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Visceral Verstehen

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Introduction

Many sociologists associate the method of verstehen with Max Weber. Verstehen, however, predated Weber and in at least one case had a much richer meaning than the one forwarded by Weber. The method of verstehen drawn on in this paper was developed by German philosopher, Wilhem Dilthey, a contemporary of Weber's.

Dilthey argued that in order to understand another, one had to know the socio-historical circumstances of that other and one also needed to "re-live" the experience(s) of that other. This is similar to the notion that Weber advocated, knowing the meanings that certain behavior had for others, but Dilthey's notion takes this much further. It is this aspect of verstehen that is the central theme of this paper. For it is through re-living the experience of another, that one can gain a visceral understanding of what that other experienced; this can provide sociological and psychological insights and awareness not previously considered. Perhaps, more importantly, but certainly for purposes of this paper, the act of re-living the experience or an event of another can also be a powerful mechanism for self-discovery.

Brief Review of Verstehen Literature

It is primarily through the publication of Max Weber's The Theory of Social and Economic Organization (1947) that American sociologists were introduced to the concept of verstehen as a method of scientific inquiry. It differs from "traditional" methods of science as it uses an "empathic understanding" of another to generate information and understanding about that other. As such, it has been characterized as an "interpretive" or qualitative method of inquiry.

Weber reasoned that since we as humans share the experience of being human and also since we share the human ability to create and use meanings, a social scientist could, through the use of *verstehen*, gain an understanding of another (or others) by placing him or herself into the social context of the other(s). By seeing and understanding the world as the other under study sees it, the social scientist could then understand not only the culture of that other, but also the motivation for, and the meaning of, the other's behavior as well.

Since the publication of The Theory of Social and Economic Organization, much has been written about Weber's *verstehen*; for instance, how it pertains to sociological theory (Tucker, 1965), how it relates to qualitative sociological research in the United States (Platt, 1985), and its relationship to hermeneutics (Oliver, 1983). Several authors have noted that *verstehen* was not unique to Weber (Outhwaite, 1976; Truzzi, 1974), have identified those who influenced Weber's thinking on *verstehen* (Oakes, 1977; Herva, 1988; Segre, 2004; Muse, 1981) and those who predated Weber with their own thinking on *verstehen* (Goodman, 1975; Hausheer, 1996).

Throughout the years, many have commented on *verstehen* (Outhwaite, 1976; Truzzi, 1974), its comparison to other methods of subjective inquiry (Hall, 1981; Martin, 2000), its parameters (Cooper, 1996; Oakes, 1977) and its place as a methodology in the human sciences (Polet, 1994). A review of recent literature on the uses of *verstehen* reveals its utility in making sense of the 1979 Iranian revolution (Kurzman, 2004), its contrast to recent developments in interpretive methods that provide an explanation of culture (Kaufman, 2004), its relevance to aging and social understanding (Sullivan, S. & Ruffman, T, 2004), its enhancement by utilization and discussion of effect sizes (Onwuegbuzie, 2003) and its potential to neatly integrate with rational choice theory (Glen, 2004). Other authors have commented on its integration with rational action theory (Goldthorpe, 1993), its relationship to common sense (Hitzler & Keller, 1989), its ability to supplement social action theory (Hall, 1984), and its utility for naturalists attempting to understand animal life (Crist, 1996).

Dilthey's Verstehen

Wilhelm Dilthey was a German philosopher who was grappling with an intellectual controversy in Europe around the turn of 20th century. The controversy centered on the seeming differences between the natural (the "traditional" sciences such as biology, chemistry, etc.) and the social (or human) sciences (Polkinghorne, 1983). Similar to Weber, Dilthey argued that humans were decidedly different than inanimate objects, the subject of study of the natural sciences, and as such, required a different method of scientific inquiry (Makkreel, 2003; Kleining and Witt, 2001; Polet, 1994; Rickman, 1960). Dilthey also argued that it was the purpose of the human sciences not necessarily to *explain* human behavior, but to

understand it (Brown, 1976; Harrington, 2000; Mazlish, 1998). The method that he advocated for doing this was *verstehen* (Dilthey, 1977).

Dilthey's presentation of *verstehen* is of interest to this paper as it is his notion of the "re-living" of the experience of another that most closely resembles the experience described below. Dilthey seems to advance the method of *verstehen* in a deeper and more integrated way than Weber due to his advocacy of the re-living the experience of another; it is precisely in this re-living that the roots of *verstehen* as a sociological intervention are found.

My Verstehen Experience

My discovery of the power of *verstehen* as a profound intervention was serendipitous. It came about somewhat spontaneously one day when I was reading about the rape of women during the conflict in Kosovo, Yugoslavia (Amnesty International, 2001). As such, my initial utilization of it as an intervention was not born out of a "scholarly" reason; it was not intentional in that sense. Rather, my use of it represented the furtherance of a decision I made about not ignoring a particular part of myself any longer.

I was quite surprised at what I found out. It was a moving, transformational, and truly visceral experience. I realized quite soon afterward that others could benefit from repeating the steps I took in doing it, in the present context, perhaps especially men, so I wrote them down. They are developed below.

The steps I outline are not an "official" way of conducting this intervention. I do not wish to make such a bold claim. I simply wrote down what I thought was the best way to conceptualize my experience. I do think that they reflect what the process of *verstehen* (as discussed by Dilthey) is about; if not in exact procedure, then at least in spirit. As such, I offer them as a framework or a guideline for shaping the intervention. With all things human, though, I am sure that there are myriad ways of conducting this intervention and different ways should be explored.

The following four steps, then, represent how to conduct the intervention. They are not the intervention per se as that is what arises through their application. By following these steps one can arrive at a "felt" or *visceral* understanding that can reveal much about oneself and about others. Note that this can be quite a revealing experience and could very well be overwhelming, depending upon the subject matter; so, one should proceed with caution.

The Four Steps

The four steps are: 1) Imagine, 2) Abide, 3) Discover, and 4) Express. Although stated linearly, and seemingly chronological, they are much more synergistic when actually employed. They are, however, as simple as they sound. One imagines, one abides in that imagination, one discovers what that imagining has to offer, and then one expresses it. In my case, the expression resulted in a written account. I don't believe that this needs always to the case, though. I have since employed these steps in other situations, when written expression of the experience was not available, and still found the outcome to be quite compelling.

As you will see, they often interact and build on one another. In the account below, you will notice that once the process has started, it moves in its own accord. It should be pursued with a sense of willingness to encounter and discover, not with a rigid adherence to the application of the steps.

The steps are simple, but they are not easy. They are demanding. They require a commitment from the inquirer, perhaps as no other method of inquiry does. To honor what these four simple steps have to offer, one must be willing to surrender to them. One must be willing to be embraced by them and follow their leads in the inquiry. Imagining and abiding are profound and powerful. What they may reveal may not be for the faint-hearted. For me, this particular inquiry was emotionally challenging and draining, but transformational at the same time. This is what makes it so profound, so compelling, so *visceral*.

How To Do It

To begin, one needs to choose a situation/interaction that one is curious about. This could be as extreme as what motivates torture or why people persist in addictions despite the seemingly obvious consequences. It could also be fairly mundane, such as what it might be like to live as another person, etc. The choice of what to encounter is determined by the individual pursuing the inquiry. In my case, I chose something that I had a personal interest in. I would think that to have a profound experience, one should choose something that one is already emotionally drawn to. I have since found this type of inquiry useful in reducing my knee-jerk aversion to certain groups of people and in countering unwanted, unconscious prejudices that exist despite my unwillingness to entertain them.

After identifying the subject area, the next step is to learn as much as possible about the group or the individual of interest. In my case, I was familiar with victims of sexual assault due to my work in a domestic violence agency. I had heard their stories, discussed their situations with agency staff, and read their comments on satisfaction and outcome surveys. I was also intimately familiar with male privilege having lived all of my life as an identified as male. Thus, I felt comfortable with my level of knowledge about the subjects of inquiry.

It is at this point that one is able to apply the four steps. In my case, the inquiry was cultivated by a passage from a text. This was the catalyst. I found a written passage helpful as it served as a touchstone that I could go back again and again. I have since applied these steps simply by observing a person interacting with others whether on television or in real life. The critical issue is to have some reference point that is either vivid enough to sustain the inquiry or one that is accessible to return to again and again.

Note that the example I describe was one that was particular to me. The motivation for delving into the intervention (understanding male privilege and how it affected me personally) was also particular to me. The choice of the area of inquiry is going to vary depending upon who is doing the inquiry. As such, the example of the content of my inquiry is just that, an example; it does *not* constitute the intervention itself. Rather, the intervention is the application of the steps detailed in the following section.

Applying The Steps

- 1) Imagine as deeply as you can what it is like to be the other person. Imagine what s/he looks like, what s/he is wearing, what s/he is thinking, feeling, etc. To as much extent as possible, you should put yourself into the shoes of the other. Pretend that you *are* the other. Re-live his or her experience as it is known to you. This is where the role of imagination comes in. This might sound difficult, but it is very likely that although you may not have had an identical experience as the other, you, in all likelihood, have had a similar experience of some kind. As such, it should prove easier than expected. The main point is to become the other as fully as possible in one's own imagination. Let no detail pass, inhibit no sense of wonder, *become* that person.
- 2) Once you have a clear, affective picture of that person in your mind, then dwell on that image, breathe in that presence. Abide there for as long as that image has something to say. Don't leave prematurely. Apprehend the person, relish the apprehension, the image, the sense that the other has or makes. Idle there, observing, attending to what it has to offer. Embrace it as fully as you can.
- 3) Discover what it has to offer. What it is like to be this person? What is this image, this apprehension telling you about the other? What can you learn from this? Listen, abide, listen, abide, attend, indulge, discover. There is much to learn if you simply pay attention. Allow the simulated *being* of that other to become your own. Realize a *felt* appreciation of what it must be like to be that person.

- 4) Express what has been discovered. What was it like to be that person? How can the experience of being that other and one's reaction and responses to it be expressed? Let any of the emotions that may have arisen in any of the previous steps provide the energy to express what it is that you gleaned from the inquiry. Let the awareness gained from the inquiry drive the expression. Express as you see fit; for me it involved writing down what I was experiencing as I was experiencing it; this seemed to fuel the experience. This written account of the experience is noted in the section below entitled, "My account." Note that in my writing the account, I do not spell out the steps as I was taking them; the account is a reflection of the steps taken as a whole.

My Experience

I have worked as the Director of Program Evaluation for a large domestic violence agency in a metropolitan area in the southwestern United States for the last six years. My initial intent in taking the job was to take a break from doing direct service work. I had been a counselor, a trainer, a teacher, and most recently had come from a demanding administrative position as the director of a judicial treatment center. I took the position as I saw it as an opportunity to analyze data without getting emotionally involved with staff or clients. This did not come to pass.

What did come to pass was a sudden and troubling awareness of how I, despite my protestations and denials to the contrary, was infused with a social "disease." One that "infects" only a certain class of people (men) and the longer I worked in the field of domestic violence, the more I became aware of how destructive it is. Unlike other ills, this one actually affects the lives of other people, not the person "infected" with it. Most who have it don't even know it. Most spread it to their male children and actually do so intentionally. The worst part is that given current social structures and relationships, it is "incurable." There are ways to resist it, however. It has a name, but typically when mentioned among sufferers, it is denied, and the person bringing it up as the cause of many, if not most, social problems is derided. This thing is *male privilege* (Schacht, 2000).

No longer was this just a disembodied, theoretical concept that attempted to explain social processes and behavior. I realized that it was an integral part of my life and had been since birth. I had it, it had me, and there was nothing I could do to remove it. Resist it, yes, eradicate it from my life, no. No longer was it something I could discuss with intellectual detachment as I had in sociology classes in the past. I agonizingly realized that I did have it, I used it, and I was not even aware of it.

Through intentional inquiry into its expression, It became quite clear to me that to

the extent that I perpetuated this privilege (consciously or not), I also contributed to violence against women. This was not something that I wanted to admit, nor did I want it to remain.

As such, I was interested in taking action to increase my awareness of it. I wanted to learn as much about it as I could, so as to lessen its impact. I wanted to know how it manifested in others, how it manifests in me, how it arises in certain situations, etc.

One of my strategies was to begin to look at and attend to those data on gender inequality that I had not concerned myself with before. For example, literacy rates for women, the extent to which women (and children) are trafficked, female genital mutilation, and many other repressive and destructive realities that women live with as part of their daily lives. I felt that my general lack of knowledge of these things was evidence of my privilege and decided that this needed to change.

The Setting

It was one time when I was educating myself about violence against women by reading an Amnesty International publication that I glimpsed this privilege in action. The text is about the proliferation of violent, cross-cultural practices that comprise the institutional life blood of violence against women (Amnesty International, 2001). It is a compelling report that contains both anecdotal and empirical evidence about the prevalence and consequences of violence against women.

It contains a number of dramatic quotes and excerpts that distill the phenomena. I came to one in particular and could not continue reading. I tried, but I kept coming back to the feeling that tugged at me when I thought about it.

In essence, it was calling to me, it wanted my attention.

I could not ignore it. I mean, I could, as I had many times in the past with similar words and images, just breezed past and rid mind of it, but I could not do that this time. I was fully aware that doing so this time would be asserting my privilege and would, in however small of a way, contribute to the very thing I was reading about. I could not let that happen. If I wanted to challenge my own privilege, I had to attend to it. I had to give this passage the time it deserved.

So, I read it, immersed myself in it, listened to it, and learned from it. I imagined, abided, discovered, and expressed.

The Passage

“She was crying when she came back. She told us she had been raped by three or four soldiers. She cried for a long time. She asked us why we were lying about it because she said she knew it had happened to us too.”

A woman from Suva Reka, Kosovo, 1999. (Amnesty International 2001, p.4).

My Account

“This breaks my heart.

It breaks my heart because I can feel the women’s pain. I know their shame, their terror, their sense of desperation and hopelessness. I know how their world has been irrevocably changed for the worse.

I feel powerless rage at the reading of it. I can’t even imagine what the woman feels.

I hear her voice, feel her powerlessness, see her face, angry, disbelieving, in shock, as her world has lost any sense and she cries out for at least some comfort, some acknowledgment, from others who have shared the same experience. The shame of the assault, compounded by the collective silence of those others, equally as traumatized, equally as in shock, equally as diminished.

I imagine...

her approaching the others, hands over her face, body racked with sobbing, eyes red and swollen, her demeanor one of incredulous shock.

She is clothed in a drab, gray dress with a well-worn, brown sweater hanging off of her shoulders, gently moving up and down as she cries. No stockings, feet covered by dusty, black leather shoes that have been worn as daily footwear for months.

She has not only been robbed of her precious soul, but she has been robbed of the seeming right to be enraged about her loss, a loss which is truly incalculable.

I CAN’T imagine how she is able to walk, to talk, to challenge others. Her cry for validation that this indeed happened. The others’ silence for fear of what might happen further.

The muzzling of their spirit by self-protective collusion is enraging. I want to shout. I want to track the sons-of-bitches down who did this and exact a similar revenge on them. Not the act of rape, but something that would mete out the same amount of fear, shame, hopelessness.

I want to cry at the women's feet. I want to tell them how sorry I am this happened to them. Beg them not to let it crush them. Acknowledge to them that there is at least one person who undoubtedly believes their accounts.

I want to invoke some healing power to restore them back to whom they were before this ever happened. I don't want to erase their memory of it, I just want their pain to go away. I want their shame to go away. I want their complete lack of faith in anything good, anymore, to go away.

I know the sense of powerlessness that arises from living within an oppressive social system. I know the rage of having to be humiliated by someone with power and authority over me. I know the temptation of wanting to exact the same humiliation on another.

I continue to imagine...

I imagine the scene of the assault. The brutality, the hatred of the men who did this. I see an innocent, frightened woman who has never done anyone any harm, who doesn't deserve anything close to this. Who is experiencing the horror of horrors.

I want to intervene. I see myself running toward her, saving her. I pick her up, clothe her, and comfort her. I am angry because of what has happened to her physically, but in some ways, more angry because I cannot remove the experience of what has happened to her. I cannot restore her innocence, her purity, her trust. Those have all been taken away from her permanently. I cannot erase the experience. Inasmuch as she felt powerless when being assaulted, I now feel powerless because I cannot really help her in the way that she needs it the most.

At that moment, I know...

the agony of this level of powerlessness. I know HER powerlessness. I know because she IS me. Her shame, terror, helplessness is mine, too.

I continue...

I can't imagine what she went through. I know if it was happening to me, I would fight. I would spit, I would curse, I would exploit any attempt to break free so I could inflict the same rage, hatred, and pain upon those who were doing the same to me.

At least, that is what I *think* I would do.

That is what *my privilege* says I would do. That is how I am able to affirm my sense of being a man by asserting that no one will dominate me. It is acceptable for me to dominate others, but it is absolutely unacceptable for anyone to

dominate me, most especially another man.

Those *men*...

I feel rage at them. I feel rage that this happened. I feel rage that this *happens*. I loathe those who abuse their power. I loathe those who take pleasure in exacting irreversible trauma on another. I want nothing more than to exact the same pain on them, or worse. I want to see the fear in their eyes, the sweat on their brow, the plea in their face. I then want to remind them of how they have done the very same thing to another human being, someone who is socially far more powerless than they will ever be. I want to ridicule their cowardice, make them feel the powerlessness that they gleefully imposed on another. I want to ask them what it feels like. I want to ask them to tell me how they think the person they inflicted themselves on felt at the time that they brutalized him/her.

Then, I recognize that I am reacting much the same way that oppressors do. When confronted with the threat of extreme humiliation, my response is to rage, to fight back, to dominate, to inflict, to destroy.

I realize that I know this rage. I know THEIR rage.

The rage with which they brutalized the women.

I have not done anything like this, but I know their rage. I know the draw of heady, power-filled dominance. I used to feel it as a child when smashing bugs, when I and a group of other boys tormented an older boy who we deemed a "homosexual..."

as an adolescent, when looking at pornography...

Ah, I *do* know this.

I wish I could deny that I know this. Wish that I could deny that I can relate to their rage, to their desire to dominate and inflict pain on another being, but I can't. I KNOW I can't.

Because, I AM them. They ARE me. We ARE men.

I know that they will NEVER, EVER experience the same depth and breadth of trauma that their victim will experience for the rest of her life, even if something that is described above ever happened to them. I know that their male privilege will insulate them from it. I know that after the initial humiliation wore off, they would reassert their manhood by feeling rage for the person(s) who did this to them. They would never think that what they did to the woman was odd, but they would think it odd if something similar were inflicted upon them. Many would agree with this attitude.

Brutalizing women is normal; brutalizing men who brutalize women is inhumane.”

Discussion

As one can see, this was quite an experience for me. It was a worthwhile experience, however. Indeed, one that was emotionally draining and one that was alarming to me, yet nevertheless, necessary. It was decidedly visceral and felt and I learned much from it; much more than I thought.

If I were to summarize what, specifically, came out of this for me, it would be the following:

- A much increased awareness of myself as a social being, as a “man,” and subsequently as a social being with a particular privilege.
- An increased awareness of all that I share with many other men, including those things that I abhor: a desire to rage, a desire to destroy, a desire for revenge, etc.
- Greater sensitivity to what it must be like for women to live in this world; an appreciation for their bravery, their resolve, their ability to face all of the suffering that men heap upon them and not exact revenge against men like men might do.
- An increased desire to end suffering of all kinds throughout the world.
- An increased sense of what is good and a resolve to see it realized.
- An awareness of the ignorance with which many of us (especially, if not exclusively, those of us who reside in privileged countries) live our lives with no thought to the lives and suffering of others.
- A deeper sense of compassion for others.
- A greater sense of and an appreciation for, humility.

Although it would seem that whomever chose to use the four steps would have similar results, this is not necessarily true. I suspect much of the reason I had the experience I did was because of my gender orientation and because of past experiences. Needless to say, these two variables would definitely have an influence on the outcome of any similar inquiry, however, the actual meaning taken away by the user of this method of *verstehen* would be idiosyncratic.

I raise this issue not to belabor the obvious, but to point out that there are different reasons to use this method and that a “standard” use of it will not result

in the same outcome for all users. As much as it is an opportunity for inquiry and discovery, it is unknown what precisely will be revealed and discovered; it is for this reason that it should be used cautiously and responsibly.

I can imagine the use of it by individuals like I did, by therapeutic interventionists facilitating such an inquiry within the context of a therapeutic relationship, or perhaps in a group setting of some kind, again, lead by a competent facilitator. However it is used and whomever it is used by, it is important to reiterate the potential for both positive and negative outcomes and to take proper safeguards to minimize the potential for the latter.

Summary

Wilhelm Dilthey advanced the method of inquiry known as *verstehen* that he considered to be unique to the human sciences. Its uniqueness derived from the ability that conscious humans have (an ability that is decidedly different than that of any other being or object) to *re-live* the experience of another through socio-historical analysis and through the use of imagination. Through a serendipitous discovery, steps that approximate this method proved to not only be valuable in increasing the likelihood of understanding others, but also in increasing personal awareness and insights.

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