

THE THIRD PERSON SINGULAR: WRITING ABOUT THE CHILD CARE RELATIONSHIP

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Nothing changes until it becomes what it is. *Fritz Perls*

There was an unmistakable tone of condescension in her apology. My urge to slam down the phone struggled with my excitement to do battle. "I'm sorry, but it's really not unusual for a Journal to be subjected to a formal Academic Review," she explained. "Any member of our Advisory Board can call for such a review if they feel that one of our publications is not meeting the criteria set out by the University Standards Committee."

"And what does all that mean?" I growled, trying to keep in mind the old adage about not shooting the messenger.

"Well they take a selection of articles published in the last four issues and assess them in accordance with accepted scholarly traditions." The words were articulated with the precision of someone reading from a policy manual.

"So some scholarly stuffed shirt has questions about the Journal of Child and Youth Care. What's the concern?"

"Well, I just work for the University Press so it's not really my area. I think the last issue drew the attention. It might have been the language."

"Ah, the Ritual Abuse issue. I guess words like "shit" and "fuck" can be offensive, speaking scholarly of course." It was an unnecessary observation, but she caught her breath to give me first blood.

"Well, there are standards of style and form that apply to all our Journals."

"It's not *your* Journal. Our contract is that you will print the damned thing and that's all. You are the printers and we are the editors and the owners. Going to another printer is a simple matter for us." My voice was calm and resolute.

"Well, you sound upset but it's not that big a deal. The review is fairly straightforward. Apart from submitting your own curriculum vitae, you don't really need to be involved that much. The Review Committee will match the articles against their criteria and will conduct their own survey of the backgrounds and qualifications of contributing authors." She had retreated to the policy manual and the first battle was won.

"Please put all this down in writing and we will conduct an editorial review of your request. We will make our decisions accordingly." I put the phone down and reflected upon my victory. I had been childish and retaliatory but I was in no mood for self-analysis. I had a just cause.

Frank Pearson filled the door of my office, looming over my delicate little world like a Colossus at the gates of dawn. I instinctively checked the status of the potentially destructible items before waving for him to enter. He lumbered over to the sofa and, ignoring its protests, eased his frame to rest within its cushioned contours.

"I wanna talk some more about my manuscript. I've been working on it a lot over the past few weeks." His high-pitched voice seemed cut off, strangely alienated, from the mighty substance of his body.

"Oh yes," I said with a poorly disguised sigh, "that was the group interaction piece. You were looking for a control group last time we talked."

"Yes, well, I've decided to settle for a 'within-group' design. After our last discussion, I went back through all the video tapes and it struck me that I could conduct a comparative analysis across subjects." He was obviously pleased with the prospect and seemed eager to receive my response.

Frank had been at the Agency for seven years and his recent admission to graduate school as a part-time student had given him new hopes for professional legitimacy. His future contributions to child and youth care would be from the vantage point of a psychologist. His enthusiasm left me cold and sour.

"What were you trying to get at in the article?" I asked.

"But you read the first draft in August." He sounded whimpy.

"I read a lot of manuscripts," I told him unsympathetically.

"I developed this social competence scale and predicted that kids who scored high would be more likely to initiate caring responses toward their peers. I had all the "highs" in one group and all the "lows" in another. Then to control for possible 'measurement effects' I tried to establish a control group from one of the other units. Don't you remember?"

"Oh yeah. I remember saying that your hypotheses were tautological and that your findings would be redundant since caring was incorporated into various items in your questionnaire. Then I couldn't figure out why you needed the three groups."

"So that's why I came up with the 'within-group' design." Then, when I looked at the tapes I came up with another way of defining the caring variable."

"Great."

"I've got the video of the mixed group session. I thought you might want to look at it."

Good old Frank was about to offer me ammunition for my war with the University. "Sure, let's do that," I said with genuine enthusiasm.

When the show was over I felt alive and well, but not for the reasons I had anticipated. Somehow, in the midst of nine surly teenagers, Frank Pearson had thrown off the ponderous presence that cast its shadow over my office, to become an articulate being of sensitivity and sincerity. As he wove his presence delicately and deftly through the hard-edged encounter, even his inert corpus assumed a new lightness and grace. Somehow, in this transformation, those around him had risen to meet his authenticity.

In less than an hour, the hostile and fragmented energy of the whole group had become aligned. And the word that emerged to capture and contain the spirit of the encounter was the word that was the pivotal word in Frank's experimental design: "caring." After seven years of superficial acquaintance, I had witnessed the essence of the man for the first time. As he crouched over the rewinding VCR, his shirt pulled high above the belt of his pants, I thought about the tragedy of such a powerful spirit being imprisoned behind the protective facade of doing life Frank's way. Thank God the man had found child and youth care and thank God for the kids who offered a vehicle for his love, even though he probably thought he did it to make a living. He removed the tape from the machine and turned toward me, his expression anxious and expectant.

"Superb, Frank, truly superb." I beamed at him.

He broke into a smile and flopped down into the chair opposite. "So you see the differential responses of these kids. You could probably identify the higher scorers just by watching the tape, right? But it's still worth collecting and analyzing the data, right? You're still interested in publishing the article, aren't you?"

I took a moment to ponder on his questions. With this type of article, we could uphold the mission of the Journal to encourage the professionalization while satisfying the pristine demands of the University Review Board. But beneath the veneer of empirical respectability was the most incredible piece of child care practice making it all possible. This was what I wanted to capture.

"No, I'm not interested in publishing the article," I said, "but I am interested in publishing AN article."

We sat in my office. Frank was slumped on the sofa trying to force the resolution in his face against the dejection in his body. "This is hard work for me," he confessed. "I thought I understood the standards and

expectations for publication. I read articles like this all the time, but never from child care workers like me. Surely that's worth something to the bloody Journal of Child and Youth Care."

"You're right Frank. There are many articles like this in many Journals much more scholarly than ours. They're like a thousand oyster shells spread across the shore. Some of them actually have oysters inside, and they are delicious to the addicted oyster eaters. Unfortunately, you just gave me a glimpse of the pearl in yours and I'm not interested in oysters anymore."

"You're dragging me through obscure metaphors again. You always throw me off when you do that. Get to the point. Are you talking about another design change and yet another rewrite?"

"I can't give you a prescription Frank. I'd only succeed in obscuring the pearl again."

"Oh, for crying out loud. Let me out of here."

"Will you trust me and try something a little different for a few minutes before you go?"

"Like what?"

"Would you sit in my chair?"

"Why?"

"Just do it and trust me. You can leave anytime you like."

Frank heaved his ample frame across the room and forced himself between the straining arms of my beloved leather backed swiveller. I removed myself from his field of vision and perched myself on the corner of the credenza.

"It might help if you close your eyes for a moment. And just allow yourself to breathe freely. Just let the chair support your body and relax. Take a moment and raise your left hand when you feel truly relaxed...at ease with yourself, here with me, in this room."

He took longer than I thought he would. After a few moments, he raised his hand slowly and deliberately. "I want you to go back to the time when you were preparing for the taping of the group session. What was going on for you at that point?"

"Well, I'd already thought about the design change, so I was more concerned with how the kids would respond to being taped. I was particularly worried about Pete Singer; he'd been preparing to go ape for two or three days."

"How did you know?"

"I just know Peter Singer. I've worked with him."

"So what do you know about Peter that was on your mind?"

"Whenever he gets a call from his father he takes a couple of days to build up a head of steam, then he blows."

"What's that all about?"

"His dad abandoned him by giving mother all the power. He only got involved when Pete was in big trouble, but even then it wasn't that Pete mattered; it was just that the old man had been called in by mother. At least, that's the way Pete sees it."

"And what about you, Frank; is that the way you see it?"

"Oh yeah. Nobody was really there for Pete. They just reacted to his behavior." Frank swallowed the air and held onto his breath. His shoulders were up and his head was locked firmly between them like a rock caught in a gully of granite.

"And you know how that feels, don't you Frank?"

Lips tight across his teeth and fingers gripping into his knees, he said nothing.

"What is that feeling, Frank? Take a deep breath and tell me about it."

"Anger. I feel angry." He expelled the words through his tightness.

"Where do you feel this in your body, Frank? Where do you feel the anger?"

"In my chest. I feel tight in my chest whenever I'm angry."

"So you have your own anger around this issue. Something that comes from your own experience."

"Yes, I really feel for Pete. In my case it was mother."

"So, you think about Peter at this moment, do you continue to feel angry?"

"At one level I feel angry for what happened, but I feel sad, really sad, about how things are for Pete." His breathing was easier now. His chest was moving freely.

"So as you go back to that time before the session, you must have had mixed feelings around the prospect of Peter blowing up."

"I wanted the session to run smoothly for the camera. I even thought of excluding Peter, but I wanted it to be real and he is an important member of the group. In a way, that group has become the only real mirror that Peter has—you know what I mean?"

"I think so. Were you worried about the project when Peter first started to show his anger in the session?"

"I was at first. I thought, 'Here goes my design, this is going to finish up in chaos.' But I forgot about that when the real stuff started to come out."

"Yes, I noticed how you moved toward Peter as he got louder. Once the other kids saw this, they seemed to hang in there too. It was like you gave Peter permission to be angry and showed the others how to listen. How were you feeling at this point, Frank?"

He was relaxed now. His shoulders were down and his body alive. "I was excited. I had a sense that the time had come for Peter to deal with this issue in the group. Somehow I knew that we would all stay in for him. There was a point where he seemed to look out from behind his anger and make the decision to come forward. It was a real act of courage. On the inside, I was cheering him on like you wouldn't believe. Then, when little Danny Cowan reached out and put a hand on his shoulder, I was close to tears; the little psycho himself actually showed a feeling. It was like a sign for the others; Barry, Mike, Shaun and Gil, they all opened up in their own way. And the others listened, Jesus, they all listened. I hadn't expected this, particularly from this group."

"Yes, they were all there for each other, weren't they?"

Frank had opened his eyes and was looking across at me.

"How are you feeling now?" I asked.

"It was a good session, wasn't it?" His grin was delightful. I nodded. "So you wanted to analyze the 'caring response' and there it was for you. But Danny Cowan screwed up your hypotheses. Never mind, that was just one response and you could easily lose that in the data, dismiss it as a spurious event. Did your other subjects respond according to predictions?"

He studied my expression quizzically. "You think my study misses the boat, don't you?"

"We're not even sailing on the same ocean," I told him. "Your session brought caring to life. Your study takes a peripheral aspect of the experience and wrings that life out of it in the service of some archaic view of science."

"But that is the accepted system; my method is standardized and, hopefully, my results will be replicable. It's a research article I'm doing. The other might be good stuff but....."

"It's the real stuff," I said. "If you want to be traditionally scientific, remember Einstein's revelation that the universe appears in a particular form relative to the position of the observer. If you want to be even more scientific, read about the phenomenon of Schrodinger's cats; it seems that our observations may have a profound influence on the things we study. In this case, your influence on process and outcome was the most obvious aspect of the exercise. From this perspective, a scientific study would begin with you. Look at the incredible information you brought forward for future study."

He rose to the challenge. "In this design, I hold my behavior constant since it was the same for all participants. Then we can look at differential responses. Controlling for specific variables, isn't that the idea?"

"No, Frank, by definition your behavior was not the same for all par-

ticipants. The reason for the differential responses is that each person in the group experienced your behavior in a different way; a way that uniquely made sense to them. No questionnaire could ever grasp this. And you, in turn, behaved differently toward each person in this group, based upon your experience of yourself. Your behavior toward Peter, for example, was very powerfully influenced by your own sense of abandonment and any observer seeking to understand the process would need to know about this. This was the basis of the connection from which young Danny responded from his experience. We might also ask some questions about this for further 'research.' This is the fascinating stuff. This is the stuff of human life that we are searching for. You understood this when you decided to abandon your study to move with the experience of the group. At this point, your social competence scale became a superficial insult to the quality of experience."

In making the last statement I gambled that he was already on board and that he would not abandon me in denunciation. I hoped that, whatever his mind was wrestling with, his body would continue to tell him the truth. Frank was, and is, a talented and committed experiential practitioner and when his curiosity was driven by his experience in the moment, he was alive and present. Whenever he went into the inertia of designs and methodologies, he became heavy and ponderous. It was as if he was trying to push the wealth of his experience into a narrow test-tube while trying to dismiss all that spilled over as insignificant or spurious. In this he was running away from his own truth and offering the slim pickings for someone else's approval. It was painful to watch.

"No single article could handle all the stuff you're talking about," he protested.

"It's not so much the volume as the orientation," I suggested. There will always be those who seek understanding through generalization and prediction, even though their efforts will continue to tell us little about the human condition. I believe that those of us who work with people have an obligation to make sure that such 'research' is cast against the actual experience of actual people in the actual process of life. As a talented and committed practitioner, you are in a wonderful position to probe the truth. What you could reveal about caring could be more powerful than a thousand predictive studies. And you could write a superb article for our Journal from this perspective."

"Are you kidding. I wouldn't know where to start."

"You already have."

Most people who take up the pen, or the keyboard, to carve out words for the anticipated enlightenment of others do so for 'oughtistic' reasons. For whatever purposes, they want the world to be a different

place and whatever they write is directed toward that end. Even those who write journalistically, supposedly reporting the “facts,” appear remarkably inept in disguising their beliefs about how such “facts” relate to a world that ‘ought’ to be.

Those who write about human behavior are the most ‘oughtistic’ of all. However scientific their claims in what they have to say, the pervasive thrust is generally toward the improvement of the human condition in accordance with some predetermined set of beliefs about human potential, moral integration, empirical validity and the like. Researchers and academics have even developed a formula (APA approved, of course) in which specific facts or variables, considered to be significant, are marshaled according to the assumed rules of cause and effect. Although this orientation has generated supportive evidence around various theories and beliefs, such “knowledge” has done little to enhance our understanding or appreciation of human life as it unfolds in everyday experience. Hence, the experiences of childhood and the adult/child relationship remain relatively unexplored.

Experiential writing is particularly difficult for the helping professional. For most of us the first helping act is motivated by a desire to change what “is” into what “should be.” In this act, we also make the shift from our own direct personal experience to the imagined experience of the other person. The more professional we become, the more we concentrate upon the “interventions” of change and the more we move away from our own humanity.

Child and youth care workers are still relatively free to write from an experiential perspective. In taking the courage to share their own experience in working with young people, they have an opportunity to generate a body of knowledge that promotes understanding, caring and respect. The “truth” to be discovered is the revelation of what *is* rather than the attainment of *should* be or the illusion of what *might* be. In peeling back the layers of their own experience, child and youth care workers can make a unique contribution to our understanding of how it really is to work with troubled kids. They can tell the untold stories of childhood and adolescence, albeit from the “truth” of their own perspective. Surely the time has come for us to re-examine our discipline that moves from the inside out. The prescriptions for such writing may seem vague, but the first step is definitive and unambiguous—look in the mirror, look beyond and tell it as it is.