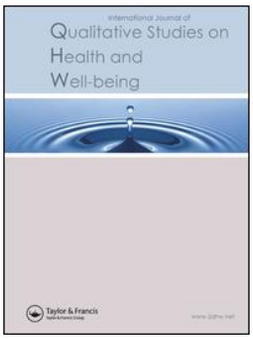

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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Thinking differently: challenges in qualitative research

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Abstract
This paper will explore ideas about challenges to qualitative research in recent years. One often hears the phrase 'cutting edge' and 'innovation' in the qualitative research tradition, and we would like to debate some of these issues. The discussion will focus on the recent challenges that qualitative researchers have faced, and in particular, on possible innovations that are emerging at the growing edge of their endeavours. Several areas of change and challenge can be identified: the integration of art and science; the development of non-traditional forms of dissemination; the collaboration of members from different disciplines the craft of qualitative research. These are emerging trends, each with a challenge for qualitative research, and they make us think about questions that we might ask to take it "out of the doldrums".

Key words: *Innovation, craft, scholarship, apprenticeship, interdisciplinarity, dissemination.*

Art and science

At its best new qualitative research is both art and science. One can consider the relevance of both art and science in qualitative research at two levels: its purpose and its process. The purposes of qualitative research are increasingly considered to serve multiple kinds of knowledge with different epistemological emphases. This point was well illustrated in by van Maanen in *Tales of the Field* (1988) in which it was shown how qualitative researchers can produce different kinds of knowledge for different purposes. Therefore, for example, in a study on psychotherapeutic self-insight, one of the authors (Todres, 2000) was explicit right at the beginning of his study about the purposes of the kinds of knowledge to which he wanted to contribute. This included propositional knowledge that could add to existing academic discourse, as well as the empowerment of practical knowledge by which readers could relate more personally and emotionally to the themes. The latter concern required a more evocative form of writing by drawing on literary guidance from the arts. Todres expressed these goals as follows:

- The 'results' would be more than a definition or series of statements about therapeutic self-insight
- It would tell us something that connects with universal human qualities so that the reader can relate personally to the themes
- It would tell a story which readers could imagine in a personal way
- It would attempt to contribute to new understanding about therapeutic self-insight
- It would not attempt to exhaust the topic but would attempt to allow it to be seen more clearly

Therefore, the purpose of qualitative research is not just a scientific concern with "truth" but also an aesthetic and ethical one that might reflect Plato's characterization of the three realms of "the good, the true and the beautiful". The challenge for qualitative research at this level is then to incorporate insights for its epistemologies, not just from the philosophy of science but from the philosophies of art, literature and aesthetics as well. One of the practical implications of this for qualitative research is that we become more explicit at the beginning of our studies

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in articulating the kind of knowledge that the specific research to be engaged in might generate.

The next level at which qualitative research is both art and science is in its process. Art in this form of inquiry is characterized by imagination, creativity and aesthetics, and it is fluid, dynamic and flexible. The researcher communicates with the audience or readership while going beyond traditional limits. Science is systematic and orderly while also imposing rigour, limits and strict rules. This broad understanding of science allows for the possibility or a human science that has different criteria from those employed in a natural science (Dixon Woods, Shaw, Agarwal & Smith, 2004). Alternative criteria are still under debate but reflect the concern to find accountable and transparent ways to approach the complexity of human experience, sociability and action in non-reductionistic ways. This concern challenges us to continue to find methodological processes that reflect the creativity of human intentionality and novelty. Such an alternative scientific concern then opens itself up to artistic methods, and this sets up a creative tension at a number of levels, and challenges us to consider the relationship between discipline and freedom—a concern that we would share with other artists such as musicians or poets.

Engaging with the world of art means producing work that has immediacy and insight, while the world of science demands a systematic and logical approach. In the past, creativity and intuition have often been separated from rigour and rationality and ascribed to qualitative and quantitative research respectively, but we would argue that qualitative research needs elements from both arts and science rather than seeing them in conflict or, as Bailey, White and Pain (1999, p. 170) say, "as incompatible opposites". Indeed, the tension between art and science in qualitative research generates creativity. However, we might err too much in artistic or scientific directions. What do we emphasise at different stages—the artistic or the scientific—in the data collection or in the writing and presentation of the study?

Qualitative research sits on the continuum between the two. It needs imagination and it should be communicated to others while also demanding rigour and structure. Indeed, it is not easy for the researcher to carry out work that is both, and often there is a trend to one or other end of the continuum. Thus, some "scientific" researchers might accuse it of being fanciful, fluid and subjective, while those who defend the artistic tend to blame "science" as being neutral, objective and limiting. They argue that science is "genuflection" towards the positivist research. However, Harré (2004) maintains that qualitative research is as, or more, "scientific" than quantitative inquiry. He argues that the *reflexivity* element is significant in any study, qualitative researchers do reflect not only on the work they do themselves, and how they are part of this but also on the reflections of the participants. The production of *meaning* too is an important element of science. Last, the *specificity* inherent in qualitative research, that is, its intensity and specific focus is a trait of scientific work. Innovative qualitative research needs to explore the aesthetic and ontological while supporting and integrating scientific knowledge.

Communication, a major element of the arts, however, remains one of the main goals of qualitative inquiry, as there is no point in carrying out research whose findings and ideas cannot be communicated. Innovative qualitative research goes beyond the boundaries of objectivity and subjectivity towards intersubjectivity—the understanding that is shared with others and which is a resource in interpreting meanings in interaction. Atkinson (2006), however, reminds us that abstraction and theorizing are also essential elements of qualitative work which is sometimes forgotten in the current desire for innovation, the trend towards subjectivity and the focus on evocative work.

The balance of art and science is all about the distinction between pure expression and scientific presentation, caring about ontological authenticity (Guba & Lincoln, 1989), which means that the research has the power to transform the world of the participants. It also needs faithfulness and evocation while still being grounded in scientific practice. The challenge of attending to the process of qualitative research as both art and science may thus require the learning of a craft that draws on literary and aesthetic traditions as well as the philosophies of science. We will return to this topic at a later stage of the paper.

The development of different forms of representation and dissemination

There is much interaction and overlap between this and the thoughts in the previous section, as this too is about the distinction between, and marriage of, art and science. However, it focuses more on the communicative concern to present research discoveries in ways that engage the imagination of readers and audiences so that the import of the research can become more alive. It also relates to the "so what" factor of research, that is, how the research can become useful in citizens' lives.

In the past, qualitative researchers presented and disseminated their studies in conventional and traditional ways. Many of us still do. Research is usually disseminated at professional conferences or

published in journals and books, generally for an academic or professional audience. There are at least two challenges here: how to make dissemination activities more imaginative and engaging, and how to take findings of qualitative research to citizens who may find these relevant and useful.

Regarding the first challenge, to make dissemination activities more imaginative and engaging, there has been a groundswell of response from a genre that is calling itself Performative Social Science. Haseman (2006) sees "performative research" as an emerging direction—he goes so far as calling it a paradigm—between qualitative and quantitative inquiry, though others such as Denzin and the Gergens see it as part of qualitative research. Performative researchers present the findings of their studies in alternative form such as moving images, poetry, theatre, photography and dance.

The novelty lies in—as Jones paraphrases Denzin—that performative social science integrates aesthetics, ethics and epistemologies. Kip Jones (2005) is a master at presenting research in this field. He looks for assistance from the arts and humanities and uses performance art to collect and disseminate qualitative research. He considers interviews for instance, as an opportunity and foundation to enact the data generated from it. In a master class which he facilitated, the findings were disseminated through role-play, and at a recent conference at Bournemouth University (2006, see also www.kip world.net), Ken and Mary Gergen explored a number of dramatic forms such as songs, poetry, theatre and interaction with the audience to illustrate and enact the points they wished to make. They were very skilful in doing this. One of the questions it raises is the balance between "telling" and "showing". Visual artists do not generally explain their presentations. They just show them, allowing viewers to bring their own reactions and meanings to bear on the work of art. In engaging in their craft of performative social science, the Gergens moved between "showing" and "telling". "Telling" attends to the more propositional knowledge concerns in which they set the context, and by which they explained the topics that they wished to illustrate. In this spirit, they also engaged in traditional arguments and references to relevant literature and a community of scholars. This helped to create a bridge for the audience to understand and place the import of what the "showing" was about. The question is related to how much and where to give interpretive freedom to the audiences in Performative Social Science. A bias towards the arts emphasizes "showing" and a bias towards the social sciences might emphasize the "telling".

The second challenge for the innovations in dissemination activity is how to take findings of qualitative research to citizens in relevant and useful ways. An important issue in this respect is how to make the findings of qualitative research more "friendly" to people who may not have academic or professional backgrounds or interests. This raises a question about rigour and faithfulness: How, and to what extent, can research findings be transformed whilst still being faithful to the essential meanings captured in the research process? There are interesting ways that qualitative research findings can be transformed, from meta-syntheses of related studies, to evocative theatrical presentations. Within an epistemology that emphasises meaning rather than measurement; the central issue may be about whether the core meanings of the research are retained and transferred through different forms and expressions. This may in fact enrich those meanings rather than reduce them. The value of empirically based qualitative research is that it provides real lifeworld occasions to be drawn on, as well as illustrative quotes from people who were living the meanings. The challenge of disseminating qualitative research through different forms of representation does not lie so much in countering a literalist epistemology about the world of meaning, but rather on addressing hermeneutic and aesthetic considerations. The hermeneutic considerations ask for a degree of rigour about the transformed representations ability to show sufficient transferable meanings from the research (the whole) as well as its ability to "flesh" out some living details of its circumstances and variations (the parts). The aesthetic considerations refer to some understanding of how different forms of re-presentation, be they linguistic as in poetry (Willis, 2002), or visual as in photography, emphasize different appeals to feeling and understanding. Within an epistemology that underpins understanding as personal and social, cognitive and affective, the mix of these different forms of representation is a potentially vital area for learning, discussion and debate in the future.

With this in mind, Keen and Todres (2006) carried out a bibliographic review of non-traditional and alternative forms of dissemination in qualitative research. These less traditional forms included research-based theatre, dance, poetic texts, and patchwork kilts.

Gray (2003, 2004) gives a good illustration of how qualitative research projects can be transformed into theatre-based presentations and then taken to audiences in a wide variety of contexts. For example, Gray, Fitch, Phillips, Labrecque and Fergus (2000) produced a research-based dramatic presentation about the experience of living with metastatic breast

cancer. Called "Handle with Care" it was also made into a video film. By 2000, the group had made over 200 presentations to professional and lay groups throughout Canada and the USA.

The challenging issue here is that we do not know whether and how this was helpful or useful to the audience, although Gray et al. (2000) sought feedback from them as to the meaningfulness and relevance of the theatrical presentation. The challenge remains of how to evaluate the meaningfulness and usefulness of such re-presented qualitative research for people's lives. It is challenging because we would not want to adopt a linear and causal model of impact and would seek more qualitative ways of how engagement with the research by citizens is taken forward into their lives in productive ways. In this spirit, researchers at Bournemouth and Växjö Universities are developing models in which novel ways of representing qualitative research are complemented by participative action research in which citizens own and they take forward the findings of qualitative studies relevant to them in useful ways. These projects are in their early stages but indications are promising. For example, Todres and Galvin (2006) have used a transformation methodology that they call "embodied interpretation" to represent an experience of caring for a loved one with Alzheimer's disease. Drawing on the work of Eugene Gendlin (1991), they represent such findings in ways that are more evocative. They now wish to engage with an Alzheimer's carers' group and study how the carers take forward the implications of the findings into their own lives. In this way, it is hoped that dissemination of qualitative research can make a difference more directly to the lives of citizens.

Often new forms of representation destroy the boundaries between data collection, analysis and representation. The challenge here is seeing the distinction between qualitative research and good journalism, movie making or theatre production. There might be the danger that, while the research is presented in an evocative and moving way, it might lack the second-order concepts of the researcher, the transformation into a scientific piece of work. Morse (2004) considers the artistic forms of dissemination as legitimate but complementary to traditional "writing up". The same criteria for rigour have to be applied. However, this is just one point of view within a spectrum of possible positions about the blurring of boundaries between qualitative research and other activities such as journalism and theatre. Within Performative Social Science, Jones (personal communication) cautions that care should be taken not to prematurely split the goals of art and science into binary categories, and to keep open a range of possible opportunities for the arts and social sciences to interact and at times, even to merge. We take the position that this can be appropriate, but that we also need "telling" and making explicit the context, purposes and audience of our endeavours, even if it is just to consciously say that this is a "showing" only, and the spirit of this is to offer maximum freedom for audience interpretation of its context, topic and purpose.

Interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity

Decades ago, there was a trend to monodisciplinarity in most research in which researchers clung to the traditions of their own discipline. Now, however, there is often an attempt in qualitative research—indeed in all types of inquiry—to become interdisciplinary, or transdisciplinary. This sometimes satisfies funding bodies as interdisciplinary research has a broader base and allows applications more readily; however, it is also a fruitful enterprise in itself. Interdisciplinarity or indeed transdisciplinarity (a related concept) prevents the hegemony of one discipline over another and takes knowledge into new directions, "outside the disciplinary box". In the past, the various disciplines taking part in qualitative research, contributed separately, and this had the advantage that questions could be asked clearly from within one discipline and answered so that everybody within that discipline could understand. However, the disciplinary structure is quite rigid and does not always illuminate a question from all sides. For health professionals in particular it is important to view their research topic from the point of view of various disciplines in order to have a fully rounded picture of their research topic. They often take elements from the social sciences such as psychology and sociology and attempt to build this into their research. The challenge to qualitative research is how to cope with the demands and purity of different disciplines as well as valuing and gaining from collaboration.

> An example of the difficulties shows this clearly. One of us (I.H.) was recently involved with two colleagues in writing a research paper on the stigmatisation of people with chronic pain. The collaborators were a sociologist, a psychologist and a health professional. The reviewer—rightly—was critical that the concept of stigmatisation was expressed in a confusing way, sometimes as a sociological term, at other times as a lay concept.

The challenge then was to give the term coherence without loss of meaning.

Interdisciplinarity will only be innovative, if members of the various disciplines involved do more than contribute to a qualitative research project, and instead, collaborate and attempt to integrate ideas from different disciplines. This means looking at the phenomenon or problem to be examined and considering how the discipline can add to the research while *interacting* with those from other disciplines. Cross-fertilization is one of the elements of this. Sociologists' thinking on culture and society, and psychologists' ideas about the unique individual, for instance, complement each other and bring about a focus on whole human beings. The work cannot take place on a superficial level but needs time and patience. Integration means that we might produce new knowledge and achieve a whole that is bigger than its parts, a "Gestalt". Learning from each other and sharing ideas and concepts gives a broader picture of the area on which interdisciplinary researchers are focused. Even if there is just one researcher, he or she can infuse ideas with elements from different disciplines. Of course, there might also be inherent dangers: the integrity of the discipline might be threatened and compromises must be made, though epistemological coherence is most important. Disciplines have their own distinct language and collaborators often attach different meanings to terms and concepts. Some colleagues recently suggested going back to the foundations and to use the great writers to gain understanding (for instance, Heidegger, Foucault, G. H. Mead). A common language can then be achieved that is understood by members of different disciplines. Those who advocate transdisciplinarity, however, maintain that valuing others and establishing links between disciplines is not enough, but that "real" connections have to be formed between the disciplines. It is interesting that the movement of transdisciplinarity has its origin in the thinking of scientists and technologists who deplore the reduction of reality to a single level, and insist that meanings should transverse and go beyond different disciplines (Charter of Transdisciplinarity, 1994). This demands openness and dialogue, which we also advocate in this article.

The challenge of interdisciplinarity reminds us of earlier debates within our qualitative research communities about mixed-methods and triangulation. There were those who cautioned against mixed discourses (Leininger, 1992, for instance) and those who countered philosophical purists' concerns with charges of "methodolatry" (Janesick, 2000). These earlier debates were helped by recognising that both positions contained valuable points: that apples are apples and pears are pears, *and* that method should *serve* phenomena rather than dictate to them. There is a useful distinction between epistemological framework and practical methods. Similar distinctions can be made with reference to the challenges of interdisciplinarity in qualitative research. We have written about the added value of such multiple perspectives. However, we might remember to consider the differences in the kinds of phenomena studied in different disciplines and the relationship of these phenomena to one another. For example, sociology studies the social world; behavioural psychology studies external behaviour; phenomenological psychology studies intentions and meanings of individuals. In being interdisciplinary, do we then simply exercise epistemological tolerance and devise different methods for studying these different levels or kinds of phenomena, hoping that the final result will be multiple and rich and maybe confused? Or do we try to engage more actively with the different disciplinary foci and questions, and devise a more epistemologically integrated methodological framework which clarifies the different disciplinary strands to the study and their relative significance to one another and to the study as a whole? Whether to support disciplinary pluralism or transdisciplinary integralism appears to be an interesting challenge and spur for future innovations. Our personal position at this time is minimal. We do wish to plead at least for a definition of qualitative research and its scope that does not prematurely privilege the concepts and images of one particular discipline within the human sciences. For example, sociology would be overly prioritized if we said that our primary definition of qualitative research is that it studies the qualitative dimensions of the social world.

Learning the craft

Artists, to be successful and competent need to practise and develop their "craft". This is no different for qualitative researchers. A craft, which is after all a skill, can be refined and cultivated. It needs the cultivation of both receptive and active qualities. We often learn our craft from experts through a mentoring relationship. This can be both a great help and a hindrance. The help is that the "modelling" provides a lively embodied occasion within which thoughtfulness and skills can be culturally transmitted. This is one of the dangers of increasingly virtual and technological contexts for learning: the subtle cues of the embodied occasion are often filtered out and devalued as not cost-effective. The help of a mentor also needs time and continuity. "Flash in the pan" courses that do a bit of this and a bit of that do not serve the possibility of craft-cultivation. We may need to fight the battle for winning the resources in

university courses to run them meaningfully and to raise craft-cultivation as a dignified learning objective in course design and quality control bodies and procedures.

If mentorship and expertise is a help, it can also be a hindrance, but the response to this hindrance may be a necessary part of cultivating one's craft. There are many stories of an "oedipal conflict" in the learning of the craft, in which researchers may have had to struggle to find their own individuality and creativity within the context of a powerful mentor.

However, let us for a moment highlight the "shadow" elements of expertise. It is often based on tradition, experience, education and training. Experts who have practised their craft for a long time might be arrogant or follow conventional and traditional lines without learning the new. They too need to acquire new knowledge and cannot be static in the pursuit of their craft (Lewis, personal communication, 2006). Part of craft is the search for perfection. As woodcarvers or painters continuously work on their opus, qualitative researchers will not be easily satisfied with their research. They always try to find contrary occurrences, new ideas, and sometimes-new interpretations.

Through their apprenticeship, researchers learn the language and discourse of their craft as well as the essential procedures. Parker (2004) argues that the craft of qualitative researchers has a number of elements requiring apprenticeship, scholarship and innovation. *Apprenticeship* involves learning from established experts over a period of time, and for learners to follow the way experienced researchers do research, at least for a while until novice researchers become experts themselves. All too often, students think that qualitative research is easy, and carry out simple interviewing procedures without technical skills of interviewing and qualitative analysis. Often they take a pragmatic generic approach that is unsuccessful and over-simplistic. They need to learn the language of the particular research approach they are taking.

We shall give an example of a researcher who had only just started on his 'apprenticeship'. A PhD student had worked on his thesis for a little while. He felt he knew everything about grounded theory and started to teach it to colleagues at a university. Unfortunately there is now a group of health professionals who have no real understanding of grounded theory.

Scholarship means that the qualitative researcher has learnt about the underlying philosophical assumptions and bases of the approach that is used. Again, often when we read a piece of phenomenological research for instance, particularly in professional journals, it becomes clear that it is not rooted in the appropriate philosophy but it uses the language of phenomenology without basing it in its philosophy.

Innovation is another element in the tool bag of a skilful craftsperson. This means that something original and new is generated in the research. Researchers often feel that innovation is connected with the use of new technologies, and they have indeed contributed to an understanding of qualitative research recently, particularly those in performative social science, but innovation is more than the use of new technology.

True innovation is the most difficult challenge in qualitative research as most researchers use well trodden paths and produce sound but non-innovative work (almost like "McDonaldization" of research, when the product is similar wherever we go) or think that technologies point to the way ahead. Can we generate new forms of qualitative research? We do have to use both existing resources and new means that come along. However, new ideas and lateral thinking create innovation, take us to the edge and go beyond craft. Good qualitative research adds imagination and creativity, combining art, science and craft. In doing this, an innovative challenge is presented regarding the extent to which one can learn from the literary and artistic worlds. It is not possible to be masters of all genres, and perhaps qualitative researchers may be moved to specialize in particular artistic directions. An anthropologist may deepen insight by a study of mythology, a linguistically inclined person may learn from the worlds of poetry and prose, while a technologically interested individual may learn multi-media skills. Such directions have implications for the flexibility by which course structures are set up. (One of our PhD students, for instance, has approached our Media School to sit in on classes of multimedia representation.)

Learning a craft begins to mature when, like a pianist transcending an awareness of the separate notes, a researcher begins to move into a more flowing integration or rhythm of thought and activity. With practice, a certain freedom begins to emerge in which one's craft becomes more spontaneous and "tacit" to one's natural functioning (Benner, 1984). One then perhaps exercises a range of options for approaching a research topic, the questions, the contexts, the epistemological frameworks, the ethics, and the range of helpful methods, the analytic frameworks and the dissemination options. Cultivating such craft may thus require a commitment of time and energy. If such a commitment is to be worthwhile it heralds a

further challenge: to find more places and contexts within which the career of qualitative research can be supported. Although the authors are not by nature interested in the formalisation of such activities, we do find ourselves motivated to find more places in the world for qualitative researchers, and so support the emergence of networks that are more formal and international organizations that promote the craft.

Concluding thoughts

We have questions arising from this paper that may stimulate further thought and debate:

1. What is the most productive balance between the artistic and scientific dimensions in qualitative research (at what stage does one or the other become more important)?
2. Do we need certain quality criteria that make data collection, level of analysis and presentation in qualitative inquiry different from other forms of performance art (what is the distinction)?
3. What kind of discussion do colleagues from different disciplines need about the influence of their specific disciplines and the type of analysis they do (how is collaboration possible in practice)?
4. When more experienced researchers reflect on their own learning of the craft, what do they see as the most important moments in this (how did they learn)?

More than innovation and "growing edge", however, we need "quality" qualitative research (and we do not use this word as a substitute for trustworthiness only but for goodness). Too many researchers are rule following and pragmatic while not being mindful of underlying philosophy and epistemology. It is not possible "in any version of social science to write down the recipe for doing good work of the highest quality, work that goes beyond mere craft" as Becker (1996) suggests forcefully, but we argue that clear thinking outside the conventional boundaries can lead not only to good but also to innovative research.

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