

In Depth

Broadening the horizons
of qualitative research
Summer 2007



Emerging To A Brave New World

Qualitative research is entering a freer, more holistic phase, says Sheila Keegan, strengthened by its relationship with the 'New Sciences'

*"Every great advance in science has issued from a new audacity of the imagination" John Dewey *The Quest For Certainty**

Qualitative research is changing. It has moved out of the lab. There is growing interest in research approaches such as ethnography, semiotics, discourse analysis, breakthrough events, blogs. There is resurgence in creative research. Insight has become established.

There is talk of co-creation, of researcher as facilitator, of 'living life as inquiry' (Marshall, 1999). Why has this happened and why now? Perhaps it reflects the coming of age of qualitative research or is, perhaps, the spirit of the age finally in tune with qualitative thinking?

Qualitative research had become bogged down in its attempt to serve two masters. On the one hand we have the rigid protocols and assumed objectivity stemming from classical – or Newtonian – science. On the other, there's the fluid, exploratory approach which most practitioners would see as essential for good qualitative research.

But, the world is changing. We can no longer rely solely on a Newtonian world view. The new sciences, including complexity, quantum physics and evolutionary psychology offer a very different way of understanding the world. This perspective shift has liberated research, providing theoretical bases for qualitative thinking which can give us the confidence to approach qualitative inquiry in new ways; ways that are emergent and more open.

By emergent inquiry, I mean research which is an ongoing process of learning, which is open to, and

builds on, ideas wherever they come from; which is rigorous but unconstrained by traditional research protocols; which is insightful, creative, which engages the feelings, beliefs, intuition and intellect of all those involved in it.

You could say it's whole body research. Also, it is not hidebound by role. Researchers, clients, consumers, and employees all work as a team, bringing different perspectives to the inquiry. Greater diversity encourages greater creativity plus more – and better – outcomes (Stacey, 2003).

Emergent inquiry is a mind-set or a way of practicing, rather than a methodology. Research becomes more like real life; messier, richer, more contradictory. We move from a linear to a non-linear perspective, i.e. think network of relationships rather than cause and effect.

Acknowledging emotional input

The separation of mind, body and emotion, introduced by Descartes in the mid-17th century and now largely discredited by neuroscience, lives on within marketing research. Opinion, feeling and emotion are concealed inputs; we often ignore them, although they're involved in every decision we make. But this is changing.

Increasingly, emotional experience is acknowledged as a valid input to research. Our opinions are not random or irrelevant. They arise in response to the interaction with our research participants, our clients, our past experiences. These interactions provoke feelings in us

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and we pick up the feelings of others; anxiety, embarrassment, the unexpected silence, which need to be understood and treated as part of the data.

They are critical to the research process, which is as much experiential and emotional as cerebral. And I am talking here about the emotional climate within our own and client organisations as well as in relation to research participants.

Qualitative researchers have always accepted the importance of emotion in research. By openly acknowledging it, however, we broaden the scope of the research process; it becomes closer to real life and so enables more relevant learning.

Knowledge is all around

When we talk about integrating research from different sources, we usually mean marrying up respectable forms of research input, such as desk research, databases, qualitative and quantitative research. This is not what I mean here.

I am talking about the researcher – along with everyone else involved in the project – keeping their eyes and ears open and gathering clues and inspiration wherever it is to be found. This could be in newspapers, in idle conversation, in past work, in sudden inspiration. Data is all around, if we can recognise it, connect with it and allow it to feed our thinking – plus have the confidence to treat it as valid research input.

Redefining beginnings and endings

Where does research begin and end? Defining the research problem is at least half of the solution and yet often we work with a problem that is ill thought out or muddled – which hasn't been given the attention it deserves. Sometimes we accept it from our client with only perfunctory questioning. This may be fine for fairly simple problems, but for larger or complex ones, it can be problematic. And more and more projects are complex, because we live in increasingly complex world.

Work with clients on problem definition can –

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perhaps should – be part of the research process. Process consultancy – an established approach within management consultancy, developed by Edgar Schein (1999) – would take this as given, but it is not traditionally part of the researcher role.

Redefine our role as research consultant, however, and it becomes our role. Problem exploration and definition may involve facilitating workshops with clients including a relevant mix of stakeholders from within – and outside – the organisation. It may mean living within the organisation for a while.

From a researcher perspective, this area is fraught. Historically the client defines 'the problem'. But, from a process consultant perspective, the client 'often does not know what she is looking for and indeed should not really be expected to know' (Schein, 1999). A change of expectations and working relationships between clients and researchers is needed before

problem definition is widely accepted as a valid research area.

At the end of the project, in the traditional research model, the researcher 'hands over the findings' and walks away. To be involved in implementation or even detailed discussion about the implications of research is assumed to undermine the independence of the research. As a result the researcher, by now a repository of knowledge not easily transmitted as 'findings', is dismissed and a valuable resource is lost.

By contrast, a process consultation model implies working with clients, and other interested parties, to spread and grow the research outcomes within the organisation, so that the research learning can be maximised. This requires a more co-operative working arrangement; greater flexibility, more interaction.

Research as a team effort

The pass the parcel model of research – client defines problem, hands it to researcher, who does the research, passes the findings back to the client, who decides on how to implement the findings – is dead. It is inefficient and limiting. Bringing different parties together, in creative hubs, networks and workshops is more likely to produce the learning we need in the age of ideas.

At a basic level, emergent inquiry is about forming more and stronger connections and networks which increase the chances of useful and ongoing learning.

Theories that support this way of practicing Complexity sciences and emergence

In recent years, the complexity sciences have thrown into question much of our thinking about how society works and how knowledge is created (Stacey, 2003). Instead of 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.

For example it understands culture as 'not so much imposed on people from outside, as exposed from within' (Seel, 2000). Culture is being created all the time by all of us. Therefore, by definition, it is fluid and always changing.

An important strand within complexity is that of emergence. This is one of those slippery terms. Academics find it hard to agree a definition. Broadly, it 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, the Newtonian clockwork world.

Weather is a classic example of a non-linear system in which many components interact in complex ways leading to notorious unpredictability, as are ecosystems, developing embryos and the brain, which defy mathematical analysis or simulation. Small, local interactions can lead to huge global changes (like the famous butterfly flapping its wings in Sussex leading to hurricanes in the Caribbean).

As Anthony Tasgal so nicely puts it, 'Systems are doing it for themselves' (Tasgal, 2003). Complexity thinking has already become incorporated into marketing speak, for example, viral marketing, tipping points, hubs.

Ironically, emergence, in the context of qualitative

research, seems quite natural. The nature of our practice means that we are always exploring individuals in relation to others and their environment within the wider cultural context. The study of relationships is intrinsic to what we do. Qualitative inquiry, at best, is a process of ongoing learning which does not naturally lend itself to the rules and constraints that are common in Newtonian science.

Friction often arises when we attempt to impose Newtonian thinking on complexity-led emergence. Geoff Bayley (2006) illustrates this conflict very clearly in his analysis of the role of the discussion guide; torn as it is between a prescriptive Newtonian comfort blanket and an emergent tool for encouraging discussion.

Social constructionism

Social constructionism meshes neatly with complexity thinking. Its starting point is that we can never experience the world neutrally as, arguably, it really is. Instead, we interpret the world, each differently, through our own particular web of perspectives and experiences. We 'construct' it (Weick, 1995).

We are, however, intrinsically social beings and construct our world through cultural parameters which we jointly shape and are shaped by. Anthropologist Mary Douglas describes this as "...the admonitions, excuses and moral judgements by which the people mutually coerce one another into conformity" (Douglas, 1985).

But, if we construct our world rather than merely observe what is out there, then it follows that knowledge too is constructed not discovered. This has obvious implications for qualitative research. The thought that we construct research findings may, initially, seem scary. In order to be accepted, however, these findings have to be plausible, coherent, reasonable, memorable, resonate with other people, be capable of being used prospectively and capture both feeling and thought (Weick, 1995). But we probably have to ditch the term findings.

Neuroscience

Neuroscience is blazing a trail, challenging our traditional perceptions of our rational and emotional selves. The Portuguese neuroscientist, Antonio Damasio (2000), offers a convincing explanation of how rationality and emotion work in tandem to allow us to make sense of the world. He suggests that rational thought uses a less evolved part of our brains than that involved in creative thinking.

Creative thinking, it seems, marks the pinnacle of brain evolution, so deserves a bit more respect than it often gets. Using our 'whole body' to engage with an experience – in conjunction with other people – means that our rationality, intuition, creativity and physiological responses are all part of the picture. At best they are aligned and working together. Objectivity and subjectivity become irrelevant. In this sense, we are acutely centred in the present, what Stacey (2002) calls the living present.

Qualitative researchers are very familiar with this whole body learning experience, in which the research process involves a sense of letting go, relinquishing control. It's worth listening to Richard Seel when says "Do not try to answer the question; wait until the question answers itself."

Drawing on the still fledgling complexity sciences, on Social constructionism and neuroscience, we can start to develop a different theoretical understanding of qualitative practice which reflects what we really do as researchers. In the past, qualitative research has sat, sometimes uncomfortably, outside the scientific method. It has been defined as unscientific and criticised for its lack of rigour. I think it's time to question these assumptions and re-examine where qualitative thinking fits in relation to science.

I believe that qualitative research is already alive and well in the exploratory stages of classical science – and this should be acknowledged, and, secondly, I believe it fits naturally within complexity sciences and we could embrace the thinking from complexity to strengthen our practice and the status of qualitative research.

Science, but not as we know it

The populist view of science – and of research as its handmaiden – is that it is objective, impersonal, that it examines a reality detached from the viewer, i.e. the positivist world view. There have, however, been many voices challenging this view (Polanyi, 1962, Kuhn, 1962, Schon, 1983, Seale, 1983, Hollis, 2002).

Polanyi, a chemist and philosopher, claimed that the scientist's personal participation in creating knowledge is an indispensable part of science itself and that, even in the 'exact' sciences, knowing is an art. Science, he argued, cannot meaningfully be separated from other

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ways of knowing.

John Shotter (2003), a social constructionist, goes further. He claims that there is really not much difference between the ways in which pure science and action research (loosely interpreted as qualitative research) are approached.

In the exploratory stages of pure science, e.g. physics, chemistry, scientists have to develop a grammar (language, constructs) to communicate. The style is conversational and informal as they decide what to focus on and how to interpret their findings.

Shotter describes this stage as having 'neither a fully subjective nor fully objective character'. The scientists are actively creating their 'findings'. However, when the science become established, the scientists, according to Shotter, 'seek to 'erase'... their own involvement in producing matters of 'objective fact'. That is, they cut the umbilical cord from their research findings and pretend that the structure was there from the beginning waiting to be discovered, rather than having created it themselves.

This is not deliberate deception, it is just the protocols that have grown up around classical science. An article in *Organisation Science* illustrates this by suggesting that 'there are still times when it is best to conceal or downplay the role that qualitative data plays in developing an author's ideas' (Sutton, 1997).

In fact this process is not dissimilar from our own behaviour in presentations, when we position ourselves



as bearers of 'findings' and then distance ourselves from the process of their creation, i.e. aping the classical model. A complexity approach, by contrast, would mean presentations as a working session in which everyone contributes heart and soul to move the learning on.

If we adopt this broader understanding of science – and research – as a spectrum of activity from tentative, messy, intuitive exploration through to the development of a collection of principles and rules for understanding the world, then qualitative research is an essential component of the scientific world-view. You cannot develop new scientific principles or suppositions without the initial inchoate, shuffling around in their formation and there is little sense in artificially separating the two processes.

This re-framing could precipitate a paradigm shift (Kuhn, 1962) in which qualitative research is accepted as a necessary part of the scientific method, although the ways in which it is evaluated needs to reflect its different contribution to science. It is more likely that qualitative research will align itself with the complexity sciences because this will give it greater weight as part of a wider body of scientific thinking.

Old vs New research paradigms

The term paradigm was first brought into everyday use by Thomas Kuhn in the 1960s. It refers to a self-consistent set of ideas and beliefs that act as a filter, influencing how we, as a society, perceive and make sense of things. It can be expressed simply as 'seeing what you believe', rather than the usual 'believing what you see'.

A paradigm shift happens when there is a change in basic assumptions within the prevailing worldview that supports a particular theory. According to Kuhn, when there is sufficient dissatisfaction with a current paradigm, the discipline is thrown into a state of crisis. During this crisis, new ideas, perhaps ones previously discarded, are tried.

Eventually a new paradigm is formed, which gains its own new followers, and an intellectual battle takes place between the followers of the new paradigm and the 'hold-outs of the old paradigm'. A classic example is the change from the historical assumption that we live in a flat world to the current belief that the world is round.

Old vs New research paradigms

Arguably qualitative research is going through a similar paradigm shift as we challenge whether the Newtonian – or classical – research paradigm is the most useful way of understanding, explaining and developing qualitative research practice. We are discovering that qualitative research which, within a commercial context, has grown up as a craft and developed largely through trial and error and the magpie activity of borrowing ideas from a range of disciplines, can now be linked to sound theoretical principles rooted in the Complexity sciences.

Like all paradigm shifts this change has been characterised by confusion and conflict, as clients and researchers alike swing back and forth between these different paradigms. This has been going on for a long time but I feel that we are finally coming to some denouement. I hope this will result in qualitative research finally being judged on its own terms.

Some practical tips for 'emergency' inquiry

- Curiosity, openness, an engagement with the problem is important. Emergent inquiry is not prescriptive; each problem requires its own approach
- Shaping the research question is central to the process; it will inevitably influence the outcome. Can you persuade clients to set up workshops to explore the inquiry? Can you invite different stakeholders?
- Encourage a view that knowledge is an evolving process, not a 'thing'
- Remember, strategy as well as learning can be emergent
- Trust your emotional learning in a research situation but be reflective, rigorous and disciplined about 'emotional' content in just the same way as you are with 'intellectual' content

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- Our role is to facilitate the creation of knowledge not to solve the client's problem. Think of ways to create a climate of 'learning' within client organisations