

AN INTERVIEW WITH NORMAN K. DENZIN

JIM DENISON

*Department of Leisure Studies
University of Waikato*

Norman K. Denzin, Distinguished Professor of Communications, College of Communications Scholar and Professor of Sociology and Humanities at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, USA is known internationally as an outstanding qualitative researcher, author, methodologist and teacher. His contribution to the debates on the ethics and politics of social inquiry have had a dramatic influence within the social sciences, humanities and education. In his most recent book, *Interpretive Ethnography* (1997) he calls for the radical conversion of ethnography and ethnographic writing practices. He contends that ethnography has the potential of becoming a form of radical democratic social practice as culture becomes more global, postmodern and multinational. But this can only be achieved, he argues, by social scientists moving closer to the narrative structures found in literature.

Other books Norman has authored include, *The Cinematic Society, Images of Postmodern Society, The Research Act, Interpretive Interactionism, Hollywood Shot by Shot, Symbolic Interactionism and Cultural Studies, The Recovering Alcoholic and The Alcoholic Self*, which won the Cooley Award from the Society for the Study of Symbolic Interactionism in 1988. He also coedited the *Handbook of Qualitative Research*. In addition, Norman is the editor of the journals, *Studies in Symbolic Interaction: A Research Annual, Cultural Studies* and *The Sociological Quarterly* and is coeditor of *Qualitative Inquiry*.

I have known Norman since 1991 when I was a graduate student in his research methods course. Norman's passion for a moral discourse of the contemporary world through ethnography and writing changed forever the way I approached topics and subjects. This interview took place over email earlier this year. The focus of our discussion was on Norman's latest book, *Interpretive Ethnography*. In what follows, he presents his stance on the emergence of new social science writing practices and what this will mean to the practice of social science inquiry.

JIM *Have you ever been to this part of the world—New Zealand, Australia?*

NORMAN I've never been to New Zealand, although I've seen pictures and films. My impressions, though, are of a beautiful, colourful country, with seashores, rolling, green hills, and meadows, charming cities, and a complex culture.

JIM *Can you explain your various titles—Distinguished Professor of Communications, College of Communications Scholar, and Professor of Sociology and Humanities—that is, what disciplines or subject areas do you have relationships with?*

NORMAN Three years ago I moved from sociology to the College of Communications and the Institute of Communications Research (ICR). Soon thereafter the College created a named chair, a distinguished professorship, and I was honoured as the first recipient of this professorship. I was recently invited to join the cinema studies faculty, zero time, and for 20 years I have had a zero time appointment in the Unit for Criticism and Interpretive Theory. I retained a zero time appointment in sociology when I moved to ICR. So I have formal relationships to sociology, communications, and cinema studies.

JIM *The title of your latest book, Interpretive Ethnography, may lead those people who consider ethnography the exclusive domain of anthropology to believe it is a book just for anthropologists. Can you explain what you mean by ethnography?*

NORMAN This is an important question. Ethnography is that form of inquiry and writing that produces descriptions and accounts about the ways of life of the writer and those written about. It belongs to all of the human disciplines, not just anthropology, and in various forms (e.g. the new journalism), it has become one of the dominant forms of representation at the end of this century.

JIM *A strong position you take in your book is that there are not, as was once believed, stories out there in the world waiting to be written by the careful social scientist, but that social scientists create stories and in fact, create subjects. Does this mean everything we write is fiction?*

NORMAN Fiction means fashioned out of the facts; Husserl said facticities of experience. I agree with E. L. Doctorow, "There is no longer any such thing as fiction or nonfiction, there is only narrative." So we have multiple forms of narrative, from performance texts to ethnography, the various forms of journalism, novels, history, biography, autobiography, autoethnography, and so on.

JIM *In your book you encourage researchers to experiment with these new sorts of texts that you just mentioned. What are your reasons for having one maintain a position within the Academy as an ethnopoet or ethnographic fiction writer as opposed to simply becoming a writer?*

NORMAN This too is important. The kind of writing you do, for example, or the writing the other authors assembled here in this section do, move across these various forms of narrative. Your ability to write prose, poetry, standard

ethnography, narratives of the self, and so on, gives you multiple tools, multiple ways of representing and interpreting the world and its problems. My goal is to open up these writing spaces, to challenge social scientists to become different kinds of writers.

JIM *As new conceptions of the research text take hold, e.g. the acceptance of personal experience, do you believe that individuals outside of the academy might start writing and publishing their own interpretive theories that they use to make sense of their lives? If so, what would this mean to the future of so called scholarly research?*

NORMAN This is already happening in popular culture, in the various worlds of recovery, in autobiographical texts. These works challenge social scientists to do the same, to break down the barriers that separate this kind of writing from what passes as canonical scholarly research.

JIM *Then how are our skills and training special? What niche can scholars have in sharing understandings of life today?*

NORMAN We are trained to listen. And we have special skills at ethnography. This gives us a niche to move not only into civic ethnography, and public journalism, but also into the spaces of autoethnography, much as Susan Krieger does in her recent book *The Family Silver*, and Ruth Behar in, *A Vulnerable Anthropology*. These kind of works show how we can share our critical understandings with others, and how these understandings can move others to thought and action.

JIM *Will moving readers this way via more reflexive, evocative writing styles make communication and expression more important than the search for knowledge?*

NORMAN Knowledge will be redefined within a framework that says a text must connect to the personal experience of the reader.

JIM *Does that mean any form of writing that connects with personal experience is good research?*

NORMAN Not just any writing which connects to personal experience is good. We must begin to judge interpretive ethnographic texts by the way they move readers emotionally, and politically. They must conform to certain aesthetic criteria, and, as I said, they must mobilise critical, reflexive action on the part of the reader.

JIM *What do you suspect the growth of new writing styles within the social sciences will mean to the way young researchers are trained to read and write? Will they, for example, be reading novels and memoirs, and will we see creative writing classes or poetry workshops being offered by sociologists?*

NORMAN I would hope that both of these changes would occur. As part of your graduate studies you did work in creative writing classes, for example. We need

to shape our seminars into writing workshops. We need to train people how to read and write in these new ways. This will involve work on what is meant by a good or a bad text, and so on.

JIM Do you see these seminars and workshops replacing courses that explore the philosophical traditions of research or that examine particular theoretical points of view?

NORMAN Yes, I think seminars and workshops can replace traditional courses. I try to turn my research seminar class into a writing workshop, for example. This allows us to move back and forth between philosophy and theory to the practices of writing.

JIM Today the buzz word in research seems to be narrative. Many researchers are [mis]using narrative in one way or another. For example, positivists are reducing their subjects' narratives to another data set. Are you concerned some researchers might appropriate poetry or fiction as another way of representing one truth?

NORMAN I don't like those postpositivist moves to subject narrative to content analysis, and in the 50s and 60s there were moves in American mass communication studies to do this with poetry and fiction. I do not think this will happen again, at least not to the extent that it did 40 years ago. This is because the narrative turn has now pushed the postpositivists to the side.

JIM How do you see the narrative turn effecting the long-running quantitative versus qualitative debate within the social sciences?

NORMAN There are many different ways to say things about society and social life: poetry, short stories, ethnographies, performance, graphs, statistical tables. No single form of representation is necessarily better than another. We need to always keep a space for both types of representation. However, we must guard against those who privilege one over the other. I, of course, feel that numbers and tables are simply truncated forms of narrative.

JIM You state quite often that with ethnography it is possible to transform social inequities. However, is there a danger of ethnographers moving too fast into new writing styles and creating texts that cannot be read or understood by policy makers?

NORMAN We need to teach policy makers how to read narratives of the self, and we need to show how narrative functions politically to create various versions of reality, as in the so-called transcripts contained in the "Starr Report on Clinton." Narrative is not neutral, therefore its impact can be vast.

JIM Thank you, Norman, for your time in answering my questions. All the best.

NORMAN My pleasure. The special section you are creating in this journal is wonderful, a work of art. Thank you for this honour.