

An introduction to Gillian Bennett's paper and some pointers for creating a critical analysis

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Contextualising the paper:

Who was the author, when and where were they writing?

Dr Gillian Bennett (1939-2023)

- a folklorist, most notable for her work on contemporary legends
- PhD – *Aspects of supernatural belief, memorate and legend in a contemporary urban environment* - stories and legend in contemporary urban environments - contemporary folklore seeing insight into present-day worldviews on the folklore of the supernatural
- Founder member of the International Society for Contemporary Legend Research (ISCLR)
- editor of the journal *Folklore* (1994 to 2004)
- Major published works:
 - *Traditions of Belief: Women and the Supernatural* (1987)
 - *Alas, Poor Ghost! Traditions of belief in story and discourse* (1999)
 - *Bodies: Sex, Violence, Disease and Death in Contemporary Legend* (2005) and have been described as "essential to the contemporary legend canon".
- In 2015 – alongside Paul Smith – Bennett was awarded the inaugural Lifetime Achievement Linda Degh Award by the International Society for Contemporary Legend Research.
- In 2018, Bennett was awarded the Coote Lake Medal, the Folklore Society's prize for recognising "outstanding research and scholarship".
- Her research examines the rhetorical strategies of storytellers and the role of narrative, highlighting how legends reflect dynamic cultural attitudes.



Outlining the paper:

Bennett, G. 1995. "If I Knew You were Coming I'd Have Baked a Cake": The Folklore of Foreknowledge in a Neighborhood Group. In *Out of the Ordinary: Folklore and the Supernatural*, edited by Barbara Walker, 122-142. Logan, Utah: Utah University Press.

- This is a book chapter within a contributed volume that explores the functions of belief and supernatural experience within an array of cultures, as well as the stance of academe toward the study of belief and the supernatural. The essays in this volume call into question the idea that supernatural experience is extraordinary.
- In Bennett's words, her focus in the paper is "'common consent and agreement" about knowledge of the future, as it is understood by a group of elderly women in my own hometown, and the ways in which I believe that the women's social situation and moral code shape the folklore that they share.'
- Bennett conducted a series of interviews of the elderly women in her neighbourhood to gather information and analyse the narratives using relevant existing literature
- The research findings are that supernatural beliefs among a particular group are shaped by social and moral codes

The critical Analysis of the paper for Assignment One

- The critical analysis of the paper for Assignment One asks you to examine them thematically as follows:
 - 1) Research methodology – how the research was carried out, how valid was the choice of methodology for the research (the remit of the project)
 - 2) Ethical considerations and reflexive position of the researchers – are they insider/outside in relation to their target groups and how has their place on that spectrum shaped their research?
 - 3) Structure of the paper – the structure and literature review... how has it been written up?

The research methodology of Bennett's paper

- What kind(s) of methodology or methodologies does Bennett use?
- Bennet uses ethnography as a form of narrative inquiry (Bell 2002)
- Her methodology is mainly qualitative, using in-depth interviews to gather data supportive of a rich and comprehensive analysis of a cultural phenomenon. This is described by Geertz as a 'thick description' – a way of providing cultural context and meaning (Geertz 1973)
- She uses a mixed methodology – this can be used when a researcher is aiming to gain a more comprehensive view of the data. It is:
 - qualitative in the sense of studying the relationship of one set of facts to another
 - quantitative – compiling numerical data, participant demographics (age, number etc. and detailing as percentiles)
- It is worth noting that Bennett does not explain her methodology. She says she is going to interview women of her local community but doesn't expand on this (she doesn't say how the interviews are to be structured / whether she will use questionnaires or surveys etc.)

The ethical considerations and reflexive positioning in Bennett's paper

Ethical considerations

- In respect of the participants in the study – Is their welfare paramount? Has the researcher informed consent, have they showing consideration and minimised harm? Are the participants self-determined? Do they have anonymity and confidentiality?
- Bennett accesses her participants through her father's GP practice. Does this raise ethical issues—e.g. Is the patient/doctor relationship respected in the sharing of their contract details (and, even if it was, was there pressure to consent due to the relationship)?
- Is anonymity compromised due to the community being small and the participants accessed through the same healthcare practice and most of them attending the same local Methodist church?
- Is the research of benefit to the community, or at least does it do no harm, and does Bennett address these ethical considerations in her study?

Reflexive position

- Insider/outsider spectrum – Bennett says the women are from her 'hometown' community, suggesting on some level she self-identifies as an insider. However, she also notes that they have a language she doesn't understand, therefore, even if she is living in the same community as her participants, she could be considered an outsider to them in terms of lacking the foreknowledge of the vocabulary they use. She is also an outsider in terms of other demographics of the group. eg. she isn't elderly, a patient of her father or a member of church many of the participants attend.

Even though the data is interesting, we are left with questions here that Bennett doesn't answer about the ethics of how she obtained the data and she does not speak to her reflexive positioning.

The structure and literature review of Bennett's paper (1)

- Is there a good overall structure to the piece, with a clear introduction, discussion, analysis and conclusion?
- Are the sections of the paper well-linked and does the analysis follow a logical progression through them?

Bennet sets up the structure of the paper at the start 'I want to begin rather obliquely, however: first looking at past traditions in order to get a historical perspective on the present, and then, by way of further contextualization, describing my research strategy and the study group members themselves.' (p. 122) and then the paper follows through on this under a series of subheadings: Historical Perspective, Research Context, Beliefs and Stories about Knowing the Future, Traditional Values and Roles, Negative Aspects of Psychic Power and Conclusion--each linked to the next with an academic rationale and/or in terms of logical progression.

The structure and literature review of Bennett's paper (2)

- Does the literature review comprehensively discuss relevant literature for the topic and is the referencing clear for the reader?
- So, in Bennett's case, does her literature review support the theory she proposes to demonstrate: that there is agreement about foreknowledge between groups from similar social situations and moral codes and that these shape their shared folklore?

Bennett's literature review:

- tracks the historical development of beliefs in omens etc. by examining trends in folkloristic writing from the late seventeenth century.
- Comments on the rationalist influences of the Scientific Revolution contributing to an internalization of supernatural experience. (pp. 123-4)
- Argues that two principal strands of folkloristic writing about foreknowledge had emerged by the mid-nineteenth century:
 - interpretation of external stimuli from 'divinatory practices and the interpretation of signs and tokens'
 - more 'personal' and 'internal' events eg. 'dreams, visions "hunches", and strange perceptions or states of mind'
- demonstrates how these two strands influenced 20th C surveys designed to study divinatory modalities eg. UK, US and Finland produced studies showing different trends and various levels of belief regarding these strands of foreknowledge.
- Bennett's research refers to these strands while preferring 'the visionary over the divinatory' (p. 124).

One suggested methodology for creating a critical analysis of a paper:

- Read the whole thing once making notes
- Write an overview of the paper using your notes
- Read a second time annotating thematically – this can be done by colour coding / sticky notes / notes in the margins etc. – according to the given themes:
 - Research methodology
 - Ethical considerations and reflexive position of the researchers
 - Structure and literature review
- Write a description of the paper in terms of each one of these themes, using your reading on research to analyse the material.

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