

Unbridging the gap between data and theory

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Summary

This paper seeks to demonstrate something of the dynamics between data and theory. It offers readers a performance of such links rather than a static representation. Conventional methodological accounts outline concepts and procedures, but leave many thinking, 'Yes, but what do these things mean in practice?' Hence here, a demonstration, one that is of course reductive, schematic and truncated, but which tries to show the process of iteration between data and theory rather than restrict itself to invoking the abstraction of 'paradigms'.

'If [...] terminology is the properly poetic thought, then terminological choices can never be neutral' (Agamben 2005: 4)

Let's start with death...

Let's start with death. Wendy Cope's wry poem 'Once I'm dead' ends: '... But still I dread/The day that we must part, myself and I./ The voice may still be heard when I am dead/ But not by me. I will have said goodbye.' Note death's self-divorce of 'myself and I'. Borges explored the same conceit of a radical gap between 'I' the writer and 'me' the having-written. He addressed himself thus:

'Years ago I tried to free myself from him and went from the mythologies of the games with time and infinity, but those games belong to Borges now and I shall have to imagine other things. Thus

my life is a flight and I lose everything and everything belongs to oblivion, or to him.

I do not know which of us has written this page.' (J-L. Borges, 'Borges and I', in *Labyrinths. Selected stories and other writings*, 2000, p 283).

Data-to-theory rests somewhere within that kind of relation, often posited as a “technological” bridge deceptive of our self-engagements. I want to explore a certain analogy between data/theory, life/death, movement/stasis, and to posit life/death as a provocative ‘depersonalisation’ (call that a ‘refigure of speech’) of that I/myself, I/me gap – between the qualitative ‘I’ of seeing, listening, asking, recording, performing and the ‘me’ of an necessarily abrupt ending in analysis, deconstruction, representation, and writing. Witness the contrast: the active verbs of the nominative ‘I’ and the inert nouns of the accusative ‘me’. In other metaphorical terms, we could (mis)call it the difference between the ‘flow’ of experience and the ‘freeze’ of meaning.

We haven’t finished with life/death yet. It is the ultimate polarity, a profound yet baffling opposition for poets, authors and philosophers. But we can turn it on its head, by opposing its very opposition and using that exercise to posit a more collusive relationship, following an anti-methodological dictum I have long favoured:

‘Show me the way to get lost’ (Stronach 2002; 2010, p. 166)

What would such a theoretical move look like? Life versus death. That opposition offers a covert existentialism to the notion of ‘death’. Somehow death is, and thereby has its equivalence with life. It struggles with life and eventually overcomes it – more lively than life itself? But if we argue that a less deceptive opposition would be life versus ‘not-life’, there are interesting consequences, philosophically and culturally. Death loses its sting, its animation as a ‘state’ or ‘existence’. Thus bereft, questions such as ‘Is there life after death?’ seem absurd when re-expressed as ‘Is there life after not-life?’, a logical contradiction open to ridicule. After all, no-one would take seriously the question, ‘Is there cheese after no-cheese?’ Or so the argument might develop had we time and space. Both the terms and their oppositional relationship can be ‘troubled’ in this way (and in many others).

Where does that take us, in this eccentric pursuit of data/theory? First it points towards an existential stratum running through both notions. Both concepts have a Being and a Becoming that Methodologies usually downplay or deny. They’re not Things; they’re not even Concepts, in themselves. (When people claim Methodology as Identity – “I’m a phenomenologist, a poststructuralist, marxist, postpositivist, hermeneuticist” etc, they’re usually posturing, as for sure I am when I claim to be a postmodernist – an identity in immediate self-contradiction.) Second, it indicates the need to interrogate the very concepts themselves, rather than to ‘choose’ varieties of either. The thinking that links data to theory is not a matter of paradigm-shopping. Third, it

suggests that we see these terms/practices as forms of movement and inter-relation, rather than more or less worthy methodological stances or positions – often a kind of petrified politics of knowledge. Both notions are somehow performances of the other, analogous to the sorts of I-me relation that philosophers and cultural theorists have posited, from Mead through to Nancy. Finally, a last analogous strand. In the narratives of thinking theory is always the death of data, which is always the death of experience – a serial killing involving multiple arrests, even if such ontological ‘arrests’ never involve epistemological convictions.

What this first section has tried to do is to enact a thinking of thinking (= theory) that does not bridge the gap between data and its inducted or deduced relation to theory. Such bridging of course can be legitimate in its place – through engineering a systematicity, a sampling, an aggregation of data into themes, concepts and relations – a ‘cosmotic’ epistemology (Law and Lin 2009) where things are made to fit together. In exercises based on the philosophies of difference, we seek rather to ‘jump’ or perhaps ‘swim’, backwards and forwards, rather than to bridge the gap with a definitive span.

So there is Engineering for Bridges, and not much more than Exercise for jumping, which mobilises our bodies and wills as well as developing through exemplification and experimentation. What can this kind of ‘jumping’ look like?

Jumping to conclusions

The following link takes you to an acting-out of such ‘jumping’ (<http://www.bera.ac.uk/files/2011/11/Microdoctoral-modelling-a-few-thoughts-on-the-raw-and-the-cooked-in-relation-to-data.pdf>). It was written after a doctoral workshop at LJMU. It is perhaps best related to Geertz’s account of the iterative journey(s) from data to theory:

‘.. a continuous dialectical tacking between the most local of detail and the most global of global structure in such a way to bring them into simultaneous view’(Geertz 1983: 69)

Conclusion (or rather ‘emerging hypotheses’)

Remember: this is ‘microdoctoral modelling’, seeking to perform – by way of truncated example not exemplar - how journeys from data to theory (and back again, and again, in many iterations) may proceed; data and theory in a to-and-fro relation in which we are deeply implicated. We have already posited an indecisive decisiveness to this process (depending on whether we address the necessities of ontology or the contingencies of epistemology). But let’s return to the actual data/theory links that we’ve been exploring: we may see the abstract more clearly through the instance of the concrete. I argued that the data from the university ethics committee could be explored in relation to ‘prudential risk’ and that such a concept allowed us to return to the data with

an illuminating conceptual tool. It expanded understanding by characterising the specific with a more general insight. But such a coupling told us much more about the nature of 'risk' than it did about the politics surrounding such a move. What about the power/knowledge implications of 'risk' displaced on to a professional/managerial register? In this kind of displacement professional responsibility is subordinated to corporate governance. Professionals give way to managers: committees establish and police protocols (even though it is other professionals who manage by proxy the procedures: think Foucault's 'self-regulation' rather than more direct impositions). But what, now, can we hypothesize about the relation between 'risk' and 'control'? A first reading might suggest that risk-control means how risk is assessed, expressed, and managed in the interests of some notion of security: the polarity is risk/security. It is a largely 'rational' evaluation. But we can displace that with the possibility (a hypothesis, to be explored..) that the aim of such management is to generate a sense of risk that is actually minimal but which is highly functional as an insecurity permitting an increase in control, and a reduction in the professional and personal values of trust, responsibility, autonomy, and even solidarity. This could license more authoritarian rule, or – to go back to Beck – engender the fantasy of control, to 'feign control' in an unpredictable world. Or even, remove risk not from an inevitably uncertain world, but from any possibility of corporate blame. Yet...

'..ethics requires us to risk ourselves at moments of unknowingness, when what forms us diverges from what lies before us, when our willingness to become undone in relation to others constitutes our chance of becoming human' (Butler 2005: 136)

A final illustration of the traffic between what is observed and how it is written up and thought about, this time taken from literature rather than research writing. Fernando Pessoa looks across the street at a sales assistant putting into the shop window 'a new brand of shoe polish':

'All these ideals [think 'theory'], possible or impossible, now end. Now I face reality, which isn't even the sales assistant (whom I don't see), only his hand, the absurd tentacle of a soul with a family and a fate, and it twists like a spider in a web while putting back tins of polish in the window. And one of the tins fell, like the Fate of us all.' (Pessoa 1998:119)

I wish I could look, think and write as well as that. And that you will!

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