'A Lie that Helps us See the Truth': research, truth and fiction in the helping professions

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ABSTRACT *In this paper I argue for fiction, and in particular, the novel, as a source of 'truth' for practitioners in the helping professions[1] to rival (and complement) the truths that are arrived at through quantitative and qualitative research. Fiction writing is presented both as a research method in its own right and as a form of reflection-on-action, the aim of which is to invoke a sympathetic response or resonance in the reader in the form of an affective (as opposed to a cognitive) understanding. I suggest that, in order for a practitioner to engage fully with her clients on the most fundamental and profound level, she must read not only research and theory, but also fiction.*

> Then I asked: "does a firm perswasion that a thing is so, make it so?" He replied: "All poets believe that it does, and in ages of imagination this firm perswasion removed mountains." (William Blake)

Beyond Science

Despite Donald Schön's assertion that the knowledge-base of professional expertise is derived from a subjective reflection on experience rather than from objective science (Schön, 1983), there is growing pressure in the helping professions for all practice to be based on the paradigm of technical rationality; that is, according to the findings of empirical research. For reasons which are largely historical, the helping professions have borrowed their research designs almost entirely from the social sciences, either the quantitative methodologies such as experiments, surveys and randomised controlled trials (although the RCT, of course, derives not from social science but from agriculture; see Fisher, 1935), or the qualitative methodologies such as phenomenology, ethnography and case study. For many researchers, these two approaches represent two distinct and mutually exclusive world views; two very different epistemologies or conceptions of truth with very different aims. Weber

(borrowing his terminology from Dilthey) referred to the aim of the quantitative paradigm as *Erklären* (explanation), and to the aim of the qualitative paradigm as *Verstehen* (understanding), and claimed that whereas the physical sciences were characterised by an attempt to explain the world, the social sciences went beyond this to "accomplish something which is never attainable in the natural sciences, namely the *subjective understanding* of the action of the component individuals" (Weber, 1968).

But not all researchers see the quantitative and qualitative paradigms as irreconcilable. Sarantakos (1994), for example, noted that "while some consider these two methodologies as contradictory and fundamentally different, others see them as the extreme positions of the same continuum", while in nursing, "quantitative and qualitative research methods complement each other, because they generate different kinds of knowledge that are useful in nursing practice" (Burns & Grove, 1987). It is often claimed that this dual quantitative *and* qualitative approach is of particular relevance in the helping professions, because it facilitates the person in receipt of the help to tell her own story and enables the practitioner to apply the findings of statistical research in a more personal way according to the needs of individual clients.

The problem, however, is that this drive towards research-based practice was initiated by researchers and managers rather than by practitioners, and only partially meets the needs of the latter. Thus, whereas the planners and managers in the helping professions might well need the demographic data and scientific explanations of social phenomena which come from the quantitative paradigm, as well as the more personal understanding which comes from the qualitative paradigm, I wish to argue that the practitioners themselves need something more, something which Rorty (1989) has called 'solidarity'.

To understand what Rorty meant by solidarity and why he believed it to be important, we must first understand what he saw as the limitations of scientific method. For Rorty, the findings of research cannot be justified or validated solely by an appeal to what Lyotard (1984) called a 'grand narrative'. Thus:

> great scientists invent descriptions of the world which are useful for purposes of predicting and controlling what happens, just as poets and political thinkers invent other descriptions of it for other purposes. But there is no sense in which *any* of these descriptions is an accurate representation of the way the world is in itself. (Rorty, 1989, p. 4)

For Rorty, science is merely one little narrative amongst many, and has no greater claim to truth than any other little narrative. To do science is to participate in a particular language game (to use Wittgenstein's terminology), to describe the world in terms of a particular vocabulary. Rorty referred to the vocabularies of the various language games as 'final vocabularies', the "set of words which [people] employ to justify their actions, their beliefs, and their lives". These vocabularies are final in the sense that "if doubt is cast on the worth of these words, their user has no noncircular argumentative recourse". The bottom line, then, is that there is no grand narrative which supports and underpins *any* language game; we choose

a particular final vocabulary either because it feels right to us at the time, or for reasons of expediency and convenience. It is therefore impossible for a user of a particular final vocabulary to argue her case rationally with the user of a different final vocabulary; there is no recourse to analytic logic. Rorty claimed that we can never *prove* to the player of a different language game that something is true; all we can do is to offer a description of the world and how it works that the other person might recognise as authentic or real. An appeal to truth is therefore an appeal to authenticity, which in turn is an appeal to recognition. Thus, a statement is considered to be true *not* when it is supported by scientific research (or, indeed, by any other form of rational argument), but when it 'rings true', that is, when it resonates with our own experiences. To accept the truth claims of another is therefore to show solidarity with them by adopting their final vocabulary.

Three Levels of Practice

I am claiming, then, that practitioners from the helping professions sometimes need to relate to their clients in a more intimate way than planners and managers. In Rorty's terminology, they sometimes need to show solidarity with their clients by participating in their language games and by employing their final vocabularies. But this requires a body of knowledge which the research methodologies of the qualitative and quantitative social sciences are unable to provide; what is required is the kind of knowledge which enables practitioners to engage fully with their clients in a way which goes beyond the detached *Erklären* (explanation) of the quantitative paradigm, and even beyond the empathic *Verstehen* (understanding) of the qualitative paradigm. What they require is knowledge which comes not from the little narrative of research, but from other little narratives, knowledge which is recognised and validated by the extent to which it resonates with their own experiences. Following Dilthey's original German terminology, we might describe this third kind of knowledge as *Identifitzieren* (identification), or *affective* rather than cognitive understanding. I am claiming, then, that there are (at least) three levels on which a practitioner can engage with her client, depending on whether her aim is to explain, to cognitively understand, or to emotionally understand her client's behaviour, feelings and actions.

Let us examine some examples of these three levels of practice engagement and the knowledge requirements of each. A good example of the first level of *Erklären* is the way in which a doctor might attempt to explain presenting signs and symptoms in terms of a diagnosis, and hence formulate a treatment programme. What is required is generalisable scientific knowledge of the presenting features of the illness, since what is being treated is the illness rather than the person. This is the most detached level of practice engagement, because it is (arguably) not necessary to have a social or psychological understanding of the individual patient being treated in order to prescribe the correct treatment; all that is needed is knowledge derived from medical research.

The second level of engagement requires the cognitive understanding of *Verstehen*,

and is exemplified in the attempt by a community psychiatric nurse to understand the problems faced by her homeless patients. This, of course, requires a partial engagement with the patients in order to empathise with their situation, and the knowledge-base for this cognitive understanding can come either directly from the relationship between nurse and patient, or from qualitative research methodologies such as phenomenology and ethnography.

The third and most intimate level of practice engagement requires the emotional understanding of *Identifitzieren*, and is exemplified by the children's nurse who might wish to attempt to understand how it *feels* to be a five-year old child about to undergo an operation in order to help and support her patients. This emotional or affective understanding goes beyond the cognitive understanding provided by social research and requires not merely empathy but sympathy. The difference between empathy and sympathy is subtle but crucial: empathy can be defined as "the ability to identify oneself mentally with a person or thing and so *understand* his or her feelings or its meaning" (*Oxford Paperback Dictionary*, my italics), whereas sympathy is "the ability to *share* another person's emotions or sensations" (ibid, my italics). The goal of empathy is a cognitive understanding of the feelings of another, the goal of sympathy is an affective sharing of those feelings.

Sympathetic Understanding

I am suggesting, then, that practitioners in the physical sciences such as engineers (and, some might argue, doctors) require only the first level of engagement of *Erklären*, and practitioners in the social sciences such as anthropologists require, in addition, the second level of *Verstehen*. However, practitioners in the helping professions such as nurses, teachers and social workers require, as well as these two levels, a third level of *Identifitzieren*. This third level of practice engagement is rarely recognised in the helping professions, and when it is, it is usually frowned upon as 'over-involvement' or 'over-identification': empathy, the attempt to (objectively) understand the feelings of the client, is considered to be acceptable; sympathy, actually (subjectively) experiencing those feelings with the client, is not. There are many reasons why practitioners might wish to maintain a certain emotional distance from their clients, but most are historical and are concerned with the nature of professionalism and the traditional class distinctions between the providers and recipients of professional helping services. There is certainly little evidence to suggest that sympathetic involvement is in any way counter-therapeutic, although it can be emotionally draining for the practitioner.

But whereas practice at the level of *Erklären* can be informed by quantitative research, and practice at the level of *Verstehen* can be informed by qualitative research, sympathetic understanding or *Identifitzieren* cannot usually be achieved through either. The reason for this discrepancy is that at the first two levels, the practitioner requires an intellectual understanding of her client(s), and is therefore engaged in a *cognitive* enterprise. However, whilst the third level practitioner at times has this same need to cognitively understand the world of her clients, she will, as we have seen, also sometimes wish to build a sympathetic relationship with them, and

that requires an *affective* understanding. Her aim, then, is not merely to satisfy her intellectual curiosity, but (as far as possible) to understand how it *feels* to be in her clients' shoes, to understand from the inside rather than from the outside, to vicariously *experience* it.

Clearly, the quantitative research paradigm, borrowed as it was from the physical sciences, was never intended to provide such a subjective, sympathetic understanding. But even at the other end of the social research spectrum, it has been argued by Mason (1996) that "qualitative research should produce social explanations to *intellectual puzzles*", whilst Van Maanen claimed that qualitative research covers:

> an array of interpretive techniques which seek to describe, decode, translate and otherwise *come to terms with the meaning*… of certain more or less naturally occurring phenomena in the social world. (1979, p. 520)

Most qualitative research, like quantitative research, has its roots in the academy rather than in the world of practice, and is therefore concerned primarily with cognitive understanding and problem solving. Even those writers who explicitly call for an *empathic* understanding as part of the knowledge-base of the social sciences are cautious about just how far we should go, such that "the empathy of the observer [researcher] with the actor [subject of the research] need be no greater than is consensible in the community of scientific observers" (Ziman, 1978). Indeed, empathy is usually held to be largely unnecessary, since it is claimed that most people conduct their lives according to the common-sense principal that "if I were to change places with my fellow man I would experience the same sector of the world in substantially the same perspectives as he does" (Schutz, 1971). Whilst there are a few notable exceptions, social research has traditionally been seen as essentially an intellectual endeavour, not suited to, or intended for, providing the sort of knowledge and understanding necessary for a sympathetic involvement and a vicarious experience.

If, as Schutz suggested, all people have essentially the same perspective on the world, then perhaps a deliberate and structured attempt at an affective understanding of others is unnecessary. Or perhaps an affective understanding can come solely through the practitioner's reflections on her relationship with the client. For example, as a teacher, my experience of failing an essay when I was a student might help me to identify with one of my current students who is doing badly on her course. However, whilst this might provide an adequate understanding in some situations, our clients in the helping professions sometimes occupy some very unfamiliar psychological, social and emotional spaces of which most practitioners will have had very little first-hand experience, and this can severely limit the hermeneutic endeavour to understand from the inside. How, for example, can a counsellor ever hope to understand fully the emotional, psychological and physical impact of bereavement if she has herself never suffered a major loss? In more extreme situations, this can cause some very real difficulties. Thus, the philosopher Ernest Nagel asks:

> Must a psychiatrist be at least partly demented if he is to be competent for studying the mentally ill. Is a historian incapable of explaining the careers

and social changes effected by men like Hitler unless he can recapture in imagination the frenzied hatreds that may have animated such an individual? (1961, p. 483)

Clearly, then, something extra is needed: quantitative research can *explain* the process of bereavement and provide demographic information, qualitative research can help us to *understand* the process as described by the sufferers, but neither can connect us with the *feelings* associated with bereavement. These must either be experienced first-hand, or else vicariously through writing or other media which *deliberately* attempt to invoke them, that is, which resonate with our own feelings.

Solidarity and the Method of Fiction Writing

As we have seen, Rorty referred to this attempt to feel the feelings of others as solidarity, which:

> is created by increasing our sensitivity to the particular details of the pain and humiliation of other, unfamiliar sorts of people. Such increased sensitivity makes it more difficult to marginalise people different from ourselves by thinking, "They do not feel it as *we* would," or "There must always be suffering, so why not let *them* suffer?" (1989, p. xvi)

For Rorty, solidarity is not brought about by theory or by research, but by reading, and in particular, by reading "the journalist's report, the comic book, the docudrama, and, especially, the novel". Furthermore, the aim of reading is:

> to get acquainted with strange people (Alcibiades, Julien Sorel), strange families (the Karamazovs, the Casaubons), and strange communities (the Teutonic Knights, the Nuer, the mandarins of the Sung). (1989, p. 80)

Reading, and in particular, reading novels, connects us with the feelings and lives of others in a way that research reports often cannot do, indeed, in a way that research reports usually do not attempt to do. When William Foote Whyte wrote his famous sociological study of street corner gangs, the aim was not for the reader directly to feel the way that the gang members felt, but to gain a *cognitive understanding* of how they felt. Thus:

> If we can get to know these people intimately and understand the relations between little guy and little guy, big shot and little guy, and big shot and big shot, then we know how Cornerville society is organised. On the basis of that knowledge it becomes possible to explain people's loyalties and the significance of political and racket activities. (1955, p. xx)

However, when Anthony Burgess wrote about street corner gangs in his novel *A Clockwork Orange*, his aim was to communicate directly how it *felt* to be a gang member; Burgess had an emotional rather than an intellectual agenda. For the social worker wishing to develop new physical resources for street corner gangs (for example, a drop-in centre), the cognitive understanding afforded by a study such as Whyte's would be very useful. For the social worker wishing to develop new

emotional or psychological resources (for example, a counselling service), Burgess's novel might be more appropriate. To take a different example, "we might take copies of both *Moby Dick* and *Celestial Navigation* on our sailboat, respecting the validity of each for their specific purposes, both of which may serve the larger purpose of our voyage" (Brown, 1994).

This might, on first sight, appear to be an argument in favour of rationalism, that is, the philosophical theory that "by pure reasoning, without appeal to any empirical premises, we can arrive at substantial knowledge about the nature of the world" (Urmson & Rée, 1991). I am not claiming, however, that writers of fiction can arrive at truths purely by introspection, that they are born with the truth somehow 'inside' them (what Kant referred to as synthetic *a priori* knowledge), and I certainly do not wish to reject empiricism in favour of the claim that novelists have some sort of 'direct line' to the human soul which by-passes the physical senses. Rather, I am arguing that fiction writing is a methodology similar to formal research, in which empirical data are collected, analysed and disseminated in a more or less systematic way.

Fiction Writing as Research

So what does it mean to claim that fiction writing is a research method? Some writers, it seems, gather their data in a way that is very similar to scientific researchers. In writing a book which is set in India, a novelist might, for example, carry out a 'literature search' to discover what others had written about the country. She might do some 'primary research' by interviewing people who have visited or lived in the country, and she might carry out some 'field work' by visiting the country herself. As Alasuutari (1995) pointed out, "of course researchers gather empirical material and analyse it, but so do fiction writers". Pushing the point slightly further, it might be said that the writer of fiction is a researcher who processes her observations about the world and its inhabitants into a literary form rather than into a standard research paper. In fact, Alasuutari pushed the point even further than this, and argued that the research report is a literary work in its own right.

But not all novelists work in this way. Many write from past personal experience rather than by seeking out experiences in order to write. The 'data' for their novels are therefore not gathered in a conscious methodical fashion, but are reflected on after the event, sometimes years later in a process very similar to what Schön (1983) referred to as 'reflection-on-action'. It is this approach to writing fiction from personal experience which many scientists would have great difficulty accepting as a means of gaining access to any kind of truth. They would claim, first, that the data were not collected in a planned and rational fashion, second that they were not analysed in a methodical way, and third that the 'study' was not written-up dispassionately and objectively. Furthermore, they might argue, there is no obvious 'end' to fiction writing; as Kockelmans (1987) pointed out, "poems and novels do not 'prove' anything".

In response to these objections, we might point out firstly that method, both as

a structure for data collection and for data analysis, is somewhat over-rated; that many important scientific discoveries occurred either accidentally where no method was involved, or else where data were collected for a different purpose. A good example of an accidental scientific discovery is Alexander Fleming's discovery of penicillin, where "a gust of wind blew through the lab window a spore of the mould *penicillium notatum*, which happened to settle in a culture dish of staphylococci" (Koestler, 1969). An example of a discovery arising from data collected for other purposes is the case of Wilhelm Röntgen who, whilst working on an experiment to study the conduction of electricity through gases, accidentally discovered X-rays. As Feyerabend observed:

> One of the most striking features of recent discussions in the history and philosophy of science is the realisation that events and develop-ments … occurred only because some thinkers either *decided* not to be bound by certain 'obvious' methodological rules or because they *unwit-tingly broke* them. (1975, p. 23, his italics)

Secondly, we might note that a dry and dispassionate write-up will not provide access to the kind of knowledge being sought in this form of research. Rather, we require a rich subjective account which has the potential to resonate with our feelings. This approach to writing is valued not only in the novel, but also in the social sciences, where van Manen (1997) has argued that the human science researcher is not just a writer of research reports, but "an author who writes from the midst of life experience where meanings resonate and reverberate with reflective being".

We can also see this writing "from the midst of life experience" in the 'hard' sciences, for example, in the work of the neurologist Oliver Sacks. Sacks complained that the traditional case study form of writing tells us nothing about the person behind the 'case'. Thus: "modern case histories allude to the subject in a cursory phrase ('a trisomic albino female of 21'), which could as well apply to a rat as a human being" (Sacks, 1986). In contrast:

> To restore the human subject at the centre—the suffering, afflicted, fighting, human subject—we must deepen a case history to a narrative or tale: only then do we have a 'who' as well as a 'what', a real person, a patient, in relation to a disease—in relation to the physical. (Sacks, 1986, p. x)

For Sacks, the case history as a narrative or tale brings together the scientific and the artistic. Thus "the scientific and the romantic in such realms cry out to come together—Luria liked to speak here of 'romantic science' ".

Third, in response to the objection that there is no obvious 'end' to fiction writing, We might restate Rorty's point that the aim of writing and reading fiction is solidarity with the characters, to provide a connection with (and an insight into) the lives of people we would otherwise not come into contact with. Furthermore, the ends of science are themselves often misunderstood. As Nietzsche (1973) pointed out, "It is perhaps just dawning on five or six minds that physics too is only an interpretation

and arrangement of the world ... and *not* an explanation of the world". In other words, science looks backwards to causes, not forward to ends.

That is not to suggest, however, that the methodology of fiction writing has contributed very much of significance to the physical sciences, and whilst there are, of course, novels and other works of fiction which pre-empted scientific discoveries, space travel (to take but one example) would never have become a reality if left to the novelists. Even in the applied social sciences the methodology of fiction writing has very limited application. It can tell us little, for example, about demographic trends or voting behaviour, although it can sometimes offer penetrating insights into individual or group behaviour. However, whilst writing fiction is not a traditional *scientific* research method, it is nevertheless an empirical method, owing more to Luria's 'romantic science' than to positivism and technical rationality. As the linguist and social scientist Noam Chomsky (1988) pointed out: "The science-forming capacity is only one facet of our mental endowment. We use it where we can but are not restricted to it, fortunately". He continued:

> It is quite possible—overwhelmingly probable, one might guess—that we will always learn more about human life and human personality from novels than from scientific psychology. (Chomsky, 1988, p. 159)

I am suggesting, then, that although intellectual modes of truth are important to the practitioner, she also requires an emotional or affective mode; a notion of truth which is validated not by comparison with external reality through empirical research, but by the extent to which it resonates with her internal thoughts and emotions.

This idea that there are alternative concepts of truth from alternative sources was recognised, for example, by Foucault, who did not seek to apologise for the lack of empirical research in his work, but acknowledged that:

> I am well aware that I have never written anything but fictions. I do not mean to say, however, that truth is therefore absent. It seems to me that the possibility exists for fiction to function in truth, *for a fictional discourse to induce effects of truth*. (1980, p. 193, my italics)

Similarly, Trinh (1989) has observed that "The anthropologist ... does not find things; s/he makes them. And makes them up".

Fiction: the lie that helps us see the truth

These different conceptions of truth, as correspondence with the external and internal world, are brought into sharp relief by Picasso's observation that "art is a lie that helps us see the truth" (cited in Horgan, 1996). In the scientific sense, all of art, including fiction, is a lie, since it is not derived from empirical research, but from the imagination. But this lie enables us, as Foucault pointed out, to "induce effects of truth" by resonating with our inner feelings. The 'lie' of fiction (indeed, of all art) is also a source of truth. This argument is moving inexorably towards the conclusion, as Ziman (1978) put it, that "the challenge to the behavioural [and, we

might add, social] sciences does not come from physics but from the *humanities*". Thus, he continued:

> In the search for reliable knowledge about, say, the psychology of sexual relations, do we turn to a book expounding the evidence for 'exchange', 'reward' and 'balance' models of love? Or do we read again our *Anna Karenina*, or *Madame Bovary*, or *Pride and Prejudice*, or Proust, or Saul Bellow, or Patrick White? The novelist, with his sensible ear and discriminating eye, articulates the universal elements in our emotional lives, and teaches us more about mankind than any formal theory. (Ziman, 1978, p. 185)

With this thought in mind, let us now briefly explore three examples of how fiction can, in Foucault's term, "induce effects of truth". In each case, a passage from a scientific or theoretical text will be contrasted with a passage from the autobiographical novel *Cider with Rosie* by Laurie Lee. *Cider with Rosie* makes no claims to be high art (many of the chapters were previously published as magazine articles), and my choice of this text is partly to emphasise the point that we are concerned here with the emotional resonance of the novel rather than with its artistic merits.

The first example deals with the issue of mother-child bonding, which is described from a social psychological perspective as follows:

> According to the secondary drive theory of sociability, the child becomes attracted to his mother because he learns to associate her presence with the reduction of hunger tensions, so that in time a secondary social drive emerges whereby the child demands the mother's company for its own sake. However, the work of Harlow has shown very clearly that this is unlikely to be the case; infant rhesus monkeys, given the choice of mother surrogates constructed of wire mesh or covered in terry cloth attached themselves invariably to the latter—despite the fact that their milk supply came from the former. 'Contact comfort' appeared to be the crucial variable fostering the attraction, not the satisfaction of somatic needs. (Tajfel & Fraser, 1978, p. 116)

Here is Laurie Lee describing 'contact comfort' from a rather different perspective:

> I was still young enough then to be sleeping with my Mother, which to me seemed life's whole purpose. We slept together in the first-floor bedroom on a flock-filled mattress in a bed of brass rods and curtains. Alone, at that time, of all the family, I was her chosen dream companion, chosen from all for her extra love; my right, so it seemed to me. So in the ample night and the thickness of her hair I consumed my fattened sleep, drowsed and nuzzling to her warmth of flesh, blessed by her bed and safety. From the width of the house and the separation of the day, we two then lay joined alone. (Lee, 1962, pp. 25–26)

In the first passage, the writers are attempting to *explain* and *understand* why children enjoy physical contact with their mothers, and arrive at the explanation of "contact comfort" as the "crucial variable". This theoretical understanding might be very useful to the child psychologist in coming to understand why, for example, some children find it difficult to bond with their mothers whilst others have difficulty in letting go. However, for the psychologist who wishes to build a therapeutic relationship with such a child, Laurie Lee offers an emotional understanding which a thousand studies of monkeys could never provide. But whereas the scientist would reject the second passage as having little of value to contribute towards psychological theory, the child psychologist might find that it is invaluable to psychological *practice*.

The second example explores the subject of motor behaviour in six-year-old boys, again initially from a psychological perspective:

> Boys try their strength in many ways, and like to fight with their brothers and father, but such fights often end unhappily for they cannot stop in time. A six-year-old develops a kind of 'tool consciousness'. He discovers his hand in this connection and experiments with it, but seems little interested in the results of his experiments. (Sandström, 1968, p. 56)

Laurie Lee perfectly illustrates this coming together of trying one's strength and 'tool consciousness', and in particular, the lack of interest in the results of the experiment:

> She [Vera] came up to me in the playground one morning and held her face close to mine. I had a stick in my hand, so I hit her on the head with it. Her hair was springy, so I hit her again and watched her mouth open up with a yell. To my surprise a commotion broke out around me, cries of scandal from the older girls, exclamations of horror and heavy censure mixed with Vera's sobbing wails. I was intrigued, not alarmed, that by wielding a beech stick I was able to cause such a stir. So I hit her again, without spite or passion, then walked off to try something else. (Lee, 1962, pp. 46–47)

Once again, literature provides an understanding which is unobtainable from the scientific account. The concept of 'tool consciousness' might help the reader to empathise, "to sense the client's private world as if it were your own, *but without ever losing the 'as if' quality*" (Rogers, 1957, my italics), but it does not provide the emotional content needed in order to extend that objective *'as if'* empathy to a subjective *'as is'* sympathy. The scientific account enables us to understand the actions of a six-year-old, but Laurie Lee's account helps us to experience vicariously the bewilderment that he felt as a result of hitting Vera with the stick. Of course, the objective understanding is necessary to the practitioner (in this case, for example, the infant school teacher), but so, too, is the subjective insight gained from reading fictional or semi-fictional literature.

The final example concerns the experience of childhood fever. This is something that many of us will have experienced first-hand, but the full impact of the

experience seems to fade quickly once the fever is over. Medical descriptions, then, hardly seem to do justice to it:

> The commonest cause of convulsions, or seizures, in children under five is a fever of over 102°F. An older child may first complain of a headache or strange sensations, such as a feeling of fear or an hallucination of sight, sound, smell or touch. This 'aura' is followed by stiffness of the legs and arms, and then repeated jerky movements. Finally, the child will often go to sleep. (Stanway, 1989, p. 128)

This dispassionate account of "hallucinations of sight" and "repeated jerky movements" suggests a minor inconvenience for the child which is quickly forgotten, and while it might help the nurse or mother to understand objectively the process of fever, it provides no real insight into the terror experienced by the five-year-old child:

> My limbs went first, splintering like logs, so that I seemed to grow dozens of arms. Then the bed no longer had limits to it and became a desert of hot wet sand. I began to talk to a second head laid on the pillow, my own head once removed; it never talked back, but just lay there grinning very coldly into my eyes. The walls of the bedroom were next to go; they began to bulge and ripple and roar, to flap like pastry, melt like sugar, and run bleeding with hideous hues. Then out of the walls, and down from the ceiling, advanced a row of intangible smiles; easy, relaxed, in no way threatening at first, but going on far too long .... going on and on till I was screaming and beating the bed-rails. (Lee, 1962, p. 159)

No matter that each fever is different; no matter that the above account might be a composite description of a dozen different fevers; no matter that it might rely heavily on poetic license; it provides an insight into the world of the child that no amount of objective theory and research ever could.

Lee, in an essay entitled *Writing Autobiography*, addresses this very issue "of truth, of fact, often raised about autobiography. If dates are wrong, can the book still be true? If facts err, can feelings be false?" (Lee, 1977). Lee, in fact, comes to a very similar conclusion to that reached by Picasso, that art is a lie that helps us to see the truth; that "the only truth is what you remember" (Lee, 1977). Thus, in discussing how he wrote *Cider with Rosie*, he explained that:

> The flowing chatter of my sisters, for twelve years unstaunched, had to be distilled to a few dozen phrases—phrases, perhaps, which they had never quite uttered, but bearing the accents of all that they had. (Lee, 1977, p. 51)

And:

> In another chapter, about our life at home, I describe a day that never happened. Perhaps a thousand days of that life each yielded a moment for the book—a posture, a movement, a tone—all singly true and belonging to each other, though never having been joined before. (Lee 1977, p. 51)

The details might be false, they might even be a deliberate lie, but, as Foucault claimed, it is a lie which can induce the effects of truth.

Conclusion

I have argued, then, that practitioners sometimes require a body of affective knowledge which the traditional social science research paradigms cannot provide. Furthermore, I have suggested that this body of knowledge can be obtained through reading fiction, and that the writing of fiction is itself a form of social research which provides access to a particular kind of truth. That is not to say that the practitioner will always practice at a level which requires such a knowledge-base, but rather that *sometimes* she will practice at the first level from quantitative knowledge (as in the earlier example of the doctor and her patient), *sometimes* she will practice at the second level from qualitative knowledge (as in the example of the community psychiatric nurse and her homeless patients), and *sometimes* she will practice at the third level from affective knowledge (as in the example of the children's nurse and her patients awaiting their operations). At the heart of this suggestion is a debate about what counts as truth; about whether novelists can make truth claims which can stand alongside the findings from research.

I have argued in this paper that truth should not be judged according to some objective criteria, some overarching meta-narrative, but more pragmatically according to the use to which it is to be put. For the nurse who wishes to ensure that a wound does not become infected, the findings of scientific research represent the truth; for the nurse who wishes to identify with the child who is suffering with that wound in order to comfort and reassure her, the truth might lie in a novel or poem. Fiction attempts to offer a vicarious experience, and as Foucault put it, "to induce effects of truth" by resonating with our own feelings. In other words, it allows us to sympathise with another person, and is, arguably, the closest we can come to understanding the truth of her experience without actually being her.

Seen in this way, literature provides us with valuable material on which to reflect; it enables a vicarious form of reflection on action that might not have been our own, but which are no less useful for that. Indeed, if reflection-on-action is seen as a valuable (the *most* valuable) source of knowledge for the practitioner, then reading fiction can greatly broaden the scope of her reflection to areas of experience that she might never hope (or wish) to encounter first hand.

I recently attended a conference where one of the speakers was arguing against reflection-on-action as an educational strategy. She recounted a story of a student who, pushed for time, invented a case study for her reflective assignment. How, claimed the speaker, could the student possibly learn anything by reflecting on a fictional account of a fictional patient, by reflecting, in effect, on a lie? Of course, if the aim of reflection-on-action is solely cognitive, to accrue 'real' knowledge about the 'real' world, then the speaker was right to be critical. However, if we accept my argument that reflection is also concerned with affective or sympathetic understanding, then the whole world of the arts becomes a rich and valuable source of knowledge, a lie that helps us see the truth.

Notes

1.   The term 'helping professions' will be employed in this paper to include nursing, medicine, the professions allied to medicine, social work, teaching, and so on; in fact, any discipline in which human relationships are a central component.

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