Hello qualitative researchers and fellow phenomenologists enrolled in ED 626,

The following essay describes the attempts of social science researchers working within the qualitative tradition to “join science and art” and “blur the boundaries of aesthetics and empiricism.” This essay examines the ideas of: (a) Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot, a sociologist and ethnographer who studies the culture of schools and teaches at the Harvard University College of Education; (b) Jessica Hoffman Davis, a cognitive developmental psychologist and student of the visual arts; (c) Patti Lather, a critical theorist, feminist researcher, and phenomenologist who teaches at the College of Education at Ohio State University; (d) Chris Smithies, a psychologist and phenomenologist who studied women living with HIV and AIDS; (e) James Clifford, an ethnographer and historian, who studies the interaction between the social sciences (e.g., ethnography) and artistic and literary movements (e.g., surrealism), and who has written extensively about the Mission Dakar-Djibouti of 1931-1933, one of the earliest ethnographic studies and the first French ethnographic fieldwork expedition.

PLEASE READ THIS ESSAY AND RESPOND TO THE IDEAS PRESENTED IN THIS ESSAY BY WRITING IN YOUR JOURNAL. PLEASE POST YOUR RESPONSES ON “CAUCUS” THANK YOU

Art and Science

Social science portraiture is a method of qualitative research that “seeks to join science and art” and blur “the boundaries of aesthetics and empiricism” in an effort “to capture the richness, complexity, and dimensionality of human experience in social and cultural context” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, pp. xi, 3). Social science portraiture was pioneered by Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot, a sociologist and ethnographer who studies the culture of schools, and further developed through collaboration with Jessica Hoffmann Davis, a cognitive developmental psychologist and student of the visual arts. Lawrence-Lightfoot summarized portraiture as a method framed by the traditions and values of the phenomenological paradigm, sharing many of the techniques, standards, and goals of ethnography. But it pushes
against the constraints of those traditions and practices in its explicit effort to combine empirical and aesthetic description, in its focus on the convergence of narrative and analysis, in its goal of speaking to broader audiences beyond the academy (thus linking inquiry to public discourse and social transformation), in its standard of authenticity rather than reliability and validity (the traditional standards of quantitative and qualitative inquiry), and in its explicit recognition of the use of the self as the primary research instrument for documenting and interpreting the perspectives and experiences of the people and the cultures being studied. (pp. 13-14)

Lawrence-Lightfoot described her attempt to develop “life drawings” of high schools that would more fully convey the highly complex relationships that exist among individual personalities and organizational culture (cf., Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1983, 1994). She wrote:

For as far back as I can recall, I have been drawn to the liberating and transcendent power of art – the music that makes my heart sing, the poetry that soothes my soul, the dance that releases my rage, the novel that takes me to distant lands and brings me home, and the painting that offers me a new angle of vision. And for most of my adult life, I have had a deep respect for the rigor and discipline of science. I have admired the rules of design and the rituals of methodology, and have been engaged by the process of intellectual debate informed by evidence and augmentation. I have been both challenged by, and devoted to, the search for authenticity and authority, for resonance and truth. “Portraiture” has become the bridge that has brought these two worlds together for me, allowing for both contrast and coexistence, counterpoint and harmony in my scholarship and writing, and allowing me to see clearly the art in the
development of science and the science in the making of art…. I wanted to develop a document, a text, that came as close as possible to painting with words. I wanted to create a narrative that bridged the realms of science and art, merging the systematic and careful description of good ethnography with the evocative resonance of fine literature. I wanted the written pieces to convey the authority, wisdom, and perspective of the subjects, but I wanted them to feel…that the portrait did not look like them, but somehow managed to reveal their essence. I wanted them to experience the portraits as both familiar and exotic, so that in reading them they would be introduced to a perspective that they had not considered before. (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, pp. 3, 4-5)

Lawrence-Lightfoot also described her desire to reach readers beyond the academy, and to inspire and seduce, as well as inform.

I…wanted to reshape the relationship between research and audience. More specifically, I was concerned with broadening the audience for my work, with communicating beyond the walls of the academy. Academicians tend to speak to one another in a language that is often opaque and esoteric. Rarely do the analyses and texts we produce invite dialogue with people in the “real world.” Instead, academic documents – even those that focus on issues of broad public concern – are read by a small audience of people in the same disciplinary field, who often share similar conceptual frameworks and rhetoric. The formulaic structure of the written pieces – research question, data collection and analysis, interpretation, policy implications – is meant to inform, not inspire…With its focus on narrative, with its use of metaphor and symbol, portraiture intends to
address wider, more eclectic audiences. The attempt is to move beyond academy’s inner circle, to speak in a language that is not coded or exclusive, and to develop texts that will seduce the readers into thinking more deeply about issues that concern them. Portraitists write to inform and inspire readers. (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, pp. 9-10).

Other social scientists have, in recent years, blurred the boundaries between art and science to produce visionary works of great power and beauty that astonish and inspire (cf., Kozol, 2000; Lather & Smithies, 1997). Educator Patti Lather and psychologist Chris Smithies (1997) juxtaposed the stories of women living with HIV/AIDS with: works of art, poetry, journal entries, essays, historical and cultural analysis, sociopolitical commentary, theoretical frameworks, popular culture, cosmology, mythology, facts and statistics about the global AIDS epidemic, and autobiographical accounts of their own experiences as social science researchers to construct a fragmented, haunting, collage-like text, Troubling the Angels: Women Living with HIV/AIDS. Lather and Smithies developed a social science artifact, a research document, a text, that exists “at the edges of disorder” (Clifford, 1981, p. 13), that subverts, disorients, questions, disturbs. Troubling the Angels: Women Living with HIV/AIDS is both phenomenological case study and surrealist collage.

Ethnography and Surrealism

Surrealism was an international transdisciplinary intellectual movement that flourished in Paris between the first and second world wars. It encompassed the visual and performing arts, literature, politics, philosophy, and the nascent social sciences.
Surrealism is closely related to the Dada movement, from which it evolved (Nadeau, 1968; Rubin, 1969).

The Dada movement was founded by a group of avant-garde European artists, writers, and intellectuals who were vehemently opposed to World War I. Horrified by the death and destruction that accompanied this war, and believing that war was the product of an insane and morally bankrupt civilization, the Dadaists developed a worldview that was simultaneously nihilistic, anarchic, irreverent, ironic, and absurd. The Dadaists sought to destabilize art and philosophy and to undermine Church and State. The ultimate goal of the Dada movement was the total destruction of bourgeois values and the annihilation of modern artistic sensibilities (Peterson, 1971; Richter, 1997).

The Dadaists created works of “anti-art” that mocked European “high art” and culture. Marcel Duchamp, for example, scrawled a mustache and goatee on a reproduction of Leonardo da Vinci’s Mona Lisa, accompanied by the message “She has a hot ass.” Dada artists constructed collages that juxtaposed seemingly unrelated images and text. Ready-mades (i.e., found objects), including urinals and garbage cans, were elevated to the status of “high art” and prominently displayed at museums and galleries. Dada writers composed poetry by cutting words from newspapers, shaking them in a bag, and reassembling them in the order in which they were removed. Dada musicians created “noise music” through the cacophonous and random juxtaposition of sound. Dada performers staged public events designed to shock and offend. Dada intellectuals lectured in the nude (Caws, 1970; Richter, 1997; Rubin, 1968).
Like the Dadaists, the surrealists perceived a deep crisis in Western culture. The surrealists shared the Dadaist vision of an insane and chaotic world shaped by random events and irrational forces, a world devastated by the brutality of modern warfare. The surrealists, however, were less committed to destruction and nihilistic exhibition than were the Dadaists; rather, inspired by the psychoanalytic theories of Sigmund Freud and Marxist political ideologies, the surrealists sought to restructure values at every level of society. The surrealists were revolutionaries; their intent was to shock a complacent world. They were also somewhat utopian; they hoped to change the world: to liberate the imagination; emancipate repressed sexualities; subvert repressive social conventions; experience altered states of consciousness; and free language (and knowledge) from the stagnation and constraints of the past (Breton, 1936; Carrouges, 1974; Gresham, 1969).

In his essay *On Ethnographic Surrealism*, ethnographer James Clifford (1981) wrote “ethnography” and “surrealism” are not stable unities… The boundaries of art and science (especially the human sciences) are ideological and shifting, and intellectual history is itself enmeshed in these shifts – its genres do not remain firmly anchored. Changing definitions of art or science must provoke new retrospective unities, new ideal types for historical description. In this sense, “ethnographic surrealism” is a utopian construct, a statement at once about past and future possibilities for cultural analysis. (p. 540)

Clifford (1981) further noted

The coalescence of a research paradigm creates the possibility of an accumulation of knowledge, and thus the phenomenon of scholarly progress. What is less often
recognized, for the human sciences at least, is that any consolidation of a paradigm
depends on the exclusion, or relegation to the status of “art,” of those elements of the
changing discipline which call the credentials of the discipline itself into question,
those research practices which…work at the edges of disorder. (p. 554)

Clifford (1981) argued that surrealism and ethnography emerged simultaneously,
in Paris, between the first and second world wars, and that the two traditions shared a
similar worldview and a common set of aesthetic sensibilities and theoretical
assumptions. Clifford described a “modernist” orientation toward cultural (dis)order
characterized by the fragmentation and juxtaposition of cultural values. Those who
embraced this “modernist” worldview (e.g., the Dadaists, the surrealists, and the early
ethnographers) perceived stable orders of collective meaning as “constructed, artificial,
and indeed, often ideological or repressive” (p. 539). The early ethnographers, like the
Dadaists and surrealists, contested these constructed realities, these “stable orders of
collective meaning,” and attempted to subvert, parody, destroy, and/or transform them.

Clifford (1981) noted a subversive attitude among early French ethnographers,
who valued “fragments, curious collections, unexpected juxtapositions,” and sought “to
provoke the manifestation of extraordinary realities drawn from the domains of the erotic,
exotic, and the unconscious” (p. 540). Clifford also noted the surrealist tendency “to see
culture and its norms – beauty, truth, reality, as artificial arrangements, susceptible to
detached analysis and comparison with other possible dispositions…[as]…crucial to an
ethnographic attitude” (p. 541). That is to say, the *postmodern* belief that truth, reality,
and knowledge are constructed by human beings in multiple forms that are forever
changing had its genesis in the “modernist” orientation toward cultural (dis)order that
subsumed Dada, surrealism, and early ethnography; this “modernist” orientation toward cultural (dis)order, this very essence of the postmodern sensibility, is now considered indispensable to the conduct of social science research in general, and ethnographic research in particular (cf., Breton, 1936; Foucault, 1970, 1972).

A favorite technique of artists working within the surrealist paradigm was collage. Collage involves the juxtaposing of images, text, and materials in order to break down the conventional codes (e.g., objects and identities) that combine to produce culturally (i.e., socially) constructed realities. The surrealists used collage to disorient (or reorient) the viewer, to jar, to shock, and to provoke a sense of the unfamiliar; that is to say, the surrealists intended that the viewer respond to surrealist artworks by questioning his or her own socially constructed realities (i.e., his or her knowledge constructs), a questioning process that provokes profound discomfort among many individuals (Breton, 1936; Carrouges, 1974; Rubin, 1969).

Ethnographers working within the surrealist paradigm also constructed textual collages. One of the earliest ethnographic studies (and France’s first fieldwork expedition), the Mission Dakar-Djibouti of 1931-1933, for example, resulted in published texts that can best be described as collages that juxtaposed textual descriptions with photographic documentation in an attempt to represent “the extraordinary beauty and conceptual power of Dogon wisdom” (i.e., the Dogon worldview), (i.e., “a mythic conception of cosmic order that aspires to embrace every gesture and detail of the profane world”), (i.e., “the cosmogonic myth” of the Dogon people) (Clifford, 1981, p. 556).

Clifford (1981) noted the research process that began with the Mission Dakar-Djibouti has produced one of the most exhaustive descriptions of an indigenous people
(i.e., the Dogon people and their neighbors) on record anywhere. Little effort was made, however, to provide the reader with a naturalistic account of Dogon daily life. In the words of James Clifford: “Realist attempts…[were]…seldom attempted; indeed, in the wake of surrealist fragmentation, what would be the point?” (p. 556). Rather, these surrealist ethnographers were interested in positioning the Mission Dakar-Djibouti within the Dogon universe: that is, a universe informed by the cosmogonic myths of the Dogon people. Thusly, the Mission Dakar-Djibouti resulted in the construction of textual collages composed of “scrupulously explicated ensemble[s] of documents, with the most important, like the cosmogonic myth, manifestly authored by the Dogon” (Clifford, 1981, p. 556).

Clifford (1981) noted ethnographers working within the surrealist paradigm believe that cultural reality is “composed of artificial codes, ideological identities and objects susceptible to inventive recombinination and juxtaposition” (p. 550). Clifford wrote:

Unlike the exoticism of the nineteenth century, which departed from a more or less confident cultural order in search of a temporary frisson, a circumscribed experience of the bizarre, modern surrealism and ethnography began with a reality deeply in question… [The “Other”]…appeared now as [a] serious human alternative; modern cultural relativism became possible. As artists and writers set about after World War I putting the pieces of culture together in new ways, their field of possible selection had drastically expanded. The “primitive” societies of the planet were increasingly available as aesthetic, cosmological, and scientific resources. This presupposed something more than an older Orientalism; it
required modern ethnography. The postwar context was structured by a basically ironic experience of culture. For every local custom or truth, there was always an exotic alternative, a possible juxtaposition or incongruity. Below (psychologically) and beyond (geographically) any ordinary reality there existed another reality. Surrealism shared this ironic situation with relativist ethnography [i.e., ethnographic surrealism]. (p. 542)