Open to Disruption
Nelson, Margaret K., Hertz, Rosanna, Garey, Anita Ilta

Published by Vanderbilt University Press

Nelson, Margaret K., et al.
Open to Disruption: Time and Craft in the Practice of Slow Sociology.
Vanderbilt University Press, 2014.
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Language and language use have perhaps been less central to sociological investigation, which is more often undertaken “at home,” than to anthropology, which has historically required immersion in “other” cultures, where language difference is both a barrier and also a route to understanding. Still, language has often been a resource for sociological analysis. I think of Chicago School (anthropologically inflected) fieldwork studies, in which researchers cataloged the argot of deviant groups (Shaw [1930] 1966) or occupational specialties (Cressey [1932] 2008), and of Howard Becker’s famous account of “how [he] learned what a crock was” (1963). More recently, sociologists have joined scholars in communication studies, psychology, and education to develop approaches that make “talk” an artifact for study: conversation analysis (Goodwin 1981), discourse analysis (Fisher and Todd 1983), and narrative analysis (Riessman 2008). Symbolic interactionists understand language as the medium of meaning-making; institutional ethnographers examine language-in-use in order to map “conceptual practices of power” (Smith 1990). And a linguistic turn in the social sciences has generated lively and fruitful theoretical debates about the constructed, historically located character of “experience” (for a summary, see DeVault and Gross 2011).

Against this backdrop, I consider language use in research practice, focusing on the words chosen to label topics and analytic constructs, and the writing practices that communicate research results. I will embroider on the themes of craft and time in two ways: first, by discussing the time I’ve needed to find the words to convey my analyses as I intended, and then by considering how my interests and inclinations have shaped my scholarship over time.
I began my PhD in sociology without any background in the field; perhaps my lack of disciplinary knowledge at the time accounts, in part, for the time I spent “muddling about” to find a topic. But I did know feminism, and I knew that my topic might not yet have a name. I wanted to study—and bring into view—some of what women knew but didn’t have words for. I wanted to challenge the connotations (of straightforward triviality) associated with a word like “housework,” but I also wanted something more concrete than “caring” (which at the time carried connotations of emotionality, not work). Don’t even ask about the title of my dissertation!—when I finished it, like many intelligent dissertators, I didn’t fully understand what it was about (and didn’t believe my teachers when they told me). But by the time I wrote the book (almost six years later), I had settled on the felicitous phrase “feeding the family.” I held onto both “caring” and “work” as elements in the subtitle.

As I’ve noted in the book, I found a literary passage that helped me hold onto a sense of the topic before I found words for it. I don’t recall why, at the time, I was reading Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*, but when I found the account of Mrs. Ramsay’s dinner party, it spoke to me (see DeVault 1991, 6–10). From then on, I could say, “That’s it,” and remind myself of what I wanted to investigate, even if I didn’t yet have the words for it. (Of course, this strategy isn’t of much use at actual dinner parties, when people ask about one’s dissertation topic—but that’s a different problem.) Eventually, I came to refer to the kind of attentive emotional service Mrs. Ramsay provides at her party as “the work of sociability” (“sociability” was a word I’d picked up from my adviser, Arlene Kaplan Daniels, who used it in her writing on the instrumentally gala affairs thrown by high-level women volunteers in their civic fundraising efforts [1987]). But part of the allure of the topic, for me, was my sense that “it” was there, pulsing with import, but also elusive, taking very different forms in different households and different moments, yet still in some sense an “it,” recognizable by those who have learned to do the work.

As I talked with women, and a few men, about excruciatingly mundane details of household routines, it was comforting to have Mrs. Ramsay in my head, as an anchor and as reassurance that what I was studying was more significant than whether to buy Froot Loops or Cocoa Puffs. As I began to analyze these accounts, I applied labels. I didn’t invent words, but I did try to use them creatively. I wrote about “monitoring” the stock of supplies in the
kitchen, about “improvisation” at the supermarket, about “attending to preferences,” and about “deferential service”—and I spent a good deal of time considering which words to use, and why. As I wrote, I discovered that I needed to explain not only what I meant, but why I’d chosen this word over that (often more common) one. I also discovered that explaining those decisions was always an opportunity to push the analysis a step or two forward.

I continue to have mixed feelings about some of these decisions. I’m delighted that the phrase “feeding the family,” with its alliterative euphony, has had wide appeal. But I am also aware of its rosy, romanticized glow. Since writing the book, I’ve run across other Feeding the Families, and they are either cookbooks or nineteenth-century domestic advice manuals; my own book is sometimes (mistakenly!) shelved in the culinary section. The phrase captures one part of my analysis (the part my grandmother liked the best), but not its sharper edge, my attention to inequity within the household. The word “provisioning” also gives me pause, with its military origin. I wanted a word that would do more than “shopping”—that would connect decisions in the supermarket with a broader strategy for what would happen later at home. I developed an analysis of shopping for groceries as work that linked a particular household with a wider market, and therefore as taken-for-granted work that is nonetheless essential to the operation of a market society, and capitalist food production in particular. Thinking about it now, I believe that analysis could be extended well beyond my initial arguments; I also see that the analogy of supplying an advancing army really isn’t apt. Furthermore, although the phrase “feeding the family” has been taken up by other scholars, “provisioning” has not. I can’t help but think that the difference comes, at least in part, from the cultural resonances of “feeding the family”; the phrase suits a feminist analysis of invisible work, but it also works pretty well (to my chagrin) for a fundamentalist argument about women’s place. Uncomfortable as it may be, I think scholars must acknowledge that the success and uptake of scholarly discoveries depend on the same kind of wordcraft that political operatives have come to deploy so skillfully, often shedding a lot more heat than light (on scholarly rhetoric in economics, see McCloskey 1990). I don’t see how to avoid these dynamics, and that insight provides all the more reason to take the time to choose words with thoughtful care.

As I moved from dissertation to book, I developed an interest in copyediting. My line editor was excellent, and I appreciated and learned from the professional attention my manuscript received. But there were questions
about consistency that caught my attention: on page ____ , you discuss x; on page ____ , you seem to refer to the same thing, but you call it y. My first impulse, as a young scholar, was to hear the comment as a straightforward criticism, and make the correction. But at times that response didn’t feel right, and I came to realize that I valued the nuances brought forward by multiple labels for activities. I don’t remember exactly how I negotiated this issue with my copyeditor, but I know that the experience gave me a longstanding interest in copyediting as a routine practice of scholarship that deserves more attention. Writing about my analytic decisions, I argued that “strategic imprecision” could be useful: “If the language is ‘man-made,’ it is not likely to provide, ready-made, the words that feminist researchers need to tell what they learn from other women. Instead of imposing a choice among several labels, none of which are quite right . . . we should make our talk richer and more complex” (DeVault 1990, 111).

(2)

I discovered conversation analysis (“CA” to insiders) while working with the interviews I had conducted for my study of feeding the family, and I learned to think of “talk” as an artifact whose details could be explicated in order to illuminate the micropolitics of interaction. Founded on the ethnomethodological commitment to examine the “primordial” grounding and “everyday morality” of interaction (Garfinkel 1967), conversation analysis examines in microscopic detail how the many features of talk (not only its content, but its pace, inflections, overlaps, interruptions, and accompanying gestures, glances, etc.) are produced “artfully” in collaborative performance that “unfolds” moment by moment. Although I haven’t taken up conversation analysis in my own work, I have taken advantage of opportunities to learn more about it, and I enjoy attending conference sessions where CA research is presented. Listening to researchers talk about the work makes it clear that the excruciatingly detailed transcripts in their articles—which outsiders like me struggle to interpret—are read by insiders only as markers for a conversation that is kept alive through audio (and sometimes video) recordings. In a presentation, researchers and audiences hear the tape together and then consider the encounter. I learn a great deal from these sessions and I carry those lessons with me as I consider my own recordings and transcripts.

In working with my housework interviews (now see, there’s an example—I’ve been sitting at the computer, struggling with what to call
them! but sometimes one has to take the easy way out, and move on)—in working with my housework interviews, I became increasingly attentive to the details of talk. I began to read transcripts not only for content, but also for the way an account or story is put together. I came to see a speaker's “craft”: there are language rules, but any speaker is also making in-the-moment choices about how to convey meaning, emotion, and significance to a particular audience. These insights grew in part from meditation on my data, and my studies of conversation and discourse analysis, but they were also fed by the burgeoning interdisciplinary field of narrative studies. It seemed, in the early 1990s, that stories were everywhere, and when I began a new series of interviews I asked explicitly for stories.

My studies of professional women—dietitians and nutrition educators—grew from my interest in household food work. But the topic is a very different one. “Feeding the family” is an activity that nearly everyone can talk about (and they want to—when I began to present my research, I was sometimes frustrated when audience members wanted to tell me about their grandmothers instead of discussing the analysis). By contrast, dietetics is a relatively small professional field whose practitioners bear the burden of stereotypes: the unattractive “cafeteria lady” or the forbidding disciplinarian who denies pleasure by enforcing the blandest of diets. Again, I can’t say for sure why I was interested in this group; it’s true that while I was contemplating a study of “food work,” I had met some activist nutrition educators, but looking back I can’t help but think that my cookbook-author grandmother and my home-ec-teacher aunt must also have had something to do with the direction of my research.

The field of dietetics and nutrition education was then—and remains—predominantly White, but I had learned by then that race matters everywhere, in different ways. I worked to recruit women of color as participants in my study and succeeded in interviewing several. Then I began to consider how we talked to each other, across racial and ethnic differences. I studied the transcripts, but here—as above—it is important to remember that the transcript stands in for our embodied encounter. I can’t now remember where we met, but I recall vividly the feeling of one conversation, for me. I would characterize our talk as tentative, delicate, and hopeful—we were getting to know each other, and testing what could be asked and told. In the moment of the conversation, and even more as I studied the transcript, I was bringing to bear what I had learned over a lifetime of talking and listening, and over a shorter but substantial period of studying gender, race,
and class inequalities and learning from work with students and colleagues of color (sometimes hard lessons, arising from my ignorance and blunders). In these analyses, too, I was interested in what the language at hand may not do easily, and how narrators use language strategically. For example, I considered the meaning of an African American nutritionist’s comment that she wanted to work with “people like me,” and suggested that she was using the phrase to reference “race” without using the word (DeVault 1995, 618). Perhaps—but readers point out that clients could be “like her” in various ways. Over the years, I’ve felt a bit less certain about my first interpretation. Thinking about it now, I recall other moments in that interview when this same participant speaks in this way—referring or pointing to understandings without labeling them explicitly. Would this expressive strategy be characteristic of talk across racial identities and the experiences associated with them? Or characteristic of a skilled public health worker, adept at navigating the subleties of cross-cultural encounters? Of course, personality and interpersonal style and tone are also (always) at play . . . and I’m sure there is more to consider. Like other researchers who work with talk, I continue to find layers of meaning in the phrases that have captured my attention.

Over the last few years, I’ve been working collaboratively with two local colleagues (in law and health humanities) to investigate issues related to health care for people who are culturally Deaf—that is, people who use a signed language to communicate and understand the Deaf community as a linguistic-minority group. My research partners bring distinctive disciplinary and personal resources to our collaboration: Michael Schwartz is a lawyer who directs Syracuse University’s Disability Rights Clinic; he has years of experience litigating disability rights cases as well as a PhD in disability studies, and he is a Deaf person who is engagingly performative and charismatic. Rebecca Garden is trained in literature and disability studies and teaches at a medical university, where she deploys narrative to engage students with the ethical issues they will encounter as professionals; she is a superb networker and “bridge person,” with a personal style that is both gentle and fierce. Most years, we have worked with law and social science graduate students on the team, and once with an undergraduate disability studies minor. Starting from Schwartz’s research on Deaf people’s accounts of their health-care experiences (Schwartz 2006, 2008), we have
been interviewing local health-care professionals in order to explore their knowledge and understandings of Deaf culture and the strategies they deploy when they encounter Deaf patients, or in other encounters where communication access is at issue. Our project is built on the idea that litigation alone will not suffice, and we have organized or participated in a variety of educational outreach events for local health-care professionals, including a two-day symposium, panel discussions, ethical consults, guest appearances in classes, and independent study opportunities for medical and nursing students interested in Deaf culture and communication issues (DeVault, Schwartz, and Garden 2011).

Issues of language and expression are at the core of this project. At our team meetings, we rely on highly skilled sign-language interpreters; I have had to learn about and navigate some of the complexities of working with interpreters, which may not be evident to the casual observer. I have to remember that Michael listens by watching, so we need to arrange the room with sight lines in mind, to allow more time for multichannel communication (discussing a handout, for example), to distribute written material in advance, and to take more frequent breaks. Working together, and learning what works and what doesn’t, is key to our analytic work: it helps me to understand what hearing professionals may not know about Deaf culture and communication, and what they might learn and do in order to work more effectively with Deaf patients. We also communicate frequently via e-mail, extending our face-to-face discussions. And since interpreters are also part of the health-care encounter we are studying, we sometimes ask them to “break frame” and participate in our discussions.

We are just beginning to analyze the narratives of health-care professionals we’ve interviewed. As we get started, I can see that language will continue to catch my attention. When Schwartz interviewed Deaf people about their health-care experiences, he found that they sometimes fought to receive interpreter services, struggling with doctors who weren’t aware of their legal obligation to provide adequate communication access or who felt that providing interpretation was too expensive or simply unnecessary. In other situations, the same patients might make the judgment that for a small or routine matter, it wasn’t worth the struggle and they would manage as best they could. Many of his interviewees expressed that experience with a distinctive sign, which Schwartz describes as follows (2006, 232): “arms raised, palms outward, arms going down, hands flicking downward—a universal gesture indicating the concept of letting go—‘Live and let live.’” His
analysis makes clear that Deaf patients have different communication preferences and that they exercise agency in their interactions with health-care professionals. But Schwartz points out that the strategy of letting go “carries within it a kernel of anxiety. The Deaf patient wonders: ‘Am I missing something that might come back to haunt me?’ There is always a fear that the information the patient is not obtaining by ‘letting go’ is exactly the information that is crucial to maintaining one’s health” (2008, 967).

Interviewing health-care professionals, I’ve been struck by a phrase that occurs frequently in their accounts of working across communication differences. They talk of “making do”: finding ways to communicate in situations that are not ideal, such as in an emergency, before an interpreter arrives; when the interpreter’s skill may not match the patient’s communication needs; or late at night, with no interpreter on duty. In these situations, health-care workers may rely on visual assessment, rudimentary gestures, writing notes, or pointing to visuals. I am often struck by the dedication of nurses and physicians in these situations, their evident concern for patients, and their artful improvisation. But these accounts certainly raise questions about the situations in which “making do” is appropriate, and for how long. More importantly, Michael, Rebecca, and I would like to juxtapose these strategies in order to call attention to the significance of communication access. If health-care providers are “making do,” and a Deaf patient decides to “let go,” what kinds of critical information on both sides of the encounter may fall by the wayside? And how might the resulting gaps in communication shape the course of a patient’s diagnosis and treatment?

As in my previous work with interviews, I expect to spend a good deal more time considering the meanings and uses of these two phrases. And as we begin to share our findings with health-care professionals and educators, I’m sure that we’ll also need to consider the distinctive vocabularies and rhetoric of medical culture. How will they hear and understand these phrases? I continue to learn—and try to remember—that my words are heard differently by different audiences, in different contexts. Recently, I presented this small piece of analysis, of making do and letting go, to an audience of Taiwanese faculty and graduate students in a school of health policy. They listened attentively, nodded, and applauded when I finished. Despite language differences (I spoke in English), they clearly got it. But over the next few days, several approached me individually to ask, “What does that mean, ‘making do’?” I was abashed to realize that I hadn’t noticed or thought about how this idiomatic expression would “play” half a world away from home, and that I had neglected to make
sure this audience understood one of my central ideas. But I am also thankful that at least some members of the audience had decided not to “let go,” so that we were able to continue the conversation and I was able to learn a bit more about what I’m communicating, or not.

**Conclusion**

I am not trained as a linguist (unless we can count my undergraduate anthropology course in sociolinguistics), but I have been interested in language throughout my life. I think back to my sixth-grade teacher, who gave us the treat of a weekly creative writing session and encouraged me to think of myself as a writer. Or even further back, to my toddlerhood: When I was around five years old, my parents offered me up as a “guinea pig” for some university students who were learning to assess children’s abilities—but they couldn’t assess mine, because I refused to speak. After we got home, my mother asked gently, “Why didn’t you answer? You know what a ball is, don’t you? Why didn’t you say?” “Well,” I replied, sensibly, “I didn’t know if they meant a round thing, or a fancy dance.” While I’ve gained confidence with age, I’ve remained a relatively quiet and reserved person—more of a listener than a talker. I prefer writing, with its very different pace. I take pleasure in choosing words thoughtfully and deliberately, tasting and testing them as I write.

Of course, my account here—of a lifelong fascination with words—is a retrospective construction. Although I’ve been aware that I enjoy writing and find words and phrases interesting, I don’t think I would have constructed this kind of “life story” without a nudge from Rosanna Hertz, who suggested this topic for my chapter. I’ve imposed continuity on a more contingent, accidental sequence of activities and encounters. That observation leads to another about research careers: I believe that most of us engage—choosing projects, pursuing lines of analysis, disseminating our work—in ways that are partly conscious and partly driven in less explicit ways, by our interests, our intuitions, and our capacity to notice this aspect of things more than that, along with accidents of history, and more. Those interests, intuitions, and capacities develop over time in the course of a career; they strengthen or wane in ways that one may not be able to control or even notice. As some strengthen over time, they deepen the craft knowledge that one brings to a project—the knowledge that is partly conscious and procedural but also intuitive, hands-on, and personal.
I learned from Howard Becker, one of my early teachers, to think of research as a craft, and my understanding of what that means has deepened over time in the course of reflecting on my own and others’ practice. As I conclude this discussion, I think also of Susan Krieger’s reflections in *Social Science and the Self* (1991). She was interested in how the self appears in social science, and she turned to the work of traditional Native American Pueblo pottery makers to consider how those craftswomen expressed individual visions within highly stylized community conventions for pot making. Each Pueblo community produces pottery with distinctive shapes and designs; outsiders may not be able to recognize the work of particular potters. But pottery makers themselves can easily identify the individual marks of their own creative work, and the distinctive designs of other craftspeople in their community. As one Laguna craftswoman explained, “So much of me goes into the pot.” Social science is a highly conventionalized practice; we are trained as researchers to follow the routine procedures that make our work recognizable, durable, and usable—like a good pot.

And still—whether I know it or not—so much of me goes into my writing.

**Notes**

1. One group of feminist scholars, however, does use the phrase “provisioning work” in a somewhat different way, to refer to all the paid and unpaid work through which women sustain families and communities (Neyesmith et al. 2012).

2. For my discovery of conversation analysis, I owe thanks to sociologists at UCLA, where I gave an early talk on the research, and to Harvey Molotch, who included basic instruction on CA in a course on the sociology of the news, which he taught as a visiting professor at Northwestern University in 1981.

3. The convention in Deaf and disability studies is to use the uppercase “Deaf” to reference Deaf culture and the Deaf community as a linguistic minority, and to use the lowercase “deaf” for auditory impairment and people with hearing loss (such as later-life deafness) whose identity is not linked to a Deaf community.


**References**


