

Colliding discourses: Deconstructing the process of seeking ethical approval for a participatory evaluation project

Gary Rolfe

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Colliding discourses

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Gary Rolfe PhD, MA, BSc, RMN, RGN, NT, PGCEA

Professor and Chair in Nursing

School of Health Science, University of Wales, Swansea

Pre-text: Before the text, a leading in, but also a pretext, a justification, an excuse.

What was the editor thinking when she asked me to comment on the paper 'Colliding Discourses'? The writer of the paper cites Rolfe (2002) in pointing out that their own reading of their own text is no more privileged than any other. What, then, can Rolfe possibly add in his commentary? Or, more generally: what would constitute a critique of this text? Where are the handles by which to grasp it? Or perhaps: does a deconstructive text deserve (or demand) a deconstructive commentary? If, as Barthes tells us, the author(ity) of the text is dead, then the burden of truth falls on the readers. And on their readers.

Con-text: with/for the text, but also the context, the situation (situatedness) of the text.

The paper constitutes an (unspoken/unacknowledged) expression of Lyotard's premise of the *differend*, the impossibility of passing judgement on one discourse from the perspective of another (Lyotard, 1983). How can the dominant medical discourse give ethical approval for a study immersed in the discourse of 'postmodern' participatory research? Similarly, how can the dominant academic discourse provide an authentic critique of a 'postmodern' research paper which refuses to play the game by questioning at the outset its own authority as a source of truth.

For Norris (1991), 'Deconstruction is the active antithesis of everything that criticism ought to be if one accepts its traditional values and concepts.' If the purpose of traditional criticism/critique is to offer answers, to provide a grounding, a centre, for the text, then the postmodern critic residing in Derrida's 'decentred universe' is able only (only?) to raise more questions, only to push the reader into 'the abyss of

deconstruction . . . with the prospect of never hitting bottom' (Spivak, 1976).

Sub-text: beneath the text, exploring its roots and assumptions, but also a subtext, an occult or hidden meaning, one of many (an infinitude of?) different meanings.

As Barthes (1977) puts it: 'At a certain moment, therefore, it is necessary to turn against Method, or at least to treat it without any founding privileges as one of the voices of plurality.' In a decentred universe, a universe without founding privileges, what role is there for ethics and, by extension, ethics committees? Or, put another way: can a decentred universe also be a moral universe? Or again: are ethics committees *really* concerned with ethics, or is this (as Foucault might have said) merely an example of power/knowledge at work, the imposition of an arbitrary authority under the guise of morality? I suspect that this is the unspoken question underpinning the author's decision to 'make more or less cosmetic changes to the proposal'. Clearly, the author does not subscribe fully to the moral authority of the ethics committee, nor believes that their judgement on their submission is entirely an ethical one.

The solution offered in the paper is to begin 'a process of dialogue with the chairperson on the LREC'; but to what extent is this a modernist solution to a postmodern dilemma, suggesting a rationality where none exists? The author continues: 'if the power of the traditional scientific discourse is discursively constituted then it may be discursively de-constituted through debates . . .' I wish the author well in her/his ongoing dialogue, but theory and practice both tell me that s/he is unlikely to be heard; that, in the final analysis, the dominant power/knowledge discourse will choose either to ignore this voice of reason, or (more likely) will not interpret it as reason at all.

The judgement: 'a judge worthy of the name has no true model to guide his judgements, and the true nature of the judge is to pronounce judgements . . . just so, without criteria' (Lyotard, 1983).

I have used this commentary to raise the issue of the impossibility of a traditional academic critical commentary, of critique, of rational judgement within a deconstructive framework. That is not to say that judgement itself is impossible, only that it must be, in Lyotard's terminology, enigmatic: a judgement without rules. My judgement, then, is that this is a brave and important paper which raises a number of issues that many researchers have struggled with in recent years. The fact that I suspect the author's chosen solution is a compromise that I fear will inevitably fail to succeed, should not be seen so much as a criticism of the paper, but rather

of the dominant discourse with which the author hopes to engage. If the paper has a fault, it is that its conclusion is somewhat over optimistic in the light of what went before it. It is a rational and humanistic assessment of a problem which has no rational solution. But, then again, the same could be said of this judgement.

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