

# **The Power of Friendship: Collective reflections towards an “experience-near” research practice**

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## **Introduction**

Janet Siltanen spent 10 years in Edinburgh, taking up a lectureship in Sociology at the University of Edinburgh just before completing her PhD. We both met her soon after she arrived, when Judith was a PhD student in the department Jan joined and Liz had recently taken up a junior teaching position in Geography at the University. In different but related ways, Jan was an important member of the social and intellectual communities to which we belonged. All three of us were at similar and formative stages in our lives and careers. Some time after Jan had returned to Canada, the two of us began to work together more closely. During a visit to Edinburgh several years after Jan had left, she played an important part in the development of a research community the two of us were working to develop. In this commentary we use some of our memories of meeting, being with and working with Jan to illuminate her influence on our thinking and our research practice.

## **Judith’s reflections**

I am standing in the middle of the local hardware store on Morningside Road, a busy village that makes up one of the seven villages of Edinburgh. People live, shop and entertain here and just beyond are the Pentland Hills, a place to walk in, to escape to. My eye is drawn to a woman with blond hair wearing a bright red jacket, a red jacket that despite the fact that I never wear red I longed to try on, to possess. There is something that draws me closer to this woman. I eavesdrop. She talks with the shop assistant. She has an American accent. (I am soon corrected of my mistake, she is from Ottawa, Canada). She is speaking of needing some things for her new flat that she has just bought. She has just moved to Edinburgh. Her flat is above one of the shops across the road. I am now very interested and moving closer I say that I just over heard she had moved here, and that I too live in a tenement flat just around the corner. She tells me that she had recently moved to Edinburgh having finished her doctorate at Cambridge and now had a job in the sociology department at Edinburgh University. I am delighted, even excited and let her know that I too am in that department as a postgraduate doing a PhD. Thus began a friendship that has lasted thirty-seven years in which we shared our daily lives, our social and emotional lives and importantly for that time in my life, our intellectual lives.

We became part of each other's family, eating together, sharing our days, sharing our weekends, driving to the university together first to drop off my daughter at nursery then swimming in the local Victorian pool before making our way to the work of our day.

We are sitting on a hill, one of the Pentland Hills which dominate the southern landscape of Edinburgh. We laugh and laugh, I no longer remember at what, just that intense joyful laughter. I feel like I have found the sister I never had, one with whom laughter is central; we are in this intense friendship.

We invite Jan to share our holiday in the foothills of the Alps, in a modest chalet, Morgins. The children are delighted as she gives each of them a lot of her time, to read a story, to play. She teaches us tai chi on the sloping lawn but we cannot control ourselves, at every movement we dissolve into laughter as we try to follow her tai chi. And then there is the badminton game we play, we try so hard to take it seriously. Being near Jan requires such control but her laughter infects everything we do and say.

At Edinburgh University we set up a women's group for faculty and postgraduate students which lasts 3-4 years. We explore feminist literature, our own writings. We share our work, what we are thinking, how we are feeling. We puzzle how to incorporate all of this, this feedback, our experiences into our understandings, our point of view, our writings.

Jan's voice, her thoughts and feelings, her critical aptitude are central to how I begin make sense of my own work. She challenges and validates my inquiries into the female experience of the Scottish teaching profession and gender and my attempts to locate this within current feminist theory. Nothing passes her by, no sloppy thinking, no grandiose statements, no invalid data. Jan scrutinises everything, she gives the same time and attention to all of our writings, staff and postgraduate students alike. She deepens my understanding of the possibilities of qualitative data. She brings such a fierce discipline to her work and indeed to mine.

Jan tells us that she is pregnant. There is only joy and indeed some tears. It is as if this baby is as much ours as hers. And we do share him, to cuddle, to change, to play with, to look after. And then she tells us that she and her partner are going to re-emigrate back to Canada, to Ottawa. Her dedicated hard work has come to fruition, she is offered a professorship at the Carleton University.

I am devastated, I am losing my best friend, my sister, my mentor. And thus begins a renegotiated relationship determined not just by the three thousand miles between us but the new lives each of us is renegotiating; for Jan not just a professorship at a new university but also a return to her country of origin in which she has not lived in for most of her adult life. For myself a letting go of my academic life to enter into a new one, that of the psychoanalytic to train as a therapist.

For a while our intellectual worlds separate as does the inclusion of each other into our daily lives and all that that entails. I miss her, I feel bereft as if I have lost a sister, a chosen sister. We visit as soon as possible. My children are delighted as Jan, her partner and their son is their family. They have no other. We have fun as we are introduced to the city of Ottawa, its history, its art, its museums, and especially its sport of baseball. Gradually over many visits I come to love this city, this university, this house by the river.

I return to academic life setting up a postgraduate program of training and research into counselling and psychotherapy. My colleagues and I are reflecting upon what model of research we wish to convey at which point Jan arrives for a visit and I ask her to share with us her thinking. Thus begins an exploration, an interrogation of the meaning and purpose of research that is deeply rooted in experience and practice.

### **Liz's reflections**

One day during Jan's visit in 2004, four of us meet together in one of the nicer University classrooms on campus: Jan, Judith, our colleague Seamus and me. I am leading our work on the development of a new research course for students on our postgraduate counselling and psychotherapy programmes. This will replace a generic research course on which we have previously relied, which is designed primarily for students on postgraduate degrees in education. We now have a sufficient number of students to justify something much more tailor-made for students engaged specifically in counselling and psychotherapy.

Judith, Seamus and I come from different academic backgrounds, with a shared commitment to in-depth qualitative research. However, the field of counselling and psychotherapy into which we have all moved has come under the sway of medical and psychological science, with a powerful presumption that "real" or "serious" science uses quantitative approaches. This includes an emphasis on testing the "effectiveness" of counselling and psychotherapy in ways that mimic as much as is possible the "randomised controlled trials" associated with medical-pharmaceutical

research. In addition to this, many of our students arrive with a view of research as, by definition, objective, quantitative, impersonal and apolitical. Consequently, if we are to offer our students an alternative vision of research – alternative to their own initial assumptions and to dominant portrayals in the research literature in counselling and psychotherapy – we need to engage critically with what is so often presented as the commonsensical superiority of a positivist epistemology and its associated quantitative methods.

I first met Jan many years earlier, having taken up a junior teaching post in human geography at the University in the mid-1980s, around the time Jan also arrived. I join the women's group Judith has described, and Jan and I are soon involved in the development of an interdisciplinary "gender studies" degree pathway. My own work is much influenced by the feminist critique of science and the development of feminist epistemologies that was spearheaded in the 1980s by scholars including Donna Haraway, Sandra Harding and Linda Alcoff. I am embedded in feminist research networks within my original discipline of human geography, which, despite moments of feeling marginalized, ignored and even regarded with contempt, are actually having considerable influence in a wider movement for post-positivist approaches. What I encounter in counselling and psychotherapy from the mid-1990s onwards seems to me to be a throw-back: I am perplexed by its dominance and the apparent lack of confident and convincing criticisms of the kind with which I am deeply familiar within human geography and in the wider social sciences. I fear that if I were to design a course grounded in the feminist perspectives which have shaped my thinking, I might provide multiple grounds for hostility and in so doing lose too many of our students. From their different perspectives, Seamus and Judith bring parallel dilemmas to our conversations. We wonder together how we can best offer our students a critical understanding of complex and wide-ranging epistemological debates about knowledge and research in a way that will engage them and enable them to design their own small-scale research projects.

Alongside the influence of positivist approaches and quantitative methods in counselling and psychotherapy research, there is concern in our field about a perceived "gap" between research and practice. Research seems to call for radical difficult attitudes and skills from those required for therapeutic practice: in their clinical work practitioners engage personally and subjectively, and draw deeply on their own emotional experience, whereas positivist research calls for objectivity, detachment and the setting aside of all that is personal and emotional. We want to challenge this and reconnect with the origins of research in our field in a discussion of direct clinical experience in all of its messy subjectivity. We want to enable students to write dissertations that draw and reflect on

their own clinical practice. We think of this as researching close to practice and that is “experience-near” rather than “experience far”.

Jan understood very well our concerns. She had been a pioneer in the feminist application of quantitative methods in sociology, but had, as she explained that day, made her own shift towards an interest in the kind of in-depth qualitative research we all wished to introduce to our students. She has trodden a path that might serve as a valuable model for many of our students.

Jan’s knowledge of methodological and epistemological debates was wide and deep. In this context, she recommended to us a book by a Danish town planner, Bent Flyvbjerg (2001), entitled *Making Social Science Matter* and subtitled “why social inquiry fails and how it can succeed again”. She talks to us about what this book does and conveys an enthusiasm that is infectious. She inspires trust and confidence. She helps set the framework for future discussion among the three of us, which we pick up once we have read *Making Social Science Matter*. We are impressed by the book. Crucially, as well as powerfully laying out an argument against attempts to model social science research on dominant views of research in the physical, natural and medical sciences, Flyvbjerg argues for the power of detailed, in-depth examples in which specific details and contexts matter, and in which practices and stories of practice are highly valued.

Deciding to adopt *Making Social Science Matter* as a core text for our course is not without its challenges. Most obviously, it doesn’t speak directly of or to counselling and psychotherapy so we will need to explain the connections as we understand them. I think of this as our translation work. Over the next few years we develop and refine the lectures and seminars through which we deliver the course in order to help students make use of and apply Flyvbjerg’s arguments to their own research projects. Feedback from students on the book is mixed: many find it hard-going and while some come to feel it is worth it, others are less convinced. But what is more important to us is that every year the dissertations completed by our students include many that are, as we hope, “experience-near” and close to clinical practice. Every year there are some outstanding dissertations and we begin to encourage students to consider publication. This is not an easy path and for the majority of students who finish their postgraduate degrees at the Masters level, there is no institutional support, and other calls upon their time take over. We begin to think creatively how we might showcase some the work our students do and gradually a book takes shape in our minds. Of course, it takes some time to progress from an idea to the completion of a manuscript, but in 2016 we launch *Practitioner Research in Counselling and Psychotherapy: The Power of Examples*,

which includes eleven chapters based on masters dissertations completed by our students, and which now provides a rich body of examples on which subsequent students draw.

Our book has its origins in Jan's guidance and influence: it wouldn't exist without her.

### **Closing thoughts**

Jan's academic biography testifies to her wide-ranging contributions to the building, sustenance and development of a range of academic and intellectual communities, with, for example, the British Sociological Association, the International Labour Organization, the Canadian Sociological Association and Carleton University. Listing roles in such organizations provides an indication of Jan's commitment. We hope that our reflections provide something different and more elusive about her way of being in relationship to those with whom she forges connections of friendship and collegiality. The vitality of her friendship has enriched both of our lives as well as enriching what we have offered our own students.

### **References**

- Bondi, Liz and Judith, Fewell (eds) (2016) *Practitioner Research in Counselling and Psychotherapy: The Power of Examples* Palgrave, London
- Flyvbjerg, Bent (2001) *Making Social Science Matter* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge