QS
Qualitative Studies

Skulking and spying then telling tales – becoming a walking-writing-researcher

Hazel R. Wright[1]

[1] *School of Education & Social Care, Anglia Ruskin University, Cambridge & Chelmsford, United Kingdom*

I share a different way of writing about research by doing and discussing it. First, the restrictions of the Covid-19 pandemic forced me to adapt my methods of researching, to catch snippets of data when and where I could, by email, phone, and family chats and then by observing and eavesdropping on passers-by on my daily walks in rural England. Then, to protect identities I adapted my way of writing, crafting partly fictionalised composite stories. I use my short vignettes, Living in Lockdown, to show how I wrote as 'others', and changed roles to fully examine my processes-in-action. Writing narratively and 'telling' stories to engage my audience, led me to parallels within the theatrical tradition, especially the Method Acting approach of Stella Adler. I also found that the archetypal figure of the flâneur (particularly as conceived by Baudelaire and Walter Benjamin) provided a conceptual framework for my walking/watching practices. He, too, simply wandered, seeing what there was to see, but usually in a city. I use these frameworks to reflect on my own work, drawing on parallel methodologies to show how it constitutes research, and explore the role that writing plays overall.

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My title caught *your* eye? I have *your* attention?

Then, I will share with you my new ways of working, driven by the Covid-19 pandemic, when close contact with others – in my case in-depth interviewing – was foolhardy and, quite often, forbidden by law.

The process emerged piecemeal. 'Targets' for biographical narrative, my method of choice, were restricted to those I already knew, some of them elderly and 'vulnerable'. And for over a month, walking locally was the only permitted reason for leaving the house apart from emergencies, or food shopping which we quickly learned to do online.

I love walking – but usually go to the hills or forests rather than stomping the local footpaths. In England, Cambridgeshire where I live is known for its flatness. Often just above sea-level, land is extensively arable (inaccessible), muddy clay (but we are on the chalk!), and dare I say it, just a 'tad' boring if you like climbing *up*.

I love walking and walking fast – but my world was full of quasi-walkers. The pavements were cluttered with others. Neighbours who chatted in socially distanced clusters, shouting across the statutory two metres gap! Sprinters gazing into the distance and giving way to no-one. People with too many dogs on extendable leads, or no leads at all: "Don't worry he won't hurt you" – but *my!* he slobbers! And large families with children on skates, scooters, and bikes-without-bells-with-rather-poor-brakes who come up behind you at speed and fall off – *if* you are lucky.

I love walking and walking fast and thinking as I walk – but this was impossible. I had to slow down, walk onto the verge or into the road, bombarded by snippets of conversations all around me, all along the way.

I learned to walk differently – fast-walking at night and in wet-and-windy weather and slow-walking on warmer days with my eyes and ears *especially* open, as noses, mouths and hands were *officially* deemed risky.

I learned to walk differently in the crowded countryside – seeking pleasure in nature and its seasonal changes but spying, eavesdropping, and storing away those snippets of conversation to make them my own, a research resource of value.

In short, I learned to walk in the crowded countryside as a flâneur – indulging my customary city habits in a rural context. For I had long realised that the love of wandering – developed with my father in early childhood and continued ever since, indulged on all my holidays and every conference I have ever been to – deserves that name. I am a lifelong flâneur – albeit one who, until recently, had little knowledge of either

Baudelaire's or Benjamin's fascination with this cultural archetype in previous centuries. But I turn to them later, for I want to share my approach and what it led to first!

So you know I walk. But not yet how I became a ♫ 'Walking, Talking', Watching, Writing, 'Living ~~Doll~~' Flâneur. ♫ [*]

At the start of the pandemic, I had turned to the elderly for research data. I was able to interview a family member (a real person, here called Grace) and talk a bit about, and to, her friends, as well.

Starting to write-*up* my material for a conference, I found my first dilemma. How could I ensure anonymity, confined as we were to our local communities? I needed more data to better conceal identities.

A second dilemma concerned writing. If *I* thought my lengthy descriptive piece lacked purpose, who would read it? I needed a punchier style.

Out walking with Grace, one step ahead to ensure her safety on crowded ill-kept pavements, I began to see the world through her eyes, to borrow the lens of *an-other*. I *could* write about her views, but people might guess they were hers.

The virtues of eavesdropping emerged when I overheard two women discussing issues similar but different to Grace's. If I blended such material with what I had already, my account would be less attributable. If I wrote it as a story, it would be livelier.

And this is how my research career as a flâneur began, for I saw and overheard many things of interest once I started to listen rather than block-out conversations. I was skulking and eavesdropping but doing no harm when collecting material by stealth for none of my writing would be about *real* people who could be identified.

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[*] Makes sense if you remember Cliff Richards performing Lionel Bart's song 'Living Doll' (with *The Drifters* in 1959, and the Young Ones, for comedy relief in 1986). It was everywhere whether you liked it or not! 😘

I had a 'way of working' that worked. It sounded dubious but was actually *very* ethical, sculpting a version of reality that felt authentic. It was enjoyable to do, playing to my love of walking, curbing my frustration with others, and letting me write creatively. Others, I am told, find it enjoyable to read – another bonus.

Storying — A serendipitous outcome? Or a developmental process?

My research preference has always been to interview *actively*, prompted by Holstein and Gubrium (1995, p.14) who (citing Pool, 1957, p.193), see 'every interview' as 'an interpersonal drama with a developing plot'. To do this effectively, I have to think on my feet rather than rely on rolling out a pre-planned interview schedule. That suits me. I like to work flexibly, to do what seems appropriate at the time and only later seek labels for the methods brought together in an emergent methodology, one tailored to meet my specific needs (Wright, 2009, 2010).

My yardstick for inclusion is that approaches are congruent rather than pre-specified within a known (or should I say, claimed?) framework. For me, random bricolage seems inappropriate in narrative work that is essentially using stories to shape events and/or portray lives. Continuity, consonance, congruence, and coherence *are* important.

During lockdown my work was similarly emergent with writing becoming an increasingly important strand within the overall process. My initial text, *There's Nowhere to Go* (the 'lengthy descriptive piece' mentioned earlier) remains a work-in-progress but is fast becoming a resource. Although not so intended, it is in effect a field-note equivalent – Clandinin (2013) would call it *an interim text* – for it is how I recorded events as they happened, or rather, a little time later, for I wrote late into the night after my first walk with Grace.

I began to experiment with writing as if I were *an-other* and my first tentative 'story', *Through the Eyes of the Elderly,* found a home in an issue of the Irish journal, *The Sociological Observer* (Wright, 2021b). Here, borrowing conceptually from Mishler

(1995), I describe my process as one of blending 'the *story overheard* and the *story observed* to create the *story imagined*', one that I can then share.

This first 'lockdown' story was about an elderly woman (a composite figure whom I later call Dora) taking a brief walk, claiming her entitlement to go outside once a day for legitimate exercise. It existed in many versions before I found a voice that I was happy with. It sees the busy pavement from her perspective, managing to convey the crowding far more succinctly and with more impact than I did in my initial 'lengthy descriptive piece' that was 'merely' observed. That first attempt – one that aimed at representation – ran to a thousand words, a quarter of which concerned dogs. The later extensively re-worked version that opens this article describes the dogs in only twenty-three words. But in the *story imagined*, the fictional Dora only needed to say "And there will be dogs…" when listing her other concerns, to convey her dislike of encountering them on the pathway.

Pleased by this brevity, I was encouraged to explore writing as *an-other* in more detail and found support for the affinity I experienced during the process in Coutu's (1951, p. 182) notion of *synconation* – a 'thinking and feeling as one believes the other person thinks and feels'. I found myself strangely 'haunted' (to borrow from Avery Gordon, 2008) by these *others* I 'adopted', the act of writing only partly cathartic. Yet I stayed with the process, continuing to collect material by spying and eavesdropping and weaving it with *legitimate(?)* data into a set of stories that spanned the life-course. Some of these stories, tasked to portray typical behaviours during the early days of the Covid-19 pandemic, are published online as *Learning to Live Differently in Lockdown* (Wright, 2021a) but I discuss them from a different perspective here, as I continue to reflect upon and develop my processes.

Learning to Live Differently offered five stories, representing different stages in the life-course.

Dora – An Elderly Citizen Living Alone

Glenda and Mark – Enjoying an Active Retirement

Dan – Working from Home

Anna and Ellie – Being Three and Going to Nursery

Teenagers – Hanging Out when Hanging Out is Banned

Collectively they enabled me to experiment with different writing approaches, to explore different *others* casting myself in different roles. I say "roles" here, deliberately to leave a space to explain my positionality. Initially, I identified the different roles I assumed as *selves* (my Narrative-Self and Researcher-Self, for example) but later chose the suffix -Me instead, worrying that 'self' carries too many connotations, opening up too many historical debates. It lies beyond the scope of this article to tangle with the challenges raised by 'isms' and 'ologies', to engage with semantics, to justify the philosophical value of my work, or wander too far into the intrapersonal worlds patrolled by psychological theory. Instead, I find that the world of entertainment (theatre) better frames my material despite knowing that this may be (mis)construed as less academic or indulgent. If so, so be it! My aims are to record an historic moment by portraying how different social actors experienced it and to share this with my readers (my audience). As with theatre, I want the readers of my text to enjoy being entertained by my words (my performance) and therefore choose to engage with it. I loved the serendipity experienced when shaping my approach so deliberately try to capture a sense of that within my written text, crafting each element and letting it unfurl slowly. My method was emergent, so I drift through this narrative, demonstrating my way of writing "off the beaten track" by *doing* it. (You will need to read to the end if you want to see how that works but do pause to study the scenery along the way!)

The backdrop — the Story-of-the-Stories and the Stories themselves.

Throughout the tale-telling process, the material I had collected shaped my decisions about how to write it up. I listened to my data continually in my head, even though what I created were fictional stories built from multiple fragments, and my starting point was different for each. I experimented with writing as *an-other* when I voiced Dora's thoughts as well as her speech), on behalf of the *other* (with Glenda who really talked to me), as an *imaginary other* when I built a composite picture of a work-at-home father from

multiple pre-collected strands, as *imaginary others* who exist as two real children when Anna and Ellie's story is performed, and then as a *narrator* when I create the teenagers' story myself – although whether I was passively or actively part of this is a moot point for in a sense I was peripheral, an unwilling listener. (When you learn more, I think you will agree that I can scarcely say observer here).

The ***Dora*** story that I discuss here, dealt with life in the home in contrast to the earlier theme of going outside. It captured the confusion felt by the elderly when life went online (onto the magic carpet according to Dora). Local social activities stopped; her independence disappeared overnight. Such extreme change was particularly difficult for older people with fixed routines and little appetite for anything new or different. Dora was alone, but not alone in this respect. 'Her' story was constructed from numerous observations and snatches of conversation all of them 'real' but brought together into a single story by me, writing as *an-other*, developing the approach used in my first story to create a *story imagined*.

Glenda and Mark*,* an active retired couple, fared better than Dora; lockdown with a partner was potentially less lonely. *Au fait* with computers, with adequate pensions and an established home and garden, their only real concern was an inability to see as much of their grandchildren as they would have liked. The couple's story was offered by the wife, in response to a request for a story of resourcefulness that was misinterpreted. I was not looking for frugality but more broadly. On reflection, I realised that her insistence that little had changed in their lives *was* the foundation for their story for other couples of a similar age were also finding it relatively easy to slip into a quieter existence, not realising just how long that might continue. The act of fictionalisation here was to write as the *other*, for I stayed with what I was told, re-ordering the elements to make them more succinct, and to ensure that none of the details revealed the couple's identities. I wrote as the wife, but the story embraced that of her husband and spoke on behalf of retired couples.

The couple's story captured a calm transition in contrast to that of the younger father, ***Dan****,* who had to contend with too many people. He was feeling the pressure of working

at home with school-age children not *at* school – but probably nothing like as much as his wife did – and this was a theme I overheard many times on my daily walks. Created as an *imaginary other,* from many snippets of *stories overheard* on my walks, Dan had a direct voice, but his wife and children could also be faintly heard within this story (appropriate as sometimes it was the wives I heard complaining). This suggested to me the possibility of creating a polyvocal family narrative and, with hindsight, maybe encouraged the next story to take a dialogic form in which two voices are directly heard.

The idea behind ***Anna and Ellie***'s story was given to me during an online chat, as a brief comment about how young children were adapting to lockdown. At that point, I am Me, openly engaged in a conversation and not consciously collecting data. As I tell you this, my role is that of Narrator, as it was when I set the scene within my published text, saying: "The story fascinated me, and I stored it away for future use". But these children have *real* identities, the person I talked to works with *real* children, so ethically the story could not be re-told exactly as told to me and nor could I allow them to be recognisable. To embellish this 'snippet' later and turn it into dialogue, I had to think deliberately as *others* might, think 'what would three-year olds do and say, what would this look like if I were witnessing it?'. I had to stand momentarily in the shoes of these *other(s)*. To avoid simple representation, I let the children become *imaginary others* with distinct personalities; pre-schoolers who could talk for themselves through me. In creating this story, several different roles were taken up sequentially although such a claim simplifies reality for the role changes were ill-defined and rarely consciously chosen, and certainly not analysed or labelled until after the event – as now.

Not so elsewhere. In the ***Teenager***'s story, despite the darkness, I have a more visible role; for I tell it from my own perspective, perhaps, allowing an identity as Author to jostle for position alongside Narrator. In part, this is a *story witnessed* rather than *overheard* for I am legitimately present. As Narrator, introducing the teenagers' tale, I described the invisibility of these youngsters during the early lockdown, their confinement to their homes or, maybe, a retreat into online interaction. As I witnessed their illicit late night in the park personally, albeit lying in bed kept awake by the noisy teenagers outside (for here it was the subjects who were loitering aimlessly in the public

space rather than me the flâneur), I was being *Me.* But as soon as I begin to think 'what is this event like to the teenagers?' (Surely just an escape from confinement not an opportunity to disturb sleepers.) I am thinking as someone *other*. The *imaginary other* however, has no part in this story as I tell it from my own perspective, albeit embellished to make it a story rather than a simple account. Above I briefly considered Author a suitable label for my role but already I choose Narrative-Me as a more appropriate descriptor, for I know that this story is based on reality as I was 'there'.

But *"why -Me?"* — to echo a commonplace childhood whine — but then discuss *acting* rather than *acting up.*

As I claimed earlier, the processes I follow align more closely with the theatrical tradition than with either the internalised multiple selves that emanate from psychological theory or the long-debated notions of self, rising out of the domain of philosophy. Therefore, to use *-Me* to identify different roles is preferable to using *-Self.* In line with this theatrical framing, the various 'Me's and 'others' you encounter in this text are performative personae generated in a liminal space in which I can think myself into another role or think as someone other than myself might think. Writing another's story is an act of creation and performance albeit on paper rather than on stage, and I can find many instances within the world of theatre where writing about the 'act' of acting quite often resonates with my experience of the 'act' of writing as developed and practised within this article. Both acts seek to perform *for* and engage as fully as they can *with* their audience, both require skills to be honed and outputs to be crafted, both harness a person's own skills to the task of representing *an-other*, both require the artful use of devices to clarify meaning and, importantly, the willing suspension of disbelief (Coleridge, 1817) on the part of the audience.

Recognising these shared qualities, I turned to the literature of acting and read assiduously seeking further framing for my own act of writing and finding parallels in Stella Adler's adaptation of Method Acting (as described by Gordon and Lang, 2009). From the mid-1930s, Stella challenged the primacy of Affective Memory – a technique that forced an actor to probe still-raw emotions. Instead, she favoured a focus on words – the script of the play, its existence as a written text. For Stella, a credible actor relied on the 'given

circumstances' of the script aided by a 'broad knowledge of history, culture, literature (p. 157) – in my terms, contextualisation; and some knowledge of the Playwright – in my case the Author – and his/her intentions. When teaching, Stella emphasised imagination and script analysis, invoking observation and sense memory before moving to improvisation, processes which resonate for me when I consider my own activities. Moreover, it is claimed that Stella's technique was intuitive and sometimes contradictory – suggesting the method was flexibly applied – perhaps an 'emergent' approach.

🎵 **"That's what Stella-did, boys, that's what Stella-did."** 🎵[†]

But what about *Me?* What do *I* do when *I* write?

My turn to story form is one of accretion, the layering of insights gleaned from very different (sometimes contradictory) traditions as I moved through life. The skills that support the crafting of stories from multiple random snippets were acquired piecemeal as my experiences changed. The Early-Years-Educator-Me observes closely, reading body language for meaning, learning to hold key material mentally until there is chance to write it down. The biographical researcher is transgressive (like the flâneur), traversing disciplinary boundaries to consider the whole person, working holistically rather than dissecting data into themes and parts. The active interviewer, interested as much in what is *not* said as what *is* said, is constantly alert, thinking creatively and with an open mind, allowing ideas to simmer and connect and impressions to flourish. Add all this to a lifelong love of reading and the act of storying seems almost inevitable – becoming a walking-writing-researching flâneur, a natural progression.

When I research and write like this, I see myself as the voice-piece of stories that tell themselves, for, as I began to discuss in my earlier article (Wright, 2021a, p. 64), I seem to be both detached *and* actively engaged with my subjects, collecting data 'deliberately and incidentally' – as, we will see, does Baudelaire's flâneur! Since my intention is research rather than fiction orientated this duality feels entirely appropriate, a balancing of personal biases that is ever present when qualitative research is approached with

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[†] Makes sense if you know Irving Gordon's song 'What did Delaware boys, what did Delaware' (performed in 1959 by Perry Como) which portrays US states as puns, making their beginnings into girls' names (What did Della Wear, boys?). The boy scouts like it! 🤭

honesty for 'one's subjectivity is like a garment that cannot be removed' (Peshkin, 1988, p. 17).

Thinking like *an-other* (a position I acknowledge is always located within my own interpretative frame) and writing as an often-composite *imaginary other,* I let the story unravel without my conscious guidance. Afterwards, I am *able* to view it as if I were an outsider and draw out points of relevance just as I would with someone else's text, or with faithfully recorded interview data, something that took me by surprise initially.

I can also pursue my exploration of writer positionality within the creating-and-writing process with more clarity. I see that my underpinning role was one of Narrator, providing each story with context and continuity, but fully believe that often – once I was engaged – the story simply wrote itself. Using my imagination, I became the voice-piece for the *others,* albeit each a composite individual; one who both existed and didn't exist, rather like the flâneur whose habits, we will see, I was unwittingly echoing.

I explored different styles of writing but never intentionally. To me it felt as if I was telling the-story-that-had-to-be-told. The *imaginary others* dictated the form of their stories and were strangely real to me. I could 'see' these characters and their settings clearly in my mind's eye: Dora finding life difficult; the retired couple adapting quite easily; the working-at-home manager safely in his attic, free from the familial chaos within which his wife was *trying* to work-at-home; the two pre-school children whose playful dialogue arose from a scenario mentioned over the phone; the teenagers in the park in the middle of the night, whose story I found myself telling from my own perspective as if to leave them shrouded in the darkness that concealed them and grant them the invisibility that they believed kept them safe from recognition.

Switching from thinking like an imaginary other to the Researcher-Me (I too claim multiple roles or identities) I was able to reflect on the stories and consider the strategies used to convey emotions, the overall meanings and significance of the detail within them. It was as if the words emanated from someone other than me; an experience that was

weirdly satisfying and apparently not uncommon (yet hard to find when looked-for rather than unexpectedly noticed. Van Maanen said this before me and so did others. Perhaps *you* can remember where!).

It was possible to consider the stories collectively and suggest what could be learned from them, to look for patterns within and across the narratives as if encountering them for the first time. Social restrictions had made the external world a strange and isolated place; writing like this was making my internal world a strange but highly populated space where I could ricochet around its inhabitants and make them dance to the tunes in my head that were slowly emerging as words. I could enjoy the company of others even when real-life contact was proscribed.

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Let me tell *you* a story now.

A new one where the story and commentary are en*acted* together.

"Are you sitting comfortably? Then I'll begin."‡

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To start in Narrator mode, the new story is about Charlie, a young boy riding his bike. He is a composite character, and when I tell his story I again act as the voice of an *imaginary other*.

> I'm going fast. In my yellow jersey. I'm in the lead. We're on our 'daily exercise', Mum, Michael, and Me, but I'm on my bike. Dad's with us, too – it's a Sunday – but he keeps stopping. Talking to Ronnie this time, 'bout his car *again*. Now he works in the attic every day, the Bimmer don't start when he wants it.
>
>   On Sundays Dad comes with us – but he isn't really with us 'cos he keeps chatting. He says all days are like a Sunday now, everything shut. My school's shut and its boring. I miss Alfie and Seb, even Miss Marten. She can do sums! My Mum gets them wrong even when I've shown her how to do them. Did she learn *nothing* at school?

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‡ How the children's story on BBC's daily radio programme 'Listening with Mother' (1950-1982) was introduced. (Nostalgia again)

Dad is better at sums but he's *always* upstairs. We have to keep the noise down, Micky and me. We take no notice. If Dad gets really cross, he might use the 'f' word again. Then Mum will tell *him* off.

Sunday used to be church but that's shut, too. We have campfire church on Friday night instead. That's more fun – it's spooky by the graves in the dark – the ghosts might come out. But the campfire's rubbish, just a torch covered in red paper and a pile of twigs. We have a real one at Beavers but here it's just pretend – like God and Angels and Harry Potter and Tinkerbell. We get hot cocoa like good boys; it keeps your hands warm. Micky and me blow it cold when they're all quiet. We make funny noises and Mum *has* to open her eyes. She pulls faces at us but can't tell us off, so we pull faces back. That's great fun.

Stepping aside from the telling, as the Reflective-Me, I can reconsider this story and briefly do so here.

I note the child's perspective but also the echoes of his class status – the Bimmer (BMW car), the largely absent father figure who can easily work at home, the names of his friends (Alfred and Sebastian) not exclusively class-bound but together suggesting upper rather than lower status. I catch the echoes of appropriated parental discourse: mention of 'daily exercise'; the phrase 'Did "she" learn anything at school?' so probably "you" in an earlier conversation; the request to 'keep the noise down'; the talk of the 'f' word; and the compulsory church attendance that hints at conformity rather than firm beliefs.

This is the Researcher-Me commenting here, as I look at the story-that-told-itself with fresh eyes to see what I can glean from it; studying it critically, too, to check that it reflects the many situations overheard and observed in passing, as I walk. Looking at this story more broadly I can see how it builds on some of the earlier ones, offering a child's perspective on the crowded pathways that so upset the elderly woman, and the problems of parents working from home particularly the dad who is there-but-not-there. As my subjects live in parallel, in families in the local community, their social contexts are

similar, especially when lockdown reduces everyone to localised living, so links make sense.

Perhaps this demonstrates how easy it is to shift from role to role, how the change is one of intent and action rather than of mental state, in keeping with my choice to frame my work with ideas from the theatrical tradition. From Narrative-Me to Reflective-Me is a marked transition but the shift from this to Researcher-Me is much subtler, no more than a sharpening of focus.

I found the act of describing the world from multiple perspectives rewarding and, moving forward, I am becoming more confident and more ambitious. Whilst there is NO suggestion that what I will write could be compared to Chaucer, I do admit to tracing my fascination with multi-voiced texts to studying parts of his fourteenth century work, *The Canterbury Tales*, in early secondary school. (As an educator that is a satisfying connection to make!)

My next project (already started) examines a family, parents and three children, and will have chapters written in the partly real/partly imaginary voices of its members. Seeking a readership beyond the purely biographical, I will act as Narrator for a family who adopted a mixed-race toddler and the experiences of 'being different' evoked in a white rural community in England's West Country in the 1960s and later years of the twentieth century. The scope is broad, enabling me to assume the voices of a family of *others* in extended texts, shaping the stories of *imaginary others* as I protect identities and let the stories develop their own styles. In dealing with issues like trans-racial adoption, bullying in school, practices of exclusion in everyday life, the Researcher-Me (me *as* me) will be both present and absent, lurking in the shadows of the characters created, waiting for a turn to speak.

Like Charlie, I think 'that's great fun'.

Unquestionably 'Living', I am now 'Walking, Talking', Watching, Writing, too. But what about the Flâneur?

I approach flâneurie as one who *does* it – and has always done it without giving it a name – part of the Geographical-Me who constantly reads my surroundings, and therefore rarely gets lost whether strolling in rural or urban areas. As a Geographer, I came to know a little about flâneurie but from a practical standpoint – the act of walking and observing was akin to fieldwork; the scanning of terrain traversed, its form and features, the plants, animals, and people whose activities bring it to life. Starting to skulk and eavesdrop on my daily walk as a form of data collection, unwittingly moulding flâneurie into a research form, I knew little about it beyond its name and what it described. When a chance encounter at a conference newly brought the term to my attention and I decided to shelter among its roots, I started to read!

We can surmise that people have always walked the land, but when did some become flâneurs? Where does the label originate, and what makes a passer-by merit the title flâneur? I needed to learn more.

The flâneur, an individual described as a 'stroller' (Lynes et al, 2019) is an ambiguous figure from the outset. Arguably in Goffman's terms (1959) he exists only through his performances (Pope, 2010, p. 7), the act of strolling in the crowd, part of it and apart from it, able to observe passers-by unnoticed and unchallenged, a description that also applies to my own activities. Traceable back to the Napoleonic era (Boutin, 2012) he has been an 'icon of urban modernity since the 19th Century' (Serlin, 2006, abstract) and 'a flourishing cultural and literary figure', 'due to the rapid change in the urban environment' (Toiskallio, 2002, p. 171).

Paris was being modernised, its growth and increasing importance as an industrial and commercial centre being used to justify a focus on vehicular rather than pedestrian access and the tearing down of ancient streets (and arcades) to make way for bland arterial roadways and spacious boulevards – symbols of progress and modernity. The flâneur was invoked to observe and comment on these changes as they happened. Being an imaginary figure, his roaming was untrammelled, determined only by the author who wrote him into

existence, able to see whatever that author wanted him to see, making him a useful literary device.

Baudelaire, famously drew attention to this archetypal Parisian figure, central to French literary and artistic culture, in *The Painter of Modern Life* (1972, 1863 in French), where he describes Mr G (the barely disguised painter, Constantin Guys) as a flâneur:

> 'His passion and his profession is to merge with the crowd … for the passionate observer it becomes an immense source of enjoyment to establish his dwelling in the throng, in the ebb and flow, the bustle, the fleeting and the infinite'. (Baudelaire, 1972/1863, pp. 12-13)

The flâneur moves in the urban crowd as into an 'enormous reservoir of electricity', taking pleasure in the diversity of stimuli of the urban environment (Baudelaire, ibid, 13) in many ways embodying the characteristics that make a good researcher (as I claim to be), for 'he takes an interest in everything the world over, he wants to know, understand, assess everything that happens on the surface of our spheroid' (Baudelaire, ibid, p. 9). Shields (1994) even likens him to a participant observer (Pope, 2010, p. 8); a parallel that I find excessive in my own context for the only commonalities I share with those I study are space, time and 'professed' activity – walking – in which we are all only *ostensibly* engaged.

This flâneur is an ambiguous figure, one of 'those independent, intense and impartial spirits who do not lend themselves easily to linguistic definitions'. A 'lover of life', he likes to 'be away from home and yet to feel oneself at home anywhere; to see the world, to be at the very centre of the world, and yet to be unseen of the world … incognito wherever he goes' (Baudelaire, ibid, 13).

This is someone whose presence is unremarked, as is mine when I am gathering data; a chameleon character whose changing hues project multiple identities not so dissimilar to the multiple voices, I use within my work. He is a shadowy figure who exists ontologically only through those who write about him and is known only indirectly

through the act of reading about him; an arguable parallel with the *imaginary other* I described earlier, equally a literary device.

For the cultural theorist, Walter Benjamin, the paradoxical – and to use his term, 'phantasmagoric' – city of Paris offered scope to work on his theory of ideological illumination, seeking to 'forge' a 'more historically nuanced' Marxism (Cohen, 1984). Benjamin decried 'phantasmagoria', 'that miasma of misrepresentation that stands for reality in our time' and sought to challenge the views of those seduced by it (Martel, 2013, online). He focussed his attention on the Parisian arcades which, in their pre-modern blending of interiority and exteriority and blurring of public and private spaces remained places where humans could loiter and stare, in stark contrast to Haussmann's modern boulevards.

In his extensive but never completed study of the arcades, places representative of the 'ruined hopes of the past' (Leslie, 2006, p. 93), Benjamin saw the 'authentic' fIâneur as a key observer of city life, fascinated by the unexpected (Van Leewuen, 2019) and alert to the significance of minor details and events witnessed. In Convolute M of *The Arcades Project* (1999, in English), Benjamin notes Larousse's description of the flâneur as one who has:

> 'His eyes open, his ear ready, searching for something entirely different from what the crowd gathers to see … [for whom a] word dropped by chance will reveal to him one of those character traits that cannot be invented and that must be drawn directly from life …'. (M20a,1,453)

Earlier Benjamin had noted Fournel's claim 'regarding the legend of the flâneur' and how: 'With the aid of a word I overhear in passing, I reconstruct an entire conversation, an entire existence' (M7,8,431). Such actions resonate clearly with my own practice of flâneurie, of being one who skulks, spies and eavesdrops, making good use of the casual comments picked up in that way.

In contrast, in another note, one just prior to Larousse's statement, Benjamin refers to Rousseau's *Second Promenade*, reporting text that captures my pre-lockdown habit of enjoying 'solitary walks and the reveries that occupy them, when I give free rein to my thoughts and let my ideas follow their natural course, unrestricted and unconfined' (M20,1,453). This was the style of walking that I was forced to relinquish when 'my world was full of quasi-walkers', leading me instead to create and present 'a plausible front, behind which, in reality hides the riveted attention of an observer …' (M13a,2,442).

Benjamin spurned the modern temptation to construct phantasmagoric visions that diminished the 'complex, hybrid, opaque reality of expanding metropolitan centres' (Van Leewuen, 2019, p. 304). He sees the city as 'the realization of that ancient dream of humanity, the labyrinth' and claims that the flâneur 'without knowing it, devotes himself' to this labyrinth [M6a,4]. In short, he is one who wanders aimlessly to see what there is to be seen.

Yet I wonder — Can Flâneurie be authentic, archetypal *and* actual? Can there be a 'living' Flâneur?

For Benjamin, the 'authentic' flâneur is equally interested in those who conform and those who don't, those who choose to live on the peripheries of contemporary life, seemingly resisting political and commodity fetishism – individuals of particular interest to Benjamin.

He denigrates as 'inauthentic', the flâneur who seeks superficial stereotypes, in effect choosing what to look at, maybe what to see, leading me to pause to consider where *he* might place *my* work. For in choosing what to include and exclude in my stories I am moulding the flâneur to suite my own purposes and am aware that to Benjamin any shaping might be inappropriate, and the process of creating 'typical' stories from multiple data sources deemed a stereotypical practice.

However, I claim authenticity, as the walking and watching began entirely without a research intent or focus, and what I saw and heard serendipitously determined what I did next. Also, because I follow constructionist rather than reductionist principles, for I build

more complex vignettes with the fragments of material I collect. I have related how I leave my mind to play with snippets of data seen, observed and asked for and let the stories unfold naturally, only re-crafting and editing once their initial shape has shown its outline. For I am seeking authenticity even when undertaking narrative 'smoothing' (Polkinghorne, 1995) to make them coherent and ensure they 'flow'. Like Frank (2010, p. 37) I believe that: 'The value of stories is to offer sufficient clarity without betraying the complexity of life-in-flux' and like Benjamin, I champion such complexity.

Continuing with the non/authentic distinction, I think it to be questionable given it is applied post-hoc to an imaginary (even if archetypal) figure. As it is a fictional archetype, writers and researchers can mould the flâneur to their own purposes and many do so for the literary flâneur can never speak independently, never set pen to paper to directly communicate with others unlike contemporary living flâneurs (like me) who can switch between passive and active engagement with the world, at will.

Thinking critically, it could be said that the flâneur enabled/enables an author to distance him/herself from his/her own opinions. From a less sympathetic viewpoint, he could be construed as passing off as 'real', impressions that are actually 'unreal', prompting me to acknowledge again the importance of admitting to fictionalisation and of stressing that it is the observation *of,* the listening *to*, and the engagement *with* real people, and thereby the collection of real data, that makes my work research not just simply writing.

As a fiction, the flâneur is hard to challenge but one area much debated is his masculinity and where this fits with more contemporary views on gender (notably by Wilson, 1992; and Wolff, 1985 if you want to read further). Indeed, Elkins, in her book *The Flâneuse* (2017), espouses a feminine version. She writes mainly about female writers who choose the city (Paris, New York, Tokyo, Venice and London) as their source of inspiration. I am ambivalent here, preferring to broaden the generic term to include women like myself whilst accepting that the historical figure was a male one. And I still hold that the archetypal flâneur remains a puppet controlled by others, a figure who *cannot actually write.* Those of us in current society who pin the label to our lapels, must recognise that we appropriate the archetype, making it serve contemporary needs. It was ever thus. As

Elkins so eloquently claims, "the flâneur is a beguiling but empty vessel, a blank canvas onto which different eras have projected their own desires and anxieties" (ibid, p.11).

Yet I wonder still, are we simply continuing the European tradition of re-writing the text that defines this archetypal figure? Or do we simply 'pass' for flâneurs rather than being truly authentic if we make such changes? This I cannot answer definitively, but I can affirm that, personally, I hold the fictional archetype dear, and reflect that as real living people we sometimes only *practise* flâneurie rather than *becoming* flâneurs.

> **So that is how the Flâneur-Me walks alongside the archetypal figure.**
>
> **Until our paths deviate, for I can write — and he cannot!**
>
> **Yet I remain enamoured by flâneurie . . . because . . .**

. . . in research terms, flâneurie is open to empirical serendipity. With this approach, I work with what I find rather than seeking what I expect to find. In using story forms to communicate these findings I also have a wide degree of choice for the genre enables me to use my imagination to anticipate the needs of my audience rather than tie myself into the linear discussion of data more often seen in academic writing.

. . . the ambience of flâneurie, its happenstance characteristics, enabled me to move from frustration to enthrallment when 'my world was full of quasi-walkers' and this still feels good. Flâneurie is a relaxed and pleasurable activity leaving me open to embrace any opportunities that arise; and that is the beauty of skulking and spying and then telling tales, as a form of research, and of sharing research with its potential audience.

> **I could stop now — but don't because I hear continuing whispers: 'Is this *really* research or *merely* fiction?' "To arms!", I call. Help me slay these demon voices!**

My way of working sits clearly within the qualitative paradigm and a narrative framework as do many others, but despite some similarities, it does occupy its own distinctive niche and I claim that it can be equally trustworthy if carried out with care.

With ***ethnography****,* the researcher observes the daily practices of a group, more often as an insider researcher, seeking to make 'the familiar strange' (Van Maanen, 1995) rather than visiting distant unknown places. As Atkinson (2017, p. 2) says, it involves

'exploration and analysis that is based on participant observation and the direct engagement of the researcher with the chosen setting'. The researcher is collecting data by watching, by joining in, by seeking clarification through conversation, possibly even interviews, and using this to create written descriptive accounts, and to make interpretations – even judgements – about what is happening and what it means. There is scope to question and seek clarification when unsure.

This potentiality of engagement with participants is alien to the detached flâneur who, as Van Leewuen (2019, p. 307) succinctly says, 'is essentially preoccupied with the practice of observing, with the role of passive spectator.' Yet surely an observer can also listen, too, and possibly focus more acutely on something significant than might be possible if playing an active role. So, need this render the findings less trustworthy? I would argue that it frees me to write what I believe to be the case rather than playing the traditional writing-researcher game of striving to support every claim with a direct quotation taken out of context.

When I begin to collect data more purposively, as I walk, there are some similarities with the observational strand of ethnography but still no opportunity for further verification through later questioning. This is not a problem for me as I have worked with young children. Close attention can more than compensate, even for a flâneur *'en passant'*. Furthermore, I question whether verbal verification always supports greater authenticity for it also offers opportunities for (mis)interpretation, for (mis)correction and (post-hoc) justification. Perhaps the hybrid nature of my methodology compensates for any lack of verbal verification for I do talk directly to some of my research 'subjects' but not with those whom I only observe.

With **auto-ethnography**, the researcher recounts his/her own life, perhaps using *an-other* as a sounding board and someone to challenge specious assumptions and unrecognised bias. Chang, a keen advocate, believes it 'shares the storytelling feature with other genres of self-narrative but transcends mere narration of self to engage in cultural analysis and interpretation' (2008, p. 43). But however rigorous the reporting and thorough the analysis, the account is essentially a personal one, only the tangible actions and *facts*

verifiable by others so inclined. Arguably, the act of making sense of things purely from experiencing them is enough, but surely the act of writing imposes a further layer of unsought and unspecified subjective filters. How can it not? Most writing-up of qualitative research data is similarly sieved but this may carry greater risks when external checks are limited. Those writing-up data collected through flâneurie are equally unaccountable, but arguably less biased since they are not their own study subjects.

Finally, with **biographical research**, my customary approach, the researcher interviews *others* in depth. S/he uses 'the individual life as a lens or microscope … to explore, relativise, confirm or correct existing understandings and interpretations of the past' (Renders et al, 2017, p. 6) and this contextualisation, the turning of a life story into a life history (Goodson, 2001) lends weight to the methodology. But this is a recall strategy as I have reported elsewhere (Wright, 2013) and we know that memory can play tricks, be overwritten or simply refuted, particularly if the participant is elderly with a diminished sense of time, logic, categorisation and connectivity. Furthermore, it is well-established that the story told today is not the story that will be told tomorrow, for how we tell things changes with mood and inclination and often recall encourages further recall or a rebuttal of an initial denial that can further distort or be corrective of the first attempt to 'tell'. But this contingency holds true for interview and observational data, too, and arguably most qualitative research findings are specific to a particular time, place and context, hence Geertz's (1973) call for 'thick descriptions', drawing our attention to what we *write* about the research context.

With my approach, the stories are composed and crafted rather than directly told and this is a slower process that allows the details to 'settle'. There is time to reflect and revise, revisit the data, or even look for more. An additional walk at a particular time of day will often provide opportunity for further verification that the story being written reflects what is customarily overheard and seen. Composing stories from multiple sources is advantageous, too, for to bring alive a fictitious character, I seek typical behaviours – those that transcend a single instance fixed in time, place and social context.

To summarise … With flâneurie as I *practice* it, the researcher stands apart from the people s/he is passing, loitering to remain in earshot and eavesdropping on their conversation(s). Any ethical concerns are addressed through fictionalisation, the building of composite stories that try to say something useful about the conversations overheard and the people observed. This is a particular style of working but its strands are not unique. The context is a chosen one as in ethnography (with no recourse to participant clarification later); the account is a personal one lacking in-built checks as in auto-ethnography; and the means of collection are informal (and partly conversational, relying on memory), as in biographical research. Yet, flâneurie is more than a bringing together of these different elements and my writing method, too, extends beyond the standard reporting of research.

With all approaches that deal with real lives and thus with complexity and uncertainty, trustworthiness – and thus their perceived value – depends on the competence and morality of the researcher. A sensitive observer and listener, able to record and interpret data skilfully, who works carefully, honestly, and respectfully, is likely to add to knowledge and understanding of the worlds in which we live – and in my case, loiter. His/her writing is likely to illuminate. But if we fail to work like this, we will distort our practices and mislead those who trust in us, rendering our stories 'merely' entertainment, rather than insightful. Moreover, if we fail to write engagingly, or lack authenticity, we may leave our audience dozing in the stalls. On a personal note, for me flâneurie would lose its allure and I would lose my enthrallment with the world I walk through, a world that still is 'full of quasi-walkers', prompting a stream of stories to harvest later**.**

At this point *this* narrative *really* does stop — but look — there is plenty more for *you* to read before the curtain finally falls!

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For a moment, the Writer-Me lurks behind the curtain hoping for echoes of a faint round of applause 👏🏿 . . . before I walk on.............. 👣

About the Author:

This researcher (**Hazel R. Wright**) dislikes being pegged and pigeon-holed! Interdisciplinary approaches and emergent methodologies are far more fun. I have 'served my time' – in publishing, where I learnt to write and edit; and as lecturer in both College and University, doing conventional research. But now I am free to experiment, to indulge my interests in people's lives, in walking and watching and imagining; free to be the flâneur I always was and to try to be the writer I always wanted to be. For this special issue, I have taken another step off the beaten track, and ventured further along the dimly lit path towards more creative ways of working.