An Invitation to Performative Research

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Abstract

Across the social sciences there has been a growing interest in arts-based and performative methodologies. Over the past decade we have created a number of research based performances utilising songs, poems and stories. Alongside these, we have also begun to explore the potential of this work through conducting further research which analyses responses from different audiences (lay and academic) to each performance. In this article we reflect some of the core reasons that underscore performative methodologies. The case we progress is that performative methodologies provide (a) a different way of ‘coming to know,’ (b) inclusive form of representation, (c) an experience, (d) a blurring the self-other divide, and (e) an alternative vision.

We hope the discussion fosters a continued interest in and a greater understanding of what performative approaches might contribute as well as providing an invitation to others explore the potential of performative methodologies within their own research practice.

Key words: Performance, arts-informed, arts-based, autoethnography, songs, music, poems, stories.

Introduction

Have you ever completed interviews for piece of research, transcribed and analysed the data, written the report, perhaps even presented the findings at a conference and received encouraging feedback, only to sit back and think, ‘Hmmm? The findings don’t really capture the spark that I “felt” during the interviews.’ Or perhaps, at another stage of the research and communication process you become aware the ‘spirit’ of what you learned about life and your participants is missing and you aren’t sure how to get it back? It’s not that your work is wrong, disrespectful, unethical, and it’s not that it lacks insight. It’s just you have a nagging suspicion that you haven’t captured something that is important to show.

If you have experienced something like we describe above you are not alone. From subject areas as diverse as sport coaching to mental health, and in disciplines which include health and medicine, psychology, sociology and education, others too have grappled with what is missing from the research report and how that information could be included; the unsaid, the lost voice, movement, colour, and those parts of life or relationships that don’t fit neatly into a traditional report (Bochner 1997; Bagley and Castro-Salazar 2011; Spry 2011; Jones 2006; Morgan...
et al 2012). We see ourselves as having inhabited this paradoxical place, of feeling we have done good work, but also conscious that some of what we have learned refuses to be packaged, refuses a textual representation and therefore, we also feel we have failed to adequately represent our findings.

Over the past decade therefore, alongside our more traditional reporting strategies, we have created a number of research based performances. *Across the Tamar* (Douglas and Carless 2006), based on our research into the physical activity experiences of women in Cornwall and *Under One Roof* (Carless and Douglas 2010a) based on ethnographic research within a local authority run sheltered housing scheme, are two examples that utilise songs, poems and stories. These have also been reproduced as CDs (Carless and Douglas 2010b; Douglas and Carless 2005) and have been used by colleagues in educational settings. While these performances cannot be included here, we provide a sample audio piece from *Across the Tamar* titled *A Woman of 83*, some photographs from two of our performances, and a brief description of the piece in the appendix.

Alongside these performances we have also began to explore in more depth the process of writing and performing stories (Carless 2010; Douglas 2009) and songs (Carless and Douglas 2011; Carless 2010a; Douglas 2012) as well as how to make space for and nurture academics who want to make use of performative approaches in their work (Douglas and Carless, 2008). Recently we have also turned our attention to explore the potential of this work through conducting further research analysing responses from different audiences (lay and academic) to performances of our research (Carless and Douglas 2010c; Douglas and Carless 2009).

Like Bagley and Castro-Salazar (2011), we feel a degree of irony here retreating to a textual form in order to make a case for performative approaches as we too believe ‘the reader of this article really needs to see the performance live to gather its real impact’ (p. 8), yet opportunities to watch performances are rare. Unless a student comes from a school of performance, drama or theatre they are unlikely to receive formal education on performative approaches and there are few post-doctoral courses that teach research based performance techniques for postgraduates or faculty. At the 2012 Methodological Innovations Conference where we performed *Across the Tamar* we were aware that even when there is an opportunity to watch a performance, the reflective practitioner only begins to unpack their questions in the days that follow.

In response, our aim here is to focus on five core features of performative approaches that have guided are use of the genre, these include;

- A different way of ‘coming to know’
- Inclusive form of representation
- Provides an experience
- Blurring self-other divide
- Provide an alternative vision

While this list is not exhaustive or exclusive, it nonetheless conveys a core rationale for why we, and others, explore performative approaches within a pallet of methodological approaches available to the social science researcher (Leavy 2009). These points form the focus for the case we present here.

**Different Ways of ‘Coming to Know’**

We have experienced artistic and creative processes, that comprise performative research, to offer different but nonetheless powerful ways through which we can gain understandings and insights into human experience.
Through these processes, it has sometimes been possible to ‘make sense’ of social phenomena in ways that would otherwise have proved elusive. Of course, traditional scientific and social scientific methods can and do provide important understandings and insights. Yet, we suggest, these ways of working tend to privilege certain types of understanding that differ in important ways from those elicited through performative methods. Eisner (2008: 5) has written: ‘knowledge or understanding is not always reducible to language … we know more than we can tell.’ This realisation hints at some of the ways that dominant language-based approaches in social science can limit what is possible to know through their dependence on (usually particular forms of) language. Through ways of working that either eschew language as the primary form of communication or utilise alternative linguistic forms (such as, for example, poetry or songs), the possibility arises to generate different knowledge in different forms (see Douglas and Carless 2009). The point, for Eisner (2008), is that, ‘not only does knowledge come in different forms, the forms of its creation differ.’

But what is it about performance that might support different ways of coming to know? Pelias (2008) highlights embodied practice as one distinguishing characteristic. In his words:

‘performance itself is a way of knowing. This claim, axiomatic for performers, rests upon a faith in embodiment, in the power of giving voice and physicality to words, in the body as a site of knowledge … it insists upon a working artist who engages in aesthetic performances as a methodological starting place.’

(p. 186)

Here, the importance of the work of art (Barone and Eisner 2012) becomes evident: performative methods depend upon the doing of creative, artistic, performative practice for insights and understandings to emerge. Embodiment is core to the process and knowing is seeded in, and depends upon, the act of performing (whether in private rehearsal or public display).

From the perspective of researcher/s’ coming to know, it less about the ‘quality’ of the product (whether it is considered ‘good’ or not), and more about what the researcher/s come to see or understand through engaging in the creative process. For us, the effort and work of engaging with performative methods can lead to valuable insights, regardless of whether or not the piece is subsequently deemed worthy of performing to others. In this sense, performative research may be considered a process of discovery through which the researcher ‘must be willing to be educated – indeed to be transformed – in that process’ (Barone and Eisner 2012:134). At different times, we have found that the understanding or knowledge we ‘discover’ through these processes enlarges, deepens, enriches, complexifies, or challenges knowledge generated through traditional modes of analysis. In short, we have come to realise that performative methods have the potential to result in unique insights into human experience and social issues.

**Inclusive Forms of Representation**

Gergen and Gergen (2011) point out that, ‘traditional communication in the social sciences is highly specialized. Theory and research findings are largely unintelligible to audiences untrained within the disciplines.’ While the complex, technical language of much science and social science has its place, we need to recognise that it is (at best) inaccessible and (at worst) impenetrable or intimidating to those outside the academy. In short, it is excludes many people in society from engaging with its content. Is it acceptable – in terms of, for example, ethics, funding, or social utility – for social science to be expressed and articulated solely through the channels of somewhat exclusive academic discourse? From a critical social theoretical approach (Conquergood 2002; Denzin 1997, 2003; Madison 2005) - where power, justice, gender, race and social systems are to the fore - we hold that the answer to
this question is no. Performative approaches offer one possible way to avoid these criticism. Alternative more accessible forms of communication are needed – not to replace existing forms of communication in social science, but to augment the currently limited reservoir of approaches.

Frank (2005: 965) observes that, traditional ‘Academic interrogation holds researchers responsible for rendering those whom they have studied “as something totally quantified, measured, and defined to the last detail.”’ These expectations, he argues, are wrong: ‘They are wrong both as an empirically adequate description of the human condition, and they are ethically wrong.’ In contrast, good performative research does not force upon an audience a single finalized perspective, but instead offers a provocative ‘picture’ which preserves complexity and multiplicity, retaining some degree of openness and ambiguity. In Barone and Eisner’s (2012:112-3) terms, ‘no work of art (or arts based research – to the extent that it is a work of art) ever finally states anything.’ Through performance, we have found, it is possible to say something in a meaningful way that still preserves the uncertainty, paradox, or ambiguity that characterises many aspects of the social world.

Taken together, these two points (accessible forms of communication and resistance to finalizing lives) permit performative work to encourage and support genuine dialogue that embraces diverse voices and perspectives. In this way, performative methods can be democratic in that they allow diverse voices to be heard.

(1) Village Hall, Age Concern meeting and feedback session, Wadebridge Town Hall
Audiences are empowered to speak back to the representations they encounter, rather than being silenced or side-lined in the face of an exclusive, singular, monological presentation of ‘truth’ or ‘reality.’ In Gergen and Gergen’s (2011) terms, ‘The sciences thus become more opened for the inclusion of multiple traditions, and thus they become more polyvocal, dialogic, and democratic.’ It is through these qualities that performative approaches go some way towards troubling and de-stabilizing the power relations inherent within much science and social science research. Looking back at the above photo we see this process ‘in action.’ Audience members, some of whom were participants in the research, were engaged in the research process. That is, those with ‘experience’ spoke with authority from an embodied reality.

**Offers an Experience**

According to Sparkes (2002) the most common forms of representation in the social sciences are scientific and realist tales. These representational strategies can be well suited to communicating certain kinds of understanding about aspects of human experience. Sparkes (2002) describes a range of characteristics of these genres which include the sense of an omnipotent or absent author and an expectation that the reader typically ‘receives’ the imparted knowledge in a relatively uninvolved manner that is somewhat removed from the phenomena of study. Performative research, like other forms of arts based research, has the potential to achieve something different: to provide the audience with an experience. For Barone and Eisner (2012: 20): ‘Only the compositions of artists and arts based researchers can redirect conversations about social phenomena by enabling others to vicariously re-experience the world.’ Good performative work, we suggest, creates the conditions for audiences to experience something that is – or becomes – important within their own life context.

While this experience will not necessarily be that of the participants or characters of the piece, it is nonetheless important for several reasons, not least because through experiencing the world anew alternative realisations are facilitated. Part and parcel of experience are emotional and embodied responses. In research into the impact of performative research we have found that personal engagement in an emotional and embodied capacity is a characteristic of audience responses and helps ground new insights within the individual’s own life context (Carless and Douglas 2010; 2011). These are not the disembodied cognitive forms of knowledge that reside in dusty volumes on library bookshelves, but instead the knowledge that can trigger an audience member to consider or commit to personal change or development. For Neilsen (2008: 96):

‘A reader does not take away three key points or five examples. A reader comes away with the resonance of another’s world, in the way we emerge from the reading of a poem or a novel, from a film screening or
a musical event – physically transported or moved, often unaware of the architecture or structure that created the experience, our senses stimulated, our spirit and emotion affected.’

There is an old joke: *Q: What are academics’ bodies for? A: To get their heads to meetings!* We suggest that activating an audience’s emotional and physical responses is important precisely because emotional and embodied ways of knowing have been systematically removed from much social science (Douglas and Carless 2013). From an ethical and moral perspective, it is important not to *replace* but to *balance* our well-established cognitive, rational, ‘objective,’ impersonal ways of knowing with visceral forms of understanding. Besides supporting multidimensional engagement with the subjects of our research, offering audiences an emotional and embodied experience also respects them as multidimensional beings, providing relevant stimulation or provocation within and beyond the cognitive realm.

### Blurring the Self-Other Divide

Good performative research, we suggest, can invite audiences to see themselves within the social environment or context being explored. We are aware of how some traditional science and social science provides understandings of others that emphasise difference – that preserve, deepen or entrench the divide between ‘us’ (e.g., researchers or audience members) and ‘them’ (e.g., participants). We have seen this to occur, for example, in the context of mental health where research can contribute to alienating – ‘othering’ –people diagnosed with mental health problems (Newman and Holzman 1996). Performative approaches have something potentially unique to offer to help redress this problem through their ability to facilitate emotional engagement with the characters or individuals portrayed (Saldana 2011). This is likely to be important in terms of self-other relations because, as Diversi and Moreira (2009: 220) observe, ‘humans seem to focus on communality with the Other only after personal emotional connections have been made.’

While there are good reasons to respect diversity and difference – to avoid falling into the trap of assuming others are ‘like us’ – there is also a danger in entrenching a rigid self-other divide that creates the conditions for alienation. Conquergood (1986:30) suggests that, ‘the act of performance fosters identification between dissimilar ways of being without reducing the other to bland sameness.’ This challenge is something we have experienced in our research: how to portray others’ lives in a way that connects to the lives of those within a community yet resists a simplistic or reductionist representation that entrenches stereotypes. Performative approaches have helped us preserve a sense of the individuality, complexity and richness inherent in participants’ lives while also communicating a sense of shared humanity across difference.

Research into audience responses to performance ethnography (Carless and Douglas 2010; 2011) offers several insights related to the blurring of the divide between self and other. Performative work reminds us how – more often than not – *we* (as researchers-academics) are part of the social world that our research explores. Further, it helps audiences see and appreciate *their* role in that social world too. Thus, when social research investigates a problem (as it often does), performance can make it evident that researchers and audiences are, in some ways at least, part of that problem. It is rarely the case that *we* are entirely removed or divorced from the social processes or phenomena we study. Rather, it is often the case that *we* have the potential to affect or influence at least some of the issues under study. This insight, it seems to us, can easily be obscured in a scientific or realist tale yet readily apparent through performance.

Critically, audience responses have led us to appreciate that performance can stimulate audience members to develop local level knowledge that is *applicable to their own life circumstances*, professional or personal (see
Carless and Douglas 2010). Through experiencing a performance, individuals can see how they might change aspects of their own lives in ways that improve things for those with whom they interact. By showing how we (researchers, academics, audiences) contribute to shaping the social worlds we describe, analyse or interpret, performative methods can encourage a sense of community and responsibility. With this comes the potential of more meaningful connection – perhaps even advocacy and solidarity – within and across communities.

**Provide an Alternative Vision**

Gergen and Gergen (2011) suggest that performative research can *expand repertoires for social action*. In their words:

“All forms of description and explanation provide models for action. By expanding the range of communicative possibilities, so do the sciences expand the repertoires for social action. Employing drama or film, for example, not only teaches about a given topic, but it also provides new images for representation and action.”

In common with other forms of scientific and social research, performative methods have the potential to both (a) call for change and (b) propose, envision, suggest, demonstrate, or model how things could be different.

Like traditional social science, performative research might reveal or illuminate problems with currently accepted social practices. Performance is particularly well suited to, for example, reveal the constructed-ness of that which is otherwise assumed to be fact. More broadly, performative methodologies have the potential to reveal the situated-ness – the perspective-laden nature – of taken-for-granted knowledge. Moreover, good performative research does more than *deconstruct* this received knowledge – it has the potential to go beyond much social science research to offer an alternative vision. Performance can provide what Denzin (2003) terms a *utopian vision* of how a particular social phenomena or setting could be changed for the better.

We are, of course, wary of the dangers of falling for a (situated and partial) ‘utopian vision’ – the risk of forcing yet another conception of change which may not turn out to have been better after all. Yet, we do aspire in our work to offer alternative visions. A key benefit of performance, for us, is that it does not (or, at least, should not) *script* this alternative as a singular, monological, or required course of action, ‘If you write with message or moral, or lesson in mind’ Saldana suggests, ‘the result is most often a heavy handed, theme-driven fable rather than a character-inspired and story-driven drama’ (Saldana 2011:121). In this regard Barone and Eisner (2012: 122) point out that: ‘if arts based social research – like art itself – may interrogate an entrenched ideological stance regarding social phenomena it must do so without imposing a “correct” alternative ideology.’ Rather, through its openness and toleration of complexity and ambiguity, performance can *implicitly* – not explicitly – offer one or more potential alternatives as possible courses of action which audiences might consider within the context of their own lives and experiences (e.g., Sparkes 2007). Here, the important quality of *humility* becomes apparent as desirable – even necessary – in a performative researcher.

**Where Might We Go From Here?**

‘Moving into the realm of performance . . . takes the researcher into different territory that includes casting, directing, performing, and staging . . . These are not skills that researchers are ordinarily equipped with. (Sparkes 2002: 144)’
There are of course many challenges facing a researcher with a serious interest in developing their own performative practice. As Sparkes notes, *casting, directing* and *performing* are just some of them. For us, writing and performing songs were already skills we used outside academia therefore their acquisition for academic purposes was less of a challenge compared with the researcher without these skills and competencies. At the British Psychological Association Psychology of Women Conference, 2012, where Kitrina performed ‘*Signals and Signs*’ some delegates confessed they had stayed away from the performance for fear they may be asked to sing or participate. These types of responses provide an insight into the dread some individuals harbour when confronted with a performance even when there is no requirement for them to perform. It is unlikely these individuals will rush to embrace performance methodologies in their own practice, even if they acknowledge and respect the case we advance here, with good reason. Working with data creatively in a workshop and exposing one’s vulnerabilities, taking off one’s hard earned reputation for excellence and becoming a vulnerable apprentice is not an easy step. We cannot underscore how difficult this is and how damaging it can be for an individual to attempt to work creatively, and to take a risk by sharing a poem or song, only for the ‘product’ to be judged by inappropriate methods or in an inappropriate moment or manner. Yet, we also recognise there is a necessity to give constructive feedback, especially when we seek to perform in a public arena claiming the performance represents research findings.

In the short term, as evidenced, for example, by Bagley and Cancienne (2001, 2002) and Llewellyn et al (2011) collaboration can be a productive route forward. In the former example, Carl Bagley (an educational researcher) and Mary Beth Cancienne (a dancer and choreographer), and in the latter, David Llewellyn (a theatre and drama specialist) and David Gilbourne and Carmel Triggs (sport psychology researchers) created public performances of their research findings. ‘*Reaching across disciplines,*’ Jones (2006: 71) suggests, makes it possible to ensure performative work has, ‘*polish and the ability to reach our intended audiences in an engaging way.*’ While this is true, for us it still seems important for the researcher to explore the data personally, in an embodied way, in order to experience a different way of ‘coming to know’ and to also to become sensitised to the vulnerability of others who work creatively.

In the current political climate, where researchers are being increasingly called upon to make a case for investments in research by engaging the public with our research, performative approaches have something to offer. Yet, it seems only when performative methodologies are assigned a place alongside the more traditional research methods courses and continuing CPD that its potential will begin to be realised. We hope our modest insights here will prove useful.

**Appendix**

While we cannot represent the *Across the Tamar* performance on the page, we are aware that for those who have not seen the performance it may be helpful to provide a brief description of what it is we do.

As an introduction, Kitrina provides context by discussing why the research was commissioned by the Women’s Sports Foundation and how older women have been described in a great deal of research literature as *inactive* and *resistant* to physical activity promotion.

She explains briefly how we carried out the research, how we analysed the data and why we have chosen to present the findings through a performance. As she comes to the end of the introduction, David begins to play *We Crossed The Tamar*, a song inspired by the stories of several participants who travelled to Cornwall from other
areas of the UK, as younger women, often on a metaphorical and physical journey of discovery and change, full of hope for the future. This is the beginning of the performance.

This song is followed by a short story about gym and aerobics classes before David sings another song, Our Dancing Feat, which reflects several women’s descriptions of their love of dancing and shows the importance being physically held and touched in later life. After this song, Kitrina tells a story about a woman’s relationship with her dog, and follows this with a poem set to music, A Woman Of 83, in which an 83 year-old woman describes how riding her bike makes her feel like “an Arthurian knight off to seek adventure.”

This is followed by another story, echoed by many participants, regarding the importance of their grandchildren. In this humorous tale, the theme is going to the fair and riding a slide. Next, David sings the song Meet Me By The Lake, a feisty rendition representing the attitudes of those women who resisted traditional stereotypes such as frail or in need of help. There is a change in mood in the next story which takes us on a journey from a busy life in youth, to the role of caring for a husband and sister who have since died, and now to a time of being cared for. Within this story are the reflections on a woman’s reliance on carers to bath her and their sensitivity in this task. Immediately following this story David performs One Step At A Time, a song which portrays struggles and overcoming, pain and joy, set against the difficulty of climbing a set of stairs every day. We change roles for the final poem when Kitrina plays guitar while David recites a poem, When Your Time Comes. This is the ‘official’ end of the performance, but, as we bow out, on the backing track comes salsa music along with one very short extract: “Like I say I’ve got a bit of arthritis but the more I sit down the worse I am. My husband can’t get over the fact that I’m moaning that I’ve got arthritis or pain in the leg, whatever, and he says, ‘You can still go dancing!’ And I say ‘You know, Norman, as soon as the music starts I ain’t got an ache or pain nowhere!’” Finale.

A Woman of 83 can be heard at: www.boomerang-project.org.uk
One Step at a Time can be heard at: www.myspace.com/davidcarless

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1 We take *performance* in Saldana’s (2011, p. 26) terms where: “only live or electronically mediated embodied work, with thoughtfully crafted quality and artistic form presented in front of others serving as an audience, merits itself as performance.”

2 The work of Kip Jones (University of Bournemouth), David Gilbourne (University of Hull) and David Llewellyn (Liverpool John Moore’s University) are notable exceptions.

**Biographies**

**Kitrina Douglas** is an independent researcher, holds Visiting Fellowships at the University of Bristol and University of Bath and is an Ambassador for the National Coordinating Centre for Public engagement. She played professional sport for over a decade and has worked as a journalist and as a commentator for the BBC and Eurosport. Her research interests, while eclectic, reflect her interest in physical activity, mental health, narrative inquiry and creative performative methodologies.
David Carless is a Reader in narrative psychology in the Institute for Sport, Physical Activity and Leisure at Leeds Metropolitan University. His multidisciplinary research explores how mental health and identity are developed, challenged, or recovered in physical activity and sport contexts. A cornerstone of his work is the use and development of narrative, auto/ethnographic, arts-based, and performative research methods.