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Naming my world: Finding my voice*

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Abstract

This is a personal account of a sociological career over four decades, influenced by developments in Irish society and sociology. I focus on the growth of a feminist sociology, the stigmatisation of unmarried mothers, concealed stories and the changing treatment of ‘voice’ in sociological research.

Keywords

Personal narrative, feminist methodologies, unmarried pregnancy, voice

I came to sociology with the upheaval of Irish society in the 1970s, buoyed along by the Women’s Movement, Community Development, Civil Rights and anti-poverty work. Ireland had joined the European Community in 1973. Equal Pay and Employment Equality legislation quickly followed. The Women’s Movement questioned whose voice and expertise matters, who is being listened to and how are accounts of people’s lives collected, interpreted, dispersed and acted upon. ‘Not about us without us’ was key to developing models of feminist research that were linked to a politics of transformation. Empowerment, emancipation and action research were our bywords (Lynch, 2000). Sociologist Mary Daly (Daly, 2000) wrote that feminist research methodology had made little impact on research practice in sociology in

*For Liz Stanley, feminist sociologist of everyday life and Ricca Edmondson, beloved colleague and *Bean Feasa*.

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Ireland.¹ She argued that limited collaboration within academia and between the academy and society, the preference for positivist modes of research and the content and orientation of research replicated conventional modes of sociological inquiry. Sociology provided information for government policy and produced knowledge for academic institutions. The National Tribunal on Women's Poverty (1989) and related projects highlighted the importance of collaborative, action-oriented research for a 'poverty-free' Ireland. The influential reports and publications of the Combat Poverty Agency are a legacy of this radical ambition.² Along with the Sociological Association of Ireland, this was a significant entry point for me and other sociologists into an activist research community, committed to equality and social inclusion. The Agency published handbooks on facilitation techniques for group work and community-based research methods. The orientation towards community, explicit valuing of local expertise and knowledge prompted my commitment to sociology, research and teaching, to story and voice. Here is my partial, fractured story, a thin slice through a particular series of relationships and events in which I was entangled that profoundly shaped me.

Why does voice matter? I think back to the first time I listened to a woman recount her story of hiding her pregnancy to radio host Gay Byrne. That was 1984 and this is what I remember. Many years previously, the woman had given birth and her baby died. She described how she wrapped the child in old clothes and placed the small body in a suitcase under her bed. After the birth, she resumed her work in the household where she was employed. Each detail disturbed me and the sequence of events that condemned who we were. What were her thoughts as her child grew in her womb? How did she hide her changing body? She worked in a household, labouring in the presence of others. Did anybody notice? Was anybody kind to her? Coping with the emotional and physical shock of giving birth alone and her rapid return to work speak of resignation. What happened next? Following the death of Ann Lovett and her baby, Gay Byrne read letters of grief and outrage from listeners.³ Ann's death prompted many delayed tellings of stories, in public and in private. Women were stigmatised for being pregnant and unmarried by the social structures of family, community, church and state. In listening, I was witness to the consequences of this condemnation for individuals. The writing down and public reading of those letters provided an opportunity to collectively contest the condemnation of unmarried mothers and children. The anonymous woman's story haunts me still.

In 2004, Christy Moore sang 'Everybody Knew, Nobody Said'.⁴

She was just fifteen years.
When she reached her full term.
She went to a grotto.
Just a field, In The Middle of The Island.
To deliver herself.
Her Baby died,
She died
A week ago last Tuesday.
It was a sad, slow, stupid death for them both.
Everybody knew, nobody said.

The Women's Movement campaigned for free, legal access to contraception, to support family planning clinics, foregrounding personal reproductive rights as a political issue (Barry, 1988; Kelly, 2019). When the Contraceptive Caravan pulled into Galway in 1979, I knocked on doors in housing estates, offering information and non-medical contraceptives to householders. It was a defining moment of my feminist life.⁵ Here is another. I was reminded of the limitations of survey research in which I was trained, by a request from a trade union to analyse data collected from women academics on their experiences of maternity leave.⁶ While survey participants had completed the closed questionnaire style questions, many took the opportunity of the blank side of the page to write about their particular experiences of attempting to take statutory maternity leave during academic term time. One woman supervised PhD students from her bed in the maternity hospital. Another planned births so that babies were born between academic terms. She described her children as 'holiday babies' (Byrne and Keher-Dillon, 1996). I recall my confusion in reading these spontaneous accounts of women caught between a professional career and a personal life. Women struggled to manage academic workload while mothering and caring. A sense of suppressed anger and resentment was scored into the words that filled these pages. Despite statutory maternity leave, academic mothers managed pregnancies to avoid perceived adverse impacts on professional careers. This too was necessary concealment and a delayed telling of a secret life. Women were a minority in academic posts. I too wanted to be a mother, academic and a working sociologist – or did I? What choices would I have to make? What limits would I or my children have to accept? I did not want to have to choose one over the other or hide motherhood from a professional life.

The Galway Rape Crisis Centre (GRCC) was set up in 1983–1984 by a group of friends in response to the refusal of a local hospital to engage in forensic examinations of women reporting sexual violence and rape. GRCC worked within a national network advocating for improved support services for women. Organised as a feminist collective, volunteers provided counselling services, support and advice to women who experienced rape and sexual violence. I listened on the phone and in person as women, young and old, recounted experiences of sexual violence as a child, as a mother, as a wife, as a sister and as a daughter. This listening to human suffering altered me; safe, confidential spaces for women and children were few. Women spoke about repetitive, consistent experiences of physical, sexual and emotional violence by family members, people whom they trusted, and often in the space of a family home. Some women agreed to participate in 'crisis' counselling. For others, that telephone call was a 'once-off'. Very few women reported incidents of sexual abuse and rape to the Gardaí. Women did not know if their words would be believed. What does it mean not to be believed, to be doubted? The person's account of a particular sequence of events and the people involved was an attempt to make sense of what happened in the presence of a volunteer, a community of listeners who understood. I learned that telling and listening are intentional acts. Talking about trauma is also reliving it. Although the experience belongs to the person speaking, I felt its resonance as a woman, with reverberations in my life. I understood what was feared was a loss of a sense of self, subdued by the first assault, an erasure of confidence, a swelling of

anxiety that almost never leaves, with a need to be reassured that it was safe to speak now. In telling and listening, a mutual recognition of the effect of violence and threat to control our speaking out emerged. To be muted is to be prevented from telling about everyday experiences. This is voice dispossession. What personal, professional and political responsibilities were needed for speaking up, to be heard and to claim our own voices? Those questions propelled me onwards. Collective action, protest and working in solidarity with others would work. Wouldn't it?

A copy of the report by the first Commission on the Status of Women (1972) is on my desk; the pink covers faded and pages ink-stained.⁷ I look for paragraphs 255, 270, 388 and 574: recommendations to remove the marriage bar, for paid maternity leave for all women, for 'an unmarried mothers allowance' and access to advice on family planning. I think of my mother. On marrying, Clare was categorised as a temporary worker with reduced pension entitlements. Clare continued to teach, unpaid between school terms or when giving birth to one of her nine children. She had to find and pay for her own replacement teacher. Sometimes she returned to work 2 weeks after giving birth. Clare was 51 when paid maternity leave was introduced. This is what she advised me: speak up, stand on your own two feet, earn your own money and get 'your piece of paper' (a qualification). In 1978, I joined the growing Department of Sociology and Politics in University College Galway (UCG) to do MA research on 'women only' income maintenance schemes. Colleagues specialised in survey research, ethnography, community partnerships and rural development. Earning university fees, rent and living costs was a priority for me; I sold home-made oat biscuits in the student canteen, carried out surveys for local organisations and tutored in statistics. Another research project stands out in my memory. Connemara West, a local development organisation, commissioned UCG to investigate structural aspects of rural poverty, identify vulnerable groups and inform priority areas of work (Byrne et al., 1991). The research involved in-depth interviews with farmers, public health workers, teachers, mothers, fathers, self-employed, tourist operators and people living alone throughout the rural North-West. Although we deployed semi-structured questionnaires for the survey, it is the memory of the spontaneous telling of life stories that lingers. Stories of leaving school early, of leaving home, of the closure of local maternity services, of isolation, of the effects of long-term unemployment and of poor public transport permeate the report. Using measurable indicators, the survey team concluded that the area was more deprived than any other rural area in Ireland. The interviews informed the evidence and analysis. It was not enough. This I knew. Although survey-style research dominated the social sciences throughout the 1960s–1980s, some researchers turned to qualitative accounts for a deeper understanding of constraining social structures on individual lives. Reservations were raised by commentators that McNabb's accounts in the Limerick Rural Survey were too 'sociological and psychological', a deviation from the expected forms of social research (Murray and Feeney, 2009). Arensberg's and Kimball's 1930s study was based on first-hand observations and interviews with small farm families. Critiqued for an overreliance on structural functionalism, for the representation of a stable, unified family and society and for the puzzling absence of an analysis of politics, religion, violence, conflict and change, a debate on the future perspectives for study of Irish society ensued (Byrne et al., 2001).

However, things are rarely as they seem; in revisiting this work, evidence of censorship of academic writing, of the micro-operations of power by vested interests and control of the public representation of sex and familism are all too evident (Byrne and O'Sullivan, 2019).

The deeply circumscribed conditions of Irish women's lives erupted into the public domain in the late 1980s and 1990s (Connolly and O'Toole, 2005). Writing about women's rights, Evelyn Mahon's analyses (Mahon, 1987, 1994) named Ireland as a patriarchal and class-based society that enslaved women. Sociologists wrote about the prevalence of violence in families (Meade, 1997), attitudes to non-marital pregnancy (Hyde, 1997; Leane and Kiely, 1997) and lesbian politics and community (Moane, 1997). Barry's (1988) formidable analysis of the bitter conflicts about abortion is prescient on the consequences for pregnant women. The 1983 constitutional referendum placed further restrictions on abortion.⁸ The Hamilton ruling prohibited the provision of information and advice on abortion facilities. Pregnancy counselling services were forced to close. Pregnant and not married, Eileen Flynn was dismissed from her teaching post at a local school; the 1985 appeal against the dismissal was unsuccessful. The same year the case against Johanna Hayes, accused of murdering her newborn son, was dismissed. The Tribunal of Inquiry that followed interrogated her sexual experiences, relationships, menstrual cycles and use of contraception. Flowers, messages of support and women's groups from all over Ireland flooded Tralee in public protest against the insensitive questioning and treatment of a young woman. Women continued to conceal their pregnancies and to seek abortions elsewhere (Conlon, 2006). A pregnant teenager was prevented from travelling to England for an abortion, her pregnancy a consequence of rape. The 1992 'X' case mobilised mass pro-life and pro-choice demonstrations, precipitating another referendum on abortion.⁹ The social condemnation, stigmatising treatment and seclusion of unmarried pregnant women from family and community have a longer history. We had to wait decades more before peoples' stories of institutional incarceration and abuse would puncture the silence of the complicit, those who knew, those who would not or could not speak. The analysis by Barry (1988) of the campaigning success of right-wing groups pointed to a reliance on concealed processes of power for their capture of the political domain. Hidden processes may have exerted their force on the everyday exchange of opinion; Tom Inglis (1998) described a society so dominated by a Catholic ethos that we could not think for ourselves. And if we did? Common sense advised silence. Joni Mitchell spoke about reading a newspaper report from Ireland that became the unexpected prompt for her song, 'The Magdalene Laundries'.¹⁰

Most girls come here pregnant
 Some by their own fathers
 Bridget got that belly
 By her parish priest
 We're trying to get things white as snow
 All of us woe-begotten-daughters
 In the streaming stains
 Of the Magdalene laundries

In Galway, we set up the Women's Studies Centre in 1990 to put gender on the public and academic agenda (Scriver and Ballantine, 2020). We gave our collective time, energy and passions to securing rooms and premises, developing gender-based interdisciplinary curricula and degree programmes and writing journals, textbooks and teaching materials. We organised public seminars, worked alongside women's groups, developed adult education initiatives, joined forces with national and international networks, developing new forms of feminist politics. Putting gender on the agenda extended beyond the curriculum; it meant facing gender inequality inside higher education. The first third-level report documenting the underrepresentation of women, *Breaking the Circle* (Smyth) was published in 1984; women occupied <4% of professorial posts within academia. Changing the curriculum and culture of Irish educational institutions required active involvement in university and national advisory committees, creating strategic alliances within and without, developing gender mainstreaming policies, contributing to national action plans, establishing access, justice and equality centres on campus, advising on family friendly workplaces and publicly naming discriminatory organisational practices.¹¹ I turned to biographical narratives of women's experiences, fiction and investigative journalism, to teach the first adult, community education and undergraduate courses in Women and Irish Society. Those books are on my shelf – including *Birds Nest Soup* (Greally 1971), *My Story* (Hayes, 1985) and *Lyn: A Story of Prostitution* (Levine and Madden, 1987). Based on lived experiences, these voices contested normative accounts of womanhood. *Holy Pictures* (Boylan, 1983), *The Noise from the Woodshed* (Dorcey, 1989) and *Night Train to Mother* (Lentin, 1989) joined novels, plays and poetry by Teresa Deevey, Kate O'Brien, Mary Lavin, Enda O'Brien, Eithne Strong and Eavan Boland. 'Women's writing' as it was labelled then, mattered. So did feminist presses such as Attic Press, Arlen House and the Women's Press. These books offered students another version of a truth, animated debate about power, conservative conventions and the significance of activism for change. Being moved by a woman's struggle for a life of her own, prompted the telling of own stories too. Understanding stigma was my pre-occupation. Single women's voices revealed singlism in social structures, culture, in everyday interactions and relationships. The tireless work of circumventing stigma, rewriting gendered identity scripts and expanding the repertoire of womanhood shone out in these resisting voices (Byrne 2014). Lentin (1993) argued that feminist research methodologies constituted a new paradigm, inviting scholars to pay attention to difference, women's voices and lived experiences. Sociologists wrote journal articles, book chapters and reports tracking the operation of power and gender in Irish society. *Women and Poverty* (Daly, 1989) *Gender in Irish Society* (Curtin et al., 1987), *Women and Irish Society* (Byrne and Leonard, 1997), *Emerging Voices: Women in Contemporary Irish Society* (O'Connor, 1998), *Partners in Production Women, Farm and Family in Ireland* (O'Hara, 1998) and *Equality in Education* (Lynch, 1999) are some examples. The multidisciplinary *Irish Women's Studies Reader*, edited by Ailbhe Smyth, was published by Attic Press in 1993. These early publications and invitations to contribute to scholarship provided resources for teaching, research, gave momentum to our activism, changing sociology as a practice to serve not only the academy but society itself.

Ronit Lentin and I co-edited an all-Ireland publication by sociologists and community activists, highlighting feminist research as a tool for change, with primacy given to women's voices (Byrne and Lentin, 2000). Biographical and narrative methods of research continued to evolve, prioritising the voice of the teller (Bradley and Millar, 2020). The story told is often broken and inevitably leaves a mark on the life. The voice centred relational (VCR) method is a participatory and systematic approach to eliciting personal experience narratives. Listening and reading are conjoined as accounts are read with attention to different aspects of voice; the teller telling a whole story, the reader's response, listening for how the narrator speaks about themselves, about relationships with others and the specific social and cultural contexts that are raised for our notice. The attraction of VCR lies in the precedence given to the teller's own story before other retellings (Byrne et al., 2009). The combination of institutional, epistemological, theoretical and disciplinary influences on researcher practices is more transparent in VCR (Crosse and Millar, 2017). Another approach to interviewing with multiple stages of analysis is the psycho-social biographical narrative interpretive method, devised by Tom Wengraf (Wengraf 2001). Narrative is understood as an expression of conscious and unconscious concerns, linking inner preoccupations with outer socio-cultural contexts. Attentive listening and ethical treatment of voice distinguishes these methodologies.

I am continually drawn to how we treat and respond to voice in research. In response to a call from the 2015 Commission of Inquiry for personal experience accounts from women and children, residents of Mother and Baby homes, 304 women (previously single and pregnant) and 228 adults (previous residents as children or babies) gave statements to a Confidential Committee.¹² The remit of the Committee was to create a sympathetic atmosphere, to listen without challenge and to compile a report in the words used by the 'witnesses', observing anonymity and confidentiality. Witness statements are broken into short segments by theme and time. Their parsed accounts are contained in a separate chapter. How accounts informed the general findings of the Commission is unclear. While some witness evidence cases are judged as 'contaminated' in the report, Committee members expressed gratitude for the depth and honesty of 'witnesses' and were 'startled' by accounts of what happened to people, *post* Mother and Baby Home. The personal experience accounts of living in the institutions are powerful and point to the fatal and lifelong consequences for unmarried women, infants and children, of an authoritarian state and class-based society preoccupied by power, status and privilege. The Commission of Inquiry found no evidence of physical or sexual abuse and little evidence of children forcibly taken from their mothers for adoption. This is in stark contrast to the detailed evidence as told to the Commission by the women and men, former residents of the institutions. The treatment, interpretation and reporting of people's experiences fell far short from what was expected. The felt misrepresentation of 'witness' accounts is regarded by survivors, family members, academics and activists as 'offensive'.¹³ So what happened? The treatment of personal narratives in multidisciplinary research, in advocacy groups and in national commissions of inquiry is diverse. The Magdalene Oral History website is host to the testimonies of pregnant, unmarried women, previously confined in Magdalene Laundries, as well as relatives and members of religious orders.¹⁴ The Tuam Oral History Project website plans to

host testimonies too.¹⁵ Artist Evelyn Glynn includes oral histories of named survivors in the artwork 'Breaking the Rule of Silence', based on the Magdalene Laundry in Limerick.¹⁶ My childhood memory is of vast stone buildings. The weight, feel and smell of white starched sheets are overlaid by the sight of lumpy, red stitches in each sheet corner. That was how my mother identified ours.

A different facing into the truth comes from an orientation to research practice that is committed to disrupting differences, to accompany each other in telling, listening and doing, to honouring voices and personal experiences, attending to human suffering. Ethical principles of consent, respect, beneficence, nonmaleficence and justice invite dialogue and collaboration between those who share personal stories with researchers and those who listen. How do we as researchers retell, recognise and respect the voice of all persons in our work? Telling is active and performed in the present; it refers to actual events, to concrete instances and to specific individuals. Telling also refers to repeated behaviours by those who had coercive power over the mind and body of another in family and institutional settings. Although these experiences have occurred in time past, they are re-experienced in time present. In inviting a re-telling and for some a first telling, creating an expectation that the full story of the person will be listened to and heard, the long-standing social mechanisms and fetters that prevent speech are loosened. Accounts offered in the context of an inquiry are accounts told in a community of others with an expectation that the account is believed, not doubted and that the experience is recognised. Each person tells a particular story, permeated by own analysis, perspective, values and ideas of how life works for them and others. There is often an after-effect for teller and listener. I think now about the emotional impact on tellers, recorders and listeners at the Confidential Committee; what was recalled in listening, what emotional reverberations remain? Is it possible to negotiate a retelling that prompts 'a living beyond' traumatic experiences? There is a need for a research process that opens up the possibility of freedom from the past without erasure while building autonomy for the future, for those who listen and those who tell.¹⁷ Objectivity requires formal validation, as do personal narratives, primarily by tellers who read the account produced by those of us who interpret what is offered. And we know this. Stories speak back to the effects of normative conventions, to the lived life and to the source of private troubles that we must address as public issues (Mills, 1959). It is our task to connect the personal to the political, to join the lived experience to the social, historical and political contexts in which a life unfolds. Maintaining a connection between voice, interpretation and activism remains a condition of the sociological contract for me. I teach socio-biographical research now; student projects speak to the global disruption of community, family and own lives by coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19). Together, we worry about the future. I hope our sociology students find some consolation in life-writing and a sense of perspective in a critical, emancipatory sociology. The poem by Boland (2020), *Our future will become the past of other women*, honours the work of suffragist ancestors who changed the future. I read the lines with all of us in mind.

That was your world: your entry to
Our ancestry in our darkest century.
Ghost-sufferer, our ghost-sister

Remind us now again that history
 Changes in one moment with one mind.
 That it belongs to us, to all of us.
 As we mark these hundred years
 We will not leave you behind.

A profound change has occurred; people's voices matter. Reporting *about* is no longer acceptable (Timonen et al., 2018). Ethical research involves reporting with *all* participants equally, not only those wielding institutional authorities. And what about voice? Voice tells *about* the self in community *with* others who hear and understand the import of what is being said. This is voice repossession in action.

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Notes

1. A paper for the 'Women's World's: Visions and Revisions' Congress, TCD 1987. See Ruprecht (1988).
2. Combat Poverty Agency publications are available here <https://www.lenus.ie/handle/10147/136803/recent-submissions?offset=0> (accessed 11 May 2021).
3. See <https://www.rte.ie/radio1/doconone/2014/0131/647608-documentary-podcast-letter-ann-lovett-gay-byrne-granard-tribune/> (accessed 13 May 2021).
4. Based on Nigel Rolfe's lyrics *The Ostrich* (1987).
5. Medical and non-medical contraceptive were illegal from 1935 to 1979 (Kelly 2019).
6. <http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/1981/act/2/enacted/en/html> (accessed 12 May 2021).
7. See <https://www.rte.ie/brainstorm/2020/1201/1181579-first-commission-on-the-status-of-women-ireland-1970/> (accessed 4 July 2021).
8. The Eighth Amendment was repealed in 2018.
9. The 1992 referendum approved the 13th and 14th Amendments (the right to information and the right to travel). The 12th Amendment which sought to exclude the risk of suicide as a ground for legal abortion was rejected.
10. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ATaFyIbd5hY> (accessed 18 May 2021).
11. Following an inquiry into gender discrimination in academic promotions, NUI Galway appointed the first Vice President of Equality in 2016. See Quinlivan (2017).
12. <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/d693a-report-of-the-confidential-committee-to-the-commission-of-investigation-into-mother-and-baby-homes-october-2020/> (accessed 13 May 2021).

13. See <http://www.nuigalway.ie/globalwomensstudies/news/researchers-respond-to-the-report-of-the-commission-of-inquiry-into-mother-and-baby-homes.html> (accessed 18 May 2021).
14. See <http://jfmresearch.com/home/oralhistoryproject/transcripts/> (accessed 4 June).
15. <https://www.nuigalway.ie/tuam-oral-history/> (accessed 18 May 2021).
16. <http://www.magdalenelaundrylimerick.com/oralhistories.html> (accessed 23 May 2019).
17. See for example <https://www.maynoothuniversity.ie/motherhood-project> (accessed 2 June 2021).

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