

**NORIAS AND FERRIS WHEELS:  
BENEFITS, INTERESTS AND ETHICS IN  
RESEARCHING VENEZUELAN AND  
AUSTRALIAN FAIRGROUND PEOPLE'S  
EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES**

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*A research project that involves non-mobile academics researching the educational experiences of two communities of fairground people presents several ethical and methodological risks. The researchers argue, however, that such a project provides an opportunity for particular findings that might not arise in research conducted by fairground people alone. Drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin's (1986) concepts of 'outsidedness' and 'creative understanding', the authors posit a two-way flow of information and communication that benefits both the occupational Travellers and the researchers. These concepts enable the construction of a useful framework for analysing and negotiating the play of different interests in the context of both the research project and the contemporary university research environment, with broader implications for understanding and performing the ethics of educational research.*

With rare exceptions (such as McIntosh, 2001 and Simpson & Coombes, 2001, both in this issue), research is something that is done by researchers to others. This fact creates immediately a political imbalance between the more powerful 'researcher' and the less powerful 'researched', which in turn produces a potential for ethical harm to be done to the 'researched'. This

potential is exacerbated when the 'researched' belong to one or more groups to whom the label 'marginalised' can be applied, sometimes despite the researchers' reservations about the application of such a label (Danaher, 2000).

The so-called 'paradigm wars' in educational research have done little to ameliorate this ethical and methodological dilemma. On the one hand, proponents of positivism have insisted on the construction of a separation between 'researcher' and 'researched', supposedly in order to enable researchers to view the 'objects' of research with sufficient detachment and scientific 'objectivity' (see Pring, 2000, pp. 40-44, 58-61; Verma & Mallick, 1999, pp. 36-38). A concomitant of this separation has been the construction of research participants as 'other' to the researchers. Paradoxically, that same constructed 'otherness' results from the naturalistic research tradition associated with interpretivism and constructivism and opposed to positivism. This tradition has insisted not only that researchers cannot attain 'objectivity' but also that they can understand nothing about the lived experiences of research participants unless they too engage in those experiences – that is, unless they share significant elements of the lives of the 'researched'. This approach relies on an equally fixed separation between 'them' (the uncomprehending academic researchers) and 'us' (the undifferentiated members of a particular and generally marginalised group).

This constructed and fixed 'otherness' between 'researcher' and 'researched', ironically evident in both positivistic and naturalistic research traditions, seems to the authors of this paper supremely unhelpful in promoting an ethically grounded research methodology. While it is important to acknowledge the ethical dilemmas confronting researchers (Danaher, 1998b), it is equally important not to descend into fearful atrophy and inactivity. Such a state does nothing to promote mutual understanding between 'researchers' and 'researched', and in fact is likely to replicate the stereotypes that contribute to some groups being marginalised from 'mainstream' society.

In saying this, we have begun nailing our colours to the mast. We contend that conducting educational research can be – but is not necessarily or automatically – beneficial to all participants. We assert that one way of making that outcome more likely is to subject our conceptual and methodological resources to a rigorous interrogation. We argue that such an interrogation needs to be an integral and continuing element of the research process.

We illustrate this argument by discussing a collaborative research project investigating the educational experiences of Venezuelan and Australian fairground people – the owners and managers of the *norias* and ferris wheels of the paper's title. The Russian linguist and philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin's (1986) concepts of 'outsidedness' and 'creative understanding' are subjected to critique as providing a potential basis for an ethically and politically informed, and a mutually beneficial, set of interactions between researchers and research participants. The paper relates these concepts to the broader agenda of analysing and negotiating the play of different interests in the context of both the research project and the contemporary university research environment, then ponders the implications of those concepts for understanding and performing the ethics of educational research.

#### THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

'Outsidedness' is a Bakhtinian concept that has great relevance for this paper's conceptual, ethical and methodological dimensions. Morson and Emerson (1990), Bakhtin's first biographers, explained outsidedness in this way: 'When one person faces another, his [*sic passim*] experience is conditioned by his 'outsidedness.' Even in the physical sense, one always sees something in the other that one does not see in oneself. I can see the world behind your back ...' (p. 53). Although the bases of 'outsidedness' could vary considerably, including 'personal, spatial, temporal, national, or any other' (p. 56),

'outsidedness creates the possibility of dialogue, and dialogue helps to understand a culture in a profound way' (p. 55).

In view of the argument pursued in this paper, it is appropriate to record Emerson's (1997) identification of the ethical implications of outsidedness:

It is worth noting that Bakhtin's vision of outsidedness is wonderfully nonelitist, nonjudgmental, and open to all, whatever our gifts or inclination. He does not stipulate that we do the other party any positive good, only that we assume an outside position towards that party. Even the laziest and most passive outsider can always help me out by letting me know what is happening behind my head; in my laziest, most passive, most testy and unengaged moods I can render outsiders at least that much of a service. (p. 210)

Thus outsidedness evokes two attributes simultaneously: a certain amount and kind of separation from the other person; and sufficient interest to pay attention to the other person. Methodologically, outsidedness constitutes the basis of our response to the hypothetical objection referred to in the abstract: that a non-fairground person, who has never herself or himself lived a mobile lifestyle, cannot possibly attain sufficiently 'trustworthy' understanding of a mobile person for that understanding to be considered 'reliable' and 'valid'. On the contrary, we argue that – provided that we have the sufficient interest referred to above – our separation from fairground people enables us to perceive and analyse elements of their multiple signifiers of identity of which they are themselves unaware.

This does not denote the voyeuristic look of the omniscient 'expert', gazing with scientific detachment at human specimens, nor lay any claim to objectivity or neutrality. One reason that it does not do so is that our 'interested separateness' is 'a means to an end', not an end to itself. That is, our analysis of fairground people's signifiers of identity of which they are unconscious becomes 'meaningful' and 'truthful' only when we use that analysis to augment our growing comprehension of their

situation. In other words, outsideness is a means to the end of creative understanding (both fairground people's and our own); in this way, we strive to give proportional attention and value to the fairground people's and our voices.

In that context, it was helpful that Bakhtin (1986) provided the following overview of the links between outsideness and creative understanding:

*Creative understanding* does not renounce itself, its own place in time, its own culture; and it forgets nothing. In order to understand, it is immensely important for the person who understands to be located outside the object of his or her creative understanding – in time, in space, in culture. For one cannot even really see one's own exterior and comprehend it as a whole, and no mirrors or photographs can help; our real exterior can be seen and understood only by other people, because they are located outside us in space and because they are others. (p. 7; emphasis in original)

At this point it is appropriate to emphasise the ethical and methodological significance of creative understanding for our enactments of the responsibilities and roles of researcher. That significance is the crucial importance of making the research project a genuine exchange of information and ideas. By this we mean that, in addition to requesting fairground people to respond to our developing analysis of their marginalisation, resistance and transformation, we need to listen and respond to their outsideness and creative understanding in relation to the research. If we are to participate in practices of mutual comprehension with fairground people, we must be open to their explicit and implicit comments on the purposes and conduct of the research project. We must also recognise that they, as much as we, have constructed and carried out the project. This means, for example, that we must seek to hear fairground people's voices about topics other than those about which they are ostensibly speaking in the interviews, and strive

to relate those voices to our developing answers to the project's research questions.

So the ethical and methodological implications of Bakhtinian outsidedness and creative understanding for researching the education of fairground people can be synthesised as follows. Interested outsidedness and creative understanding can function as an 'antidote' to a reductionist rendering of marginalisation and resistance. It can operate in this way through productive use of the researchers' openness to the multiple signifiers of fairground people's identities manifested through language, specifically the Bakhtinian notion of the utterance. In this way, the interview transcripts that are the research project's principal data gathering technique can become the basis of ongoing and mutual comprehension between 'the researcher' and 'the researched'. In the process, these transcripts can become the site in which marginalisation and resistance can 'speak' to each other and thereby lead to transformation. A crucial 'sign' whether this possibility is being actualised is the extent to which multiple voices are heard and responded to mutually and non-hierarchically in both this paper and the project on which it is based.

#### **THE RESEARCH PROJECT**

Having outlined the paper's conceptual framework, we turn now to apply that framework to our analysis of the educational experiences and opportunities of Venezuelan and Australian fairground people. We emphasise at the outset that that analysis is partial and tentative, rather than comprehensive and definitive. Nevertheless we hope to highlight some of the crucial issues relating to who potentially benefits from, and/or is harmed by, the research project of which this paper forms a part.

The Australian section of that project has been in continuous operation for more than ten years. Between 1992 and 1996, a group of researchers at Central Queensland University conducted interviews with Australian fairground children, their parents, their tutors and their former teachers from the

Brisbane School of Distance Education (Danaher & Danaher, 2000; Danaher, 1998a, 2001a). (It is hoped to conduct further interviews with the fairground people about the newly established Queensland School for Travelling Show Children.) More recently, the researchers have turned their attention to educational provision for Australian circus people (see Moriarty & Hallinan, 2001, in this issue).

The Venezuelan section of the project is more recent and less extensive (Anteliz & Danaher, 2000). In 1999, the third author, working with the aid of an interpreter organised by the first author, interviewed two fairground operators in Caracas, the Venezuelan capital city, and both first and third authors conversed informally with a small number of fairground workers in the regional city Valencia. These interviews and conversations were intended as the start of a more extensive investigation of Venezuelan fairground people's attitudes towards and experiences of educational provision.

#### **BENEFITS OF THE RESEARCH PROJECT**

As with most if not all of the papers in this volume, it is relatively straightforward to identify the benefits as seen through the eyes of the researchers involved in the project reported here. Those benefits might be divided into two categories: private and public. Privately, while acknowledging the multiple ways in which academics plan and implement their respective career paths, the researchers add to their store of cultural capital through the publication of journal articles, conference papers and books analysing the research findings. This is sometimes turned into financial capital when that cultural capital is used as the basis for applying for academic positions or for promotion within existing positions. For each author of this paper, Traveller education research constitutes a major element of the author's research agenda and hence of that person's cultural capital. It is therefore crucial for each of us to have access to the fairground people's store of knowledge, and for them to be willing to enact the role of research participants.

Publicly (and again allowing for legitimate differences in how academics conceptualise and engage with such hardy perennials as 'equity' and 'social justice'), the researchers are committed to disseminating accurate information about the lives and educational experiences of occupational Travellers. In so doing, they seek to dispel stereotypical myths about those lives and educational experiences. This is different from claims to 'speak on behalf of' Travellers – although it is important to acknowledge the potential ease with which such a position can slide into 'advocacy', 'appropriation' or 'complicity' in replicating the Travellers' marginalisation (Danaher, 1998b). Instead, this position derives from an interrogation of traditional signifiers of identity directed at (and against) Travellers, and a conviction of the need for more accurate and positive narratives to be told by and about them.

Before we turn to consider potential benefits of the research project for fairground people, it is salutary to reflect how the private and public dimensions of benefits from the project accruing to the researchers relate to the positivistic and naturalistic research traditions outlined at the outset of the paper. Acknowledging the research's private benefits demonstrates our rejection of positivism's emphasis on objectivity. We are not detached and disinterested observers; on the contrary, we have individual and shared vested interests in the project's success. Similarly, the public benefits of the research draw attention to another aspect of our interests: our commitment to highlighting particular elements of the fairground people's lives (marginalisation, resistance and transformation) that other researchers might downplay or reject altogether. At the same time, both these private and public benefits set us apart from – or outside – the people whom we are researching; while they too seek to maximise cultural capital and social justice, they do so in very different ways and contexts. Thus these private and public research benefits tend to counteract the naturalistic insistence on immersion in the lifeworlds of the people being researched. In other words,



highlighting the researchers' private and public benefits from the project recognises their agency and political positioning in their own right – not as either 'objective experts' or 'objective ciphers of the researched'.

It is a reflection of the longevity and pervasiveness of the positivistic and naturalistic research traditions that inferring the benefits of the research project for the fairground people is necessarily partial and tentative. Indeed, one outcome of this paper might well be including questions about benefit in future interviews with them. Nevertheless, we assume that, as with ourselves, the benefits for them have private and public dimensions, and furthermore that these dimensions relate respectively to cultural capital and social justice. That is, it is likely that, for at least some of the interviewees, participating in a university research project was felt to enhance their cultural capital and their positions within the fairground community in which they live. Similarly, it is probable that at least some of the interviewees agreed to participate because of their conviction that doing so might contribute to dispelling some of the enduring and negative stereotypes about their lives (see also Danaher, 2001a).

Having identified what we consider the major benefits of the research project, we turn now to examine the related, and broader, issue of the play of interests underpinning the project, after which we move to the question of ethics and educational research. Both issues are approached from the perspective of the conceptual framework outlined in an earlier section of the paper.

#### **INTERESTS IN THE RESEARCH PROJECT**

The Bakhtinian concepts of 'outsidedness' and 'creative understanding' have particular significance in the changing context of university practice and research. This context involves a play of different and sometimes competing interests. In Australia, the contemporary manifestation of university practice responds to the growing influence of market oriented

models expressing themselves in an emphasis on issues of benchmarking, quality assurance, user pays and so forth (Danaher, Gale & Erben, 2000, pp. 56-58).

These forces have brought radical changes to the ways in which the university conducts and values its practices, including research. These changes mean that a traditional university value of 'detached purity' – the idea that the academy was an ivory tower removed from the murky world of commerce committed to scholarship for its own sake – no longer has great covenance, at least at an administrative level. In a sense, individual academics have resisted this shift, attaching themselves to an ongoing commitment to engage in the challenge of generating ideas. This means that many academics feel disposed to position themselves 'outside' the current and emerging imperatives of the scholarly field, particularly if those imperatives demand conducting research that 'pays for itself' or 'shows a profit'.

Given this context, it is instructive to note that the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's (1998, 2000; see also Webb, Schirato & Danaher, 2001, chap. 7) research has focused on the way in which academics form a dominated class faction within a dominant class. Bourdieu argues that the complicated position of being simultaneously inside and outside the field of power has the potential to create a sense of empathy with others. Commentators like John Frow (1995) have rejected this position as overestimating the links between academic knowledge and benefits for others (the same issue prompting this collection of articles). Certainly, it can be problematic to assume any equivalence or even coincidence of interests between researchers and other research participants. There can, however, be a certain amount of empathy based simultaneously on separate and shared interests between these two groups – that is, based on the Bakhtinian notions of 'outsidedness' and 'creative understanding'.

From this perspective, the very idea of regarding the educational experiences of Venezuelan and Australian

fairground people as important can seem audacious, requiring some justification in terms of a research and educational agenda imposed from elsewhere. The empathy that this research might develop would then be based on a shared refusal of these imperatives. If both the experience of, and research into, fairground lifestyles is rendered marginal, then this position of mutual outsidedness can generate a degree of power. For such research identifies itself in terms of its difference from what is counted as mainstream research.

This play of power interests forms an ongoing struggle over what is valued within social and cultural spaces. Fairground people continue to face the challenge of remaining relevant and significant in the face of new technologies, leisure practices and social change. Academic research into the lives and interests of marginalised peoples itself risks being marginalised in a context that reduces research to the goal of extracting external funding or restricts it to areas of governmental priority such as information technology.

Here we can identify another complexity in the relationship between outsidedness and insidedness as it applies to academic research. It can be argued that research leading to new knowledge emerges most forcefully not within established fields and their standard doxa (that is, what constitute the orthodox forms of knowledge), but rather from within the gaps and margins between research activity and valued knowledge. For example, Einstein's theories of relativity emerged not from within the field of physics at the time but from his own outsider position with the Swiss patent office. So the establishment of key directions and priorities in research (that is, establishing the distinction between central and marginal research outcomes) can lead to constructing an orthodoxy that discourages innovative research. A creative understanding and refusal of the terms of this 'game', along with a willingness to adopt an outsider's position in terms of these values, posits a challenge that can contribute to what Harrevelt (2001, in this issue) has called a 'discursive dissonance'. By this we mean that positing

alternative discourses in the face of mainstream imperatives creates the spaces and gaps through which more innovative ways of thinking can emerge. These are some of the ways in which a broader reflection on the interests associated with research can attach new understandings to the narrower question of benefiting from that research considered in the previous section of this paper.

#### **THE ETHICS OF EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH**

We turn now to consider the implications of the earlier foci on research benefits and interests for the crucial issue of the ethics of educational research. In particular, while empathy can occur and be fostered between researchers and fairground people in terms of their mutual outsideness, this does create certain ethical challenges. For example, and following from a question raised earlier in this paper, should researchers position themselves as advocates for these communities? Drawing on particular assumptions about the benefits of educational research, some respondents to this question would answer in the affirmative. They would argue that researchers can give voice and direct attention to the problems, aspirations, contributions, values and beliefs of marginalised peoples. Moreover, researchers, based on their cultural capital within the academy and their links with fields such as politics, government and the media, can be said to play a role in creating understanding of these communities across a range of different sites. This is not quite the same as a patronising discovery model that assumes these communities are invisible outside the illumination that the great light of the academy might cast upon them. Nevertheless we have significant reservations about ascribing to it as an encapsulation of our view of the benefits, interests and ethics of educational research. For one thing, such a position appears to discount the centrality of dialogue in relations between researchers and research participants, because the advocacy sometimes occurs without the detailed knowledge and informed consent of those on whose behalf the advocacy is taking place. For another thing, the practice of

advocacy tends to replicate the power differential between those advocating and those being advocated for.

We have other grounds for reservation about claims made in relation to the ethics of educational research. At this point we need to qualify our earlier remarks about the mutual outsidedness of the researchers and the fairground communities. Such outsidedness is always limited and partial; parties can move beyond this position to engage with the inside forces in respect of which they define themselves and takes their bearings. Just as researchers play the game of attempting to validate their research through grants, publications and being 'taken seriously' within the academic community, fairground communities have established links with central institutions in order to gain 'favours' such as educational provision, access to governmental resources and so forth.

Similarly, the connections between researchers and researched communities are limited and partial, recognising that these parties belong to separate social universes with their own temporal and spatial arrangements. While researchers seek to establish a respectful and open dialogue with the researched communities, this dialogue constitutes something of an 'interruption' in the routines to which both parties are characteristically exposed. The very novelty of the dialogue situates it as being outside and creative. This sets limits on the extent to which each party can know and represent the other, while setting generic and discursive boundaries on the form of that knowledge. Acknowledging this through a creative understanding of their own perspectives can help researchers avoid the risk of seeking to speak on behalf of, or in the place of, the subjects of their research.

By virtue of their position within the academy researchers have links to networks of power and knowledge that are different from the networks of power to which the fairground communities have access. So outsidedness, like any position, is not fixed but rather a play of moves, a shifting perspective that engages in the ongoing struggle to resist being fully colonised,

definitively located and therefore made too greatly subject to the values and gaze of others, such as to close off the possibility of escape.

All of this means that the questions of who benefits from this research dialogue, and of the nature of the ethics underlying that dialogue, can most fairly be answered from an open acknowledgment of the limits and partiality of the encounter. The researchers benefit from a rich issue with definite outcomes. The academy benefits from being exposed to an issue that can add to as well as challenge research literature across a range of fields. The fairground communities can benefit to the extent that this greater awareness leads to changes in provision in areas such as social services, educational provision and cultural representations.

Beyond this, the ongoing dialogue and relationship among these disparate forces (researchers, academia, fairground communities) can benefit from engaging with concepts such as outsidership and creative understanding. Interest in, and sympathy for, the values of the other has become a standard concern in the academy, displacing earlier intellectual paradigms that regarded colonising the other as unproblematic. In such a context, the idea of otherness belonging to all those with interests in research potentially impels new approaches to understanding and performing educational research ethics.

## CONCLUSION

It should be clear by now that we regard the research project recounted here as having multiple benefits. At the same time, we have an enduring sense of unease at the project's potential for contribute to the fairground people's ongoing marginalisation. We take some comfort from this unease being shared by other educational researchers. Pring (2000) contended that 'theoretical perspectives concerned with social reality need to be more tentative, more ready to cope with the exception, more adaptable to the changing consciousness of those who are part of that reality' (p. 117). Stronach and MacLure (1997) went

further and argued in favour of 'uncanny openings' and a 'kind of strategic uncertainty' by which 'to mobilise meaning ... rather than to fix it' (p. 5). This approach accords with our desire to make tentative, not strong, claims about research outcomes, and with our aim of helping to construct provisional spaces where other games can be played and other voices heard.

Despite these reservations, we confirm what we said at the outset of the paper: that we need to avoid descending into fearful atrophy and inactivity. Here we align ourselves with Stronach and MacLure (1997) when they identified 'a more optimistic argument that the acceptance of [discursive] disorder should not be mistaken for passivity or acquiescence' (p. 98). Like Stronach and MacLure, we would consider such 'passivity or acquiescence' at once politically disengaged and ethically inappropriate.

What is needed instead is the development of road maps for conceptualising and conducting research – however limited, partial and temporary those road maps might of necessity be. We close by reasserting the value of outsidedness and creative understanding as two among several compass bearings on our particular road map for this specific research project. Those compass bearings might give us sufficient energy to escape the magnetic fields of positivism and naturalism, and in so doing to charter new approaches to understanding and performing the benefits, interests and ethics of educational research.

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors are grateful to the fairground people, and their teachers and administrators, who participated in the research; to their fellow Traveller education researchers at Central Queensland University; and to the former Research Centre for Open and Distance Learning and the Faculty of Education and Creative Arts at that institution for funding the research. Some of the ideas presented under 'The Conceptual Framework' in the paper appeared also in the third author's doctoral thesis (Danaher, 2001a); Dr Leonie Rowan as thesis supervisor, Dr Caroline Dyer, Professor Terry Evans and Dr Betty Jordan as thesis examiners and Dr Máirín Kenny as thesis respondent provided invaluable feedback about that material. Some of these ideas were applied to a different context in Danaher (2001b). Mr Peter Hallinan commented helpfully on an earlier version of this paper.

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