A Critical Appraisal of Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot’s *Portraiture* as a Method of Educational Research

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Portraiture is a creative qualitative approach to engaging in research of leaders and groups in action and in telling the stories of individuals in life. It was first employed to great effect in Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot’s 1983 AERA award-winning book, *The Good High School*. In an effort to expand and explain the application of portraiture as a method of scientific research, Lightfoot co-authored a second book with Jessica Hoffmann Davis entitled *The Art and Science of Portraiture*, released in 1997. This article critically examines the assumptions and methods of portraiture. It questions the authority of the portraitist in arbitrarily and unilaterally creating portraits, pointing out there is no external, independent referent for ascertaining the truth-telling capacity of the portraitist because the definition of truth is circular. Furthermore, the objective of portraiture to capture the “essence” of the subject is implicitly a quest for a foundational and stable truth, which in turn requires the portraitist to become omniscient or else the resulting verbal canvas contains only a half or three-quarters truth. Portraiture represents an example of grand theory in the social sciences when such theories are on the decline. The article suggests that the problem with portraiture as a research method is to be found not in technique, but in its failure to interrogate what it conceals, i.e., the politics of vision.

*Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot broke new ground in performing research in educational leadership with the release of her 1983 book* *The Good High School: Portraits of Character and Culture*. For this work she won the Outstanding Book Award from AERA in 1984. In her more recent book co-authored with Jessica Hoffmann Davis (1997), *The Art and Science of Portraiture*, she takes up epistemological and methodological issues involved with the concept and practice of portraiture as a research method.

The purpose of the book by Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffmann Davis was to blend art and science together in the act of engaging in portraiture. The rationale offered was that for portraiture to be considered an accepted and respectable methodology in educational research, it must pay attention to its methods because as Usher and Edwards (1996) note, “Science is its methods” (p. 36). There are certain generally accepted procedures for engaging in a scientific activity. These undergird any claim that portraiture can be considered “scientific.” In addition, for portraiture to find acceptance as a research methodology it cannot be so esoteric as to render it impossible for competently trained practitioners to teach or utilize it. Since the 1984 AERA award, there has been the lingering suspicion that portraiture depended too much on Lawrence-Lightfoot’s genius and talent as a writer/artist instead of on the more prosaic but traceable and re-traceable methods of the scientist. The challenge facing Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffmann Davis was that if other less endowed or insightful persons could not similarly employ the practice of portraiture, then it could not be scientific, because science is premised on replication as a form of verification.

In this article I offer a critique of Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffmann Davis’s (1997) *The Art and Science of Portraiture* from a postmodern position, focussing on the following points:

1. De-constructing their presentation of portraiture reveals that it contains significant contradictions, in which the more obvious vocabulary of the *old objective science* is avoided, but the verbal surrogates employed amount to the same thing;

2. The claim that the reader of portraiture can construct his/her own interpretation from “thick descriptions” ignores the complete dependency of the reader on a finished product from which there can be no independent access to information and alternative explanations. In short, there is no way to unmake the omelet (portrait) once it is cooked (constructed); and

3. The narrative within the narrative (story within a story) of portraiture is the imbalance of power and authority between the researcher/portraitist and the reader/viewer. The latter problem is concealed within the narrative and may even be concealed from Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffmann Davis.

What remains shrouded in portraiture is the politics of *vision*, that is, the uncontested right of the portraitist/researcher to situate, center, label, and fix in the tintured hues of verbal descriptive prose what is professed to be “real.” Admitting that such an activity is *subjective* does not come close to dealing with the power to engage in it. It is

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that power that remains concealed in portraiture. It is a tension within all educational research, but even more so within an approach that professes to be emancipative, open, and ultra-sensitive to such issues.

The Language of Portraiture

In *The Art and Science of Portraiture* the authors tackle issues familiar to those engaging in qualitative research. Included among them is the problem of the objectivity/subjectivity of research in which the researcher stands apart from his/her work and remains a neutral observer of that which is being studied. In portraiture this stance is not possible because the developing of a portrait involves the active association of the researcher and the person being observed in constructing the portrait itself. This interaction considerably muddies, if not outright challenges, the “stance” of objectivity which researchers in the classical modernistic approach hold dear. Rightly, Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffmann Davis expose the classical stance as illusory because the hand of the researcher is still “evident”:

We see the researcher’s imprint in the selection of the research question, in the design of the study, in the data collection strategies, and in the interpretation of data. There is no voice, no soul, in traditional quantitative forms of inquiry, but the researcher’s hand—revealed in the conceptual orientation, the disciplinary lens, the methods and design (and probably personal disposition)—is certainly present and shaping the work. (1997, p. 87)

It is in the notion of “voice” that Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffmann Davis stake their claim to the difference in research method. *Voice*, according to Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffmann Davis, encompasses orientations of the researcher to matters of epistemology, ideology, and method (1997, p. 87). They then enumerate six ways that the concept of *voice* is distinctively used in portraiture. They are:

- Voice as witness
- Voice as interpretation
- Voice as preoccupation
- Voice as autobiography
- Voice discerning other voices (listening for voice)
- Voice in dialogue

The sketch of the researcher in the process of developing a portrait is shown to be that of a discerning observer who is “distanced from the action” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffmann Davis, 1997, p. 87) so that s/he is, “able to see the whole, as far enough away to depict patterns that actors in the setting might not notice because of their involvement.” The portraitist is thus a “boundary sitter” who serves as a “witness” by giving expression through creation of a scene, the selection of a story and the development of “language and narrative style” (p. 88).

The portraitist interprets actions undertaken in the context s/he has created. This is accomplished through “thick description” and involves “decoding the environment” in which the actors have been observed (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffmann Davis, 1997, p. 91). *Voice* is also the “lens through which she [the portraitist] sees and records reality” (p. 93). Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffmann Davis concede that this voice is “more than interpretive description. It is the framework that defines—at least initially—what she sees and how she interprets it” (p. 93).

In voice as autobiography, the portraitist “reflects the life story of the portraitist” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffmann Davis, 1997, p. 95). Here the portraitist/researcher brings her own life story, her familial, cultural, ideological, and educational experiences, to the research project. In the matter of discerning other voices, the voice of the portraitist/researcher differentiates between *listening to a story* and *listening for a story*. The latter implies a much more active role for the researcher, for it means that the portraitist is creating and molding a story instead of merely searching for one. Portraiture is thus a constructivist activity involving intervention instead of a passive observation of life in context.

In the section “Voice in Dialogue,” Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffmann Davis recast the concept of voice from that of a witness and reposition it directly in “the middle of the action (in the field and in the text)” (1997, p. 103). In this active positioning via selection of and identification of themes within the actors’ voices, “they [the portraitist and the actor] both express their views and together define meaning-making” (p. 103). Despite this activist/constructivist position in which the portraitist’s “soul echoes through the piece . . . she works very hard not to simply produce a self-portrait” (p. 105).

In summary, portraiture as a research method includes traditional qualitative techniques and its transposing stance, namely objectivity/subjectivity, but it is a far more assertive and interactive process than perhaps even some qualitative researchers would find comfortable.

The Critical Appraisal: What Kind of Truth-Seeking Is This?

This critique of portraiture proceeds down two major avenues. The first pertains to the assumptions regarding the nature of truth discerned when engaging in portraiture as a research activity. Like all research methods, portraiture is offered, at least implicitly, as a form of truth-seeking. The second avenue is the line or space that separates the researcher from that which is being researched. While much qualitative research engages in activities that erode the traditional notion of the researcher’s stance, portraiture boldly punctures such pretenses.

Throughout Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffmann Davis’s text there are frequent comparisons to positivism and classical, modernistic scientific procedures. The authors are careful to point out the differences. Much of this contrasting has already been done in other texts about qualitative/quantitative methodologies (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). What does not change, however, is the attitude about the final result of employing portraiture. Though not directly stated as such, the resulting portrait is a literal, encompassing, and stable *truth*. And that truth is singular, unequivocal, and transcendent. By *transcendent* what is meant is that the summative portrait is beyond reproach. It isn’t that the reader cannot form alternative opinions; rather, it is that the reader has no actual means to do so. The *power relations* between the researcher/portraitist and the reader are not comparable. The reader is presented with a portrait, a *fait accompli*. How could the reader reject an entire portrait as a “non-essence” of the subject? Informing the reader of a portrait that s/he is free to imagine a different one conceals the fundamental problem. A “thick description” does not reveal the essential shaping processes at work. These are the “structured silences” whose presence is admitted but never revealed.
Portraiture, while differing from positivism in its methodological permutations, nonetheless has the same goal in mind, that is, the production of a grand narrative that is totalizing, enduring, and revelatory. After all, modernistic science is about discerning a grand pattern that contains grand truth. Though not explicitly addressed, a close read of the Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffmann Davis text embraces a similar agenda.

In the act of creating a grand narrative (the “essence” they strive to encapsulate in a portrait), they accept the idea that the knower and the known are separate or separable. In this they adopt the traditional conventions of “scientific activity” at a time when the status of these conventions as the hallmarks of good “traditional” science is being severely questioned (see Geison, 1995).

Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffmann Davis give lip service to the idea that contexts have multiple stories, but they do not acknowledge that such contexts may also contain multiple truths. As the portraitist works the verbal canvas, she “creates a narrative that is at once complex, provocative, and inviting, that attempts to be holistic, revealing the dynamic interaction of values, personality, structure, and history” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffmann Davis, 1997, p. 12).

Here we have the classical, modernistic scientific agenda enshrined in “social science portraiture” (p. 8). The activities of portraiture are designed to unmask a totalizing “essence” by creating a singular “central story, developing a convincing and authentic narrative” (p. 12). The metaphors are all the same. They involve a unitary reality (p. 13), a stable truth, a singular essence (p. 13) molded into an “aesthetic whole” (p. 12) by “capturing the image” (p. 4; italics added).

The portraitist-researcher bestows upon herself the authority to enter a context and find the story because it is always presented as a singular and totalizing picture. It is laboriously put together with a near inexhaustible predilection for contextual detail. And the portraitist is characterized as having infinite and totalizing power in presenting an authentic view of reality which fully captures “the essence and resonance of the actors’ experience and perspective through the details of action and thought revealed in context” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffmann Davis, 1997, p. 12). Here we have the classical, modernistic scientific agenda enshrined in “social science portraiture” (p. 8). The activities of portraiture are designed to unmask a totalizing “essence” by creating a singular “central story, developing a convincing and authentic narrative” (p. 12). The metaphors are all the same. They involve a unitary reality (p. 13), a stable truth, a singular essence (p. 13) molded into an “aesthetic whole” (p. 12) by “capturing the image” (p. 4; italics added).

The portraitist-researcher bestows upon herself the authority to enter a context and find the story which reveals the truth. There is no doubt in the proponents’ prose that the truth told by the portraitist researcher begins her work, “We see the portraitist off her perch of ‘boundary sitter’ and it would be brought into play, and (2) nothing apart from logical, reasoned argument is involved in an ensuing consensus” (Giddens, 1991, p. 131). In short, an “ideal speech situation” is brought into existence when “there are no external constraints preventing participants from assessing evidence and argument, and in which each participant has an equal and open chance of entering into discussion” (Giddens, p. 131). Within this context, the truth-telling capacity of the portraitist could be checked. But it would mean knocking the portraitist off her perch of “boundary sitter” and it would challenge her right to be the final arbiter of what was the “central story” in the portrait.

Inclusivity and omniscience are only necessary if one is posturing to present a single, grand, encompassing truth.

Nowhere do Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffmann Davis ask the question, “By what right does the portraitist create and impose a centralized narrative which centers and marginalizes a context and actors in my painting?” Who gives to the portraitist the authority to designate a single metanarrative and to define its meaning for us in the process? As the portraitist researcher begins her work, “We see the portraitist standing on the edge of the scene—a boundary sitter—scanning the action, systematically gathering the details of behavior, expression, and talk, remaining open and receptive to all stimuli” (1997, p. 87; italics added) and “she [the portraitist] tries to capture all the specifics. . . . the documentation . . . is purposefully all-inclusive” (1997, p. 45; italics added). The omniscience of the portraitist is a requirement in order for the portrait to be presented as authentic, real, and revelatory. If the portraitist missed some important detail, then by definition, the truth that emerges would only be a half-truth or three-quarters of the truth. So the inclusivity claimed by portraiture would undermine itself. Inclusivity and omniscience are only necessary if one is posturing to present a singular, grand, encompassing truth.

While Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffmann Davis concede that they have created or constructed a central story in which the portraitist is an active participant (1997, p. 50), they continue to use words which mask their actual construction of actions in context as opposed to “discovering them.” A central story is “discovered,” a “pattern” is “found,” implying that it was always there and was the result of the “re-search.” This metaphor preserves the traditional scientific model of gathering data first and creating narratives (theories) sec-
The question of how one “sees” in constructing a portrait deals with presuppositions to the act of portraiture (inquiry) itself. For example, in examining a photograph, which was once thought to be more scientific than superior to art because of its impartiality, Sontag (1977) notes: There can be no evidence, photographic or otherwise, of an event until the event has been named and characterized. And it is never photographic evidence which can construct—more properly, identify—events; the contribution of photography always follows the naming of the event. (p. 19)

The portraitist is alleged to bring her own set of morals into the context and it is her voice that is pervasive and persuasive. Yet somehow the portraitist uses the concept of “groundedness” in presenting an image, and a singular one at that, of the truth in a setting. The question of the existence of a “pre-field” prior to engaging in portraiture is acknowledged by Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffmann Davis (1997, p. 93). Yet they fail to deal with the idea that this pre-field is simply their own “thrown projection” which cannot become transcendent. It cannot “eliminate its situatedness merely through an act of methodological self-control as the discourse of science requires. There is no presupposition-less knowing and no definitive terminus of knowledge—the ‘perfect knowledge’ which grasps the truth of its object” (Usher & Edwards, 1996, p. 36).

The “phenomenological paradigm” which informs portraiture as a research method (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffmann Davis, 1997, p. 86) “is undermined by the continued commitment to scientific method and an empiricist epistemology as conventionally understood by scientific psychology” (Usher & Edwards, 1996, p. 43). The insistence of creating only one story in portraiture is required by its claim that there is only one truth to be discerned in the objective to capture a singular “essence” on the verbal canvas. Multiple stories and multiple truths are simply not permissible. This stance is traditional science’s insistence on control, which is central to prediction and mastery.

As subjects, we create and re-create ourselves through the stories that are told and we ourselves figure as the characters in the drama. But there is no one story, although there is a story, a very powerful story, that says there is. Some stories “enclose” and by so doing provide a world which can be controlled. These are stories based on the fear . . . that without closure the world, and in particular the social order, would get out of control. But if there are many stories then the world in a sense is always out of control. . . . Imposing a closure therefore denies openness and attempts to fix subjectivity. (Usher & Edwards, 1996, p. 147)

The necessity of making a final closure is fixed in logocentrism, a desire “for a fixed origin or centre, an absolutely stable ground which can serve as the basis for permanent hierarchies and rigid boundaries” (Usher & Edwards, 1996, p. 147). Portraiture makes it clear that as a method it must develop one single, central narrative; that is, the story that contains the truth. It is the kind of definitive closure that “places us permanently inside closure” (Usher & Edwards, p. 147).

In the presentation of portraiture there is no acknowledgement that the language used to create verbal narratives is not a clear window into any singular reality and therefore a single truth contained in a single story line is illusory. Language contains an independent cosmology apart from the portraitist using it and rests on “classifications which have no overt mark . . . but which operate through an invisible central exchange of linkage bonds in such a way as to determine other words which mark the class” (Feyerabend, 1993, p. 164, citing Whorf, 1956, p. 121). Language operates to shape and give presence to ideas. It is not in control of the portraitist, but imposes control over the portraitist’s mental activities.

While it may be a requirement in traditional scientific methods to reinforce concepts of objectivity and rigor which are inextricably intertwined into the concept of reliability and replication, a view of reality as singular reinforces the idea of consistency in a world in which inconsistency is the norm. While Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffmann Davis reject the idea of objectivity on the surface, they do not reject the idea of a definition of a singular reality that is produced by it. The predication is highlighted by Lakoff and Johnson (1980) who remarked, “it is one thing to impose a single objectivist model in some restricted situations and to function in terms of that model—perhaps successfully; it is another to conclude that the model is an accurate reflection of reality” (p. 221). Portraiture as a method violates the traditional notions of objectivity, yet following the tenets of its model, it leads to a singular and centralized truth. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffmann Davis characterize rigorous and total attention to contextual detail because “the reader will discover resonant universal themes” (1997, p. 14) from this procedure. Such universal themes become transcendent and independent from the context in which they were derived, exactly the same agenda of traditional researchers who neutralize context at the outset via sampling (p. 14). Thus, through different paths, we arrive at objective truth using language which is assumed to be based on a universal conceptual system that becomes independent of how those in the situation may perceive it. The truth which emerges from the creation of a centralizing narrative imposed by the portraitist shifts the ostensible rules of portraiture from “how people understand something as being true” in their context to “something which is actually true” (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 217) out of their context. Thus, while portraiture insists that it deals with meaning in context, the portraitist assumes the power to impose a vision of stable truth which is independent from the context in which it was generated. The “paradoxical paradigm” to which Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffmann Davis refer (p. 86) is simply produced by the incompatibility of the purposes of portraiture clashing with the oppositional assumptions and requirements of the social science she desires to embrace.

The highly problematic nature of truth-seeking in portraiture is underscored by Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffmann Davis’s utilization of the literary technique of foreshadowing. After the portraitist-researcher has created the narrative “about which contextual details to employ—selections shaped by the central themes of the portrait that she wants to foreshadow in the opening passages” (1997, p. 45), the portrait is presented.

Foreshadowing has a tautological function. Its purpose is to “provide a physical framework, a feeling of embeddedness in the setting, and a forecasting of values and themes that will shape the narrative” (Lawrence-Lightfoot
The Project of Portraiture: Relentless Interrogation, Penetration, and Demystification

One way of examining the project of portraiture is to view it in the context of Foucault’s analysis of the dilemma of the social sciences. Foucault (1973) doubted that any of the social sciences could actually be science. The human sciences utilize borrowed mathematical formalizations from models or concepts in biology, economics, and the sciences of language (p. 347). Their difficulty and uncertainty as sciences was due to “their dangerous familiarity with philosophy, their ill-defined reliance upon other domains of knowledge, their perpetually secondary and derived character, and also their claim to universality” (Foucault, p. 348). Foucault posited that the “entire domain of what can be known about man” could be reduced to three pairs of words: function and norm; conflict and rule; signification and system (1973, p. 357). Foucault insisted that “these concepts occur throughout the entire volume common to the human sciences.” Psychology represented a study of “man in terms of functions and norms”; “sociology is fundamentally a study of man in terms of rules and conflicts . . . the study of literature and myth is essentially the province of an analysis of significations and signifying systems” (1973, p. 358). Foucault observed that all of the human sciences “interlock and can always be used to interpret one another; their frontiers become blurred, intermediary and composite disciplines multiply endlessly, and in the end their proper object may even disappear altogether” (1973, p. 358).

The problem with the human sciences is that they find themselves treating as their object what is in fact their condition of possibility. . . . They never cease to exercise a critical examination of themselves. . . . So that, unlike other sciences, they seek not so much to generalize themselves or make themselves more precise as to be constantly demystifying themselves: to make the transition from an immediate and non-controlled evidence to less transparent but more fundamental forms. (Foucault, 1973, p. 364)

One sees in the themes of portraiture Foucault’s pairs in the contrasts Lawrence-Lightfoot employs. For example, in sketching out the context of Milton’s Academy in The Good High School (1983), descriptions that emphasize signification and system are employed in describing the dwellings. Conflict and rule highlight the dress code that did not permit the students to wear blue jeans. In prescribing the rules of portraiture, Lawrence-Lightfoot indicates a progression where first the portraitist “depicts a detailed description of the physical setting.” As in the case of Milton’s Academy, these involve signification and system. The second rule of portraiture deals with the “researcher’s perch and perspective,” which may involve a collage of all three. The third deals with history, culture, and ideology, which centers on norm, conflict, and rule, while the fourth identifies “central metaphors and symbols” (1997, p. 44), Foucault’s signs and signification.

The drive for the portraitist to capture reality (a metaphor used frequently in describing the aim of portraiture) is obsessive; for example, it is used six times on the first six pages of the first chapter. Lawrence-Lightfoot describes what she wanted her subjects to feel with their portraits:

I wanted the subjects to feel seen as I had felt seen—fully attended to, recognized, appreciated, respected, scrutinized. I wanted them to feel both the discovery and the generosity of the process, as well as the penetrating and careful investigation. (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffmann Davis, 1997, p. 5)

Lawrence-Lightfoot wants her subjects to know they’ve been thoroughly examined, exposed, “penetrated,” to use her words. They have, in Foucault’s terms, been “de-mystified.” So the process of portraiture involves exposé, stripping away of pretenses, and turning the researcher’s high-intensity, focused lamp on the actors. Reality, total reality, is thus revealed in the relentlessly pursued interrogation of portraiture.

Portraiture as a “scientific” research method possesses some of the same flaws as a painting in the world of art. The artist’s selection of color, shade, and light are part of “the politics of vision” (Callen, 1995, p. 112). The artist does not see what is there. The artist sees only through the images of gender, culture, social mores, and relationships. The imposition of a singular meaning as in a painting or portrait displays a differentiated and hierarchical perspective that is
neither neutral, natural, nor egalitarian. A center requires margins. It engages in deliberate erasure and ignores certain silences. The practice of centering itself is structured into portraiture as a requirement. The major criticism of portraiture is that it is the view and not the object produced by it that is flawed (see Callen, 1995, p. 110). If portraiture were about revealing the presence of simultaneous multiple truths it would possess the capability of being reflexive. But Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffmann Davis’s insistence on the creation of a grand narrative with a stable and fundamental truth as its object encapsulated as an uncontested “essence” sacrifices the power of portraiture to effectively present multiple realities and to open the gaze of the portraitist to this possibility. As long as the portraitist hides behind the centralized metanarrative required by “scientific” practice, the distance between the implicit politics of vision inherent in producing a solitary view and the multiplicity of meanings embedded in all contexts will be muted or erased. The tragedy is that the “truth” revealed by the methods of science is disfigured and effaced by the requirements and rules it insists on using as a precondition. Portraiture practiced as a science is little more than systematic and structured reductionism. While the portraitist may believe that s/he may be open to all stimuli (a claim that is dubious on its face), all stimuli are not presented in the final portrait as multiple truths. Scientific method has, after all, a price. Reducing the potential multiplicity and diversity of simultaneous truths to a singular story line, no matter how compelling or interesting, may be the most important disfigurement of the ensuing portrait placed on the verbal canvas.