**Faking it as a researcher**

**The pattern of my reading practice changes as this PhD progresses.**

This superficiality of my reading practice at this later third stage was in vivid contrast to my earlier experience, during the first reading wave when first I embarked on this inquiry. Then the reading seemed to occur in expanded time, in a cocoon of total absorption, when I seemed to have days to immerse myself in a literature, and could dwell for a day over a whole chapter. Here at this later stage I was reaching for sound- bites, for crisp encapsulations, while knowing the damage to the texture of truth that such nuggets might do, if ever I were to find them. I wish to swallow wisdom whole, while knowing that swallowing whole, or ‘introjection’ as Fritz Perls (1973) the gestalt theorist would have it, does not work. Whatever needs to be internalised needs chewing over. Yet despite this awareness that quick reading fixes were impossible, it seemed that each dip into the pile of literature that was growing apace on my shelves provided a persistent reminder of the vastness of my ignorance, chastising me with me a ringing reminder of how much that I didn’t know. And each book or paper that my hand dipped into contained a bibliography that would further detail the limitless boundaries of my ignorance.

At times this overwhelming sense of ignorance, of being painfully knowing what you don’t know, could be overwhelming. Early on in this research project I was told that at the end of this doctorate I would be a unique custodian of knowledge in my area. I would know more that anyone. Yet there have been times in this endeavour when I felt that I probably knew a whole less that many other people. There were times when I would trudge back to the library, resigned defeat hanging over my head as I returned the unread books and paid the fine. My mumbled apology was as much to myself for my weakness in not reading this stuff as to the librarian for lateness.

I was also aware that, as subject matter expert, it was incumbent on me not only to know what was contained in ‘my’ literature, but also to be alive to the critique of the same, from a whole variety of schools of critical dissection. And in addition to knowing the critique, that I may be required to know the rebuttals to these critiques. A countervailing voice was saying that these texts have already been critiqued to death, and that the arguments are so well rehearsed that there seems little point in me regurgitating these again simply to display that I have encountered them. The truth is that for much of this time when interrogating this literature, I felt more apprentice than a critical master craftsman, more an acolyte then a high priest. And from the position of interpretative qualitative apprentice I was not wanting to hear too many critiques of the interpretative literature at a time when I was enthused by it and wanting to go and experiment with this alternative practice. My blood was hot, and in fact I was hearing quite enough discouraging noises and reservations within me and without having to go seek more in literature. These contrarian inner voices were represented already, stoking that growing feeling of vulnerability. No matter how often I stiffened my resolve by saying that I was pursuing a grounded method, therefore traditional methodological criticisms did not apply. I none the less felt the disquieting impacts of the chatter of my inner critic deeply. This chatter rebuked me be saying that the development of my critical faculty is an important part of learning this craft, not least because the development of the necessary detachment to appraise coolly a theory or method is essential otherwise I could be totally enchanted or seduced by the power of my fad or fancy, only to be deeply exposed and embarrassed at a later date. And so the chatter between the top dog and the under dog rambles on, interminably. Allow me to tune you in to some of this endless background noise.

**A visit to hear Carolyn Ellis.**

One synchronous event that occurred during this third wave of reading was a visit to the Bristol GSoE by Carolyn Ellis, a seminal influence during my first wave of reading. Her appearing in Bristol felt like nothing less than an act of materialization; of the right person at the right time, to take me back to the basics, just at a time when I was getting lost in foreign literatures, and becoming bitten by nagging doubts about the approach and about my suitability to deliver to the same. This appearance of Carolyn Ellis was an example of both manifestation and embodiment, as described by Markova (1994) and by Spencer (2004).

I travelled to the GSoE with John, one of my supervised students who was following autoethnography as his dissertation method and my colleague Ann Rippin. I didn’t know quite what to expect, and in fact I had some inner reservations about coming at all. Ann and I discussed this, and agreed that the underlying apprehension we both experienced was akin to those feelings of dread you have before going to a concert where a favourite band were to play a treasured album that you have been playing at home time after time. There was the fear that the music would somehow be changed, that the magic would be lost. Or that the band would play something quite different, something we wouldn’t want to hear.

All was said by Carolyn as it is written. I was on the right track with my PhD. Our lips moved in sync as we joined her in the response to the questions. Well not quite, but it almost seemed like that. I was in fact taken by her matter of factness, and also by her humour, which was unexpected. This encounter caused me to open afresh her recently published ‘Ethnographic I’. (2006) This book is a revelation, an ethnographic novel on ethnographic method. I skim through this book – as I seemed to be skimming through many things at that time, pausing here and there to read pieces that resonate with her seminar.

This treasure includes an appendix which I had not examined closely at the time of first reading. This appendix is entitled a ‘Chart of Impressionist and Realist Ethnography’. This is a beautifully constructed chart which rings marvellous bells as I sink in a hammock between the poles that hold up the continuums, swinging comfortably because I feel I now know quite deeply what these poles mean. And I didn’t two years ago. But despite this smugness I discover that this reading also raises a difficult to locate anxiety. A closer look and I realise why I am unsettled, as this chart bears remarkable similarities to the polarities referred to in WoW. This discovery raises deep fears of accusations of faking it, worse of plagiarism that I should be disguising easily accessed truisms as hard won personal learnings. Indeed so strong is this feeling that I ask if I did in fact copy this chart. The answer comes back that that would have been impossible, as it was written after WoW. But it may have been that I copied something like it?

In something of a panic, I reach for Denzin and Lincoln (2005) and the rest of the literature that is cluttering the house in an attempt to match this WoW sequence of thoughts and their phrasing to the sources, but I cannot find these WoW words in this sequence anywhere. That is not to say that there is not there somewhere. I feel a deep insecurity about this. The examiners will know. They are omniscient. And they will ask. I know they will ask. Then I look at the monumental volume of Denzin and Lincoln again and cry. In the entirety of my time on that desert island I could not absorb all of this, let alone apply it. There is so much of all of this that I speculate whether anyone could summarise it, show mastery of it. Yet I dare I say that I am familiar with the literature. What a fake I am.

**Identifying the audience I might be attempting to fool.**

The theme of faking it brings to mind the question of who might I be faking it for? Beyond the known audience of examiners and co-creatives, there is the implicit wider academic audience, which I have heard described as academic to academic, which I have abbreviated in true consultant fashion to A2A. The phrasing of ‘academic to academic’ – has it ever before been represented as A2A? – had so much embedded behind it. I remember once sitting in the restaurant of the Randolph Hotel in Oxford with a trade unionist I was working with from British Leyland having breakfast, looking out at the massive solidity of the medieval wall of the college opposite. I commented to him, marvelling at the thickness of the walls. ‘Yes’ he ruminated, ‘I notice their thickness too. I notice how that thickness keeps all of that exclusive knowledge in. And people like me out’. Do I want to write A2A, I ask. Well perhaps I dream of being a key dancer in that exquisite gavotte. At other times I wish for a different step altogether. One of the greatest condemnations of A2A community is to say of a text that is not scholarship but a ‘stream of consciousness’, a judgment which obliterates much of my attempt to build research through narrative, dependent as that narrative is on capturing a stream of consciousness feel, if not written entirely as a free flowing stream.

Despite this A2A censure I continue to believe that such narrative is important, not least because I am seeking an audience beyond A2A.There is self as audience, as in the self as you would write to in your private journal, expressing doubts and perhaps forbidden feelings. There is reflexive writing such as this. Much of this writing is for the benefit of the writer, for self understanding for understanding of context, for therapy and for healing.

There is writing as co-creation, where co-creators are recipients of this writing, are customers of the same, and at some level co-authors also, for this narrative writing seeks an audience beyond confines of academia. This wider audience predicates the language it is written in, and style or genre that the narrative might follow. I recently tested out WoW on an intelligent but naïve audience, to see if it worked. It was a thrill to hear that it was accessible and relatively jargon free. I then shared it with a friendly academic, who pronounced that this was a ‘wonderful weaving of what could be construed as cliché but in fact comes together fresh and alive’. But he is friendly, and I know that the writer needs to navigate with some care among all of this. I have been told so often by so many academics that I should save the ‘fancy stuff’ till after fud, but to stick with doing the conventional thing for fud.

**Faking it.**

I also know that I feel that I stand naked without this conventional apparatus. Worse still, not just naked. I could also stand accused of plagiarism. As the chatter builds, then the theme of faking it leaps to the psychodynamic surface. It strikes me that this embodiment of feelings of faking it could be a ‘parallel process’ (Hawkins, 2002) where my experience of method tracks one of the major themes of my substantive ICC study. The parallel process occurs when the theme resonates within the text that it seeks to illuminate. It would seem that the ‘faking’ theme which has haunted me as a consultant is re-visiting me here in my academic incarnation. Here I face a double or even triple risk of faking it. There is the faking it involved in busking along with this recondite method, where I am faking it though my unfamiliarity with this method. There is the faking it attached to this method being seen as a fake methodology which looks into the lives of a bunch of fakes. Then there would be the reverse faking it that would be involved in my feigning pursuing conventional method literature review which had never occurred in practice, where I am seen to play it safe, to go through the motions, to satisfy the system tick the boxes. Where I could sound clever and hide behind authority, even making it look as though my reading was planful, strategic.

How would it be to go down the conventional route, to fake it the other way around, to avoid accusations of faking it that might accompany authenticity? My supervisor read a paper I wrote last year and was very thoughtful about it. He said he really liked the ‘thinking with’ bits, but was far less sure when I lurched into ‘clever stuff’ which abounded in references and citations attached to carefully worked abstruse arguments. He reminded me that I was writing a different type of PhD, and that it was important that I did not attempt to write a pale apology for acceptable conventions. It seemed that there was no room for Trojan horses here.

Yet I do not feel that I am faking it in writing this up. I know I am tempted to fake it, and that is worrying. But then to be aware of the temptation is healthy in that such awareness should assist me in defending against it, at least through guilt or conscience. I feel that this WoW is a demonstration of emergent interpretative practice, which may be more powerful for the reader than a conventional method literature review seeking to justify the approach without in any way demonstrating it. I believe that the representation of what is scrawled on the wall should be not only a demonstration of method, but of something beyond method, which can sound mechanistic and formulaic. Instead I would this demonstration to evince a deep faith in this reflective approach, and its resulting products. In fact, I am beginning to think that this is an ontological matter, which questions whether method and substance can be separated. The corollary of this belief would be to I question whether the methods chapter and the literature review can be as distinct as the conventions assume.

**Impostor syndrome.**

I have grown to learn from my colleague Ann that a close relation to these feelings of faking it, of being found out, is the ‘impostor syndrome’ ( Clance & Immes 1978) a body of theory borne of the Seventies feminist wave. The authors of this work suggest that the impostor syndrome applies mainly to women, but my own experience and that of men we have shared this would contend this woman only assumption. This syndrome is defined as

‘The impostor phenomenon is used to designate an internal experience of intellectual phoniness which appears to be particularly prevalent and intense among a select sample of high achieving women’. (Clance & Imes, 1978: 241.) These authors suggest that successes in life are likely to be attributed to mistakes in selection procedure; to overestimation of ability; to others feeling sorry for them; to having charmed others or just dumb luck; in short to any external factor, rather than to take credit themselves for their successes as a result of their abilities, talents and efforts. They also suggest that you higher you go in an organisation, the more` likely it is that you will be affected by this syndrome

The sharing of this thinking with our students provoked such deep resonance that we offered a workshop on the theme of Impostor syndrome which was readily taken up by our students. I attach below my writing which I completed on that workshop, in response to the prompt question ‘I feel like a fraud when …'

I felt like a fraud when ….

*I was facilitating a management seminar with a group of hard nosed truck manufacturers. It was hard work uphill, a colourless and terribly factual experience. And then it happened. Suddenly and for no reason I could discern – maybe it was the suit I was wearing – but I suddenly felt the embodiment of my father the manager. I felt I had donned his mantle. I was inside of him, or rather he was inside of me. I was at some level entranced by this. In fact so much so that I was reckless enough to take the risk of sharing this visitation with my group. I am not sure what I expected back from them following my revelation, though I noticed that I trembled as I shared my out-of-body experience. The hombre who had assumed the role of leader of the posse was cruelly dismissive. He said that I had made it all up. And that even if it had happened it was nothing. Quite nothing, and that I was wasting my time with this fantasy. I felt completely naked as in one of those dreams when you are suddenly naked in front of a crowd. I was hurt, badly hurt and was to learn not to share some much on impulse again. As I was to learn later from Carolyn Ellis ‘don’t bleed when there are sharks about’.*

This free writing story was oblique, but it went to the heart of a number of my current dilemmas. In conversation post this writing, I mused on my current role as a teacher in a research intensive University, with all of the baggage that brings with regard to feeling like a fake. And having lots of others around to remind you of the same. The question was to ask really why I had set myself up in this way. Was it an opportunity to work though this fear, confront the fear of internal fakery? Was I confronting those feelings of faking it through going to conferences and realising that just about everyone has read more than me?

This is my first experience of working in an academic environment and I am fortunate indeed to have colleagues who work to help me with this feeling of fakery, rather to press my buttons... though there are those that do that too, By way of illustration of the working of the impostor syndrome in an academic environment, Ann Rippin my co facilitator of this workshop has given my permission to share a sample of her response to this same prompt question.

*There are no end of occasions when I feel like a fraud in my professional life. Being a career academic is like being a peacock. We are paid to strut and to outshine the other peacocks on the manicured lawn. ‘Look at me’. The glistening tail feathers fanning majestically behind me as I walk: the long trail of references framing my elegant haughty head. Smile while the effort of keeping up those credentialising tail feathers is as grinding and painful as walking any distance in Jimmy Choos.*

*So. A fraud. I could have chosen nice, simple dull empirical research, but I chose … to mix it with the theory boys, who trace everything back to Heidegger or Zizeck or Merleau-Ponty. I’ve read nothing yet time and again I put myself through the mill … why do I do something so hard? And why with young men with goatees and polo necks and apple macs and social science degrees. And how come I don’t get found out? How come they write back and say that my work is untheoretical they still publish it. You write beautifully they coo. Well yes I have to ..write beautifully, style over substance*.

Reading this is comforting to know Ann feels this too. But then compared to me, she knows everything and everybody. So what chance do I stand of not being perpetually exposed as a fraud? I guess the truth is that the inner critic is relentless and indiscriminate in choosing its victims. Intellectual brightness is not an exclusion clause. We are all fair game. Unless of course we decide to stop playing the game. But I have a feeling that we would need to agree to stop together, to break the reinforcement.

Which brings me to the final prompt question, which was daring to challenge us to consider a world without the internalised impostor.

Imagine what it might be like not to feel like a fraud. What would you do? How would life be different?

*I would tell it like it is. I would feel liberated, and certainly less bovvered. I would stop British type hedging. I would cease subterfuge; stopping worrying that everyone here except me seems to know their lines the lines. I would be happy to be unmasked, delight in stripping away the layers, layer after layer. Life would be a whole lot clearer. More whole. I would love more deeply. Live more lightly, ride high while I really go for my passions. I would feel joy pulsate through my veins more often. I would not feel like I need to keep pushing against the tide. I would simply be who I am, be the best that I am, being myself at my best to the table.*

*I would be more confronting, yet also be more content with my lot, happier to stay with my lot, to rock and roll with it all. I would dive deep and dig deep. I would cease to chastise myself, in stead writing without fear, allowing myself to follow my curiosity, wherever it might be headed. I would live much more often in the zone, in a flow state. I would feel less anxious about the necessary minimising I do in the face of multiple demands. I would finish my PhD with far less citations in fact I would simply surrender a lot of unnecessary anxieties. In fact I feel that this impostor day has been a refreshingly authentic event. I am reminded of how rarely we get to this level of authenticity. And am presented with a vision of how it might be that if we live without the impostor syndrome in our lives.*

Ann’s response – better than mine of course, mutters my inner critic – says

*I would walk to the podium full of confidence. I would look out clear eyed on the assembled group. I would speak from a place of deep certainty and calm. My voice would be steady and even. It would reach to the back of the room and curl around the listeners hearts like smoke … I would let go of jealousy. I would look at others achievements with equanimity joy even, rejoicing in their success as a part of the collective success, seeing their achievement as cumulative building on mine, adding to mine, rather than detracting from it. There would be enough for all of us. I would not see success as finite… The impostor syndrome is tenacious. It will not be satisfied by easy answers. It had a tyrannous perfection. Shards of ice in Kay’s heart. I want to end confidently and strongly. But the perfectionist in me is too deep.*

**Conclusions drawn from all of this reflecting on dirty writing and dirty reading.**

These chapters remind me that the theme of crisis of representation, which I had at the outset largely repudiated for my ICC population, may well have relevance for alternative researchers, and I reflect it could be that this PhD may be speaking to that theme for that population. This sense of researcher crisis was most dramatically revealed to me through meeting Brearly (2006) and discovering details of her work with Australian aboriginals who wished to express their lives through their art, and to gain academic recognition for it. Her research is extraordinary, and it helped immeasurably in my understanding of this crisis. She it was who sang her PhD, causing her external examiners their own problems on the way. She it was who reminded me of my wish to be part of alternative expression, and that this was not just borne of indulgence but was an important carrying of a banner for others less empowered than me. She also challenged me to not funk out of doing this. And it is marvellous to know her name at last. So what do I have to worry about? Get on and do it. Not just in words but in other ways. So what am I worried about? Look at what that lady is risking here it is magnificent really quite magnificent. So I need courage do I not? Go for it. Part of the just do it message is to stick to my guns and to include WoW in its current form within this PhD write up, as I believe it is an authentic rendition of my method, and also that it may be a contribution in its own right.

I have learned that when I say ‘crisis of representation’, that this crisis occurs at two levels. There is the crisis of representing a disadvantaged group. Then there is the crisis of re-presentation of the research, of using alternative approaches to discover knowing or meaning. Just as the social grouping might be unacknowledged or disparaged, so too could be the means through which the research is presented, if that way reflects the ways of knowing that work for that group. This has also caused me to ponder on the distinction between arts based methods being seen as means of representing research outcomes in themselves, rather than as means to sources of data.’

A principal method discovery gained from pursuing this line of inquiry in these chapters is that learning is temporary, and that a fud could be a temporary learning institution, as Bridger (1972) would style it, though this PhD hardly feels temporary at the point of creating it. Klein (2005) goes further to describe research a ‘transitional process’. What is discarded today could beg for inclusion tomorrow. Just as a natural conversation evokes stories that would not surface in another context, so too does the research move on impulse moving recursively through the themes. Part of the discovery is that nothing is ever finished and that we do a disservice when we attempt to force a finish, an ending. To clean things up, to clean the mess from the pavement. I am learning that it is okay for research to be internally messy, to be inconsistent, and to reflect inconsistencies in the world. Research is not a mirroring of perfection, or reflective of a desire for perfection, which can only distort. This is not to say that my method is a deliberate reaching for chaos, or a rejection of coherence. I recognise that we as humans do reach for coherence we need the gestalt complete, we can seldom settle until it is. On the other hand, research need not be driven by this seeking of coherence, and it does need to address indeterminacy. The work of De Certeau (2000) reminds us that research is full of holes, and that what you exclude is as important as what you include. These two chapters which follow WoW are by way of inviting the reader into those otherwise excluded inner conversations and choice points that determine the final public outcome of any text. As much as this chapter opens up on what lies behind the scenes in this research, so it also exposes the truth that this writing will be interpreted by the reader in ways that may of may not reflect my attempt at representation.

This act of editing reminds me once more of the walls subliminal influence, in the way that the principles on the wall have guided the editing process, and of how these ideas being up there on the wall, and now here in the text, and in here in me, mattered. If these principles meant something then, at the point of committing them to the wall, then they mean even more now. A whole lot more. This chapter has also reminded me of the inescapability of the parallel process. This chapter is written by an ICC studying ICCs, and to that extent is perforce bound to be a reflection on the writer and his inner state. To that extent the writer and the reader grow to know more of this species ICC.