"Thoroughly Post-Modern Mary"
[A Biographic Narrative Interview With Mary Gergen]

Kip Jones

Abstract:

Method: The Biographic Narrative Interpretive Method (Prue CHAMBERLAYNE, Joanna BORNAT & Tom WENGRAF, 2000; Tom WENGRAF 2001; Gabriele ROSENTHAL 2004; Kip JONES 2004) uses an interview technique in the form of a single, initial narrative-inducing question (minimalist-passive), for example, "Tell me the story of your life," to elicit an extensive, uninterrupted narration. This shift encompasses willingness on the part of the researcher to cede "control" of the interview scene to the interviewee and assume the posture of active listener/audience participant. A follow-up sub-session can then be used to ask additional questions, but based only on what the interviewee has said in the first interview and using her/his words and phrases in the same order. Through hypothesising how the lived life informs the told story, the case history is then finally constructed from the two separate threads of the "lived life" and the "told story."

In this paper, the "lived life" and "told story" are presented in a "raw" form with the further involvement of the reader in mind. The story has not been "analysed" by the interviewer, but left open and transparent. Still, the production of the story becomes the creative output and social construction of both the storyteller and the interviewer (the performer and the audience) and, in this case particularly, one story of many stories that could have been told by the person interviewed. Routine facts are often back-grounded by the narrator through the use of this method in favour of spontaneity in the storytelling and the creation of meaningful life metaphors. In this way, the personal journey to "who the interviewee is today" is described, rather than merely a list of accomplishments.

"The Lived Life": Mary GERGEN (née McCANNEY) was born in 1938. The first part of her childhood was spent in the small town of Balaton, Minnesota. She subsequently moved with her family to Minneapolis when she was 12. She attended a suburban middle-class high school where she was popular. She went on to the University of Minnesota after graduating high school and continued to be both a gifted student, well-liked and social. In her final year she met an architecture student and married him shortly after graduation. The couple had a girl, Lisa, and a boy, Michael. Over the next seven years, Mary studied part-time for a Master's Degree in Counselling Psychology. Her husband was a fast track architect and they expected to move to Rome in the early 60s, but moved instead to Boston where he could continue his studies at MIT.

At a Halloween party given at Harvard, Mary met Ken GERGEN for the first time. They had a long conversation and she discovered that he had an opening for a research assistant, a position for which she immediately applied. She got the job and Ken encouraged her to finish her Master's Degree. She worked for him for two years; he later accepted a position at Swarthmore College in Pennsylvania, leaving Harvard (and Mary) behind.

Both of their marriages began to end. Ken received a fellowship to study in Rome and Mary and her two children left with him on a ship to Rome in 1968. They were married in October of 1969. Back at Swarthmore, they began to work together on experimental projects, antiwar protests, etc. Ken and Mary lived and worked in Japan in 1972-73. By the mid-70s, Mary realised that she wanted a PhD and became a graduate student at Temple University in Philadelphia in 1974 where she quickly became involved in teaching. In 1976-77 the couple spent a year in Paris.

After receiving her PhD, Mary worked for a time at AT&T doing longitudinal studies on managers' lives. Eventually, she got a teaching job at the Pennsylvania State University local campus, fifteen minutes drive from their house, where she went through the ranks from assistant professor to associate professor to full Professor of Psychology and of Women's Studies. In 1988-89 Ken and Mary went to Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study, but Ken spent most of the year at Heidelberg in Germany, leaving Mary on her own in the Netherlands.

She and Ken persist in teaching and are involved in the Taos Institute promoting social constructionist ideas, as well as co-editing The Positive Aging Newsletter. Mary continues to travel, teach, write and give papers and workshops. Recent publications include Social Construction: A Reader with Ken GERGEN and Feminist Reconstructions in Psychology Narrative, Gender, and Performance.
The Told Story:

I couldn’t help

but wanna start

Back before my birth

To create a setting
For (myself)
[Within a family] and
Also [within a generation] and
[Within a historical period] and
[Within a particular place].

I guess that I want you to remember the movie,

"The Last Picture Show"

Main Street

I hope you have seen that movie,

but perhaps you will recall that there’s a

The Last Picture Show. Just as our lives are discontinuous, with jarring scene changes and ridiculous episodes of embarrassing events, so is life presented to us in this small town. The film’s purposely jarring editing is transformed in our minds, as we watch, from a disjointed amalgam to a stream of consciousness effect that is very lifelike. One knows, then, that you are entering an alternative world just as real in its way as your own. This movie pulls you in.
The center of the film and the major theme – should you listen to your heart or your libido if the two don’t combine in the same person? Perhaps the saddest comment in this film is that too often these two halves to a whole do not come together as a package and people are forced to choose.

Main Street: I guess it’s a symbol of great hopes for a metropolis ah, but it's a village with seven hundred and thirteen people in it. The town is called Balaton.

Balaton had a grain elevator, in fact three of them, at the end of this street—there was a park with a bandstand, and then there were the railroad tracks and the elevators. And the elevators contained grain and grain was the principle ah, export of the farming communities around this rural town in south-western Minnesota. There was Laura Ingles Wilder, a writer who wrote stories about a family who lived in Minnesota in the 1800’s and the most famous book was called, The Little House on the Prairie. And I identify with that kind of locale.

When I was a child there were periods of time where I was QUITE BORED.

My mother when she was in High School met the travelling salesman who would come through town. My mother, who was 18, became pregnant before the marriage, I think on St. Patrick's Day, actually. And my FATHER, um and my mother were married when he was 29 and she was 18.

Quite a LARGE age gap between them.

Dad was the 'boss', and Mom was the respectful and respected wife.

My FATHER,
  my sister
  and I

Catholics were the only in that town.
(I think that it’s kind of important that that was the case.)
My family, my **FATHER** and the dentist were the some of the most educated people.

My **FATHER** who was the intellect and the one I most admired in that respect, and who I most wanted to please.

My mother was somebody that I felt I had some superiority over.

(\textit{an} and yet I loved her and she loved me. and who I was.)

[I haven't mentioned that my sister was born in 1940]

I was the politician and the negotiator and ah, the one who could get along just fine with everyone.

**PHYSICALLY**

my mother was

\begin{itemize}
  \item lighter skinned and
  \item lighter \textit{brown} hair and
  \item green eyes,
  \item smallish (uhm) and
  \item pretty and
  \item very young, and
\end{itemize}

(I always ah took a certain pride in how pretty and young she was in the course of the world.)

My **FATHER** was

\begin{itemize}
  \item handsome,
  \item athletic,
  \item \textit{dark} skinned,
  \item \text{dark black hair},
  \item \text{brilliant blue eyes}
\end{itemize}
The omnipresence of the war.

Everything in that small town was orientated toward the absence of the sons.

I was in a little group of children that were all born at the same time and there were four boys and me. I was in this family where I was the oldest and the oldest girl, and there were two younger girls and then the rest were these little boys. So, I never had this sort of inordinate respect for boys my age or younger. I also (pause) was (pause) one of the best students in our class. But I do think that I had this real sense of ownership and belonging and ah, you know that I was somebody in this little town.

When I was 12 we had to move to Minneapolis because [my FATHER] had been promoted.

[He was not very self-promoting and I think that was a problem].

We had to leave, it was very hard. No! it wasn't hard, I was looking forward to it, I thought it would great, I thought it would be like Balaton,

Only bigger.

I started to collect movie star pictures.
When I was a girl, I saved up my stars for my piano lesson successes to trade for movie tickets that could be redeemed at the local theatre. I used to save them for Roy Rogers and Dale Evans movies. She was the only female cowboy movie star, married to Roy in real life... and I really identified with her. My favorite cowboy stars. (They also had singing). I even played ukulele in 6th grade, and had outdoor, cowboy fantasies. In fact at Catholic Confirmation, you were supposed to receive a vocational plan (to be a nun, they hoped), and I could see myself out west, in charge of a ranch-orphanage. (At that time, age 12, no men in sight... just me and my girlfriends running the place.)

[Anyway, we moved to Minneapolis. I had the worse year of my life. These girls were girlie girls. They played jacks, skipped rope, and sat around and they even started to like boys.]

I joined the sort of not goody-good popular group, and I stayed with those people all through high school.

My body changed and
I became

*um,*

a lot more attractive

*and never really fashionable, but certainly trying*

and,

*um* (PAUSE)

I suddenly

I could have

*any boy*

and I

ran through them.

© 2004 FQS http://www.qualitative-research.net/fqs/
The centre of my life was (sort of) to be socially successful.

I was a car-hop, uh just like in American Graffiti,

The film is about a group of recently graduated teenagers and their stories during one night of cruising the streets the relative innocence of the summer of 1962. The lives of several high school grads are exposed here on the last night they will all be together.

only NO roller skates.

I went to the University of Minnesota;
(Social life was just as important as getting good grades)

Broke up with my boyfriend,
[not because there was anything at all wrong with him but I was so sick of being tied down]

And I just went on a spree and
Had a really good time and

F E L T F R E E .

In my senior year (pause)
I got engaged and ah, (pause)

to an architectural student

and I did go home and
I was married in June,
I was pregnant in July and
had my first child the following April.

Ah, Lisa, and ah then 18 months later I had my second child, a little boy Michael

more or less staying at home

© 2004 FQS http://www.qualitative-research.net/fqs/
I started to go back to graduate school (seven or so years)

Masters Degree in Counselling Psychology

My husband had um, (pause) he was ah, a fast track architect, Architecture was his WHOLE LIFE.

He was on the track for the *Prix de Rome* and we were going to go to Rome

I was real excited about that because

[Although I had wanted to go to Europe at various times, there never was the money for it.]
We ended up in Boston and that's when I got a job working at Harvard for

***************

Ken Gergen

The reason that I got a job was that he had a friend who was an architect who was our friend, and there was a Halloween party and we were invited to this Halloween party and when I came in, in 1965 people were saying that Ken and his wife had come as psychological concepts and what were these concepts? And I found out and told people what the concepts were and it was rather appropriate and suggestive of his marriage, which was he had come as the ID and she had come as the Super Ego.

***************
I met Ken that night and found out that he had an opening for a Research Assistant, [he had just gotten a grant], and
we sat on the stairs.

Marilyn Monroe & Tom Ewell in "The Seven Year Itch"

and had this conversation that was marvellous!

and

I have to say despite the fact that I was in a perfectly okay marriage (PAUSE)
with a person who was highly talented and A NICE GUY,

(who was not exactly on my wave length …) [mine was more intellectual]

that I have to say in some way

I fell in LOVE with Ken that night.
I also noticed that every other woman at the party seemed to be in LOVE with him too.

And so that was an interesting observation on my part.

Then he took a job at Swarthmore; and moved to Swarthmore;

[I continued on at Harvard for another year]

My marriage

ah, began to END
and

and ah

at the culmination of

Ken had won a Guggenheim Fellowship to Rome

and he ah,

and I and my two children left together

on a ship

SAIL WITH THE STARS

© 2004 FQS http://www.qualitative-research.net/fqs/

His marriage began to END,
It was the year of sex and drugs and rock and roll; it was also the year of the Martin Luther King and Bobby Kennedy assassinations, Prague Spring, the Chicago convention, the anti-war movement and the Tet Offensive, the student rebellion that paralyzed France, Civil Rights, the generation gap, the beginning of the end for the Soviet Union, and the birth of the women's movement. 1968: That world-changing year of social upheaval, when television’s impact on global events first became apparent, and where simultaneously, in Paris, Prague, London, Berkeley, Chicago, New York and all over the globe uprisings spontaneously occurred. 1968 encompassed the worlds of youth and music, politics, war, economics, assassinations, riots, and demonstrations—and the media, --how we got to where we are today.

Martin KURLANSKY 1968 The Year that Rocked the World.

The 60’s were a time for "Make Love, Not War". 

strong radical feelings against the government
feelings of freedom
REBELLION REBELLION REBELLION
breaking down of hierarchies
sexual freedom

an ethos that seems a bit \textit{WEIRD} just now.
"I realize that what seemed to be the ways of the world 40 years ago are out of step with today. Hard to look back and not be a bit aghast at what was so much more conventional then."

We worked at home and played and

**um**

the children.

They *loved* Ken, they treated him like a *FATHER* from the first days and that whole issue was totally fine.

**Um,**
certainly I had some guilt at separating them from their *FATHER,*

*but*

because he was never really involved with them anyway, that wasn’t so bad.

**Um,** he missed me

*but* (pause) I was better off

and I have never really regretted my choice.

( It was harder on Ken because that

he had to *leave* behind two adorable *children*

he had been very close with)

© 2004 FQS [http://www.qualitative-research.net/fqs/]
I remember going to an APA meeting and starting to . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .

ah (pause)

I had a big crying jag in the car, before we got to Toronto [or wherever the APA was] because I felt like I just have got to have more (pause) status

I have to have more independence

I have to have my own PhD,
more & more women were going on for further Education

and I saw myself as being in a secondary role in this nowhere land.

We thought that I would never grow into an autonomous

um, kind of more peer (long pause) with HIM until

I could establish [some separate ground]

if I saw myself ah, developing

it would be like first under his wing

© 2004 FQS http://www.qualitative-research.net/fqs/
and then
as a HELPER
and then
totally
separating
and going off
doing other things
and then
coming back again.

[In some sense
I don’t think that
I’m ever
gonna
um,
be his
full equal —]

for me,
my work and
what I do and
what I think is

a form of
I do crazy stuff
and um
(in a way)

EACH of US
is always
AMAZING!!

finding paths,
finding relationships,
finding ways of learning
that we’re different and
but also feeding back

© 2004 FQS http://www.qualitative-research.net/fqs/
I love getting on airplanes with my briefcase. I am kind of an EXHIBITIONIST and I’m very social and out-going.

Isadora Duncan

when I found my own niche, the niche was this intersection of feminist theory and SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM.
Uh,

I started playing around with writing styles

sort of disassembling narratives and so up r/i/p/p/i/n/g the papers

so that there there there there there there there there

were ribbons of ribbons of ribbons of ribbons of ribbons of ribbons of ribbons of ribbons of ribbons of ribbons of ribbons of ribbons of ribbons of ribbons of ribbons of ribbons of ribbons of ribbons of ribbons of ribbons of ribbons of ribbons of ribbons of ribbons of ribbons of ribbons of

different colours, not colours, different fonts and lines and

intersecting other voices, making my paper poly-vocal

and the voices of the people I was studying,
the autobiographies I was studying,

and just being kind of daring about it.

Ken spent a long time (one year) … in Heidelberg, because he had won some fantastic prize and I was sort of on my own there in the Netherlands I couldn’t talk to him and so I sat down at the computer and I wrote this performance piece, and I had never done anything like that.

“Post-modern Mama”,
I called the piece.

I wore a costume because I wanted it to be embodied in feminism,

so I wore heels and a red boa.
Ken … he’s a real comedian, actually

sometimes we sing
and he plays the banjo
and there’s no stopping us,
sort of craziness that we can get into,

but serious CR^ZineS

finding out new ways of living together

(There’s one part of US that wants to sort of simplify and slow down)

and another part of US that has these eyes (I’s) that we can hardly resist the next thing that’s GOING ON>>>>>>

MOVIES… they were my life.

Ken and I agree that one of the links between us is our ways of living out MOVIES in our life… creating sets, striking sets, acting into a scene… our theoretical ideas about emotional scenarios..

seeing ourselves as our favorite actors...

F U N N Y  S T U F F  L I K E  T H A T .

© 2004 FQS http://www.qualitative-research.net/fqs/
"I do think that my greatest personal asset is my optimistic, good feeling flow emotional nature, and I think I am quite protective of it. For example, I have never gone to therapy, nor have ever wished to do so, because I would not want my "gift" to be taken away from me. If I share any bad thoughts or feelings, it is with a couple of close friends, including Ken, who will listen and be consoling, but not be too invasive. I always know that no matter how down I might be it will soon pass… and so it is only necessary to wait for morning."

It's probably all related to the MOVIES... LOVE, AFFAIRS, SEX, BETRAYAL... and finally, because we grew up in the 50's...

HAPPY ENDINGS.

Lyrics to "Happy Trails" by Dale Evans Rogers

Happy trails to you, until we meet again.
Happy trails to you, keep smilin' until then.
Who cares about the clouds when we're together?
Just sing a song and bring the sunny weather.
Happy trails to you, 'til we meet again.

Some trails are happy ones,
Others are blue.
It's the way you ride the trail that counts,
Here's a happy one for you.

Happy trails to you, until we meet again.
Happy trails to you, keep smilin' until then.
Who cares about the clouds when we're together?
Just sing a song and bring the sunny weather.

Happy trails to you, 'til we meet again.
Credits

Photographic reproductions courtesy of the following: Rolfe Alumni Group; True Catholic Organization; Tom Tierney; The Roy Rogers-Dale Evans Museum, Branson, MO; The Missouri Heritage Project, 1999 for educational use; Chuck Adams; Marilyn Monroe, LLC (CMG Worldwide); B. Krist for Greater Philadelphia Tourism Marketing Corporation; Swarthmore College; Matson Navigation Company, Inc.; University of Pennsylvania; Vidisco Ltd.; Peter Kurth; Stephen Mifsud (Malta) – http://www.marz-kreations.com/home.html; Diva Las Vegas; Tickety-boo Ltd; Paul Ivester.

Full Interview

The full interview and follow-up questions and their responses are available at: http://www.qualitative-research.net/fqs-texte/3-04/04-3-18b-e.htm. A list of Mary GERGEN’s academic achievements can be seen at: http://mary.gergen.socialpsychology.org/.

References


Author

Kip JONES is an ESRC Research Fellow at De Montfort University in the UK. His work includes developing qualitative approaches to systematic evidence review, including using meta-ethnography and narrative techniques to "synthesise" qualitative research. He is Associate Book Review Editor of the online journal FQS (http://www.qualitative-research.net/fqs/fqs-eng.htm). He has written on and given workshops in narrative biographic interpretive method. His chapter, "Minimalist Passive Interviewing Technique and Team Analysis of Narrative Qualitative Data" in New Qualitative Methodologies in Health and Social Care, F. RAPPORT, (Ed.) was published by Routledge in 2004. He continues to explore ways to incorporate methods from the arts and humanities in the presentation of social science data.

Contact:
Dr. Kip Jones
Mary Seacole Research Centre
De Montfort University
266 London Road
Leicester LE2 1RQ UK
E-mail: kipjones@dmu.ac.uk

Citation