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Tripping, slipping and losing the way: moving beyond methodological difficulties in social research

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Introduction

This article is as much concerned with research as a social process as it is with the process of social research. It will draw extensively on ethnographic research on walking (Vergunst, 2008) and on a comparative anthropology of the line (Ingold, 2007) in order to forge a new approach to understanding the relation between movement, knowledge, description and measurement in the social sciences. By walking this particular line, we are taking the first steps towards a conceptualisation of the social researcher as journeyman, wayfarer, fellow traveller or craftsman.

The article is located within a growing body of scholarly activity that has raised fundamental questions about the epistemological bases of applied educational research. As Smith (2007) suggests, an emphasis on the epistemological basis of educational research findings[1], although laudable in intent, 'directs us to the theory of knowledge, which in the analytical form that "epistemology" strongly implies (though it need not) suggests a traditional examination in terms of, for instance, justified, true beliefs, or the distinction between knowing how and knowing that' (p 1). He points out that 'knowing, in these sorts of terms, is only one of many relevant ways of relating to the world and of imagining [or experiencing] the connection between us and it.' We broadly concur with Smith's view, and will draw upon ways of walking, discussions of embodiment, place and materiality, and a consideration of their analogues in relation to the processes of social research in order to explore alternative ways of knowing. As Smith points out, 'instead of knowing the world we might be attuned to it, sensitive to it … [we] might *resonate* with it, share its rhythms – the way we might be at one with the natural world if we opened ourselves to it instead of approaching it as scientists' (p 4) (emphasis in original).

This endeavour will take us beyond the Romantic sensibility to the environment that derives from 'standing on this pleasant lea' and '[having] glimpses that would make [us] less forlorn'[2] towards a more honest appraisal of the physical difficulties of walking, the actions of the body and its fluctuating rhythms. These are evident in the following short extract from Wordsworth's 'The Excursion' (1814):

> Across a bare wide Common I was toiling
> With languid steps that by the slippery turf
> Were baffled; nor could my weak arm disperse
> The host of insects gathering round my face

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[1] This relates to a seminar on the 'epistemological basis of educational research findings' under the auspices of the ESRC's Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP) http://www.tlrp.org/themes/seminar/bridges.html

[2] William Wordsworth 'The world is too much with us' (1807).

The social realities with which we grappled in the research project described below were also baffling and slippery, complex, uncertain and contingent (Law, 2003; 2004; Law & Singleton, 2000; Law & Hetherington, 1998; Griffiths & Macleod, 2008; Pirrie & Macleod, forthcoming). The specific methodological challenges that we encountered were intense experiences that ruled out the style of representation that one might find in a handbook on social science research methods. The analogy with the experience of walking is as follows: if a walker slips and is injured on rough terrain, the character of the walk changes radically. His account, 'often told in a humorous and entertaining style … appropriate to the easy sociability of hill walking' (Vergunst, 2008, p 106) will take precedence over the neutral descriptions of routes that appear in guidebooks. Such accounts attest to the actuality of walking, to its very unpredictability, to 'the sheer presence of the body in the world' that we believe is the key to reflexivity.

We shall draw a distinction between what Ingold (2007) has described as 'occupant' and 'inhabitant' knowledge (p 89). These forms of knowledge are related to radically different conceptions of what it is to do applied research in the social sciences. The former is associated with cartographic metaphors (for example, an exploration of the 'routes, destinations and outcomes' of a group of young people) and an imaginary 'bird's eye' view (or rather an impossible everywhere-at-once-view) that glides effortlessly across a planar surface. Knowledge 'is integrated not going *along,* but by building *up*, that is by fitting these site-specific fragments [or in research terms "findings"] into structures of ever greater inclusiveness' (p 88). Inhabitant knowledge, on the other hand, is concerned with textures, with a form of lived experience that is derived from an at times uncertain engagement with 'protrusion or flatness, stickiness, roughness or smoothness, felt according to the conditions of the feet and the judgement of the eyes' (Vergunst, 2008). Inhabitant knowledge is more akin to attentive wayfaring than to embarking upon a journey. The wayfarer 'has no final destination, for wherever he is, and so long as life goes on, there is somewhere further he can go' (Ingold, 2007, p 77). The wayfarer 'knows as he goes' (Ingold, 2000, pp 229-30). Occupant knowledge rests upon a fundamental distinction between locomotion (research process) and perception (research 'findings'). The traveller is oriented towards a particular destination or series of destinations. He is enlivened and recovers his sense of agency only upon arrival, and is frequently inconvenienced in transit. Ingold (2007) observes that 'the tourist may be advised to expunge from memory the experience of getting there, however arduous or eventful it may have been, lest it should bias or detract from the appreciation of what he has come to see' (p 79). By the same token, accounts of the difficulties in conducting research are generally suppressed in sanitised reports of research findings that carry strong implications of empiricism. Smith (2007) points out that 'it would be odd to present, for instance, a sociological perspective, philosophical analysis or a set of

creative insights as any kind of *findings*' (p 2, emphasis in the original).

As will already be apparent, this article is also concerned with the central role played by metaphor and analogy in enabling us to make sense of the social world (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Hofstadter, 2006). Hofstadter defines analogy as 'the triggering of prior mental categories by some kind of input'. He adumbrates the notion of the 'central cognitive loop', namely the process of cognition that is influenced both by an individual's personal history and through their interaction with others. As Hofstadter explains, 'each person, as life progresses, develops a set of high-level concepts that they tend to favour, and their perception is continually seeking to cast the world in terms of those concepts.'[3] These high-level concepts (and their respective advantages and limitations) are a function of researchers' individual histories and of their current dominant *modus operandi* as journeymen, wayfarers, fellow travellers or craftsmen.

An epistemology based on allegory will enable us to capture what is missing from more conventional approaches to the representation of 'things that slip and slide, or appear and disappear, change shape or don't have much shape at all' (Law, 2004, p 2). The article concludes with a brief exploration of Kafka's parable *Der Kreisel* (the spinning top) in order to illustrate the ways in which literature can open doors to the imagination and enable an ethical response to a complex social reality.

Tripping, slipping and losing the way

Before we begin our account of tripping, slipping and losing the way, it is instructive to consider the example of the artist Richard Long. He construes art as 'a formal and holistic description of the real space and experience of landscape and its most elemental materials'.[4] He has made most of his work by walking: in straight lines across grass fields, 'going nowhere', as he puts it; and in map works that recorded 'simple but precise walks on Exmoor and Dartmoor'. He considers his landscape sculptures to 'inhabit the rich territory between two ideological positions, namely that of making "monuments" or conversely of "leaving only footprints". This is as good a description of our current enterprise as we are likely to find. For here we are mainly concerned with research leavings, i.e. the traces left by the footprints of the 'walkers' — the researchers as wayfarers, journeymen, fellow travellers and craftsmen — and by those of the young people that were the object of enquiry. If we can be said to be making a monument at all, then this is one that may further our understanding of how social science works.

Our walks were never simple and precise, and they rarely took us in a straight line across green grass. Ethnographers of walking have revealed that tripping, slipping and losing the way are integral to the experience of walking, even in the city.

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[3] http://prelectur.stanford.edu/lecturers/hofstadter/analogy.html

[4] http://www.richardlong.org/

Moreover, they argue that it is mishaps such as these that 'tell us something about the relationship between the walker and his or her immediate surroundings' (Vergunst, 2008, p 109). Vergunst suggests that this relationship involves forms of knowledge that are very close to how Taussig (1992) described the sense of the everyday

> Surely this sense includes much that is not sense so much as sensuousness, an embodied and somewhat automatic "knowledge" that functions like peripheral vision, not studied contemplation, a knowledge that is *imageric* and sensate rather than ideational' (my emphasis) (p 141)

The everyday occupies the space between the general and the particular. This is fertile ground for the 'concrete, context-dependent knowledge' that according to Flyvbjerg (2001) is the real strength of social science. Flyvbjerg develops a conception of the social sciences that is founded upon a modern reading of the Aristotelian concept of *phronesis*. As he explains:

> *Phronesis* goes beyond both analytical, scientific knowledge (*episteme*) and technical knowledge or know-how (*techne*) and involves judgements and decisions made in the manner of a virtuoso social and political actor' (p 2)

Flyvbjerg's virtuoso social and political actor has much in common with Ingold's wayfarer, who demonstrates inhabitant knowledge and makes judgements and decisions as he moves along. Flyvbjerg argues that the production of explanatory and predictive, that is to say epistemic, theory is the preserve of the natural sciences; and that the 'two types of science [natural and social sciences] have their respective strengths and weaknesses along fundamentally different dimensions' (p 3). Epistemic theory is similar to occupant knowledge in that it is built *up* rather than *along*. This is in marked contrast to how we might proceed if we were to practise social science as *phronesis*. The way in which the American novelist and painter Henry Miller describes his creative process is particularly illuminating, in so far as it bears a striking resemblance to the practice of wayfaring as elaborated by Ingold (2007):

> My whole work has come to resemble a terrain of which I have made a thorough, geodetic survey, not from a desk with pen and ruler, but by touch, by getting down on all fours, on my stomach, and crawling over the ground inch by inch, and this over an endless period of time in all conditions of weather (Miller, 1941, cited in Flyvbjerg 2001, p 133)

As ethnographers of the research process, crawling over the ground inch by inch, we discovered that mishaps and enforced detours intrude into even the most meticulous of research designs; moreover, that the route-plan is often a less effective means of orientation than the drawn sketch. It transpired that these mishaps and disruptions were more than transient inconveniences to be systematically underplayed in any account of our findings: rather, they were the mechanisms that elicited a reflexive (rather than a mere reflex) response, and functioned as 'particularly pointed examples of becoming aware of what an environment is *really* like' (Vergunst, 2008, p 114). Let us now get down on our hands and knees and explore the research environment.

Boxing the compass

The initial point of reference is an exploration of the methodological challenges that arose during a three-year longitudinal study of a group of thirty young people who had been permanently excluded from a special school or Pupil Referral Unit (PRU) in the 2005-2006 school year. The aim of the project was 'to identify and explore the routes, destinations and outcomes of young people who have been permanently excluded from a Pupil Referral Unit (PRU) or a special school for pupils with behavioural, emotional and social difficulties (BESD)'. The Department for Education and Skills (DfES) (now the Department for Children Schools and Families – DCSF) commissioned the research in response to a specific recommendation in the report of the Practitioners' Group on School Behaviour and Discipline [The Steer Report] (DfES, 2005). The report had raised serious concerns about the quality of educational provision for young people with challenging behaviour (DfES, 2005, p 9). The Steer Report recognised that 'there are occasions when it is necessary to exclude pupils from a PRU or a BESD special school (including residential schools)', but questions were raised about 'what alternative forms of education are available for these most vulnerable pupils, particularly in smaller authorities that may only have one PRU' (DfES, 2005, p 57).

It soon became clear the Department's focus on routes, destinations and outcomes framed the research enterprise in a way that was to prove fundamentally unproductive. Why? Perhaps Ingold (2007) can set us on the right trail here. He asks us to imagine a flourish made on a page by the gesture of a hand holding a pen. The particular line he has in mind is the one traced in the air by the Corporal in Laurence Sterne's *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy*, first published in 1762 (Sterne, 1978, p 743). This type of line is 'intrinsically dynamic and temporal' and leaves a trace that we can still read today. Ingold contrasts this with another kind of line, which he describes as a line in a hurry. This is a line from which any traces of movement have been removed: it is 'more like a series of appointments than a walk' (Klee, 1961, p 109). In order that we might visualise this type of line more clearly, Ingold (2007, pp 73-74) invites us to conduct the following experiment. Take the line produced by the Corporal's stick-waving gesture and cut it into segments of approximately equal length. Then wind up each segment like a thread until it disappears into a single dot. We are then presented with a scatter of dots that we could, if so inclined, join up again as in a child's dot-to-dot puzzle. However, this endeavour would not feel like child's play, and the result would bear only a faint resemblance to the original flourish. There would be no trace of movement, and we would end up with a chain of connections between fixed points. The pattern that the joined-up dots would eventually form 'is already given as a virtual object from the outset' (p 74), quite unlike the line that goes for a walk. The analogy with the research process is as follows. Much of our energy was focused on determining transition points, drilling down into black holes. What

was the date of this child's permanent exclusion? How many fixed-term exclusions had there been prior to that? When was he finally admitted to [Facility X]? Why had he been placed on the Child Protection Register? When (and why) had he been removed from the Register? Our inability to find the answers to apparently straightforward questions of this type resulted in some tense discussions amongst the research team and occasional bouts of self-moralising. Were we really such shoddy, ineffective researchers? After all, was it not a relatively simple matter to determine what was on a young person's statement of special educational needs (SEN)? Were we asking the wrong people? Why did we rarely find ourselves talking to anyone who had actually *read* a particular child's statement, or even one who knew where it was? Were we simply not being persistent enough?

Our initial response to the difficulties outlined above was to treat them as technical problems that could be overcome with persistence and determination. We would then embark upon yet another series of telephone calls and emails in our attempt to recruit 30 young people to the study and to discover more about their wayfaring. This meant that we frequently had discussions of the type illustrated below:

> Researcher A: I finally got through to Mr X, who thinks he will be able to pass on the details we need. I'll leave it for a few days before I get back to him.
>
> Researcher B: That's great. I've sent Mrs B the project leaflets, and said that I would get back in touch again once I'd had a reply from Mr P.
>
> Researcher C: I've sent 16 emails to five different professionals, and I still don't feel I'm even getting close. The question is how long do I give it?
>
> Researcher D: If this is what you're going through, just think for a moment about what it must be like for some parents, who are trying to get what their child needs, or just to get some information. There's abundant research evidence to suggest that they won't have your resources, in terms of levels of education, knowledge of the system, social capital or even just access to the internet and someone to pick up the telephone bill. Just think what it must be like for them…

The inhabitant knowledge that these experiences generated was that we came to regard what had at first appeared to be logistical problems as significant research 'findings' in their own right. Moreover, it appeared that by focusing on enumerating instances (e.g. number of fixed-terms exclusions) and on detailed mapping of 'routes, destinations and outcomes' (subsequent placements; negotiation of access; patterns of attendance; achievement and attainment, etc), we lost sight of an essential feature of wayfaring:

> …while on the trail the wayfarer is always somewhere, yet every 'somewhere' is on the way to something else. The inhabited world is a reticulate meshwork of such trails, which is continually being woven as life goes on along them. (Ingold, 2007, p 84)

The traveller, on the other hand, is one who 'departs from one location and arrives at another and is, in between, nowhere at all' (p 84). We were systematically

attempting to reduce the liminal, the space in-between or in the margins (Conroy, 2004). Although Conroy's 'cornerstone metaphor' is primarily spatial, he extends its meaning to encompass the interpersonal and the temporal (e.g. transitional periods in a person's life) (Why was it so hard to find someone who 'held the child's story'? Why was it so difficult to assign events to dates and to arrange them in chronological order?) It became evident that the young people participating in the study lived *in* the world but were not *of* the world. That is to say that they were not of a world in which constructions of educational practice and conceptions of human flourishing were constrained by the metaphors of calculation, management and technology. Our failure to take full account of the liminal meant that the young people's full humanity faded from view. Moreover, it demonstrated that we too were subject to the pressures of the prevailing culture of accountability (O'Neill, 2002) that had resulted in many of the difficulties we had experienced in recruiting the sample in the first place.

It is instructive to draw on the ethnography of walking to illustrate the impact that these experiences had on the research team. Vergunst (2008) describes in some detail what happens when walkers lose their way on a remote hillside. He describes the formation of a 'coterie' in the walk. This is a distinctive gathering that takes place when there is a large group of people present. Three or four people break away from the main group and huddle over a map, discussing the progress of the hike and the extent to which the group might have lost its way. This is one way of spreading responsibility, particularly in difficult circumstances, beyond the 'leaders'. However, getting lost imposes a strain on social relationships. Whose fault is this? Why did we take that route? Why did she walk on ahead? Why should we listen to her? Did I not say that this was going to happen?

There is a fairly limited body of literature on the emotional impact of research on the researcher (Young & Lee, 1996; Hubbard *et al*, 2000; Grinyer, 2005). This has tended to focus on the emotive nature of the topic under consideration rather than on the conditions of knowledge production and the constraints imposed by conducting government-funded research in a competitive market environment. The issue of differing perspectives within the research team is also rarely addressed in the literature, even by those authors who invoke the notion of reflexivity. Let us recall the moment we set out on this particular walk.

Desperately seeking data

We attempted to negotiate access to a sample of thirty young people with 'formal gatekeepers who work for statutory agencies with a remit to control or supervise … and who [had] limited community involvement' (Emmel *et al*, 2007). The process of identifying the gatekeepers, typically social workers, members of local Youth Offending Team (YOT) or Connexions PAs, was considerably more protracted than originally anticipated. This was in part due to the complex needs of many of the young people recruited to the study. Their varying degrees of engagement with a wide range of service providers made it difficult to identify a

key worker who had actually *met* the young person (rather than merely met a standard of practice by, for example, making an appropriate referral or discussing a case with a colleague). This made the identification of a trusted intermediary more difficult. There was also substantial variation in the extent to which gatekeepers were prepared to reveal information about individual young people who met the inclusion criteria for the study. Some were reluctant to disclose information about the current whereabouts of the young people, even to professional researchers conducting a government-funded research project, and when provided with the customary assurances in respect of confidentiality and data protection. On the other hand, there were some who were prepared to discuss confidential information over the telephone, as they believed that this was in the best interests of the young people concerned. It soon became evident that one of the assumptions underpinning the research design was unfounded. We had assumed that the Directors of Children's Services in the local authorities concerned would be able to identify *one* person responsible for education other than at school (EOTAS) in their authority. Furthermore, we had taken it for granted that this person would have a clear overview of the destinations of the very small minority of pupils permanently excluded from special schools or alternative provision in that authority. Neither of these assumptions turned out to be correct. Moreover here was considerable variation in both the range and the degree of specificity of the designations of the local authority contacts provided. We were initially directed to inclusion service managers, exclusion managers, alternative education services, heads of departments of special educational needs, behaviour/pupil support services, school attendance officers and education welfare personnel. These individuals were located at different points in professional hierarchies, and the degree to which they had an overview of the trajectories of individual young people varied substantially. This led us to conclude that the young people in the sample were 'hard to reach', 'hard to find' 'vulnerable' or otherwise 'in need of protection' (McNab *et al*, 2007; Atkinson & Flint, 2001; Brackertz, 2007; Arthur, 2004) not merely by virtue of an innate quality. They were described in this way because hard-pressed professionals were falling victim to the 'supposed crisis of public trust' that O'Neill (2002) considers is actually a 'culture of suspicion'; and to its proposed remedy, the search for more perfect accountability. This manifested itself in 'detailed conformity to procedures and protocols, detailed record keeping and provision of information in specified formats and success in reaching targets' (O'Neill, 2002). Time and time again we found ourselves perusing volumes of repetitive narrative stored in box files in social services departments, only to discover that we could not make sense of any of this information until we could identify someone who 'held the story'.

It is instructive to look at the evolution of the term 'vulnerable', as it was so frequently invoked by the respondents to justify non-compliance with simple requests for information. The term 'vulnerable group' first came to the fore in the 1980s, and became increasingly prominent in the 1990s (Furedi, 2006; 2007).

Furedi recounts how Frankenberg *et al* (2000) searched Bath Information and Data Services (BIDS) [a bibliographic database used by the academic community] for the period 1986 to 1998 and found over 800 peer-reviewed articles that focused on the relationship between vulnerability and children. The authors note that 'while in the first four years of this period, there were under 10 references each year to vulnerability and children, an exponential increase to well over 150 papers a year occurred from 1990 onwards.' Furedi notes that 'in the late 1980s the word "vulnerable" started being used to describe people's intrinsic identities. 'Vulnerability was no longer seen as something that springs from specific circumstances, for example poverty; rather it was considered to be an inherent condition of the individual' (2007, p 7). The inherent 'sense of powerlessness and fragility' conveyed by the notion of 'vulnerable' or a 'vulnerable group' appears to be fundamentally at odds with the centrality accorded to young people's agency and aspiration in *Every Child Matters* (HM Government, 2004). Neither does it reflect the self-perception of a number of the young people who participated in the study. Ivan, for example, who had been permanently excluded from a PRU for carrying a knife, thought of himself as streetwise and tough. The headteacher of the primary school he was currently attending saw a different side to him, as he sat cross-legged on the floor of her office playing with a toy designed for a much younger child. Isaac knew where to get drugs and motorbikes. Yet his eyes filled with tears and he became very quiet when his caseworker disclosed during the researcher's visit that he was unlikely to be released early from the Young Offenders' Institution where he was serving a 15-month sentence for burglary and theft. These stories, and many others like them, illustrate that vulnerability is context-dependent and variable.

Chasing the spinning top

We have alluded to divergences of opinion within the research team as to whether we could impose some kind of narrative coherence on a complex social reality. We had set out with 'an ontological commitment to singularity', yet what we were now experiencing was 'the epistemological frustration that comes from perceived representational failure' (Law and Singleton, 2000, p 11). To return once again to the metaphors of walking, we had set off on a stiff climb armed with a reliable guidebook to find ourselves falling into a steep chasm and *Touching the Void* (Simpson, 1998). Not only did we experience a degree of representational failure and the ensuing recriminations, but also, initially at least, we were unable to move from a consideration of the particular towards one of the general. In short, we were failing in our mission as social scientists.

There are certain parallels between our activities and the *modus operandi* of the philosopher in Kafka's parable *Der Kreisel* (the spinning top). Kafka describes how a philosopher watches intently as a group of children play with a spinning top. As soon as the top starts to spin, he springs into action and tries to stop it in its tracks, quite oblivious to the children's cries of protest. He does this time and time

again, but his elation is always short-lived. No sooner has he caught the spinning top than he throws it to the ground in disgust and disbelief.

Kafka explains that the philosopher believes that it is only by fully apprehending the smallest detail — in this case the motion of the spinning top — that he can understand the general. So he ignores the big issues (specifically power relations) and focuses exclusively, indeed almost obsessively, on the workings of a gaudy toy. Oblivious to the children around him, he launches himself in a vertiginous rush at the spinning top, only to find that he is holding a useless piece of wood. He staggers off, deafened by the jeers and shouts of the protesting children.

Perhaps Kafka's philosopher should have understood that it was the very act of grasping the top that put the apprehension of its qualities out of reach. Perhaps he should have been more attentive to the forces that set it in motion in the first place, namely the children whose play he persistently interrupted. What would have happened if he had paid more attention to his surroundings and observed the children in their game? Would he have learned more about the operation of the top? Might he have become more aware of his own limitations? We experienced similar frustrations as our attempts to ascertain the answers to relatively simple questions were repeatedly thwarted.

Kafka's parable reminds of the necessity of the broader attitude of attentiveness rather than obsessive attention to detail. Parables such as the one discussed above can enable us to exercise our ethical imagination, to move beyond the particular and to see the bigger picture. It is only by doing this that we will achieve our mission and traverse the rocky mountain.

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