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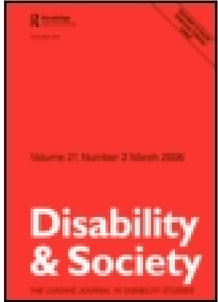

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Sounds of Silence: narrative research with inarticulate subjects

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ABSTRACT *This article addresses the challenge of using narrative methods with people who have learning difficulties. Such informants present four particular interview problems: inarticulateness; unresponsiveness; a concrete frame of reference; and difficulties with the concept of time. The authors focus on the first two of these problems and argue that neither of them constitutes an insuperable barrier to people telling their story. Drawing on detailed interview material from an informant with learning difficulties, the authors set out to show in practical terms how these problems might be tackled, emphasising in particular the importance of being attentive to what goes unsaid. They conclude that researchers should put more emphasis on overcoming the barriers that impede the involvement of inarticulate subjects in narrative research instead of dwelling on their limitations as informants.*

Recent sociological research has been marked by the rise of the storytelling movement. As Bowker (1993) has observed, the age of biography is upon us and narrative methods are now attracting an interest unmatched since the hey-day of the Chicago School. This revival owes its impetus to the coming together of a number of critical strands of thought: growing frustration over the problem of the 'disappearing individual' in sociological theorising (Whittemore *et al*., 1986); a reaction against the 'over-determined' view of reality brought about by methods that impose order on a messy world (Faraday & Plummer, 1979); and creeping disenchantment with research that subordinates the realm of personal experience to the quest for generalisation (Abrams, 1991). One expression of these concerns is the 'excluded voice thesis' that has developed primarily from feminist research and critical race theory (Farber & Sherry, 1993).

The 'excluded voice thesis' postulates that narrative methods provide access to the perspectives and experience of oppressed groups who lack the power to make their voices heard through traditional modes of academic discourse. This article addresses the challenge of doing narrative research with one such excluded group: people with learning difficulties.{1}

Very little work has been done using narrative methods with people who have learning difficulties. Certainly, there has been a growing recognition in recent years of the importance of listening to what they have to say. In 1984, Richards could

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identify only five British studies in the previous 20 years which had involved people with learning difficulties as informants. This picture has now changed significantly and a body of literature is beginning to accumulate based on interview research with people who have learning difficulties (see, for example, Lowe *et al.*, 1986; Cattermole *et al.*, 1987; Sugg, 1987; Flynn, 1989; Potts and Fido, 1990; Booth *et al.*, 1990; Welsh Office, 1991).

For the most part, however, informants with learning difficulties have been regarded mainly as sources of data for researchers' narratives rather than people with their own stories to tell. This marks the crucial difference between narrative research and interview research. In the former it is the voice of the subject that determines the frame of reference of the narrative (Thompson, 1981). Although a lot has been learned about interviewing people who have learning difficulties (see, for example, Sigelman *et al.*, 1981a, b, 1982; Flynn, 1986; Atkinson, 1988; Bicklen and Moseley, 1988; Booth *et al.*, 1990), much less is known about doing narrative research. The task of confronting the methodological problems it presents has only just begun (see, for example, Atkinson & Williams, 1990; Booth & Booth, 1994). In this article, we set out to illustrate some practical issues in the use of narrative methods with people who have learning difficulties using case material from an ongoing study.

People with learning difficulties present the narrative researcher with a number of challenges among which four stand out as particularly important. None of these are unique to their label; they are also encountered with other informants. Equally, they may well arise in prospect more than in practice. However, researchers should at least be prepared for them before they enter the field.

Inarticulateness

The inability to communicate fluently in words. Inarticulateness goes beyond mere shyness, anxiety or reserve. It originates with restricted language skills, but is generally overlaid by other factors including a lack of self-esteem, learned habits of compliance, social isolation or loneliness, and the experience of oppression.

Unresponsiveness

A limited ability to answer some types of question. In a series of studies designed to test the efficacy of different question formats with respondents who have learning difficulties, Sigelman and her colleagues (1981a, b, 1982) found that open-ended questions received the poorest response. Few respondents could answer them adequately and those who could provided relatively little information. Biklen & Moseley (1988) likewise 'suggest avoiding open-ended questions'. Yet in narrative research it is generally agreed that interviews should be 'open and fluid' in order to enable the subject 'to take the lead' (Plummer, 1983). Contrary to Thompson's observation (1981) that most material is normally 'narrated independently of direct questions', the lack of responsiveness to open-ended questioning by informants with learning difficulties usually requires the researcher to adopt a more direct style of interviewing.

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A Concrete Frame of Reference

Difficulties in generalising from experience and thinking in abstract terms. According to Labov & Waletzky (1967), narratives have both a referential and an evaluative function (see also Kohli, 1981). The referential function involves reconstructing past events in some sort of chronological order. The evaluative function involves relating these past events to the present: reconstructing the meaning of the past from a position in the here-and-now in order to give meaning to the present (Bertaux-Wiame, 1981). The concrete frame of reference typical of many people with learning difficulties cramps their capacity for looking back on their own past with the sort of reflexivity the evaluative function demands. Consequently, it is often hard to establish the significance of past events in people's lives. While Spradley (1979) has pointed out that people who are overly abstract are often less useful as informants, people with learning difficulties present a challenge for precisely the opposite reasons.

Problems with Time

Marked by a strong present orientation and difficulties with dates and numbers. These problems are only partly a consequence of not knowing how to tell the time or use a calendar. They are also indicative of lives which lack many of the milestones people use to order their past, such as examinations, the driving test, first car, starting work, setting up home, job changes, promotions, marriage, parenthood, etc., and many of the props—trophies, certificates, photo albums, scrap books, possessions—they use for marking the passage of time. Flynn (1986) advises that questions about time and frequency are best avoided when interviewing people with learning difficulties (see also Atkinson, 1988). Biklen and Moseley similarly report that their 'informants often confused time sequences and settings'. While ways can often be found around some of these problems (Booth & Booth, 1994), they do put limits on the important referential function (see above) of narrative which is essentially a story in time.

This article focuses on inarticulateness and unresponsiveness as obstacles to the use of narrative methods with people who have learning difficulties. We argue that neither amounts to an insuperable barrier to people telling their story. Bertaux (1981) says that 'a good life story is one in which the interviewee *takes over the control of the interview situation* and talks freely' (italics in original). Similarly, Plummer (1983) comments that good informants 'should be fairly articulate, able to verbalise and have "a good story to tell" '. For the reasons outlined above, informants with learning difficulties who satisfy these criteria are likely to prove the exception rather than the rule. However, this fact alone should not be seen as an excuse for discounting the usefulness of narrative methods. Fluency is not the only key to communication. Silence may be as telling as talk. When using narrative methods with people who have learning difficulties, researchers must learn to read the spaces between the words. Our aim in this article is to show what this means in practical terms. Let us begin with a story.

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Danny Avebury's Story

Danny Avebury is 20 years old and has learning difficulties. He is the eldest of four children and lives with his parents on a small council estate. The family has always lived in the same house. Danny likes where he lives: the neighbours are friendly, he says. They have no telephone, and no car as neither of his parents drive. Both his mother and father have learning difficulties. Two younger sisters still live at home and attend special school; Danny's 19-year-old brother, Bob, has moved out to live with his girlfriend. Bob has a car, but Danny hasn't seen him since he left home. Danny, his parents and his brother are all unemployed. When Danny left special school at 16, he enrolled at a further education college to study maths, English and computer work. Two days a week he does voluntary work on a community farm, and one morning he goes with the gardening group from college to trim hedges and cut the lawn at an old people's home.

Danny is tall and slim with black hair which has recently been cut from shoulder length. His mum cuts his hair. He has a friendly manner and smiles frequently. He wears a baseball cap and the casual clothes of his generation, although they are a bit on the large side. He usually carries with him a large holdall bag for his books and personal stereo. He also smokes.

Out of college Danny spends most of his time at home watching television. His favourite programmes are *Home and Away* and football matches. He rarely goes to bed before one o'clock as he likes to watch the late night films. He also enjoys listening to local radio and tapes on his stereo; his favourite singers are Meatloaf and Belinda Carlisle, and he has posters of Madonna on his bedroom wall. Occasionally, he goes shopping with his mum or accompanies his parents to the local pub. He doesn't belong to any clubs and has never been to the cinema. When he goes out in an evening, it is to sit on his front wall and talk to his friends in the neighbourhood. They are all much younger than him. There is a student at college whom he would like to get to know better, perhaps one day even call his girlfriend, but at present he sees her only from a distance.

He has friends at college, but doesn't see them outside. He says his parents stop him going out. He only remembers going on holiday once, to Cleethorpes, and that was with college. He has never been on holiday with his parents. His mum and dad have no regular friends whom they visit or who come to see them.

At home Danny says his mum does most of the jobs around the house, including the shopping. His dad does 'nowt': just sits around most of the time, although occasionally he will do some gardening. Danny washes the pots for his mum and sometimes helps his dad in the garden, but his main job is to look after the family pets—a budgerigar, a cat, 18 tropical fish, two rabbits and a ferret. He found the ferret. When Danny leaves college he would like to work with animals.

Danny's one freedom is his racer bike on which he takes himself off to the park for a ride—always on his own and only during the daytime. This Christmas he has asked for rollerblades like his friend Adam's.

As a child, Danny used to be collected from home by a special bus. Today he catches two buses to college. He enjoyed his school days and liked his teachers. He

had friends at school, but never played with his brother who went to a different school and mixed with a different crowd. His mum and dad have always taken an interest in his education. They regularly attended parents' evenings at his special school and recently were at college to see him presented with a certificate for his achievements.

Danny is unable to remember much at all about his childhood, not even when his sisters were born. He cannot remember ever seeing his grandparents nor any other relatives but, he says, he has never felt lonely. The one incident from the past he does remember well is when he went out with his brother and stole a car. Danny was the passenger. The police came to see his parents and gave him a stern warning. It has never happened again. Although his brother has now left home, Danny is still watched very closely by his parents.

He wishes he could make more decisions for himself, like choosing to go out at night or to keep his hair long. His sister once tied his hair back in a pony tail, and he rather liked it that way, but his mother decided he should have it cut short. Danny sometimes has arguments with his parents, especially about going out, but on the whole they get on all right. He feels they are a close family. He loves his mum and dad.

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The Origins of Danny's Story

Danny Avebury (not his real name) is one of the people involved in an ongoing study {2} designed to investigate the longer term outcomes for older, adult children of having been brought up by parents with learning difficulties. Using narrative methods, the study seeks to encapsulate the experience of growing up with disabled parents in order to shed light on the relationship between parental competence, family functioning and child outcomes, and to explore the limits of good-enough parenting.

Danny's story has been compiled from interviews undertaken as part of this research. We have chosen to recount it because Danny presents an extreme example of the general problem of inarticulateness that narrative researchers might expect to encounter—usually in a less severe form—when interviewing people with learning difficulties. As such, his story and the interviews from which it has been put together merit closer analysis for two reasons. First, they demonstrate that narrative research is not fatally compromised by Baron's (1991) paradox: that those who most need to have their stories heard may be least able to tell them. It is possible to use narrative methods to give a voice to people who lack words, and to gain a measure of access to the lives of even the most inarticulate and unresponsive informants. They may yield a much poorer harvest of material than would be obtained from studies involving better informants but enough, nonetheless, to make the effort worthwhile in a literature that is still largely 'void of the experience it would presumably portray' (Whittemore *et al.*, 1986). Second, Danny's story contains general lessons for narrative researchers which challenge the view, based on a model of disability as individual pathology, that the problems of interviewing inarticulate subjects are merely a function of their own limitations (Booth, 1995; Oliver, 1992).

Danny Avebury was chronically short of words. He would only speak when spoken to and then as little as possible. During three interviews running to almost two-and-a-half hours of recorded conversation he uttered only 10 complete sentences, including four 'don't knows' and a 'can't remember'. His longest sentence was made up of five words. His fullest reply came to a question about his pets when he said he had 'a rabbit an' all, and a ferret'. Otherwise, his responses to three out of every four questions consisted of a single word only.

There is no reason to suppose that Danny's reticence was his way of saying he did not wish to be interviewed. He always greeted the researcher with a smile and a friendly hello. He willingly agreed to the second and third interviews. He never failed to turn up. Indeed, on one occasion he rang to say that he had a dental appointment and might not make it back to college in time, but was there on the day as arranged.

In an effort to find some way of drawing him out, an informal group discussion was arranged with his tutorial class at college. We wondered if Danny might be a bit more forthcoming given the support and example of his peers. The group comprised nine students of whom five had learning difficulties and four were catching up on their education. They had all known each other for some time. Conversation was guided around commonplace issues such as what people liked doing best at college, what they liked doing in their spare time, what jobs they did around the home, what they would like to do when they leave college, and so on. Danny was even quieter than usual. In an hour's recorded discussion he spoke just 40 words, and then only in response to direct questions put to him. Observation of him with his tutors confirmed the reactive nature of his conversation and the monosyllabic quality of his speech. Danny, we concluded, just didn't have much talk in him.

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The Making of a Narrative

In narrative research, according to Thompson (1981), it is 'normal for much of the material in the interview to be narrated independently of direct questions'. The reverse is more likely to be true in the case of inarticulate subjects. Danny Avebury only replied to direct questions, and then not always. This puts more onus on the skill of the researcher who must not only work harder (by having to ask more questions and probe more fully to elicit information), but also pay more regard to the form of the questions, the sort of language used and the conduct of the interview. Part of the problem here is that 'we have very few ways of conversing with persons who are not as smart as we are' (Biklen & Moseley, 1988). Too often these ways involve talking down to people as if their lack of words denotes a lack of comprehension. The researcher must establish a level of communication that facilitates rapport without making people feel inadequate. Our experience is that even the most inarticulate people generally discern a great deal more than their conversation reveals. We have found it important to begin interviews without any fixed assumptions about people's ability to understand what was being asked of them. Their abilities have to be tested. At the same time as coaxing conversation out of people the researcher is also having to explore the efficacy of different modes of questioning

in an effort to find ways of helping them respond. Tremblay (1957) has described this technique as 'self-developing' in that the researcher must refine the 'interviewing method during the course of a session, or through repeated contacts, as the amount of knowledge about the problem increases and as the ability of the informant is fully revealed'. Looking more closely at Danny's transcripts provides a useful window on this process at work.

Danny was not able to cope with open-ended questions. Any form of question that did not lend itself to a one word reply was usually met with silence:

> *Int*: Can you try and think back to when you were a small child. What is the very first thing you can remember?
> *DA*: (Long silence)
> *Int*: Is there any particular thing you remember...that stands out in your mind? It might be a good thing, it might be a bad thing.
> *DA*: (Very long silence)
> *Int*: Nothing coming to you?
> *DA*: No.

These silences were not all of a kind: they were laden with at least four possible meanings. They might indicate that Danny had not understood the question, or that he could not articulate the answer, or that he wanted to avoid answering without actually lying or that he did not know the answer. The skill of the interviewer lies in detecting which of these possibilities applies in each instance and, therefore, in deciding how to proceed. In the case of the first two, the question might be rephrased and put again, usually in a simpler form or prompts might be given to illustrate the form of response. In the third instance, some less threatening way of approaching the topic needs to be found. In the latter case, the line of questioning might best be given up and a fresh topic broached.

A useful strategy in rephrasing questions was to break them down into simple parts admitting a yes/no response or similar one-word answer:

> *Int*: I want to get a picture of your mum and dad in my head. How would you describe them? How would you describe your mum for a start?
> *DA*: (Long silence)
> *Int*: What's she look like?
> *DA*: (Long silence)
> *Int*: Do you think you look like your mum or your dad?
> *DA*: (Silence)
> *Int*: Can't you say that?
> *DA*: No.
> *Int*: You don't know?
> *DA*: No.
> *Int*: And you can't describe her—is she tall?
> *DA*: No, small.
> *Int*: Is she dark or has she got grey hair now or is she...What colour's her hair?

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DA: Brown.
Int: Does she wear glasses?
DA: Yes.
Int: What about your dad? Is he small?
DA: No.

Again the open-ended question failed to elicit any information at all; its purpose is primarily to signal a change of topic and to mark out what the interviewer would like to talk about next. Note also that Danny says he cannot answer the first direct question, although the easy option for him would have been to feed the interviewer by making up a reply. He seeks to answer truthfully or remains silent. (Evidence that he understood the question came later in the interview when he said he thought his sisters looked like their mum.) As the extract also demonstrates, acquiescence—the tendency to respond affirmatively regardless of the question—was not one of his traits. He was prepared to say no. This enabled the interviewer to use leading questions (Is she tall? Is he small?) as a means of probing for information that Danny would not volunteer himself. The problem with an inarticulate informant like Danny is that he does not provide any clues about what the interviewer should be asking: unlike more fluent subjects whose responses generally contain the seeds of the next question. The only practical option is to offer up a menu of suggestions with which he can either agree or disagree. The following extract from the transcripts illustrates the approach:

Int: Can you remember what toys you used to have...when you were small? Any toys that you used to like?
DA: (Long silence) No.
Int: Did you used to have toys at Christmas...and on your birthday?
DA: (Long silence)
Int: Were you given presents?
DA: (Long silence)
Int: You can't remember?
DA: Can't remember.
Int: What about your last birthday? What did you have on your birthday this year?
DA: I don't know.
Int: Is it that you can't remember or that you didn't have anything?...It doesn't matter what you say.
DA: (Long silence)
Int: Perhaps your family doesn't buy each other presents on their birthdays? Do they?
DA: No...No.

The silences in this sequence were not empty of meaning. Danny was made a little uneasy by the topic, as if embarrassed for his family, but after trying to avoid a reply his basic honesty (and his lack of words) prevented him from giving a less than truthful response when the interviewer finally hit on the right question. By the

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gradual *elimination of alternatives* it is possible to piece together a story bit by bit. Equally, by the *progressive adaptation* of questions it is usually possible to find a formula that will trigger a response. Once again, this entails listening to the silences in order to detect whether the question needs putting a different way, the topic needs approaching from a different tack, or the respondent really has nothing more to say on the subject. As the following vignette shows, direct questions alone did not always bring a reply if they outstripped Danny's comprehension:

> *Int*: I know this is very difficult to think about, but if you ever did in the future... if you ever became a parent, and you had children (Danny laughs), do you think you would do things differently for your children than your mum and dad have done for you?
> *DA*: (Long silence)
> *Int*: Do you think you would treat them any differently?
> *DA*: (Long silence)
> *Int*: In some ways, it's a round about question that's really asking do you think your mum and dad should have treated you any differently?
> *DA*: (Long silence)
> *Int*: Is there anything you wish they'd done for you that they haven't done?
> *DA*: No.
> *Int*: So if you had some children you'd treat them exactly the same as your mum and dad have treated you?
> *DA*: Yes.
> *Int*: That's what you're saying?
> *DA*: Yes.

What Biklen & Moseley (1988) have called this strategy of 'successive approximations' provides a grounded approach to understanding something of the subjective world of inarticulate subjects while raising two attendant dangers. Because the researcher has to do most of the pedalling, there is an ever-present risk of the interview becoming more like an interrogation. People with few words cannot easily defend themselves against unwelcome or intrusive questioning. Once again, the researcher must heed the sounds of silence for those unspoken signals by which an informant indicates that enough is enough. A second danger of the strategy is that the framework within which information is obtained comes to reflect the researcher's concerns rather than the informant's own view of his or her life. There is a sense in which this is part of the price that must be paid for getting any material from inarticulate subjects. By the nature of things, their interviews rarely assume the character of a true dialogue. People who are able to express themselves easily give direction to the interview by what they say. With people who are not talkative the researcher has to be more attentive to what goes unsaid, and to learn to distinguish between an expressive silence (waiting to be broken) and a closed silence (waiting to be passed over).

There are no easy rules for distinguishing these two types of silence, except that the researcher should not give up too quickly. The clues are usually personal and idiosyncratic, and are picked up only by getting to know the informant. For this

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reason, interviews with inarticulate subjects should normally be spread over several sessions, and where possible supplemented by time spent with the person in other settings and situations. In Danny's case, he often implicitly invited the interviewer to probe more carefully by smiling or laughing, remaining quiet and still, or maintaining direct eye contact. Equally, he indicated his discomfort and desire to move on to some other topic by, for example, shifting around in his seat, fiddling with his watch or his clothes, or looking away. The following passage shows the interviewer responding in turn to both kinds of silence:

> *Int*: Do you have any close friends, anybody that you see quite a lot?
> *DA*: (Long pause) No.
> *Int*: You don't have a girlfriend?
> *DA*: (Expressive silence)
> *Int*: Do you? That's not a no there. You've got somebody you'd like to call your girlfriend?
> *DA*: Yes.
> *Int*: What's her name?
> *DA*: (Closed silence)
> *Int*: I won't embarrass you. But you would like to get a bit closer to her?
> *DA*: Yes.

In the first instance, Danny's demeanour indicated there was something he wanted to say and the interviewer sensed that the silence was not a barrier to further exploration of the topic. On the second occasion, the interviewer quickly perceived that she had overstepped the mark and withdrew.

Two aspects of the process of piecing together a person's story by the elimination of alternatives deserve emphasis. First, it opens up the possibility of developing a narrative by *creative guesswork*. Different storylines may be tried out with the informant until an admissible version is established—in much the same way as a police Identikit picture is assembled. Take the following example:

> *Int*: Have you had any trouble with the police?
> *DA*: (Looks sheepish and doesn't answer)
> *Int*: Looks like there might have been a bit of bother at some time. What was that?
> *DA*: (Silence)
> *Int*: Was that you or your brother? This is strictly confidential. It's not going to go anywhere.
> *DA*: (Laughs)
> *Int*: I'm not going to tell anybody else. It's just to get a feeling of the sort of life you've had. You've had a bit of trouble with the police?
> *DA*: Yes.
> *Int*: What, you?
> *DA*: Both of us.
> *Int*: What happened?...What were you doing?
> *DA*: (Silence)

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Int: Did they just come round and have a word with your mum and dad?
DA: Yes.
Int: What, just to warn you was it?
DA: Yes. (Laughs)
Int: Can you tell me about it, because it sounds as if it's something in the past now. What had happened?
DA: (Silence)
Int: Had you been messing around and sort of throwing things or spraying things or...?
DA: (Silence)
Int: No? It's none of those, is it?
DA: No.
Int: Was it you and Bob together doing it?
DA: Yes.
Int: Were you nicking cars?
DA: Yes.
Int: So it was Bob who was driving?
DA: Yes.
Int: And you were passenger, were you?
DA: Yes. (Laughs)
Int: How many cars did you nick then?
DA: One.
Int: Just the one?
DA: Yes.

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This technique is crucially dependent on the veracity of the informant. It will not work unless he or she can be trusted to reject a false narrative hypothesis. Danny had already established himself as a truthful lad. His inability to put himself into hypothetical situations stripped him of the capacity to deceive. His only alternative to telling the truth was to remain silent. When he spoke he meant what he said. Secure in this knowledge, it was possible for the interviewer to suggest likely scenarios ('Were you nicking cars?') in order to weave a story from the resulting yesses and noes. This method does not easily square with standard textbook guidance on good interviewing practice. It can be seen as putting words into the mouths of informants. Our position is that the challenge of interviewing inarticulate subjects calls for unorthodox methods. The only way of collecting their stories may be to loan them the words.

A second point to note about this approach is that stories also evolve in the absence of concrete information. Ruling things out can be as revealing as a wealth of detail. When Danny says that he doesn't go out with friends, doesn't go out in an evening, doesn't belong to any clubs, has never been to a football match, has never been on holiday with his mum and dad, has never been on any school trips, doesn't receive birthday presents, and that neither his father nor his mother nor his brother have a job, he evokes a childhood corroded by poverty and bounded by narrow

horizons without having need of any rhetorical skills. Stories can emerge in a succession of noes to direct questions about everyday personal experience.

This leads to a final point. It is possible for people to communicate a story in one word answers. Even single words can leave a big wash. Denzin (1989) may be right when he argues that lives are available to us only in words, but we must avoid the mistake of assuming that we cannot access the lives of people who have difficulty stringing them together. The following edited extract from Danny's interviews shows why:

> *Int*: What do you do on a Monday?
> *DA*: Farm.
> *Int*: What's the farm? It's not here... whereabouts is that?
> *DA*: No. Bretton.
> *Int*: What do you do up there?
> *DA*: Planting.
> *Int*: What do you think you'll do when you leave here then? Have you thought?
> *DA*: No.
> *Int*: What would you like to do?
> *DA*: On a farm. Hartshead Farm.
> *Int*: What, with animals though?
> *DA*: Yes.

These same questions put to someone who was more forthcoming might have been expected to produce more quotable material. Yet Danny's close-mouthed responses, taken with what he said elsewhere in the interviews, provide their own eloquent picture of a lonely young man, with no realistic hope of a job, putting up with a college placement doing gardening that he doesn't really enjoy while dreaming of working with animals, like the pets he looks after at home.

Danny's poor self-expression may not prevent him from telling his story, but it does have implications for the way it is turned into text. There is insufficient continuous speech in the interviews to present the story in Danny's own words. This makes it necessary for the researcher as editor to play a fuller part in reconstituting the transcripts as narrative. The story as told above has been cast as a third-person account. While true to the material it loses the authenticity of the subject's own voice. This problem has led Booth (1995) to suggest that narrative researchers should be more willing to experiment with the fictional form as a research tool in its own right. Certainly, the issue of representation—who is doing the talking and how accurately the text reflects the data—assumes a particular importance with inarticulate subjects.

Conclusions

Danny Avebury's story represents meagre pickings for almost two-and-a-half hours of interview time. A Studs Terkel or Tony Parker would not make a living out of the Danny Avebury's of the world. Yet for all its lack of narrative depth or richness

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Danny's story is revealing as one of a type. It properly belongs to a class of stories about the problems that young people with learning difficulties have in negotiating the transition to adulthood (Jenkins, 1989). The drift is in the detail. Danny, at 20 years old, is not allowed out at nights. He spends his evenings sitting on the garden wall talking to the younger children in the neighbourhood or watching television by himself. He enjoys riding his racer bike on his own in the park and would like a pair of rollerblades for Christmas. He sometimes goes to the pub with his mum and dad. His mum cuts his hair and not how he likes. He has never had a girlfriend. He would like more say in making his own decisions. These particulars of Danny's story are a manifestation of a more general theme—the adult-as-child—which similarly finds expression in the accounts of others like him. Put alongside these other stories, Danny's narrative has a valuable role to play in making this abstract theme more tangible in personal terms (Abrams, 1991). It also illustrates the truth of Biklen & Moseley's (1988) dictum that, 'Nothing is trivial to qualitative researchers'. The small particulars and happenings that Danny so sparingly relates assume what Bruner (1991) calls an 'emblematic status' by virtue of being embedded 'in a story that is in some sense generic'.

There is another reason too for paying attention to Danny Avebury. Too often the problems of interviewing inarticulate subjects are seen in terms of their deficits rather than the limitations of our methods. Such a 'deficit model' of informant response is rooted in a view of disability as a problem of the individual. It serves to legitimate the exclusion of, for example, people with learning difficulties from a participatory role in narrative research in ways that mirror their exclusion from the wider society. The emphasis of research should be on overcoming the barriers that impede the involvement of inarticulate subjects instead of highlighting the difficulties they present. Conventional research methods can create obstacles for inarticulate subjects in terms of the demands they make on their inclusion. The lesson to be drawn from Danny's story is that researchers should attend more to their own deficiencies than to the limitations of their informants.

It is too easy as a narrative researcher not to bother with people like Danny; to argue that the investment is not worth the return just because it does not generate good text. There is a danger of allowing ourselves to be drawn by the tempo of our times into a kind of 'fast research' with a premium on quick results. Against this background, it is important to remember the virtues of an older, anthropological tradition which recognised that the task of learning to communicate with subjects takes a long time. Narrative researchers must go back to such basics in order to ensure that their scholarship does not continue to silence the stories of people like Danny Avebury.

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NOTES

{1} The term 'learning difficulties' rather than 'learning disabilities', 'mental handicap', 'mental retardation' or other synonyms is used in this paper in line with the preferences of the self-advocacy movement. See, for example, Wertheimer (1988).

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