Mess and Method: Researching others’ realities
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Some questions:
• How do we maintain a sense of real life in our research? A sense of messiness? Should we?
• What happens when we impose theoretically informed interpretations on participants’ stories? ‘Whose story is it anyway’?
• Is there a place for serendipity in research?

Ten things don’t hold still1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LIFE is...</th>
<th>RESEARCH is...</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Messy</td>
<td>Ordered / ‘hygienic’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serendipitous</td>
<td>Systematic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individually experienced</td>
<td>Looking for commonalities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concerned with representation</td>
<td>Concerned with representation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiple realities</td>
<td>Reductive to one reality? (common-sense perspective on reality, even for ‘QUAL R’?)</td>
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<tr>
<td>A-theoretical?</td>
<td>Theoretically meaningful</td>
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“Because the subjects exist in the report only through the voice of the researcher, there is a natural tendency for their complexity to be suppressed and their identity to be generalized (or essentialized) to fit the dominant assumptions and theoretical constructs of the researcher and the disciplinary community.” (Canagarajah 1996:324)

R’s voice

Embracing Bricolage, Crystals and Mirrors
The researcher as bricoleur, maker of quilts
• Uses tools & materials to hand
• ‘Emergent construction’

The researcher’s reflexivity on research and writing process is crucial
Awareness of our ‘othering’ & clarity about who we are

Representation vs. Re-presentation:
• seeking to go beyond value- free re-presentation to critical analysis
• Participants’ words are used for something beyond immediate

Crystallization, not triangulation: keeps meanings open & partial; uses contrasting modes of producing knowledge (Ellingson 2013: 433)

Expanding our continuum?

Art/ impressionist | Middle-Ground | Realist
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• To survive contested truths | • To explore the typical | • To discover objective truths
• To construct personal truths | • To generate description and understanding | • To generalise
• To explore the specific | • To generate pragmatic implications for practitioners | • To explain reality ‘out there’

How do we cope with life? What is unique about my or another’s experience? What other ways can we imagine?

Auto-ethnography
Interactive interviewing
Performance
Visual arts

Focus groups
Participant observation / ethnography
Thematic, metaphorical and narrative analysis

Coding tests
Random sampling
Measurement
Surveys

[From Ellingson, LL 2013:418]

Artistic approaches in TESOL: crafted narratives

“...deliberately styled in arts-based forms (stories, poems, plays, and the like) and that are meant to be evocative and aesthetically engaging ….. could also be in visual, video, or performance modes. Implicit analysis or social commentary is often embedded within the crafted narrative, which may be serious or humorous, contemplative or dramatic, other- or self-focused, or some combination.” (Nelson 2011: 465)

Encourages ‘grassroots knowledge work’ (ibid: 470)

More Questions:
• How far can we go in being creative?
• Is this a realistic choice for most researchers? For publication?
• Is it sufficient?
• Straddling the continuum is possible (?) aligns with mixed methods?
• What are particular challenges for TESOL research contexts?
• What story would you craft about our experience today?
• What art could you create?

References:
Canagarajah, S 1996 ‘From critical research perspective to critical research reporting’ TESOL Quarterly 30/2 pp. 321-331