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REVIEW: Speed Bumps: A Student-Friendly Guide to Qualitative Research (authors: L. Weis & M. Fine)

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impact of these pieces on pre-service and novice teachers. In sharing this concern with a colleague, she suggested that these stories might be an excellent starting point for a dialogue on the culture of teaching and an exploration of proactive strategies for teachers interested in effecting “real” changes in the way they do their work as well as working toward classroom, school and system level change.

I agree that we must bring these powerful stories to those who make and influence decisions about education so they have a sense of what teaching today is really all about. The authors of *Daily Meaning* together provide a rich description of their fears and frustrations, their exhaustion and disheartenment and their insights and dreams.

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L. WEIS & M. FINE. *Speed Bumps: A student-friendly guide to qualitative research*. New York, NY: Teachers College, Columbia University (2000). 144 pp. US\$16.95 (ISBN 0-8077-3966-9).

Those of us who drive are familiar with speed bumps, awkward convexities placed thoughtfully on the road in order to make us slow down, either because we need to move cautiously through the area, or to alert us when we tend to veer off the road. Within the context of qualitative research, Weis and Fine refer to speed bumps as moments of reflection on the methodological and ethical concerns that make researchers slow down in order to realize more fully both objective and subject in their research. Specifically dedicated to students, this book could be seen as a collage of different voices uncovering researchers' personal concerns, dilemmas and situations that tend to be excluded from formal, published reports. What makes this book even more student-friendly is that it compiles graduate students' own stories, in which they confront their individual speed bumps in the process of doing qualitative work.

Drawing upon their most recent ethnographic study, *Unknown City: The lives of poor working class young adults*, that addresses the lives of young adults in the poor communities of Jersey City and Buffalo, Weis and Fine advocate the role of qualitative research in promoting social justice in culturally diverse America. By focusing on the issues of crime, poverty and violence within different demographic groups, Weis and Fine argue that development of social policies must include the voices of marginalized people.

The book's main section consists of four chapters. In the first chapter, Weis and Fine introduce and contextualize their research. *Unknown City* involves

154 interviews of White, African American, and Latino young adults of both sexes, age 25 to 35, from the poor communities of Jersey City and Buffalo. It was meant to address their experiences since leaving high school and to explore a spectrum of social problems including crime, racism, violence, and police brutality. The questions are clearly stated to target the issues “. . . relating to neighbourhood, schooling, experiences with jobs, family, gender relations, violence, social activism, religion, racial, and ethnic identification, children, and desires for the future, both one’s own future and that of children” (p. 26). Interviews were conducted in both English and Spanish.

The findings demonstrate that narrative responses on these issues varied dramatically among the six demographic groups such as white men, white women, African American men, African American women, Latinos and Latinas. For example, most white men perceived the street violence as the main problem in their community, while projecting their personal fears onto significant others such as parents, children, sisters. They also seem to sympathize with police, dismissing the police brutality and corruption as racially trumped up. Fewer white women trust police, identifying corruption in the ranks; however, they see police as responsive in the case of domestic violence. On the contrary, for both African American men and Latinos, the problems in their communities derived from the lack of jobs, racism, and police corruption and harassment including brutal use of force, false arrests and exaggerated charges. Although African American women encounter less violence in their homes than Latinas and white women, they find police also unresponsive in their communities. All quotations supporting the statements appear concise and well edited. However the sections reporting the views of the White men and women appear shorter than other sections. Weis and Fine suggest that the above stated findings should be taken as the signs of a deeply fractured American community at the turn of the new century. In the development of social policies that are sensitive to differences associated with gender, ethnicity, race as well as the social status of people, “the question, today, is not what to do, but who is going to listen” (p. 25). Using qualitative research to encourage listeners from the centre to hear the needs of the people from the margins makes *Unknown City* a book dedicated to social justice.

The second chapter deals particularly with the method and design of the study. The study included both individual in-depth interviews and focus group interviews across all six demographic groups. In addition, Weis and Fine perceived group interviews as more hopeful and articulate than individual ones. The interview questions were developed in consultation with graduate students who were also trained and involved as field interviewers. Even though Weis and Fine state that actual interview questions were

formulated in an open-ended fashion, they did not explain if standardized questionnaires were adopted by each interviewer making the comparability of data easier.

Also, this chapter covers the issues of participant selection as well as the structure of qualitative analysis followed in the study. In both Jersey City and Buffalo, the participant selection focused on four sets of urban institutions: 1) schools and post-secondary institutions; 2) churches and spiritual sites, 3) social agencies and self-help groups, and 4) community centres and activist organizations. "White men, for example, are underrepresented in social agencies because they tend to attend in fewer numbers than the other groups, and Latinos are overrepresented in community centres, due to the prominence of particular community centres in the communities in which we worked" (p. 27).

An extensive analysis drew upon 184 coding categories generated in an inductive fashion ranging from "Physical abuse," "Where from," "Childhood fears," "Family when growing up," "What community means," etc. Data gathered in the focus group interviews were also coded with similar categories; however different coding schemes were set up.

The computer-based analytic programs such as *Hyperqual* and *Ethnograph* were used for initial filling in and breaking down of categories. Weis and Fine say that actual analysis began after hours of sorting interview segments, printing out categories and creating specific manila folders for each category. After more than a year of analysis, they started writing in collaboration with a number of graduate students, focusing on the issues of reflexivity and representation.

The third chapter focuses on ethical issues, raising a whole spectrum of critical questions on the issues of reflexivity, textual subject, representation and social responsibilities in qualitative research. By criticizing the difficult relationship between the researcher and subject in social science texts, Weis and Fine focus on the implications of the researcher's own political reflexivities in formulating the representations of others. In fact, they are concerned with what Michelle Fine calls "working the hyphen" between Self and Other, and produce writing that bears responsibility and communicates in ways that may "transform public consciousness and common sense" (p. 33).

This chapter encompasses also the view of Susan Weseen and Mun Wong, associated researchers, on the issues of race, community and cultural differences. There are some wonderful insights on the ethics of informed consent, "who is informed and who's consenting" (p. 41). Additional emphasis is placed on the narrative; how one distinguishes between good and bad stories and what could be done with data that refer only to daily life routine. Weis

and Fine recognize that qualitative life narratives should not involve only hot statements loaded with “the exotic, the bizarre and the violent” but also passages that refer to mundane daily life (p. 50). The chapter concludes with a set of marvellous critical questions such as: “Have I connected the voices and stories of individuals back to the set of historic, structural, and economic relations in which they started? Have I described the mundane? How far do I want to go with respect to theorizing the words of informants? Have I considered how these data could be used for progressive, conservative, repressive social policies? Who am I afraid will see these analysis?” (p. 65).

The last chapter compiles the insights of fifteen graduate students from State University of New York at Buffalo and City University of New York whose research addresses youth and young adults in urban communities. Their research involves thesis and dissertation studies that include various interview studies and participant observations within the contexts of so called “free spaces.” These imply churches, schools, lesbian and gay movements, civil rights movements, and other levels of subculture in which young people may realize their identities and project political change. I found this chapter to be the most exciting to read as each essay documents honestly the struggle of young researchers in facing their own speed bumps. These include the issues of gender, race, cultural background, and textual representation. The only problem that I had with this section is that most of the researchers could have introduced the research questions in their writing more successfully.

Some of my favourite entries include the stories of Susan Lombardo, Kathleen C. Tocke, and Anne Galletta. Susan Lombardo confronts the implications of her Irish background in the research that addressed Irish people. Although she felt connected to the symbolic meaning of red hair, freckles and accent, Susan learned that she failed to address whiteness portrayed in her dissertation. Kathleen C. Tocke discusses sexually harassing bumps that she encountered in coping with the sexist comments of boys at the high schools where she did her research. Thinking what to wear and how to fit in as a five-foot nine-inch female researcher made her realize that being sexually harassed could also be a part of the research. Anne Galetta’s story is equally intriguing. One day during her ethnographic work at the Centre Academy High School, Anne encountered a student who offered to do her nails. The problem is that Anne had never had her nails done before, and most importantly not by an African American woman. “As Patricia rubbed [my nails] with alcohol, my whiteness became as perceptibly strong to me as the sent of the alcohol smarting my nose, and I felt an overwhelming desire to run as far away from this place as I could” (p. 85). Anne’s concern is: how is one supposed to deal with the uncomfortable situations that could also be part of the participant observation?

To readers engaged in social research, this book offers an excellent background for understanding ethical concerns and reflexivity in their methodologies. The stories of struggle, differences and dilemmas that Weis and Fine perceive as moments of slowing down, I find to be the moments of honesty. At its best, this book will encourage both young and veteran researchers to confront their own speed bumps and promote social responsibility in qualitative research in the future.

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