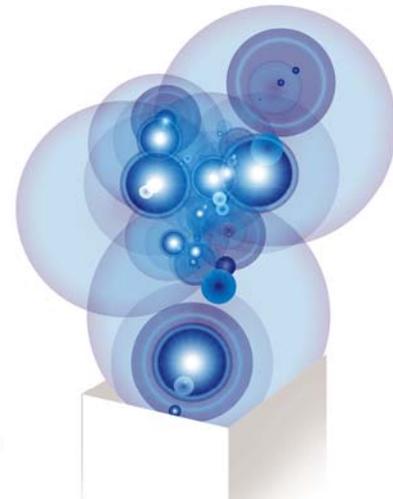# imagination

THE CREATIVE CRAFT OF RESEARCH
AMSRS CONFERENCE 06

About our Speaker

Sheila Keegan is a Chartered Psychologist and Founding Partner of Campbell Keegan Ltd, a qualitative research consultancy set up in 1983, working in the private and public sectors with issues broadly related to change and communications. She had a doctorate in management and organizational change. For light relief she is a writer, photographer and broadcaster.

Dr. Sheila Keegan: Profile

- Chartered Occupational Psychologist
- B.A. (Hons) Psychology
- MSc. Social Psychology
- HNC Design (Photography)
- Doctorate in Organisational Change
- Master Practitioner in Neuro-Linguistic Programming
- Media Psychologist, e.g. TV/press spokesperson for Ken Livingston's 'Recycle for London' campaign, psychology expert for the Sunday Express, Psychologist for Virgin Holidays, Vanessa Feltz radio programme
- Occasional university lecturer: Cambridge University, City University (MBA Course), Middlesex University, Portsmouth University, Hertfordshire Business School
- Committee Member of British Psychological Society (BPS) Qualitative Research in Psychology (QMiP) Section and Editor of the QMiP newsletter
- Conference speaker: MRS, ESOMAR, AQR, BPS
- Teaching on MRS and AQR courses
- Radio presenter (Written and presented programmes for Radio 4)
- Journalist/photographer: (Sunday Telegraph, Daily Telegraph, The Psychologist, Organisations & People, BBC Family Life magazine, Freeserve website, Mensa Magazine, Trailfinders magazine, Rough Guide Travel anthology).

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imagination

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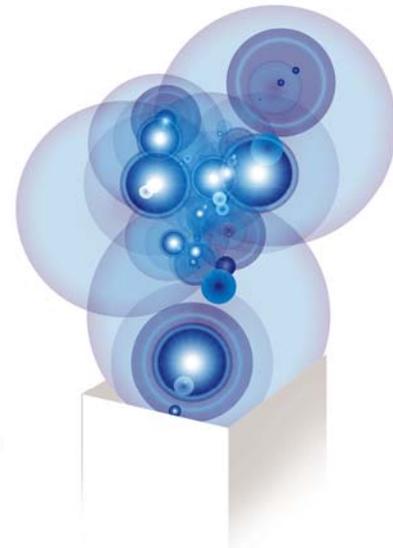
Examples of Consultancy Projects

40+ projects with the Central Office of Information on a wide range of areas over the last 20 years.

- A study amongst GPs to explore the help/support they need in the area of mental health
- Evaluating communications across and within all the units of the Cabinet Office as input to a communications review and re-structuring
- Exploring attitudes, concerns, needs in relation to pension provision and retirement planning
- Some fifteen studies in the area of learning and education, carried out amongst children, parents, teachers and education specialists.

Projects for commercial and government organisations:

- Ongoing development and evaluation of a year long leadership programme amongst senior clinicians, managers and the Executive Team within a mental health trust.
- A study, covering the US and UK, exploring employee attitudes and behaviour in relation to new technology, how this affected working practices and ways in which employees could be supported whilst they adapted to these changes
- An annual review of the attitudes, needs, aspirations of NatWest Bank shareholders, in order to steer shareholder communications
- A series of projects for BACS to explore people's attitudes towards money and bill payment, as a backdrop to customer communications.
- Exploring people's attitudes towards travel and airport facilities for BAA and BA as input to corporate strategy development.

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Science vs Imagination:
A house divided against itself cannot stand

Dr Sheila Keegan
Campbell Keegan Ltd
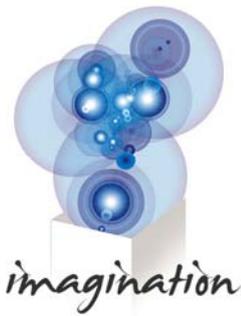
There is more light here

Someone saw Nasrudin searching for something on the ground.

'What have you lost, Mulla?' he asked.

'My key,' said the Mulla.

So they both went down on their knees and looked for it.

After a time the other man asked:
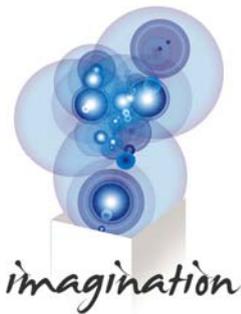
'Where exactly did you drop it?'

'In my own house.'

'Then why are you looking here?'

'There is more light here than inside my own house.'

Idries Shah 1966:26

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I have sometimes thought that all philosophical disputes could be reduced to an argument between the partisans of "prickles" and the partisans of "goo". The prickly people are tough-minded, rigorous, and precise, and like to stress differences and divisions between things. They prefer particles to waves, and discontinuity to continuity. The gooey people are tender-minded romanticists who love wide generalisations and grand syntheses. They stress the underlying unities, and are inclined to pantheism and mysticism. Waves suit them much better than particles as the ultimate constituents of matter, and discontinuities jar their teeth like a compressed-air drill. Prickly philosophers consider the gooey ones rather disgusting – undisciplined, vague dreamers who slide over hard facts like an intellectual slime which threatens to engulf the whole universe in an undifferentiated aesthetic continuum. But gooey philosophers think of their prickly colleagues as animated skeletons that rattle and click without any flesh or vital juices, as dry and dessicated mechanisms bereft of all inner feelings. Either party would be lost without the other, because there would be nothing to argue about, no one would know what his position was, and the whole course of philosophy would come to an end….

Historically, this is probably the extreme point of that swing of the intellectual pendulum which brought into fashion the Fully Automatic Model of the universe, of the age of analysis and specialization when we lost our vision of the universe in the overwhelming complexity of its detail. But by a process which C.G. Jung called "enantiodromia", the attainment of any extreme position is the point where it begins to turn into its own opposite – a process that can be dreary and repetitious without the realization that the opposite extremes are polar, and that poles need each other. There are no prickles without goo and no goo without prickles.

Alan Watts 1969:130-132

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Introduction

### What is happening in the world of UK qualitative research?

Often it's easier to see patterns, trends, in retrospect. *"Ah, that's what was going on then!"* *"So that's what they meant when they said so and so".* When we are in the midst of a period of intense change we are more likely to experience confusion than clarity. In fact, confusion often defines impending or ongoing changes. Competing forces vie for supremacy. Often they are contradictory. I believe that we are experiencing such a time of particular change within the UK research industry, in which we are questioning what it is we do, how we do it and whether or not all of this activity can and should be subsumed under the 'research' umbrella. But researchers do not work in isolation and they both influence and are influenced by adjacent professions; advertising, PR, client companies, government, media … broadening out to politics, education, philosophy, globalisation…and so on. A mesh of changing patterns.

Who knows where these changes will lead but, in the absence of a crystal ball, here are a few trends that, I think, are interesting, particularly in relation to the theme of 'Imagination'. I am not attempting to be exhaustive, just illustrate the issues:

- Over recent years, 'research departments' within client companies have increasingly been re-defined as 'insight departments', implying recognition that research is a means to an end, rather than an end in itself. Whilst, in principle, this seems a good move, there also needs to be a new way of thinking alongside a change of name. 'Insight' suggests that research outcomes can be interrogated, developed, can act as a springboard to new ideas and new directions. This is an exciting shift, but only if the name change genuinely reflects a change in mind-set within the organisation.

- Companies are introducing initiatives in innovation, for example, P&G have a team devoted to 'Creativity', in recognition that it is the life-blood of the company. Creativity and innovation have become corporate mantras.

- Roles and relationships between researchers, ad agencies and clients, it seems, are becoming more co-operative; more interactive (Research Magazine Jan '06). This may reflect a stronger role for qualitative research in up-front strategic development, the stage at which research is less threatening to the agency than at the creative development stage. Or it may mean that we've discovered that it works 'better' if we work together!

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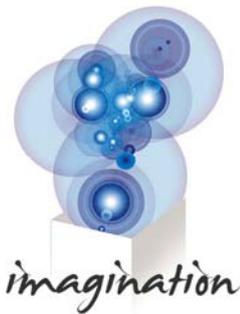
- A variety of creative 'outlets have sprung up in recent years; brand agencies, creative hot shops, ideas factories and so on, Many are encroaching on areas that traditionally fell somewhere between researcher and ad agency. What are the implications for research? I believe we have never sufficiently promoted the creative aspects of what we do, perhaps because we believe this will undermine our credibility as researchers. Perhaps it is time to re-consider?

- There has been a heightened interest in more nebulous aspects of research, for example, 'Quality', which was the subject of a recent AQR Trends Day. What is quality? How do we recognise it? How do we develop it? This interest stems from a need to develop alternative ways of evaluating – or justifying - qualitative research, given that scientific 'validity' and 'reliability' measures are not appropriate.

- Qualitative research has expanded its methodological armoury. In the last few years, there has been a burgeoning interest in ethnography, NLP, discourse analysis, semiotics, Creative Workshops, Breakthough Events, online debates, Skype groups and much more. This diversity raises a number of issues, amongst them, 'When does research stop being research'? 'How do we evaluate the legitimacy of these approaches?'

- There is tentative but growing dialogue between commercial research practitioners and academic researchers. Each camp has very different priorities and even different 'languages', so dialogue is not straightforward. However, this dialogue is, I believe, essential to fuel the development of our industry.

- There has been a movement, within some sectors of qualitative research, towards viewing research as consultancy. The emphasis is on enhancing the client's thinking and corporate strategic development, rather than the research itself. It explicitly positions research as an input to thinking. Arguably this is divisive to the research industry, in that it questions the 'purity' of research. Can data gathering and consultancy live comfortably – or even uncomfortably – under the same umbrella? Does research, as consultancy, become a form of sugging?

I think these themes – and many more that I have not listed - reflect a shifting perception and practice of research; a move away from rigidity, strict structural protocols, assumed objectivity, towards research as a process of learning, in which emphasis and value is placed on outcomes - and research protocols are regarded as hygiene factors. However, such a change is not without its problems and challenges.

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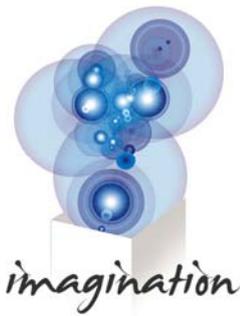
What are the current challenges for qualitative research?

Recently the AQR carried out a number of Round Table discussions with the broad aim of exploring 'the industry'; satisfactions and concerns, where it might be 'going' – that sort of thing. Talking with a group of experienced qualitative researchers, the most striking aspect was the diversity of our views on what we actually do and how we do it. We argued back and forth in a fairly heated manner and it was clear that we had wildly different views about the role and theoretical underpinnings of our practice. And this, in turn, fed our views on how we analysed and made sense of the qualitative work we are engaged in.

Given such diversity, how can we nurture a strong, cohesive industry? Alternatively, is it precisely this diversity that makes the industry strong? Personally I believe diversity is healthy, but I also believe that it is important to clearly understand where the roots of diversity lie – why we think as we do. In particular, if our view of research is broadening, so we view it primarily as a process of learning, as I suggest above, then the need for a more clearly defined theoretical underpinning to qualitative practice becomes even more urgent. Otherwise, 'research' becomes reduced to the level of soapbox: We will blow our credibility and our point of difference.

Like most professions, when we begin to contemplate where we should be 'going', we generally start from where we are. What are the new techniques? How do we 'take' qualitative research into the board room? What new areas can qualitative research develop into? How do we change the public perception of 'the focus group'? Why don't advertising agencies love us? Navel gazing is an occupational hazard.

In my youth, I spent ten years, on and off, working with a client to try to make sherry popular with young people.
Then along came alco-pops.
Both are alcoholic drinks, but that is about where the similarity ends.
It taught me that the real question is, often, 'What is happening out there and what can we contribute? rather than 'How can we persuade them to like us?'

We could apply the same question to qualitative research today. Instead of asking, 'How do we make ourselves more appealing to our current and future clients?' maybe we need to ask, 'What is happening in the world and what could we offer that it needs'. The first is a packaging job. The second may entail a radical rethink.

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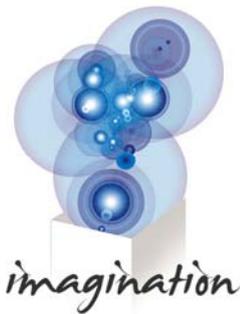
I believe that qualitative research – or more precisely, qualitative thinking - has never been more relevant in a business context than it is today. To make the most of the opportunities that are arising, I believe we – clients, agencies and researchers - together need to be more courageous. We need to look at what ways of understanding research - and what research practices – are most useful in this 'new age' and then decide whether or not we are willing to change our current practice so that we are relevant and willing participants in the 'new age'. I am also suggesting that if we do not evolve our practice to meet these requirements, then others may move in to fill the gap – and we will find ourselves sidelined and downplayed within the business decision making process.

I am arguing that we must evolve a different perspective on qualitative research which develops, and makes better use of, the wide range of skills and abilities which are inherent in qualitative practice but which, I believe, are currently under acknowledged. To pin my colours to the mast: I think it is time to really take on the role of business consultants, without the ambivalence and prevarication that has limited us in the past. To do this effectively, we need to develop greater confidence and leadership, we need to integrate research and consultancy to a much greater extent, we need an open acknowledgement that the researcher is part of, and inseparable from, the research process and outcomes and, above all, we need a more interactive, learning based understanding of research itself.

I start from the premise that, in the current business and social climate, where communications are fast and multi-directional, where social and geographical mobility are endemic, where there are few certainties, traditional models of research are becoming less relevance and need to be re-assessed. Instead, we must begin with the 'world out there' - or rather the new ways in which we are making sense of this world - and build an understanding of research which mirrors it – and which better matches our clients' needs. And, I believe, we need a new research paradigm to make sense of this world.

Qualitative research is particularly well placed to make this shift. It has already developed many of the skills, experience and ways of thinking which are appropriate to this new paradigm. However, we still cling – overtly or covertly – to the tail coats of traditional scientific method, even though science itself has moved on. I am suggesting a less circumscribed, but no less rigorous, form of research - 'emergent inquiry' - as a new perspective on qualitative research; a perspective in which we view scientific method as a discipline, not a set of rules, in which knowledge can be fed from a broad pool of experience and where we acknowledge that research is, by definition, a creative and collaborative process.
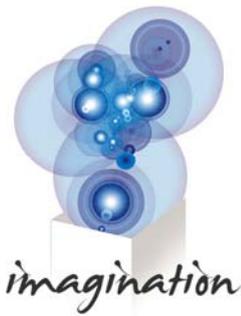
But, if we remove the traditional constraints from research – or at least remove them from centre stage - is this still research? Are we then losing the baby with the bath water? If we change how we practice then we need to change the 'frame of reference' for qualitative research – how it is legitimised - so that this more accurately fits what it is we are actually doing?

In this paper I am meandering between these themes, attempting to link them and draw some implications for the future of qualitative research including the important role that creativity and imagination play in this new perspective. The paper is broadly split into four sections:

- How we can understand 'knowledge' and whether science, research and imagination can be reconciled
- The changing 'world order' and themes that shape this world
- 'Emergent Inquiry' and how it might fit into this new world
- How this can be a legitimate form of qualitative research?

This paper is, as an exploration of ideas and possible futures must be work in progress. I hope it will encourage readers to engage with the ideas, challenge them and develop them in different ways.

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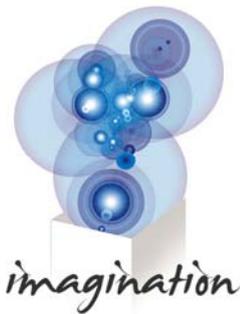
Roads to Knowledge

Of what relevance is Imagination to Research?

'Imagination'. I was mulling over the title for this conference in my head, wondering what I might say that was relevant and thinking, 'How do Imagination and Research fit together?' Where is the connection? On the surface they are not natural bed-fellows although there is much talk nowadays about 'creative research'. What do we mean by this? Is 'creation' the same as 'imagination'?   Why, I wondered, was 'Imagination' chosen as the conference theme, rather than 'Creativity'?

I consulted my dog-eared 'Dictionary of Psychology'. It described 'Imagination' as follows:

> *"**Imagination.** The constructive, though not necessarily creative, employment of past perceptual experience, revived as images in a present experience at the ideational level…such construction is either creative or imitative, being creative when self-initiated and self-organised, and imitative when following a construction initiated and organised by another".*

I wasn't sure this helped me greatly. In fact, this definition raised more questions for me than answers. 'Imagination' is defined in terms of what it is and what it is not and these elements are then set up in opposition to one another. I was left wondering, 'Are ideas and experience really such separate activities'? Do we have to be *either* creative *or* imitative? Can we ever be totally self-organised *or* totally organised by another? Where are the more subtle influences of individuals on each other; the family, the group, society?

I tend not to see the world as so neatly categorised and, indeed, I would argue that our need to divide and define - a useful and necessary convention which enables us to navigate through life - can also be an obstacle to understanding. We tend to confuse words - symbols representing the world - with our actual experience of the world. Or, as the famous NLP mantra succinctly reminds us, 'The map is not the territory' (O'Connor & McDermott 1996:64).

Could this cultural tendency to 'divide and rule' be part of the reason why imagination and research seem mismatched? As this question drifts lazily about my brain, I gradually head into broader realms; into that nebulous and taxing area of '*how we make sense of the world*'? I wonder how useful – personally, socially, culturally - it really is to break our experience of the world down into component elements in this 'reductionist' way, in order to understand it? Maybe it would be 'better' to approach the world in a more holistic way, appreciating interconnection and relationship between 'things' as much as their separateness? What would that be like? And then, what does 'better'

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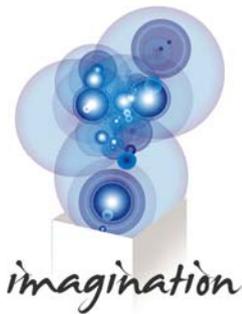
mean? One way or another, this is a question that has dogged philosophers, scientists and religions – probably since the birth of human consciousness.

I was reminded of the philosopher and theologian, Alan Watts. I first came across his writing some 30 years ago, in what I would still regard as a truly mind blowing book, 'The Book on The Taboo against knowing who you are', published in 1969 but still extraordinarily prescient today. Watts draws on both Newtonian Science and Zen Buddhism to challenge prevailing Western perceptions of 'reality'. When I first encountered Watts' writing, I was bowled over by the notion of viewing the world as fluid, indivisible, a pattern of movement, which we, as 'individuals', come *out* of, (because we are a transient expression of the whole realm of nature) rather than come *in* to (as temporary and 'alien' visitors) in much the same way as the wave *comes out* of the ocean and sink back into it (Watts 1969).

This way of understanding the world is in sharp contrast to the (largely) Western sense of the individual as intrinsically separate – and often in conflict with – other individuals and nature itself. Most 'Western' perspectives are predicated on the belief that expressions of nature – including individuals - are discrete, relatively unchanging objects that can be named, e.g. dog, person, relationship, movement, love and, through the process of separation from their context, be better understood. An important consequence of this way of thinking is the belief that we, as human beings, are different and apart from nature and that, by inference, we have the potential to control it. A natural follow on to this is the belief that the world can best be understood in terms of opposites; object vs background, you vs me, man vs nature, life vs death…indeed, science vs imagination. 'Naming' reinforces these divisions in that it defining an 'object' by excluding its context. We then forget that these 'opposites' are a convention; simply different ways of looking at the same phenomenon. It is easy to see, given the impending ecological crises which threaten our world, how the cumulative effect of this thinking can have catastrophic consequences for our very existence.

In the process of deciding how to approach this paper, I re-read another of Alan Watts' books, 'The Wisdom of Insecurity'. I felt the same surge of excitement that I felt 30 years ago and also a strong sense of recognition.

> We think that making sense of out of life is impossible unless the flow of events can somehow be fitted into a frame-work of rigid forms. To be meaningful, life must be understandable in terms of fixed ideas and laws, and these in turn must correspond to unchanging and eternal realities behind the shifting scene…ideas and words are more or less fixed, whereas real things change….to define has come to mean almost the same thing as to understand…we resort to the convention of stills whenever we want to describe or think about any moving body, such as a train, stating that, at such-and-such times it is at such-and-such places.   (Watts, 1954:41-44)

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The essence of what Watts was saying in the '50s and '60s is being re-stated today by very diverse sources, including the Complexity Sciences (Stacey, Griffin & Shaw 2002), Social Constructionism (Weick 1995), Neuroscience (Damasio 2000) and Environmental Science (Lovelock 1988). Even politicians are getting on board and, some would argue, that attitudes within the general public are beginning to shift towards the necessity of a more symbiotic relationship with nature.

But what has all this to do with Imagination and Research? Before addressing this issue, let us return to the original question; how to meaningfully connect the two; 'Imagination' and 'Research'? Back to the dog eared dictionary.

> "**Research.** *Systematic scientific investigation in pursuit of knowledge, or confirmation, in any field.*"

My initial reaction was, 'What a distance we've come from 'Research' according to this definition'. 'Systematic', 'Scientific', 'Investigation' 'Confirmation'. Do these words describe your working practice? On first glance, they are a long way from mine. They also seem a long way from 'Imagination'. So how then can 'Imagination' dovetail with research and with knowledge generation?

The differences in apparent meaning between the two concepts, Research and Imagination (or creativity), which are nowadays juxtaposed almost without question illustrates, to me, the gap between research practice – and I am talking here about qualitative research, because that is what I know – and its traditional scientific roots[1]. And yet, I will argue that qualitative research needs to reinforce its scientific credentials (using the broader understanding of science I explore later in this paper). Or, to put it another way, we need to reconcile the artificial duality which we have created by seeing science and creativity as opposing forces rather than aspects of the same phenomenon; to acknowledge creativity as intrinsic to scientific investigation.

There is much confusion and ambiguity within the research world – indeed, within the world at large - about the nature of science and scientific inquiry; whether research has to be conducted as 'scientific inquiry' and subject to the 'rules' of science if it is to be valid – or whether only certain types of research can be considered 'science'.

We see it all the time in day to day research practice. Recently I was asked to write a discussion guide for a qualitative project involving group discussions. I wrote down five or six themes I intended to work through; planning to vary the content and structure according to dynamics within each group. The commissioning client circulated my themes within the company and I received a flurry of (unsolicited) responses over a

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[1] You might question, with justification, whether the roots of qualitative practice really are in science, but I think that qualitative research is often judged by 'scientific' measures of validity and reliability (and found lacking) and, rightly or wrongly, has often been required to justify itself in terms of scientific principles.

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three day period, each attempting to author the definitive discussion guide. Some were 5-6 pages long. Clearly it would be impossible – and of course pointless – to use any if these highly structured and prescriptive discussion guides in a group discussion – that is, if I wanted participants to really participate. This, to me, was a good example of our obsession with defining, pinning down, in the mistaken belief that greater precision will inevitably result in greater 'truth'. Which isn't to say that it can't in some situations, for example counting the number England 'wins' in the World Cup (Sorry – very topical as I write!). But, in understanding attitudes and behaviour, exploring dreams, ambitions, the future? Well, we need something more than numbers. As John Dewey (1938) puts it, 'it is no reflection on the nutritive quality of beefsteak that it is not fed to infants'.

You could say there are still two world views competing for dominance; the one concerned with objective fact, measurement, definition, the other with subjective experience, opinion and intuition – although recently the arguments have stilled within research, as much because we are bored with the debate as because the issues have been resolved. We have called a pragmatic truce on the basis that we do what is 'useful' in a particular situation, not because we have understood and resolved the underlying differences. As Watts (1954) puts it, 'to define has come to mean almost the same as to understand'.

In this paper I will attempt to reconcile these apparent contradictions; to argue that qualitative research, at best, reflects emergent scientific thinking, by embracing the rigour and discipline traditionally associated with 'science' but also encompassing passion, emotion, creativity and intuition.

I am suggesting that the confusion and ambiguity within research practice (broadly between science and creativity) stems from a lack of rigour in our understanding of knowledge and how it is generated, i.e. the epistemological basis of our practice. This stems from a populist and inaccurate view of scientific method which has resulted in science and creativity being set up in opposition to one another.

Within the commercial world we have, for too long, failed to interrogate the underlying assumptions that support our research practice. As commercial researchers we have divorced ourselves from our academic roots – often to the point where we are quite derisory about the possibility of academia feeding our understanding. Equally, academics have trodden a different path, concerning themselves with theory and methodology, sometimes to the exclusion of practical experience. We are left with the absurdity of theory and practice as very different disciplines - breeding more compartmentalisation and an academic *vs* practitioner climate.

You may think, "Epistemological basis! What has that got to do with my day to day research work? It is a subject for philosophers, not research practitioners". I disagree. I am arguing that our assumptions about 'knowledge' and how it arises shape our

EXIT

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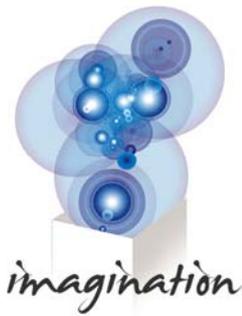
thinking, our actions, our practice, all the time – it would be impossible to practice without them - but, because we have not adequately explored these assumptions and because we do not properly understand why we practice as we do, we cannot convincingly justify a qualitative approach – although clearly, most of the time, it 'works'. Our default mode is often a 'scientific' or reductionist approach to knowledge; dividing and categorising in some areas of our practice, whilst simultaneously, and often without awareness of the contradiction, espousing a creative, holistic research approach.

I am not saying that both elements aren't necessary and useful. Far from it. But I do think they need to be active 'at the same time'. Let me give an example. I like the notion of 'holding the hypothesis lightly' in a research situation. What do I mean by this? Well, many of us do this tacitly, without consciously articulating it, when we are moderating a discussion group: We have an idea, formulate a loose theory, test it with research participants, modify it, reinforce it, abandon it, move on, bring in another idea, develop it, challenge it, incorporate participant views and so on, as a continuous process, moving towards a fuller understanding of the issues and possible 'solutions' or directions. Intrinsic to this process is an openness to ideas and feelings; reflecting, questioning, creating, challenging our own thinking and that of participants *in the moment.* The situation is not structured, but neither is it unstructured. Rather the structure is being formed by the process of generating knowledge itself. It is not being applied from outside, as in a set of pre-determined questions. This I would see as combining scientific rigour and creativity 'at the same time'.

If we are going to argue that our current qualitative research approaches are sound, defensible, useful and robust, shouldn't we be able to explain from where we derived these approaches; our assumptions about the nature of knowledge what informs them and how we make sense of the world. If we are practicing (and by default defining) our research in a particular way, we need to be able to articulate more clearly the reasons for our practice. It is not enough to say that we do it this way because 'it works', when we do not know why it 'works'. This is lazy thinking and leaves us open to the criticism that we are lightweight, lack rigour and have no theoretical justification for our practice.

Similarly, if we are going to use Research and Imagination in the same breath, then we need to be clear about what they mean, how they are linked, what theoretical and epistemological assumptions we are making and, most importantly, how embracing both can enhance our practice.

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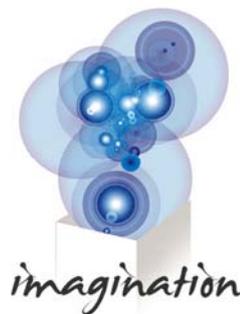
What do we mean by 'research?'

Perhaps we need to start with our understanding of research and establish whether what we do, as qualitative practitioners, can really be called research. Does it help or hinder to label it in this way? I will start with the assumption that the purpose of research is to generate knowledge. But, what is knowledge?

- Is it what we discover?
- What we are told?
- What we create?
- What we sense, what we feel?
- Can it be all these things?

Crudely, traditional science, at least as it is popularly understood, tends to emphasise the first two interpretations. Knowledge is there to be found; a thing, immutable, understood in the same way by all. Or it is what others, more knowledgeable than ourselves, have told us – it is a given truth. This understanding of knowledge views it as something separate from ourselves; objective, cerebral, an entity which can be passed from person to person without essentially changing its nature.

A different approach to knowledge generation, which is embedded within much of 'Eastern' thinking and is a bedrock within the Complexity Sciences, Social Constructionism and Symbolic Interactionism, is the view that knowledge is *created* rather than (or as well as) being discovered and is not just a cerebral activity, but incorporates the *whole body* and, indeed, is an intensely *social* rather than just a personal activity. Put another way, knowledge is generated in the *interaction* between ourselves and our environment. This is obvious when we recall the conversations between research participants – indeed in any part of life - in which different versions of the 'truth' are explored; is it better to allow children to regulate the amount of soft drinks they consume or should the parent dictate consumption? In the processes of conversation 'shades of truth' emerge, and often new perspectives, which enable us to direct our clients in certain directions and avoid others. This is a small snippet of life's experience, but it is a creative process, one that requires thinking, feeling, physicality – it requires the participation of our whole being.

From this perspective, knowledge is not a thing apart from ourselves. It is the process of creating meaning together, using all the shared faculties at our disposal and, by definition, it can never be truly 'objective'. Understanding knowledge and knowledge generation in this way puts very different complexion on what we do as researchers.

Our particular understanding of how knowledge is generated inevitably reflects the prevailing cultural climate. In more structured, hierarchical times, when greater
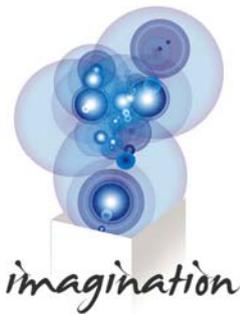
credence was placed on reason over emotion in knowledge generation, knowledge which could be seen as fixed, objective and quantifiable was privileged over subjective, intuitive, experiential knowledge. In current times emotion has enjoyed something of a resurgence of status and research can more easily be accepted as a creative process, inseparable from the researcher. But the polarities are still there and the arguments rumble on; quantitative vs qualitative, measuring performance vs experienced change. The growing party political emphasis in the UK on philosophical concerns; happiness and quality of life as indices of societal success rather than just economic performance is an illustration of this. Should we understand success in this way *or* that?

The term 'research' has come to mean knowledge that is 'objective'; presented as factual, detached, unemotional, not open to interpretation. Just think of the way in which it is portrayed in the media: 'Research has discovered that…', 'Based on research amongst…' Research is presented as definite, indisputable fact. It is a brave person who is willing to challenge research presented with such authority and certainty. And if you dare challenge, you had better be sure to use the same factual, unemotional style or you will be dismissed as ill-informed and hysterical.

But we all know, from our own experience, that research is also 'subjective'; exploratory, tentative, emotional, open to interpretation, because that is the nature of the beast; that is what we are as human beings and 'knowing' is not located solely in our conscious brains.

If we are attempting to integrate 'objective' and 'subjective' perspectives, we need to look at ways in which we can incorporate different ways of knowing; propositional, experiential, conceptual, physiological; to re-unite the mind and body and to view knowing as a personal – and at the same time social - process. Quite a tall order!

Reconciling Imagination, Science and Research

It seems to me that the apparently conflicting faces of research, be they data gathering vs interpretation, divergent vs convergent thinking, storytelling vs logic are all part of the same issue; confusion of the *metaphors* of 'objectivity' and 'subjectivity' with reality. Let me give an example:

Recently, at a briefing meeting Jane, my client, was presenting stimulus material that we were to use in a forthcoming project; concept development for a new snack product. Jane was very keen that we present a series of descriptors in a certain order. I made a feeble protest that this would bore participants and that it was better to present them in a way that fitted the mood and needs of the group at the time. However, she was anxious about the project and her anxiety translated into a need to try to over-control the group process, so she disagreed. I felt a wave of boredom engulf me. And then, implicitly,

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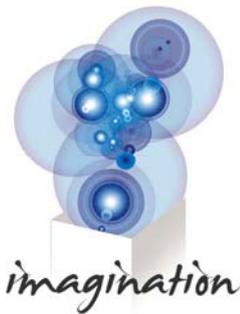
almost by default or through a reluctance to appear too forceful – or maybe just boredom – I found that I had agreed to approach the groups in the mechanistic way that Jane had suggested.

Now this is strange because, in practice, I had no intention of doing this. And, thinking about it afterwards, I realised that this is a common pattern. I pay lip-service to a mechanistic approach, but then I carry out the research in the way that I think is the most appropriate at the time. And, what is even more curious, this is usually what the client expects and wants, in spite of initial protests. If I had carried out the research in the mechanistic way that we had originally agreed, then Jane would have been disappointed.

So what is actually going on here and why is there this collusion between me, the researcher, and Jane, my client? Why this need to pretend that what we are doing is, can be, controlled and rational? And why the need to be so covert?

This small incident is an illustration, I believe, of what happens all the time, at every stage, in the research process. On some level, we present ourselves as 'pure scientists', able to capture, define, and categorise human behaviour in the same way we would pebbles, as if it is a 'thing' we are seeking to understand, rather than a 'process'. But, at the same time, we know that human beings are far too unruly to tolerate being treated in this way – they (and we) defy the attempt to impose this static order because we know this is not the way that human beings are.

But, nonetheless, we keep on trying, regardless; from the tortuous juggling as we strive to achieve the perfectly balanced research sample, to the definition of research participants in terms of the minutiae of their lives (Walkers crisp eaters, Direct Debit users); from the way we define 'consumers' as a species apart from ourselves, to the way we create useful consumer typologies and groupings *and then treat them as if they really exist, rather than being useful tools.* We dissect and isolate and label – because it is only by doing this that we can retain an illusion of control over what we are doing. We talk about 'the research process' *as if* it is truly objective, *as if* the participants in the research groups will, or indeed can, be controlled; run as a mechanical system. We know that this is not how it really is, but if we challenge this way of viewing the process then, implicitly, we challenge the validity of the research process itself. Qualitative research drags the ball and chain of scientific rationalism behind it – and this holds us back.

Why do we do it? One explanation is that we attempt to reduce things to a mechanical system because "only a mechanical system can be clearly understood and transparent" (Allen, 2002)). All well and good. If we did not do this, we would be in the state of unfiltered perception that Aldous Huxley called 'Mind at Large', in which "every person is at each moment capable of remembering all that has ever happened to him and of

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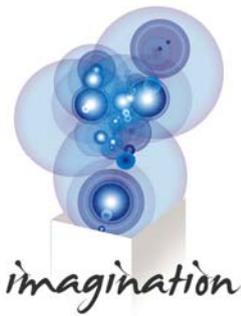
perceiving everything that is happening everywhere in the universe". (Huxley, 1954)
Inconceivable to mere mortals. And not very useful for day to day living.

The trouble is, with this reductionist, mechanical model, we forget that what we perceive
is not reality, just our selected version of it.   We are confusing the 'map' with the
'territory'. We need to find a way of accepting – and believing - that 'objective' and
'subjective' are simply tools which provide different perspectives on the same reality.
Otherwise, research will be stuck in an eternal see-saw, like the infamous 'wife and
mother-in-law' figure-ground dilemma, below, trying to satisfy the demands of seemingly
contradictory masters – and doomed to failure.

Ambiguous figure-ground effects

A

The wife and mother-in-law ambiguity.
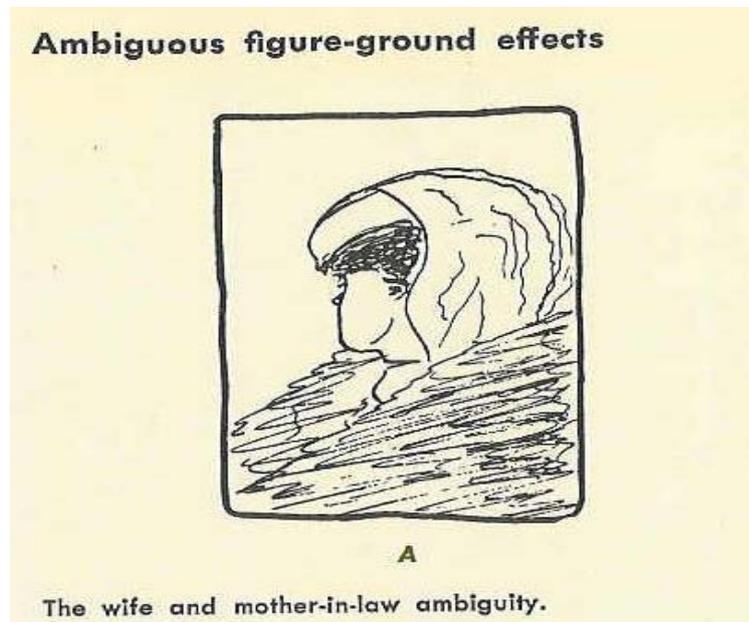
> …we set ourselves against ourselves and become like Ouroboros, the misguided
> snake, who tried to eat his own tail. Ouroboros is the perennial symbol of all
> vicious circles, of every attempt to split our being asunder and make one part
> conquer the other.
>
> (Watts 1954:40)

Sometimes it is hard to believe that we can avoid this objective/subjective split, it is so
deeply ingrained within our cultural heritage. Perhaps it is easier to reinforce the
difference, for example by accepting that 'numbers' and 'ideas' can never be integrated..
Could we, for instance, split the research industry; data factories to churn out the
numbers and 'meta-analysts' to interrogate and interpret (Clegg 2003, Baker &
Callingham 2003).
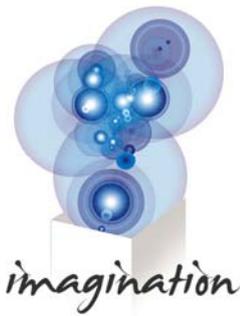
Alternatively, it is tempting to collapse the paradox of objective vs subjective into the convenient panacea 'It's all subjective anyway'; to accept that 'objectivity' is unattainable, always an illusion. However, this approach simply substitutes the quest for 'objectivity' for the equally limiting acceptance of 'subjectivity' - the extreme 'post modern' position that everything is equally valid. But 'subjectivity' undermines credibility. According to accepted wisdom, research based on the researcher's 'subjective' opinion lacks professional grounding. From a client perspective, what weight does 'subjective' opinion carry? How can he or she justify paying for it.

What about an alternative approach; one which attempts to work *with* the paradox of objectivity and subjectivity *at the same time?* Before exploring this route in relation to our research practice, let us briefly look at some academic approaches to this issue.

This objective-subjective dilemma is not confined to commercial researchers. It has exercised scholars across a spectrum of disciplines for centuries. Of particular relevance to researchers is the Social Constructionist, John Shotter's, attempts to reconcile the two sides. Shotter (2003), drawing from a range of disciplines, distinguishes between 'classical, finished sciences' and research sciences, which 'inquire into possibilities not yet actualized'. Basically, Shotter is saying that there is not really that much difference between 'classical, finished sciences', which are ordered and represent 'a reduced and idealised "subject matter" in a static, pictorial manner' and action research (for which read qualitative research) if you view them as existing along a continuum in terms of their development. 'Pure' science starts out with the scientists involved needing to develop a 'grammar' (language, constructs) in order to understand one another and to decide between themselves the areas that are considered worthy of research. The style is conversational and informal as they decide what is important and what is not. At this stage the conversations between peers 'have neither a fully subjective nor fully objective character'. The way in which they think and talk about their work at this early stage is not fixed in stone, already there waiting to be discovered; it is actively created. Shotter goes on to explain that it is only when the science becomes established that scientists '…seek to 'erase' so to speak, their own involvement in producing matters of 'objective fact'.

That is, when the scientists feel they are on solid ground, they cut the umbilical cord from their research thinking, adopt the posture of 'observer' and pretend that the structure was all there from the beginning, waiting to be discovered, rather than being created. This is not a deliberate attempt to deceive; it is just the way we give authority to scientific research within our culture. This explanation seems, to me, to be a very useful way of describing how different perspectives are relevant for different research tasks, although they are essentially part of the same process.

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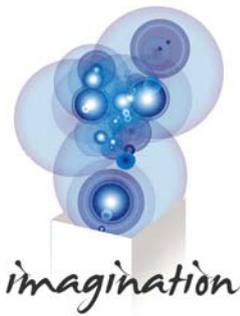
Alan Watts illustrates this well. He describes it as like seeing a cat through a slit in the fence. You see the head and think that's all there is but, as the cat moves past, you see it's body and tail and realise the parts you see are not separate 'things' but part of a whole cat.

Shotter is describing the early stage of a research project, a stage that we are all familiar with; the initial client meeting and you are struggling to understand the inner workings of the client company and the research problem and not to show your confusion.
The client asks;
"So what do you think we ought to do?"
And your mind goes blank and you play for time and ask a question and then, suddenly, from no-where, a plausible suggestion pops up and you offer it up, grateful to your subconscious, and the client seems impressed and it triggers off a thought in him and he responds and suddenly you feel a bit more confident and build on his suggestion and you're on your way. So, over time, the chaotic confusion transforms into a more or less feasible route forward. This is how most new thinking emerges – it is messy, frustrating and tentative – not a straight, predictable direction – though that may be how you describe it in retrospect. This is just as much 'research' as the orderly power point charts we deliver at the end of the project.

Shotter concluded the article by saying;

> Instead of the either - or oscillation between formal systematicity and creativity as fixed and static 'points of view', surely there is now a need in all of science to understand how, dynamically, we can move between them, and in so doing, dialogically or chiasmicly relate them in a meaningful relation with each other.
>
> (Shotter 2003)

Shotter is exploring the questions that we, as commercial researchers, have struggled with for years. How can we utilise the tension between systematizing and creativity – or 'objective' and 'subjective' - in our research practice? And, he is making sense of the early stages of the research process, when creativity, intuition, emotion are all essential elements of knowledge generation – just as they are within the qualitative research process.

M.I.T social scientist and consultant, Donald Schon also throws some interesting light on this debate. Given that commercial qualitative research has developed largely through apprenticeship and is widely regarded as a 'craft', it is appropriate to explore how tacit knowledge can be understood and legitimized. Schon (1982) addresses just this issue when he describes the dichotomy between the 'hard' knowledge of science and scholarship, which has a clearly defined language and grammar and the 'soft' knowledge of artistry and professional practice (within which I would include qualitative research which is often tacit and difficult to articulate.

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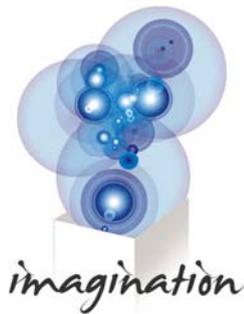
We can readily understand, therefore, not only why uncertainty, uniqueness, instability and value conflict are so trouble-some to the Positivist epistemology of practice, but also why practitioners bound by this epistemology find themselves caught in a dilemma. Their definition of rigorous professional knowledge excludes phenomena they have learned to see as central to their practice. And artistic ways of coping with these phenomena do not qualify, for them, as rigorous professional knowledge.

(Schon 1982:43)

Schon develops an understanding of knowledge and practice based on a close examination of what practitioners actually do, starting with the assumption that competent practitioners know more than they can articulate and exhibit a kind of knowing-in-practice, which is mostly tacit. He postulates that practitioners develop reflection-in-action, by which he means the processes by which they use past knowledge and expertise to inform the unique present situation, i.e. they become researchers in the practice context. This involves constructing 'a new theory of the unique case' in which means and ends are not kept separate but are defined interactively; thinking and doing co-exist and problem setting is part of problem solving. In particular, he suggests that a practitioner makes sense of a unique situation by seeing it as something familiar. The familiar situation functions as a precedent or 'an exemplar for the unfamiliar one' (Kuhn 1997:306), so that past experience can be brought to bear on the current situation.

Reflection-in-action is understood as three kinds of experiment, although in practice these often happen simultaneously; exploratory experiment (to see what follows, without predictions), move-testing experiments (to assess whether the action produces an intended consequence) and hypothesis testing (to see if it effects an intended discrimination amongst predicted consequences). In the process of this experimentation, the practitioner 'shapes the situation, but in conversation with it', i.e. the aim of the practitioner is to transform the situation.

Schon explores reflection-in-action – which I believe is an essential component of qualitative research - with 'scientific' rigour. In doing so, he illustrates how positivist (detached, factual) and interpretive 'paradigms' are not the disparate poles that we sometimes regard them as, but that different research approaches reflect the different needs of the situation, i.e. that all research is contextual.

Although his approach is rather too mechanical for my tastes, by looking at a spectrum of different types of knowledge, Schon is attempting to bridge the gap between classic science and research science. In doing so, he is making explicit and accounting for practice whilst illustrating that each methodology approach is valid and appropriate to the needs of the situation. Legitimization comes from a rigorous methodology which is appropriate to the nature of the study.

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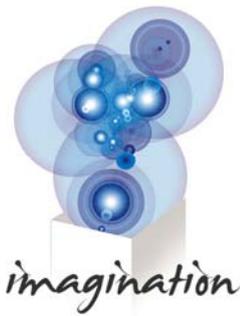
How does all this relate to our qualitative research practice?

Let us return to 'real life'. What relevance has this philosophical debate around different ways of understanding knowledge got to do with the real life issues that concern commercial and social researchers on a day to day basis?

I will sum up the reasons I believe it is relevant:

- Qualitative research within both commercial and academic arenas is still constrained by a traditional scientific paradigm which struggles to make sense of and validate qualitative approaches. In academia it has often been easier to ignore qualitative research than to try to develop a new paradigm which makes sense of this type of knowledge. In commerce, qualitative researchers are adept at 'sitting on the fence' and juggling two conflicting ways of understanding reality - 'realism' (which assumes there are facts to be discovered and harvested) and a variety of 'interpretivist' approaches (which essentially assume that knowledge is constructed) - at the same time.

  And our clients collude; they may insist that the research sample and topic guide are slavishly adhered to, although it is simultaneously accepted that the researcher is providing an informed opinion, based on training and past experience as well as present learning and creative interpretation. This 'fence sitting' limits the development of qualitative research as a way of creative thinking and problem solving, because we are constantly being pulled in opposite directions; to present 'objective' 'discovered' truth and to offer creative direction.

- The scientific model, when crudely interpreted, regards research as data gathering (rather than actionable learning) and the researcher as data gatherer (rather than an active sense maker). Often this leads to research being relegated to a back room function and to under-acknowledgement of its input to decision making. Furthermore, researchers may be excluded from implementation of the strategy that arises from their research, because this is perceived to compromise their 'objectivity'. Researchers who see themselves, essentially, as consultants, using research to inform their thinking, may feel the need to curb their input and expressed opinions for fear of seeming to 'overstep the mark'. As a result, much of the most useful input for the client walks out in the researcher's 'head', at the end of the presentation.

  We present ourselves as observers; forever watching, standing outside, becoming invisible even to ourselves. Our opinions are curtailed. We provide the illusion
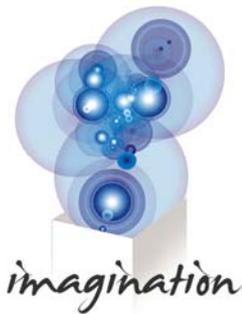
that we are neutral, uncontaminated, uncontaminating[1]. Our language reflects this role, in that much of it is passive, static, retrospective; 'reporting', 'consumers', 'respondents', 'findings', 'methodology', 'briefing', 'target', 'campaign' and conceals our active participation in the 'findings'. It is the language of butterfly collectors who catch, name and mount specimens. But we are more like naturalists, working in a world of shifting relationships, changing perceptions, contextual understanding. We can never really be outside the research situation. We can never be truly objective and nor would we want to be. There is no 'outside'. Our very presence changes the situation, the response, the nature of the inquiry. We all know this so well, it is second nature. And yet we pretend that we don't.

One very important consequence of 'setting ourselves apart' in this way, is that we cut off some of the most powerful sources of learning we have; our intuition and our 'whole-body' experience. The influential Portuguese neuroscientist, Antonio Damasio, has written very persuasively about the essential role that emotions and feelings (the conscious experience of emotions), play in decision making and how it is impossible for us to experience anything, consciously or unconsciously, without constant 'whole body' communication (Damasio 2000). The mind/body split does not exist. It is a fiction. We all know this intuitively – and neuroscience reinforces this belief - but we spend a good part of our everyday lives denying it – presenting our arguments as if they are not informed by our emotions. Damasio challenges the accepted wisdom that logic is at a higher 'level' than creativity and intuition and believes that it might be a more recent evolution than simple rationality. As Mark Earls remarks, gleefully:

Creativity – not rationality – is the icing on the human evolutionary cake.

(Earls 2002:25)

We cut off parts of ourselves, important parts which feed our thinking and creativity, when we succumb to the myth of 'standing outside'. This false premise limits us and prevents us marshalling and utilising all the resources at our disposal. It diminishes our potential.

---

[1] I can hear you protesting. 'No, this is the old model of research. New methods of participatory research have changed all that. Ethnographic approaches mean that researchers are more integrated. There is not the same division of researcher and researched as there is, for example, in focus groups.' I'm sorry, but I don't buy this. The same model exists. All that ethnography and its ilk do is blur the edges. In a way they make it more difficult to see what is really happening. I'm not saying there's anything wrong with new approaches. Far from it. But I believe it is our assumed way of thinking that we need to question, not just the way in which that thinking is expressed.

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- The term, 'Qualitative research', suggests a methodological focus, rather than a way of thinking and a route to understanding and decision making. Spotlighting methodology – in order to demonstrate scientific credentials - detracts from the (less visible) painstaking and skilled thinking, analyses, synthesis, creativity that is knowledge generation – and which is the purpose of research. Consequently, it is easy for those unfamiliar with the rigour of qualitative practice to assume that it lacks discipline; that 'anyone can do it'. One result has been the frequent denigration of qualitative research in academia and the media.

Within commercial research, there has been growing interest in developing a new paradigm which more accurately reflects the activity we call qualitative research (Ereaut 2002, Valentine 2002, Keegan 2005). In parallel, academic research has also been developing new ways of understanding qualitative research (Alvesson & Skolberg 2000, Shotter 1993, Marshall 1999). These approaches attempt to liberate qualitative thinking from the traditional scientific paradigm, but without losing the discipline and rigour associated with the scientific method. You could say they are attempts to unify science and imagination by creating a new paradigm which acknowledges the importance of all our facilities – intellect, intuition, and emotion, in the generation of a holistic type of knowledge.

However, we do not practice our research in a vacuum. Commercial research has a clear purpose – it is not an intellectual pastime. It has to be relevant to – and fit within – our current cultural and social environment. Before exploring how we might understand and practice research in a different way, I will take a broad look at the world we currently inhabit. What are the priorities, concerns and needs of today's world? And, more precisely, what types of knowledge are acceptable, relevant and constructive?

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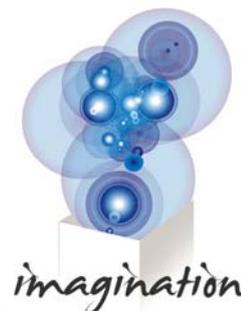
Knowledge in a Brave New World

The changing world order

I will start with a whirlwind tour of some of the key issues and themes that are shaping our lives and working environments and the way in which these themes are influencing how we think and make sense of the world.

Think of some of the issues that have impinged upon your consciousness in the last week; that have entered your letterbox or your conversation, that you have heard on the radio or seen on television. Probably these have included a fair smattering of war, globalisation, house prices, technology, education, neuro-science, communications, global warming, starvation, football, AIDS, China…and so on and on.

When we look around us, we see amazing things. We hear and touch extraordinary things. Our sight, hearing, touch, smell, taste are extended, wrapped around the world through the power of modern communications. We all lived through the collapse of the twin towers as it unfolded on television. We understood the scale of the tsunami even before those who were involved realised its full horror. We watch the moment of fertilisation of sperm and ovum. We can access the world from our palm. These things have become so commonplace that it is easy to forget that we experience the world in a way that no other age has experienced it. We have a huge body of knowledge to draw on. How do we make sense of it all?

As recently as a couple of generations ago, within 'Western culture', when our connections to the larger world were smaller and information flow limited, it made sense to emphasise structure in families and organisations, to define roles precisely; father went to work, mother looked after the home, children were seen and not heard, people knew their place, class barriers ensured they stayed there. There was a belief that absolute truth was possible and that God ruled the world. You could say there were fewer alternative perspectives on life. Of course it was never really that simple, but this was the general drift or at least the 'model' of the world that many people aspired or conformed to.

This old order no longer seems so relevant in a global environment where different world views are commonplace, where individuals and societies are geographically and socially mobile, where there are few certainties and where 'change is the new constant'. Alvin Toffler, in his prophetic book 'Future Shock', published in 1970, anticipates 'the collapse of hierarchy' and 'the new ad-hocracy' (task force management). He predicts 'the fractured family', our attempts at 'taming technology', 'diversity of life-styles', a 'surfeit of sub-cultures' and the need for 'education in the future tense' (teaching children to deal with the future world, not the world of the past). It is a '1984' experience to re-read the book and realise that, thirty five years on, we are, largely, living the future he predicted.

However, you could say that the world has not changed, but the way in which we make sense of it has changed. In recent years, there has been a fundamental shift from viewing the world as 'out there'; immutable, constant, to viewing it as socially constructed, i.e. 'reality' is created in the relationship between the world and our perceptions of it – and this is constantly shifting. We see what we believe, as much as believing what we see. The implications of this apparently simple concept have had a radical effect on our notions of 'truth', 'science', 'objectivity' and, of course, the processes of marketing, social and organisational research and how we understand what it is that we are doing when we 'conduct research' – as I discussed in the previous section, and will come back to in later sections.

Themes that shape our world

The reasons for these changes in our perception of the world have been endlessly debated but, for the purposes of this paper, I would like to focus on a few key themes that are shaping our world and examine what these might mean for the way in which we live our lives and for our qualitative research practice.

Some of these themes are so familiar that they have become clichés; we no longer 'see' them and therefore underestimate their effect on us. As the Social Constructionist, John Shotter puts it, they have become 'rationally invisible'. The themes I have chosen to focus on are by no means exhaustive but will, I hope, throw some light on later discussion:

The end of certainty: In a post modern age it is difficult to hold on to a belief in absolutes. Social Constructionism – at least within large sectors of the Western world - has increasingly become the cultural 'norm'. To a large extent, we have come to accept that we construct our world rather than merely observe what is 'out there'. We each experience things differently, depending on our past experiences, training, expectations, context etc., but generally we operate within broadly agreed cultural parameters.

> …instead of focusing immediately upon how individuals come to know the objects and entities in the world around them, we are becoming more interested in how people first develop and sustain certain *ways* of relating themselves to each other in their talk, and then, from within these ways of talking, make sense of their surroundings.
>
> (Shotter 1993)

Those of us with teenage children do not need reminding of this; a teenager's world view of, say, rights and responsibilities, is likely to be very differently constructed from that of her parents. Our parenting styles today reflect this shift; for instance parents are more likely to negotiate rules with their children, taking into account different perspectives of

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parent and child. 'Right' and 'wrong' are less clear-cut. Authoritarian parenting is regarded as less 'appropriate' – or even less feasible – nowadays.

Interconnectedness: For three centuries Western science has successfully explained many of the workings of the universe, aided by the mathematics of Newton and Leibniz. It was essentially a clockwork world, one characterized by repetition and predictability; a linear, dependable world and a very useful model. But this is no longer enough to explain how the world works:

> Most of nature, however, is nonlinear and is not easily predicted. Weather is the classic example: many components interacting in complex ways, leading to notorious unpredictability. Ecosystems, for instance, economic entities, developing embryos, and the brain– each is an example of complex dynamics that defy mathematical analysis or simulation.
>
> (Lewin 1993)

Nonlinear systems behave in quite different ways to linear systems. Small inputs can lead to dramatically large, but unpredictable, consequences. Many of us are familiar with the so-called 'butterfly effect'; a butterfly flaps its wings over the Amazon rain forest, and sets in motion events that lead to a storm over Chicago. The next time the butterfly flaps its wings, however, nothing of meteorological consequence happens. Nonlinear systems, and other ideas and terms from the Complexity Sciences, such as 'edge of chaos', 'self-organising systems', 'strange attractors', 'fractals', are gradually infiltrating our way of thinking and our language.

There is an increasing acceptance that we cannot compartmentalise our world. The effects of one event may trigger a seemingly unrelated happening elsewhere. We cannot totally predict or anticipate the result of our actions. The best we can do is form an intention, act on it and accept that the outcome will be a consequence of circumstances and the mesh of our intentions along with those of others. If we really accept this proposition, think what it means in terms of the five year plan!

These notions of interconnectedness, which represent the forefront of modern science, are remarkably similar to the insights from Zen Buddhism and the Vedanta philosophy of Hinduism, explored by Alan Watts and touched upon in the previous section. It is ironic that, at a time when, arguably, East and West are ideologically more distant than they have ever been, philosophically they are increasingly coming into alignment.

Speed: Faster and faster communications demand faster and faster response times and an expectation of 'availability'. How does this affect decision making, given that decisions based on 'all the facts' are often obsolete before they are made? Increasingly decisions have to be made, not on the basis of considered 'fact', but on predictions, anticipations of future 'fact'. The ability and willingness to make 'appropriate' decisions

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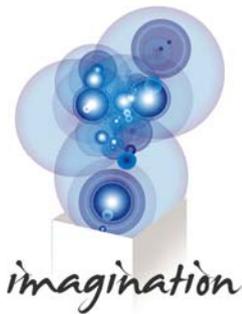
'on the hoof' – or to decide not to make them - is a key requirement of leadership nowadays.

> Every society faces not merely a succession of *probably* futures, but an array of *possible* futures, and a conflict over *preferable* futures.
>
> (Toffler, 1970)

We cannot wait to be absolutely sure about the effects of global warming. We have to act 'as if' it is true. But acting 'as if' a process or event will happen does, in itself, influence the likelihood of its occurrence. Nothing can be viewed in isolation. You could say that it was ever thus; we all – from individuals to large corporations - attempt to plan our futures in one way or another and have to make decisions based on insufficient information. Perhaps the difference is that 'good enough' decision making – with its strong emphasis on speed and improvisation – is becoming more acceptable within scientific thinking, where 'objectivity', caution and fact gathering have traditionally been rooted.

The 'living present': There is a view, arising from Complexity Sciences and gaining wider acceptability, that all we can ever know is the present moment or 'the living present' (although the term was used by John Dewey in the '30s and Alan Watts in the '50s, with very similar meaning). This view holds that we are continually reconstructing our past, in the light of the present and of an anticipated future.

> The process perspective takes a prospective view in which the future is being perpetually created in the living present on the basis of present reconstructions of the past. In the living present, expectations of the future greatly influence present reconstructions of the past, whilst those reconstructions are affecting expectations. Time in the present, therefore, has a circular structure. It is this circular interaction between future and past in the present that is perpetually creating the future as both continuity and potential transformation at the same time.
>
> (Stacey 2003)

This perspective emphasises the creative and interactive nature of the way in which we make sense of our experience. It understands life as process, rather than a series of static or contained events and implies continual movement and change. Knowledge itself can be understood in this way. It is not static, but constantly being recreated as we incorporate new perceptions and experiences into our shared experience, over time.

The death of 'personality': Not so long ago, psychologists talked about 'personality traits', which remained relatively constant regardless of context. This perspective grew out of the emphasis on the individual as a unit, rather than part of a community. Amongst people in general there was a view – and often there still is - that to change

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your mind shows a lack of moral fibre. Think how politicians are vilified for swapping parties or even re-considering views they first expressed years before.

However, we now find more fluid notions of personality (Weick 1995; Stacey 2003), which start from the premise that we are essentially and unambiguously social creatures, even when we are on our own. These perspectives emphasis that we behave in different, and often contradictory, ways depending on the situation and the social group we are in. A caring neighbour to an Asian family may become a racist thug at a football match. Take Diana, Princess of Wales. She became iconic not just because she was a beautiful princess, but because she was such a wild and wonderful mix, like the rest of us; caring mother, innocent girl, adulteress, glamour queen, high handed, casual, scheming, a charity worker. She was a chameleon.

This perspective sees us acting less as discrete units with a constant set of values and beliefs, but as part of a fluid network of relationships in which values and beliefs emerge and are played out in a variety of different ways depending on context.

'Personality trait' theory emphasises constancy, whereas Complexity theory emphasises fluidity and flexibility. Neither view is right or wrong. It depends on what we pay attention to. And it is a matter of which is the most useful way of understanding for the task at hand. As we are required to become more and more adaptable and improvisational in our working and personal lives, a 'Complexity' view of personality may simply be more useful for making sense of our experience.

All of these cultural shifts have both informed and been informed by new theories and perspectives in the natural sciences, social sciences and management and organisational development which, in turn, affect the way in which we work and what is required of us. To a greater or lesser extent – and consciously as well as unconsciously - they are colouring our understanding of the world at large and our understanding of the organisations we work with; their policies and strategies, their marketing and internal communications.

In what ways does, or could, this thinking impact on our work as qualitative researchers? What does it suggest to us about the way in which our practice is evolving and what might be expected of us by our clients now and in the future?

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What are the implications of this 'world view' for qualitative research practice?

These are huge areas of change that I have barely have touched on - and who knows how they will develop in the future. However, I want to try to make some connections between these cultural and societal trends and the commercial qualitative research industry; to start to understand what they might mean for our practice.

Research as social construction

A Social Constructionist perspective takes as given that we construct our world, in the interaction between ourselves and our environment: This is an intensely creative process and cannot be otherwise. Clearly this does not imply that we all have totally different perceptions of the world. Other people, as well as the physical world, are part of our environment and this limits our options; we are constantly shaping and being shaped by our environment, human and otherwise. It is not a free for all. In practice it means there are differences but, in the main, not wildly different world views. If there were, buying a loaf of bread would be a major philosophical hurdle. We are hard-wired for a degree of conformity and co-operation.

Research is, by its nature, a process of construction, rather than simple discovery, as we select what we pay attention to, interpret, structure and develop knowledge in ways that make sense to us and, we hope, to our clients. We have no option but to interpret what our senses perceive and the way in which we interpret sensory input is influenced by the prevailing world view or paradigm as well as our personal experience.

Given that we all make sense of the world slightly differently, depending on our past experience, training, knowledge etc., the greater the diversity of input into a research process, the greater the potential range of ideas that emerge. Engaging clients, customers, creatives, whoever else may contribute in some way, as co-creators, into the research process can only increase the scope of our knowledge and options. However, this does not necessarily mean that all contributions are equal or that the process needs to be egalitarian – there are judgements to be made about how best to manage the involvement of different parties in the process.

If we accept this perspective, then it has important implications for our research practice; for a start it assumes knowledge is never static and that it is coloured by cultural and personal agendas. Perhaps more contentiously, I would argue that the validity of a research approach must also be evaluated by socially constructed standards – which cannot be applied from 'outside'.

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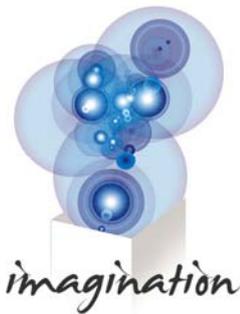
Researching the future

The research we are carrying out today has to relate to people's future needs, not those of the past, although we are drawing on the past to create knowledge. How can we prepare for a flu epidemic that may never arrive? How can we anticipate next year's fickle teenage fashions? If we cannot assume a linear relationship between the past and the future, how then do we answer the 'what if' questions? Just as Toffler talks about 'education in the future tense', so we need to deal with 'research in the future tense'. Increasingly we need to help our clients answer the questions that they do not yet know they have. How do we go about doing this? What can we learn from Complexity sciences, Social Constructionism and relationship psychology which will help us to anticipate the future?

Finding the creative edge

'Researching the future' can, perhaps, be made more tangible by linking it with our understanding of imagination and creativity. Complexity Theory defines the 'edge of chaos', at its simplest level, as the point in a system where there is stability and instability at the same time. There is a balance; neither too little nor too much structure, the state between chaos and stuckness (Stacey 2003). It is claimed that this is where creativity emerges. If this is so, if the 'edge of chaos' is where change and new thinking happens, is not this where we should be working if we are concerned with innovation? If it is inspiration and ground breaking direction we are after, 'safe research' is less likely to produce the change we need. Instead we must encourage situations which we cannot totally control, but which also, at the same time, are contained, not chaotic; places where new thinking can emerge. And we must also understand how to tap the creativity in ourselves and to understand how we might encourage others – clients, research participants - to stimulate their creative potential as well.

Much work, carried out over the last two decades on the nature of creativity and idea generation, indicates that, not only are these essential components of successful business development, but they can also be developed through structured training (Puccio, Firestien, Coyle & Masucci 2006). If we accept that knowledge is created, as much as discovered, then it is important that our abilities to encourage a creative orientation in ourselves, our clients, our research participants is finely honed.

In attempting to address these questions, qualitative research is seeing a resurgence of interest in creative research techniques. Sometimes this can be as simple as allowing research participants to set the agenda; issues may emerge which the researcher has not anticipated. Or it may involve some disruption in habitual patterns; psycho-drawing, role play, deferring judgement, redefining 'strange' ideas into useful ones (Parnes 1967). Currently more structured approaches such as Creative Workshops (Holmes & Keegan 1983) and Breakthrough Events (Langmaid & Andrews 2003) are increasingly being used to position 're-search' as 'future-search'. In these approaches, researchers work with people in groups to re-define problems, generate new ideas, create alternative

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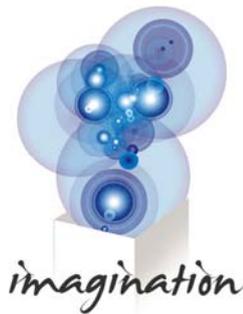
interpretations. These are approaches which explore possible futures that enable researchers and clients to develop hypotheses and make educated guesses about trends and cultural shifts.

To give an example: We are currently working with a large financial organisation to help them to redefine their business. This involves conversations with very diverse groups of people, of all ages, regions, backgrounds, in order to explore peoples' attitudes, needs, hopes, fears for their lives and their families – and not just their financial lives. Essentially, it is to understand what 'makes them tick'. We approached the project in a variety of ways, one of which was a series of day long Breakthrough Events, in which a mixes of people from 17-70, shared their lives and aspirations with us. Some of this involved 'Future-Search' techniques, in which they worked in syndicate groups to re-define problems (which they themselves had voiced) and explore possible futures. We used a wide range of psychographic and enabling techniques, such as drawing and role play; much of the agenda was set by people themselves. Some of these sessions were videoed or photographed. We got a tremendous amount of useful output from these sessions, but were particularly surprised at the value participants themselves seemed to derive from them. Many participants claimed that the day had given them the time to think about what they really wanted from their lives – time that they rarely found in 'real life'.

However, the most important aspect was that we needed to immerse our clients in the output from the Breakthrough Events [Ideally we would have included them in the Events, but this was not possible]. We 'presented the findings', but this was not enough. We needed active client participation if the work was to really feed into cultural change within the organisation – and if it did not feed cultural change, then it would have been little more than entertainment. We facilitated a number of half day Workshops within the organisation, in which stakeholders were encouraged to work with us to connect the output from the research with their own perceptions, beliefs and also their role within the organisation. We needed to make the research outcomes real and we needed clients to 'own' them, if they were to start changing 'hearts and minds'. This is not an easy process and it needs to be part of a wider agenda of cultural change, strongly supported by senior management.

The growing importance of leadership

Working life is not only about fixed, learnt skills or knowledge. Increasingly it is about acting authoritatively, making 'appropriate' or 'good enough' decisions in an uncertain situation, where there is insufficient information and too little time to gather it. Informed improvisation becomes the name of the game.

> Groups tend to recognise the leader role in those who have
> acquired a great spontaneity, a greater ability to deal with the
> unknown as it emerges from the known context.
>
> (Griffin 2002)

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Do we see ourselves as leading, as showing spontaneity and a greater ability to deal with the unknown? This is not a characteristic that we would associated with the traditional researcher role, but I would argue that it is essential for a new researcher role where there is a requirement to make informed decisions, strategic recommendations, creative leaps with limited time and partial resources. Leadership needs greater acknowledgement and development within a research context. But to lead, we need to be confident to express our opinions, to go beyond the research. We need to define 'research' as 'research consultancy'; to get it beyond the 'objectivity' stranglehold.

Challenging the 'linear' model of research

The speed of expected turnaround from research to feedback is accelerating. We've all experienced it; the phone call the next morning – what were the 'findings' from last night's groups? There is no time for consideration. We feel we have to respond. We are the research experts, aren't we?   With a faster and faster turnaround and expectation of 'results', do we just need to think faster? Is this about developing the ability to assimilate, prioritise and generate knowledge more quickly so that we can make fast but appropriate responses? Or do we need to re-think the research model that puts us in this position?

The way that research projects are traditionally structured means that we put ourselves in the position where in accepting the project, *we* own the problem and have to deliver the solution; to 'give our client an answer'. Generally this means adopting a linear approach to research, i.e. the client passes the agreed brief to us, we go off and solve the research problem and, hopefully, come back with our 'findings' and pass the solution back to the client, like a fatted calf. Is this the most useful way of creating and conveying knowledge?   Are there better ways in which clients can 'know' the research outcomes? When we start thinking along these lines, we begin to question this linear model of research.   Qualitative research, in particular, does not fall naturally into this model. There is an inevitable tension in forcing non-linear processes, such as knowledge generation, which is messy and unpredictable into a linear structure, in which much of the essence of knowledge can be lost in the process.

An alternative way of understanding research is as a more co-operative process, in which all the parties work together and spread the responsibility for generating knowledge. This can be a richer and more productive way of working. We start to consider how we can break down boundaries so that more interaction can occur. The importance of networks and viral development of knowledge is highlighted.

For instance, we have recently been working with a client on repositioning a particular branded service. We have worked together with the client and ad agency to identify brand positionings, develop them in research and act in a planning role to steer thinking within the company and translate the ideas into effective advertising. Of course, this requires a particular quality of relationship between all the parties involved, in order to
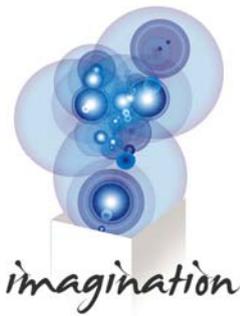
avoid some individuals or parties feeling that their role or input is threatened or under acknowledged. Often these sensitivities result from historical precedent. The more we can change existing patterns, the more natural working in this way will seem.

The researcher as integral to knowledge creation

Although I am advocating that we try to breaking down role boundaries and work together to a greater extent, I am not suggesting that individual contribution is unimportant. On the contrary. Through emphasising co-creation and shared knowledge, there is a danger of underestimating the input of the researcher. 'Interconnectivity' and 'relationship' are often interpreted as 'out there'; person to person, group to group, client to researcher, researcher to 'consumer'. However, co-creation can equally be applied to the researcher's 'conversation' within him or herself. It is what Ralph Stacey, from a complexity perspective, refers to as 'silent conversation', in which the individual is effectively going through the same processes 'internally' as the team may be engaged in 'externally' in conversation with each other.

Symbolic Interactionist, G.H.Mead (1962), refers to this internal conversation and problem resolution as the 'parliament of selves'. The analysis, interpretation and presentation of knowledge generated through research are hugely skilled activities which have taken a seasoned researcher years to hone. The reflections, connections, intuition and inspiration which go into generating knowledge from 'data' – and that distinguish knowledge from data – what we loosely label as 'analysis' – are the kernel of qualitative research. And this takes time. The fact that it is largely invisible in the research process has meant that it is often ignored. Without it, we would be just data gatherers.

Equally, co-creation does not imply equal or similar input. If it did there would be no point. It is the diversity of experience and perspectives of everyone involved that create genuine innovation.

## How do we, as researchers, deal with these implications?

Fortunately qualitative research is blessed with having a well established pedigree in many of the qualities needed to contribute to this new perspective on the world. You could say that many of have been working in these ways for decades and that fashion has only just caught up with us.

We are expert at making connections, establishing relationships, working with the unknown, making creative leaps and creating meaning within the context of the client's problems, 'consumers' lives and the world at large.

But we are timid. We are timid in two ways. Firstly, we often hang on to an outdated model of research, with a linear structure, hidebound by research protocols which emphasise monitoring and control, in a world that needs ideas and inspiration. Then we

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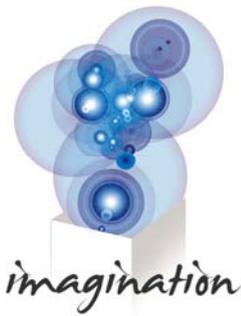
conform to a system that 'divides and rules', which further limits our potential: We separate 'consumers' from 'clients', our professional selves from our personal selves, 'data' from 'interpretation' 'logic' from 'emotion'. And indeed we often separate 'research' from 'imagination'. We 'allow' our clients to define the problem rather than helping them to explore and identify it as part of the research process. We are also timid in that, too often, we avoid speaking out, voicing our opinion, for fear that we will not be considered 'proper' researchers. Our own views are carefully laundered for client consumption.

Of course this isn't true all the time. When we know our clients well, when we feel comfortable and expansive, then we do not revert to this default mode. Our research is more imaginative, we make more connections, invite more input. But often we still feel on shaky ground because we have no theoretical underpinning for this way of working and we are fearful that we will be seen as impostors.

How could we begin to change this? Let us now bring these themes together and look at how we might evolve a way of researching which in more inclusive and responsive to the world as we know it, to the needs of research and our clients and to an appropriate understanding of how we generate knowledge.
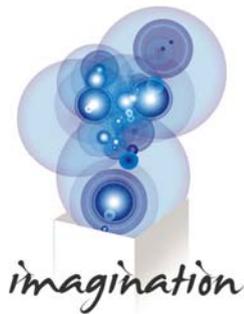
'Emergent Inquiry': A new qualitative perspective

What do I mean by 'emergent inquiry?'

The traditional scientific method – in the sense in which it is popularly understood - is very reassuring. It presents a world which is knowable, controllable and predictable. It enables us to make sense of the world, in a myriad of ways. Its benefits are clear. However, it does not mirror the world as we experience it; a world which is altogether less coherent and less predictable. This latter world is the one we must deal with as researchers – as human beings. We face a dilemma. Do we squeeze our 'data' into pre-ordained categories, in a reductionist manner, possibly losing the essence of our inquiry in the process – but creating manageable 'findings' - or do we immerse our clients in the viscera of raw data and hope that they will swim rather than sink in the enormity of it all and pull out something of benefit. Of course, in the crudest sense, this is the dilemma we face every time we put together a presentation. How do we shape and select input, convey emotion and contradiction, argue rationally, somehow get the clients 'inside the heads' of the research participants and also leave them with a sense of understanding and direction …and so on. It's a daunting task and we only ever partially succeed. And of course it is not an either-or choice; we do the best we can to combine richness of output with manageability, coherence and direction.

'Emergent Inquiry' is an attempt to provide a rationale for what many of us already do, which is combine the best of scientific method with innovation (or creativity, imagination, Social Constructionism, call it what you will) in order to create as full and holistic an understanding as possible with our clients; understanding which will enable them to make appropriate business decisions. Emergent Inquiry has grown out of current thinking in the Complexity Sciences, Social Constructionism and Symbolic Interactionism, as well as current commercial qualitative practice.

In essence, the aim is to loosen the boundaries of research, making it more congruent with 'everyday life', whilst at the same time maintaining research rigour and creative direction; scientific method acts as useful discipline, but is not a set of rules. From this perspective, knowledge is 'emergent'. This means that it is not fixed and immutable, but may develop and change over time, being fed from the broad pool of clients, researchers, research participants and so on. Research, by this definition, is a creative and collaborative process.

By Emergent Inquiry, I mean the sort of research which is open to, and builds on, ideas wherever they come from, which is not constrained by research convention; research which is creative, which engages feelings, beliefs, intuition as well as intellect. You could say it is 'holistic' research. It is not hidebound by role; researcher, client, consumer, employee, but allows each person to bring different perspectives to the inquiry on the basis that greater diversity encourages greater creativity and more – and

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better - outcomes. I would regard emergent inquiry as a 'mind-set' or a way of practicing, rather than a collection of research techniques.
But what does this actually mean for day to day qualitative practice?

In my thinking so far, I would see Emergent Inquiry as involving three interwoven and fluid strands or themes. All of these are ways of pushing back the parameters of research; making it more in line with 'real life'; richer, messier, more contradictory. Essentially, it is an attempt to move from a linear to a non-linear perspective.

Acknowledging and welcoming emotional input

We 'know' in every fibre of our bodies. Admittedly we 'know' in different ways in our muscles and skin than we know with our conscious mind. The point I am making is that 'knowing' is not restricted to the brain:

> …we accept a definition of ourselves which confines the self to the source and to the limitations of conscious attention. This definition is miserably insufficient, for in fact we know how to grow brains and eyes, ears and fingers, hearts and bones, in just the same way that we know how to walk and breathe, talk and think – only we can't put it into words. Words are too slow and too clumsy for describing such things, and conscious attention is too narrow for keeping track of all their detail.

(Watts 1969:138)

In fact there is a belief within some medical circles, partly based on anecdotal reports from a number of organ transplant recipients, that memories reside or can be activated deep inside our bodily cells as well as our minds - or brains.
(www.med.unc.edu/wellness/main/links/cellular%20memory.htm). Reportedly, there have been a number of organ recipients who have developed certain tastes or aptitudes after their transplant which they did not have before and which were characteristics of the donor. Clearly this is a highly controversial area, but it does underscore how little we still know about the relationship between mind and body. Is it so inconceivable that, for example, our hand can 'know' to remove itself from a flame - and move so fast that that the message bypasses the brain?

Or, take a headline I read in this week's Sunday Times, "The Defence attorney argued that it was his brain that stole the money not him" (Sunday Times 9th July 2006). The story related to a man whose brain had been shrinking, a fact substantiated by an MRI scan. His defence lawyer argued that the shrinkage of his brain had affected his judgement and so he could not be held responsible for the crime.

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These two items highlight the huge confusion that exists in our notion of 'self'. Many of us would question whether memory can really exist in the body, outside the brain. But can we also argue that the brain is capable of acting independently from the 'self'? Where then, does the 'self' reside? Clearly we still have a lot to learn, but one thing is fairly clear. We 'know' a lot more – wherever this 'knowing' is located - than our conscious mind lets on – and it is time that we let other parts of our 'self' get in on the act.

As we touched on earlier, the separation of mind, body and emotion, introduced by Decartes in the mid 17th century and now largely discredited by neuroscience, is alive and well in the world of marketing and social research. Opinion, feeling and emotion are still concealed inputs to research; we act as if they do not exist whilst unavoidably employing them in every decision we make. Indeed they are an invaluable input to our understanding, so much so that their absence undermines reason:

> The neurological evidence simply suggests that selective absence of emotion is a problem. Well targeted and well-deployed emotion seems to be a support system without which the edifice of reason cannot operate properly. These results and their interpretation called into question the idea of dismissing emotion as a luxury or a nuisance or a mere evolutionary vestige. They also made it possible to view emotion as an embodiment of the logic of survival.
>
> (Damasio 2000:42)

It is important to acknowledge that emotional experience – from research participants, researchers, clients and other stake-holders – as valid input to research. Our opinions are not random or irrelevant. They arise in the context of the research situation and are informed by past experience. As such they are critical and, indeed, are the basis of research and consultancy, which are as much experiential and emotional as cerebral. What we experience, what we feel – and what others experience and feel - is valid research input. If we attempt to cut out this out, then we revert to literal interpretation; to taking what people say at face value. Experienced qualitative researchers have always accepted the importance of emotion in research. I'm not saying anything new, but I think it needs greater emphasis. By openly acknowledging the importance of emotion, we broaden the scope of the research process; it becomes more true to 'real life' situations and in this way it enables more relevant knowledge generation.

Giving a practical example makes this clearer. Experienced qualitative researchers will readily describe the feeling they sometimes get in a research situation;, they don't know quite what it is, but they know something is happening. One veteran qualitative researcher described it as 'a bit like butterflies in my stomach. It's hard to describe, but I know something is happening. It's like I know emotionally, before I understand it – before I get the intellectual understanding. Like an emotional footprint. I know I'm on to something important and I have to just wait and be alert – like a lion stalking the prey, I

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suppose – and not interfere. Sometimes it is when things are confused or when, for no apparent reason, I get really interested in what is going on.'

We are using this instinct, this way of knowing, instinctively – as we do in the rest of life – but how often do we encourage young researchers to watch out for these moments. We are more likely – inadvertently rather than deliberately – to encourage them not to trust their emotions, to dampen down such 'instincts'. And, of course, there are good reasons for this – emotional responses which are un-disciplined are like loose cannons. Researching with all our faculties, including our emotions, is not an excuse for self-indulgence. Damasio stresses the importance of 'well targeted and well deployed emotion'. Emotion has had a bad press over the years and we tend to associate it with excess, lack of rationality and distortion. We have been very effective at learning how to discipline and focus our rational minds, but less effective at developing strategies for utilising emotional energy in a positive way. This needs to be part of researcher training. Ignoring emotional content when researching is not the solution; we need to acknowledge it but also know how to utilise it, as an aid to understanding.

## Generating knowledge as a way of life

When people say that we need to integrate research from different sources, they usually mean that qualitative research needs to be married up with other 'respectable' forms of research input, such as desk research, data bases, quantitative research. I'm not dismissing these research inputs, but it is not what I mean here. I am talking about something more basic.

Within our culture, we have grown to view 'research' as something separate from 'life' when, in practice, we experience the day to day world through 'research'; we observe, make meaning, create connections, test hypotheses, experiment. I am suggesting that we need to consciously lower the barrier between 'research' and 'life'. Instead of 'research' being corralled into research *method*, the researcher – along with everyone else involved in the project – would keep their eyes and ears open and gather clues and inspiration wherever it is to be found. This is already happening in much research, for example, with the increased emphasis on ethnographic techniques and pre and post focus group activities for research participants, but I think we need to go further, so research itself is less about research method and more about research as a way of understanding and thinking (in which method is a useful tool).

This perspective assumes that research fodder is all around, if we can recognise it, connect with it and allow it to feed our knowledge generation. The more we can get out of role – client, employee, researcher, consumer – whilst still using the experiences, knowledge, skills and rigour that are associated with that role, the more connections we can make and, potentially, the more creative and useful the outcome.

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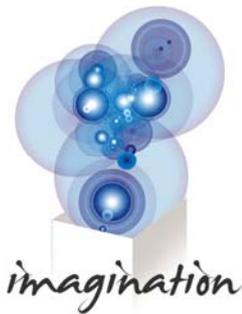
Problem exploration and definition as part of the research inquiry

Where does research begin and end? In shaping and defining a relevant research inquiry, we are partially determining the outcome; the topic of inquiry is socially constructed, just as the outcome is. Yet too often we are willing to work with a 'problem' that is ill though out or unclear – which hasn't been given the attention it deserves. We 'accept' it from the client with only perfunctory questioning. This may be fine when the project is fairly simple, but for larger or complex problems and projects, it is just not good enough. And more and more projects are complex, because we live in increasingly complex working environments.

When I was a cub researcher, I worked on a project for a shoe manufacturer (now long defunct) who wanted to find out why certain shoe styles were not popular, when they were very similar to shoes that their competitors were selling successfully. We took the client's definition of the problem at face value and duly carried out a number of group discussions. We discovered that, whilst there was nothing wrong with the shoe styles, potential customers could not bring themselves to go in the stores, because they hated the image they portrayed. Even if the styles had been the peak of fashion, they would not have bought them, because they would not enter the shop. Perhaps if we had worked closer with the client we would have defined the problem in a different – and more fruitful - way and this would have led to a very different, and more useful, research project.

Qualitative research needs to encompass problem definition as part of the research process. Process consultants (Schein 1999) would take this as given but it is not traditionally part of the researcher role. If, however, the role is redefined as 'research consultant' then it is essential. At Campbell Keegan we have carried out facilitated workshops with clients, including a relevant mix of stakeholders from within the organisation, and from outside as well, in order to explore issues from different perspectives and help define the 'problem' to work on. And, when this is part of our task, then it needs to be costed as such, rather than loosely described as a 'briefing'. However, this is a sensitive area. The role of 'client' implies knowledge of the problem. A client is 'supposed' to be able to define the problem and know what steps he or she needs to take to 'solve' it. But, as process consultant, Edgar Schein points out, the client 'often does not know what she is looking for and indeed should not really be expected to know'. A change of role expectations between clients and researchers is needed before problem definition can be openly acknowledged as a valid research area.

At the end of the project, the traditional research model decrees that the researcher hands over the 'findings' and walks away. To be involved in research implementation is deemed inappropriate; it is in conflict with the 'objectivity' of the researcher. As a result, the researcher, by now a repository of knowledge which is not easily transferred as 'findings', is dismissed and a valuable resource is lost. By contrast, a 'process consultancy' model implies developing research knowledge within the context in which it
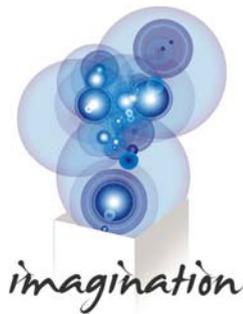
is relevant, so that learning from the research can be disseminated and developed.   For example, on occasions, we continue to work in the client company, inputting into corporate development. Sometimes this is in the role of 'consumer champion', to ensure that the project stays true to consumer needs. At other times it is as an impartial participant, who can help clients to question and draw out implications from particular strategies. Both of these roles draw on the wide experience which we, as qualitative researchers, have of people, their needs, beliefs, aspirations etc., as well as knowledge of specific markets or social contexts. Working with clients in this way, to draw out the implications of the research knowledge and move this forward within the organisation is a key part of consultancy and maximising the benefits from the research.

I am not suggesting that we share the whole research experience and analyses with our clients. We are good at analyses; we have the experience and honed skills. Attempting to share analysis in the early stages of a project can be time-wasting and unproductive. However, once we have developed our initial thinking and hypotheses, sharing and developing thinking further with our clients as a means of disseminating knowledge and encouraging involvement throughout the organisation is good practice. There is no formula for this. We need to stay flexible to determine at what stage co-creation is useful and when it is counter-productive or a waste of resources. We also have to work closely with those in the research or insight departments, so that this is a co-operative task, rather than being seen as external researchers encroaching on the planning or internal organisation functions.

Where does all this take us?

If we – researchers, clients, agencies - access all of our faculties, abilities, experience, feeling, we can bring a lot more to the inquiry than, in general, we currently allow. And we would also put our various roles to one side during the process, as we worked as co-inquirers on the task. Roles have their uses, but they can get in the way of inquiry if they limit the extent to which we allow ourselves to become involved; if we can only participate 'in role'. Ideally we would each bring the breadth of our experience to a situation, without being hide-bound by role. This might enable researchers, consumers and clients to jointly work together, rather than being pre-determined stops on a linear path.

Emergent inquiry implies co-creation of knowledge that is meaningful in the context of the problem. Judi Marshall, an academic researcher, describes this process of 'living life as inquiry', as:

> By *living life as inquiry* I mean a range of beliefs, strategies and ways of behaving
> which encourage me to treat little as fixed, finished, clear-cut. Rather, I have an
> image of living continually in process, adjusting, seeing what emerges, bringing

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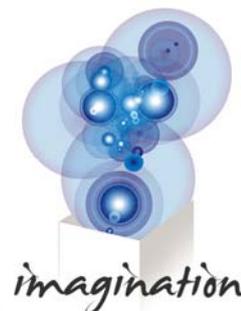
these things into question…In this integrated life, in which research is not
separate or bounded, I <u>must</u> hold an attitude of continuing inquiry, as I seek to
live with integrity, believing in multiple perspectives rather than one truth, holding
visions of a more equal world and hoping to contribute to that practically, not
separating off academic knowing from the rest of my activity.

(Marshall, 1999:155-171)

I do not share her view of emergent inquiry as a spiritual journey, but I agree with her
basic orientation; that research can be a process of ongoing inquiry which is not
bounded by the separation of reason and emotion, which is open to ideas wherever they
emerge, which is a broader process than just 'research' by its traditional definition and
which allows for a range of different perspectives.

What then are the underlying assumptions of this approach?

Trying to pull out what characterises this approach and sum up how it differs from more
traditional approaches to research, I have come up with the following, which is a sort of
'work in progress' understanding of what emergent inquiry might mean:

- Curiosity and openness to whatever emerges is the starting point; to be engaged
  with the problem (even if not the product area) is a pre-requisite. Creating
  possible solutions to problems is part of being human, as well as part of being a
  researcher. If you help define the problem, there is much more interest in helping
  to find suitable 'solutions'

- Defining the problem is part of the solution. If we accept 'the problem' on a platter,
  we do not have the opportunity to help shape it. However, if we accept that
  knowledge is created, then the 'problem' is also created through the way we
  choose which aspects we will pay attention to, and there are many possible
  options. Shaping the question is central to the task of research, **is** part of the
  research, in that the way the question is shaped will inevitably influence the
  outcome.

- Knowledge is constantly moving on, being re-created. It is never static. We can
  get a fix on a particular research problem or issue and create potential solutions -
  and this is generally good enough for our purposes - but it is always work in
  progress, it can never be the final solution.

- Our role is to facilitate the creation of knowledge, but we do not have sole
  responsibility for delivering 'an answer' to the client. It is important that the
  thinking, guidance, potential routes that we offer can be further worked on with

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our clients, so that there is the greatest possible input to decision making.
Working on the potential directions together, either as part of the feedback
session or at separate sessions afterwards or as an ongoing 'consumer
champion' are fruitful way of bringing knowledge together, developing it and
exploring implications – rather than the more common sequential process, in
which the researcher is dismissed whilst the client group decide what to do with
the 'findings'.

- We are participants in the research process, not observers. As such our
  emotional responses in the research situation – as well as those of research
  participants, clients and other stakeholders are just as valid as our rational
  responses – in fact are invaluable - in understanding and constructing possible
  outcomes of the research.

- As researchers, starting from a position of ignorance is OK. We may be experts
  in research approaches, but we are probably not experts in the subject matter we
  are focussing on or in creating solutions to the particular problem we are
  exploring. In relation to our clients we tend to adopt the role of the supplier-client
  or expert-patient. In both of these role relationships, the power balance is stuck
  and the possibilities for interaction and development of ideas is stilted, because
  the roles tend to define the interaction. Clients generally feel that they ought to
  know the research question. Researchers generally feel that they should not be
  too challenging to the client's defined objectives. In the ideal world, if both sides
  chilled out and put their roles to one side, the researcher would be able, as
  Schein puts it, 'to access her areas of ignorance' without fear of appearing stupid
  and the client could accept the questioning as part of the research process, rather
  than a challenge to his or her authority. We need to work together as colleagues,
  co-creating the possible routes forward.

- Role boundaries are often a distraction to learning. It is useful to start from the
  assumption that everyone has more to contribute to knowledge building than they
  consciously know, or that we can usually access. By developing an egalitarian
  culture, the contribution people can make to knowledge building is much broader,
  encompassing the personal as well as the professional – what Damasio describes
  as 'whole body' knowing.

- New and creative thinking occurs when we are outside our comfort zone, when
  we encourage diversity; it is our job to encourage people to think the unthinkable,
  do the undoable. This has implications for group structure. There are good
  reasons for having homogenous groups. There are also good reasons, on
  occasion, for doing the opposite.

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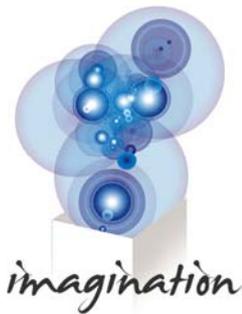
- Commercial qualitative research has become wedded to the small group. In psycho-dynamic circles, the large group is a well used format and the differences between small and large groups has been written about extensively (Stacey 2003, Dalal 2002). Psychological research suggests that large groups (20+) often provoke deeper, more primitive feelings. They are more emotionally charged. Working with large groups has parallels with working within organisations and often triggers off patterns which replicate organisational conflict and problem resolution. Equally, they may replicate viral marketing patterns or the development of cult brands. It is time, as qualitative researchers, that we explored the possibilities of large groups for our practice.

I am suggesting emergent inquiry as a way of thinking which encourages us to approach research in a different way, a way which is more receptive to new ideas, with a creative outlook combined with rigour and discipline, with openness, a spirit of humility and with collaboration, on all sides. It is a process of participative inquiry which includes researchers, clients, customers and other interested parties.

Given that emergent inquiry is a way of thinking as much as a methodology, it can take many forms, depending on the needs of the research project. On some occasions we have facilitated multi-client workshops to help define the problem to be addressed in the research. On other occasions we have convened group discussions or Creative Workshops or day-long sessions with a diverse mix of customers and clients, including creative artists or forum theatre actors. Sometimes we need to read up about a subject and integrating this academic learning into evolving hypothesis from ongoing research. Equally our input can be intensely practical, for example running viewed consumer groups interspersed with client sessions to develop ideas to be fed into subsequent groups. It can even mean sitting in a darkened room and allowing a host of inputs and different impressions and thoughts to incubate until some sort of synthesis emerges! There comes a time where we, as external researchers, have to let go and enable those within the organisation to continue the process; we have set up self-managed learning sets within client organisations where employees can discuss the research implications and what they feel they need to do to develop and progress the ideas and initiatives within their particular departments. The main thing about emergent inquiry is that it is not prescriptive, but grows out of the problem to be addressed.

Much of this problem solving calls for creative techniques to prompt all of us to think differently, for example, role play where client teams can experience what it is like to be a customer, painting or drawing in which customers express their feelings about a service experience through colour or shape, writing the CV or obituary of a brand - the whole host of psycho-graphic and enabling techniques which have developed over the years in order to help develop ideas and their formulation. This is an area where qualitative researchers have particular strength and experience.

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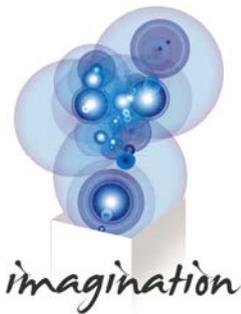
It may be quite uncomfortable to be 'up front' with clients in the way that I am suggesting. Unless the clients are already – at least to some extent - 'converted' to this way of working, we tend to play safe. We shy away from putting ourselves on the line. We are more comfortable when we able to stand back from the research, relying on traditional research boundaries, not openly voicing our opinion. But if we don't push ourselves to do it, don't evolve our way of working, qualitative research runs the risk of slipping down the pecking order, becoming less relevant in organisational strategy development and communication.

So, what stop us doing this?

The main barrier, I think, is that we fear that this approach will not be viewed as research. We fear that, if we expose ourselves as the multi-faceted people that we are – and I include clients here - rather than simply play 'to role', we will lack credibility. And, we fear that, because emergent inquiry does not have a rigid structure, it cannot easily be defined in terms of research norms. It lacks objectivity. It does not measure up in terms of 'validity and reliability'

How then can we justify it as a sound, authoritative research approach?

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How can 'Emergent Inquiry' be legitimised?

Research as exploratory science

As I have tried to highlight throughout this paper, we have a cultural heritage which decrees that 'Scientific research is objective' and that true research needs to be rooted in scientific method. Within everyday life, this notion of 'objective science' is good enough as a working model for understanding the mechanics of the world. However, it does not adequately account for creativity, exploring new areas, pushing back the frontiers. In these areas research can never be 'objective', as any pure scientist will tell you. 'Objectivity' always exists within a particular world view; the invisible web of rules, beliefs, assumptions that define our world. And therefore, is always relative. Take our certainty that the world is round. An exponent of flat earth theory would get short shrift today. But remember, before Arab scientists discovered, in the 9th century, that the earth was indeed round, a flat earth was a universal truth. 'Truths' that we hold as sacred today, will be similarly debunked in the future.

New scientific hypotheses and theories are the result of curiosity, engagement, inspired guesswork, a linking together of previously unconnected assumptions or empirical observations. These are always creative acts in which the scientist is a key player. It is only later, when the theory becomes established that the scientist distances him/herself from the discovery and it becomes a 'fact', supposedly independent of its creator. New understanding always start with this curiosity and engagement; connecting the previously unconnected. This is the 'edge of chaos', where true inquiry and original thinking is generated and it is where much qualitative research practice is located. But if we can't label it as 'the truth', how do we know if it has any worth at all?

A different way of understanding research discipline and rigour

From the perspective of 'Emergent Inquiry', knowledge that is generated in a research project is a form of truth which has been jointly developed by those involved in project, at that time, within the context they are working in. If we assume that this 'truth' or knowledge is socially constructed, then the evaluation of its worth or legitimacy must also be socially constructed. We cannot sensibly apply scientific measures of evaluation - which derive from one approach to understanding knowledge (that it is discovered, objective, a 'thing') - to an approach which has arisen from an alternative understanding of knowledge (that it is never 'objective', that it is created, that it is an ongoing, changing process).

However, although I would disagree with the idea of 'objective truth', I would argue that it is possible to achieve a relative 'truth'; a partial, situated, contextualised 'truth', which is socially constructed within a particular group or culture. If 'legitimisation' of qualitative research knowledge cannot come from traditional means of validity and reliability used in

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classical science, then we must find it in a process of personal and shared reflection, reflexivity, analysis and questioning of the underlying basis for assumptions and theory. Ultimately legitimisation comes from an assessment by all those involved, about whether the knowledge makes sense and makes a useful contribution to ongoing understanding and decision making. Pragmatically, this involves the evaluation of plausibility and degree of fit with existing knowledge from other sources – though of course this needs to be treated with caution, to make sure that it does not simply reinforce the known. This process requires further reflection, questioning etc. In fact, the processes of reflection and analysis are ongoing throughout the whole research process, not applied in retrospect. They are integral to the research inquiry.

However, 'reality' is the final judge. The world does not tolerate all understandings equally and the meaning we jointly create has to make sense within an existing socially constructed reality – and plausibly start to shift that 'reality'.

This process of legitimisation is difficult to describe because, although it clearly involves a good deal of intellectual engagement, it also involves feeling, intuition, instincts, physiological reactions, many of which are tacit and difficult to pin down - although this does not make them any the less real. Legitimisation, therefore, is partly a 'felt' process – a shared 'knowing' that what is emerging is 'right'. John Shotter and Donald Schon have gone some way towards describing this process, in 'action research' and 'reflection-in-action', as I described in the previous section, but it is essentially experiential. As such, it is not easily communicated by words alone. In a sense, the 'teacher-pupil' relationship or apprenticeship - the process by which qualitative research was taught or 'passed on' in the '70s and early '80s (and to an extent is still taught) naturally lent itself to this way of learning.

In saying all of this, I am not claiming that research structure is redundant or that careful attention to samples, discussion guides, recruitment and presentation charts are not important. I am saying that these are hygiene factors. We need to go beyond them. And we need to take research knowledge laterally, not literally; developing their implications and connections rather than implementing the 'findings' We need to absorb structure as a discipline and then move on - just as we might write a discussion guide to focus our attention or to reassure the client, but then ignore it in the real life situation. I am not advocating sloppy research. Far from it. In a sense this approach requires far more discipline than a formulaic approach to research; it requires an ongoing monitoring of, and reflecting on, the appropriateness of action, interpretation and direction.

What I am describing is a process of ongoing inquiry and legitimisation which requires our participation as 'whole people', engaging all our facilities and those of our clients, of consumers and of other stakeholder groups, in order to jointly create knowledge which is relevant to the needs of our complex world.

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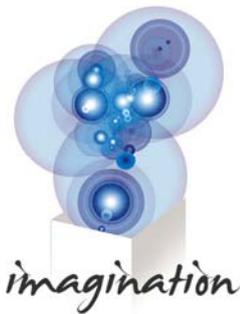
At its most basic level, it is the extent to which participants, given their different interpretations and interests, feel that the inquiry process has helped their understanding of the defined problem and generated possible routes forward. However, legitimisation it does not necessarily imply agreement. Weick points out that, 'people may not share meaning, they do share experience' (Weick 1995:188). In fact, Weick suggests that arguing is a crucial source of sensemaking and that ambiguity allows people to maintain the perceptions of agreement which is necessary to working relationships; potentially, novelty and innovation emerge in the ways in which conflicting perspectives are explored and argued out.

So how, in practice, do we develop the ability to assess the legitimacy of our work or that of other people? Commercial researchers have long understood the importance of intuition, of understanding the importance of trusting emotional responses. The excerpt below from Gordon and Langmaid's book, I find particularly good at conveying the processes of reflexivity, emotional and sensory awareness, intellectual analysis which contribute towards legitimisation.

> Now that the tape is rolling, you will re-experience elements of the group at a very profound level. You may see a series of flashbacks or hear snippets of conversation or see 'important body language. Don't force it, let it run to its natural conclusion and then look back over it. What was going on? Were process factors or task defences at play? Is this straight talking we're hearing? What is the psychological climate like – the emotional atmosphere in the room? If you ever wonder whether you're experiencing a true version of what happened or not, become aware of your own body as you replay the tape. You'll find yourself re-experiencing the postures, facial expressions, heart-rate, eye movements and so on of that time back there when you were in the group.
> (Gordon & Langmaid 1988:141)

I am aware that, by advocating emotional knowing as a way of legitimizing Emergent Inquiry, I can be seen as playing into the hands of those with a positivist predisposition; inviting the accusation that validation or legitimization by the researcher him/herself is no validation at all. I am laying myself open to the charge of 'flaunting irrationality' or 'blatant subjectivity'. But, if we are to heal the rift between 'mind' and 'body' which has dogged us since Descartes, then emotion and reason need to be united as equals. Damasio talks of 'well-targeted' and 'well deployed' emotions. This, of course, is very different to emotion as a 'loose cannon' – emotion, like reason, emerges in more or less fruitful ways.

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In conclusion

At various times in the history of commercial qualitative research, there have been debates about the 'guru' vs the 'business' approaches to qualitative research. The former elevated the gifted individual, the artist whose work could not be carried out by anyone else. The disadvantage of the guru was also its strength – the work could not be carried out by anyone else! It is difficult to run a company on this basis. The 'business' approach really took off within the UK in the early 80s, when qualitative research boomed and, cashing in on the growth, companies became more business-like and needed to create a more streamlined – sometimes mechanistic - approach to qualitative practice. Whilst this was profitable and enabled a larger work force, the research itself sometimes lacked inspiration, because it was formulaic and there was too little emphasis on research as a creative process.

One of the drawbacks of these models of research, in which the researcher goes off, does the groups and then reports back on the 'findings', is that the researcher is locked into the expert role and the client can only ever have second hand or propositional learning. In doing this, we create a problem for ourselves by each understanding only a part of the picture. Rumi, the 13th century Sufi teacher, clearly illustrates this problem though the story of the blindfolded men examining an elephant:

> Each thought that one part was the whole and experienced it in a
> manner slightly different from reality. The elephant was for one only a
> fan (an ear); for another, a rope (the tail); for a third, a pillar (a leg);
> and so on. (Shah 1972:2)

I am not suggesting a return to either the era of the guru or the formulaic business model. Emergent inquiry is, essentially, as process of shared – or organic - learning and understanding. The knowledge is not vested in one individual, the researcher, who is deemed to be the 'expert', but is spread across all of those involved.

I am aware that this understanding of research will, in some senses, be familiar – and many researchers will say that this is how they currently practice. Or at least, like me, they may say that some aspects of this way of working they practice some of the time. It depends on the project, the client, the time-constraints. This may well be the case, but if it is, then it is likely that they have developed this working practice in relative isolation, or with a group of like-minded researchers. It is not an openly acknowledged way of working in the UK. Where it is happened, it is likely to have 'evolved' in practice, rather than being linked to a consciously thought out theoretical base. It is not discussed, challenged, developed as an industry way of 'thinking'. One of my aims in writing this paper is to open up the debate about what we do as 'researchers' and to air the meaning of qualitative research in a world which is more demanding of us than ever before and where the status of research is under threat from other, newer, more 'sexy' offerings. I believe that qualitative research has much more to offer than it is currently given credit for, and I want to see us achieve that potential.

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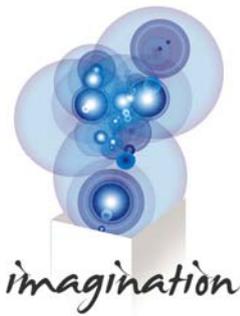
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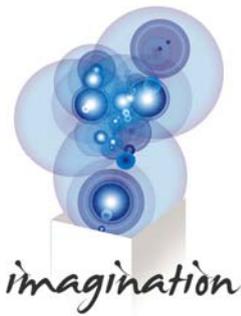
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