'Emergent Inquiry': A Practitioner's Reflections on the Development of Qualitative Research

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper addresses the emerging way in which qualitative research is now carried out within the commercial world, the influences of shifting paradigms and the importance of theoretical understanding for current practice.

Design/methodology/approach - The 'method' underpinning this paper is qualitative observation drawn from research across a wide range of client companies during more than thirty years of commercial qualitative practice, as well as from recent, ongoing conversations with other commercial practitioners and academics, and from the academic and practitioner literature.

Findings – Commercial qualitative research has, largely, moved away from a classic scientific paradigm towards a social constructionist perspective. The paper explores how the concept of *emergence* derived from complexity sciences and the contribution of neuroscience to understanding the role of *emotion* in judgement and decision making, can help make sense of current commercial practice.

Practical implications – The implications for commercial practitioners are highlighted. Training in analytical skills and emotional awareness as *reflection-in-action* (Schon,1983) is needed in order that analysis and interpretation are embedded within the ongoing research process, i.e. training needs to include qualitative *thinking* as much as *practice.*

Originality/value – The paper highlights the creative potential of 'emergent inquiry', improvisation 'in the moment' and the particular skills required.

Keywords Emergent inquiry, commercial qualitative research, complexity, emotion, emergence

Paper Type Commentary paper

Changes in the commercial qualitative research market

'Commercial' and 'academic' qualitative research are quite different disciplines. The role of commercial research is to help guide client decision making. Its purpose – and the way in which it is evaluated – is largely determined by its perceived usefulness; if it cannot help clients to make better decisions, then it is of no value. Essentially, it is a consultancy role. Academic research focuses primarily on developing knowledge. Consequently, there are many differences in the perspectives, approaches to methodology and styles of analysis between academic and commercial qualitative research.

Qualitative research still principally resides, in the commercial world, under the 'scientific'[1] umbrella and, arguably, is undermined by the seductive appeal of the 'power of numbers'. However, qualitative practice is changing; moving further away from a 'scientific' paradigm. What does this mean for the legitimisation of commercial qualitative research?

In recent years there have been significant shifts in the role, perceptions and usage of commercial qualitative research. Awareness has risen amongst the general public, in particular through the use of qualitative research in the public sector and by politicians (Imms and Ereaut, 2002; Desai, 2002). Simultaneously, commercial qualitative research has burgeoned worldwide in the last 20 years, with global turnover of commercial qualitative research at just under US$4bn in 2007 (Esomar, 2008). It has evolved from predominantly interviewing methodologies towards greater diversity, encompassing a wide range of research approaches and understandings of qualitative practice (Nancarrow, Spackman and Barker, 2001). For instance:

(1)   Qualitative research has become a 'stand-alone' approach, rather than purely an exploratory precursor to quantification (Gordon,1999a).
(2)   Many research departments in commercial organisations have been re-designated as 'consumer insight' departments, to reflect their emphasis on outcomes of research rather than methodology.
(3)   Qualitative research techniques have expanded into creative and innovation forums, in addition to their role in exploring and evaluating concepts and propositions (Langmaid and Andrews 2003).
(4)   The roles of researcher and client are overlapping and becoming more interactive, reflecting the growing trend towards collaborative research, 'co-creation' and less structured methods (Medeiros and Needham, 2008; Cherkoff and Moore, 2007; Pakel-Dunlop, 2007).
(5)   Commercial qualitative research has expanded its methodological armoury. Ethnography, Neuro-Linistic Programming, discourse analysis, semiotics, creative workshops, online focus groups, blogs, client immersion and so on, have become commonplace (Desai, 2002b). We even have focus groups conduced on Second Life (Tatar, 2008)
(6)   There is open acceptance that commercial qualitative research inevitably involves interpretation, judgement and business advice on the part of the researcher and, in this sense, it is reinforcing its role as research consultancy rather than 'pure' research (Keegan, 2005; 2006; 2008; Ereaut, 2002).

The traditional model of commercial qualitative research involved the 'naïve consumer as respondent' and the 'expert researcher'. The researcher attempted – and inevitably failed – to be unbiased, neutral and ideally taciturn. The 'consumer' was kept in the dark about the purposes of the research and, usually, the name of the client. Ostensibly, power resided with the researcher, who extracted what s/he needed from the 'respondent' with little concern about the effect of the research process on the participants.

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[1] I am using this term loosely here – and throughout the paper - to mean the populist view of scientific method, originally derived from logical positivism, i.e. highly structured research methods, researcher as detached observer, data which is 'uncontaminated' by the research process or the researcher.

Today, the researcher-consumer relationship is different. Research participants ('respondents' redefined) are viewed as 'co-creating' the research outcomes. Research participants are regarded as experts in terms of their own experiences and the researcher is trying to make sense of this expertise in the context of other participants' experiences, for the benefit of both the consumer and clients. Ideally, there is shared power. In various combinations, researcher, client and research participants jointly construct the research problems and the research outcomes.

How have these changes come about and why now? Do they reflect the 'coming of age' of commercial qualitative research' or is it, perhaps, the spirit of the age finally tuning in to qualitative thinking? Is this a positive development for the commercial qualitative research industry?

Conflicting paradigms within commercial qualitative research

Commercial qualitative research is divided in its attempt to serve two masters. On the one hand there are the strict research protocols and assumed objectivity rooted in classical science. On the other hand, there is the fluid, exploratory approach which appears to be at odds with the scientific paradigm but which many commercial practitioners would see as essential for good commercial qualitative research (Gordon,1999b)

The changes in commercial practice outlined above reflect a move away from an empirical model of research, the 'detached observer' and 'unbiased' data gathering. Instead, qualitative research is increasingly understood as 'social construction', which is dependent on historical and cultural context. From a constructionist perspective, it is through the daily interactions between people in the course of social life that our versions of knowledge become established, i.e. research outcomes are a 'negotiated understanding' (Burr,1995), developed between the community of clients, researchers and research participants, within a wider cultural context.

By definition, social constructionism assumes that we *interpret* the world, rather than passively absorb 'reality' or 'fact'. 'Different people in different positions at different moments will live in different realities.' (Shotter,1993), although within particular communities, there is likely to be considerable overlap between individuals' versions of reality. From this perspective, qualitative research can be viewed as creative processes of interpretation and iterative learning – or as the ongoing construction of 'reality'.

Research based on classical scientific principles will differ from that which assumes a 'Constructionist' position. Each requires quite a different approach to research methodology, analysis of 'findings' and the way in which the research is presented. Yet commercial researchers rarely talk explicitly to their clients about the assumptions they make or which of these theoretical positions they will adopt. Does this matter? Well, yes, because it is easy for misunderstandings to arise between clients and researchers, if they have different understandings of how the research findings will be arrived at and interpreted. A client who expects a structured 'traditional' approach, will be unhappy if the researcher adopts an emergent or collaborative approach without prior discussion. Lack of clarity can create conflict.

A client who spends considerable time ensuring that the research spec is 'perfect', who wants a very detailed discussion guide for a group discussion,

who asks for research concepts to be ranked in the group, who takes a literal view of what research participants say, is likely to be coming from an (implicitly) empirical perspective. One who focuses more on the ideas that are emerging from the research, who makes connections with previous research, who is excited by the interaction amongst research participants, is probably coming from an (implicitly) constructionist perspective.

The traditional model of research, based on empiricist principles, emphasises precision in the setting of objectives, the sample specification and recruitment. Similarly, rigour in data collection, thorough analysis and accurate presentation of findings - which are differentiated from 'the recommendations' - are assumed. A linear model of communication operates, in which the client defines the 'problem', hands it to the researcher, who 'solves' the problem and then hands 'the solution' back to the client.

But this is quite a different scenario from much commercial qualitative research today. Subtly, alongside, and intertwined with, the empirical model, another approach has evolved. As befits a commercial industry, it has emerged to cater for changing client needs in a world where time is increasingly scarce and where business problems are complex and continually evolving. Nowadays, research objectives are often multi-layered, sometimes contradictory and may change as the project progresses. There might be a range of complementary research approaches used, some of which the client will participate in. Sometimes, the researchers may be the repositories of brand history; the one constant in companies with rapid staff turnover. They may be expected to act as researcher, consultant and lead decision maker. The boundaries between roles may create tensions – creative or otherwise.

The 'problem' of mixed paradigms which are not articulated
You may ask, 'Why is this a problem? Both empirical and constructionist approaches are valid and each may be used as appropriate or, indeed, they may be used in conjunction.' This is true, but it depends on both researchers and clients being very aware of which paradigm they are using, how they are using it – and when - and ensuring that research disciplines, appropriate to the paradigm, are employed. If this is to happen, there needs to be a much clearer understanding of the theoretical underpinnings and disciplines associated with a social constructionist approach to qualitative research within the commercial arena. If this is lacking, then research quality may be jeopardised.

Take a caricatured example: Clients are watching a group discussion through a one way mirror. They are chatting, drinking wine. A junior client is simultaneously transcribing the interview content on her laptop. The transcript is being web-streamed to Cincinnati where a more senior client is in a meeting on an unrelated subject. She occasionally glances at her Blackberry to read the transcript. By the time the researcher has completed the group discussion, the clients behind the one way mirror in the UK have conferred with the senior client in the US and the decision to pull the ad campaign has been made.

There is an increasing trend for clients to absorb the initial stages of qualitative research; a group discussion, an ethnographic study, without the apparent need for the researcher's detailed coding, analysis, interpretation

and structuring. The experience of *observing* or *participating* in the research *becomes* the research. Or take videoed 'ethnography', edited to present the most articulate and photogenic research participants who will engage and entertain the sales team in a professional 3 minute vox pop, presented as 'research'. These are very different understandings of 'research' from that conducted using a scientific model. This 'reductionist' approach to research, by-passing analysis, or presenting 'findings' as bite sized, easily digestible nuggets, raises a number of questions, amongst them; 'How do we evaluate the legitimacy of these approaches?' 'When does research stop being research and become something else – and what is this 'something else'? 'What is the theoretical understanding that underpins these research approaches?' and, most importantly, 'Do any of these questions really matter any more?'

Most commercial researchers would view research carried out in this way as partial; it may be 'emergent' and involve 'co-creation', but it cannot be considered as rigorous or valid research because it misses out the key stages of analysis and interpretation. But, if it helps client decision making, has it not served its purpose? Is it not simply qualitative research evolving to meet current business needs for speed and egalitarian decision making?

The view that will be developed in this paper is that research without rigour, reflection, analysis and interpretation will, over time, undermine research expertise and the commercial qualitative research industry. The great strength of commercial qualitative research is *qualitative thinking* (Gordon,1999c), creativity, the ability to make connections, analytic skills, listening, reflecting, reflexivity, improvisational skills, developing narratives and so on. If these skills atrophy, then the key commercial qualitative research skill set will be lost. Even if the methodological frame changes, and the constructionist approach becomes standard, it is important that this qualitative skill set is preserved. If we abandon the scientific model of research (although some would argue that we never truly adopted it) and view research practice as, essentially, socially constructed, iterative learning, then we need to be clear. What theory underpins this approach? What are the guidelines for practice? How do we legitimise this form of research and how do we train commercial qualitative researchers in the appropriate skill set?

New scientific developments
Alongside these shifts in commercial qualitative research practice, new scientific understanding of the world has been developing. The complexity sciences - particularly in relation to human interaction e.g. Stacey, Griffin and Shaw (2000) - and neuroscience (Damasio, 2000) have been making significant contributions to our understanding of how human beings communicate and make sense of the world as we experience it.

These are very broad fields and, for the purposes of this paper, two areas that are particularly relevant to an understanding of commercial qualitative research will be focused on; *emergence*, deriving from the complexity sciences (Stacey, 2001) and *emotion* in relation to judgement and decision making (Damasio, 2000)

Complexity sciences and the notion of 'emergence'
Complexity sciences have thrown into question much of our thinking about how society functions and how knowledge is created (Stacey, 2003a). For instance, rather than thinking of society and culture as a collection of *things*, i.e. people, organisations, job roles, information, the emphasis within complexity thinking is on relationships *between* things. From this perspective, culture is fluid and ever changing and it is this cultural web of meaning that is our proper area of study (Chandler and Owen, 2002)

Complexity language has infiltrated marketing and the media. Tipping points, viral marketing, co-creation, herds, hubs and hive mind are becoming part of everyday conversation. Web communications, crowd behaviour and brand evolution can all be thought of in terms of emergence. The internet, in particular, has become a medium for emergence.

> People began acting as one and the idea went viral. "We are the hive mind, the anger that leaked from the computer screen," explained a long-haired twentysomething …" The cult failed to understand how things arise out of mass consciousness… What you are seeing here is the emergence of a new kind of democracy" …leaderless organisation structure barely recognisable from the protest movements of old"
>
> (The Times June 20th 08)

An important strand within the complexity sciences, is that of emergence (Stacey,1996). Although emergence is a difficult concept and academics disagree as to the exact definition of the term, it broadly describes how larger patterns arise from local-level interactions. These patterns cannot be understood or predicted from the behaviour of the lower-level interactions alone. Neither can they be understood in a linear way, e.g. as cause and effect. Emergence focuses on the *present moment* as our only point of experience and influence. However, our experience in the present, inevitably, incorporates the past and the future, as Professor Ralph Stacey (2003b), a complexity theorist, explains:

> 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… Time in the present therefore has a circular structure.

This notion of emergence, of unpredictable and surprising outcomes, seems quite normal within the context of commercial qualitative research. The nature of qualitative practice means that, by definition, an exploration of the ongoing inter-relationship between individuals, brands, services, their environment and the wider cultural context is required. The study of relationships is at the heart of what qualitative research is all about. Qualitative inquiry, understood in terms of emergence, can be seen as a process of emergent, iterative learning which does not naturally lend itself to externally imposed rules and constraints.

What then does emergence mean in relation to commercial qualitative research? Essentially, it is the spontaneous flow and development of

communication in the present moment - in which change in opinions or attitudes may occur. However, this change is not by chance, but is constrained by the checks and balances that operate in the particular relationship or context (Shaw, 2002).

In a research situation, certain areas of exploration are off-bounds because they are below conscious awareness, they are irrelevant to the study or they are too intrusive. But equally, the researcher needs to delve beneath the mundane and obvious; to make new connections, to generate new ideas or emotional responses. In complexity terms, researchers are aiming for 'the edge of chaos'; the stage between chaos (complete lack of structure which inhibits creativity) and stagnation (where thinking is stuck). This is the stage where fresh thinking is most likely to emerge. At this point, the emphasis is on improvisation, on different ways of understanding or resolving the research issues in new ways.

Indeed, friction often arises when we attempt to impose a classic scientific framework on emergence interaction. Geoff Bayley (2006) describes this conflict very clearly in his analysis of the role of the interview discussion guide, torn as it is between acting as a pre-agreed, structured set of topics and questions *and* a tool for encouraging emergent discussion. The detailed, four page guide may be an appropriate tool for linear, prescribed research approaches, but it is inappropriate for a fluid, qualitative exploration which weaves its way between the needs of researcher and the interests of the research participants.

Spatial and temporal models of qualitative research

The classic scientific approach tends to treat *knowledge* as a 'thing' to be defined, organised, packaged cohesively, consistently and free of emotion. Essentially it is a *spatial* model of research, with knowledge fixed in time.

However, if we understand knowledge as emergent and holistic, i.e. involving mind, body and emotion and concerned with personal and shared experience rather than 'fact' or 'logic', then we must view knowledge as emotionally charged and constantly evolving. Similarly, the legitimisation of research outcomes, which is part of the ongoing creation of knowledge, must also be evolving. Knowledge, from this perspective, is *temporal,* i.e. changing over time. This does not imply that intellectual rigour is not important. Rather, it is incorporated within the ongoing process of generating knowledge; 'rigour' is in the processes of reflection, monitoring, evaluating – the qualitative skill set - which are all occurring at the same time during the research itself.

For example, in this truncated, familiar, dialogue taken from a research interview, we see the ongoing processes of evaluation, moderation and development which typically happen:

Participant: "No, I don't like that" (advertising concept)
Researcher: "What is it you don't like about it?"
Participant: "Well, the woman, her manner. She's too…well too..
Researcher: "Too what?"
Participant: "Too sexy. Too in your face."
Researcher: "And what about the ad, as a whole, how does that
                 strike you? What's happening there?
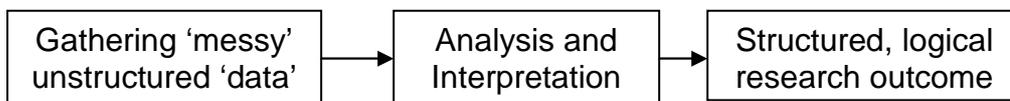*Participant:*   "Well, she dominates it, so I don't like it?"

Researcher:	"And if she was different…?"
Participant:	"With a different woman, it would be different"
Researcher:	"In what way would it be different?"

And so on….

This seemingly 'bread and butter' conversation is, in fact, the process of emergent inquiry in action. The researcher and participant between them explore the parameters which might change the meaning of the advertising concept. Each utterance brings forth a response from the other which slightly shifts the conversation. This response, in turn, elicits a further shift in direction and meaning - and so on (Mead,1962). Together, the researcher and participant construct a useful way forward. This requires both researcher and participant to be improvising 'in the moment'; in Stacey's (2003c) 'living present'. This is quite different from a process in which a pre-prepared discussion guide is used, the researcher is asking questions prepared in the past and is not reacting to the specific situation with the particular individual. The researcher is not improvising 'in the moment'.

The differences between a spatial and temporal understanding of knowledge creation is illustrated, very simplistically, below. In a classical research model, knowledge has a more fixed, linear quality, whereas emergent inquiry is fluid and can be visualised as a spiral – although in reality it is a myriad of interconnected spirals.

Classical Research

| Gathering 'messy' unstructured 'data' | → | Analysis and Interpretation | → | Structured, logical research outcome |

Emergent Inquiry

| Ongoing thoughts, feelings, emotions (experience) – and also evaluation - shaping and being shaped by others and the environment. Knowledge evolving over time |

This way of understanding research, as fluid, ongoing knowledge generation, is increasingly adopted in a business climate where there is information overload and where speed is becoming an over-riding necessity. It also allows a more creative forum for researching the future (Gordon,1999d) It is re-shaping research practice. For instance it has led to the virtual abandonment of the written report, to the 'instant debrief' after fieldwork - as discussed earlier - and to client interpretation of research before – or instead of - the researcher's analysis or presentation. It has encouraged 'client immersion' and a wide variety of co-creation research approaches in which clients and consumers work together.

Neuroscience and emotion

The second area that is contributing to commercial qualitative thinking, through challenging our traditional perceptions of our rational and emotional selves, is neuroscience. The renowned Portuguese neuroscientist, Antonio Damasio, offers a convincing explanation of how rationality and emotion work in tandem and suggests that creative decision making uses a more evolved part of our brains than that involved in rational thought. Thinking creatively, according to Damasio, marks the current pinnacle of brain evolution (Damasio, 2000c). Using our 'whole body' to engage with an experience – in conjunction with other people – means harnessing our rationality, intuition, creative intelligence and physiological responses. Peter Senge describes this experience as *alignment*, in which 'a resonance or synergy develops, like the 'coherent' light of a laser rather than the incoherent and scattered light of a light bulb' (Senge,1990).

Qualitative researchers are very familiar with this whole body learning experience, in a research context which involves a sense of letting go, relinquishing control, whilst at the same time steering the process. Richard Seel (2000), describing this apparent contradiction, advises, 'Do not try to answer the question. Wait until the question answers itself.'

Classical science often downplays the importance of emotion and intuition in knowledge generation. In practice, however, we 'know' in every fibre of our bodies; 'knowing' is not just a conscious activity. Admittedly we 'know' in different ways in our muscles and skin than we know with or conscious mind (Wilson, 2002), but 'knowing' is not restricted to the brain, as Alan Watts (1969) eloquently explains:

> …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.

The separation of intellect, body and emotion, introduced by Descartes in the mid 17th century, is still 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, as Antonio Damasio (2000d) describes:

> 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.

It follows that qualitative research needs to acknowledge emotional experience – expressed by research participants, researchers, clients and other stake-holders – as valid input to research. Our feelings and opinions are not by chance or irrelevant. They arise in the context of the research situation and are informed by past experience and future expectation. As such they are critical and, indeed, underpin research and consultancy, which are as much experiential and emotional as cerebral. If we attempt to cut out these aspects of research, 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 (Smith, 2003). This is nothing new, but it needs greater emphasis. By openly acknowledging the importance of emotion, research becomes richer and closer to 'real life' situations. In this way it enables more relevant knowledge generation. A veteran qualitative researcher described to me her intuition that 'something important was happening in the group' as 'a bit like butterflies in my stomach… hard to describe. It's like I know emotionally, before I get the intellectual understanding. I'm on to something important and I have to just wait and be alert. Sometimes it's when things are confused or when, for no apparent reason, I get really interested in what is going on.'

We use this ability, this way of knowing, instinctively – as we do in the rest of life – but how often do we teach young researchers to recognise these moments. We are more likely to encourage them *not* to trust their emotions, to dampen down such 'instincts'. Of course, there are good reasons for this – emotional responses which are un-disciplined are like loose cannons. We tend to associate emotion with excess, lack of rationality and distortion. However, Damasio does stress the importance of *well targeted and well deployed emotion*. 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. Ignoring emotional content in research is not the solution. It will infiltrate regardless.

Gordon and Langmaid (1988) discuss the importance of confusion in understanding emotional issues. 'Confusion …always indicates that you are on the road to understanding something'. 'Staying with' confusion or other emotional upheavals, noting changes in mood in a research situation, exploring boredom or anger or conflict, learning to take our own emotional responses seriously and reflect on them will all encourage new depths and breadth of understanding. These are areas we need to hone. We need to explicitly teach 'moderating feeling' as part of commercial qualitative training. Equally, we need to be explicit with clients about what we are doing. 'I'm going to allow research participants to express their anger about this, not try to suppress it. They need to be angry – and then we will work through it.'

'Emergent Inquiry': Making sense of new ways of practice
Emergent inquiry, as a term, has been used in academic literature to describe forms of collaborative or participative action research (Walker and Foote, 2000; Frongillo et al 2003; Seel, 2006; Kemmis and McTaggart, 2000). In essence, 'emergent' research is viewed as shared, ongoing, iterative learning, although there is no commonly agreed definition of the term. Power is not vested in one individual – the researcher – who is deemed to be the 'expert',

but is spread across all of those involved; clients, customers, research participants and other interested parties.

Within the context of this paper, the term emergent inquiry is used to describe a way of practicing which, to an extent, is intrinsic within the qualitative tradition, but which is evolving to reflect a changing cultural climate and different client needs. From an emergent inquiry perspective, qualitative research is understood as a methodology in which the focus of the research is truly 'in the moment'; on the emergence of ideas, thoughts, feelings and how these develop, shape and are shaped by others (researchers, clients, research participants), 'moment to moment', as the generation of knowledge. From this perspective, research is temporal and holistic - rather than reductionist - in that emotion, feeling, intuition are as much a part of 'knowing' as intellectual understanding. It is nonetheless dependent on an eclectic and open-minded perspective and a toolkit of techniques to enable research participants to explore their responses to the research areas and generate new ideas.

This approach privileges knowledge creation, but this is not to suggest that the research disciplines of defining objectives, sample structuring, analysis and presentation are not critical (even if they evolve throughout the project). They are essential, in that they provide the structure and 'constraint' which allow something new to emerge, just as, in complexity theory, 'the edge of chaos' is the place between chaos and stagnation where creativity is fostered.

'Emergent inquiry' is an attempt to describe and start to develop a theoretical understanding for what many qualitative researchers are *really* doing, which is a combination of facilitation, observation, leadership, analysis, critical thinking, reflectivity, reflexivity, emotional and sensory awareness, improvisation, hypothesis generation and testing, creative thinking, developing narrative and more, *at the same time*, as an ongoing 'stream of consciousness'.

Defining the 'Research problem'
The principles of emergent inquiry are relevant throughout the research process. Emergence, in relation to qualitative research, opens up other areas for consideration. For instance, why do commercial researchers separate the research objectives from the research itself, if both are part of a process of iterative learning?

In defining a research 'problem', we are partially determining the 'answer', in the sense that the 'problem' is socially constructed, as is the 'answer'. Many years ago we were asked to research some new shoe designs. The target audience loved them, although they were not selling well in the store. It turned out that although the women loved the shoes, they hated the store. They would never shop there, so never saw the shoes. We had mis-defined 'the problem'.

Historically, the client has been responsible for defining 'the research problem' – which is inevitably constructed from the client's perspective - and 'handing it' to the researcher. This may be fine when the project is straightforward. However, more and more research projects are complex, not least because there are multiple stake-holders involved, each with different agendas.

Process consultancy, is an approach to organisational development, change and learning, developed by Edgar Schein and now widely adopted within major corporations. It may be used during organisational change programmes, to develop corporate strategy, or to facilitate team building. In process consultancy, problem exploration is regarded as an essential part of the consultation process with clients (Schein,1999). However, it is not traditionally part of the researcher role. From an emergent inquiry perspective, however, problem definition is a natural part of the research process, not a separate exercise. Facilitated workshops with clients, including a relevant mix of stakeholders from within – and possibly outside - the organisation, can be invaluable in order to explore issues from different perspectives and help define the 'problem' to be addressed.   However, this is crossing a boundary. Traditionally, clients are 'supposed' to be able to define the problem and know what steps they need to take to 'solve' it. But, as Edgar Schein points out, the client 'often does not know what she is looking for and indeed should not really be expected to know' (Schein,1999b). A change of role expectations between clients and researchers is needed before problem definition can be openly acknowledged as a valid research area and can be viewed as an essential part of emergent inquiry.

Handing over 'the answer'
Equally, at the end of the project, traditionally, the researcher hands over the 'findings' and walks away. To be involved in research implementation is 'inappropriate'; it is in conflict with the 'objectivity' of the researcher. So, 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, adopting a 'process consultancy' model, the researcher helps the client to develop the learning, to disseminate it throughout the organisation and to help employees put it to practical use. This might be in the role of 'consumer champion', ensuring that the project stays true to consumer needs, or as an anchor, to help clients question and draw out implications from particular strategies. These organisational roles draw on qualitative researchers' psychological and cultural experience, as well as their knowledge of specific markets or social contexts. Working with clients in this way, to draw out the implications of research knowledge and move this forward within the organisation, is a key part of emergent inquiry and of maximising the benefits of the research.

Researching the future
Sometimes the view is expressed that 'market research cannot be creative'; that it offers 'a rigid step-by-step methodology' in which, 'traditionally, market researchers and managers are detached from the inquiry so as not to contaminate the data' (Maklin, Knox & Ryals, 2008) This suggests that researchers are ill equipped to handle collaborative research methodologies in which stakeholders (consumers, clients, researchers, others) jointly co-create value, (in whatever way this is defined). A brief skim through commercial literature should provide reassurance that this is simply not true of much commercial qualitative research. Collaborative research, in one form or another, has been carried out by commercial qualitative researchers for decades (e.g. Holmes & Keegan,1983; Gordon,1999e; Spenser & Wells,

2000).   Commercial qualitative researchers have always tended towards eclecticism and pragmatism, adapting methodologies to fit the needs of the inquiry (Wardle, 2002) Indeed, emergent inquiry, by its nature, is an essential ingredient for collaborative research. It encourages creative interaction between participants, incorporates the flexibility of an evolving research agenda, involves iterative learning and the assumption of participants as co-researchers.

Nonetheless, collaborative research has seen a resurgence within the commercial qualitative research industry (Cherkoff & Moore, 2007; Medeiros and Needham, 2008; Kooli, Wright and Wright, 2009) in response to changing corporate and consumer culture. Emergent inquiry and collaborative research methodologies require specific qualities and skills. Two areas need to be addressed:

- the role of 'data' analysis and interpretation
- the implications for commercial qualitative research training

The analysis and interpretation required in emergent inquiry must reflect the method of inquiry itself – as is true in classic 'scientific' research. In emergent inquiry, analysis and interpretation are *embedded within* the research process and are part of the iterative learning.

Schon (1982) argues that practitioners need to develop reflection–in-action, using past knowledge to inform the present. Training researchers and clients in reflective skills and personal awareness is essential grounding for the effective practice of emergent inquiry. Knowledge (incorporating analysis, interpretation and evaluation), is created through listening, sharing reflections on practice (both individual and collective), experimentation, critical self-reflection, reflecting on the reflections. The personal qualities of the researcher, developed through formal training, personal development and experience are critical. This does not mean that personal or shared analysis and interpretation *outside* the research situation are unnecessary. Training of new commercial qualitative researchers needs to include *qualitative thinking* as much as practice.

Summary
Commercial qualitative research has evolved through practice to fit current consumer and client needs. This has meant a move away from the classic scientific paradigm towards a socially constructed perspective. The author has discussed 'emergent inquiry' as a methodology which addresses the need for research which is a process of iterative learning. This has implications for commercial qualitative research practice and, in particular, for the skill set required of commercial researchers. A particular area of concern is ensuring that an emergent methodology incorporates 'reflection in action'. The paper highlights the need for appropriate training, to ensure that the rigour of commercial qualitative research is maintained.

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