

Cultures of Listening, Dark Listening and a plea for Theory

By Johanna Motzkau, The Open University, UK

Abstract:

Russi (2021) suggests ‘eavesdropping’ as a way to appreciate the practical implications of Shotter’s (2015) stance that social inquiry is an art/craft beginning with experience, rather than a technique pre-determined by theory and methods. Following Russi’s instruction to eavesdrop on his eavesdropping, I explore his concepts of experience and listening. Contrary to Russi I issue a plea for theory, as theoretical frameworks are key for tracking the politics of knowledge surrounding social inquiry. Illustrating the process theoretical character of Russi’s concepts of experience and listening, I argue for the possibility of theory as emergent within experience. Here my concept of cultures of listening is relevant, as it helps to consider eavesdropping as a form of dark listening (Motzkau & Lee forthcoming).

Introduction

What does Russi (2021) mean by eavesdropping? The instructions are simple. He asks us to listen to our own listening while listening to him listening to himself, as well as to others(?), listening. This proves just as intriguing as impossible, making Russi’s paper a stimulating read.

Russi (2021) traces the practical implications of Shotter’s (2015) suggestion that social inquiry should be considered an art/craft, rather than a technique pre-determined by existing theory and methods. Russi unpacks and animates his take on Shotter’s stance by presenting a series of vignettes, intimate experiential snapshots, from his own personal, professional and research supervision encounters. These are explored to illustrate and examine specific modes of listening, and how they constitute social inquiry as an art. The article is deliberately crafted in a hesitant, meandering fashion, with what the author describes as false starts, mutters and pauses, designed to make the reader experience the irregularity and hesitancy of communicative sense emerging within social inquiry. Drawing on the work of communication scholar Lipari (2014), the art of social inquiry according to Russi demands “the development of new capacities of intensified listening” (Russi 2021, p. 2); it is to learn to “attune”-, and to listen to, such “grumbling beginnings of articulation in a communicatively sustained reality” (Russi 2021, p. 2). By opening up to this experience, Russi assures us, we can develop a suitable ear, one capable of

attending to the mutters and pauses, while “letting go of the expectation that a contribution to social theory first begins with theory” (Russi 2021, p. 2), and instead holding “on to the possibility that social inquiry might begin with experience itself, however confusing and ambiguous it may be – and *because* it is confusing and ambiguous.” (Russi 2021, p. 2).

I wholeheartedly agree with Russi’s project and sentiment, as I am indebted to a long tradition of work within Critical Psychology and Practice Research (e.g. Holzkamp 1985; Nissen 2000) that has consistently challenged the origin, aim and subject of social inquiry, demanding methods be appropriate to phenomena, rather than phenomena being defined to suit methods (Motzkau & Schraube 2015). Still, following Russi’s instruction to eavesdrop on his eavesdropping, and tracing his concepts of listening and experience, I issue a plea for theory. Contrary to Russi, I argue in favour of explicit theoretical frameworks as they anchor social inquiry, keeping track of its politics of knowledge. I also illustrate how Russi’s ideas of experience and listening in flow express a process theoretical sensitivity (Stenner 2017), opening up a potential for theorizing as neither prior-, nor subsequent to-, but emergent within experience. Here my concept of cultures of listening is relevant, and eavesdropping, I suggest, is better captured as dark listening (Motzkau & Lee forthcoming).

Experience in process

Reading Russi’s opening instructions, as quoted above, my attention is drawn to the phrase ‘experience itself’. What is experience *itself*? Does the term ‘itself’ imply an essence or pureness of such ‘pre-theorized’ experience? Is such experience especially authentic, the true origin of social inquiry? A clue is given earlier when with Shotter the author says that we need to listen to the whole realm of “heuristic activities that take place prior to theorizing” (Russi 2021, p. 1). But what is this realm prior to theorizing? Let me offer a snapshot of myself eavesdropping on Russi unfolding one of his scenes of eavesdropping. In Part 1 (Russi 2021, p. 5) he offers a version of his own monologue/narrative/thoughts on a scene that aligns Joyce’s ‘Finnegans Wake’ with the author’s Grandma’s wake, but the latter is not introduced as such. This is me reading section 1.

This snapshot summons the liminality of wakes by transporting me from an insightful account of how engaging with Finnegans Wake helps to reimagine what listening means, to an account of Russi's grandma's wake. This is done without warning, as Russi wants me to stumble into this intimate scene uninvited, unprepared, I feel, as I have a double take of the innocuously presented phrase 'I notice the tube refrigerating grandma', stealthily placed in the middle of the paragraph. This is where I am meant to stumble. And I do. And so I find myself listening to my own listening, while also noting the paradoxicality of this carefully crafted scene being presented to me as if I stumbled upon it at random (out of the blue, as Russi insists); I am instantly transported to a family funeral I recently attended. I do not want to be there. Anyway, I am not allowed to stay long, as Russi abruptly returns me to Joyce. I like the analogies drawn here, and how they open up ideas about the emergence and liminality of listening. I am on safe ground. Attunement, Kobut, I think, Konrad Lorenz's goslings, but there are no references.

For me, each of Russi's rich and evocative scenes summoned a multiplicity of thoughts, memories, questions and analytic threads; each of them triggered an ever-evolving series of nested worlds. Here I am reminded of a book by the Argentinian author Julio Cortazar (1966) titled "Around the day in 80 worlds". As I have elaborated in Motzkau (2011), Cortazar chose this title as an homage to Jules Verne's 'Around the world in eighty days'. What notion of experience does Cortazar's title suggest? I argue that by turning Jules Verne's title inside out, Cortazar makes a shift from a traditional conception of matter and subject as separate, towards life understood in the spirit of a Whiteheadian process ontology (Whitehead 1927-8[1985]). We could say that Jules Verne's journey around the world in eighty days illustrates what Whitehead criticised as modern science's bifurcation of nature into 'objective causal nature' (i.e. matter), and 'subjective perceptions/experience' (i.e. subject). During Verne's journey the person encounters the world, i.e. matter, as a purely spatial, enduring entity, external to- and independent of themselves; and while a linear succession of time passes 'for' the person (eighty days), matter (the world) does not in the same way part-take in this passing, or experiencing, of time. In contrast to that Cortazar's inversion illustrates the generative dynamism of time/process. By suggesting that the journey takes place around the day, and generates worlds, Cortazar indicates that both, matter and subject emerge at once. This means both are the product of continuous actualizations, instant encounters resulting from a dynamic of relating that in turn produces synchronous, nested worlds, from-, and within, experience. By moving from a world we can travel in eighty days, to a day travelled in

eighty worlds, we move from matter as fixed, timeless extension in an abstract Newtonian universe, to a relational process ontology where experience is not split off from 'objective' reality or matter, but is conceived as the very becoming of 'objective reality' to which its expression is a contribution. This means to grasp the world as constituted through a continuous succession of instantaneous configurations of matter. Here mind, self and matter are not separate 'states' or 'substances', but are equally considered to be founded in ongoing processes and practices of relating. This is commensurate with the idea of the "communicatively sustained reality" (Russi 2021, p. 2) that Russi presents in order to trace the 'grumbling beginnings of articulation'. In this sense human social and psychic existence is continuous with a wider nature which can itself be characterized in terms of the experiences and expressions of coordinated events (Stenner 2017). We could then understand Russi's search for beginnings as an awareness for the processual nature of experience 'itself'. Russi's scenes illustrate that when we attune ourselves to what he calls 'experience itself', we end up immersed in the dynamic flow of those nested worlds emerging and branching out as we encounter and relate to them, leaving us with the sense of 'assembling a raft at open sea' (Stingelin 2000), arriving in the middle of something that has always already begun (Deleuze 1990).

Against this process theoretical backdrop the search for beginnings itself, the expectation that there should be beginnings, seems to be an unhelpful pre-conception anchored in a linear, causal, modern scientific mode of thought (Stengers 2000). Still, Russi's search for beginnings might be rhetorical, as he clearly appreciates the benefits of exploring the nested worlds of emergent experience. Greco & Stenner (2017) have characterised scenes/moments of stalled transition and paradox similar to Russi's, as liminal hotspots (Motzkau & Clinch 2017). Here I agree with Russi. By closely attending- and attuning to such instants/scenes/moments, and by carefully staging the liminal dynamics of listening within them (as Russi does), we can begin to engage more explicitly with our own and other's listening practices. With Nancy (2007) I want to add that ultimately speaking, hearing and listening are entwined and conditional upon another as they each anticipate another. "As if in all hearing there was a hearing say [sic]. In all saying there is a hearing and in hearing itself there is a listening." (Nancy 2007, p. 6). In the same sense Barthes (1985) noted that 'listening speaks': it speaks in that it brings an anticipated meaning (implied speaker) to the listening situation already, evoking certain understandings and

muting others (Motzkau & Lee forthcoming). This is also why I disagree with Russi concerning power and expectations.

Power: Cultures of listening

In order to attune to listening practices, to develop a 'suitable ear', we should not, as Russi recommends with Lipari (2014), jettison our preconceptions and expectations to attend to 'experience itself'. On the contrary, we need to be aware of-, and trace our preconceptions and expectations. Our own and others' listening is shaped by what I termed Cultures of Listening (Motzkau & Lee forthcoming). The concept of 'Cultures of Listening' is based on the idea that listening is not merely an aspect of auditory perception or communication, but that listening is about how we understand, remember, record and share its results, and the consequences of this for action. This means each instant of listening is shaped by-, and expresses political, social and experiential circumstances, i.e. cultures. And here the concept of power is key. Following Bonnet (2016) listening is the capture of sound within discourse via the trace it leaves, i.e. via the resonance it creates. Authority and power are then exercised through the discourses that make up the cultures of listening that determine what resonates, or can be heard, who is listening, and thus crucially, what is allowed to 'speak in listening' (Barthes 1985), i.e. what becomes efficacious. This is important.

Many scholars have considered the issue of researcher positioning and power within social inquiry, but no matter whether this happens within social constructionist (Shotter 2015), discursive (Wetherell 2012), critical discursive (Parker 2002), phenomenological (Langdrige 2018), process theoretical (Stenner 2017), Latourian (Law 2004)' Marxist (Dreier 2008), Marxist-Latourian (Nissen 2000), psycho-social (Frosh in press), intersectional (Phoenix et al 1991) etc. frameworks, the key aim is always to examine, challenge and transform the power dynamics that affect how we relate to- and produce the social world we are part of and study; how we conduct research as a practice. There is no listening outside of history.

"Cui bono" asks Stengers (2008) with Starhawk the witch: who benefits from our social inquiry, why are *we* here, why are *we* asking *these* questions? How are we constituted as inquiring subjects vis a vis our subjects of inquiry? What drives our theorizing and how does it come to matter, become efficacious, within the practices we study?

“We are dealing here with the politics of knowledge. Indeed, my question is intimately associated with the question of the differential productions of subjectivity – linking those who theorize with those who are theorized. To dare to accept the characterization of our theories in terms of ‘efficacy’ or ‘magic’ and not in terms of (valid) knowledge.” (Stengers, 2008, p. 54)

Here, for me, Puig de la Bellacasa’s notion of ‘care’ is key (Puig de la Bellacasa 2014). This notion of ‘care’ implies that our practices of ‘taking an interest’ should open us up to risk; being interested and caring in this sense means to allow what we encounter to move us in unpredictable ways. Stengers calls this a ‘risky ecology of interest’, i.e. putting ourselves amidst the world so it can affect us, operating within what I call an epistemology of care.

“[...] we have to take care of our own mental and collective ecologies [...]. And this means reclaiming an ecology that gives the situations we confront the power to have us thinking feeling, imagining, and not theorizing about them. In this I am a Marxist – the point is to “change the world, not to understand it”, but I add that this implies giving to the world the power to change us, to “force” our thinking. (Stengers 2008, p. 57).

This resonates with what Russi implies when he describes eavesdropping as “letting questions be handed to you as you discover yourself” (Russi 2021, p. 2), while adding a disclaimer against ‘naïf empiricism’. Yet, there is a difference between ‘theorizing’ (as preconditioning our questions and conclusions), and theoretical frameworks as ontological landscapes to host our ecologies of care, allowing us to remain mindful of the efficacies of power and the politics of knowledge. This is an important distinction. I insist that power, or force, is not, as Russi claims, a mere theoretical concept we can “point to in pre-existing literature” (Russi 2021, p. 1). But power is expressed in and infuses the baggage of expectations and history we bring to any situation/context we experience and/or research. It fuels the cultures of listening that shape what can speak in our listening.

Dark Listening

I agree with Russi that new modes of listening are needed. But despite Russi’s disclaimer, the term eavesdropping carries unfortunate implications of intentional, unidirectional and ‘non-consensual’ listening to others. Still, I could imagine a form of listening that might allow the world to ‘force our thinking’, as long as we only listen to our own listening. Inspired by ‘Audio Obscura’¹, an artwork by Lavinia Greenlaw (Greenlaw & Abrahams

¹ To listen to the audio collages follow this link <https://soundcloud.com/artangel-2/lavinia-greenlaw-audio-obscura> [last accessed June 2021].

2011), I call this approach Dark Listening (Motzkau & Lee forthcoming). Greenlaw describes dark listening as ‘listening to what you cannot hear’, creating audio collages carefully crafted as interventions to interrupt our sense-making activities, suspend our urge to form narratives, so we hesitate and explore what we do with what we hear, what frames our listening. I translated this into Dark Listening, a participatory method based on audio diaries, completed by participants talking about their experiences and challenges with listening in their professional practice (e.g. child protection social workers). Selected extracts from different diaries are anonymised (re-recorded by actors) and turned into audio collages. These are listened to and discussed by groups of participants, facilitating conversations about what (collectively/personally) frames/challenges/undermines their listening practices. Dark Listening is then an intervention to promote listening to ones own listening; spying on the mechanics of our own sense making, we might surprise ourselves when unraveling the cultures of listening that guide what we allow to speak in our listening and what is, in turn, silenced. This is where the art of social inquiry can emerge alongside theory, both part of emergent experience, and neither its afterthought.

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