

Problematising qualitative research in organisations

Three voices, three subjectivities, three struggles

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to illustrate the authors' multiple subjectivities, in research and in practice which are ever shifting in context with each other. The authors present richness of understanding which can be revealed when researchers eschew consensus, certainty and easy solutions. The authors aim to show that plurality of ontological and epistemological approaches combined with diversity in understanding and subjective experience is necessary in qualitative research in organisations.

Design/methodology/approach – The authors take a playful and incomplete narrative approach in their critical reflection on the subjectivities being silenced or ignored in organisations and in academia. The authors present an unsettling and ambiguous read but the aim is to question the formulaic, linear, simplistic solutions and structures evident in organisations and academia that silence uncertainty, emotions, voice and creativity through standardisation and the rhetoric of collaboration for performance enhancement. This process the authors have termed philosophical violence.

Findings – The authors identify philosophical violence as a dominant theme in qualitative research, in organisational practice and within academia. In contrast, the authors' embodied subjectivities preclude the reaching agreement or consensus too quickly, or indeed, at all. The authors' embodied struggles add to the understanding of ambiguity, difference, critical reflexivity and understanding, providing richness and accommodating diversity and paradox in the inquiries in the organisations.

Originality/value – The authors show the struggles as hopeful and the non-collaborative collaboration as a resource from which the authors can individually and jointly develop new understandings of working and thus survive the philosophical violence found in organisations and in research. Honouring subjectivities is essential for rich qualitative research in organisations.

Keywords Intersectionality, Power, Critical reflexivity, Feminism, Post-structuralism, Queer theory

Paper type Research paper

Ladies and gentlemen, we introduce your narrators

The three of us met whilst working on our PhDs in a group environment from 2003 to 2010. Liz Hayes (2010), *The Reluctant*, worked with reluctance, playful subversion and fundamentalist thinking in her management consultancy practice with organisations. Clare Hopkinson (2010), *The Reflective*, inquired into nurses reflecting in the hospital ward and Alan Taylor (2009), *The Queer*, queried and queered the organisation. Each of us presented our work in creative ways that included our "selves" and passions as we sought to be critically reflexive about our inquiries in an applied subjective way.



We have used the terms Reluctant, Reflective and Queer to discriminate the three authors of the text, given that convention dictates that anonymity of authorship is essential to the peer review of submitted academic papers. To some degree, however, this immediately draws attention to our troubled voices and subjectivities, and enacts the struggles we elucidate through the remainder of this paper. We are immediately silenced as identifiable subjects to some degree. We know it's a big ask of our readers to tolerate the subsequent complexity, ambition and ambiguity, but we see no other way to invite you to enter into the ontological and epistemological dilemmas we stumble over in our academic lives.

Since the completion of our PhDs we have found ways of inquiring together. Philosophically we differed in positioning our PhDs: The Reluctant used feminist approaches (Naples, 2003), and praxis wisdom, The Reflective used Bourdieu's (1990) *Logic of Practice* and The Queer drew upon queer theory (de Lauretis, 1991) as well as the work of Deleuze and Guattari (1983). Our research interests interweave around leadership and health and social care. Two of us work at universities in the UK and one is an organisational development practitioner in Ireland. Within and against a possible framing of commonality of interest and/or focus, we are discovering that our embodied subjectivities preclude us reaching agreement or consensus too quickly, or often indeed, at all. For example, we write from our own subjectivities that include our differing experiences and body of knowledge and we come from different disciplines and positioning yet we all hold the position of living life as inquiry (Marshall, 2004). We do not always agree as our passions and strength of voice can be different at different times. Sometimes when two of us are in agreement, and the other is not, the other can feel an outsider or experience the disagreement as a personal attack. This taps into our fragilities. The Reflective, as a nurse, sometimes brings her own personal and cultural "baggage" of being dismissed raising feelings of anger or being personally criticised. This can work to fuel a deeper conversation alternatively she can feel as if her voice has less influence and is less important. Furthermore, as a heterosexual woman how can she fully appreciate the lived experience of The Queer's working life in an organisation or how the Reluctant experiences the pressures of resisting fundamentalist thinking whilst creating and sustaining her consultancy business? What level of authority does she have to comment on the direction of the paper when it is positioned using the theory of intersectionality and post-structuralism when her embodied subjectivity finds some structures comforting, for example Bourdieu's (1990) notions of habitus and field during her own PhD, an author at odds with post-structuralism?

Rather than see these tensions as problematic, however, we understand our diversity and our various subjectivities as resources from which we can individually and jointly develop new understandings. We three have found we have to agree to disagree, and we have developed a methodology of non-collaborative collaboration to ensure that the reflexive subjectivity of each of us is honoured.

We find this work challenging and at the same time hopeful. We will argue that this philosophical pluralism and nomadism, fluid and contingent, contextual and transient sustains and supports our personal resilience in challenging practice contexts, as well as deepening our learning and enriching our research.

And now, as we struggle with our early-career post-doctoral research identities (while we grow into our mid-50s in chronological age) we work at the interstices of two systems which are both predicated on the certainties and consensus of science: higher education, specifically in post-1992 institutions in the UK; and healthcare. It's both diverting, and terrifying, to be navigating this environment with postmodern and

post-structural feminist sensibilities. As experienced professionals seeking to enhance our teaching, mentoring, consulting and organising, we find that our subjective identities, and our different approaches, are not easily accommodated by healthcare research, academic norms or organisational praxis. When we remind ourselves that those identities in themselves are fluid and shifting (McDonald, 2013) we realise that the systems we find ourselves in are doubly terrified of our subjectivities and terrifying to our subjectivities. Indeed we find that health and social care, and perhaps public administration in general are sometimes viciously at odds with our subjectivities. So we can agree that neither an intersectional approach nor the notion of habitus, nor acceptance of reluctance are given much credence in an organisational or healthcare environment which values evidence-based practice or certainty above all else. We thus experience dissonance and paradoxes when our notions of knowledge or truth(s) are not readily accommodated within our research and practice contexts.

So we find ourselves living life as inquiry (Marshall, 2004) in our exploration of, or researching, research itself, particularly in its relation to practice. Thus we challenge each other in a critically reflexive process. We are trying to find ways to establish our own academic credentials while paying attention to the learning we have experienced, which has enabled us to develop our voices, yet which may have condemned us to struggle with our subjectivities in an environment where even radical perspectives have a powerful grammar and set of taken-for-granted assumptions. While this is somewhat in line with Caroline Ramsay's (2014) argument that a scholarship of practice should be focused on attention rather than knowledge, our attention to our experience drives it home to us that too often it is knowledge which is privileged. So social work and social policy colleagues who espouse anti-oppressive practice are sometimes the most dirigiste in their insistence on a Marxist paradigm; queer theorists and feminists may engage in oppositional dialectic which refuses nuance and paradox; and so post-modernism and post-colonialism can feel more -ism than post anything.

A renowned academic writing on gender seems to be sexist and bullying at a conference, and a fellow delegate reflects that he's always like that. A colleague known for anti-oppressive writing dogmatically closes down discussion, insisting that it's neo-liberalism at play again.

We thus experience many struggles to respect and build on knowledge and academic tradition, sometimes finding it does not fully serve our purposes, it does not allow us space to articulate our thinking, which we illustrate later in the paper in a story of attempting to get a paper published that does not use the traditional research structure. We recognise that you the reader may struggle, in turn, as we explicitly honour contradiction and confusion, but we do not intend to cause unnecessary confusion and hope this writing contrasts with the generally accepted nature of academic discourse, with its theses and antitheses its propositions and contestations. This paper is rhetorical, motile, performative as well as non-collaborative in keeping with a post-structural philosophy.

The hope is that the text becomes open to you the reader and through exposing our three subjectivities we find a proliferation of meaning, an opening potential for interpretation rather than what we could describe as a coherent or collaborative-conclusion.

Writing into our subjectivities and positioning this paper

What is subjectivity in research anyway? Bourdieu (1990) argued in *The Logic of Practice* that setting subjectivism against objectivism is an artificial divide; a polarisation that is unhelpful in social science research. In much empirical and social

science research, detached propositional knowing and objective positioning is highly regarded, with subjective and action orientated inquiry seen as less worthy (Brydon-Miller *et al.*, 2003; Heron, 1996). In positivist approaches relationships exist but are often denied as relevant or as not influencing the process at all. Bourdieu (1993) would argue that a doxa exists; that is, an assumption so taken for granted that it is not noticed or questioned. So rather than deny our plural subjectivities, here we query the fantasy of objectivity. The cut of our knives alienates objectivity at precisely this juncture in a reversal of the norm, naming the doxa.

In healthcare research, action research does not appear in the hierarchy of research evidence and you will nowhere find a post-structural research approach. Additionally, randomised control trials are at the top of the taxonomy (Evans, 2003) denying the existence of subjectivity. We have all experienced this bias against subjective research directly through ethics research committees. Specifically, they have insisted that I, the Reflective, could not include students I was currently teaching and assessing in a piece of action research. In contrast, the participatory action research paradigm presupposes that the specific and situated nature of the research is what makes a real difference to those engaged with the process. Interpretations obtained through a detached observer are less likely to provide the richness and validity of those arrived at through inquiry with others (Reason and Bradbury, 2006). I learnt from my ethical approval encounters how unquestioning of ontological positioning is the scientific mainstream. Nevertheless, as Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) and Foucault (1980) argued those who determine the value of knowledge hold the power. We see that in healthcare research/practice we experience, resist and survive (and enact) power and its concomitant violence against ourselves, our subjectivities, as well as each other.

We consider ourselves practitioners as well as researchers, and as mentioned above, are self-consciously researching research, to make sense for ourselves and hopefully for others. By this we mean that together we are inquiring into the enactment of research; our struggle to find academic voice; and the particularity of our own subjectivities in an ontological arena which would seem to preclude any notion of subjectivity in itself. The tensions in representing the self elucidated by Kathryn Haynes (2011) in this journal, are multiplied, braided and interwoven in trying to collaborate in our writing together.

We offer a mosaic of stories, which are incomplete reflections of our struggles as we develop the practices of critical reflexivity within our own research/practice. We recognise that “narration is the quintessential form of customary knowledge, in more ways than one” Lyotard (1984, p. 19) and therefore attempt to provide a story that nomadically meanders in line with the reality of practice. Ordinarily, “(w)riting conventions typically prevent a text from appearing too contradictory and confusing for the reader” (Alvesson and Deetz, 2000, p. 78), so it is a delicate balance to accommodate the paradoxes in this display.

We narrate the risks associated with encouraging an empowerment dynamic through a deliberate focus on investigating culture and context with a critical eye. We also reflect on the constraints of publication illustrating how our plural subjectivities, and the underpinning philosophical positions, become radically challenging, if not totally unacceptable, to the mainstream consensus on research within our field(s) of practice. As we endeavour to enact, or reify, or express our positions, our philosophies of knowledge, of research, and of practice are frequently labelled as too difficult, or too complex to be even acknowledged within a field which is forever demanding clearly defined research practices, pre-definition of research questions, processes, protocols and pre-determined outcomes.

In the context of this paper, we also express some of our nervousness around the split between practice and research by adopting the term research/practice. This may also appear as practice/research as both terms (and both activities) are equally important to us, and for us, impossible to untangle from one another. So the first paradox we identify explicitly is that we seek to be grounded in day-to-day action, as much as philosophical abstraction, and perhaps conflate these in our subjectivities, in a sustained tension.

For example in the practices of adult learning and organisational development we have experienced how practice demands a critically reflexive muscle that permits the messiness (Schön and Rein, 1994) to be more visible. Linden West (1996) argues that higher education also has the potential to offer learners some space to experiment with questions of identity and learn from that experience. But in researching how this happens, he highlights the challenges of separating medium and message, narrative and experience, reality and representation, self and story. From an organisational standpoint, Shaw (2002, p. 29) characterises inquiry processes in organisations as being about “thinking in the middle” in a paradoxical process of continuity and change. Our respective journeys as practitioner academics working in health and inquiring and supporting leadership narratives that travel through the “malestream” leave us wanting to grapple with these messy, mercurial worlds in this more co-creative fashion.

In this paper we first outline how we currently practice/research by showing how we began the creation of this paper, then we link our stories of our work inquiries to illustrate the interplay of our philosophies and of our subjectivities. Next we will consider non-collaborative collaboration before questioning subjectivity in the context of the academy as an example of a large organisation, as well as generator of what is taken for knowledge. However, these stories and discussions meander into other sections to show the fluidity and nomadic nature of our working together. It is our working together which we do not like to regulate or categorise, we are not claiming a new discipline.

We challenge ourselves to write in a way that reflects the impossibility of consensus, and we challenge our readers with complexity, dissonance, disruption and paradox. We write together and we write as individual voices within this piece. We know it’s ambitious, and we know it’s different from the norm.

It’s not from a sense of belligerently wanting to experiment or to push the boundaries of the mainstream/male stream but rather we’re inviting you the reader to see if any of our reflections speak to your own struggles with voice and subjectivity. We’re attempting to honour our various subjectivities and the reviewers’ and the reader’s too.

Making our dilemmas and writing decisions visible

The trouble with subjectivity is its very subjectivity. In relation to qualitative research we can observe that subjectivities are troublesome and often irreconcilable. We find that divergence and contingency have to be accepted as normal; in relation to organisational and research contexts, which often privilege certainty and consensus, or agreement, irreconcilable subjectivities therefore pose a fundamental challenge. We three have found we have to agree to disagree, and we have developed a methodology of non-collaborative collaboration to ensure that the reflexive subjectivity of each of us is honoured.

Discovering our voices in the stories of writing this paper

We began this paper by preparing a presentation for the *Qualitative Research in Organisations and Management (QRQM)* conference in New Mexico 2014. At that time

our conversations seemed to coalesce around our determination to embody our several subjectivities and we began to inquire about how our hybrid and shaky selves might find a form that dares to question from the margins while still being implicated in a system that gives us our living and identity. In our weekly Skype conversations, it became clear that even as we shared experience of the struggle of finding voice while taking a deliberately subjective stance, we were entering into what seemed to be a philosophical dialogue about the nature of research and about what it means to be the three of us researching individually and collectively. We gave one another encouragement that doesn't come from a top-down institutional or paid work context but from our experience of thinking together in a critically reflexive organic process – built on our shared experience in taking up our respective professional roles as scholarly practitioners in healthcare and other leadership contexts. We voiced our subjectivities and we noticed our differences, in philosophies, approaches and understandings.

We three do not share an agreed philosophy, but we are accepting of the range of philosophies that each of us, and all of us, can embrace in our approach to research and practice. We do not necessarily agree with one another, in fact we often do not agree with our (individual) selves from moment to moment!

Thus we embrace a plurality of approaches, a proliferation of understandings and a recognition of multiple possibilities, as essential to help us understand an increasingly complex working environment, and a milieu where there is actually little agreement about diagnoses, interventions and outcomes but dominant discourse(s) assumes that there always is agreement. One thing we can agree on is that, as a result of the above, we all have an acute sensitivity to the operations of power – that vested interests are often producing pre-determined truths, which meet the interests of those in power. Or that vested interests are making life what seems to be easier, but is based on hidden violence.

There are three of us writing this paper, but only one of us, the Reluctant, was able to present at the *QROM* Conference. Now we reveal, through narrative, how we dealt with the dilemmas of multiple subjectivities in our preparation and delivery of a paper, and how this informed the writing.

For the conference presentation, I (the Reluctant) was inquiring about the potential to present knowledge (Heron, 1996) by “breaking the silence” around the unseen and the unsayable when it comes to the contradictions and use and abuse of power and people in organisations. I sensed that we wanted to acknowledge our different experiences and our own internal power struggles as expressed in our Skype conversations and as we wrote into the same themes. For example, I constantly shared my on-going dilemmas around noticing how organising and managing in organisations is often so reductive and haphazard in practice. As a consequence, people go to extraordinary lengths to survive in organisational environments that are often bereft of human connection or a spirit of hope and kindness.

In our conversations, I began to see the potential for how our nomadic post-structural positioning (Braidotti, 1994) might provide another lens and help with reframing organisational experience. On later reflection, I wondered if I'd somehow positioned the Queer and the Reflective as the properly tenured academics that should provide the relevant theory and expertise. I'd somehow created a binary where I as the labouring organisational “Ms Fix it” just had to get on and survive while the full-time academics should try to make neater sense and theorise from my experience.

The “properly tenured academics”, of course, wondered if we had positioned the Reluctant as the one who properly “knows” through her practice, while we struggle to express our own doing, as much as our thinking.

I, (the Reflective) could not go to the conference but crafted a presentation beforehand which covered what I would have said if I had been the one presenting on behalf of myself and my colleagues. Of course this was very different to what the Reluctant actually presented and would have been different from what the Queer would have done. This reflects our different voices, struggles and subjectivities. We struggle with who takes the lead; has dominance; whose ideas are utilised or rejected; whether to make a coherent whole out of conversations that struggle to articulate meaning, often wondering how we maintain collaboration and challenge without two pairing against the third, for example. These reflect the struggles of working in a wider system such as the academy or in health care. How do we incorporate our three voices when we are all different, how do we approach the research and ideas differently through our own subjectivities? We too have a need for certainty in the midst of inaction, and we also have our own frailties and sensitivities. We know we need to acknowledge these.

We thus ask, what choices do we have, and what choices do we make, both individually and as three authors of conference presentations, and papers submitted?

The Reluctant: I enjoyed the opportunity to present a version of our paper at the conference. But this was no well-polished singular narrative. I rejected The Reflective’s presentation even though it seemed to me to be more attuned to the norms and conventions expected of academics at an academic conference. Our agreement – based on trust and mutual respect – was that I should feel free to appropriate our material and invite conference colleagues to wonder about my and our subjective stance(s). We have all experienced how such a presentation, including our articulation of the associated struggles, can be constructed as deeply troublesome as we complicate the linear, the positivist, and confront ourselves and our audiences with the responsibility of being in the midst of (open, still evolving and becoming) systems (Grosz, 2004; Braidotti, 2002) and sets of relationships that refuse simplistic explanations and require a tolerance for ambiguity. Immediately after presenting, reflecting in and reflecting on the experience (Schön, 1983). I e-mailed my impressions of the conference feedback to the others:

Some people interpreted what I said as us being little more than a support group. One woman rather stridently wondered why I could not just say that we were obviously collaborating together. She just could not get our concept of subjectivities as non-collaborative, collaboration!

Another delegate asked to check if she got my meaning. She picked up on “the violence of organization” and also wondered if we were illustrating the violence of the academy. I was invited to think about the extent to which our paper also spoke to the “violence of the academy” and whether in those circumstances we were interested or engaged in constructing a healing narrative.

I was also asked if it was possible to write with all these subjectivities and disjunctures playing out. I said it was a challenge but it was also the reason why we “stick at it” together.

My main sense is, that for some people, they interpreted our work as that of some “young” academics attempting to establish themselves. This is nothing new as it’s just a familiar story of competing for tenure and recognition. Others may well have dismissed it completely it as it was not unfamiliar in the worlds of pre-defined research projects and clearly articulated outcomes. Maybe a few people were left wondering about their own philosophy and practice of research (E-mail 18 April 2014).

We include the above story to make very clear that as well as our own subjectivities, this paper was created through dialogue with others. Indeed we can also draw attention here to the insight given by one of the reviewers of this paper, who reminded us that a Foucauldian view would indicate that violence would also be enacted “in the regulation of subjectivities” (Foucault, 1979), in a particularly reflexive turn. Therefore there are even more than three subjectivities herein. Recognising this, we are being unrealistically over-simple in our title – merely three subjectivities? We can understand that the subjectivity of the conference attendees, the reviewer, the editor and the reader also come into play. And all of these are potentially regulated and disciplined. Indeed we have benefited from the multiple subjectivities of our reviewers through their comments in the shaping this paper. Is that also a form of ontological violence?

So what? Isn't this proliferation and braiding of meaning merely complicating everything unnecessarily? We argue that the impact of these subjectivities, as well as their suppression and regulation, on our research/practice, is so significant that we do a disservice to our work, when we elide and regulate subjectivities, and that we thus do violence in our organisations and in our research/practice.

Too often, this proliferative richness of meaning, and understanding, and insight is reduced to simple, certain and comfortable propositions through elision of most of the variety of perspective into the reduction of one particular (and perhaps dominant) perspective. We consider this a loss, and we consider this philosophical and ontological violence. The potential diversity and richness is elided such that some subjectivities are effectively silenced. This is violence, and nothing is more important in these postmodern times.

We posit that there is violence in organisations, violence in the academy, violence in qualitative research in organisations and management. We do not wish to replicate these cycles of violence yet again, so let us try to show you, through narrative, so that you can perceive whether or not you think there is violence at play.

First, then a story from practice, which we will then develop through to a story of publication in academic journals. As well as containing the complexity we wish to communicate in this paper, such stories also enable us to recognise our subjectivities, and ontological nuances in our conversations together. We consider narrative as something of a protection against ontological violence, as complexity, contradiction and paradox can be illustrated. So we use stories such as this all the time (Richardson, 1997; Clandinin and Connelly, 2000):

With ten minutes to the start of proceedings, new hospital board members are busily chatting and eyeing up the seating arrangements in an old fashioned, wood panelled boardroom. Public Hospital Board membership may not come with a generous expense account but it offers a mild form of public celebrity for a few members of the party faithful and the occasional positive deviant.

Their mission is to take on the mantle of governance and make the delivery of cheaper, faster, safer healthcare look like a credible endeavour. This involves laying down the paper trail to evidence quality and patient safety and ensuring that all documentation is filed for the purposes of justification and potential litigation. And in the midst of all the busyness, they must remember to avoid implicating the Health Minister, the Government and even the medical fraternity no matter what shameful stories and experiences are uncovered. This is all about perpetuating “business as usual” – no matter what the difficulties.

A renowned academic – the sort beloved of organisations looking for the latest business school fad – is about to present his dumbed down version of transformational change for

challenging times. He has already promised a non-academic, pragmatic “Back to basics approach” to change in organisations. So in this atmosphere of tentative introductions and unacknowledged anxiety, the familiar creed of Kotter’s eight-step model of change (Kotter, 1996) is already flickering and poised to reassure everyone that change is all about mitigating error and following the eight key steps for leading change.

Rita, the CEO, sits half way down the rosewood table and worries that her robust rationale for investing in staff engagement programmes might not be enough to reassure the new Board members that the hospital is of a sound organisational mind and possessed of a credible backbone of transformational intent. The previous day, a local newspaper requested a statement from the new Board around why taxpayers’ money was now being wasted on outbreaks of irony and hilarity when it’s so obvious that the frontline of health care is being massacred on a daily basis.

Apparently, the hospital HR Department was launching a new on-line “Performance Enhancement Framework.” Following the carefully crafted powerpoint presentation, a painstakingly, well-branded CD-Rom, containing the new tool-kit, was to be presented to the sixty hospital staff. The HR Director was “on message” and as such he stressed the importance of “enhancing clinical and corporate performance in the cut and thrust of delivering acute care.” Then at the call for comments and questions, some smartass prefaced his remarks by wondering if performance enhancement sounded more like a government sponsored health promotion programme designed to offer a lifetime supply of Viagra to all staff! He even suggested that it could even be an added extra on the latest “Reducing Stress by Building Resilience” initiative. After that the whole event degenerated into sexual innuendo and uproarious laughter.

Could this be another case of discovering the Emperor’s New Clothes of Targets, Business Cases, Toolkits and Timelines had yet again appeared in full colour technical grandeur and magnificence and for once, nobody was capable of taking it too seriously? (The Reluctant: Free fall writing March 14).

This was my roughly hewn attempt – born of frustration and exhaustion – after listening to more stories that hinted at the levels of incredulity and cynicism, which are barely below the surface in most organisations. It was juxtaposed with the image of the expert that was about to provide all the answers for the less knowledgeable but well-intentioned public interest volunteer. I was poking fun at the dominance of business jargon and drawing attention to assumptions that seem to suggest that the latest performance management tool will eliminate all those negative behaviours and silence the constant mantra of those who trade in gripes and blame in the canteen and along the corridors.

Although the above story is fictional, the actual presentation that provoked the writing was about being asked to design a staff consultation event for a new model of performance management. The new framework seemed simple, logical and utterly devoid of the actual context or any reference to assumptions that might be at play in that particular organisational culture. The “bells and whistles” presentation offered a magic potion would efficiently manage and possibly cure the negative behavioural challenges that seep into the life of a well-controlled organisation. More poignantly, the carefully researched model of best practice was unable to acknowledge other perspectives; most especially the experience of those who know that structural, rule-bound processes that enforce external demands are so often at the expense of open conversation and human connection. Nancy Naples articulates such tensions when she writes about an:

[...] irreconcilable tension between the search for a secure place from which to speak, within which to act and the awareness of the price at which the secure places are bought, the awareness of the exclusions, the denials and the blindnesses on which they are predicated (Naples, 2003, p. 161 citing Wildavsky, 1979).

As an experienced organisational development practitioner with a keen interest in relating an organisation's context and culture to its work, I notice the exclusions, the denials and the blindness that are best served by the habitual and the taken-for-granted assumptions that keep us silenced. Consequently, I wonder if my bouts of ironic writing are a response to what I experience as a form of violence when matters of human connection, culture and context go missing from the dominant organisational narrative. Drawing on feminist research methods, the concept of "survivor" narratives (Naples, 2003) was helpful in repositioning and writing about troubling organisational experiences as a form of "speaking truth to power" (Wildavsky, 1979).

The concept of an intersectional approach (Crenshaw, 1989) that refuses to abstract gender from other dimensions of social identity and diverse contexts reminded me to avoid abstracting power from other dimensions such as social status, competition and the dominance of leader discourses that make up the hidden stories in my experience of working with organisations.

From working with organisations seeking to address issues of violence against women informed by a feminist analysis, I'm familiar with the concept of a survivor discourse, i.e. where knowledge is grounded in personal experience and emotional pain and is often presented in the form of public witness or the making of creative artefacts such as poetry and other forms of creative expression. Naples comments on how the survivor discourse is often contrasted with an expert discourse that is positioned as being more systematic and objective in its claims to truth. In reflecting on the development of my standpoint as an academic practitioner, it was a comfort to position myself as a "survivor" of the dominance of technocratic, reductionist thinking in organisations.

The Reflective and the Queer, in their own turn, recognise themselves as survivors too. Survivors in their different subjectivity, having experienced a different violence, but this much connects us.

Mary Jo Hatch *et al.* (2005) characterised the reach of management culture as greater than any colonial power exercised in the twentieth century and called for the counterbalancing powers of democracy to reinforce values of ethical responsibility and freedom among its members (p. 129) As someone living in and working with organisations in a post-colonial context, I began to make connections with how colonial power reaches into how we think and what we judge as acceptable. It teaches us to dismiss our own opinions as primitive, uncultured, and lacking in sophistication. Irish people are well schooled in these processes. We learn to play the game of acquiescence and we find ways to subvert the system – often for reasons that are critical to our survival. Such experiences are indeed familiar coping mechanisms in surviving the dominance of a managerialist culture.

Specifically then we can understand the reach of management culture as a primary mechanism for the articulation and negotiation of power. Qualitative research with its potential for the recognition of subjectivity is therefore a key arena for the negotiation of power, in our post-colonial contexts. It's essential therefore, for us, that suppressed subjectivities are aired, developed and negotiated.

Subjectivity and intersectionality

One use of intersectionality in this context then, is to foreground and honour subjective tales. While the Reluctant chose to foreground the story above, the Reflective and the Queer, had they been presenting at the conference would have foregrounded another story.

That's why the weekly Skype conversations and our fledgling attempts to write and present our ideas and experience are so important. It's about finding a space that provides us with some framings and a language that enables us to continue to survive (and possibly flourish) in organisational contexts that refuse to engage with subjectivities, struggle and voice. It's about being comfortable with proliferation. This is not something that we find particularly common in organisational or academic practice/research contexts. Dissonance and non-collaboration do not seem to be comfortable for many of us.

Even with knowledge of relevant theories and a shared intellectual commitment to ideas of complexity and responsiveness, our experience has taught us that day-to-day communicating and so called ordinary intentions are just as likely to draw one into "the complications" of voice, unrest, and discomfiting experiences in organisations. There are not enough stories that tell us that this is normal and that the gendered workings of power are not just an occasional apparition when some woman or, more rarely, a man draws it to our attention.

We developed our strategy in writing this paper together, from our thinking together, one of us presenting at one particular conference, gaining feedback from other people, then further thinking together and writing individually and together throughout. It's really to show that difference and subjectivity can be celebrated and that we then develop understandings which are richer than merely one objective (or rather one particular subjective) argument.

As we mentioned earlier, of course, more than this, the paper we finally present to *QROM* is of course informed by reviewers and an editor, so there are other voices, other subjectivities and other struggles interwoven.

How much do we experience this as violence, as synthesis, or as life-affirming? We now go on to discuss some of the violences of the academy, but first affirm the positive potential of academic dialogue, returning again to the conference involved.

Intersectionality can also help in our understanding and application of our ontological underpinnings. This is not a paper with a single explicit theoretical framework. Instead we are moving through queer theory, feminist theory, post-colonial theory and other implicit theories, no doubt, which we do not even name. Our subjectivities, always in the process of being expressed, also imply multiple and perhaps contingent and unsteady theoretical frameworks.

Indeed, we see a plurality of approach, an awareness of intersectionality, a recognition of multiple possibilities, as essential to help us understand an increasingly complex working environment, and a milieu where there is indeed little agreement about diagnoses, interventions and outcomes. Where we do find agreement is noticing where power is in operation, and that vested interests are actually producing the desired pre-determined truths, which actually meet the interests of whoever is in power.

We are thus rather attached to our different voices, struggles and subjectivities, and ontologies recognising that in a threesome this is also problematic: who takes the lead; has dominance; whose ideas are utilised or rejected; how do we make a coherent whole out of conversations that struggle to articulate meaning, how do we maintain collaboration and challenge without two pairing against the third? These are in essence a microcosm of the struggles of working in a wider system such as the academy or in health care. How do we incorporate our various voices when we are all different, approach research and underpinning ideas differently through our various subjectivities, reconciling our individual needs for certainty in the midst of inaction, still recognising our own frailties and sensitivities?

Particularly, how much do our gendered subjectivities get enacted, and come into play at this juncture. Just like the boardroom story, above, would not it be entirely natural for the male in the group to come in here with an answer? Power and gender are also at play in our research/practice together and separately.

So, with just a little slip it could be me, the Queer, presenting Kotter's lovely staircase, or other certainty, for the client in the Reluctant's story. It could be the male co-opting the work of female colleagues to the furtherance of his career. So very often, as a man I am asked or exhorted to perform this very function. I'm a male academic. I have research targets. I am encouraged to peddle my wares, demonstrate impact, and translate research into practice. Here I could be, the male thrusting academic, with mastery of my subject, offering up a simple tool for you to play with.

What the above tale alerts the Queer subjectivity to is the violence against all of us, and the violence perpetrated by all of us. That subjectivities, always and already gendered are alive here. As is evidenced above, too often in our research, inquiry and practice, the answer is to find the man who knows, who can explain, as the most comforting violence. But in a post-structural feminist take, let's query this. We will attempt this by opening up the philosophy and subjectivity playing through our practice/research. We attempt this by silencing the thrusting male academic at exactly this point, ensuring his withdrawal from intercourse. We three are all eschewing violence (sadism, and masochism) at this intersection, and we now recount a story of how all this gets played out in writing and in the processes of academic publication.

Reflexively turning to the quest for academic publication

Our conference abstract suggested that subjectivity is an important way of questioning power and embodied culture while placing context as a central feature of research. Paradox, tensions and subjectivity, with which we are all comfortable, and indeed use as powerful support to knowledge generation, are often vilified as timewasting, self-absorbed navel-gazing antics that can never produce any significant generalisable and authoritative truth. Moreover we all have encountered a perception of philosophy as "all that theory" being somehow a barrier to REAL research when we attempt to critically reflect on the meaning, purpose or validity of our research/practice.

For me, the Reflective, this means in practice that our embodied subjectivities preclude our reaching consensus and as a nurse I find this lack of obvious action and certainty unsettling. I was trained in pragmatism after all, with assessment skills so embedded in my practice, that I seek interpretation and connections everywhere. Our embodied struggles add to our understanding of ambiguity, difference and critical understanding as we work in our respective organisations. These struggles provide a richness and paradox to our inquiries that is both hopeful and challenging. The diversity and challenge is a struggle to work with, both in my organisation and in our collaborations, which we carry out in our own time.

We know that in understanding our experience as a struggle it's easy to slip into negative, over-critical judgments. However, we all feel negative at some time working in our organisations: not feeling our work is understood, or appreciated by our colleagues and managers. This is a common refrain in health and social care, higher education and public service more broadly. Therefore, as we write about our subjectivity and develop our awareness of the potential for violence it begs the question: how do we sustain a hopeful struggle that does not sink into the victimhood and defeatist attitudes in the face of the dominant discourse?

We are arguing that this is never as simple as presenting a vigorous, clear, well-argued and rational critique, or an objective, clearly articulated summary of our agreed position, thereby merely acting as a mirror to the dominant. Thus we would replicate violence. We are modestly (we hope) trying to present our subjective experiences of engagement in practice/research in a way which opens up avenues for discussion, and proliferates understanding.

Philosophical violence in the academy

We now narrate a tale of a struggle to get a paper published about using poetry with nurses. The story highlights the resilience required in the face of comments, which are critical, in the many understandings of that term. Furthermore, the significant learning for us as researchers/practitioners coming into the writing world later in life with our own more-established subjectivity and identities, is to not personalise the feedback but remain open to the challenge, to show subjectivity without further propagating violence.

The Reflective continues:

I am on my third journal and sixth version of the paper about how I used poetry in a critically reflexive action research inquiry. In the paper I questioned traditional linear versions of published research. I was struck by the irony when the feedback from the journal said could I please re-submit the paper under the following headings: Aims, Research Question, Methodology and Design, Findings/Results/Discussion and Recommendations. Was it a discussion paper? No – then it must be research and so had to have those headings! In my opinion it was both – but where is the space for that? Thus, I am reminded of a Wittgenstein quote from *Philosophical Investigations*, cited in Bourdieu:

How am I able to follow a rule? – if this is not a question about causes, then it is about the justification of following a rule in the way I do. If I have exhausted the justifications I have reached bedrock, and my spade is turned. Then I am inclined to say: “This is simply what I do” (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 25).

Returning to the paper I made some changes, asked a colleague to read it, re-wrote it twice (but my paper was still not following the traditional style) and tried a different journal. This time the paper was accepted but with a large number of major changes. I was advised to look at theories in linguistic discourse especially the use of metaphor and poetry; I had made assumptions about a collaborative inquiry process that I had used; why had I used three strands to the inquiry as this was complicated, ambiguous and confusing? I had managed to convey this in my thesis effectively without any changes so I was particularly flummoxed by that comment. I should be less tentative in my approach, more confident in my claims; what were the benefits for the nurses in using poetry; I needed to show what I had done rather than question the traditional approach to research – most of these comments were helpful. As I continued working on the paper I found I had lost the argument about linear approaches to research. There was a word count and I needed to trim the extraneous argument away and keep to the core message “using poetry with nurses as a co-inquiry process seemed to engender empathy”. There you go again, “seemed to”: why are you so tentative and not forceful with your line of argument?

Then the Queer saw a special call for action research in healthcare. This journal had published poetry before, valued multiple ways of knowing and encouraged new and fledgling writers. My paper was accepted with five points to address. The feedback indicated it was well crafted with a thought provoking contribution. The areas for improvement were mostly helpful: it would help to provide clearer aims and objectives for the research. This was not quite so easy to address, as it was an emerging nonlinear research process, but I could give it a go.

I reflected on how challenging it is for researchers, using iterative and emerging designs, to create or establish clear objectives in the midst of practice.

The feedback asked me to show why poetry is particularly relevant or appropriate as an intervention tool in the healthcare sector rather than any other (hang on, I am not claiming that at all, I have no way of knowing that and the word “tool” always antagonises me). The paper would benefit from explicit positioning in the dialogic/linguistic traditions of action research – but this isn’t my field. I positioned my work using Bourdieu’s concepts of habitus and field albeit probably not very well as the second reviewer had said.

I made the changes, and a report of how I had addressed the comments. It was a struggle to keep to the word limit but as a nurse I mostly follow the rules, and managed it. I knew I hadn’t addressed Bourdieu’s concepts as well as I could if I had had more words but something had to give. The paper was better than before; I was pleased with it and I expected it to be published. The comments came back; yes it’s better but not publishable in its current form. This time, the first reviewer has made 20 suggestions for improvement including referring to the piece as having linguistic sloppiness with areas where the text is poorly written.

However it’s not all bad – there is some hope. The second reviewer tells me it is a very well-written manuscript with a really interesting contribution to the action research field and healthcare sector. I ask myself: is it possible to be both sloppy and well-written? And I realise I have returned to dualistic thinking. Of course it is. I still haven’t integrated Bourdieu’s concepts as well as I could (yes that’s fair comment). Then, the special editor tells me the paper would benefit from: a section on the purpose and the research questions (that’s in the introductory paragraph, so I don’t understand this), then a section on Research Design and Methods (I’ve addressed this as well but used a different title), then Analysis and Results (ah, [...] the usual linear approach!).

I feel angry and deflated by the dominant discourse which is trying to force me down a traditional route once again.

In our next Skype conversation I talk about how deflated I am and the Reluctant reminds me of a Tony Benn quote about two ways to control people: create a culture of fear and de-moralise them. I certainly feel demoralised. I have never claimed to be a linguist. I do not particularly want to make strong claims about poetry as an intervention tool. I do not believe in authoritative truth. But I feel like I am being driven into providing certainty – “Use poetry – it’s great – it makes people cry and then they feel a whole lot better! The crying gives them empathy for others”. Somehow I seem to have stumbled across the invisible electric fence of the publishing/academic world that keeps giving me shocks. I am a practitioner academic – I straddle both camps – am I only flirting with the academy?

Reflexively returning to this paper

Here, then, in a paper on subjectivity, offered up to the journal, *QROM*, we have offered tales with holes in them – incomplete and incoherent tales – to subvert our own assumptions and those of the reader. The discursive freedom within any of our research/practice roles is limited, and determines who we can be, as a subject, of course; and in a Foucauldian analysis, the options for resistance are limited, but by drawing attention to our located and determined subjectivities we hope to trouble ourselves and the academy.

We wish to draw attention to the undiscussable violence of research/practice. We argue that qualitative research is necessarily subjective, and by eliding the subjectivity from our approaches we inflict real violence on ourselves, our subjects, and even others distant from the research.

We relate our subjective survival narratives, as healing narratives for ourselves of course, yet also as illuminatory, in terms of the weaving and play of philosophy in our practice/research, our experience of submission/surrender/survival and their relationship to violence. Violence in research/practice, violence in practice and violence in the academy. Our understanding of our research/practice is indeed personal, survival oriented, narrative and subjective – we thus re-articulate the concept that the personal is political.

We would add to this that we can consciously use and subvert the form, content and style of our subjectivity towards political and communicative ends:

It is fundamentally necessary to draw attention to the way that our thinking is always and already determined by otherwise unexamined assumptions. “What is feminist, or perhaps, more recently, queer, is that which performs its own parody, its own excesses” (Grosz, 1995, p. 17).

So we acknowledge our own identities, our own parodies and our own excesses.

In this paper, as well as the accounts written by the two women, there is also an authorial voice which is the “other”; queer man. Serendipitously a subjective narrative doesn’t appear. Is this because men remain invisible in subjective work, or are we performing the abstraction and use of women’s experience under the gaze of the man? Perhaps we are self-consciously enacting gendered violence, and can never escape it. To draw attention to the subjectivities of men as well as women in the academy is a dangerous pastime. We discuss this in our Skype calls sometimes.

Here we offer the possibility that the man is less visible in this submission, because we are enacting a submission of man to woman, and a privileging of the woman rather than male dominance. Or is the male merely hidden but still powerful. By eliding the male subjectivity (which is often dressed up as objectivity) are we furthering insight or not?

We are instead, self-consciously, offering a set of uncertain, weak, disarticulated, subjective and philosophical speculations on our own research/practice:

For most people in the real world uncertainty is taken as a sign of weakness. Which has devastating effects on those who try it, unless they already have high status.[...] But – this is the argument – one possibility is for those who are told as privileged to perform their multidiscursive writing as weak, inconclusive and limited, in the hope that this will make it easier for those who are less privileged in turn to perform their writing as orderings rather than orders (Law, 1994, pp. 191-192)

In our own work together, at any one time, and in this paper, in this suite of narratives, who knows who is exploiting whom? Who is privileged? Who is the subaltern? Because we are white and relatively wealthy, but also female, queer, colonised, reluctant and thus abject, we do not know whether we are privileged or not. We suspect we are, with our aspirational academic lives, and therefore we attempt this writing as a narrative of failure as much as success. A narrative of critical failure, or a refusal to take up the norm of the research paper or the perfect form of the heroic narrative.

We feel that as privileged academics and particularly those researching organisations and management we must advocate for subjective non-consensual, contradictory approaches. If we, who are privileged and who understand intersectionality, feminism and post-modernism to some degree, end up merely replicating the violence of the academy, then we (re-)inflict violence on ourselves and most importantly on those who truly have no voice within organisations.

In terms of materiality, then, it is essential in this text to foreground and perform our own subjectivity, however que(e)ried and performed to excess. We reveal our frailty, and

our violence, we also attempt to play with our own accounts and our own identities, confusing male and female, and revealing and hiding a phallic voice in this writing. We wish to draw attention to the violence of masculist and autocratic tendencies and accept that all of us, including the Queer, are complicit, and that all researchers/practitioners are complicit with violence either intentionally or unintentionally to others.

We suggest that there is usually a patronising, deficit model, and it's a gendered model, often at work in narratives around subjectivity in organisational practice/research. In daily research/practice there is barely a week goes by when the Queer does not notice the normal of professors appending their name to research and publications which they did not create; the normal of male academics being "paid to think" while women actually do the work; the normal of women's experience being co-opted and scrutinised and "othered" and thus worthy of research and inquiry.

In the above stories, we have more experience of the women in our trium(vir!)ate: is this the powerful admitting and self-consciously indulging in appropriate violence towards himself, and emasculation to allow space for the subaltern? The patriarchy, an objectivity which is also a performance, a narrative, and most importantly, a subjectivity, is sometimes overwhelming, particularly when dressed up as the truth.

Conclusion

We are arguing that within the academy and in organising there is a governing narrative to the role of the academic which is comforting, yet crushing. When we try to introduce some questioning, querying and troubling from a reluctant viewpoint, a reflective viewpoint or a queer viewpoint, then we are truly problematising qualitative research in, on, around and through organisations. This becomes a problem for all of us, and for our subjectivity: how do we maintain our values when our subjectivity is seduced by our own desire for dominance and potentiality, and succumbs to our own violence? With our postmodern subjectivities, we sometimes fear complete invisibility, inauthenticity, the impossibility of our subjective and contingent philosophical position(s). We also fear a response that regards us as emotional, not rational, a support group and therefore dismissible.

A further struggle and tension is the inevitability of not always incorporating all our ideas equally. The Reflective struggles with this by sometimes feeling insecure if her ideas are not incorporated. On an intellectual level she sees our differences in experiences, understanding and knowledge of academic literature creates our unique subjectivity but emotionally this difference can sometimes feel like a personal attack, two against one, or all of us differing completely and a lack of achievement to complete our work.

The Queer struggles with a lifetime's experience of being "other", yet privileged, knowing that something was different from an early age, and yet still finding it difficult to advocate over and against difference without being overwhelmed by his own emotional response.

However, we challenge each other and remain vigilant to our own weakness and blind spots which can get played out during our reflexive conversations.

We write into each other's texts, then withdraw gracefully or petulantly; two of us reach agreement and the third becomes strangely silent; we write three accounts, and then our fear of incoherence defeats us and the paper moves no further forward. We persevere and encourage one another to accept the dissonance, incoherence and sometimes ugliness of our text, for these are our stories, however disarticulated. We have to accept that our failure is inevitable herein, but it's not comfortable for any of us.

All our stories are borne of critically reflexive subjectivities and represent the lived experience of struggling to voice stories from what feels like the margins of dominant theories in organisation studies and the norms that emanate from a business school education or even the more qualitative research paradigm. We listen to the rhetoric of education design and practices that support leaders, produce leaders and managers that are more cognisant of supposed new paradigms such as the new “triple bottom lines” of people, planet and profit and often we are full of fear and despair. The violence of each makes us struggle, but the violence of three linear demands is overwhelming. The fantasy of three measurable objectivities is crushing to all of our subjectivities.

We hope we have presented ourselves as contradictory as much as cohesive, as open as much as closed, as potential as much as history, sometimes incomplete, and incoherent. And academics, practitioners, researchers are not supposed to be like that. But if qualitative research, which could be seen as always already subjective, merely reverts to the patterns of consensus and certainty, seeking clarity, collaboration and objectivity then we are doubly implicated and doubly guilty of colluding in that philosophical violence.

We have acknowledged that our own subjectivities/surrender/survival can be experienced as deeply troublesome as we complicate linear, positivist consensus. This confronts us with the responsibility of being in the midst of systems and sets of relationships that refuse simplistic explanations and require a tolerance for ambiguity and critical reflexivity. As in the Reflexive’s account of her journey towards publication we are often struck by multiple ironies in our reflexivity (Corlett, 2013) – and when we are collaboratively struck, then we both feel validated, but also somewhat intimidated with these insights gained through recognising our multiple and non-collaborative subjectivities. We are thus hesitant about any claim to authority or truth. We have seen the damage that such totalising and demotic claims to truth can make. We cannot avoid making a claim to our voices in the world, but we can disassociate ourselves from any reified truth claims or from anything that smacks of authority.

The writing of this paper has been a challenge, and we surmise that the reading of it has been a challenge, too, but we hope a worthwhile one. For ourselves, writing into the somewhat rigid demands of a journal paper, including the structured abstract, has been a profound challenge to our heartfelt subjective desires to communicate our lived truths. We could, and will at another time, draw on queer theory, post-colonial theory and no doubt others to help us understand but for the moment we choose an extended quote from a feminist source:

Feminist research undoubtedly has radical potential for negotiating alliances across profound differences, for listening to experience of “othering” for addressing the effects of privilege and identifying the situatedness and politics of any research process. The point of investigating gendered lives across difference is still to establish the best possible stories of diverse gendered social realities. Political transformation requires being able to judge between competing knowledge claims and being able to locate the exercise of power in the production of knowledge (Ramazanoglu and Holland, 2002, p. 120).

We fundamentally believe that being able to judge between, does not mean then choosing the single theoretical framework, the single narrative or the mutually agreed consensus to govern our research/practice, as that merely replicates the violence of power. For us, being able to judge between knowledge claims necessitates the preservation of multiple and contradictory subjectivities wherein the fluidity

of experiences and knowledge remains alive. We have to embrace our diverse, messy, contradictory and sometimes incoherent subjectivities in our production of knowledge.

We suggest that this account of our practice/research can be conceptualised as a submission or surrender narrative or a hopeful narrative. By offering up incomplete and fragmentary text we hope this might be considered as a surrender to the reader, to the dominant, and comfortable with its own incompleteness and unknowing. We have no idea what you will make of this; and that's fine. We hope to continue a conversation with you too, a non-collaborative collaboration. It may be a struggle at times, and it's languishing in subjectivity, but this text has our authentic voices, troubled though they may be.

We hope it may also support yours.

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