly important and come to the forefront of consciousness, to a place they did not have when not relevant. So for instance, in a notorious scandal concerning the conduct of policemen in New Zealand one of the women involved "told the Sunday News the sex was consensual at the time, however, she later felt she was manipulated and made to perform 'like a circus seal'" (*New Zealand Herald*, June 7, 2007). As the story of what a woman has the right to expect changed, so her experience of her experience changed, in this case with tragic results.

Semetsky, using both Dewey and Deleuze, makes a point resonating with Nietzsche's notion of "closing the doors and windows of consciousness for a time". We process or make connections derived from the 'signs', which form our experience of the event and consequent decision-making. "It is the totality of experience that emits signs, which by necessity exceed any pre-given system of significations. Conscious decision-making will be deferred for a moment because the state of mind is as yet pre-reflective" (Semetsky, 2007: 40). Semetsky further quotes Dewey's point that "we *de-fer* conclusion in order to *in-fer* more thoroughly" (Dewey, 1991: 108).

When we embark on research that seeks to understand the subject's experience, are we then asking about their perceptions, their extraordinary exceptions from the ordinary, or about the ordinary in their lives? Are we asking what they remember, or what they have decided, at this time, not to forget? And to what extent are we obliged to accept the representations of their perceptions as 'true', or to treat them simply as states of consciousness, or as evidence of the importance of certain discourses in their lives?

### **The 'communicative turn'**

In response to these questions I would like to turn to a view of experience which is less individualistic than phenomenology, and less archaeological than Foucault: a dialogic of the present as it were. Dewey regards the possibility of communicating experience as essential to our continued existence as societies:

society exists through a process of transmission quite as much as biological life. This transmission occurs by means of communication of habits of doing, thinking, and feeling from the older to the younger ... Unless pains are taken to see that genuine and thorough transmission takes place, the most civilized group will relapse into barbarism and then into savagery ... (Dewey, 1966: 3).

The communication, which ensures participation in a common understanding, is one which secures similar emotional and intellectual dispositions—like ways of responding to expectations and requirements. Dewey's view is that unless there is a certain basis in emotional, ethical and intellectual concurrence then relationships remain on a level he describes as "not yet social". To be genuinely communicative, that is, social, is also to be educative (5).

(T)o be a recipient of a communication is to have an enlarged and changed experience. One shares in what another has thought and felt and in so far, meagrely or amply, has his own attitude modified. Nor is the one who communicates left unaffected. Try the experiment of communicating, with fullness and accuracy, some experience to another, especially if it be somewhat complicated, and you will find your own attitude toward your experience changing; otherwise you resort to expletives and ejaculations (Dewey, 1966: 5).

This reciprocity perhaps stands somewhere between and beyond the position of Laing, to whom experience is prior and is articulated as a kind of pure narrative, and that of Foucault, for whom the discourse is prior and constructs the experience. Here the experience of both the teller and the told alter with the telling: there is an ontological effect, not just an epistemological one. The interviewer does not just accumulate more information; he or she is changed in a meaningful way, as is the interviewee by the shared experience of the narrative.

This position would render any attempt at 'objectivity' simply irrelevant, if not unethical, since it would in fact be an attempt to negate the communication by taking the hearer out of the emotional, ethical range of the narrator, if not out of their intellectual range. It would allow the 'giving voice' element that Laing suggests, but something more would have to happen: the voice would have to become the combined, communicated voice of both parties. Dewey forestalls the Foucaultian position by saying, "The experience has to be formulated in order to be communicated. To formulate requires getting outside of it, seeing it as another would see it, considering what points of contact it has with the life of another so that it may be got into such form that he can appreciate its meaning" (Dewey, 1966: 5-6). Does this mean, imposing a particular form of discourse on the raw material? Very likely it does—often in the form of a joke, or self-deprecation, or some culturally and socially acceptable genre. But that does not mean necessarily that the genre itself constructed the experience, although it may mean that it constructs the narrative of its communication. Here, there is recognition of a kind of raw material of experience, which may be outside of discourse, although its communication is dependent on discursive patterns.

Inna Semetsky connects the empiricism of Dewey and Deleuze, and the echoes are significant. In relation to the production of subjectivity she writes of Deleuze's thought:

The production of subjectivity is not based on any prescribed code, but is creative and artistic, and also includes ethical and aesthetic dimensions punctuated by moments when being *old* oneself simply would not make sense any longer. Because 'when something occurs, the self that awaited it is already dead, or the one that would await it has not yet arrived' (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987: 198-199), ... the occurrence of an event, the human experience *per se* is to be considered as a condition of possibility, ... of becoming-other, that is, different from the present self (Semetsky, 2007: 3).

Deleuze, according to Semetsky (2007), inverts the Platonic system so that not only does the ideal become 'real' but the becoming-state is also real, as in not-yet achieved, but not not-real either. "In Deleuze's radically materialist philosophy everything is real, including the virtual which, however, is not—as yet—actual" (Semetsky, 2007: 112). So not only is the raw-material experience real, but the experience of the communication, the genred narrative is real also as it moves from the not-yet actual to the past, in a process which, as both Dewey and Deleuze would agree, has an effect on the becoming of both parties—or all parties—to this process.

If this is the case, and obtains in all cases of genuine, that is, social communication, then social research which involves a researcher listening to others relating their experiences cannot be other than 'participant research', since the ontological effect applies to both narrator and listener. That being so, all our anxieties about, 'research subjects' and 'participant research' and the various associated problems of ownership, degree of participation and responsibility, possibilities of exploitation and so on can be set aside. If there is no emotional, ethical and intellectual communication, as Dewey would have it, there is no real creation of a society, so no genuine communication, or education, or research has taken place. Nothing has happened, except perhaps that paper has been written on. If these things have taken place, there has been genuine communication, then all parties have become different people. In this case, all are participants in their mutual education. Gert Biesta (2007) makes a similar point in his paper on Dewey's "communicative turn".

Reflections on the power relations of researcher and researched lie behind *Kaupapa Maori* research models, which insist on an ethical relation between the researcher and the researched, often by means of an insistence that the researched shall 'benefit' from the research. Questions might be asked about the nature of this benefit: is it to be material, politic, or perhaps lie in the changed understandings Dewey talks about on the part of both researcher and researched? The research *whanau* concept is an attempt to broaden the ethical relations still further, and to strengthen the protections for the researched. Such considerations owe much to feminist writers like Melanie Klein and du Bois, who rejected the power relations and epistemological assumptions inherent in conventional researcher/subject positions (Graham, 2007). Graham articulates a hope that dialogic forms of research will allow a more respectful and articulate position to be allocated to the subject. But it seems to me that Dewey would go further, in this dialogic form by allowing for ontological change on the part of both parties, and perhaps for the *whanau* as well. Dewey comes close to Deleuze and Guattari's concept of nomadology— the subject is never static, but always in the process of becoming someone else. It is not a *being* who recounts their experiences, but a *becoming*.

To accept the nomadic concept of people's lives, the importance and acceptability of directed forgetting, the necessarily selective notion of narrative, the mutual affect of dialogic relations between researcher and researched, and the possibility of affecting a wider community as well, one starts to move the notion of research into 'experience' away from static conceptions of the role of researcher and researched. It is no longer appropriate to envisage capturing the 'voice' of a stable entity as she hands over the truth about her life or some aspect of her life to an objective, recording researcher.

Such an understanding of research and experience provides a ready analysis and critique for works written in the education field. To take an instance, Brown et al. (2007), have produced an example of research, which might illustrate such a basis for action, based on neo-Marxist philosophers, including Chantal Mouffe (2005) and Louis Althusser (1971). By interviewing their research subject teachers at the beginning and end of a year in which they implemented a new approach to mathematics teaching, the researchers were able to define ways in which the teachers added the new concepts to existing paradigms to create classroom procedures, relationships and understandings, which reflected not only the new, but also the interaction between the old and new ways of operating. In effect, each teacher had a different response to the new programme, which stemmed from previous understandings, and created a new version of the new paradigm. All of them adopted a changed teacher identity, but it was not the same teacher identity, although all of them used the terms required in the new situation. The research was not aimed at assessing how 'successful' they were, but at charting their journey towards creating this new identity. However, the research does not seem to have altered the conceptual repertoire of the researchers themselves, so although it conforms to Deleuze's notions of 'becoming' in relation to the subjects of the research, it does not fulfil the requirements of Dewey's notion of 'communication' with regard to those who conducted the research.

After all this, is it possible to retrieve the notion of 'experience' as a useful one in educational research? Well obviously, people are not going to stop doing it—the education research industry has now a kind of energy of its own. If we did not have access to students', or citizens' ideas on how bureaucrats or teachers affect their lives we would presumably just continue doing the same old things. The problem is, however, that we do just that, despite the appeal to experiences. Perhaps Dewey, Deleuze, Nietzsche and Merleau-Ponty offer us a clue as to how we might rethink our research procedures so that we escape the notion of the confluence of empirical self and body, by allowing for the social and cultural; escape the limitations of the static self, by substituting becoming for being; understand that narratives are always partial, selective, constructed by circumstances and audience; and substitute a notion of truly reciprocal communication for the one-way street of conventional research.

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