

## Editorial: A Conversation about Performative Social Science

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ambiguity,  
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**Abstract:** Conversing by e-mail and mediated by an imaginary cyber-moderator, two of the co-editors of this Special Issue on Performative Social Science (PSS) Mary GERGEN and Kip JONES, themselves pioneers of PSS, engage in conversation around such topics as creativity, skill and craft, outputs and outcomes, aesthetics, audience, evaluation, interpretation, scholarship, ambiguity, talking and doing, and inter-disciplinary collaborations. While GERGEN concludes that action is meaningful and rich in symbolic significance, JONES, like Norma DESMOND, speculates that PSS "is big; it's the pictures that got smaller".

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**CYBER-MODERATOR: A few pioneering social scientists have been using tools from the arts, particularly through drama, to engage audiences for some time now. Recently, however, there seems to be an explosion of interest in all of the arts and their possibilities within social science and more academics are beginning to explore their own creativity. We encourage this, but should we also acknowledge the limitations of an individual to produce outputs which are professional enough to reach audiences and withstand scrutiny? Are skills and craft necessary components of this new method? How is all of this "evaluated"? [1]**

MARY: When I hear the word, "creativity" I imagine the aesthetic world: artists at their easels, sculptors chiselling away at blocks of marble, actors proclaiming lines of SHAKESPEARE, and musicians, poets, and novelists creating new artistic pieces, often alone in their studios. But then I remind myself that scientists have a lore of creativity, as well, which stretches far back in time. Each strand of creativity is revered within its own discipline, but the two streams seem quite separate from one another. The visual artist, musician or writer live in the world of fantasy and fiction, (with internal norms according to the "group" with which they are identified), while the scientist's creativity is identified within the strict confines of an established discipline, which is bound by rules, laws, and strict protocols of behaviour. I think the cross-over that we have witnessed in this Special Issue of *FQS* has heralded the bridging of the two streams of creativity. Both the aesthetic means, as promoted by those we call artists, and social science concerns, as advanced by scientists, are melded into a unified whole. [2]

Yes, they are there, but, as you ask, is the artistic side of the equation good enough to be appreciated by today's audiences? One might equally pose the question as to whether a good performance piece, with fascinating aesthetic quality, is sufficient as a work of science, as judged by contemporary standards

of the scientists? Clearly to become a highly appreciated artist, one usually must work very hard at the craft and use all forms of connivance and collusion to make a dent in the highly competitive world of art, as I have heard about it second hand. And an equally arduous path awaits the ambitious scientist, eager to find a journal in which to publish a manuscript. What is the balance that is needed, as a social scientist, to be accepted in the sciences, while producing an aesthetic piece? [3]

Given the competitive nature of both strands and the expectations of the audience, it might seem that the project of PSS is doomed to failure. Yet, this is not the case, and I think one reason for this is that the positioning of artistic modes of creativity together with issues and ideas familiar within the scholarly fields is in itself sufficiently novel and illuminating that no one seems to mind if all the highest glory of either one is attained in the cross-over. [4]

I think of a project in which people were interviewed about significant events in their lives, and from the interview transcripts, researchers created poetic phrases in which they took the liberty of creating the emphasis that they thought the interviewee had projected in the tone of their voice, the redundancy of the comments, and their emotional expressiveness. Through altering the interview comments, and using repetition, a deeper, and more informative outcome was attained, one that was more useful in gaining understanding than a strict report of the interview statements would have been. [5]

Ken GERGEN and I have talked about the professionalism that is lacking in most artistic productions by social scientists. He takes the point of view that "amateurism" is more likely to spawn new productions and projects than a totally slick performance will. If the performers are too good, they suggest that only a special and gifted few are able to advance the PSS agenda. I tend to agree, but there have been some performances, especially when we did a five year long annual symposium at APA (American Psychological Association) conferences called Performative Psychology, when I thought the line had been crossed between amateurish and embarrassing. How amateurish can we be and still be taken seriously? That's the question that is taunting us all, I would say. [6]

KIP: You bring up many points that I have also been considering. "Amateur and embarrassing" productions is one that I have often worried over. I have referred before to these kinds of productions as the Mickey and Judy response: "I know what we'll do! We'll put on a show!" I doubt that in those movies ROONEY or GARLAND ever actually raised enough cash to save the farm. It is also worrying that social scientists' knee-jerk response to the "performative" is too often to put on a play. There is a plethora of tools from the arts that can be explored to order for production to fit the research itself and the potential audience. I would suggest considering other media, particularly new media. Or could your paper become a radio play, for example? Or could it be turned into an open scripted community event with participants moving from audience to performer and back again? In the end, could the audience 'write' the play? How could the paper be represented visually? Could it be danced without words? Is there music that comes to mind

when you think about the narrative and how could this be used to montage the story aurally? This issue of *FQS* gives many fine examples of the range of alternative artistic possibilities for social scientists. [7]

MARY: In terms of evaluation: All evaluation is from some standpoint, and some forms have longer, clearer and more accepted histories than others. You fail or pass A levels, (correct me if I am wrong) In the U.K., and in the U.S., we have a combined score for our SAT's (Scholarship Apptitude Test) of 1,600 or less. When it comes to artistic ability or social skills, we are on shakier grounds. I don't think anyone doing performative social science would claim that there are conventional standards by which to judge a piece. It is an open question. Perhaps we don't want to come to a conclusion about what counts or is good or bad. Perhaps we would like to leave it open, in the realm of the relational—that is, the reactions of people who engage with the performative piece is what counts. And then, that too is open to response. In general, I think we don't want the performance creators to have the last word, nor the inter-actors or audience, nor the reviewers or critics. That said, journal editors, colleagues, hiring and tenure committees, and other gatekeepers will have their says. That is the way of the world. Should there be a last word? Whose should it be? [8]

KIP: Standards for "judging" performative work need to be found within contemporary aesthetics. We would not scrutinise textual production of social science by standards from 50 or 100 years ago, so why would we do that with aesthetics? In post-modern times, should we be "judging" or evaluating at all? Wouldn't it be better to think in terms of how production is communicating with local communities, contributing to conviviality, even change? Is the audience's experience enough? How are they relating and responding to us? [9]

When we move to the performative, as researchers, we cede "control" of interpretation of our work to our audience. This is the singularly most important shift in social science practice that PSS makes. Ironically and at the same time, we gift ourselves with the opportunity to be more interpretive, more intuitive, more creative, in our outputs. Our job is not so much to convince as to provoke and stimulate. [10]

The reality is that social scientists may very well feel that their skills are inadequate to move into the realm of the arts and media production. This is where collaboration becomes central to this new movement. By forming partnerships with practitioners from the arts, we again "cede control" of our work and open up the possibility of further interpretation by others. [11]

Having explored this in workshop circumstances, I see a clear division in ways of proceeding that has become apparent. The social scientist tends to want to spend a lot of time thinking and talking about what s/he might do to expressively interpret her/his work; the artist tends to grab tools and materials and begin to experiment and play with concepts and possibilities. Learning to work in this creative way is a lesson worth learning if social scientists want to work creatively and productively. Perhaps a "guilty pleasures" example: The TV fashion design

programmes, Project Runway (US version) or Project Catwalk (UK version), give budding designers a challenge project in each episode. The artists make sketches of their ideas first; usually for about ten minutes. The rest of the allotted time (about two days) is spent *creating* their vision. The process of *doing* is the creative endeavour. This lesson is crucial for social scientists wishing to engage in creative undertakings of their own making. [12]

It is not impossible for social scientists to expand their skill and craft in creative ways of developing their work. This takes some humility and the ability to embrace "not knowing". If we want to produce visually, learn to see better; if we want to work with sound, learn to hear better; if we want to use physicality, get to know our bodies better. Most of all, these efforts will take the commitment to look beyond the narrow confines of our own disciplines to the wider world, even worlds other than our own. I know that I personally have learned more about producing performative social science, for example, by watching Kylie MINOGUE than by reading Judith BUTLER. If "camp" can be seen as a production technique, then I certainly owe more to the former than the latter. I remain steadfastly committed to a fusion between popular culture and serious scholarship in order to reach wider audiences with my own work. [13]

Thinking performatively is about putting aside that analytical part of ourselves that normally deals with data and such, and moving to the other side of the equation and getting in touch with that earlier place where we were energized by the data itself—how it was sparking ideas that were coming from our own personal experience which, every creative person will tell you, is the fount of all creativity. It's also about communication; it's about how we are going to develop our skills in collaborating with someone who is speaking a different language, coming from a different background; going through that learning process is almost as important as the end product itself. Where I see people going a bit off is when they want to sit and talk about, "What is Truth?" and other cerebral gymnastics that we all do all the time anyway. In reality, it's more about how do we find our creative impulse and how can we contribute that to the experience. It isn't the end production, really. Ultimately, is it possible to collaborate and produce something creatively that is better than having research printed in a journal? It's one of those either/or things and you may walk away and say, "I'd rather have my material printed in a journal", and that's one answer. If, however, you're interested in tapping into a zeitgeist in a wider arena than just standard scholarship, PSS is one way to go. [14]

**CYBER-MODERATOR: Both artists and researchers typically work in isolation. How do we encourage cooperation, collaboration and dialogue across disciplines? How do we facilitate creative encounters and relationships between artists and researchers that will lead to joint efforts and outputs? Is a community (physical or virtual) necessary in order to produce this work? [15]**

MARY: Indeed, I think that there must be those who engage in brokering arrangements that cross disciplines. Conferences, on-line exemplars, small group gatherings in academic settings across disciplinary boundaries, all are needed.

Journals such as *Qualitative Inquiry* and, of course *FQS* in particular, are helpful in providing models of what might be possible for the weak of heart. The activities that you, Kip, and your online and live colleagues have been promoting are central to this mission. [16]

Today, looking at the [Performative Social Science listserv](#) I was delighted to see that new interdisciplinary degrees are being created that merge the interests of people who are eager to participate across some boundary that separates the performative and the scientific. For example, an MA in Media Ethnography is being considered at the Art and Design Research Institute at Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU). What does the future portend for the students taking such a degree? Will they find work or non-academic activity that will be advanced by this type of education? Is this type of program a foolhardy endeavour or a harbinger of the next wave in our culture? [17]

KIP: Interesting that you bring up that particular offering at MMU, Mary. The organizer, Amanda RAVITZ, a visual anthropologist, was one of the facilitators in Bournemouth's workshop series in PSS. Interesting because this demonstrates how PSS is moving forward in step changes and becoming more solidly embedded in academic practice. Another example: I am now working with postgrad students from the Media School here at Bournemouth and I have been offered a cross-School appointment in order to bring these two worlds together: Health and Social Science and Media. "Ambiguity" seems to be moving into the Academy then! [18]

**CYBER-MODERATOR: Kip mentions the word "ambiguity". He seems to like this as a word and concept, but what does it mean? By building ambiguity into our productions, are we further fuelling audience participation in discovery of meaning? Or, are we simply blurring the boundaries of our outputs because we are unsure of their meaning? [19]**

MARY: I suspect a bit of tongue in cheek here as you ponder the lack of clarity in the meaning of the term ambiguity. What if it is possible that building in ambiguity is both an attempt to help the audience to discover new meanings and to signal our own lack of certainty? Or what if it is sometimes one and sometimes the other? [20]

KIP: Well, "ambiguity" actually came up recently at a funder's consultation event in terms of "predicting" what the outputs might be for future research and this is, of course, always an exercise in the ambiguous. The delight was in the fact that we were actually admitting to it! Since it was a roomful of mostly creative types, the audience seized upon the word and decided to work with it, rather than against it. We agreed that researcher/artists could gain a great deal from the concept of ambiguity as method. "Findings" in the traditional sense would be sidelined or even banished. Dissemination would become method. Researchers would move from the safety of "knowing" to the uncertainty of "not knowing" (HEIDEGGER). Data would return to its place of importance as resources for explorations of multiple understandings and keys for further engagement by wider

communities beyond Academia. Knowledge would be constructed socially in a relational way within a participatory society. The researcher would become a gatherer, a facilitator, a curator, a Wizard of Oz. Text would become only one tool within a toolbox of many instruments. Silence would be golden. [21]

MARY: A different "take" on this concept is to suggest that ambiguity never is the product of one "author" but is always already in relation to others who are involved in the performance. One might even try to leave the door open to an ambiguous reading, but find that it is shut without anyone even noticing that there were other options for interpretations. Isn't it also the case that sometimes an interpretation is made of something you created that is far from what you thought you did, but then you can also see the path by which the other found that meaning? I have had that happen to me. Do you see a relational approach as one that might be a way of addressing this conundrum? [22]

KIP: Yes, I agree with you on this from my own experience. I was writing recently about my Princess Margaret production (also written about in FQS, JONES 2007) in a piece entitled, "Rough Talk and Chocolate Brownies" (JONES, 2008):

*"When I used to paint pictures, (I would say 'for a living', except that there is not much of a living to be made from painting pictures), the thing that always amazed me was how viewers would/could put themselves into the pictures' stories and relate to the paintings personally. These narrative canvasses usually chronicled something from my private life—and this created the irony of this phenomenon."* [23]

This is exactly what I mean when I talk about ceding control of interpretation to the audience. Academically speaking, we could then talk about BOURRIAUD's Relational Aesthetics and how Relational Art is located in human interactions and their social contexts. (I have written at length about this elsewhere, JONES, 2006). When at its best, this is what PSS is doing or attempting to do. [24]

**CYBER-MODERATOR: SHAKESPEARE wrote: "Talkers are no great doers". How does that apply in the sense of research dissemination that moves "beyond text"? [25]**

MARY: You are suggesting that one of the advantages of performative work is that it extends beyond "just talk" to something more akin to doing. In some sense, I think we never move beyond text, even in the midst of intense action, but that is only because action is defined as being meaningful ... and thus rich in symbolic significance. However, performative work is more than talk, and it is more potentially interactive than listening or reading. So it does seem that it is ahead of the game in terms of being a doing, rather than just a talking. [26]

KIP: Yes, and it is the artist's inclination to "do" that I referred to earlier. If we want to be creative in our outputs, we will need to engage in a "paradigm" shift—from talking to doing. Moving beyond text and words and employing the power of sound, movements and pictures, all moving towards the development of the potential of alternative means of communication of social science data. This

makes it possible to *return* to text with a much more creative and playful concept of the potential of text. Think KEROUAC, BURROUGHS, et al. or even earlier than that, STEIN and JOYCE. Many of the articles in this Special Issue embrace this long tradition of creative textural production. [27]

**CYBER-MODERATOR: Does PSS "fit" within a larger framework of research and natural "shifts" that are already occurring in academic study and research? Where are the "new PSS" researchers coming from? Why is this happening now? [28]**

KIP: What fascinates me is how shifts and changes occur simultaneously, often globally, within and across various disciplines. I am convinced that it is when one discipline is "talking" to another that these shifts begin. Sometimes, collaborating across disciplines also comes into play. One shift in higher education in recent years has been an engagement in postgraduate study by older, more seasoned students. This often means that these students bring with them life and work experience from outside the confines of the particular academic discipline of their current study. These postgrad students can not necessarily be led down one linear academic path and are more willing to engage with thinking "across disciplines" and bring to their efforts experiences from outside the walls of Academia. Those particularly attracted to PSS in higher education include people with backgrounds and experience from the media, as painters, musicians, etc., who are now engaged under the wide umbrella of Social Science scholarship in some way. These are the initial pioneers of PSS who bring both the utility of their arts-based backgrounds and creative problem solving skills to their academic pursuits. These are the same people who saw standard PowerPoint presentations and said, "Hey! We can do this better!" [29]

MARY: I do agree with you, Kip. I hadn't thought about the influence of older students, who do bring with them a fuller array of experiences than the traditional younger student. I also think that the influence of post-modern thinking has been important. One of the ideas that I think is influencing the borderland borrowings is that there is scepticism about the necessity of there being a special form that presentations must take on. Rather, there is no sacred language that must be used in order to engage in disciplinary work. Being able to step back and question why an article must be written in a particular way or why the line must be drawn between poetry and prose, or why first person indicators must be avoided—all become open to question. [30]

**CYBER-MODERATOR: How have rapid changes in technology contributed to the evolution of PSS? Is PSS a reaction to technology or a beneficiary? We seem to bounce between worldwide anonymous audiences for our efforts and local audiences and communities, encounters very anchored in restricted space, place and time. Should we be working at both macro and micro level, or is one more important than the other? [31]**

KIP: I am intrigued at the moment in working on both levels simultaneously. An example: sometimes people from Australia, Canada, or the USA will e-mail me

when we are putting on a Masterclass or Workshop in PSS here at Bournemouth in the UK and ask: "Can you put the event on the web so that we can watch from here?" My gut reaction is, no, it is not the same thing. These are local events and it is in the participation that the work is accomplished. These are not "lectures" in any traditional academic sense. The majority of the time is spent "doing", as discussed earlier. On the other hand, I had no problem at all in making a short film (JONES & MALLABY, 2007) ABOUT the experience of the workshops, interviewing some participants and "teasing" the audience with visuals representing some of the activities—without being prescriptive. This was in order to encourage the audience to consider these possibilities for themselves, what *they* could do, think about what *their* workshop might be like and so forth. The video has been viewed over 1,000 times so far. This is but one example where micro/macro becomes clearer for me. (Parenthetically, this is also an example of an output produced through collaboration with a professional filmmaker.) [32]

MARY: Issue one: I think you raise the challenge of how to be micro when macro. You resist it, but also seem to be doing it. There is something about the face to face interactions that are generally so much more fulfilling on an embodied/personal level. Yet, I also think that you under-estimate the creative potential in just seeing the short film you did about the experience. There are many ways that viewers might expand or be influenced by your film than replicating a workshop format. Perhaps they take one piece of it to their classroom, or explore new ways of relating to a friend, etc. [33]

There is something positive about keeping a trace of a performance, even if it involves more passivity on the part of the viewer. In terms of my own performances, one of the regrets I had over the years (and I'm talking years since the early 1980's), was that after the "show" was over, it was over. There was nothing left to hold on to. Sometimes there were photographs or perhaps a short video, but still, this desire for some permanence was unfulfilled. (Of course, there was another part of me that wondered if I had too much desire for recognition or résumé-building going on and that it was better for the world and my character to just let things come and go. Sometimes I was even glad that the performance had disappeared into thin air.) [34]

Another take on the micro (in person)/macro (web-based) divide is to find value in distance connections. I have been involved in a program originating in New Zealand, and for my part, I interact in a discussion group with students over a 14 week period, as they read a text I co-edited, with Ken GERGEN. We share some photographs, but mostly we "talk" to each other. Usually because they are therapists, perhaps, the discussions come to be very self-disclosing, especially on their parts. I don't think it is provoked in any direct way by my conversations, but it happens regularly. I come to feel very close to these students, and I get to know them much more than almost all of the students that I have been together with in a classroom structure. Once, one of these students came to a workshop. I was so eager to meet him in person. I was very disappointed, however, as it was as though we were starting over again. To me, our relationship was a huggable one,



but that was not how he responded to me. As physical beings, we did not resonate as we had on the web. [35]

**Cyber-Moderator: Mary, I know that you have been doing performative social science pieces, long before DENZIN coined the term in 2001. I believe that you wrote and performed "Post-modern Momma" around 1981? Can you tell us something about the progression and development of that, from an idea, to performance, to publication? [36]**

Looking back, I think the first performance piece I did alone was called "From mod masculinity to post-mod macho: A feminist re-play". The piece you know best, Kip, called "Post-modern Momma" was originally called "Woman as Spectacle" but that came later; both pieces are found in my book (GERGEN, 2001). Back to the story: Ken and I were fellows at the *Netherlands Institute for Advanced Studies (NIAS)* in Wassenaar. I had an enormous and beautiful study, with carpets, oil paintings and windows looking out at the lush greenery; the sand dunes and broad beaches of the sea were a short bike ride away. Just as Virginia WOOLF had suggested, a room of one's own (and a stipend) made it a heavenly place for creative work. One day I was reading a piece by Stephen TYLER, a post-modern sociologist who had given the talk at a conference in Amsterdam. I got really disgusted at the macho male tone of the talk, all about his two voices—Apollo and Dionysus. Ken was off in Germany doing his second-life role as Humboldt scholar, so instead of talking, I wrote out my frustrations, as though I were answering TYLER. I don't know how it all turned into a play, but I imagined two women characters talking, and even gave TYLER a small reply. The playlet included French phrases, honouring the French post-modern connection, and metaphors that contrasted masculine and feminine forms of relating; but the piece took on a life of its own. I did the first draft in a day. [37]

Later, we were invited by Steinar KVALE to a conference on post-modernism in Denmark. I decided to do my play, and dress for the part. I bought a ten foot long red boa worn with black turtleneck and pants, and added high heels and earrings. I wanted to be an embodied speaker, exuding a feminine look. John SHOTTER agreed to read TYLER's part, while I did the rest. I swear no one knew what to make of it, but the women in the audience responded with a pleasure it was hard to fathom. The philosopher-men, most of whom were quite adversarial in their conduct, generally, were distant and quiet. Ken was nervous, but seemed to think I'd pulled it off. Later KVALE had a contract to put the papers from the conference into a volume of *The Humanist Psychologist*. I was informed that my piece was not accepted. Although not surprised, I was disappointed. I was very grateful that Ken stood up for me and indicated that he would withdraw his paper if mine were not accepted. So mine was published (GERGEN, 1990). Later, when the volume became a book (KVALE, 1992), the text of my presentation was included, and even praised by KVALE for its innovative style, reflecting a post-modern consciousness that the other papers did not have. [38]

In print, it has a different quality. I used various forms of spacing and fonts to indicate the tone I was trying to achieve. Of course, it is a different experience,

similar to reading a play rather than watching it, as the emphases are missing. Yet, it is easier to see the nuances when the words are not tumbling out at a fast pace, that cannot be reclaimed. I am glad that it is now safely ensconced in various places. Each of my performances has a political edge to it; that is the starting point. That is my engine. [39]

I do have one regret in doing single performances. I do feel that I am shutting down conversation and critique by performing. In another work I'd like to figure out a way to include the audience as actors. I'm not sure that solves the problem. The totality of the form does not welcome intrusion. It would be messy. I'm not sure if I am "on to something" here or not. [40]

KIP: I definitely think that you have hit upon a crucial element in the future development of PSS: allowing for intrusions, shocks and surprise endings by focussing the development and production of performative pieces on the audience as the final interpreter, interlocker, magician, sage. This is where the politics become profoundly embodied; the evocative transformed to the provocative; and the possibility of social science research contributing to changing hearts and minds a reality. [41]

**CYBER-MODERATOR: Is a redefinition of the "public space" of research necessary in order to benefit from this movement? Has the community of recipients of research widened because of this new public space? [42]**

MARY: I feel that some form of democratization has been going on in all areas of life since the 1960's. There have been ups and downs, of course, but the trend is there, and although it sounds good, when I call it democratization, it is less than good when one considers some of the consequences: any kid can get a gun and go to school with it (an American example); it isn't difficult in some housing projects in the middle east to be trained to blow oneself up and destroy the order of some mighty military command; it isn't hard to put a movie of yourself on YouTube, or write your opinion on a blog. Don't you think that this opening of the public space for all people in all venues has varied consequences for performative research? [43]

KIP: The Agora has always existed and "public space" used performatively for various purposes. I don't think that it so new to make use of public space as it is a need for Academics to reach wider audiences; part of this has to do with research funders who are no longer so interested in "outputs" as they are in "outcomes". Outcomes mean, what meaningful effects do our research projects have on the wider world, or at least on the very segment of the population that we are "studying"? Secondly, these same funders want this information to reach a wider audience, not just a narrow academic and/or policy audience. This creates a scramble around widening means of dissemination of research findings that is quite new. [44]

The democratisation of the Internet was built into the medium from the outset. This means that the medium will include the good, the bad and the ugly.

Democracy also means choice. There are no ticket takers or gatekeepers on the Internet, try as some may. The Internet is the global water cooler. [45]

As far as dissemination is concerned, my own experiments with uploading my videos to the net have proved quite interesting. Thousands have now viewed them. The same material in published format would never have reached such a large and varied audience. In fact, I have little idea of who my audience is. This is part and parcel of, again, ceding "control" over my outputs and putting my trust in the audience. I do know that some of the videos are being used for classes, Blackboard, etc. Otherwise, like Norma Desmond, I just put my faith in "those wonderful people out there in the dark". [46]

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