

# **Re-invigorating and Re-defining the Practice of Qualitative Inquiry within a Business Context**

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# Abstract

This thesis aims to develop new understanding of commercial qualitative research, informed primarily by thinking from complex responsive processes, social constructionism and the philosophy of social science, supported by approaches to validity and legitimacy which are epistemologically appropriate to this understanding.

Commercial qualitative research has the over-riding aim of helping to guide the decision making of the commissioning client; its purpose – and the way in which it is evaluated – is, essentially, determined by its perceived usefulness, rather than methodological considerations. Until recently there has been little interest within the qualitative industry in theory that informs practice. One result of this pragmatism is conflicting paradigms; an unquestioned ‘positivism’ sitting alongside – and intermingled with - a variety of ‘interpretivist’ approaches. This has resulted in much confusion, contradiction and, I believe, has stunted the development of the qualitative research industry.

This thesis explores the meaning of ‘inquiry’; how research ‘data’, and the processes of making sense of this ‘data’, can be understood within a commercial research context. I propose a view of qualitative research – ‘emergent inquiry’ – which is not hidebound by research structure but which involves a process of joint and evolving sense-making. Starting from the premise that reliability and validity (as understood in their scientific application) are inappropriate ways of understanding ‘emergent inquiry’, I explore an understanding of legitimacy which, I believe, is more appropriate to the inquiry method that I have outlined.

My intention, in this doctoral research, is to strengthen theoretical understanding, practice and legitimisation of commercial qualitative research practice. Through challenging taken for granted assumptions, I am attempting to contribute to the



ongoing development of professional practice; highlighting a different understanding of qualitative practice – ‘emergent inquiry’ - with appropriate legitimisation, rather than ‘borrowing’ legitimacy from an inappropriate ‘positivist’ epistemology.

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# Synopsis

## Introduction

At the beginning of this programme, I wrote in my journal:

*“I feel as if I have had 20 years of not thinking”*

Clearly this was not true – at least not in the everyday sense that we understand thinking. But it was true in the sense that my thinking had become ‘tram-lined’; my practice was frenetic, not given to reflection. I wanted space to think. This was my first aim.

My second aim was to find a way out of my current practice. I was bored. My work felt stale.

I did not particularly link these two aims.

In the event, the two have become one. I have been learning to escape my practice – as I then defined it - by thinking about it; by reflecting on what I am doing, how I am doing it and linking this with how others do it. In this process I have become curious and re-energised. In a sense, this thesis is both a story of re-engagement with my profession as well as an exploration of how commercial qualitative research might be enriched by different theoretical perspectives.

So, how has my thinking changed over the course of the last three years? Given that I was bored with my working life, I started off determined not to use my practice as a research source. Pragmatism forced me to re-consider. It was impossible to work, participate in this doctoral programme and, at the same time, engage with a separate research process. With great reluctance, I acquiesced and decided to use my working practice as my research material. Gradually, I became more engaged. I started the process by reflecting on my practice and the reasons for my dissatisfaction. I became more aware of the theoretical assumptions that inform it and of conflicting epistemologies at work; I described this as ‘a

positivist shell vying with an interpretivist centre'. Increasingly I realised that the conflict between these two epistemological positions lay at the heart of my dissatisfaction and, I felt, prevented the profession as a whole from developing. As the movement of my inquiry, which I articulated as 'Re-invigorating and re-defining the practice of qualitative inquiry within a business context', deepened, I realised that I needed to redefine what 'research' might mean within my community of practice and the client community I work with. This required significant shifts in my understanding of how I might practice – from an 'event' perspective to one of ongoing process - and also required a quite different understanding of how, broadly, positivist and interpretivist epistemologies can be understood to contribute to the processes of qualitative research – or 'emergent inquiry', as I would now describe it.

This synopsis summarises the movement of my inquiry throughout my doctoral research. However, it also reflects a further development of my thinking after completion of the four projects which comprise this thesis. In particular, I explore the key challenges, as I would see them:

- (i) How can emergent inquiry be understood and positioned within a commercial research community of practice?
- (ii) How can it be regarded as legitimate, i.e. rigorous, valid, reliable and, most importantly, useful? How does a client know that the outcome of 'emergent inquiry' has any veracity, given that it is 'subjective' and therefore 'contaminated' and 'biased'?

## **My practice as a commercial qualitative researcher**

Before embarking on these meaty issues, I will start with a brief introduction to commercial qualitative research as I practice it. I am a ‘qualitative researcher’; that is, my work is defined by a methodology, rather than an ‘end benefit’.

I am commissioned by clients to recommend, structure and implement qualitative research projects which will address their particular needs and aspirations. Most commercial qualitative research is carried out using either discussion groups (or ‘focus groups’) and/or individual interviews, although in recent years this emphasis has shifted to include other methodologies, e.g. ethnography, semiotics, NLP, cultural analysis, creative workshops. When I have conducted the fieldwork and analysed the data, I report back to the client, initially in the form of a verbal presentation, which is usually followed up by a written report. ‘Fieldwork’ is the normal industry term for these initial research stages and therefore I use it here, as I will use other industry terms throughout this thesis. However, the language used in commercial qualitative research, e.g. fieldwork, interviews, conduct (as in ‘conduct a focus group’), findings, data, reporting, consumers, now seems quite alien to me. It reflects the positivist framework within which qualitative research is still encased – though bursting out of. Part of the process of reinvigorating qualitative research is, I believe, the development of more appropriate language and discourse to adequately describe what we do.

Superficially, the old chestnut of ‘objectivity’, in relation to qualitative research, has largely been laid to rest, as least amongst the clients I work with. There is an acceptance that the views, opinions and recommendations of experienced qualitative researchers are subjective, though based on a broad knowledge of particular markets, social trends and psychological principles. However, what we do, as qualitative practitioners, is nonetheless still defined as ‘research’ and research, within the current business climate, still implies ‘standing outside’; objectivity. Indeed, an expectation of ‘objectivity’ and ‘subjectivity’, interwoven

and ill-defined, exists amongst both researchers and clients – but it is not overtly acknowledged or explored. This often leads to confusion and misunderstanding. In spite of the transparent subjectivity of what we offer, there is strong resistance to the idea that the researcher is an integral part of the process he or she is engaged in. As a result, research ‘findings’ can become reified. Clients frequently want to ‘take’ our recommendations and ‘apply’ them. Although it is widely accepted that the way in which we work, and the type of knowledge we are generating, is fluid, relational and subjective, it nonetheless needs to be ‘translated into hard data’ in order to be regarded as valid and useful within most organisational contexts.

Clearly there is considerable ambivalence about what qualitative research ‘really is’. It is not ‘objective’. It cannot be ‘just subjective’. There is a wild swinging back and forth between opposing paradigms in an attempt to reconcile the apparently irreconcilable. This has contributed, I believe, to a sense of stagnation in the qualitative research industry, because we have been unable to break free from this ‘double bind’. It constrains the way in which the industry can develop.

The nature of commercial qualitative research is that it has no formal training requirement and no established qualifications - although many qualitative researchers have a social science background. It is taught ‘on the hoof’. As a result, practitioners may be very skilled at what they do, but have little idea about the theoretical assumptions that inform their practice (Gordon 1999:62). In fact, commercial qualitative research is generally regarded as more of an art than a science and it cannot sensibly be separated from the process of business winning and client relationship management. (Thorpe 2003). Essentially, it is evaluated in terms of its usefulness in helping those that commission it (Marks 2000). As a result, it has become pragmatic, versatile and innovative.

Commercial qualitative research has grown substantially in the last ten or twenty years and is now regularly used by organisations as diverse as government,



charities, media, education, religion, the entertainment industry, NGOs, advertising and all manner of sales and marketing companies – as well as in organisational development. Regardless of the client or context, the over-riding aim is to help guide strategy and inform decision making. Although my practice is based on qualitative research, the ‘recommendations’ I make go well beyond the ‘data’. In essence I would see it as ‘research based consultancy’ – though this seemingly innocuous description conceals a ‘can of worms’, as I will explore later.

## **A brief history of commercial qualitative research**

How has commercial qualitative research come to this point, where it is riddled with contradictions and confused epistemologies? And why, in spite of this, has it grown, indeed thrived, over recent decades?

In order to position my own thinking within the wider field of commercial qualitative research, I will take a brief journey through the history of the industry. It is probably worth pointing out that commercial qualitative research practitioners have had a singular disinterest in the history of the profession, a fact that I have referred to throughout this thesis because it has, I feel, had a significant effect on the development of our practice. The first book on UK qualitative market research practice (Gordon & Langmaid) was not published until 1988. Over the next decade only a trickle of books were written or edited by practitioners. This is now changing, but it is significant that, of a recent series of seven books, ‘Qualitative Market Research: Principle and Practice’ (Ed. Ereaut, Imms & Callingham 2002) not one of them offers even a brief history of the industry<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Of course, this lack of published texts on commercial qualitative practice can be seen as an advantage. As Kuhn (1970) persuasively argues, the ‘temptation to write history backwards’ (ibid:138) can have a stultifying effect on the development of a profession. In this sense, the lack of defining texts ‘liberated’ commercial qualitative research and allowed it to pursue new avenues with less constraint.

Interestingly, American publications are more forthcoming. Puchta & Potter (2004) cite Robert Merton as ‘the father of the focus group’ (ibid:4) and claim the first example of focus group research to be at Columbia university in 1941, when research was used to test people’s reactions to wartime radio broadcasts. They also claim that between 1950 and 1980 focus groups in the US were rare outside the field of market research. Mariampolski (2001) provides an interesting trip through the intellectual heritage of commercial qualitative research which, he claims, goes back to the middle of the nineteenth century and includes psychology and psychoanalysis (Freud, Carl Rogers, Edward T. Hall), scientific methods (Max Weber, Robert Park), Erving Goffman and the Chicago School, social reality (Georg Simmel, Edmund Husserl and the Symbolic Interactionism of Herbert Blumer, based on G. H. Mead’s thinking).

In the UK, Gordon (1999) attempts a brief history of commercial qualitative research whilst, at the same time, acknowledging that ‘there is little available that tells us when commercial qualitative research first came into being, why it did so at that time, who the main pioneers were, how many practitioners there were four decades ago compared to today and so on.’ (ibid:15). Gordon cites the motivational researcher Ernest Dichter as ‘the so-called father of qualitative research’ although, like Mariampolski, she claims that commercial qualitative research has been influenced by a wide spectrum of thinkers, including Boas, Mead, Malinowski, Bateson, Evans-Pritchard and Radcliffe-Brown<sup>2</sup>.

Gordon describes the initial stage of commercial qualitative research practice as the ‘traditional period’ (early 1900s to World War 2), which modelled itself on the positivist scientist paradigm, characterised by a commitment to objectivism, a belief that what was studied was unchangeable and the assumption that the researcher could translate his fieldwork into general theories of the human condition. She adds a salutary note of caution:

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<sup>2</sup> It is interesting that, outside commercial qualitative research, Kurt Lewin is frequently mentioned as the ‘father’ of action research (arguably qualitative research) (Gummesson 2000; Shaw 2002; Schon 1983), whereas I can find no mention of him in commercial qualitative research writing.

It is worthwhile pointing out that, although the assumptions of the traditional period of qualitative research have been seriously challenged by academics, they remain free of criticism by most buyers, users and practitioners of commercial qualitative market research today. The positivist interpretation of human behaviour lingers on.

(ibid: 23)

After the Second World War, qualitative research entered the ‘modernist phase’, with its accompanying attempts to formalise qualitative methods and make them as rigorous as those of quantitative research. This was the era of fierce debates between advocates of qualitative and quantitative methods – a futile debate that has not totally subsided, even today.

Gordon describes how, during the 1970s and early 1980s, boundaries between the humanities and the social sciences merged, leading to debates about ‘truth and fiction’, until the mid-1980s and the ‘crisis of representation’, in which the ability of the researcher to really capture the lived experience of research participants was questioned. The legitimacy of qualitative research, in terms of reliability, validity and ability to generalise, again became problematic, despite the fact that these terms had been constantly redefined in each phase of qualitative development.

By the late 80s, qualitative research was coming to be widely seen as a series of creative and interpretative acts, in which there is no single interpretative truth and the legitimacy of research was defined in terms of its usefulness to the client. This trend has continued, with an increasing emphasis on ‘researching the future’ (ibid:281-301).

Reading Gordon’s account and comparing it with my own experience as a qualitative research practitioner during much of this period (1978 – present), I am struck by my lack of awareness, at the time, of the phases she describes; of how little it impinged upon my practice. Attitudes and practice changed, but this came about by knocking up against the needs, concerns and expectations of clients and colleagues, rather than through formal – or indeed informal – debate.

Reading her summaries today I can, retrospectively, recognise the stages. However, my experience was that the industry did not pass neatly from one stage to the next. As with any paradigm shift, there was ‘an increasing shift in the distribution of professional allegiances’ as practitioners of the new paradigm ‘improve it, explore its possibilities, and show what it would be like to belong to the community guided by it’ (Kuhn 1962:157-58).

However, I think something more was happening. Rather than simply shifting allegiances, I would see the commercial qualitative research industry as ‘adding on’ new perspectives without questioning or dispensing with the old. This, I believe, is why there is such confusion and contradiction in how we currently practice, which has led to the stagnation I have described elsewhere. We are still struggling in our attempt to reconcile the positivism of the ‘traditional period’ with the ‘interpretivism’ and multiples ‘truths’ of the current period. However, we stubbornly refuse to abandon either position or to find a way of reconciling the two. I believe it is because the conflicts between these paradigms have not been widely explored – largely due to a strong culture of anti-intellectualism within commercial research – that they are not recognised and not addressed<sup>3</sup>.

## **My aim in this research process**

On a personal level, the feeling of stagnation which led me to this doctoral programme has encouraged me to seek alternative ways of working, of thinking. My academic research, throughout this doctoral process, is an attempt to break

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<sup>3</sup> By contrast, whilst commercial qualitative researchers were adopting a pragmatic position and getting on with the business of growing the industry, academic qualitative researchers were, apparently, in turmoil. They ‘experienced a series of crises, ruptures, rifts, and even revolutions beginning in the early 1980s.....They benchmarked interrogations, rifts, ruptures, moral and practical dilemmas, and revolutions that changed ethno-graphic practices forever.... Even in the relatively short time frame between the first and second editions [of the Handbook of Qualitative Research], we found a radically altered landscape, forever transformed by a series of issues and usages that would have been unthinkable in the early 1970s. (Lincoln & Denzin 2003:1)

free from the double bind of my practice; to explore and develop alternative perspectives which will 'liberate' qualitative research, so that it can be a true process of inquiry, a process which accepts the paradox of objectivity and subjectivity and transcends the two. Essentially I am interested in exploring how qualitative inquiry and thinking can develop beyond the constraints of a traditional 'research' context and can increase its 'usefulness' without losing its intellectual rigour.

Since I started this programme, I have become aware of a groundswell of other voices within the commercial research and related industries expressing a similar sense of frustration and sheer boredom with the way in which qualitative research is currently practiced (Baker & Callingham 2003, Ereaut & Imms 2002, Earls 2002, Tasgal 2003, Thorpe 2003, Oldridge 2003, Heath 2001, Gordon 1999, Desai 2002). Many of these practitioners are looking to alternative perspectives which offer a more interactive, 'process' approach to understanding the nature of qualitative inquiry and its role in guiding policy and decision making. So too, I have been exploring alternative ways of understanding what I do; in particular, social constructionism, which highlights the way in which we make sense of events; the process by which we create meaning (Weick 1995, Burr 1995), complex responsive process theory which emphasises interaction and diversity as integral to processes of change and continuity (Stacey 2001, 2002, Shaw 2002, Streatfield 2001, Griffin 2002, ) and 'practitioner' literature (Schein 1999, Schon 1987, Block 2000, Argyris & Schon 1974, Gummesson 2000, 2001, 2003, Shotter 1993, 2003).

My intention, in the course of this doctoral programme, has been to allow change in my professional practice to emerge whilst, at the same time, allowing 'what being professional means' to shift, both for me as a practitioner and also for members of my community of practice. This has involved participating in and reflecting on my practice - on my own and with clients, colleagues and other participants on this programme. This participation and reflection is integrally

linked to my growing understanding of other perspectives through my reading and conversations with others.

## **The commercial and academic qualitative research worlds**

Given that I am in the rather peculiar position of using an (academic) qualitative research methodology to explore a (commercial) qualitative research practice, it is perhaps useful to briefly raise the issue of difference. Until recently, there has been very little contact between commercial and academic qualitative researchers; the two worlds have developed more or less independently. As a result, there are considerable differences between the two approaches and also considerable mutual ignorance (Catterall 2000, Barker and Nancarrow 1998, Gordon 1999, Ereaut 2002). Wendy Gordon, a well respected commercial qualitative researcher, comments that, although she has worked as a qualitative research practitioner for 30 years, like me, she did not know that Denzin & Lincoln's (1994) *Handbook of Qualitative Research* existed, until she came to write her (second) book. She was equally surprised to find that there was nothing in its 586 pages that referred to 'qualitative market research' (Gordon 1999:19).

Criteria of 'success' amongst academic and commercial researchers are very different, as are time scales, funding and reporting requirements (Ereaut 2002:7-8). In addition, few academic researchers undertake more than one or two research project a year which reduces the opportunities to try out new methods or variations on existing ones (Catterall 2000, Thorpe 2003). Commercial practitioners, by contrast, may be involved in 30 or more projects a year, with frequent opportunities to experiment with methodology. Within the last few years, however, there has been a renewed interest amongst both commercial

practitioners and academics in comparing and sharing their experiences (Ereaut 2002, Catterall 2000, Chrzanowska 2002, Thorpe 2003). This thesis will, I hope, form part of this sharing.

So, how am I to understand qualitative research from these two apparently disparate perspectives? This has been something of a problem throughout my doctoral work because, as I discuss above, the two are not the same and I need to clearly differentiating them. ‘Qualitative research’ in a commercial setting is more limited, at least historically, in its research methods; the emphasis being on interviewing rather than the spectrum of approaches utilised in academic research (Cotterall 2000). At the same time, it is less rigorous, more concerned with ‘usability’ than validity. Expediency can over-ride technical purity, so that a researcher may ‘invent’ an approach if he/she feels it will best meet the research objectives or encourage new perspectives. Crudely, if it works, it is considered valid – and I am conscious that this statement begs the question of what I mean by ‘works’ and ‘valid’; questions I will return to later.

Inevitably, much of the work of this thesis has involved exploring research issues and, in particular, the way in which I believe commercial research is currently ‘contained and constrained’ by a positivist frame of reference. At the same time, I am conscious that I have made little explicit connection between my commercial qualitative research work and the qualitative methodology I have adopted on this programme. I did not deliberately set out to separate the two and, from my current perspective, it seems strange to me that I *have* separated them. I now see that this separation is an artefact, a result of the way in which I have understood commercial qualitative research as two separate processes; the research ‘itself’ and the client contact that ‘surrounds’ it. Clearly this is not solely my doing. It reflects the evolution of the qualitative industry in which this division has become accepted and, eventually, ‘rationally invisible’ (Shotter 1993:11).

Later in this synopsis I will describe how I have come to see the two qualitative worlds as essentially the same, though each having a different focus, but for now I will continue the rather artificial distinction and describe the methodology that I have adopted in my doctoral work, in order to explore and develop my practice.

## **My doctoral research approach and methodology**

Perversely, given the nature of my research question, I have found exploring the methodology I am adopting in my doctoral research to be quite difficult. There are two reasons for this. Firstly, it feels important that I do not confuse the methodology I employ in my practice with the methodology I am using to explore it. Although ultimately I feel the two methodologies do need to be brought together, so that each may enrich the other, it is important for me to be clear, initially, about the differences between them or, more specifically, my understanding of the methodologies and the epistemological assumptions that inform my ways of practicing in each sphere. Secondly, the academic and commercial research worlds are very different and the same terminology sometimes has different meanings in each world. For the sake of clarity, I want to address them separately.

Clearly my research approach is qualitative. It is informed by complex responsive processes and social constructionist thinking as well as, inevitably, by my working practice as a commercial qualitative researcher. As such, it is rooted in an understanding of knowledge as emergent, involving human interaction which is enabled and constrained by our mutual interdependence. This poses inevitable challenges for a research methodology because it needs to reflect this particular understanding of inquiry and knowledge but, at the same time, it must be sufficiently rigorous to claim legitimacy in relation to academic criteria. In order to be compatible with the epistemological approach I have adopted in this thesis, my research approach therefore needs to reflect the range of ways in



which we ‘make meaning’ of our experience together, i.e. speaking, listening, reading, writing, thinking/reflection, acting; processes in which the emergent meaning acts back to influence the very practice that creates it.

My methodology can be classed as a style of *participatory or co-operative inquiry*. Reason and Bradbury (2001) describe their form of participatory inquiry as a process of relationship, mutual sensemaking and collective action (ibid: 2), which draws on both positivism and interpretivist paradigms:

...it follow positivism in arguing that there is a ‘real’ reality ... and draws on the constructionist perspective in acknowledging that as soon as we attempt to articulate this we enter a world of human language and cultural expression. Any account of the given cosmos in the spoken or written word is culturally framed, yet if we approach our inquiry with appropriate *critical skills and discipline*, our account may provide some perspective on what is universal, and on the knowledge-creating process which frames this account.

(ibid:7, italics added)

Determining the ‘critical skills and discipline’ that are required of any form of emergent inquiry is an area that I explore later in this synopsis because this seems to me to lie at the root of issues around validity and the legitimacy of this type of research.

Reason and Bradbury are, essentially, concurring with Popper (1999), and others, in adopting a ‘realist’ view of the world. This assumes that there is an underlying ‘truth’ and that participatory inquiry, whilst inevitably constructionist, is an attempt to get as close as possible to this truth whilst always remaining an ‘approximation to the truth’ (ibid: 21). In this respect, participatory inquiry, as understood by Reason and Bradbury, has more similarities to the model of practice adopted by many commercial qualitative researchers than to the methodology I am employing in my doctoral research, i.e. positivism and interpretivist paradigms are acknowledged but remain separate and distinct; parallel world views.

I want to touch on the variety of approaches that encompass *Action Research* or Action Science (Gummesson 2002) at this point. Reason & Heron (1996) differentiate ‘action research’ from ‘traditional research’ on the basis of its egalitarian approach; that is it is research *with* people, rather than *on* people. By definition, they would see this as a process of change. Whilst it is generally regarded as a form of – or indeed the same as – participatory research, the purpose of Action Research, as Reason & Bradbury (2003) define it, is ‘to liberate the human body, mind and spirit in the search for a better, freer world’. I would not see the purpose of my research as ‘emancipatory’ in this way. Whilst I do act with intention, I do not see myself as ‘using’ research to create a ‘better, freer world’, but rather to understand and influence the processes of communication and change in my everyday interactions with clients and others.

For these reasons, I find Stacey & Griffin’s (2004) term ‘emergent exploration of experience’ (ibid:1) a more accurate description of my methodology. Although Stacey & Griffin acknowledge many interests in common with Reason and Bradbury, they do not assume a systemic whole or adopt an emancipatory stance. Neither do they regard the individual and the social as separate levels but as the same phenomenon, arising together. Their methodology has grown out of complex responsive processes thinking (Stacey 2001), ‘a method of exploring our own experience of interaction with each other and the ways in which this patterns our experience’. This is essentially a temporal process theory, in which human interaction is taken to pattern itself, thereby eliminating the need to think in terms of systems and boundaries.

However, participatory inquiry, as a generic approach, covers a broad arena and, in order to more closely position my own methodology, I will briefly introduce some qualitative approaches which have contributed to my understanding of the research methodology I have adopted.

**Grounded Theory**, originally developed by Glaser and Strauss, is now something of an umbrella approach (Goulding 2002:46); a way of thinking about research

which releases it from the hypothesis/test/report model. It assumes no hypothesis at the outset (although inevitably some intention), and so allows the process to dictate the direction, alongside emerging hypotheses. This approach fits rather nicely with Shaw's description of 'an emerging sense' as 'carry[ing] with it the idea of something evolving, in the process of becoming more itself although it sometimes [becomes] something else' (Shaw 2002:102). However, Grounded Theory also carries with it the notion of the quest being 'pure'; that is of 'data build up to saturation' by the researcher 'staying in the field until no further evidence emerges' (Goulding 2002:46). Here I would diverge from this thinking. I favour Weick's (1995) approach, which suggests that we are eternal 'sense-makers'. Data does not create meaning of its own volition. We continuously create and re-create meaning as a way of life. Nonetheless, the emphasis of Grounded Theory on unfettered inquiry is very appropriate to the methodology I am employing in my doctoral research.

I am struck by how my research approach sits between the thinking of Action Research and Grounded Theory, borrowing from both. I am neither motivated by an over-arching goal, i.e. driven by the desire for a 'better world', neither am I goal-less, i.e. allowing data to reach 'saturation'. I see my approach as active sense-making, socially constructed in interaction with self and others; an 'intensive processes of joint inquiry amongst diverse participants' (Shaw 2002).

Alvesson & Skoldberg's (2000) useful overview, '*Reflexive Methodology*', connects a spectrum of approaches and thinking around qualitative inquiry which acknowledge the *reflexive researcher* role; they describe a history of the line of thought which has resulted in a concept of 'inclusion' of the researcher as influence – even protagonist – within his/her research processes. The processes of iterative writing, reading, thinking, conversation with peers during learning sets, extended residential sessions and ongoing peer review, have contributed towards an intensely reflective and reflexive process; they are central to the research methodology I am adopting as part of this doctoral process.

Alongside ‘reflexive’ and ‘grounded’ approaches lies, what I believe to be an essential research component; that of intuition or *hermeneutics*:

...the mind of one individual – especially its more creative, non-rule-bound aspects – is not accessible to the reason of another individual, trying to analyse it from the outside; only intuition can fully assimilate the mental universe of another human being. In so far as this empathy is complemented by the interpreter’s broader or at least different stock of knowledge, it is even possible – and this constitutes one of the main theses of hermeneutics – for interpreters to understand agents better than agents understand themselves.

(Alvesson & Skoldberg 2000:54)

Alvesson & Skoldberg differentiate between ‘objectivist hermeneutics’, in which subject and object are sharply divided and ‘alethic hermeneutics’ which dissolves the polarity between subject and object and instead, focused on pre-understanding and understanding; the basic idea of alethic hermeneutics being the ‘revelation of something hidden, rather than the correspondence between subjective thinking and objective reality’ (ibid: 58). However, I would posit a slightly different understanding of hermeneutics. Whilst objectivist hermeneutics would clearly not fit with my epistemological understanding, I would also challenge the view, implicit in alethic hermeneutics, that there is a ‘whole’ and that hermeneutics enables one to find something ‘hidden’. This suggests a formative teleology, i.e. that meaning is there to be discovered, rather than created. Instead, my understanding of hermeneutics is that of emergent process, i.e. whilst I would still view it as a type of knowledge achieved by ‘a kind of mental flashlight, giving an immediate and complete overview (ibid:52), I would regard this as an ongoing, emergent process, which never results in completion.

Storytelling or ‘*narrative analysis*’ is another strand which I would see as an essential to my methodology. Reissman (1993) describes very clearly why she considers stories and story-telling to be important as both the data and the metaphor for research processes:

Story telling, to put it very simply, is what we do with our research materials and what informants do with us. The story metaphor emphasises that we create order, construct texts in particular contexts...Narrative investigation takes as its object of investigation the story itself..."

(Reissman 1993:1)

The focus on 'the story itself' and the way, as well as the order, content and prioritising of the telling – along with the continual reiteration of the story – are, I believe, how meaning is created and re-created with self and others as part of ongoing process. Ultimately the narrative analyst employs 'subjective' judgement to decide on the 'categories of importance' and the 'meanings' to be created, using 'critical skills and discipline' (Reason & Bradbury 2001:7). However, this can be a contentious area. Reissman insists that because stories are 'essential meaning-making structures, narratives must be preserved, not fractured, by investigators, who must respect respondents' ways of constructing meaning' (ibid: 4). I would, instead, view meaning as co-created by respondents, researcher and clients and influenced by the intended purpose of the research.

In summary, I would regard the methodology that I am employing within this doctoral research process as fitting within a broad 'participative inquiry' arena, as Stacey & Griffin (2004) interpret this (emergent exploration of experience). It assumes the researcher is integral to the process. It adopts an exploratory ('Grounded Theory') approach, although from the perspective that meaning is created in the process, rather than being discovered or emerging from the data, as traditional understandings of 'Grounded Theory' suggests. I would also assume an initial 'intention' for the inquiry, although I would regard this as continually emerging in the processes of interaction, so that change – and new thinking – potentially evolve. I would not necessarily see this process as 'change for the better'. A very important part of my inquiry is the ongoing processes of reflectivity and reflexivity through iterative writing, conversation, reading and my current practice. It is through this continuous – often exhausting - process of working on the 'material' (self, writing, reading, practice etc.), aided by a form

of emergent hermeneutics, that I believe, innovation in my practice – or more accurately, my way of being - emerges.

Although this methodology section has, deliberately, focused on the methodology I am adopting in my doctoral research, it is worth, briefly, comparing it with my commercial practice methodology. The essential difference, I believe, is that commercial research has not, until very recently, concerned itself with distinguishing between and understanding the *processes* of qualitative research – or indeed addressing validity. The emphasis has been on what ‘works’ – from the perspective of helping the client’s understanding and decision making. As a result, methodological change has been driven by *usefulness of output*. This has encouraged flexible and creative thinking and discouraged the categorisation of research approaches, such as I have attempted above. However, in practice, the approaches I describe are, essentially, no different to much that is consciously and habitually adopted within a commercial context. For instance, commercial researchers have used analysis of ‘stories’ for half a century and hermeneutics, creative idea generation and reflective/reflexive methodologies are very familiar within the commercial qualitative research industry (Holmes & Keegan 1983). The key difference is that the approaches adopted in commercial research have arisen out of extensive practical experience of working with people in groups.

A question that spans the academic and commercial fields is the legitimacy of such approaches: ‘How do we know that any of this is ‘real’ and not a product of imagination?’ This is a discussion that I will reserve until the final section of this synopsis, because it is relevant to my understanding of ‘emergent inquiry’.

## The movement of my inquiry

This thesis comprises four projects, along with this synopsis. In reviewing the projects and drawing out the key themes, I am struck by the shift in my understanding of my practice. Whilst the nature of my inquiry has remained relatively constant, the way in which I understand ‘research’ has fundamentally changed, alongside my growing interest, engagement and understanding of different theoretical perspectives. Instead of focusing on how qualitative research is *used*, I have moved to exploring what qualitative research *is* – and how it can be understood and legitimised in a different way.

My first project centred around two issues; what my working practice actually is – or rather how I would define it - and the satisfactions and frustrations that it encompasses. I start to examine the assumptions that inform the way in which I work and the theoretical perspectives that permeate these assumptions. I explore how qualitative research has become locked into a formulaic way of working defined by methodology rather than the processes of inquiry. In the course of my reading and exploration, I discover that, whilst I have been expressing my frustration by withdrawing from the qualitative research industry, others had been starting to question and re-examine what we are trying to do (Valentine 2002; Gordon 1999; Ereaut 2002).

By examining the detail of work projects which I found satisfying and those that were frustrating, I began to see the ways in which my assumptions, beliefs and behaviour – which reflect the practice norms of the industry – both enable and constrain the way in which I practice. Simultaneously engaging with thinking from other perspectives - complex responsive processes (Shaw 2002; Stacey 2001, 2003, 2004; Stacey, Griffin & Shaw 2000) and social constructionism (Shotter 1993; Weick 1995) - I begin to re-think the processes of qualitative research; I ponder on the implications of viewing research more as a continuous process, rather than a series of events. The notion of ‘research findings’ being

created rather than discovered is something I largely take for granted, although this is not openly acknowledged within the commercial research industry.

Weick's explanation of sense-making as, of necessity, a creative process and his assertion that 'we only know what we have done after we have done it' gave validity to beliefs which I had developed, but felt unable to voice openly within my current practice. In a sense, Project 1 raised many of the questions that I have been attempting to explore in subsequent projects.

Reading back on this project nearly three years on, I am struck by how hard I try to avoid writing about my working practice, choosing instead to focus on activities which are 'engaging', but 'not work'. But, at the same time, the themes that run throughout my thesis are emerging; the feeling of lacking integration, feeling 'partial' in my working life, how I might harness the different 'aspects of self'? So too, the frustrations of a 'linear' approach to research comes through - and how I hold on to a client-supplier model of interaction, in spite of the fact that it can foster client relationships which are stuck, sterile. But I am unable to see an alternative, other than to avoid certain clients. I do not see client interaction as a relational process, which I am co-creating.

Project 2 grew naturally out of Project 1. I became interested in exploring the effects of a 'Newtonian' paradigm on the development and practice of qualitative research and I explore the issues of 'objectivity' and 'subjectivity', as they emerge in specific situations. Looking back, I would now take a slightly different approach; by regarding 'objectivity' and 'subjectivity' as separate types of experience, I create a false dichotomy. I would now view one as inevitably embedded within the other, the difference being which of them is privileged on a particular occasion.

My main interest in project 2 was to better understand what it means to be 'engaged' as a qualitative researcher. Traditionally 'engagement' is not something that, as a researcher, I would aspire to. In fact, the opposite is true. I am trained to be 'dis-engaged', to adopt a 'theoretical attitude' (Shotter 2003) by



distancing myself from the 'object' of my research. In the process of writing and receiving comment on this project, I became increasingly aware of the way in which this renders me 'rationally invisible' (Shotter 1993) in certain parts of my practice. More than this, I became conscious of the sometimes tortuous ways in which I hide my 'self' behind the work I do.

But this is not the whole truth. In another sense, I am very engaged with what I do. My engagement is with the process of creating meaning and with communicating this meaning in ways that resonates with, and inspire, my clients. It felt as if this storytelling world was trapped within the world of Newtonian logic.

This paradox raised the issue of what qualitative research 'is', what its 'boundaries' are and what it might become. I became interested in Shotter's (2003) distinction between classical, finished sciences and research sciences which 'inquire into possibilities not yet actualised' and explore how these processes are both similar and different. He concludes, '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 chiasmically relate them in a meaningful relation with each other.' And that is the nub of my question too. How to utilise the tension between systematizing and creativity in qualitative inquiry?

Reading the project again, I am conscious that clients are shadowy figures. I am preoccupied with creating meaning and communicating this meaning. There is little thought about co-creating meaning. From avoidance of my working practice in project 1, I move towards trying to understand what I am doing in my practice. What assumptions am I making? Why am I acting in this way? What are my frustrations? It is like peeling away the layers of the onion. What will be left? And it is as if I am in a maze, walking round and round, plotting, planning, observing the pattern, but not sure how I can get out. And then, at the end, I start

to test the water, to see if there is an alternative way of practicing, as I stretch my understanding of 'research' outside the traditional parameters.

Around the time that I embarked on Project 3, I was invited to give a paper at a joint UK/US industry conference. This allowed me to explore my thinking on changing working practices with colleagues in the qualitative industry and enabled me to reflect on a number of issues around power relations, ethics, diversity and the processes of change and continuity.

I explore my evolving sense of identity as a qualitative research practitioner and how I am coming to understand this, both within a specific work/project context and also, more generally, in relation to my colleagues and clients. In particular, I pay attention to when my experience of 'membership' of my community feels most at risk and when I am participating in an interaction where the mutual constraining is shifting. I describe the ambivalence with which I approached speaking at the conference and similar ambivalence when I undertake to run a workshop as a 'spokesperson' for an official body representing the qualitative research industry. In these situations, the notion of 'what it means to be a qualitative researcher' is continuously being negotiated and re-formulated. The theme throughout these different encounters is similar: What are the processes of mutual recognition that allow a piece of work to emerge in such a way that it is still recognised as professional and, at the same time, allow 'what being professional means' to shift?

Clearly, whilst conversations with others are integral to this process of change, such change processes are simultaneously happening as 'silent conversation' (Stacey 2003) - a process of mind. I became increasingly interested in trying to understand my changing working practice in terms of Mead's perspective that 'mind presupposes, and is the product of, the social process' (Mead 1934). I explore how we, as individuals, experience change and how 'cognitive bracketing', which Weick (1995) describes as a way in which we 'create breaks in the stream and impose categories on those portions that are set apart', can

create different aspects of self and how these different aspects can enable a 'parliament of selves' (Mead quoted by Weick 1995). In turn, I became intrigued by the notion that identity can be viewed as a process of interaction between different aspects of self – and also, simultaneously, as a process of interaction with others. This opens up the possibility that cultivating different aspects of self (or 'selves' as Weick would describe them), increases creative possibilities. As Weick asserts, 'the more selves I have access to, the more meanings I should be able to extract and impose in any situation' (ibid:24)

This project, for me, was something of a turning point in my engagement with my doctoral research. I began to believe that it may be possible for the nature of my working practice to change; that I can work within the qualitative industry in a way that I enjoy and which is satisfying. With each project, I become clearer about the areas of interest to me. I move from feeling very bored and stale with my working practice, through to a sense of frustration that my practice is not changing as quickly as I would like but, at the same time, feeling confused about what exactly this change might mean or 'look like'.

In project 4, I explicitly take up the challenge of exploring commercial qualitative research as 'emergent inquiry', by which I mean a process in which all parties involved; clients, researchers, stakeholders are jointly involved in the ongoing development of understanding and direction, which is not constrained by the requirements of the traditional research paradigm. To do this, I first enter the realm of philosophy of science and consider such basic questions as 'What do we mean by research?' and 'How do we articulate a research method, i.e. fundamental or regulative principles which determine our methodology and meet our needs and those of our clients?' Second, I flag up the key issue, which I have already mentioned in the Introduction and which I will develop further later in this synopsis; that of the rigour, validity and reliability of emergent inquiry.

Through questioning what I mean by 'research', I start to explore the nature of knowledge and where, in relation to a research project, the inquiry 'begins'. In

particular, I am interested in how different understandings of consultancy (Gummesson 2000, 2001, 2003; Schein 1999; Ereat 2002; Shaw 2002) can inform emergent inquiry, by including the processes of creating and defining the research 'problem' as part of the inquiry itself, rather than a prelude to it – and engendering a spirit of inquiry which will continue within the organisation after the 'research itself' is completed. In a sense, this way of thinking complements and expands on 'silent conversation' as a form of inquiry, which I explored in project 2. Both are attempts to understand research as evolving process; to include reflection, reflexivity, and a more fluid understanding of knowledge generation.

However, I am conscious that, at the end of project 4, I am still facing a dilemma. I am advocating emergent inquiry as the 'new' qualitative research, but I have not developed a rigorous, theoretical understanding which will support this way of working. Currently, a strong enabling constraint of commercial qualitative research is the checks and balances offered by a positivist epistemology. There are clear guidelines in terms of data protection, established norms of recruiting interviewees, the 'quasi-objective' researcher and so on. These checks are partly intended to protect the public and, as such, cannot easily be abandoned. Clearly they can act as a straitjacket, but they also provide a code of ethics and notions of validity. If research is 'emergent', what meaning do validity and ethics have? If validity is understood as an emergent process, how can it be 'sound, defensible, well grounded' (Oxford Dictionary)? Conversely, if ethics is to be thought of as 'the interpretation of action to be found in the action itself, in the on-going recognition of the meanings of actions that could not have been known in advance' (Griffin 2002:182), rather than as 'fixed realities', a very different perspective on practice is needed. These are issues that I need to address if I am to practice in this way and, indeed, if I am to persuade clients that emergent inquiry can be of benefit to them.

## Different perspectives on commercial qualitative research practice

Before addressing these issues, I think it would be useful to briefly explore the key difference in approaches to qualitative research that currently exist within the industry, in order to help me to position ‘emergent inquiry’ within this context.

Throughout my thesis I have been exploring the (apparently) competing paradigms that operate in commercial research – although they are subtly and complexly interwoven. The positivist view (in its most extreme form) regards research as data gathering, the researcher as an independent, external observer, and the findings to be a product which can be sent and received. Then there is the variety of interpretive views of research, many of which are represented by different qualitative research practitioners. Implicit in these perspectives is the impossibility of ‘standing outside’, of being ‘objective’ or discovering ‘facts’; an acceptance that reality is socially constructed.

Nowadays, within UK commercial qualitative research, a ‘pure’ positivist position is unusual, although greater emphasis on positivism is more common in the US than in the UK. Wendy Gordon (1999) differentiates between the ‘dependent focus group’, which is more prevalent in the US, and the ‘psychodynamic focus group’ which is more typical of the UK (ibid:63)<sup>4</sup>.

She describes the ‘*dependent group*’ as a rational, structured forum for debate where utterances are taken at face value and the moderator aspires to detachment. As Puchta & Potter (2004) put it, ‘one of the issues in moderation is how to stay neutral...we will consider some of the ways in which moderators achieve neutrality; that is, how they ask questions without planting opinions and how they receive answers without assessing them’ (ibid:42). Effectively, qualitative data is treated in much the same way as quantitative data, through content

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<sup>4</sup> I have discussed these different models of qualitative research in project 3.

analysis, clustering of findings and data presented as facts, ostensibly without interpretation. Mariampolski (2001) believes this model has evolved because 'American research practice has grown up with a pragmatic stance that tends to be more receptive to management ideals taught in business schools' (ibid:12).<sup>5</sup> It is also similar to the way in which some academic researchers historically treated qualitative research - as rather inadequate quantitative data:

...quantitative data can readily be turned into qualitative ones (albeit with some loss of information), by arranging them into frequency distributions....However, qualitative data cannot be turned into quantitative data except in a very few instances and then only with the aid of certain assumptions.

(Oppenheim 1966: 255)

By contrast, in a '*psychodynamic group*' - what I would call an 'interpretivist' position - emotions, thoughts, bodily actions are all part of the research process. People's utterances are not taken at face value, the conversation meanders, there is no assumption of objective truth and the group moderator does not adopt a 'detached' posture. Mariampolski describes this as 'more theoretical in its explanatory approach and more firmly rooted in the sociological and psychological principles' (ibid:12). However, even within this camp, there is considerable variation between the emphasis that different researchers will place on the 'data' - in the sense of what people say - and the recommendations and guidance they will offer to their clients<sup>6</sup>. Some would consciously separate the 'findings' from the 'interpretation', others - and I would put myself in this camp - would regard the research as a way of jointly evolving thinking which would then be further developed on one's own or with research colleagues and clients.

It is relatively easy to define research from a positivist perspective. If the researcher is 'external observer' and the object of study clearly demarcated, then

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<sup>5</sup> There has been considerable resistance in the UK to the adoption of US qualitative research practices. In particular, UK researchers have often resisted adopting the US term 'focus group', because it is seen to represent a linear, superficial approach to research. By contrast, the term 'group discussion' is considered to represent a more discursive, emergent, multi-faceted research process.

<sup>6</sup> I have discussed this in more detail in project 3.

the boundaries between ‘research’ and ‘non-research’ are fairly clear. From an ‘interpretivist’ perspective it is more difficult – indeed the term ‘define’ is, in itself, problematic. If we start from the premise that, as researchers, we cannot but be part of the research process, if we accept that all knowledge is co-created, if we believe that what we know is constantly changing, if we agree that there are no definable boundaries around research - how then can we have any shared concept of research at all? It is these fears - that research will becoming amorphous and therefore lacking authority - which have, I believed, encouraged commercial qualitative researchers to retain the ‘positivist shell’. Paradoxically, it is also the reluctance to let go of this shell which, I believe, has limited the development of the qualitative research industry.

## **The journey towards ‘emergent inquiry’**

So how does ‘emergent inquiry’ differ from these current research paradigms, which have grown up within commercial qualitative research?

Throughout much of my project work, I have explored how the qualitative research industry - practitioners and clients - co-create patterns of interaction and meaning ‘around’ the research. I have talked about the ‘linear patterns of client interaction’ – which I have felt to be constraining – and the ‘rich, complex patterns of the research itself’ – which I mostly experience as liberating.

Following on from this, I concentrated on client interactions, particularly those which I defined as ‘problematic’, whilst attempting to protect ‘the research itself’ from my inquiry, on the grounds that it was ‘not a problem’. In doing this, I was compounded the split between ‘client interaction’ and ‘the research itself’; treating it as ‘real’ rather than a social construction.

In Project 4, I came to the realisation that this split is not inevitable. It is a function of the way in which I, my clients and the industry as a whole, have

constructed the way in which we work. With the realisation that the research inquiry can be considered to start from the first client contact – arguably before – I began to understand the implications for my practice. Although, in one sense, I had always understood this, I did not fully appreciate what it meant in terms of the nature of client interaction. The accepted researcher position is to adopt a broadly sender-receiver briefing model - in which the client outlined his or her needs, objectives and concerns, the researcher takes them on board and uses them as the basis for the research – a process which, for anything other than the simplest of projects, is often unsatisfactory. Viewing inquiry in this broader sense meant that conversation with the client would be integral to the research inquiry, not a prelude to it or an afterthought. In practice, it is this latter approach that I try to adopt, wherever possible, with my clients. However, without a theoretical understanding of its significance, I often defaulted to the former mode when faced with ‘difficult’ or unfamiliar clients.

Taking this integrated perspective, I began to explore ways in which inquiry with clients could be viewed as part of a broader research process. I became interested in Process Consulting (Schein 1999, Block 1999) which, through emphasis on ‘the helping relationship’ and the need for the client to be actively involved in problem diagnosis and generating possible solutions, challenges many of the givens of the commercial qualitative research approach – and more broadly the ‘expert’ or ‘supplier’ approach - to client interaction (Schein 1999:7). Traditionally, in commercial qualitative research, winning the business and client relationship management are given precedence over the research process during the early phases of project development (Thorpe 2003), as befits a client-supplier relationship.

Viewing inquiry with clients as an explicit part of the research process led me, in turn, to challenge my understanding of ‘research’. Previously I had defined ‘research’ - in terms of my practice - as the process of designing a research programme, interviewing, analysing the data, presenting findings and recommendations to clients. Although there are clearly other inputs to this



process, such as prior experience, intuition, prioritising, making meaning from the data, storytelling, these activities are largely unacknowledged in client interaction; because they happen within the structure of the research programme, practitioners and clients do not generally question their legitimacy. However, if the definition of research is expanded to include client interaction - and Process Consulting flows through client interaction, research and beyond - then this opens up the whole issue of what we actually mean by 'research' and how we differentiate it from everyday living.

Mulling on these issues, I re-read Judi Marshall's paper, 'Living life as inquiry', which she elaborates 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 things into question.... In this integrated life, in which research is not separate or bounded, I must 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, J 1999: 155-171)

When I first read this paper, I had felt uneasy. This was not just because I do not share Marshall's view that research should necessarily contribute to a 'more equal world'. It was her understanding of 'inquiry' that I questioned. How, I wondered, could what she described be classed as 'qualitative research'? But the paper refused to go away, and I found myself returning to it. Then I realised that what Marshall describes is quite similar to what I am doing on this doctoral programme. So why did I still feel uncomfortable?

Finally I had grasped that the conflict arose because I had not really reconciled my understanding of qualitative research in my working practice with qualitative research as I practice it throughout this doctoral programme. I was reading the paper as a commercial qualitative researcher, not as a doctoral student, and I was

reacting to the lack of boundaries; the lack of clear problem definition and imposed methodology. By protecting my 'practice' version of research from scrutiny, I had maintained two parallel world views and inadvertently prevented learning from flowing, one to the other. Originally, I had defined the 'the problem with commercial qualitative research' as, 'the way in which it is constrained by a positivist epistemology' and concentrated on 'solving' the problem of constraint. I now see that, in doing this, I was using spatial logic; presenting qualitative research as 'surrounded by' positivist epistemology, as though on a static, conceptual map, removed from the flow of experience. Understood in this way, positivist and interpretivist epistemologies are inevitably in conflict. The logical solution, from this perspective, is to 'set qualitative research free'. However, if qualitative research is viewed as process rather than an element in a spatial map, then this perspective makes no sense. I needed to develop a different understanding of the research process which did not set up positivist and interpretivist epistemologies as antagonistic.

Temporal logic, which Shaw describes as 'logic that distinguishes and relates concepts as emerging in a continuous flow of present experience' (Shaw 2002:121), suggests a more fluid understanding of practice, in which the patterning of our experience with self and others emerges through the interaction, inevitably involving continuity and change because, by its nature, it is a dynamic process. Viewed in this way, the 'research itself' and the 'positivist shell' which 'encases' it are not either/or positions because they are both aspects of the 'flow of experience'. Temporal logic eliminates the need for the apparent conflict between positivist and interpretivist epistemologies by understanding both to be part of the movement of experience. This understanding of how meaning is created draws on Complex Responsive Processes of relating (Stacey et al 2002), within which the causal framework of Transformative Teleology is taken to be:

...the relational processes of communication, within which people accomplish joint action, are actively constructing the future as the living present and that future is unknowable in advance. Throughout, the process is characterized by the paradox of the known-unknown and in it

emerges the aims people formulate, the goals they set, the intentions they form and the choices they make. What is being expressed here is individual and collective identity at the same time.

(Stacey 2002:188)

Adopting this perspective, I gradually came to understand emergent inquiry as an ongoing, iterative, process of jointly creating understanding and meaning through human interaction; meaning which is never static or independent of its context. Whilst I would argue that this has long been the case within ‘the research itself’, i.e. the interviewing and analysis processes<sup>7</sup>, it has not been true of the wider research context. In relation to emergent inquiry, the research process can be considered to start with the first contact with the client; the discussion of and the creation of the ‘problem’ to be addressed – and the way in which the ‘problem’ evolves - are part of the research process, although the nature of this conversation and the role of the researcher may differ from that adopted in subsequent interactions with ‘research participants’. Equally the process may continue after the research has formally ended, through ongoing interaction within the commissioning organisation itself - and possibly elsewhere. This understanding of qualitative research is therefore unbounded, fluid, evolving. Essentially it is a way of thinking as much as a methodology. How then, if we have removed the traditional constraints of the research paradigm, can we be sure that it is rigorous, reliable and valid?

## **How can emergent inquiry be ‘legitimised’?**

You may ask, ‘Does it matter if emergent inquiry is ‘real’ research or whether it is ‘legitimate’ or not?’ In terms of generating knowledge, it probably doesn’t. However, I am asking the question from the perspective of someone who works in a profession that defines its activity as ‘research’ and if I want to develop my thinking within this context, then I need to be able to legitimise what I do in

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<sup>7</sup> At least within my own commercial practice

relation to my community of practice – whilst at the same time changing what that practice might be. The challenge here is to attempt to shift commercial qualitative practice without losing its professionalism; to evolve an understanding of emergent inquiry which does not simply collapse in upon itself as ‘a way of thinking’. There is a need to understand ‘living life as inquiry’ in such a way that it is clearly rigorous research practice, rather than a way of stumbling through the day or as a mysterious art form.

Until recently, there has been little attempt within the commercial research industry to understand and explain how or why qualitative research really ‘works’ or, indeed, to view the processes of qualitative research as valid in their own terms (Ereaut 2002, Gordon 1999), although some researchers have specifically chosen to distance qualitative research from positivist associations.

We have deliberately avoided using words like ‘reliability’ and ‘validity’ as they inevitably evoke scientific positivist notions of *statistical* reliability and *statistical* validity

(Imms & Ereaut 2002:123)

Historically, the ‘validity’ of commercial qualitative research has been provided by the ‘positivist shell’ that encases it – the research sample, protocols of interviewing, Market Research Society (MRS) guidelines, research norms - which is why it is so difficult to let go of this ‘shell’, even if it is clearly inappropriate and anachronistic. Arguably, it is not in our interests to do so. The label ‘research’ confers respectability, it allows clients to justify the expenditure, it gives weight to our opinions. However, the ‘shell’ has outlined its usefulness – particularly in a ‘post-modern’ world - and if we examine it closely, the discrepancies become obvious<sup>8</sup>. One unhelpful consequence is the ongoing, stultifying battle between opposing epistemologies which I have described.

If we understand qualitative research as ‘emergent inquiry’, then the positivist trappings (though not necessarily the contribution of a positivist approach to

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<sup>8</sup> I discuss this in more detail in Project 4

meaning) automatically fall away, along with the ‘misplaced’ validity. However, if I cannot validate what I do in terms of established research ‘norms’, then I need to find other sources of validation and/or develop a new understanding of my practice in conjunction with my research peers. Through exploring other - non market research - approaches to qualitative inquiry, I began seeking out alternative communities of practice to inform my own.

Although I believe commercial qualitative research has historically relied upon an inappropriate ‘pseudo-scientific’ notion of validity, I do believe that there is, nonetheless, ‘real’ validity in qualitative practice. This does not derive from the ‘positivist shell’, but from the rigorous thinking, reflection, experience, intuition, creativity and bodily resonances of the ongoing interaction between and within practitioners, clients, research participants - and the recognition by clients that qualitative research can help them to think differently. This is a pragmatic judgment based on the usefulness of research in the ‘real world’. As such, I think it is more appropriate to call it ‘legitimacy’ rather than ‘validity’.

However, whilst this ‘legitimation’, works effectively in practice, it needs to be clearly articulated and theoretically justified if we are to finally let go of the positivist ‘security blanket’.

In attempting to do this, I will draw upon three related areas or bodies of knowledge in order to develop an alternative understanding of legitimacy which is appropriate to the nature of emergent inquiry. These are:

- Alternative perspectives on ‘positivism’
- The personal participation of the researcher
- Emergent inquiry as social construction

## Alternative perspectives on ‘positivism’

The populist view of science – and hence research - is that it is objective, impersonal, examining a reality detached from the viewer, i.e. the positivist world view. This separation of science from everyday life, of theory from practice, of fact from value, has had far reaching effects, as the chemist and philosopher, Michael Polanyi baldly states:

I start by rejecting the ideal of scientific detachment. In the exact sciences, this ideal is perhaps harmless, for it is in fact disregarded there by scientists. But we shall see that it exercises a destructive influence in biology, psychology and sociology, and falsifies our whole outlook far beyond the domain of science.

(Polanyi 1962: vii)

Polanyi expands on this theme by illustrating how the scientist’s personal participation in his knowledge, in both its discovery and its validation is an indispensable part of science itself; that even in the ‘exact’ sciences, ‘knowing’ is an art. In doing this, he emphasizes the fallacy of ‘objective science’ and argues that it cannot meaningfully be separated from other ways of knowing.

I do not want labour this point. It has been addressed in a variety of ways by writers such as Schon (1983), Seale (1998), Hollis (2002), Kuhn (1962), Brunskell (1988), Baert (1992), Shotter (2003). However, it may be useful to expand a little on Shotter’s perspective, which I mentioned earlier, because it specifically relates to qualitative research. Shotter (2003) argues that claimed truths in classical science are simply the result of ‘after the fact justificatory rhetoric’, which minimize the scientist’s subjective involvement and subsequently become embedded in ‘certainties of practice.’ We then forget that that these ‘objective’ truths were once exploratory hypotheses. He sees ‘research sciences’ as basically no different from ‘classical sciences’ except insofar as they are still open, evolving and not yet defined by ‘certainties of practice’.<sup>9</sup> From this perspective, subjectivity and interpretation are the basis of all research –

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<sup>9</sup> I discuss Shotter’s argument, in more detail in Project 2.

indeed all of life – they are simply obscured in ‘classical’ science by a reification of knowledge which gives the appearance of objectivity. This ‘objectivity’, in turn, is elevated to the status of ‘truth’, against which ‘non-classical’ science is measured and found lacking.

This perspective offers a stepping stone to my main focus of interest. If we accept that a ‘positivist’ view of research simply refers to established, reified (but nonetheless relativist) ‘truth’, whereas an interpretivist viewpoint refers to knowledge at a different stage of development, i.e. still open, evolving - and that the two are not discrete or antagonistic approaches - how does this then impact on notions of validity – or legitimacy? ‘Classical sciences’ have long established and rarely questioned notions of reliability and validity. ‘Research sciences’ - and I would include the broad field of qualitative research here – were historically measured by these same standards because there were no generally agreed alternatives. Inevitably they ‘failed’ and were therefore deemed ‘non-scientific’ and, by implication, less valid and less valuable. More recently, ‘post modern’ approaches have argued that we should not attempt to validate qualitative research at all. It is simply too complex; ‘truth’ is too problematic. Instead validity is taken as synonymous with ‘usefulness’ or, at the extreme, is ‘in the eye of the beholder’. This raises two issues for me.

Firstly, I do think it is important for a community of practice to be able to articulate and validate its practice. If the fall back is ‘usefulness’, we need to explain what it actually means to be ‘useful’? Assuming that ‘classical’ and ‘research’ sciences are essentially the same process, although different ways of knowing are privileged in each because of the stage of their development, should we not assume the same for their validation? Should we not privilege different ways of validation for each? Clearly the same approaches to legitimisation cannot be applied across the board. We therefore need to establish the appropriate form of legitimization which will fit the specific nature or style of the inquiry we are engaged in.

Secondly, both positivist and interpretivist inputs are, I believe, essential to the research process, rather than either/or positions. Crudely they might, respectively, be considered to represent continuity and transformation. How then can they be understood in such a way that, potentially, they both contribute productively to evolving inquiry processes? I have already touched upon this issue in the last section, in relation to Shaw's (2002) understanding of temporal logic and I want to expand upon this here. Griffin talks about 'cult values' which he describes as 'idealised ends that are considered to be inviolable, a harmonious whole which everyone is forbidden to argue with' (Griffin 2002:24). Positivism can be understood as a cult value, which diverts attention from what we are actually doing and towards an idealization. However, as positivist ideals are functionalized, or put into day to day practice, their idealized 'purity' cannot be sustained, but must adapt to the situation. They become themes which shape experience – mutually adapted and changed by other themes - rather than rigid constraints. This, I believe, is what Shotter means when he says that:

'in taking a dialogical, argumentative view of the growth of knowledge rather than an eliminative, Neo-Darwinian, monological stance, the previous concerns of cognitivism should not be wholly eliminated or backgrounded, but be considered as a 'voice' in the dialogue also. But now, not so loud as to silence the voice of these other concerns'.

(Shotter 1993:7)

In commercial qualitative research, the emphasis is often placed on research structure and 'the quasi-objective researcher', i.e. a fairly static, essentially quantitative, model. However if, instead of being a static constraint, Positivism is understood as 'a voice in the dialogue', then it can be seen to act as a discipline; an enabling constraint which contributes rigour to the inquiry process. It then acts as a sort of rudder or balance which emerges in the process of knowledge generation. Positivism as 'a voice in the dialogue' is, inevitably, socially constructed and needs to be understood as part of the research process, rather than being 'externally imposed' (Hollis 2002:254). In this sense, any notion of 'objectivity' in research outcomes is also a social construction.



By attempting to break down the barriers between ‘positivist’ and ‘interpretivist’ perspectives and emphasizing their similarities rather than their differences, I want to pave the way for an acceptance that the researcher is always, and inevitably, a key element in the research, regardless of whether we choose to call the research ‘classical’ or ‘exploratory’.

## **The personal participation of the researcher**

As a prelude to exploring the participation of the researcher in the research process, I feel it is important to revisit the academic and commercial research worlds in order to draw some distinctions between their approaches to the thorny issue of validity. Classic notions of validity and reliability – or the interpretivist alternatives, e.g. successor validity, catalytic validity, voluptuous validity and so on (Seale 2003:171) have greatly occupied academic researchers over the years and have generated ongoing debate and even ‘crises’ and ‘revolutions’ (Lincoln and Denzin 2003:3-8).

Why then have they barely raised their heads in commercial qualitative research? Certainly this can partly be explained by the residual ‘positivist shell’ which has effectively deflected such conversations, but this cannot account for the almost complete absence of discussion of the subject throughout the 25 or so years that I have been practicing. My first instinct, when considering how to explore ‘legitimacy’ in relation to emergent inquiry was to ‘apply’ concepts taken from the academic field to commercial research. But this felt like a retrograde step. At first I could not figure out why this was. Then I realized that, in order to develop an appropriate notion of legitimacy, I needed, first of all, to explore the different expectations and outcomes of academic and commercial research, because these inevitably affect what legitimacy might mean in each context. I believe there are two key areas of difference here.

Firstly, in much academic research the focus is on evaluating the formal research process itself. Seale talks about ‘overarching criteria for judging the quality of research’ and ‘the need for a new conceptualization of the relationship between qualitative social research, theory and indeed philosophy’ (Seale 2003:169). By contrast, commercial researchers, whilst concerned about methodology, are also very conscious of the output of the research; the research is ‘a means to an end’. Imms and Ereaut point out the ‘dual role’ of the researcher who has ‘accountability to research standards and accountability to the client’s objectives’ (Imms & Ereaut 2002:13) and Ereaut (2002:150) suggests innovation, integration, resonance and adequacy – which she relates primarily to outcome rather than methodology – as possible criteria for evaluating research. Ultimately, commercial researchers are selling their services and that is where the primary focus of their attention lies. Hence their limited engagement with methodological validity.

Secondly – and related to the first point – commercial researchers are also consultants, as I have discussed earlier in this synopsis and throughout this thesis. I have proposed that, from a commercial practitioner perspective – and arguably in all forms of research - research and consultancy are inextricably bound together<sup>10</sup>. Research Consultancy is an ongoing process which continues after the ‘research itself’. It informs the emergent conversation within client organizations and helps shape and develop future strategy. There is no ‘finishing line’ where research ends and implementation starts. As a result, the notion of ‘legitimacy’ is not circumscribed by the research, but permeates the research/consultancy process and needs to be constantly addressed as it emerges during this ongoing interaction.

I have discussed these differences at some length because it is important to distinguish between *emergent inquiry*, which is similar to many contemporary approaches to qualitative research within the academic world, and the *legitimization of emergent inquiry* which needs to be addressed differently from

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<sup>10</sup> I expand on this area in some detail in Project 4

academic and commercial perspectives, because the purpose and context of the inquiry often differs. In exploring legitimization in commercial practice, I want to start by focusing on the contribution of the researcher to the research process. In doing this, I am not suggesting that this is an individual activity – I would regard it as inevitably shaping and being shaped by social experience - but it is useful to start from the perspective of the individual researcher before, in the next section, broadening this to explore social construction of meaning.

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 which is often tacit and difficult to articulate.

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 epistemology of 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 (ibid:68). In particular, he suggests that a practitioner makes sense of a unique situation by 'seeing it as' something familiar (ibid:138). 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 are often fulfilled by the same actions; 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' (ibid 151), i.e. the aim of the practitioner is to transform the situation.

Schon explores reflection-in-action – which I believe is essential to qualitative research, both in my practice and on this programme - with 'scientific' rigour. In doing so, he illustrates how positivist 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. By offering a spectrum of experimental types, I would see Schon as 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. He is attempting to provide a rationale for what Marshall describes as 'living life as inquiry'. This, in turn, dissolves the need for qualitative research to be 'held' within, and legitimized by, a positivist frame.

Whilst I find Schon's exploration of reflection-in-action very helpful, his emphasis on the individual and on conscious choosing of roles, values or problem setting, presents a rather static and rational view of knowledge generation (ibid: 63). Consequently, there is little sense of emergence or of the

potentially transformational effect of shaping knowledge through interaction, which I would regard as essential. However, at other times, for example when discussing client involvement, he appears to be advocating a form of emergent inquiry (Schon 1982:297).

I would also read Schon as emphasizing the rational aspects of problem-solving at the expense of emotional knowing, which I would regard as integral to reflection-in-action. The neurologist, Damasio (1999), based on his study of individuals who have sustained neurological damage, addresses the part emotion plays in reasoning. Starting from the premise that emotion and reason need to be viewed as aspects of the same process<sup>11</sup>, he argues persuasively that:

...emotion is integral to the processes of reasoning and decision making, for better and for worse ... The neurological evidence simply suggests that selective absence of emotion is a problem. Well-targeted and well-deployed emotions seem to be a support system without which the edifice of reason cannot operate

(ibid:41-42)

Many commercial researchers have also, more intuitively, understood the importance of trusting emotional responses, as this advice on transcribing a focus group tape illustrates:

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)

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<sup>11</sup> I have discussed Damasio's work in more detail in Project 3

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’. I think I have to take that risk. 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.

As yet, we do not have an established terminology – and perhaps we never will - to discuss emotion in the way that Schon discusses experiments in ‘reflection-in-action, although Damasio goes some way towards this by describing a sort of knowing-in-practice in which similar situations provoke similar feeling states or body rhythms that orient a person to act into a situation, i.e. feelings unconsciously guide choice (Damasio 1999:170). In fact, Stacey points to the striking similarity between Damasio’s understanding of the feeling of knowing in terms of physiological correlates, that is, interactions between neural patterns in different brain regions and Mead’s notions of interactions between organisms (Stacey 2003:116). Could we, then, develop an understanding of emotion-in-action or, even, a more integrated approach; life-in-action? Or have we, after all, come full circle to ‘living life as inquiry’ where the research cannot be other than its own validation?

## **Emergent Inquiry as Social Construction**

In the previous section, I explored both reflection-in-action and emotional knowing (as integral to reflection-in-action), from the perspective of the individual. I did this deliberately, for the sake of clarity and also because I

believe that this is how we often experience such activities - as 'silent conversation' (Stacey 2003:237)<sup>12</sup>. However, I also believe that these processes are essentially social. Adopting Mead's view that 'mind presupposes, and is a product of, the social process' (Mead 1934:224)<sup>13</sup>, I would understand reflection-in-action, including emotional knowing, as inevitably social processes, whether they are engaged in privately or in interaction with others. So how then do we understand legitimacy from a social constructionist perspective, in the context of a group?

One assessment of legitimacy is how consistent the research outcomes are with what the organisation already know from other sources, i.e. how far the research is believable (Ereaut 2002:152). Plausibility and a degree of fit with existing knowledge is important but clearly, of itself, it is not enough. Ereaut also suggests we assess the outcome in terms of how far it advances the client's thinking. Often the role of the research consultant is to make new links, create new ideas, make meaning from confusion. Validity is understood by Ereaut as 'the *tension* between (a) holding a belief in an external 'reality' that can be uncovered *and* (b) holding a belief that 'reality' is socially constructed (ibid:153). She quotes Kirk and Miller (1986) who suggest that, 'the world does not tolerate all understandings equally'. In this sense, I would agree; the meaning we jointly create has to make sense within an existing socially constructed reality – and plausibly start to shift that reality.

I draw on Complex Responsive Processes and Social Constructionism to inform my understanding of emergent inquiry as a social process and also to inform the way in which it can be legitimised. Whilst clearly I would not agree with the notion that legitimisation is the search for objective truth, I would argue that it is possible to achieve a relative legitimisation; a partial, situated, contextualised legitimisation, which is socially constructed by a community of practice. Given

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<sup>12</sup>- I discuss the notion of 'silent conversation' more fully in Project 3

<sup>13</sup> As above

that I take this view of knowledge and meaning, i.e. that they are intersubjective phenomena, then notions of validity must also be intersubjective.

Emergent inquiry is essentially a sense-making process, an activity engaged in by participants who, to a greater or lesser extent, share similar goals, objectives and orientations. Within a commercial context there is a research issue or problem, which may shift during the course of the inquiry but which is broadly agreed at the outset. From the initial stages of client interaction, through inquiry with research participants, through analysis and sharing the research findings with clients, the processes of reflection-in-action are ongoing, being shaped by and shaping the processes of inquiry themselves. In fact legitimisation can be regarded as another theme patterning experience.

So how, in practice, do we recognise this form of legitimisation? I would understand it as 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. Legitimisation does not necessarily imply agreement. In fact, as Weick points out, 'people may not share meaning, they do share experience' (Weick 1995:188). In fact, Weick suggests that arguing is a crucial source of sensemaking (ibid: 145) and that ambiguity allows people to maintain the perceptions of agreement which is necessary to working relationships (ibid: 122). In this situation, I would see the process of legitimisation emerging from both the 'mutually reinforcing interpretations' (ibid:73) that exist within the organisation or work group and the differences in interpretation that also exist; the ways in which conflicting perspectives are explored and argued out, which potentially leads to novelty and innovation.



## **In Conclusion**

Although I have drawn on these three areas in order to explore ways in which we might attempt to legitimise commercial qualitative research – or more specifically, emergent inquiry - they provide an incomplete and in many ways an unsatisfactory answer. Perhaps it cannot be otherwise, regardless of whether the inquiry emanates from an interpretive or even a positivist tradition – given that positivism itself can be viewed as standing on shaky ground. At the end of the day, the most pragmatic form of legitimisation for emergent inquiry may, after all, be its usefulness; the quality of the engagement it fosters, the ideas it generates, the subjective assessment that it helps thinking or acting or feeling about the problem, as it has been defined – or, indeed, helps to redefine it. Perhaps the most we can do is be aware, in the emerging interaction with self and others, that legitimisation is an ongoing concern.

# Project 1: Taking Qualitative Inquiry 'out of the box'

## Introduction

Why am I sitting here, on a bank holiday weekend, anxious, fretting at the blank screen, torn between using the space I have carefully, obsessively, carved out for this...this...activity, this dragging out and dissecting and chewing over and re-living of the past, making sense of the present. I have friends out there, sitting by the river, sipping chilled wine, living their lives..... So why don't I just leave it...why don't I just go and join them ... sip my wine, turn my face to the sun, bathe in the easy companionship of old friends...?

I am conscious of the dilemma; sitting on the cusp of autobiographical and theoretical. Either mode I am comfortable with, but what is this 'third way', this narrative that is both at the same time? If it is not one or the other, then what is it? How do I stop myself slipping into a familiar pattern?

Then there is the question of 'Whose narrative is this anyway'? There are several voices that could write this narrative. All different. All mine. Some will fit the course requirements better than others. How do I feel about the voices I silence?

## The Good, the Bad and the Ugly

I re-read the 'brief' - as I do, repeatedly, trying to hold on to a sense of what I am trying to do. Somehow, as I hesitate and my mind wanders, I lose sight of it. It slithers away from me - as when you walk downstairs to collect something and then cannot remember what it is.

I will start with what 'works' and what does not 'work' in my current practice; 'the good, the bad and the ugly'. And, already, I am stuck. What do I mean by 'current practice'? Is it the 'job' I do, that pays the mortgage, interests me some of the time, that gives me a 'work role' and something to call myself at parties? Is it the photography, the writing, the journalism that I do occasionally, enjoy enormously, but earn little money from? Is it being a parent, trying as best I can to encourage, support, 'launch' my teenage daughter? And where do I stop? Does 'current practice' include my relationships with friends, my interest in travel, involvement in courses, collecting Bunnykins plates? Is it to do with the way I try to balance my life between all of these things? In one sense, I cannot separate my 'working practice' from the rest of my life. In another I do, very clearly, very consciously, separate what I do from what I am. Is this a question in the making?

For the moment, I will talk about 'current practice' in a broad sense; a situation, 'project' or 'curiosity', regardless of its context or purpose. This gives me the freedom to explore how my intention and 'framing' of the situation might influence the outcome. Why is it that some of these situations, when I think back on them - and often at the time - feel 'good', whereas others feel unsatisfactory or 'bad'? What determines how I evaluate them? I know - I believe - that a small change in a situation can radically alter an outcome, but how can I know what this change is, at the time or even in advance? In NLP terms, "*What is the difference that makes the difference?*" (Ian McDermott, 1999, ITS Seminar)

## The Jumping Cat

A simple beginning. A straightforward situation. I was travelling with my daughter in Burma. We visited a monastery on Inle Lake, in central Burma. The monks in this particular monastery have developed a technique for training cats to jump through hoops. Apparently this is difficult to achieve – cats do not like jumping through hoops. I wanted to take a photograph of a jumping cat, so I chatted with one of the monks and he offered to pose for me. He led me to a place, by the water, with an interesting backdrop and I took a photograph of the cat mid-jump. It is probably the best photo I have ever taken, but I did not know this until I had returned home and developed the film.

Arguably, this is a straightforward story of a lucky holiday snap. I am a competent photographer who ‘struck lucky’. However, I have never been satisfied with this explanation. There was, is, something about the situation that feels as if it is more than this.

The monk spoke very good English. I was interested in his life at the monastery and we spent an hour or so talking. He explained how, originally, the cats just lived there, alongside the monks, and then they started to sit in the monks’ cupped hands as they sat cross-legged, meditating. The monks began to lift their hands, so the cats had to jump to sit in them. Then they encouraged the cats to jump over their hands and, by gradually lifting their hands higher and higher, the cats became more and more competent. Finally, they learnt to jump through hoops. Successive generations mimicked their elders and now the jumping cats have become an established tourist attraction.

I was fascinated by his story and by an article he showed me in a German magazine, which included a great photo of a tortoiseshell cat jumping through a hoop, set against a grained wood background. I desperately wanted a picture of a cat jumping against that background. I had no idea where it was taken and I did

not feel that I could ask the monk to take me there and pose for a photo, especially as a large tour group had just arrived. So, I sat. And waited.

After a while, he turned to me,

“Would you like to take a photo of one of the cats in the same place?” he asked, pointing at the photo in the magazine.

Delighted, I agreed, and he led me outside.

Curious to see what was happening, the tour group straggled behind.

I followed him to a wooden platform that jutted out over the water. Suddenly, he squatted down, positioned the hoop and the cat jumped. Unprepared, I squatted and quickly pressed the shutter on the camera, just as the tour group rounded the corner. The monk rose immediately, lifted the cat and hoop and headed back inside, before the group had time to realise what was happening. I was disappointed. There had been no time to think, to prepare.

Such a fast moving shot could take hours to get right, with endless attempts to position monk, cat and hoop in exactly the right alignment. When I developed the contact print in my darkroom, weeks later, I watched, with growing excitement, as the image emerged in the dim, red light. It was perfect.

How did this happen? Maybe it is mystical inclinations that encourage me to believe that it was more than luck. As Ansell Adams, the seasoned photographer, puts it, “*Luck favours the well prepared*”. I have had some fairly serious training as a photographer, so why was it such a surprise? It was easy for the monk to have guessed that I wanted *that* photo. But was it just luck that I got the *perfect* photo?

Was there something about the connection between us that created a synchronicity in our thinking and actions at exactly that moment? If this was the case, then what are the implications for the rest of my ‘current practice’, however I define it? Is it possible to foster or create this synchronicity at will? Is it just a

function of establishing rapport? Are we looking at ways of communicating that go beyond the established methods that we recognise in our culture?

These issues of coincidence and connection have long interested me - and surface in a variety of contexts. Peter Senge talks about 'alignment', in which:

...a commonality of direction emerges and individuals' energies harmonize. There is less wasted energy. In fact, a resonance or synergy develops, like the "coherent" light of a laser

(Senge, 1992:234)

Synchronicity, on the other hand, has a variety of interpretations. The definition of 'synchronise' in the Oxford dictionary is 'occur at the same time, be simultaneous'. Jung, however, goes much further:

I am therefore using the general concept of synchronicity in the special sense of a coincidence in time of two or more causally unrelated events which have the same or a similar meaning, in contrast to 'synchronism', which simply means the simultaneous occurrence of two events.

(Jung, 1961:419)

Jung returns time and again to the theme of 'synchronicity' as an explanation for coincidence, positing a non-linear way of 'knowing' rooted in the 'unconscious'. It is this understanding of 'synchronicity', which seems to me to have some similarity to current themes in Complexity.

On a more prosaic level, 'rapport', a cornerstone of NLP, is undoubtedly a prerequisite for conversation, whatever its outcome:

Rapport is essentially meeting individuals in their model of the world...To gain rapport with others you need to acknowledge them and their view of the world. You do not have to agree with it, just recognise and respect it. The question is, how?

(O'Connor & McDermott, 1996:10)

Rapport, alignment and synchronicity, though different concepts, seem to me to be related in the sense that they both allow, and are the result of, heightened awareness of 'living in the present'. They are themes, qualities, sensitivities that I aspire to in the way I live my life but, at present, they seem largely fortuitous. Is there a way of encouraging their presence? As I develop my thinking and ways of experiencing, I want to explore the relationship between these three ideas.

## **Following the Photo**

I visited Ireland with two school friends. I was sixteen. It was our first holiday on our own. Ireland was 'safe'; our parents were Irish immigrants with a fossilised image of an Ireland that was slow and enveloping and immune to modern incursions. It was August 1969. We heard there was trouble 'up north' so, with teenage enthusiasm, we headed straight to Derry – straight into the middle of the Battle of the Bogside and the beginning of 30 years of violence in Northern Ireland. It was shocking and terrifying. I appreciated for the first time that the BBC was biased. Suddenly, inadvertently, I had entered my father's world.

I took half a dozen photos on my Kodak Instamatic camera. One was of four children, aged between 10 and 12, making home made petrol bombs; well dressed children in white ankle socks pouring petrol into lemonade bottles and stuffing the necks with rags. Thirty years later I decided, for the first time since that visit, to return to Derry to try to find the children in the photo, to see what had become of them. It was June 1999. The peace process was looking good and there was an air of optimism.

Why did I want to do this? It was prompted, in part, by my tentative need to reconnect with my Irish Catholic roots. Irish Catholicism, at least in the orthodox form that I experienced it as a child, presents the world as full of sharp divides.

There were 'Catholics' and 'non-Catholics', 'right' and 'wrong', the 'saved' and the 'damned'. There was little room for compassion, kindness or tolerance of mistakes. My way of dealing with this, at the time, was to become 'English', to overlay 'English' values and ways of viewing the world. This made me an 'outsider' to Irish culture, yet I did not quite 'fit' within an English culture. I lost something of the essence of myself. As time goes by, I feel increasingly uncomfortable with this division. It limits me and, I believe, it is one of the reasons why I feel dissatisfied with much of my (paid) current practice; my experience feels partial, lacking integration, devoid of emotion. I want to explore how I can harness these different aspects; to create richer, deeper, more creative conversations with myself. One way of doing this, is to re-engage with the culture I was brought up in.

There were other reasons why I wanted to return to Derry. I am interested in photography as story-telling and in using words, pictures, other mediums, to create shared understanding, 'better' communication. I wanted to understand the story of these children's lives; brought up, as they were, in extraordinary circumstances which, for them at the time, were 'ordinary'.

I turned up in Derry with Nigel, a radio producer, to make a programme for Radio 4. We had no idea where to start. All we had was the photo. I had been in touch with the 'Derry Journal' before we arrived and they had published a story about our first visit in 1969 and my return trip. Decades of fear and caution in Derry have fostered a culture in which grape-vine communication leaves the internet standing. In Derry people read the local paper. 'Everyone' knew who we were and within minutes of arriving in the Bogside, we were being 'vetted'. There were several days of excitement, of following up leads. But they led nowhere.

Then, eventually, a break-through.



“That’s one of the Kelly brothers – Tony, I think” said an old lady in the community centre, pointing to one of the children in the photo. “You’ll find Paddy, his brother, at the taxi rank.”

The taxi rank, down a dark lane, seemed suddenly alien. This was unknown territory. Would we be welcome?

“Paddy’s not here”

“Well, it’s Tony I’m looking for really. Do you know where I can find him?”

A snort.

“Well now, that I wouldn’t know.”

Much later, we discovered that Tony was an IRA prisoner who had escaped from Long Kesh. He is still on the run.

We arrived at Paddy’s house, unannounced, asking for Tony. Paddy looked wary, undecided, then asked us in. We showed him the photo.

“No, that’s not my brother”

Another false trail.

He hesitated, then offered us tea.

We played with his young daughter as we talked about the peace process. I told him of my Dad, who was a staunch Republican and had been a runner for the IRA as a child. Did he believe me, with my middle class, English accent?

I had no idea what was going on, but I knew something was happening. I sensed that I was being sized up, that there was some sort of test, but what should I do to ‘pass’? What could I say to persuade him that I could be trusted? I was conscious of being on the brink, conscious that by saying the ‘wrong’ thing I would ‘blow it’, without even realising that I had done it. I continued talking with him, aware that I wanted to form a connection, wanting him to believe that I was not just a ‘reporter’ looking for a story, but that this was my story as well as his; a shared history. An hour passed in this way and we could no longer string out the cup of tea. He was not going to help us. Somehow, in some way, I had failed. I started shifting, hugely disappointed, gearing myself up to leave.

“Let me have another look at that photo”, said Paddy, suddenly.

I passed it over.

“That one there. That’s Jim Muldoon. I’ll give him a ring.”

Things moved fast. Jim arrived, burly and humorous, and pointed to one of the other children.

“Hey, Paddy, isn’t that your brother Mickey?”

“Maybe it is, maybe it isn’t”, replied Paddy.

It was. We interviewed Jim and then set off to visit Mickey, who was keen to share the experiences that had shaped his life. As I left he gave me a sketch of Mairead Farrell, one of the ‘Gibraltar Three’, who was shot dead, though unarmed, by the British Army. The sketch was drawn by his brother, Tony, in 1989, when he was imprisoned in Long Kesh. On the back it was signed by 43 IRA prisoners, also in Long Kesh at the time.

Mickey, in turn, passed us on to Denis Gallagher and his sister, Lizzie, the two remaining children. Denis had been imprisoned for fourteen years, for handling explosives and attempted murder. He talked candidly about his experiences and looked wistfully at the photo.

“I suppose, today, looking back at that photo; that was me starting off on the road to prison. I never had regrets. I never believed that I was wrong.”

We made the programme and it went out on Radio 4. I also wrote a piece for the Sunday Telegraph.

I greatly enjoyed making the programme and it ‘worked’. But why? Why did people talk, open up, take risks to help me? In part I think it was simply – or perhaps not so simply – because I was interested in their stories and I was sympathetic to their beliefs, though not always the way in which they put them into practice. There was more than this, however. My training is in qualitative inquiry. I ‘interviewed’ (had conversations) with the people I met in the only way I know how, an approach which is summed up by Wendy Gordon:

Objective reality does not exist – the truth cannot be captured. There is no value-free science. Research is an interactive process shaped by (a researcher's) personal history, biography, gender, social class, race and ethnicity, and those of the people in the setting.

(Gordon, 1999:21)

I listened, I empathised and I tried to understand. Nigel, the radio producer, thought this strange. He felt I should challenge, be more confrontational, like a 'proper' journalist. I tried, because I was conscious that I was an amateur and I wanted to do it 'right', but I simply did not know how, so I reverted to my familiar style. The result was that people opened up. We got what we needed – and more - as people felt acknowledged, that their views were being respected.

Did this process also help them to make sense of the events that began all those years ago? Did recounting their stories to a stranger change them in any way? I don't know. The nature of my working practice is that, in most situations, I talk with individuals or groups of people, I try to understand where they are 'coming from', I 'take' this understanding and use it as fuel for my own thinking. Does it affect them? It must have an effect, however fleeting, but I do not give this much thought. Perhaps I should?

Interestingly, both these examples of situations that have 'worked' are from outside my 'working practice', using a narrow definition, although they have involved skills that I use daily in my working practice. Conversely, the examples of situations that have not 'worked' as I would have wished are from within my 'working practice'.

## **How we can we inspire young people to learn?**

We - my business partner, Rosie and I - are completing a project which involved talking with a broad cross section of schoolchildren across England. The aims of the project were to explore;

*How do we inspire young people to learn?*

*What do we mean by education?*

We had a fairly free hand in designing and setting up the project. We drew up the research objectives and the research sample, which involved 22 group discussions with children aged 5-16, from a range of socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds. We had a briefing meeting with our clients, in which they broadly went along with our recommendations and were happy to let us conduct the research in whatever way we felt was appropriate.

For me, this was a very interesting project because it reached the heart of my interest in how we learn and develop and because we believed that it would allow us to have some input into education policy and communication.

The discussion group stage went well. Rosie and I spent many hours discussing what we had found. We were very excited by it all and talked about the ways in which we could bring the presentation of our findings and recommendations to life. There was so much of it and it was so amorphous. How could we keep the sense and feeling of it and yet still present it in a manageable, structured way? Our assumption was that there had to be a way to do this. We felt constrained by the presentation format. We were 'expected' to deliver a presentation – perhaps with some questions throughout – in Power Point format, for maybe two hours. But we wanted our audience to **feel** what we were saying and to own the issues. How could we do this? How could we challenge when we weren't sure how we might communicate in a more fruitful and creative way? We never discussed these concerns and expectations with our clients. Neither, I realise with hindsight, did we discuss them seriously between ourselves. We did not believe that we had the power to change things.

We delivered the presentation. 35 people attended, all of whom were involved in developing and implementing education policy and communication. We had been allocated two hours. It was not enough time to convey what we felt we

needed to convey. Yet, it was too much time in a formal presentation setting to explore such complex findings. We did a 'standard' presentation. Our clients seemed to find this acceptable, but we remained dissatisfied.

Since then we have had feedback from our client. The audience was enthusiastic; 'fascinating', 'enlightening', 'wanted to let you know how good it was', were some of their comments. What does this mean? How do we judge what is 'good' communication and what is not? In NLP terms, 'the meaning of the communication is the response you get' (O'Connor & McDermott,1996:21). By this light, they got what they wanted. But is it what they needed? How could we have communicated in a way which gave them what they wanted *now*, but also encouraged them to start the process of change which will lead to an educational system which 'delivers'; that inspires young people to learn and educates them in a way that achieves this?

How to communicate 'better' is a key interest in my working practice. However, I often feel a sense of frustration and futility, when I cannot communicate in a way that gives the fullness and 'feel' of what I am trying to convey. As Joseph O'Connor and Ian McDermott put it:

We cannot help making meaning of what we see, hear and feel. We are not only gifted communicators, we are also gifted creative receivers. Misunderstanding is the price we pay for being able to convey or infer so many subtle shades of meaning. Perhaps the miracle is that we are ever understood at all!

(O'Connor & McDermott,1996:20)

## **The project from hell**

Recently I took on a project at short notice. It was for a new client - new to us. The project involved the development of a new skincare range. Although the

market did not particularly interest me, the strategic issues were quite interesting and challenging.

The client, Andrew, sent me a short and poorly thought out brief for the job. I phoned him back and queried a couple of points which he could not explain properly. *I did not pursue him on it but, in my proposal, I changed the information he had given me, so that it made sense in research terms.* His assistant, Alison, rang late on a Friday to say that they wanted me to do the job, but they wanted to change a number of aspects – fairly major elements which meant that the job needed re-costing. They wanted to stick within the original budget so, sitting outside the gym on my mobile phone, I scribbled on the back of an envelope and we haggled about the budget. *We do not normally operate a barter system, but Alison needed to get the job commissioned and I wanted to be helpful.* At the briefing meeting, the next Monday, Andrew was absent. His colleague briefed me. *I consider the briefing to be the most important part of the job, particularly with a new client. It is where trust is established, where the responsibility and power, both overt and covert, is negotiated. I felt uncomfortable that he was not there.*

I set up the job, sub-contracting part of the work to a colleague, Coby, in Germany. I flew out to Germany to brief her. Andrew decided to change the brief –and the discussion guide (agenda) for the group discussions for the third time. I found this irritating. I consider the discussion guide to be our concern, not that of the client. *Still I complied, without complaint.*

I am conscious, as I write this, of the boredom and sterility of the exchanges between me and Andrew; of a sense of passivity, of playing a role, on my part. There is none of the excitement, of shared discovery, that characterised my Irish....adventure. The word popped out, and I censored it as inappropriate to this context - and then I re-instated it, because that is what it was....an adventure.

The German leg of the research was a disaster. Thirteen clients arrived (Americans, just flown in, and Germans) to watch the group discussions through a one-way mirror. Qualitative inquiry in the US tends to be quite different than in the UK. Wendy Gordon differentiates between two different models of qualitative research groups – the ‘dependent’ group, which predominates in the US and the ‘psychodynamic’, group, most commonly adopted in the UK.

The model in the US is completely different. Focus groups...are positioned as a forum for rational debate and fact finding.

(Gordon, 1999:63)

whereas:

The assumptions underlying the psychodynamic group are that group processes and group ‘baggage’ are the bricks and mortar of the group process. The content of a group discussion reflects the social and cultural dynamics driving the attitudes and behaviour of the members as a group, rather than reflecting the psychological profile of each individual.....there is no objective truth that can be extracted from a group of people.

(ibid:113)

She goes on to say:

There is no right or wrong way to conduct a group, only that the moderator and clients accept the model in operation, and therefore understand the nature and limitations of the information and insights contributed by the participants.

(ibid:114)

Sadly, Andrew and I had not discussed the ‘model in operation’. In fact, a psychodynamic model is so assumed by most of the clients I work with in the UK, that it is usually a ‘non-issue’. However, this was not true of the Americans. They were working on the basis on a ‘dependent group’ model and wanted a ‘question and answer’ session, where respondents were asked to respond by putting their hands up. We, on the other hand, wanted to understand how our respondents’ ‘mapped their worlds’. Meanwhile, the Germans were smarting with resentment because the research had been commissioned by the UK and not by them!

The result was that the ‘observers’, in my view, ‘hijacked’ the research. They insisted that Coby change the agenda while the group was in progress – but they could not agree on the way in which this should be done, so she received a range of conflicting instructions. Inevitably, the result was confusion.

The term ‘observer’ is, in itself, interesting. My belief is that ‘observers’ should be just that; they attend on the group moderator’s terms, i.e. they should not interfere with the group process, which is the moderator’s responsibility. Again, this is quite different in the US, where moderators have ear pieces, to allow ‘observers’ to steer the group and prompt specific questions.

Coby phoned me the following day, in considerable distress. She had two more discussion groups that night? How should she handle them? I felt angry. I believed that Andrew lacked the experience and insight needed to manage the project. I felt that Coby had been ‘set up’ and that we were not being allowed to do our job properly. My first instinct was to phone Andrew to complain about the treatment meted out to Coby. *However, what I actually did was to commiserate with Coby, to reassure her and then to tell her to just do what they wanted. I did not phone Andrew to complain. Instead, we continued as if nothing had happened.*

As I write this I again notice the pattern of passivity and deference in my behaviour. Repeatedly I behaved in ways that were neither comfortable nor fitted with acceptable working practice. And yet I continued with this pattern of behaviour, in spite of the growing dissonance between how I viewed the research project and how Andrew viewed it. There is something here about ‘the power of the powerless’. I saw Andrew as relatively ‘powerless’, but it was this very perception that prevented me from challenging him and potentially changing our working pattern. In effect, by hanging on to this perception, I was myself rendered ‘powerless’.



The second day of the German research went well. The Americans and Germans between them had abandoned the UK agenda and substituted their own, although there was still considerable conflict between them. Over the next few days, I had several cool telephone conversations with Andrew. He was abrupt and non-committal. I was 'business-like but helpful'. Neither of us mentioned the first night of fieldwork in Germany.

He decided that he did not want a presentation of the research that we had already agreed. Instead he wanted a report by the following Monday – three working days after the fieldwork had been completed. *This was ridiculous timing, but I agreed.* Why did I do this? I regard the presentation, like the briefing meeting, as a key part of the job. It is an opportunity for dialogue, for clarification, for allowing people to 'own' the findings and 'move things on'. However, I did not argue for a presentation. Instead, I decided to write a very thorough document. Did I believe that I would win him over with my insight and experience? It took me two full days on that weekend to write the report. *I do not normally work on weekends. Nonetheless, I did it.*

I e-mailed the report to Andrew on the Monday morning, asking him to phone me to discuss it. He did not return my call until Wednesday. It was now nine days since the 'difficult' groups in Germany. By this time, I was in a hotel room in Preston, on my mobile, feeling tired, overworked, wanting to be at home.

There were no preliminaries.

"I want to go through the detail of the report. But first I need to talk to you about the German fieldwork. Coby didn't know what she was doing. The groups were a shambles. We didn't get what we wanted out of them and it's your responsibility. She was badly briefed by you. We either want the groups re-done or we want a substantial discount."

I was so shocked I was speechless for a moment. I didn't dare to say anything, because I feared I would be rude – or break down. I felt – feel - it was a good

piece of research, carried out under very difficult circumstances; his accusations were unreasonable, unfair and mis-judged.

“I need to go back to Coby and examine in detail what happened. I’d like you to put your comments in writing”, I replied.

“Right, I’ll do that. Now can we go through the detail of the report?”

“No, of course not,” I retorted. “You’ve just told me that the fieldwork it was based on is invalid, so how can we talk about it at this stage. We have to sort out these other issues first”.

Andrew wrote me a short, much toned down, e-mail and I responded with four pages of ‘facts’, offering to have the research independently validated, offering to come and talk about it with him and his colleagues. He ignored my e-mail. He had already gone on holiday for ten days! Weeks later, after more messages and e-mails from me (he refused to speak to me again), I agreed a discount on the project, to get shot of it. I am left feeling cheated – of the money, certainly - but more importantly of recognition for the work.

As I write, I feel a growing impatience. Why am I wasting my time describing this unpleasant episode in such detail? What does it add to an understanding of the influences and experiences that inform my current practice?

Mulling it over, I realise that ‘The Job from Hell’ is a gift, a wonderfully frustrating illustration of how we can ensnare and be ensnared by ‘the enabling trap of professional practice’ (Patricia Shaw, 2002). There are certain beliefs I hold about my professional practice which are rarely questioned, either by me or my clients – such as:

- The initial briefing meeting with the client is key; it sets the tone of the project and builds trust, especially with new clients
- A ‘psychodynamic’ model for a group discussion is the ‘right’ - indeed the only valid - one

- I must defer to the client's 'view of the world'
- Once the research objectives are agreed, the way in which they are met is my responsibility, for example:
  - The discussion guide (agenda) is my 'property', not that of the client
  - In terms of the research structure and format, I know 'best'
  - The discussion groups are under my control
  - 'Observers' are just that; they should not interfere with the research process
- We need to talk around the research findings to communicate effectively
- It is important for the client to 'own' the findings

Clearly some of these underlying assumptions are mutually exclusive.

Highlighting them also raises a question about the extent to which I am prepared to conform and 'play the game'. Conforming and 'playing safe' are likely to ensure an ongoing practice. However, innovating and challenging will generate more personal interest and satisfaction in my work. Can I do both? Can I generate work which I will find rewarding?

## **The Long and Winding Road**

As I think about what I do and how I do it, some of the historical training, influences and experiences that underpin my current practice become more visible. I think it is useful, at this stage, to explore some of the assumptions and beliefs that are intrinsic to the way in which I currently work.

Commercial qualitative research or, more accurately, 'qualitative inquiry' (Wendy Gordon, 1999) has its recent roots in clinical psychology and psychoanalysis. In the '50s and '60s 'motivational' research developed in the UK as a complement - some would say in competition to - survey research. Ernest Dichter was a strong exponent of 'motivational research', 'with its emphasis on the interpretation and analysis of human motives stemming from the insight, training and experience of the analyst rather than from what the individual actually said and believed' (Gordon, 1999:27).

In the late '60s and early '70s, 'motivational research', which stressed psychoanalytical interpretation, evolved into 'qualitative research', which is more technique and methodology bound. Simultaneously, commercial qualitative research moved away from its academic and therapy roots and adopted an 'apprenticeship' model of training, whereby new recruits learnt under the mentorship of more experienced researchers.

For this reason, qualitative marketing research, as applied to contemporary commercial and social problems, exists like a goldfish in an empty glass bowl, separated from its impressive academic heritage, credentials and authority, and therefore vulnerable to challenge.

(Gordon, 1999:18)

In the last few years another shift has occurred, with the 'group discussion', which suggests an open, exploratory, relaxed format, being re-positioned as a 'focus group', implying a narrow, linear model.

I have included this brief history because I now believe that much of my disillusionment with my current practice (and the debasement of 'focus groups' in popular culture) stems from the mechanisation of qualitative research brought about by separation from its historical roots and also from current academic thinking. This dissociation of practice from the roots that feed it has led, I believe, to a sort of aimlessness and disinterest within me, certainly, but also, to a degree, within the industry as a whole. It is the 'boiled frog' syndrome (Senge,

1992:22); slow, gradual change goes unnoticed, until it is 'too late'. 'Learning to see slow, gradual processes requires slowing down our frenetic pace and paying attention to the subtle as well as the dramatic' (ibid:23). By returning to the detail of what I do, I hope to re-energise my current practice and, more importantly, use the skills that I have developed in a way which is more creative, integrated and satisfying.

Shotter, quoted by Weick, describes 'the manager's task' in a way which, to me, is uncannily similar to the process that I believe unfolds in a group discussion:

(as) not one of choosing but of generating, of generating a clear and adequate formulation of what the problem situation "is", of creating from a set of incoherent and disorderly events a coherent "structure" within which both current actualities and further possibilities can be given an intelligible "place" - and of doing all this, not alone, but in continual conversation with all the others who are involved... To be justified in their authoring, the good manager must give a sharable linguistic formulation to already shared feelings, arising out of shared circumstances...

(Weick, 1995:9)

A key skill in qualitative inquiry is, I believe, the ability to be subjective and not subjective, at the same time. Often a client, at the briefing meeting, will ask, somewhat anxiously, "What do you think of these advertising routes...or branding or concepts?", and I am surprised to find that I do not have a view. Somehow I have learnt to put my opinions to one side because they are not relevant at this stage.

Similarly, during the course of a research project, I evolve hypotheses but I must not, as far as is possible, allow these hypotheses to contaminate what is happening in the present conversation, because this will bias the outcome. I must evolve hypotheses whilst not acting on them. I have to 'hold my hypothesis lightly' and start each research session 'freshly subjective'. I find it difficult to describe this process when training new researchers. I always stress that the analysis is part of the research process. To 'gather data', and then 'analyse' it, is

both inefficient and inaccurate because, at a later stage, you need to reconstruct the research situation 'in your head' with all the added selectivity and bias that this involves. The group discussion is a process of drawing out meaning and creating a coherent structure and this process continues as the meaning and structure from different group discussions are interwoven and built into an intelligible 'whole'.

Communicating the 'findings' of the research to the client also requires the ability to be subjective and not subjective at the same time. How to convey a plausible, engaging 'story', with several possible endings, whilst keeping my ego disengaged?

As I write I am struck by the inappropriateness of much of the language that is used within qualitative inquiry and how it constrains our thought and action. Research, consumer, findings, recommendations, respondents, observers, sample, focus group, presentation - all of these descriptors pose problems and can limit how we view our practice. As Shaw points out:

A core of repetitively sustained, habitual ways of recounting and accounting are kept alive between increasingly clearly identified members of the profession. A systematic practice discourse of work and deed develops which increasingly comes to police the very terms in which the ongoing contesting of the practice is conducted.

(Shaw, 2002:96)

Initial questions that arise are, 'How do I develop qualitative inquiry without these limiting constraints? How can I cut back the ivy that is strangling the tree's growth? How to feed the roots? Can I transplant the tree to sunnier, more auspicious climes?

Pondering on these questions, I have found myself flicking through the marketing research journals that are squeezed through my reluctant letterbox. I am curious. Is there any sign of change, of new thinking?

True, there are still papers entitled, 'The record of internet-based opinion polls in predicting the results of 72 races in the November 2000 US elections' and 'Attitudes towards customer satisfaction measurement in the retail sector'. But, I discover that, whilst over the last few years I have been expressing my frustration by withdrawing from the qualitative research industry, others have started to question and re-examine what it is we are trying to do. As Virginia Valentine (2002) puts it:

It seems to me that the pain and frustration of MR over the past years has sprung precisely from the feeling that we are not realising our potential. It is indisputable that MR is at a crossroads. What else is re-launching, if not a change from one direction to another? ... It is a time when the past has lost its grip and the future has not yet put on a definite shape

(Valentine, 2002:169-175)

## **Where to next?**

And so, again, it is a bank holiday weekend. Warm and sunny. Laughter mixed with the smoky smell of barbecued sausages drifts up from my neighbour's garden. Am I any clearer about what I am trying to do here? Yes, probably. There are themes that are beginning to emerge, some born of frustration and irritation, others born of the excitement of recognition or a sudden insight.

And what about my earlier concerns, voiced that first bank holiday weekend? 'Why is it important to me to do this?' It's a big question and I am not sure I can answer it at this stage. It is enough, for now, to feel that something is beginning to shift, that I am beginning to feel a renewed interest - hey, let's call it excitement - in what I do or rather, in what I might do - and how I might be.

The other concerns, 'How do I write in this 'third way' between autobiographical and theoretical' and 'Whose narrative is this anyway?' seem to have resolved

themselves. I've enjoyed the writing and it seems to have wound its way happily between the two modes. I've also come to accept that this particular voice is 'good enough' and useful for the task at hand. The others will get their turn, at some stage. Themes that interest me are emerging:

### **The need for 'adventure', a sense of discovery and 'voyage':**

In projects that have 'worked', there is a sense of connection (either individual or shared), of learning, of excitement. I want to foster that sense of 'alignment' or 'synchronicity'. Is it possible? Can I create situations where it is more likely to happen?

### **How to communicate 'better', 'fuller':**

The way in which we communicate the 'findings' of our 'research' is, inevitably, partial and partisan. I want to explore ways in which this can be more 'whole', more experiential for the 'audience'. To do this, I am aware that I need to re-examine the framework - and the vocabulary - with which we currently operate.

### **How can different elements of my identity feed one another in my current practice?**

Historically I have separated different 'selves' and viewed them as different roles and functions. I like this sense of multiplicity. As Weick points out, 'If people have multiple identities and deal with multiple realities, why should we expect them to be ontological purists? To do so is to limit their capability for sensemaking' (Weick, 1995:35). However, I would like to develop more fluent conversations between my 'selves', to enable a fuller and richer experience in my current practice.

But, the big issue, 'What is the question'? Am I any closer to it? Well, yes and no. There are strands, inter-connected, still emerging. I need to feed them, let them grow. I have discovered that I *am* interested in qualitative inquiry - something I did not really believe when I started this process of exploration.



However, I have become even more disenchanted with the hide-bound structure within which it is currently encased. The question then becomes, 'How to get rid of the bath water and carry the baby elsewhere?' How can I retain what I feel is the 'heart' of qualitative enquiry and develop it within a framework where it can evolve to meet - or anticipate - current business needs? As Virginia Valentine brazenly puts it:

What are we if not the 'guides' of the new business world order?  
(Valentine, 2002:168)

# Project 2

## What does it mean to be ‘engaged’ as a qualitative researcher?

### Introduction

Perhaps the obvious place to start is where I left off in Project 1. Reading back over it now, three months on, it already seems distant from me; the pain of its birth giving way to the curiosity of observing a separate and independent being. Do the themes of my inquiry that I tentatively offered then still make sense to me? How do they fit with my proposed research?

At that time, I drew out three themes:

- The need for ‘adventure’, a sense of discovery and ‘voyage’
- How to communicate ‘better’, ‘fuller’
- How different elements of my identity might feed one another in my current practice?

If I was describing this first theme now I would, perhaps, word it differently – placing the emphasis on ‘making sense of’ or ‘creating’ rather than ‘discovery’, in line with a transformative teleology perspective (Stacey, 2001:60). I would also, with the second and third themes, be less focused on myself as the ‘originator’ of actions and meaning and more focused on the processes of communication between myself and others.

However, in essence these themes still make sense to me, although I would now see them more as personal interests and goals (or intentions), rather than necessarily themes of my inquiry. I do not want to be limited by them at this

stage. Other, more relevant, themes may emerge as I continue to explore. I have therefore decided to ‘park’ them for the moment, explore other areas, and return to them at a later stage.

But where to go from here? I have found it hard to bridge the gap between my growing understanding of a complex responsive processes perspective and the quite rigid structures that define my current practice. The two ways of thinking seem to exist in parallel and, although I can jump across the gap and then jump back there is not, as yet, any common language to form a bridge.

I work as a qualitative researcher. As in any job, there are numerous unstated assumptions and expectations – the ‘enabling constraints’ (Shaw, 2002:51) of professional practice. Sometimes my assumptions and expectations are similar to those of my clients, sometimes they differ. (I will explore some of these differences and how they arise in more detail at a later stage). If I am to work and earn a living as a qualitative researcher, then I must be able to operate broadly within the existing framework of my professional practice. At the same time, I feel ‘stuck’ in my practice. I want it – me - to change; I want to feel more involved, to enjoy my ‘practice’, however I define it, more fully. To do this, I need to explore different perspectives, which will challenge, and may even undermine, some of the basic assumptions, beliefs and practices that inform what I do professionally. And, more than this, may challenge and undermine the profession as a whole. How do I go about this? Can I do it? And, indeed, will it be of any benefit?

Historically, commercial research has been defined by ‘objectivity’, ‘impartiality’, a position of ‘standing outside’. Arguably, quantitative research still aspires to this position. The pretence that qualitative inquiry can be ‘objective’ has long been abandoned, but the alternative, based on either/or thinking, is that, if it is not ‘objective’, then it must be ‘subjective’. This is no easier a position to hold for either researcher or client. From a researcher perspective, ‘subjectivity’ undermines credibility. If research is based largely on

opinion, then where is the professional grounding? From a client perspective, what weight does 'subjective' opinion carry and how can he justify paying for it?

In practice, of course, it is more complex. 'Objectivity' and 'subjectivity' are not discrete and different expectations of 'objectivity' can cause conflict between client and researcher. I believe that this issue is ignored because it is too problematic for the industry to address. But it is an issue that, whilst enabling qualitative researchers in their current practice, constrains the way in which the industry can develop. It is a theme I want to explore in this paper. In particular, I want to examine what we mean when we say 'objective' or 'subjective' and how useful these are as working concepts.

From a personal perspective, if my practice is to change, I need to be more aware of the process of how I do what I do. It is easy to see the 'stuck-ness' as 'out there', in the industry as a whole when, in reality, I am, of course, myself creating and being created by the same enabling constraints at the same time. It is also easy to view all the constraints as equally immutable and the cumulative effect can seem like the proverbial 'climbing Everest'.

To begin to consider alternative perspectives and explore how they might be useful in my working practice, I believe I need to:

- Slow the process down and look at the detail of what I do and how it potentially constrains as well as enables. As Shotter puts it: 'Making these disorderly moments rationally visible by critically describing them from within the event itself' ( Shotter ,1993:60)
- Explore which constraints are 'essential' to the process – or in my terms 'non-negotiable' - and which are not
- Experiment with changing the negotiable elements of the process

- Look for points of ‘leverage’; ‘seeing where actions and changes in structures can lead to significant and enduring improvements.’ (Senge, 1992:114)

As I write this, I have a growing awareness of how embedded a systems way of thinking is in my approach. It is the default setting and as soon as I try to make sense of what I am doing, I find myself back in the language and thinking which assumes that ‘I’ can stand outside and ‘experiment’ or impose change; that I can define outcomes and strategies for achieving them.

It seems to me that this is exactly the issue I am seeking to address in my practice – how to ‘stand back’ and ‘talk from within’ at the same time. Both of these are useful and complementary perspectives but, I believe, neither is more ‘right’ than the other. They are metaphors which have become taken as ‘fact’ and, in the process, have created an artificial polarity in our thinking. Damasio emphasises just this point when he discusses the challenges of studying consciousness.

Above all, we must not fall in the trap of attempting to study consciousness exclusively from an external vantage point based on the fear that the internal vantage point is hopelessly flawed. The study of human consciousness requires both internal and external views..... Whether one likes it or not, *all* the contents of our minds are subjective and the power of science comes from its ability to verify objectively the consistency of many individual subjectivities.

(Damasio 2000:82-3)

As a qualitative researcher, I have been trained and am skilled at presenting my ‘findings’ as ‘objective’, whilst knowing the absurdity of this. In this paper, I am interested in exploring an alternative approach; to explore my behaviour, thoughts, beliefs, as far as is possible, as they arise, from within the experience itself.

The following two narratives attempt to explore my current practice in this way; by examining the detail of what appears to be happening, viewed from the

perspectives of the programme, i.e. complexity, relationship psychology and participative inquiry.

## **The Acorn and the Oak Tree**

Glamex<sup>14</sup>. I have worked with the company for more than twenty years. French, ebullient, explosive, but very focused on the minutia; the verbal. The word is all:

*“Should we say, ‘luscious lips’ or ‘pouting lips’, ‘moisturising’ or ‘moisturises’?”*

This, in a press advertisement filled with strong visual imagery, in a market where image and promise are everything. I have always found the apparent contradiction between the expansive organisational style and the obsession with detail very curious. Each time I work with them, I stress the importance of context and the interdependence of the parts. But I feel I am talking into the wind.

What is this driving need to simplify, to reduce our understanding to a point where it can be controlled but, in the process, has lost its meaning? Peter Allen in his talk at the Complexity Society conference (2002) claimed that ‘only a mechanical system can be clearly understood’ and ‘transparent’. ‘Understanding the present is about reducing reality to mechanics’, he said. This is clearly one way of making sense of the world, but what a price to pay for understanding.

In my own practice, ‘making things clear’ is a large part of what I am paid to do. I am brought in to give direction, to provide answers. In doing this, I am expected to simplify and prioritise; to provide, with relative objectivity and with the help of external research, a different perspective to those which exist within

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<sup>14</sup> A pseudonym

the organisation. I am the external expert. In a sense, what I am doing is objectifying the subjective experiences of the people I speak with in my research; transforming their experiences into manageable and useful marketing tools. Sometimes a mechanical approach may be the most useful way of doing this. Sometimes not. This is what I want to explore.

Certainly it is the mechanical model that Glamex adopts. This time they want to launch a new anti-ageing cream. I have been brought in to talk to ‘consumers’ about the new concept and the proposed name. I am in a briefing meeting with Fiona, the research buyer, and Sophie, the brand manager. This project is Sophie’s baby. She is fighting to protect it from the incursions of ‘International’, who want to ‘own’ the project. ‘International’ has very different ideas about how the new anti-ageing product should be positioned in the market. They want to emphasise the technological developments, the complex ingredients. Sophie thinks they are wrong; that the emphasis should be on the sensual aspects of the cream and the effect on the skin.

This is a multi-cultural conflict and I am here as arbiter. I am to run two discussion groups with potential users of the new anti-ageing cream. The project team has generated many words which they will blow up and paste onto boards for me; words to describe alternative brand names; Primigravida Active, Primigravida Evolutive, Primigravida Optimum, Primigravida Duplex. Words to sum up the product function: First signs of ageing resolution - or solution, or complex. Then lots more words to describe the concept; what chemicals it contains and what wonders these will perform on the skin.

Sitting in the meeting, I feel a mounting sense of *déjà vu*. I feel impatient, disconnected. I have a strong urge to just make my apologies and leave. Instead I politely smile and nod appropriately:

“I think we should show the product names first and see what they mean to people,” suggests Sophie.

“I think we should leave off the Glamex name, in case that biases people. Then we can show them the two concepts to explain the product; the International one first and then the UK one and then the descriptors and finally we’ll show them the packaging.”

This is the building block approach. Show people little bits, this bit or that bit? Build it up, until you reach the whole. If you combine the best bits then, by definition, you end up with the best whole, maybe even more than the sum of the parts. But, the broad assumption is that the bits are independent, that each does not affect the perception of the other.

Almost invariably I argue against this approach. True, there are times when it is relevant, but mostly it is so artificial, asking people to respond to isolated bits, a response which they would never have to make in ‘real life’ and which makes no sense as an abstraction. How can we expect people to react in the same way to Primigravida if it is made by Glamex or by Superdrug? How can one element not impact on and be impacted on by others? Why do we assume in the first place that people care enough to bother analysing a press advertisement in this way?

I argue for the opposite approach, but I am not wholehearted. I have done this so many times before that I am tired of hearing myself say it.

“Let’s take a whole - any whole - and see how it works. Then we can ‘evolve’ it, move it towards its best positioning. It’s like, if you look close up at a leaf, you see one thing – and if you look at the leaf on the tree you see something else. Both are ‘true’. They’re just different perspectives. Let’s start with the tree”, I suggest.

I mention ‘low involvement processing’, in which Heath (2001), a branding specialist, talks about automatic out-of-awareness processing, a simple form of learning, where data are connected to each other and to simple concepts through



association. If we force people to rationally explain, then we lose a sense of how this operates. And, I suggest, this is an important element of advertising and brand awareness. It is particularly important with products, such as anti-ageing creams, that have such highly charged emotional connotations. When the communication is fast and cursory, such as glancing at a press advertisement, there is likely to be very little differentiation between elements. ‘Low involvement processing’ is then, I believe, the norm.

My comments prompt Fiona to open up the conversation.

“We’re really confused”, she explains. “When we’ve researched our skin care products in detail, people really like them. They love the packaging, what the product promises. They get very excited and want to rush out and buy it. But then when we take people into the store, they complain that it’s all so confusing. All the names sound the same. They don’t know how to choose or what they mean.”

“It’s the leaf and tree situation,” I suggest. “What you see depends on how you look at it.”

I find myself arguing for the importance of trying to ‘hold’ these different perspectives at the same time, in spite of the apparent contradictions; to resist the urge to understand by reducing the complexity. As I write, I am suddenly aware of how this connects with Gordon’s (2001) attempts to link Damasio’s (2000) thinking on neuro-psychology to the way in which brands are encoded. Gordon, based on Damasio, suggests that a single brand is encoded in different areas of the brain; broken up and stored or processed in maybe 75 separate modalities – sensory, abstract meanings, emotions, behavioural tendencies..... If this is true, then it is hardly surprising that the way in which ‘consumers’ respond to a brand will vary depending on the way in which the dynamic, associative network of brand characteristics in the brain is triggered. A brand in the hand will trigger quite different patterns of associations than a brand on a stand, i.e. displayed in store alongside dozens of others. This thinking may challenge the way in which

we, as practitioners, have traditionally attempted to understand people's relationships with brands.

Back at the briefing. I am conscious that both Sophie and Fiona are looking puzzled. This thinking does not fit the Glamex model and they do not really want to spend time debating it. I feel faintly embarrassed, as if I have spoken out of turn. We drop the conversation and return to a discussion of the research methodology. And then, implicitly, almost by default or through a reluctance to appear too forceful - or maybe just boredom - I find I have agreed to approach the groups in the mechanistic way that Sophie has suggested.

This is strange because, in practice, I have no intention of doing so. Thinking about this now, I realise that this is a common pattern in my relationship with clients. Sometimes I pay lip-service to a client's approach, but then I carry out the research in the way which I think is most appropriate, regardless of what has been agreed. And, what is even more curious, this is often what the client expects. If I carried out the research in the mechanistic way that we originally agreed, then they would be disappointed.

So, what is actually going on here and why is there this collusion between me, the researcher, and Sophie, the client, to pretend that the research process is other than it is? And why does it need to be covert? Somehow, I feel this is tied in with the issues of power dynamics and also with how we, as qualitative practitioners, define 'research'.

## **Power dynamics in the client-supplier relationship**

Earlier I talked about the 'fact' that I am commissioned – and paid – to do a job. "If I am to work and earn a living then I must be able to operate broadly within the existing framework of my professional practice". Reading this again, I sense

a certain passivity and resignation behind this belief; the implicit assumption that I must conform to the client's agenda, that he/she holds the ultimate power. This perspective views power as being held by one person (or organisation) 'over' the other in quite a static way. Often it amounts to crude economic power.

I realise how strongly this belief acts as an enabling constraint on the way in which I behave in my professional practice. I act out a role that separates off certain aspects of my identity. I am the 'supplier', they are the 'client'. This can engender a static, formulaic relationship in which the power balance becomes 'fixed', there is too much stability and, as a result, there is less scope for novelty to emerge.

Sometimes, I feel, it is simply easier to play to this role, especially if the job is not one I feel strongly engaged with. I separate my 'self' from the job I am doing. In this sense, I become 'mechanical'. But, it is in doing this that I lose my sense of involvement and pleasure in the work.

There is a dilemma here, though. Just as too little engagement can lead to sterility, too much can cloud 'relative objectivity'. I have to work harder at keeping my 'self' from contaminating the project when I am interested in the subject I am researching.

From a complex responsive processes perspective, this static view of one party 'holding' the power makes no sense (Stacey, 2001: 213). And, in practice, of course, as illustrated above, the power relations I have with clients are not simple and one way. They are constantly being re-negotiated. What is curious, however, is why - from both my perspective and that of the client - they need to be covert. How would it be if I assumed this dynamic power relationship with clients in an overt manner?<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> This is an area I will explore in Project 3

Clearly, in some ways and with some jobs, I want to maintain the status quo. If I did not, then I would not have continued to work in this way with Glamex over so many years. One of my learning set members described his way of segmenting jobs as, 'fun jobs, development jobs and bread jobs'. Within this framework, this is a 'bread job'. But this is not enough of an answer. It is not the whole answer. When the phone rings and it is another Glamex job, I feel a mixture of familiarity and satisfaction and disappointment. There is always, even after all these years, the immediate gratitude of 'being wanted', being 'the chosen one', regardless of the client or the job. With Glamex, there is also the sense of being at home with the culture, almost a familial sense of comfort, predictability and irritation. There is not the challenge of a new organisation, a new market, a new culture. Sometimes I want the sense of ease this brings.

I have recently agreed to work with Glamex on a retainer basis. I have never worked in this way before; projects are usually commissioned on an ad hoc basis. As well as providing some continuity of work flow, I feel that this new relationship gives me licence to challenge more overtly. I am acknowledged as the 'continuity' factor. What do I mean by this? Within Glamex, turnover rates are very high. The people I work with tend to be young, mobile, in the job for one or two years before moving up or on. I have been working *with* Glamex for longer than any of the people I know there have been working *for* Glamex. This gives me a broad perspective; historically, in terms of corporate culture and in terms of my familiarity with the brands and products. I enjoy the process of exploring new initiatives within this broader context.

Writing this, I realise that there is more satisfaction in working on Glamex projects than I generally acknowledge. In particular, I enjoy the role of 'external expert' and the power that this affords me. Why then do I still feel dissatisfied?

Thinking back to my meeting with Fiona and Sophie, I see that there is something here about the concealment of power, the fear of being attacked or rejected if I try to change the accepted patterns of power relating. And this is

odd, because I have always thought of myself as reasonably comfortable with 'exercising power'. Increasingly I am coming to question whether this is really the case. In relating with Sophie, I am not openly challenging. I pay lip-service to her view of the way the project will be conducted, but I shift the pattern of power by conducting it in the way that I want to do it. This fits with Stacey's view that power not exercised in accordance with hierarchical structure tends to be regarded as illegitimate. In order not to be branded 'illegitimate', I become 'covert'. I engage in what Stacey describes as a 'shadow relationship' (Stacey, 2001:168).

In the meeting I realise, also, that I do not want Sophie to be involved in the research process. On this occasion, (although this is not always the case), I see myself as working *for* my clients, rather than working *with* them. I see my role as engaging with them at the briefing meeting and during the final presentation, but I see the research process itself as my 'territory', my responsibility.

I wonder to what extent this separation of 'the client interaction' and 'the research stage' - and the barriers that this creates - limits my engagement with the process? What would be it be like if I was more open about my views? I guess I would feel more engaged in the process, more of 'me' would be involved and this would lead.....I don't know where.

Thinking about this further, I see another, underlying, issue. In the meeting we are talking as if the research process is truly objective, as if the participants in the research and the discussion group will, or indeed can, be controlled; run as a mechanical system. If I challenge this way of viewing the process, I implicitly challenge the validity of the research process itself. This might lead to a re-evaluation of the role of research within Glamex and might result in a change in my relationship with the company, for better and/or worse. Why would I want to do this when I earn my living quite comfortably in this way? But it is not in Sophie's interests to challenge this either. She wants 'evidence' from research to

support her opinions. She wants 'facts' from me, not more opinions. It suits everyone this way.

But this seems defeatist. Is there another way of looking at it? If I was to adopt a broader view of research as 'learning', without the artificial boundaries I put around this process, then it can be understood as beginning with my first contact with the client and extending long after I have departed. Would this give me more freedom to practice as I would like? Possibly. It is worth developing this thought in terms of how I currently view research and the limitations this view imposes.

## **How commercial qualitative practitioners define 'research'**

As I discussed earlier, the perception of 'research' is still largely determined by a quantitative model, i.e. it is empirically based, involves data, analysis, validity, robust samples etc. Whilst an experienced client or qualitative practitioner would regard the 'research' label as a 'loose coat' i.e. kept for convenience, but not to be taken too seriously, novice researchers and less experienced clients often cling to the structure rather than the process of the 'research' label, i.e. they are more interested in doing it 'right' than in generating useful thinking. This can be frustrating and limiting.

However, I do not think that this is the 'main' problem. The 'main' problem, as I see it, is more subtle: If the research label is removed, i.e. so that research is re-defined as, say, 'learning', where does my status come from? What authority can I draw on to give credence to my attempts to 'make things clear', to provide 'answers'? If I approach a client without the familiar label, even as a 'loose

coat', what am I? How can I still be the 'expert'? The fear is of losing a sense of work self. And I do not know what would replace it.

Recently, I conducted a round table discussion with a number of colleagues, all of whom had been working within qualitative research for more than 10 years. We were discussing the future of the industry and what we felt were the current priorities. The discussion never reached 'the future'. It stumbled on the conflicting perceptions of 'the present'. An outsider might be forgiven for thinking that we all had completely different jobs. The only unifying descriptor – and even this was not without contention - was that we are all qualitative researchers. Take this away and we had no sense of shared identity.

These are issues that Rosie, my business partner, and I have been struggling with for decades. How to transcend the straightjacket of the research label? We have attempted this in many ways including, in the late 80s, setting up a separate company, Management Link, which addressed communication and change within organisations. We managed to avoid the word 'research' in all of our literature. It was a reasonably successful venture, which led to interesting work and gave us access to senior management. However, in retrospect, I realise that, although we changed the way we talked about what we did, we did not change what we did in practice. Essentially it was traditional 'research', but carried out within organisations.

I am now interested in exploring what a new qualitative approach to research might look like. And, in doing this, I realise that, whatever point I start from, I seem to find myself heading towards the same question, "How is it possible, as a qualitative researcher, to be both objective and subjective at the same time?" It's a simple question, but it has wide reaching implications. To achieve it would require a different definition of what we, as qualitative researchers, do and a quite different relationship between researchers and clients. On a personal level, however, it might allow me to engage much more fully in my practice.

## **The discussion group in practice**

To return to the project: Later that day, after the briefing meeting with Fiona and Sophie, I am in East Molesey, where the first discussion group will take place.

The participants have gathering in the room next door while I arrange the boards and set up the microphone. Sophie is sitting in on the group, as an observer.

Suddenly, she leans forward.

“The discussion guide (agenda). Where is the discussion guide?”

“I haven’t written a discussion guide”, I reply.

She looks shocked. This is equivalent to admitting professional misconduct. I see her indecision. What should she do? Should she berate me for not producing one? She is a reasonable woman and does not want to make a fuss, but how can she ignore this? For once, I resist the urge to say more. I watch her wrestle with the dilemma. Finally she decides to do nothing. But she is visibly anxious. Will there be chaos in the group? Can I be trusted to cover the areas she needs covered? Who is assuming responsibility here? I am conscious of the shifting power relations. In the client’s office, I defer. Here, in ‘my’ territory, the power dynamics change.

Again we have the apparent conflict between the ‘objective’ model of research which Sophie is illustrating; data which can be measured, monitored, controlled and the ‘subjective’ model which I espouse, which is free-flowing, uncontrollable, potentially disastrous. But this is not really how it is. I have absorbed the needs of the research, but I do not want the group to be hide-bound by the agenda. This seems to me to be a good example of being ‘objective’ and ‘subjective’ at the same time.

The participants are called in and take their seats. There are nine of us in the room; me, Sophie, and seven women in their 40s, all users of premium skin care products costing upwards of £40. Eight of us sit in a circle. In the corner sits



Sophie; youthful, over-glamorous for the situation, in tight leather jeans and newly highlighted hair. I have positioned her clearly outside the circle – an observer. The participants register her as they enter the room; her youth, her clothes, her air of anxiety. She, in turn, evaluates them. What will they do to her baby? She is not allowed to speak during the course of the group, but I have told her that she can ask questions at the end of the session if she wants to.

Each participant introduces herself, says a little about her life, her concerns about her skin, the products she uses. Then I open the conversation up. Although the discussion is ostensibly about skin care and, ultimately, about the product concept and naming, I allow the conversation to rove fairly freely. I am interested in understanding what researchers, Chandler and Owen describe as ‘the consumer culture’.

Our proper object of study is not the individual either as a rational or a psychological being. Our proper object of study is the cultural web of meaning and behaviour which we call ‘consumer culture’.

Chandler & Owen 2002:34)

Within the discussion, we meander from the effects of childbirth on attitudes towards life, health, relationships and skin care, to the psychological implications of ageing, to men’s growing concerns with appearance.

“I suppose what I really want is to be young. I hate the idea of growing old, of losing that sense of optimism and freedom and possibility”, says Sara. Others join in, voicing their concerns, elaborating, contradicting, deflecting the conversation.

We discuss the joys of shopping for skin care products in a department store.

“It makes me feel special. I don’t often feel special now that I’m a mother. I feel dowdy. The consultant sits you down and asks you what you like, tries things on you. Takes an interest. You need that sometimes,” adds Kate, wistfully.

Others nod, in sympathy.

We discuss the ‘magic’ of certain brands of skin cream.

Jane leans forward, excitedly, “I read about that Crème de la Mere that all the stars are wearing. It’s £130 a pot. I went into Selfridges to look for it. I’m glad they didn’t have a tester because I’m sure once I’d tried it, I wouldn’t be able to use anything else.”

What are we really talking about here? Is it simply ways of stopping facial skin feeling uncomfortable? Or is it an exploration of the joys and disappointments, the hopes and fears that are the enduring themes of all our lives and of how we utilise fantasy, redemption and re-birth in the process of trying to make sense of it all. It’s both of course and a myriad of themes in between. Unless I understand something of the complex web of emotions, fantasies and desires that skin care (and other) products embody, I cannot suggest ways to present them that will entice and satisfy potential customers.

Arguably it is immoral, to utilise these desires and emotions for such a tawdry end, but that is not the area I want to explore here. More relevant to this conversation is an exploration of the huge gulf between the reduced and linear conversation I had had with Fiona and Sophie earlier in the day at the briefing meeting and the rich, contradictory, associative, meaningful conversation we are having in the group discussion. In practice it was completely irrelevant whether the product names were introduced with or without Glamex branding. Building blocks bear no relationship to the ways in which these women made sense of their lives; they did not think, act or interact in this way.

Dutifully, we consider the product and the descriptors, but only once we have created the context in which they are relevant. We work on the concept and descriptors, adding and taking away bits to see the effect. It is a dynamic, creative process in which everyone gets hugely involved and which they enjoy enormously. Almost as a by-product, we sort out the client’s problem.

I am aware as I write this of the two different worlds that my practice encompasses; the client side, in which I reflect at length on the power dynamics

and enabling constraints and the research side, where I suddenly ‘disappear’, become ‘rationally-invisible’ (Shotter,1993:60). This is what I have been trained to do, to hide behind the ‘findings’. A small example; if I want to make a point in a presentation which I know will be contentious, I may quote one of the research participants and so deflect ownership. Rendering myself ‘invisible’ is another way of assuming an ‘objective’ – and authoritative - position. Predictably, I have no problems ‘coming out’ on these issues with Rosie, where there is no need for a mask of objectivity.

“That’s the best group I’ve sat in on in the two years I’ve been at Glamex”, Sophie enthuses when the group has finished and the women have left, clutching and cooing over the skincare samples which I had given them as an unexpected ‘extra’ to their payment.  
“They were really good”.

Two realisations strike me. Firstly, in Sophie’s eyes the women were ‘the group’. Their ‘success’ she attributes solely to their own efforts and abilities – and to ‘luck’. As so often happens, successful group moderation was ‘invisible’. She simply could not see the moderator contribution - my contribution - to the ‘success’ of the group or, indeed, that her presence had also had an effect. Herein lies the dilemma of the qualitative skill. Done well, it is not recognised and so is undervalued. Done badly, it is visible and open to criticism. Why is this, I wonder? Perhaps it is to do with the development of qualitative research as a craft. The skills are developed to a level of unconscious competence (O’Connor & McDermott, 1996:6) through apprenticeship. As a result, the skill base has not been defined or analysed. Other professions mark their territory. Should we mark ours? Would we gain more professional recognition? But would we lose the ‘art’ and creativity of our profession as a result?

My second realisation was that Sophie did not understand – or did not care - that I had subverted the research process by not using a discussion guide and by not steering the group through a logical decision process as we had previously

agreed. But these were precisely the reasons why it was 'successful'. Had I conducted the group in the mechanical, orderly fashion we had discussed in the morning it would, I knew, have been much less productive. Although Sophie had initially been very anxious about the perceived lack of structure and control of the group, because it was a situation that she was unfamiliar with, she was pleased with what emerged in the group. Chrzanowska describes successful group moderation as 'enabl(ing) qualitative market researchers to keep the focus on the client's issues, while remaining within the respondent's frame of reference.' (Chrzanowska, 2002:12). This is a both/and approach which is part of the traditional qualitative research 'world view' and I have found it a useful model as a qualitative moderator.

How would it be if I looked at this group discussion process from the perspective of complex responsive processes? Yes, there is an agenda, agreed with the client and, yes, the agenda is covered, but the emergent nature of the group process which takes place in 'the living present' (Shaw, 2002:46), is much richer and potentially more transformational than Chrzanowska's description implies. I have an image of the discussion group as a large lake set in rugged landscape; swirling waters, hidden depths, stagnant pools, but with tame streams feeding and exiting from it. It is not the experience of the discussion group itself that frustrates me, but the transition from a linear, reductionist approach to one which is rich and vital and then back again.

So, why did I not talk to Sophie about what I was doing; explain to her why I had chosen to work in this way? I think it was largely because I did not feel that she belonged in the research situation. She was an interloper. Rather seditiously, I also wanted to prove a point; that my way is better than hers. However, by not talking to her about it, I was perpetuating the 'client'/'researcher' divide; reinforcing the working *for*, not working *with*, pattern which in turn, discouraged the emergence of new patterns of relating. Also, perhaps, I did not want to overtly challenge the 'objective research' model.

There are times, with certain clients, where this approach is fine. I cannot hope to convert all clients to my way of practicing. However, it has become my automatic approach. I would like, selectively, to start challenging this assumption – to explore the nature of the constraints.

In recent years, much to my chagrin, clients have increasingly chosen to ‘view’ discussion groups, in research labs with one way mirrors. In doing so, they can experience the richness and diversity of ‘consumers’ lives and how their product or service may fit within it. However, from the client's perspective, there is often much at stake. If 'consumers' criticise ideas that are presented, this may undermine their role within the organisation or disrupt established plans. Sometimes there is conflict between the client's ‘take’ on the group and mine. The issue becomes, 'Whose version of reality is most accurate'? Rather than exploring this diversity of views, I would normally try to impose the 'research' model, using 'participants' as my weapon - my authentic source. And I, of course, am the impartial witness.

As I write this, I am aware of a certain arrogance in the assumptions I have made. I assume that, as a researcher, my sense-making is often superior to that of my clients, largely because I have less emotional investment in the subject matter I am researching and also because I have a deeper understanding of ‘consumer psychology’.

But, at the same time, this is what I am currently paid to do and to be.

## **Come the Presentation**

But then. The problem of communicating this richness of experience. How to convey a sense of these women’s lives; their needs, longings, wistfulness, joys, all of which impact on their desire to buy a premium skin care product. to the

marketing team back at Glamex? The best I can do is weave a narrative, using the women's own stories and quotes to illustrate, to generate a mood, to create a world that they, the marketing team, can enter. But then I also have to tell them which names to use. The temptation is to reduce the richness of the experience to a set of rules and guidelines which they can use to go forward, like moving from one railway gauge to another as I move from the complex to the simple.

So, in an attempt not to reduce and segment, I constantly relate detail to context; to make sense of the names within the broader picture of the women's lives – but I know much of this will not be heard. The pressure of needing to launch a brand, of tight deadlines, of the chain of anxiety reaching up the organisation, means that bits will be cherry picked to fit the existing agenda. More and more bits.

But then, I am left with the questions; "What benefit would there be for Glamex in a change of process"? And, "What benefit would there be for me?" Perhaps the current model is good enough for its purposes. Perhaps it doesn't need to change and I am clutching at straws, desperate to justify a change of approach where none is needed. The task, in this instance, is to help the company develop a new moisturiser. To facilitate this process, and for my own interest, I choose to adopt a more open approach. All well and good.

A more relevant question is 'Why did I choose to focus on a 'bread job' here? I think I chose this particular project because it is an extreme example of the work I do – one where I have a strong professional investment, in the sense that I have an ongoing relationship with the client and I want to help them solve their problems - but very little emotional investment. That is, the subject area holds little intrinsic interest for me. I thought it might be interesting to 'make visible' some of the patterns of relating that exist, as much as anything to question why I choose to do this type of work at all. And, to an extent, it has been useful. What has become increasingly obvious to me is the 'game' that I play with clients around the area of fact and fiction, objectivity and subjectivity. Both parties

know that 'objectivity' is a mask we hide behind when it suits us, but industry 'norms' and mutual convenience prevent us from acknowledging this. What if we could? What then?

I now think it would be interesting to explore another project; one in which the subject matter does interest me. Is my engagement with the project different? Am I more willing to challenge the patterns of relating between the client and me?

## **The Medium and the Message**

Recently I was asked by Pharmatox<sup>16</sup>, a major pharmaceutical company, to undertake a project on the development of the H.R. website on their intranet. The company had been formed two years earlier - the result of a merger - with all the disruption and anxiety that this inevitably entails. This was the third merger that many employees had experienced in the previous ten years.

John, a director in the H.R. department, commissioned the research. He had never been involved a project like this before. He was a little anxious about it, but very open to suggestions and we had a couple of meetings to discuss how we should proceed. I felt very strongly that we should not focus primarily on the website, but needed to explore it in context. I wanted some understanding of the processes of communication within the organisation and the role of the different communication channels, especially the intranet, before homing in on the specifics of the website. Without this broader context, I felt, it was impossible to understand how the site currently fitted with employee needs and how it might be improved.

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<sup>16</sup> A pseudonym

I notice that, although the project was very different from the Glamex project I described earlier, the same issues of interconnectedness and context quickly arose. This is a recurring theme in my practice, one that I want to acknowledge here without examining in depth, as I did in relation to Glamex.

John and I are sorting out the details. He is concerned that if I initiate a conversation on 'the current climate' it will open up a 'can of worms': Many employees feel very insecure in their jobs, with good reason. There has been a wave of redundancies and more are imminent. He is afraid that, once broached, the topic will dominate the conversation. I feel that, by not acknowledging these broader concerns, I am likely to both alienate participants and also limit the necessary understanding of employees working lives - but I offer to contain them, so that they will not take over the discussion. He agreed to this.

What do I mean when I say I 'offered to contain' employee anxieties? I could not possibly do this in a literal sense. What I meant was that I would start with employee issues and concerns, whatever these were and, with employee agreement, work towards the areas I needed to address – a sort of holistic approach to research. In doing this, I felt, I could acknowledge their concerns and also provide a context for the issues I needed to explore.

Thinking about this further, I realise that the need to be more 'holistic' in my approach within the discussion groups, is more than a 'research' need. I have presented it here, as I present it to clients, as a way of getting the most out of the research situation - but it goes beyond this. It concerns the respect afforded to participants in the discussion group; an acknowledgement of their needs, concerns and a recognition of my relationship with them as one of partnership, rather than 'exploitation'. Rather bizarrely, I feel the need to unite with them against 'the client'.

Let me try to explore this further. There is a view of research participants, amongst many (not all) clients, as a 'resource' and, like an oil field, it is expected



to be there and available, when needed. This attitude often breeds contempt for ‘consumers’ which surfaces in a variety of ways. By contrast, I want a relationship with participants as ‘co-inquirers’, rather than ‘consumers’. Of course I have to meet the objectives of the research as well, but these goals are not incompatible. Conversely, the one facilitates the other.

So where does this perspective come from? In its development, commercial qualitative research drew heavily on the thinking of psychotherapist Carl Rogers and his ‘person-centred’ approach to therapy. Although his contribution is rarely recognised in qualitative research nowadays, Rogers’ three conditions for establishing a therapeutic relationship – empathy, genuineness and unconditional positive regard (Rogers 1995) – are still a cornerstone of the qualitative approach. And, thinking about this further, I wonder whether my need to divide the ‘client’ and ‘research’ parts of my work that I described earlier stems, at least in part, from the different ‘identities’ I adopt. In a research situation, I adopt a Rogerian perspective. In a client setting, I adopt a business-like, sometimes adversarial, stance; guarded, more role bound. There is certainly less of ‘the living present’ about it.

To return to Pharmatox: The project interests me and I am keen to make the most of it. Pharmatox is a ‘new’ client with whom I have no established way of working. Also, John is not a research buyer. We are therefore not constrained by the conventions of shared history or the ‘research model’. As a result, I feel freer and motivated to shape the project in a way I believe will be both interesting for me and most useful for my client. I am energised by this; it feels like a voyage.

As I talk further with John, it becomes clear that there are underlying tensions permeating the project; different parties are involved, with conflicting agendas. These differences become increasingly apparent as the project progresses and reach their zenith during the presentation at the end of the project.

However, at this initial stage, I am just worried that the I.T. people will expect a detailed analysis of site specifics (a project that is to be carried out separately). I am not going to – cannot – deliver this. I am not an IT expert. My focus is on ‘communications’. At my instigation, John wrote to all the parties involved to explain the scope of the project – what it could and could not do - and to invite input.

Why did I feel the need to do this? In the Glamex project I was keen to relax the project boundaries. Here I was trying to pin them down. In part it was an attempt to manage people’s expectations, a normal part of any project set up and particularly important with a new client. But I was also feeling vulnerable, about my IT ignorance and because I was in unknown territory - almost all of my other clients I have worked with for years. To an extent I felt ‘on trial’ and my instinct was to reduce risk by trying to control what could be controlled.

And yet, I had chosen to ‘up the anti’ by encouraging John to broaden the scope of the project and, as a by-product, to open myself to attack, especially from ‘I.T’. Somehow, I felt the risk was worth it for a project which I might engage with, even enjoy.

And here is an interesting comparison. Within Glamex I am known and trusted. It would be reasonable to suppose that this would encourage me to challenge, to be more outspoken. By contrast, with Pharmatox, I have yet to prove myself and by rights I should tread carefully. In practice, the opposite happens. A complex responsive processes explanation might suggest that, with Glamex, there is too much stability in the power relations which leads to stagnation, whereas with Pharmatox, the power relations allow change and constancy to occur at the same time, so there is more fluidity in the patterns of relating (Shaw, 2002:129)

In an earlier draft of this project, I discussed, at length, how the Pharmatox project was set up and the themes that emerged from the research. I did this because the content of the project interested me and exploring the processes of

communication within Pharmatox seemed very relevant to my exploration on this programme. The response from my learning set was that, whilst the content of the research was interesting, they felt that I was ‘not present’ in the narrative. I had ‘adopted the accepted voice of my profession’, to explore ‘communication’, but had not reflected sufficiently on my own communication. This seems to me to be another illustration of the way in which I have been trained to be ‘invisible’; to present my research ‘findings’ with a greater or lesser degree of apparent objectivity, depending on the audience. But to conceal myself in the process. When considering my communication processes with clients, I am comfortable with a reflexive style. When exploring the research itself, I automatically revert to a more detached stance, except with close colleagues.

So, there are several options at this point. Firstly, I can retain – and justify - the content of the research, on the basis that it contributes to my understanding of communication within organisations. Secondly, I can explore the processes of communication within the discussion groups themselves. Thirdly, I can omit all of this and concentrate on the patterns of relating with my clients and how this may differ according to the nature of the project. I have decided on the third option, because it is a better fit with the themes of this project. However, I will give a brief overview of some of the ‘findings’, in order to provide a context for what happened in the presentation.

To summarise: I conducted eight discussion groups with a mix of Pharmatox employees in the US and UK, over a three week period. Many of the themes that emerged in the research reflected the changes that had come about since the merger. Whilst these changes often seemed fairly superficial, it quickly became clear that, in practice, they required a quite radical change in the processes of communication within the organisation. These changes were not adequately acknowledged by senior management and there was little support for employees who had difficulty adapting to the changes.

Most employees felt more anxious and more time pressured than they had in the past. Power dynamics had shifted considerably and in unexpected ways. There was considerable confusion about the intranet, a lack of differentiation between sites and a need for support. It was within this context that most Pharmatox employees were contemplating the new H.R. website.

## **Playing to the audience**

I talked a lot with John about how best to present the findings. I was still concerned that the I.T. people would dismiss the context and want to home in on the detail of the website.

The presentation was to be relayed by video link to four sites; two in the US, two in the UK. The slot was 1-3pm in the afternoon. By 1.00pm three of the parties were in place but the US technical division had disappeared. No-one could find them. Forty minutes later they were discovered in the wrong video suite, quickly re-located and we were ready to roll. I had intended that the presentation would last two hours and, preferring an interactive session, invited questions throughout. But I was feeling frustrated that we had lost so much time. I decided to cover the general issues more rapidly than I had intended. Twenty minutes in and I was talking about the different ways that people respond to technology and the different support that they might need. Rob, an I.T. specialist from the States, interjected:

“Have you got a list of the different job functions and the areas represented, because that will affect what people say?”

I was unsure what the underlying purpose of the question was, but I assured him that we had.

A few minutes later he interjected again. His tone was abrupt. It was clear that he intended to be disruptive.

“You’re saying sites. What do you mean sites? Are you talking about the intranet as a whole, X website or Y website. You have to be clear.”

I explained that this was part of the problem. Many people did not know the difference; the whole concept of the intranet confused them and they did not know how to handle the enormity of it.

And then other members of the audience joined in the conversation, explaining to him, as they saw it, what the issues were:

“Well, is this supposed to be a presentation about X website or what? What is this all about?”

I explained that it was about X website, but within the whole communication context, as employees experienced it.

Changing tack, he continued, unabated.

“What I want you to do is go back and interrogate the data, to see how our intranet compares with other peoples’. And I want you to tell me how X site compared with Y, compares with S, compares with B”

At this point, I had options. Clearly he felt irritated that the focus was not on X site, which he was working on. He exactly illustrated the problem that I was trying to explore. Excessive focus on detail, without any appreciation of the interconnectedness of the detail or the broader context, fuelled the confusion that prevailed amongst employees. I could have said this. Instead I referred him back to the research aims and told him that there was no intention in this project to compare this intranet with others or to compare specific sites. This could be done, but it was a completely different project.

Again, other people intervened to emphasise these points. Rob’s interjections, added to the initial delay, meant that video conferencing time ran out before I had finished the presentation. I felt very frustrated, at the curtailed time and at his antagonism. What more could I have done to prevent this or even to have pre-empted it? I had known that such a reaction from I.T. was a strong possibility and, in a sense, he acted exactly as I might have predicted. Is this a function of the constraints of this type of interaction? Or an inevitable

consequence of conflicting cultures and agendas? How might I have handled it differently? Increasingly I feel that the presentation format, even where it is 'interactive', is an inadequate medium for communicating this type of ...type of what? Information? Data? Findings? Recommendations? None of these are adequate words to describe what I am trying to communicate in these sessions. I am trying to convey people's experiences, how they make sense of their worlds and the potential implications of all 'this' for corporate planning. In the past I have described this as 'helping clients to get inside the heads of their target market'. I believe that it is only by seeing from the 'inside out', that they can hope to create the appropriate product, service, whatever.

Video conferencing also played its part in disrupting communication. Whilst I could see the participants in each of the sites, on screen, I could not pick up the nuances of their body language and behaviour. The format interrupts the natural resonance that exists when the 'audience' is in the same room as me. It interferes with processes of communication. If emotion and feelings are inseparable from reason and, indeed, reason is impaired without them (Damasio 2000:41-42), then it is hardly surprising that communication suffers in this context. I cannot fully experience Rob's gesture and response. He cannot experience mine. Rightly or wrongly, I feel that the conversation with Rob would have been quite different if we had been in the same room together.

Normally, the presentation would be the end of my involvement in the project. I simply hand over my recommendations to the client. This time, I decided to try a different tack. John and I went for a coffee after the meeting. He was very apologetic, feeling that I would be upset about the disruption of the presentation. I was irritated, rather than upset, but keen to continue the conversation. I offered to be part of the ongoing development team, to act as the 'end user' champion, for one further meeting, possibly more. This change in my normal pattern was a deliberate attempt to develop an ongoing, rather than a sporadic client relationship which, potentially, might change the nature of my practice. John needed to consider whether or not my continuing involvement would be useful.

Since that meeting, I have had feedback from John. Other participants in the presentation were angry with Rob, the I.T specialist. They felt that he had disrupted their learning from the session. I was somewhat reassured by this, but I did wonder why none of the other 20+ people present, including me, had challenged him more directly. Why had we all allowed him to behave in this way, when it was clear that his aim was not to explore the issues, but to defend his own territory? Reflecting further on my own behaviour, I think I was nervous about challenging him because I felt ill equipped to meet him on 'his' ground. My I.T. knowledge is very limited and it was clear that Rob wanted to talk 'his' language. I wanted to talk 'mine'. Essentially there was a power struggle around whose language would dominate; his focused, technical language or my relational, psychological language. Had I challenged him directly, I ran the risk of losing the language battle. I also ran the risk of alienating the other participants in the meeting. In the event, it was he who became alienated rather than me.

## **Communication revisited**

Two weeks later, I returned to Pharmatox to follow up on the earlier presentation. By this time, John had been made redundant. He had already left the company. Annie and Liz, who worked with him, had been allocated other jobs, outside HR. As I walked into the room, I sensed a rather frivolous mood, of the sort I've experienced before when people finally know 'what is happening', even if it is bad news; anything is better than the uncertainty.

My return visit involved a telephone conference call; Annie, Liz and me in the UK, Amy and Beth in South Carolina, Martin and Paul in Philadelphia. Rob, the I.T. expert, had deliberately been excluded from the meeting. I find telephone conference calls even more difficult than video conferencing. It is very hard to gauge the response to the gesture in such disembodied communication,

particularly when the format is more presentation than conversation. As I talked, I grew anxious, unable to connect with the invisible audience. I was conscious of how much my normal face to face presentations emerge from the interaction with the audience, even when they do not speak. I felt the need to constantly interrupt what I was saying, to ask for comments, to confirm their understanding. In spite of - perhaps because of - these difficulties, the participants were very receptive and responsive. They are more familiar with telephone conferencing than I am.

At this point, in an earlier draft, I reflected on the 'findings and recommendations' of the research, reviewing them in the light my further reflection and reading and commenting on how this changed what I suggested to my clients in the telephone conference call. In a sense I was reflecting on my reflections about the experiences and reflections of the participants in the research. In this process, I guess, I become invisible, as I discussed earlier. But this is my job. Is it not useful to reflect on the recommendations I give to clients? Does this necessarily render me 'invisible' and, if so, does it matter?

So, the question then becomes, having eliminated the 'invisible' me from the earlier section, do I do the same here? I feel uncomfortable about this either/or position; either I speak from within the experience or I speak about it. The former seems to be the requirement in relation to this programme, but it may be useful to do both. From a qualitative research perspective it is useful for my work, as it is currently structured, to reflect on and be reflexive about the recommendations I give to my clients. From a complex responsive processes perspective, because it is of necessity adopting an outsider stance, it is invalid. This is an area I want to explore further in Project 3.

Back with the telephone conference call: I suggest that it might be useful to build in more employee feedback in the future development of the intranet sites. "We can't do that", exclaimed Amy from South Carolina. "We have to hammer it home. We can't ask them what *they* want. We have to do it and then change it in response to feedback. They have to see it as an evolving process."



This I found interesting. Having spent time talking to employees about this issue, I could see it from their perspective.

“Why haven’t they got it right?”, said Rory, in Philadelphia “Some of the links don’t work. The gadgets are difficult.”

“Well, I guess it’s only recently been launched.” I suggested.

“It’s been there for a year. They should have sorted it by now”.

Still, it seems, we tend to think of change as an event, rather than an ongoing process. Change will happen and then it will stop and then we will get used to the new state. And then, maybe, sometime in the future, there will be another change ‘event’. In spite of the lip service we pay to change as a ubiquitous part of contemporary working life, most of us still seem psychologically ill equipped to ‘live’ change on a daily basis.

“It’s a different way of thinking”, I suggested to Amy. “Perhaps people still use the book model. A book is published and it is finished. Complete. Nothing can be added to it, until another edition comes out. Maybe many employees view the intranet in the same way. It should be completed and then ‘launched’. It’s hard for people to grasp that it will never stay still. It will never be finished. It’s even harder for us to grasp that we will never grasp it. As soon as we think they have grasped it, it will change. Somehow our expectations of constancy need to shift”

Perhaps the thought that we will never completely understand, that our ignorance will leave us exposed, triggers off feelings of panic and shame, because it challenges our sense of self and identity (Aram, 2002). If learning always involves panic and shame and we have now largely institutionalised the concept of ‘constant change’ in our culture, then we somehow have to cope with the ‘fall out’. Diversity, change, creativity, twinned with panic, shame and anxiety?

The conference call was good, in the sense that I feel I had an opportunity to explore with my clients, in a relaxed way, some of the themes I had missed out in the video conference. However, I still feel a sense of inadequacy; that I could

not convey the experience of the research participants in a way that my clients could really understand and ‘own’. This is a recurring theme; how to communicate more effectively within the current constraints of my working practice?

I have now finished my work with Pharmatox. There is no-one that I know left in the HR department. I am disappointed. I would have liked to remain involved with the intranet development project. I am conscious that, the way in which I approached this project and the investment I was willing to make affected the way in which the project developed. In particular, the lack of a restrictive ‘research’ model freed me up to work in way which grew out of the needs of the project, rather than being superimposed by research protocol. Perhaps part of ‘making visible’ the process of my practice allows me to choose more carefully the work I want to do in the future.

## **Where is all this leading me?**

One of the reasons I started this doctoral programme was to try to find a route out of the work I currently do; to challenge and evolve the skills that I have acquired over the years so I can use them in a different way – a way that is not yet obvious to me. However, in order to do this, I have needed to delve even further into my current practice – a process which has been at times very frustrating, tedious and time-consuming but, I hope, ultimately worthwhile.

I have been attempting, in this project, to explore what it means to be ‘engaged’ as a qualitative researcher. This is not straightforward. As a researcher, I am trained to ‘dis-engage’; to adopt a ‘theoretical attitude’ (Shotter 2003). In the process of writing this project, I have become increasingly aware of the way in which this can render me ‘rationally invisible’ (Shotter 1993:11) and how I can hide my ‘self’ in the work I do.

However, from another perspective, I am very engaged with what I do; I am engaged with the process of creating plausible and relevant stories and with communicating these stories in ways that resonate with and inspire my clients. This is my role as storyteller, which combines knowledge, experience, creativity and intellectual rigour in such a way that it has meaning and usefulness within the client context in which I practice.

Currently my practice encompasses two discrete worlds; the storytelling world and the world of Newtonian logic; the former trapped within the latter. It is too simplistic to describe this as a split between the client world and the researcher world, although this is often how I describe it and often how it *feels*. These two worlds are in conflict and the conflict is constantly being re-created between all of us, clients and researchers, within a qualitative research context. In some situations, e.g. within a group discussion, I feel as if I am in a creative, dynamic interaction, whereas in other situations e.g. many client meetings, the interaction seems formulaic; I feel very bound by the enabling constraints of my practice. Paradoxically, when I feel comfortable and familiar, as with Glamex, the constraints sometimes feel stronger than with a client, such as Pharmatox, where habitual patterns of interaction are not entrenched. However, with Glamex, I am, in other senses, less constrained. I can, for instance, be very open and vociferous in my views, without the need for assumed 'objectivity'.

There are a number of themes that have emerged in this project and which will no doubt re-appear in later projects; the interconnectedness of 'wholes' and 'parts', the struggle to communicate 'better' and 'fuller', the need for adventure. However, I feel that, for me, this issue of conflicting worlds – and how they might be reconciled - lies at the heart of this project. This is the issue of what qualitative research is, what its 'boundaries' are and what it can become.

Yesterday I reviewed an article from Marketing Week for another trade publication. The article was called, 'Two worlds collide'. Essentially it addressed this age-old debate; can we, as researchers, be objective and still

provide – or even implement – useful interpretations and direction for clients. It concluded that ‘the profession is heading for a split’; there will be ‘data factories to gather and codify the raw data’ and ‘meta-analysts to interpret the data’, i.e. Newtonian logicians and storytellers. There was no suggestion that both of these activities can be, must be, addressed at the same time. I wondered if we, as qualitative researchers, have become so ‘invisible’ behind our craft that there is little awareness, even within the marketing community, that we have been striving to do this – with some degree of success - for years? And, if there is so little awareness that the pretence of data/interpretation boundaries have been dissolving *within* qualitative research, what hope that they will dissolve *between* research and the outside world?

It seems to me that these conflicting faces of qualitative research, be they storytelling vs logic, data gathering vs interpretation, divergent vs convergent thinking are all part of the same issue; confusion of the *metaphors* of ‘objectivity’ and ‘subjectivity’ with reality. As a basic NLP proposition puts it; ‘The map is not the territory’ (O’Connor & McDermott 1996:64). But somehow, we have come to believe that it is. Until we can find a way of accepting that ‘objective’ and ‘subjective’ are simply tools which provide different perspectives on the same reality, then it feels to me that qualitative research will be stuck in this eternal see-saw; trying to satisfy the demands of seemingly contradictory masters – and going no-where.

I began to muse on the hopelessness of ever really transcending this objective/subjective duality, so deeply ingrained is it in our cultural heritage. It’s tempting to collapse the paradox conveniently into ‘It’s all subjective anyway’, which simply substitutes the quest for ‘objectivity’ for the equally facile acceptance of ‘subjectivity’. Then, I started reading Shotter’s (2003) article on Action Research. And I felt a glimmer of recognition.

Shotter distinguishes between classical, finished sciences, which are ordered and represent ‘a reduced and idealised “subject matter” in a static, pictorial manner’

and research sciences, which 'inquire into possibilities not yet actualized'. In his view 'inquiries in participatory action research draw on the same processes of human communication and interaction as those in fact used in natural sciences, when viewed as unfinished, unsettled research sciences'. He goes on to explore the similarities between classical and research sciences, highlighting the early stages of classical science when participants need to develop a 'grammar' in order to understand one another and, implicitly, to decide between themselves the areas that are considered worthy of research. At this stage the 'dialogically-structured activities' have 'neither a fully subjective nor fully objective character'. In this way, he presents a continuum from the conversational exploration of possibilities to the 'truths' of finished sciences - by which time the underlying assumptions and co-created 'grammar' have become invisible. '....Scientists seek to 'erase', so to speak, their own involvement in producing matters of "objective fact"'. This explanation seems, to me, a very useful way of describing how different perspectives are relevant for different tasks, although they are essentially part of the same process.

Shotter goes on to say that the style of writing in finished sciences is 'in fact quite unsuitable for expressing the results of action research projects'. Here, I think, I would disagree with him. An 'objective' or at least a 'relatively objective' style can be useful – though it may not be the only possible style - provided it is viewed as a metaphor. However, once we forget that we are using metaphor and regard what we say as truth, then we have a problem. Otherwise, it seems to me, we can never get away from the 'raw data'. The only truth becomes the utterance at the moment of saying it, unfettered and unexpurgated. And even this cannot be the 'real' truth. As I see it, rejecting an 'objective' style in expressing the results of action research projects brings us back to the same duality that Shotter is arguing against. If there is a continuum between 'finished' and 'research' sciences, then let us explore how the middle ground can be expressed, as imperfect as this might be, rather than attempting to force explanation towards one pole or the other.

Shotter in an attempt, it seems, to boost the claims of action research to be a 'valid' science, suggests that outcomes in action research may offer a 'greater degree of surety' than outcomes in natural sciences because they involves human activities which to an extent we can control. As he puts it, 'understanding what is involved in making something happen between us once, we can be sure about specifying the conditions appropriate to making it happen between us again. This suggests a degree of predictability in human interaction which is not matched by my experience.

Shotter concludes by stating, '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 chiasmically relate them in a meaningful relation with each other'. And on this I would agree with him. How can we utilise the tension between systematizing and creativity in qualitative inquiry?

Last week I was at the Market Research Conference in Birmingham. One of the speakers started his talk with a quote:

'Advertising has not yet found its Newton'

Lord Saatchi: The Times February 2002

Forget for a moment the delusions of grandeur implied. For me, here was another moment of recognition. Saatchi could just as well have said, 'Qualitative Research has not yet found its Newton'. Maybe the time is right to expose the shortcomings of our Newtonian assumptions underpinning qualitative inquiry and explore radically different perspectives. The speaker went on to quote Kant as saying, with equal pomposity, 'Newton for explaining a blade of grass could never be found'. Maybe this is the challenge.

# **Project 3**

## **Exploring changes in my practice as a qualitative researcher**

### **Key themes and focus of this project**

In this project, I want to explore how changes in my working practice are beginning to emerge. I want to use this exploration as a way of reinforcing new patterning and further questioning the old. And, as I write this, I am conscious that it is easy to slip into the cliched assumption that the old patterning is bad and the new good. One thing that has struck me recently is that questioning old patterning often prompts me to recognise its usefulness. I am moving towards a position of evaluating patterning in terms of its relevance at a particular moment in time rather than in terms of its origins; the objective is more flexibility in my thinking.

I also want, in part, to use my emotional response to my changing practice as a barometer of 'success'. Let me explain this. In one sense, I am quite capable of operating effectively in a work context whilst feeling bored and stale – by which I mean I perform the task to the satisfaction of my client. I want to do more than this. I want to practice in a way that also satisfies me. This requires some shift in my thinking – and practice. Historically, running a small business and employing 16 staff meant that the main emphasis needed to be on satisfying client needs in order to create an economically successful enterprise. I am no longer an employer. I no longer need to do this in quite the same way. However, a successful strategy is difficult to abandon, even when it has outlived its usefulness. My understanding of 'success' is changing. In order to develop a

different notion of 'success', which involves a greater sense of engagement, excitement and novelty in my working practice, it is important that I pay attention to my own experience, take it seriously, and foster situations in which I enjoy the work that I do.

The themes that I want to explore in this project therefore centre around my experience of these changing patterns in my own working practice. As I challenge my own thinking around my practice, change, continuity and conflict inevitably emerge. This I experience both within myself and in relation to clients and colleagues.

The different client and colleague engagements I explore in this paper broadly encompass the same theme: What are the processes of mutual recognition that allow a piece of work to emerge in such a way that it is still recognised as professional and, at the same time, allow 'what being professional means' to shift.

I examine my evolving sense of identity as a qualitative research practitioner, both within a specific work/project context and in relation to my colleagues and clients. I explore my interactions with other members of my research community; times when my experience of 'membership' feels most at risk or when the mutual constraining is shifting. I explore the ambivalence with which I approach speaking 'in the spotlight' at an International conference and similar ambivalence when I agree to run a workshop as a 'spokesperson' for the QRA, an official body representing the qualitative research industry. In these situations, the notion of 'what it means to be a qualitative researcher' is continuously being negotiated and re-formulated.

As part of this process, I explore the tension between working with others vs working by oneself. I am interested in the nature of 'silent conversation' when alone, when with others and in relation to actual conversation with others. In what ways do these different perspectives contribute to the ongoing negotiation of enabling constraints of professional practice?



I will start with the story of how I came to give a paper in Lisbon because, in a sense, this is the story of my 'coming out'.

## **‘Yes. Let's go to Lisbon’: Giving a conference paper**

Rosie, my business partner, and I meet up to prepare a presentation together. This is a social as well as a work occasion. We spend a couple of hours chatting, avoiding the task of preparing the presentation for as long as possible. Eventually, when it is clear that we have, finally, to get down to work. Rosie says,

"Did you see that email about the Lisbon conference?"

"Yes, I thought it might be interesting," I reply. "I like the idea of Lisbon. I've never been there. Why don't we go? We could give a paper."

"Yes. Let's go to Lisbon," Rosie responds with enthusiasm.

We delay preparing the presentation for another half-hour while we consult our diaries.

Finally, I say,

"You write a synopsis and see if they accept it."

Interestingly, at this stage, neither of us has mentioned what the topic of the paper might be.

Rosie wrote a synopsis. She showed it to me a few days later. I glanced at it, nodded, and she sent it off.

Some weeks later an email arrived.

"Congratulations. Your synopsis has been accepted. We would like you to give a paper within the 'New Models for Qualitative Consultancy' opening session."

The email came as something of surprise because we hadn't given the conference much thought beyond fantasising about the joys of Lisbon. Initially Rosie and I had intended to go together. Now that the conference had become a reality, we looked at our diaries in a new light. It was not a convenient time. Both of us had

personal and work commitments. It made sense for one of us to go, but which one? We jostled with this issue for some weeks, neither of us really wanting the responsibility of it. In particular there was the hurdle of the 6-10,000 word paper to write, plus a PowerPoint presentation. Why had we not noticed these before? Rosie made the decisive move.

"Look, I've nearly finished my course, you're still in the middle of yours. Use it as course material. I think you should go."

I acquiesced.

Why? Well, I guess, it was what I really wanted to do. I was just reluctant to admit it.

## **Silent conversations: Who are all these conversationalists?**

Until this time I had not really thought of the conference paper as anything to do with this programme. Which was odd really. One of the members of my learning set discovered that I was speaking at the conference and felt that I was being secretive by not sharing this news. I did not feel as if I was doing this. I just did not make an overt connection. The two strands, the DMan programme and the conference paper, had 'drifted along in parallel'.

This is quite a familiar experience for me. It often happens that I do not connect two quite significant events or thoughts and then, suddenly, I do, and I wonder how I ever kept them separate. I suspect this is a common experience.

Nonetheless, I think it might be useful to explore this process in more depth, because I sense that it can throw some light on how transformation may occur. Was this a conscious decision to keep the two strands apart? I do not think so. How then could it happen? How was it possible for the 'I' who was planning the conference paper to 'hide' this fact from the 'I' who is doing this programme? What does this mean in terms of my sense of self and identity? And, more

specifically, how can I understand this in terms of the central theme of this paper; my evolving sense of identity as a qualitative practitioner?

Weick would explain this separation of two conceptual areas as 'cognitive bracketing' (Weick 1995:35), a way of artificially coping with seamless experience by creating categories. 'People create breaks in the stream and impose categories on those portions that are set apart' (ibid 35). These categories, in turn, shape our future experience, because we create and find what we expect to find. It is the basis of language, of how we perceive the world. Weick talks about 'cognitive bracketing' in relation to categories of objects, to ways of thinking and sensemaking. 'Bracketing' creates different viewpoints, different aspects of self, however transitory, in individual processes of relating. In this way, diversity, that necessary aspect of transformation, becomes the basis of sensemaking. 'No individual ever acts like a single sensemaker. Instead, any one sensemaker is, in Mead's words, "a parliament of selves"' (ibid 18). Weick continues, 'if people have multiple identities and deal with multiple realities, why should we expect them to be ontological purists?' (ibid. 35)

I would agree with Weick; cognitive bracketing is intrinsic to our thinking. However, 'cognitive bracketing' on its own is not enough to explain how changes in patterning can emerge. It does not account for novelty; it reifies objects, concepts, behaviour. We need a more dynamic perspective. And, in fact, Weick does talk a great deal about the dynamic nature of sensemaking. My own experience is that my identity as a 'qualitative researcher' – indeed as a person - is continuously being renegotiated and I need a perspective which will help me to understand this process.

Mead approaches these issues from a process perspective. His starting point is that 'mind presupposes, and is a product of, the social process' (Mead 1934:224). He elaborates: 'self-consciousness involves the individual's becoming an object to himself by taking the attitudes of other individuals towards himself within an organized setting of social relationships' (ibid 225). The attitudes of others are,

of necessity, diverse. There is a sense, therefore, in which the individual may become a number of 'objects to himself' or, perhaps more accurately, there may be a number of different aspects to this 'object to himself'. This perspective enables "a parliament of selves", in which identity is constructed in the process of interaction between different aspects of self (mind) and also, at the same time, other minds. And, of course, these other minds are also, simultaneously, in the process of interaction between different aspects of self. As a consequence, the person 'talks and replies to himself as truly as the other person replies to him' (ibid. 130)

Conversation, including 'silent conversation' and conversation with others, can therefore be understood as the process of continual redefinition of aspects of self and the emergence of aspects which are 'called forth' in a given situation. Certainly my experience of this process is that, in 'silent conversation', certain 'voices' come into play. These can be as rich and 'real' as the conversations I have with other people. Equally – often concomitantly - they can be fleeting feelings or ill defined thoughts. It feels to me as if these 'conversations', in some way or another, reflect aspects of the different relationships and roles that I have experienced throughout my life. In Mead's terms, they incorporate the myriad of 'attitudes of other individuals towards (my)self'. They can be understood, in all their diversity, to be patterning themselves and calling forth further thoughts, feelings, beliefs. As a result, they are sometimes in conflict or, at least, different. This 'difference' I think of as very fruitful. Clearly if different patternings are in ongoing conflict, then the sense of a unified identity may break down. However, if there is little diversity, then there can be little transformation. Somehow there needs to be sufficient diversity and consistency to enable a unified sense of self or identity whilst, at the same time, sparking transformation. It feels to me that my sense of what it is to be a qualitative researcher evolves, as these ongoing 'conversations' pattern themselves, creating both continuity and transformation at the same time.

## The Paradoxical processes of Mind

How can I link these notions of ‘cognitive bracketing’ and ‘conversation patterning experience’ with the process of deciding to give a conference paper in Lisbon? I do believe that, in some sense, I did not want to connect the two strands; the conference paper and the DMan programme. By giving the paper, I would be challenging the basis of commercial qualitative practice; my profession. The anxiety this produced might have thwarted my intention. I did not want to focus on what I was doing, so ‘cognitive bracketing’ served a useful purpose by ‘hiding’ my intention or, more accurately, separating two ‘competing’ intentions. However, different aspects of self are not so easily quieted. Conversations continue unabated, patterning experience and intentions. Eventually a connection may occur.

If I accept the idea of interconnectivity, then intention and ‘conversation that patterns itself’ can be viewed as paradoxical processes. As Weick puts it, ‘People construct that which constructs them, except both constructions turn out to be one and the same thing’ (Weick,1995:60). This is an important area because it lies at the heart of my exploration in this paper; how the enabling constraints of my profession are shifting, the ways in which ‘what it means to be a qualitative researcher’ is continuously being re-negotiated and the extent to which I might be influenced by, and simultaneously influence, this process.

It is, perhaps, useful at this point to explain what I was attempting to do in the paper I gave at Lisbon and why it generated such anxiety. I will be brief. In essence, I was questioning the ‘scientific’ model applied to qualitative inquiry; how this involves a degree of deception and how it limits us. I challenged the assumptions of our profession, the way in which we have conducted ourselves for decades, the validity of our way of operating. I was encouraging a more honest perspective which recognises the holistic, creative processes we are really engaged in. This was an attempt to bring together some of the thinking I have

been evolving over the last 15 months and integrate it within my current working practice, in a way that made sense to my peers - other qualitative researchers.

## **How do we experience the processes of continuity and transformation?**

During our learning set meeting, I was mulling on these issues of intention and change and ways of understanding them, when Preben started talking about different perspectives on change processes; 'making things happen' and 'letting things happen'. He explained the differences, as he perceived them, and I suddenly became excited and started to make connections with how I experience change. I recognised that both experiences; 'making' and 'letting' things happen, are very familiar to me.

I realise that this is dangerous territory to venture into. In separating the two perspectives in this way, I create a false dichotomy. They are abstractions, ways of describing my experience. Whichever I privilege, the other, of necessity, is embedded within it, albeit invisibly. However, the very nature of thought and language is to select and privilege certain categories of experience over others. I do not see how one can think without creating these artificial demarcations, at least if we are to use the medium of language. All I can try to do is retain the notion that these demarcations are conveniences; tools for exploration - and delve into my experience in order to explore the contradictions that belie the categories.

Sometimes, as when working through this project, my dominant experience is of 'letting things happen'; I feel unable to 'force' the process. In other situations, such as with many work projects, my experience is of 'making things happen'; I feel focused and quite oblivious to distractions because I want to achieve some specific goal. Although this demarcation is artificial, it nonetheless seems useful

in helping me to understand how change might come about in my practice and within the qualitative research industry as a whole. Perhaps by exploring my experience of how these processes of change emerge, I can better understand the interconnectedness between the two perspectives. In an attempt to do this, I will return to the story of the Lisbon paper.

## **Preparing the Lisbon paper**

Time went by. I was frantically busy with work and with finishing Project 2 and had given little thought to the conference paper. I received increasingly irate emails from Kurt, the US co-ordinator. Where was my paper, my presentation? And, finally, "Are you still intent on giving a paper at Lisbon?" I felt very stressed about it; conscious that I had made the commitment, but unable to see how either the paper or the presentation would get written.

Uncharacteristically, I ignored the emails and went on holiday for a week to Goa. After a couple of days lolling mindlessly around the hotel pool, I started reading Mark Earls' book; 'Welcome to the Creative Age: Bananas, Business and the Death of Marketing'. It was light, easy to read and touched on some of the issues I was interested in within the qualitative arena, although Earls was looking at them from the perspective of marketing and advertising. His book triggered off all sorts of thoughts and, free from domestic distractions, I scribbled furiously in my journal, excited by the prospect of crafting these disjointed thoughts into a conference paper. I arrived home late on the Friday night, tired and jet lagged. The next morning, at 4.00am, I was at my computer. By 4.00pm on Sunday afternoon, I had written 9,000 words. I was pleased with myself. The paper needed some refining, but basically it was there. The presentation followed quickly afterwards, composed around a collection of black and white photos. I was very keen that it looked good and I went to a great deal of effort to ensure that the final effect was visually dramatic.

I think it was only at this point that I realised that what I was doing was very important to me. As with my initial realisation that the paper would reflect my involvement with the DMan programme, I needed to go through the next stage of the creation process – the writing - before I could understand what I was engaged in. It was too scary to contemplate in advance. Imagining the possible response to the paper from my colleagues would have generated anxiety and inhibited my thinking. Instead, I focused on the immediate issue of producing the words.

I sent the finished paper to a couple of colleagues. They were, I think, rather surprised that I was doing this - at this late stage in my career. As Roger put it, "I started reading it because I thought I ought to and then I thought, 'Oh, this is really rather good'." But there was clearly some puzzlement. I was described last month in a trade magazine as 'a senior industry figure', which usually means someone who used to be dynamic but now lives off their former glory. Why then was I bothering to raise these issues; to challenge the system I had, to an extent, created and profited from? This was the question that, I felt, Roger had left unstated and it is a question I periodically ask myself.

## **‘Allowing things to happen’; an aspect of change**

It felt as if I was avoiding facing up to the significance of what I was doing in preparing the paper; I was ‘allowing things to happen’. What do I mean by this? Specifically, how can I understand this perspective both in terms of changes in my own practice and, specifically, in relation to developing the Lisbon paper?

I could try to understand ‘allowing things to happen’ in terms of how I obscured my intention in order to avoid making a conscious decision about the content of the paper. Doing so certainly reduced my anxiety. I can also think about it as necessary for different strands of thinking to develop independently to a certain point before they can interact to potentially create novelty. If the two strands,



qualitative practice and (broadly) complexity thinking, had become enmeshed too early, there might have been less opportunity for novelty to emerge; there would be a tendency to modify rather than radically challenge my practice. This perspective assumes that this is a process which I can control. However, I am not sure that such control is necessary or even possible.

An alternative is to explore this area by developing my earlier thinking around 'conversation'; in particular 'silent conversation'. Different 'silent conversations' are happening all the time. They are bubbling up, changing, reiterating themselves. As I mull on this, I feel a sense of the paradoxical nature of these conversations; of both controlling and not controlling them at the same time. Shaw's description of this 'emerging sense' as 'carry[ing] with it the idea of something evolving, in the process of becoming more itself although it sometimes [becomes] something else' (Shaw 2002:102), seems to me to incorporate the idea of intention as well as the unknown; weaving these paradoxical aspects together.

Thinking about the nature of 'silent conversation' inevitably raises the issue of *ways of knowing*. 'Allowing things to happen' feels like a different, broader way of knowing than 'making things happen'. I experience it largely as a 'gut feeling'. My brain feels partly disengaged or, more accurately, rationality is only one element in the process. Judgement is toned down and intuition given fuller reign than normal. The 'silent conversation' feels rich but often inchoate. Although I experience 'allowing things to happen' as present centred, it is not a random or uncontrolled state. It has a fine balance of gestures, responses, anticipation and compensation. It is concerned with what feels right 'in the moment'. And I realise, as I write this, it is not disconnected from experience or intention either; intention - 'making things happen' - is embedded within the emerging experience.

'Knowing', at a conscious level, is limiting in that, at least within our Western culture, it downplays the importance of bodily awareness and privileges

'thought'. Damasio views the duality of mind and body as a useful construction, because it allows us to explore different perspectives on our experiences. However duality, taken literally, is essentially misleading because both mind and body pertain to a single organism and are mutually interdependent, 'fully and mutually mimicking each other in their different manifestations' (Damasio 2003:209). Physiological gestures and responses, emotions and feelings make a greater contribution to self awareness and decision making than we generally acknowledge. 'Knowing' thereby becomes a richer, 'whole body' experience. When making complex decisions 'into the unknown' we need to use all the resources at our disposal. By implication, 'making' and 'letting' things happen are inevitably facets of the same process.

## **The Conference**

It was the first day of the conference. I was preparing to give my paper and I felt extremely nervous. What was this about? I give presentations most weeks and usually I enjoy them, so why did I feel so anxious about this one? I did not really question this at the time, mainly because I was so consumed with the task of getting through the paper without hitch. I hadn't given a conference paper for 20 years - in fact I had avoided attending conferences for years - so I assumed that my anxiety was because the style of presentation was unfamiliar. My allotted time was 20 minutes, which was strictly enforced, so I had to be very tight in my delivery. This meant that I could not adopt the discursive style I am comfortable with. I was, more or less, reading a script.

In retrospect it seems obvious to me why I was so nervous; I have earlier described the reason for this nervousness. I did not know if I could challenge the basis of my profession and still be seen as professional. Could I do it in a way which was credible and comprehensible to the audience? And could I do it justice in 20 minutes?

In general I treat presentations as dialogues, even when the audience is silent. By contrast, this presentation seemed cold, almost clinical. I had no idea how the audience was receiving it; I felt quite cut off from them. I finished the speech and sat down. It was question time.

"Thank you. I can really understand what you're saying. You've put a structure to these issues. I think we really have to try to think differently in what we do", was one comment.

"But how do we sell it to our clients?" was another.

Most of the audience did not speak, so who knows what they were thinking.

During the tea break people came over to talk and it was exciting. Somehow the paper seemed to have fired them up, opened up conversations, with me, with each other. It was only much later that I heard that this was only half the story. Whereas some were enthused, others were disturbed by what they interpreted as an undermining of our profession, a demonstration of lack of confidence in qualitative practice. I was surprised and quite disappointed by this. I had felt that my presentation was upbeat. But of course, I should know that challenging the status quo is threatening and is bound to cause consternation, at the very least.

But, at the time, I was on a real high. I felt I had succeeded in what I was attempting to do. I had managed to link some of the thinking I have been evolving, based on complexity and other perspectives, with qualitative practice and I had managed to communicate this in a way that was comprehensible and acceptable to my peer group and which also furthered conversation. Why this swing from high anxiety to elation? I think my worse fear was that I would not be understood; that I would be met with incomprehension, feel excluded and, consequently, shamed. When this did not happen but, instead, there was recognition of what I was saying, at least amongst some of the audience, I felt validated, included.

I am sure that, had I formulated a clearer intention of what I was attempting to do at the outset, I would have been much more circumspect about the process. I would still have given the paper - I had committed to doing it - but I suspect that I would have backed off from expressing some of the ideas. I would have been conscious that I was putting my professional reputation on the line and might have been attempted to reduce the risk by 'playing safe'.

This raises an issue for me about the ways in which change processes occur. Whilst we can never wholly predict the response to the gesture, it is never random either; we can have an intention which may influence the processes of change, although we cannot know in what way this may happen. I set out to introduce some ideas which questioned the honesty of our practice and our relationships with our clients. I decided to couch these controversial thoughts within engaging, humorous visuals and I worked hard to link the language I used with current qualitative language; to form a bridge. I felt that these aspects of presentation were important as a way of contextualising the thinking and making it easier for people to understand. I was trying to form links which would facilitate change – to offer ideas and language and feelings which would find some resonance with the audience and which would trigger further thought and conversation. In practice the paper triggered a myriad of responses, ranging from dismissal - there is nothing new here - to excitement at challenging ideas, through to rejection – and no doubt other reactions besides. Looking back on it, this is probably the best I could have expected.

## **Challenging the enabling constraints of professional practice**

There was an interesting postscript to the conference. A couple of weeks later, I was at the monthly committee meeting of the QRA. I am a committee member. Some six months before, a sub-committee was set up to address 'New Thinking'.

Although this is an area I am interested in, I did not want to be part of the sub-committee, partly because I do not think these issues are best addressed by sub-committees, but mainly because I did not want to take on another commitment. Nonetheless, I had agreed to have some input to it. But, as is the way of these things, the sub-committee disintegrated and somehow I was left holding the baby – another example of ‘hiding’ my intention from myself. Meanwhile, there was a long standing arrangement to run a 'New Thinking' workshop with the RUA, the association for research buyers. As the only one of the original group who was still, however loosely, affiliated with the 'New Thinking' sub-committee, it fell to me to run the workshop. I was feeling oppressed and rather resentful about this, although clearly I had contributed to this situation.

I had no time to prepare anything for the RUA workshop and I did not know what I could introduce as a theme. Then it occurred to me that the Lisbon paper was the obvious starting point. It clearly addressed some key issues in 'New Thinking'. However, I was visiting RUA as a representative of QRA, I was not promoting Campbell Keegan Ltd. I needed to check out that this was acceptable to the committee.

I raised the issue near the end of the committee meeting. It had over-run - again - which always irritated me and I was twitchy, keen to get off. I was anxious about raising the subject, not wanting to be seen as exploiting the session for my own gain yet conscious that by presenting my paper I would, inevitably, be doing so. I explained the dilemma. At present I was running the session on my own, I did not have time to prepare something from scratch and, anyway, I wasn't sure what I could prepare. There *was* no QRA position on 'New Thinking' – as there never could be.

As I saw it, there were three options: Someone else could run the workshop, I could facilitate it jointly with another member of the committee who would input an alternative perspective to mine or I could run it on my own and use my Lisbon paper as a starting point for discussion. I pointed out my concerns that, with this

latter option, I could be seen as having a conflict of interests. What did they think? What I did not add was that I was also anxious about presenting the Lisbon paper to this particular audience. In Lisbon I had been addressing my peers. Talking to clients about issues which could undermine the role of qualitative inquiry was potentially dangerous. Was I again abdicating responsibility for the decision?

When I had finished speaking, there was silence. Many people had not read my paper, so perhaps they felt they could not comment. I again asked for opinions. There was more silence, followed by awkward shuffling. I was feeling painfully embarrassed, desperate for someone to say something, anything.

Eventually Carol spoke,

"I think your paper may be too theoretical."

What did that mean?

It was Carol who had told me, before the committee meeting, that some conference delegates had been disturbed by what they saw as the lack of confidence displayed in qualitative research "on the first day". When I talked with her about it further, it became clear that it was my paper she was referring to.

Now, Marie took up the conversation.

"I think we have to be careful that we don't show qualitative research in a negative light."

The atmosphere became even more tense.

Ann continued. It was clear that she and Marie had been discussing this issue earlier.

"It's not that we're concerned about you delivering it as your stuff", she continued. "It's just that I don't think this is what we should be sharing with clients."

"I think it's exactly what we should be sharing with clients", I replied, tersely. Silence.

Was I deliberately seeking to be provocative? In retrospect, I think I was testing the ground, gauging the degree of resistance I might expect from my peers if I pursued my current thinking.

"Well, in that case, would someone else like to do it or does someone want to share it with me?" I continued.

More silence

Michael spoke up.

"Well, it's clear that no-one else wants to do it, so I think we have to let Sheila do it as she wants."

"It's certainly a very sophisticated and attractive presentation", said Carol, trying to restore normality.

"Could you just put a few thoughts on a PowerPoint and use that?" asked Marie. I was now feeling very irritated. I wanted nothing more to do with running this workshop. I felt put upon, embarrassed and belligerent.

"Well, yes, I could, but it would look pretty amateurish and anyway, whatever I prepared now wouldn't be as well thought out as what I did for Lisbon."

What was going on here? Marie was the one who had written in an email after we returned from Lisbon, "I really enjoyed your paper. Truly inspiring". Now she was bothered, not by the fact that it was a CKL presentation but, apparently, by the inappropriateness of the content.

"Perhaps you could just use the slides from the back of the presentation which are more positive", suggested Carol.

"Yes, I'll do that", I agreed, because I wanted the conversation closed.

As Patricia later pointed out, I did what I usually do in such situations. I agreed, in order to avoid conflict, but then carried on as usual.

Afterwards I was more upset about the exchange than I would have expected. I felt undermined by it and started to question whether it had been wise to deliver the paper in the way that I had. Was I really being so pessimistic? I believed I had been talking about how qualitative thinking is potentially much more powerful than we allow ourselves to acknowledge - and how we might stop limiting ourselves. I was encouraging us to recognise and acknowledge our

skills and abilities. But the paper had been interpreted - by some people, at any rate - as a statement of weakness, of lack of confidence. Is it simply that any examination of existing practice, whatever the discipline, is likely to be interpreted as criticism?

I was also conscious that I was drawing attention to myself and, in the process, setting myself apart. I have always had an ambivalent relationship with 'being different'. Presenting myself openly to my colleagues as 'different', i.e. challenging the practices which provide us all with a living and revealing a different 'identity' as a qualitative practitioner was particularly anxiety provoking. Rather than making that choice and living with the consequences, however, I was abdicating responsibility; 'allowing it to happen' – though also, of course, 'making it happen' at the same time.

There is a recurring theme here, which has cropped up throughout this narrative; that of 'letting things happen' or, to put it another way, of 'not taking responsibility for my actions'. I described this process earlier as a way of reducing my anxiety around change, as facilitating the emergence of novelty, as enabling 'whole body' experience. All very noble and positive. However, seeing the frequency with which this theme appears, I now wonder about the way in which this 'abdication' of responsibility constrains change at the same time as enabling it. Not taking responsibility also dis-empowers me. It summons up the 'Lion in the Mist' metaphor which I used in the title of my conference paper. By not accepting responsibility I remain shadowy; unfettered but weakened. What purpose does this serve? How does it relate to my theme of change and continuity – and how can I understand this 'abdication' from a complex responsive processes perspective?

I think this way of acting can possibly be understood in term of conflict and power relations. By 'abdicating responsibility' I am attempting to avoid exclusion and, in doing so, reducing diversity. By attempting to maintain continuity, I limit the potential for transformation. This is part of the ongoing



negotiation between 'being professional' and, at the same time, allowing 'what being professional means' to shift.

Replaying the conversation with Carol and Marie I realise that I was being told, very firmly, not to rock the boat. Yes, people recognised that what I was saying had some validity and it resonated with their own experience but, at the end of the day, we all had a living to earn. By questioning the theoretical underpinning of our practice, I was threatening our livelihoods. In fact, what was happening in the committee meeting illustrated some of the issues I had been raising in my paper, in particular our need to hide behind the role of 'researcher' and, in the process, conceal our 'real' selves from our clients; questioning the basis of our 'authority' potentially weakened our role. Yet again, the issue of hiding emerges. The enabling constraints of our professional practice mean that aspects of our experience become rationally invisible to us. However, even those aspects which are visible, but inconvenient, also become 'unspeakable'.

## **Ethics as an emerging process**

I was not sure how I would handle the RUA meeting, but it was clear that the ball was in my court. As a QRA representative, I felt that I needed to express something of a party line – I would be exploiting my position if I did not – but at the same time, I was not prepared to totally abandon my own thinking.

Why did I feel such a need to toe the party line, especially given that there *was* no party line on the specific issue I was talking about – 'New Thinking'? Somehow I believed it would be disloyal and exploitative to use a QRA platform to criticise current qualitative practice. This concern was rooted in another agenda. Although I was ostensibly leading a workshop on 'New Thinking', in reality I was also 'selling qualitative research', in a generic sense. Part of my agenda was to promote the industry and encourage clients to join QRA. 'New

Thinking' was, in this sense, the vehicle. There was a business agenda. Can there ever not be when working in a commercial environment? How then could I reconcile my role as QRA spokesperson with my claimed desire to move towards a definition of 'success' as 'engagement, excitement and novelty in my working practice'?

This raises an interesting question. What kind of understanding of ethics is required if the meaning of what we do is evolving as we act? Was it 'ethical' not to endorse established QRA values, given that I was speaking in its name? Or, as Griffin argues, can ethics be thought of as 'the interpretation of action to be found in the action itself, in the on-going recognition of the meanings of actions that could not have been known in advance' (Griffin, 2002:216)? My aim, and the theme of this project, is to explore the processes of recognition that allow a piece of work to emerge in such a way that it is still recognised as professional and, at the same time, allow 'what being professional means' to shift. To do this I must, in some way, both acknowledge established values and, at the same time, allow an ethical perspective to emerge. It is the tension between these two themes which generates anxiety and excitement.

This tension between the established and 'what might be' is constantly being redefined. I cannot claim that, in my interaction with the QRA committee I, alone, was unblinkered and beyond worldly considerations. The incident reminded me of how I had responded in a comparable situation. I was having lunch with Robert, the Chair of RUA. In the course of the conversation, he suggested that we run a mixed workshop with qualitative researchers and clients, to explore our joint practices. Without thinking, I replied, "Oh, I don't think we could do that. I don't think researchers would open up with clients there."

He was mildly irritated.

"But we're talking about working more closely together. That's what we've been discussing all this lunch-time. What is the point, if there isn't shared learning?"

And, feeling very sheepish, I had to agree with him.

Clearly, I too am very much part of the problem. Repeatedly these themes of change and continuity are played out in my working practice. Whilst I profess my desire to change my practice, at the same time, I cling, with desperation, to the familiar.

## **The Paradox of Change**

Why is it that we find the prospect of change so threatening? There is something of a paradox here. Physiologically we are geared up to change; we react to change in our environment and become habituated by constancy. If deprived of stimulation, which provokes physiological change, then we very quickly become psychologically unbalanced. Numerous studies have pointed to the effects of ‘under-stimulation’, including depression, anxiety, apathy, loss of self confidence, declining intellectual performance (Toffler, 1975:467-470). Yet we are all – in different ways - resistant to change, even when it potentially benefits us. This might be partially explained by our equal, perhaps less widely acknowledged, inability to deal with ‘over-stimulation’, what Toffler describes as ‘future shock’, which ‘occurs when the individual is forced to operate above his adaptive range’ (ibid:313). Toffler continues:

Rational behaviour, in particular, depends upon a ceaseless flow of data from the environment. It depends upon the power of the individual to predict, with at least fair success, the outcome of his own actions. To do this, he must be able to predict how the environment will respond to his acts. Sanity itself, thus hinges on man’s ability to predict his immediate, personal future on the basis of information fed him by the environment. When the individual is plunged into a fast and irregularly changing situation, or a novelty-loaded context, however, his predictive accuracy plummets. He can no longer make the reasonably correct assessments on which rational behaviour is dependent.

(Toffler 1975:319)

Toffler’s predictions, made more than 30 years ago, have proved uncannily accurate. “Anxiety society”, a term coined by the Future Foundation to sum up

the rising levels of depression, uncertainty and anxiety in society is attributed to the effects of ‘over-choice’ and ‘over-stimulation’ (The Sunday Times: July 27<sup>th</sup> 2003).

But, how to reconcile this view of ‘sanity’ as dependent on our ability to predict the future with the complex responsive processes perspective which asserts that the future is paradoxical; predictably unpredictable? These perspectives would seem to be diametrically opposed. Although intellectually I can accept the view that the future is under construction, I still act as if I can predict it. I head off to Sainsbury’s in the belief that it is still where I left it last week. How else can I live my everyday life? If, however, we accept the view that ‘the world people act in is the world they have created by acting in it’ (Stacey, 2001:33), i.e. a transformative teleological perspective, as opposed to the formative teleology of Toffler, then the differences become clearer. A formative teleological view of change must create anxiety within an increasingly complex world, because it assumes that we are able to control and unfold the future. And this is clearly impossible. A transformative teleology, on the other hand, by emphasising intentions and ‘a prospective view in which the future is being perpetually created in the living present on the basis of present reconstructions of the past’ (Stacey, 2003:10) does not assume control over the future, but a degree of influence over it which cannot be known. ‘Sanity’, in a complex world, may mean letting go of our illusion of control and autonomy.

## **Trying to understand change and continuity**

Throughout this narrative I have been exploring the processes of change in my working practice and how these might be understood. I now want to move on to examine these processes in more depth from a theoretical perspective and to look at how they might contribute to an understanding of a new qualitative inquiry

process. In order to do this, I need to explore the nature of change and continuity and how these emerge in a future under construction.

Damasio explains change and continuity in terms of a 'core self' and an 'autobiographical self'. The 'core self' is ephemeral, continually changing. The 'autobiographical self' acts as an anchor, providing a sense of constancy. Working in union, he believes, they allow for change and continuity at the same time:

...the self in our stream of consciousness changes continuously as it moves forward in time, even as we retain a sense that the self remains the same while our existence continues. The solution comes from the fact that the seemingly changing self and the seemingly permanent self, although closely related, are not one entity but two. The ever-changing self identified by [William] James is the sense of core self. It is not so much that it changes but rather that it is transient, ephemeral, that it needs to be remade and reborn continuously. The sense of self that appears to remain the same is the autobiographical self, because it is based on a repository of memories for fundamental facts in an individual biography that can be partly reactivated and thus provide continuity and seeming permanence in our lives.

(Damasio 2000:217)

Damasio's division between 'core' and 'autobiographical' selves eliminates the paradox of change and constancy. He suggests that these two selves exist in parallel; inter-related, but separate. He also suggests that the 'autobiographical' self is unchanging, a library of stored information which can be referred to, as necessary. However, elsewhere Damasio argues very persuasively that emotion and reason are aspects of the same process; that we cannot engage rationally without emotion. His philosophical premise, it seems to me, is based on the notion of 'wholeness'; that mind and body are different manifestations of the same bodily processes.

Introducing a split between 'core' and 'autobiographical' selves, however compelling an explanation, seems to undermine this position and contradicts his basic premise of 'wholeness'. As a metaphor for different aspects of change and

continuity, the split may be useful, but it introduces a division between different aspects of 'self' which I find artificial and unnecessary. I would argue against the assertion that our personal history is 'fixed' and unchanging and that the present, 'transient' self is somehow separated from past and future. I find more resonance with the explanation of change processes adopted by social constructionism and complexity theories (Weick 1995, Stacey 2001)

Stacey, whilst addressing these same issues of continuity and potential transformation, offers an explanation which does not necessitate a split 'self'.

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 2003:10)

Because reconstructions of the past and expectations of the future are being created *at the same time* in the 'living present', there is no need, in Stacey's explanation, for a split between a 'core' and an 'autobiographical' self. Past, present and future exist in the 'living present', as one process, encompassing both change and continuity.

Similarly, Weick stresses the dynamic nature of the meaning we give to our lived experience when he says that, 'meaning is not "attached to" the experience that is singled out. Instead, the meaning is in the kind of attention that is directed to this experience' (Weick, 1995:26). Both of these writers, Stacey and Weick, though writing from different perspectives, emphasise the creative and interactive nature of the way in which we make sense of our experience.

## **The tension between working with others and working by oneself**

So, how can I make sense of these different perspectives on change and continuity? In particular, how can I understand the tension between working with others and working by oneself and how this relates to continuity and change in my working practice and the qualitative industry in general?

My experience is that working ‘by myself’ is at least as important as working with others. What are the implications of this belief to my practice? Well, it does allow me to work in a way that feels comfortable and creatively stimulating. But, at the same time, it can perpetuate a ‘bat and ball’ approach to client work; the client offers a briefing document, I respond with a proposal, he commissions the work, I go away and do the research – excluding the client from the process as much as possible – think it through on my own and then come back and present the findings... and so on. In many ways I find this unsatisfactory. It often leads to a sense of staleness and difficulty in communicating at different stages of the project, in particular at the end when I am trying to convey the richness and breadth of the ‘findings’.

At different times, during the course of this doctoral programme, I have been aware of my need to defend this position – although it is not so much a ‘position’ as a natural predisposition. My learning set have, on occasion, expressed the view that I am ‘hiding’ the process of making sense of what I am exploring in my projects. They are sometimes right, in that I am not sharing this process, but it does not feel like a deliberate act of concealment. I am conscious that I have a strong need to nurture and protect my embryonic thinking; I do not want it to leave the nest until it is strong enough to survive and defend itself in the outside world. I fear that it will become diluted or absorbed; it will cease to be ‘mine’. And I am conscious also that by describing ‘it’ in this way I am reifying my thinking rather than viewing it as a process.

Equally, I could view my 'embryonic thinking' as the ongoing processes of 'silent conversation' between my "parliament of selves"; my identity emerging in the process of interacting. This has a fluid, 'process' perspective which is comfortable to me – it is also more exciting because the emphasis is on the processes of creation and emergence.

Recently I have been experimenting with a different way of working. I have suggested to clients that we give greater emphasis to co-creation – in place of my solitary analysis - more of a process than an event model; more conversation, less presentation. Although it is not simply a matter of substituting one approach for another in this pat fashion. This can simply lead to a process that becomes formulaic and 'reduced' as well. Also, I am ambivalent about this approach. I'm not yet convinced that it will produce a better 'result' for the client.

I want to better understand these processes of 'conversation'; 'silent' and with others, as well as solitary thinking in relation to co-creating with others, in terms of how they enable and constrain my practice. I am starting from the premise that 'silent conversation' happens all the time, regardless of whether we are on our own or with others, whereas clearly solitude does not. However, I think there may be some benefit in exploring the idea of 'silent conversation' in solitude.

There is currently a belief - voiced loudly in popular culture; counselling, media, gender debates etc - that 'relationships' and 'communication' are the primary routes to creativity, change and human happiness; relationships with 'significant others' are the pinnacle of human endeavour and we should all aspire to 'healthy' and 'fulfilling' personal relationships. Less than this is considered a sign of inadequacy, even mental dysfunction. But, as Anthony Storr (1997) points out, many of the world's greatest thinkers have been solitary; they have not reared families or formed close personal ties. This is true of Descartes, Newton, Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein. None of them married and most live alone for the greater part of their lives.



Storr offers an alternative perspective to this view that change processes are facilitated primarily through 'relationships' with others:

It seems to me that what goes on in the human being when he is by himself is as important as what happens in his interactions with other people....The creative person is constantly seeking to discover himself, to remodel his own identity, and to find meaning in the universe through what he creates. He finds this a valuable integrating process which, like meditation or prayer, has little to do with other people, but which has its own separate validity. His most significant moments are those in which he attains some new insight, or makes some new discovery; and these moments are chiefly, if not invariably, those in which he is alone.

(Storr 1997:xiv)

I would not go so far as Storr in his belief that the creative process 'has little to do with other people'. Neither would I go along with his notion of the creative person 'discovering himself' - although I believe this is a semantic issue - I think Storr would view 'discovering' as a process of creation. Nonetheless, it is indisputably true that many significant moments of insight occur when alone and 'silent conversation' can be just as important as interaction with others. Perhaps more so for some people.

Although we pay lip-service to the importance of solitude and 'silent conversation', in practice most of us seem to give much greater emphasis to shared conversation and co-creation. In personal and work life, I am conscious that I allocate too little time to 'silent conversation' in solitude; to reflecting on and incubating ideas. How would it be, for instance if, instead of Workshops and Awaydays with our clients, we encouraged them to spend four or five hours on their own in a room without distractions?

And, as I write this, I am conscious that I am making the assumption that there is a qualitative difference between 'silent conversation' on my own and 'silent conversation' when in the presence of others. One aspect of this is the belief that, on my own, it is somehow 'better'. If I really believe this, then it is little wonder that I initially shy away from sharing the processes of my thinking with

others. But do I really believe this, or is it simply a habit I have developed? How can I understand 'silent conversation' in terms of my evolving role as a qualitative practitioner?

'Silent conversation' is an ongoing process, both when alone and when engaged in conversation with others. Are these different or are they, as Mead asserts, essentially similar processes? When in conversation with others, there is a social pressure to respond to their gesture in a fairly immediate fashion. So too, 'silent conversation' that occurs in a social situation is likely to be constrained – as well as enabled - by this necessity to respond to the other. Does this differ from 'silent conversation' in private? When alone, there may be less time pressure, more time to 'mull' on thoughts although, of course, the 'parliament of selves' is in full flow and is also mutually constraining. Does this create a different sort of process? Perhaps there is more diversity when with others? Less predictability?

I wonder if 'incubation', which I referred to earlier, can throw any light on this. Incubation is a familiar process, acknowledged in everyday conversation – 'sleeping on it'. Typically 'incubation' is used to describe a time when the issue or problem is not being consciously considered. During or after this period, insights or ideas often 'well up', apparently out of nowhere (Parnes 1967:38/9). Incubation is not a rational process. I would see it as intuitive 'whole body' processing in which different manifestations of the body, including different aspects of self, 'converse'. I think of it as 'letting things happen'. In a way it is non-verbal 'silent conversation'.

I think there may be a sense in which 'silent conversation' when alone is experienced differently from 'silent conversation' when with others, but this may be more to do with the way in which our attention is directed – or our cognitive bracketing – than the processes themselves. It is difficult to 'hold the tension' between 'silent conversation' and conversation with others. The tendency is to privilege one over the other.

## The RUA meeting

June 11<sup>th</sup> and the RUA meeting which caused me such consternation a few weeks before has arrived. I feel surprisingly relaxed about it, considering my anxiety in Lisbon and the terse conversations at the QRA meeting. I had decided to ask a colleague, Gill, to facilitate the meeting with me. Gill and I have known each other for years – she was once my client – and we have recently discovered that we have similar interests; last year she wrote a book on analysis and interpretation in qualitative research and, although our thinking originates in different disciplines, there is considerable overlap in our perspectives.

I had changed the presentation from the Lisbon version. I made it more positive in tone but without, I hoped, toning down the content. Instead of focussing on how qualitative practice undersells itself, I intended to emphasise how we could broaden its definition and application.

The session was held at the RAF Club, resplendent with obese gold cherubs and flaking paintwork. Twenty-five clients turn up and scatter themselves throughout the large room. My initial attempts to cluster them towards the front, in order to facilitate a more interactive session fail; they skulk at the edges of the room, asserting some inalienable right to invisibility.

The audience is passive, inscrutable, as I kick off. I intend to cover the background briefly, hoping that it will trigger conversation. After twenty minutes, I stop. I have suggested viewing research as a process rather than an event, talked about how we can choose our own beginnings and endings to projects, how we are trapped in the either/or mentality of objectivity or subjectivity. I need some feedback.

“Does this make sense in terms of your experience?” I ask. “What do you think?”

“Yes”, this makes a lot of sense to me”, says Gaye. “We usually have workshops at the beginning and end of jobs. We have a very co-operative way of working. We’ve been doing this for some time.”

She is friendly and supportive of what we are saying but the underlying message I take out is, “We’re already doing this. What’s all the fuss about?”

A few other people join in. Again, they are interested, curious, but keen to identify themselves as ‘already on board’.

What does this mean? Is what I am saying just ‘old hat’? Is this a reflection of the latent competitiveness between client and researcher? Do they feel chastised in some way and need to assert their authority? Or have I somehow succumbed to the temptation to collapse the paradox, in order to clarify what I am trying to say. I am attempting to explore with them the thought that research processes are not either subjective or objective, that it is something else we are doing. I find it hard to retain that thought myself and it is clear that many in the audience have similar difficulties. There is a tendency to simplify the issue to objectivity *or* subjectivity – and of course no-one accepts that this is what we want.

“I’d feel very disappointed if we hired good brains and all I got was objectivity”, says Gareth. “I want someone who’s not afraid to work outside the brief...”

Put like this, it sounds as if all I’m saying is that qualitative research is not a pure science. And what’s new about that? It’s hard to ‘hold the paradox’, that subjectivity or objectivity is not the point. How is it possible to explain this more clearly?

I feel that the conversation is sinking; that somehow it is being reduced, simplified, reified; objectivity or subjectivity, this methodology or that methodology, to workshop or not to workshop. All of these are mechanistic interpretations of what I am trying to convey.

“You’re not going to find as much resistance as you think!” says one client, trying to be helpful.

“But why not?” I want to retort, although I don’t. “If you really understood what I’m saying, then there should be resistance. It’s because I haven’t really thought

this through sufficiently, or haven't explained it well enough, or have lacked the courage to go far enough that you see this as a cosmetic change." So often I feel I have grasped a different way of perceiving, only to find that it has disappeared like the morning mist.

But maybe there is more to it than this. It's true that it is hard to keep the subtlety and nuances of what I am exploring when I present it in this fashion, as a brief presentation. I am fighting against a cultural backdrop. My own and other people's. It is too easy to dismiss all of this with, 'But we do it already', and 'You're not going to find as much resistance as you think'.

Someone else says, 'But this is really interesting for me. We're laggards in the insight movement. We haven't got to the workshop stage yet', as if this is a training programme his company needs to go through, step by step.

And I wonder what I am really doing here? Am I undermining my role? I try not to burn my boats, so I talk about the continuing relevance and usefulness of focus groups; I am conscious that I am here as a representative of the qualitative research industry. On the other hand, people did speak together, share their experiences, explore their practice. What more do I want – to be hailed as a Messiah, have the scales fall from their eyes whilst they shout 'Halleluiah'?

The end – and I am unsure. The session seems to have gone very well, everyone appears to have enjoyed it and left cheerfully. People come up to thank us and continue the conversation. But are we just after dinner speakers?

I have had no feedback since, other than one client wanting our logo - my cat photograph - to use as a screen saver.

Later, thinking about this experience, I am struck by my battle with change and continuity; the see-sawing back and forth, my struggle with the tension of simultaneously trying to convey difference whilst remaining recognisably the same. Somehow it was easier in Lisbon. I was engrossed in the topic and less

interested in the effect it might have on my audience. Now that's an interesting observation. In Lisbon I was much more anxious and unsure about my reception and yet, in retrospect, I describe it as 'easier'. Easier in what way? Well, I was doing what I wanted to do. In a sense I was acting into the unknown, 'letting things happen'. This was anxiety provoking, but, at the same time, liberating. At the RUA session, I was 'playing safe'; I was talking to a client audience and I was representing QRA. Both of these factors constrained me, encouraged greater caution in what I was saying. This felt like 'making things happen'. I was talking about a new way of practicing, but I did not want to let go of the old way. Also, by this stage, the presentation had become a 'objectified'. I often notice this when I have to repeat a presentation. The first time I am creating it as I go along. The second time it is formulaic. It is no longer a part of 'me'.

This connects to Shaw's discussion of 'improvisation' in which 'the art lies in moving into what might be emerging without too fixed an idea of what each move will lead to' (Shaw 2002:42). This is a process which is both ordinary, in the sense that it is part of everyday living and also extraordinary, in that it is the stuff of innovation. It creates a sense of 'aliveness'- the sense of engagement, excitement and novelty which I seek in my working practice. It is what I intuitively feel will lead to a more satisfying, more creative way of working. Shaw describes 'improvisation' as 'not solo work, but ensemble work in which situations that are always not fully defined are further elaborated and evolved from within everyone's participation in them'. (ibid:42). If we accept that the 'individual mind and the social are the same process' (Stacey 2001:8), then 'improvisation' must be a process of individual mind (or aspects of self) at the same time as being social. However, there are differences between individuals in their propensity to improvise 'solo' or in a group; differences which Storr attributes to nature, nurture and 'societal norms'. Our current societal emphasis is on 'relationships'. As a consequence, I believe, the very important contribution that 'solo improvisation' can make to change and innovation is marginalised.

I am also struck by how quickly knowledge which is fluid and evolving becomes codified. My thinking which, leading up to the Lisbon paper, had felt exciting and novel, no longer seemed so. Stacey acknowledges this when he says that, ‘knowledge assets, therefore, have this paradoxical aspect: they must be codified if they are to become an asset but once this happens, they lose value’ (Stacey, 2001:23). Our need to codify and reify is strong. To prevent the evolution of my qualitative inquiry becoming fossilised and stale, needs a process of thinking which is improvisational, in ‘silent conversation’ and in conversation with others.

## **The GRA meeting**

I also used the Lisbon paper as the basis for another client meeting. However, this felt like a very different experience than the RUA session; a more positive experience, and I am interested in exploring why this was so. Why, in the RUA session, did I come away feeling flat, wondering what had happened, whereas in the second session, with the GRA<sup>17</sup>, I left feeling enthusiastic and full of ideas. Perhaps, by exploring the differences, I can better understand the processes of change and continuity in my evolving practice.

Kate, a research buyer at the GRA, phoned. She asked if I would come along and present my Lisbon paper to an internal GRA audience; a mixture of research buyers and ‘strategic consultants’, a separate unit within the GRA. I was happy to do this, although I offered the adapted version and explained that I would prefer an interactive session rather than to present the paper. I would start the ball rolling, but then we could talk around the issues. I was feeling quite comfortable with the material by now, although I was growing more conscious of its shortcomings – and the way in which I was offering it. Nonetheless, I knew most of the research buyers, though not the strategic consultants, so I felt quite relaxed.

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<sup>17</sup> The GRA is a government department responsible for commissioning social research projects

Surprisingly, on the day, eight strategic consultants turn up, outnumbering the researchers. GRA researchers are, in the main, older and more research literate than most commercial clients. Many have chosen to work within the GRA because they are interested in social research; it is an ethical decision. I feel more empathy with them than with many commercial clients. They are heartily vociferous and opinionated and I encourage them to interrupt but, unlike the commercial clients of the previous week, they need little prompting. This means that a robust debate gets going very quickly.

And there is much diversity in their views. Julian is on board.

“Yes, we still have to pretend to be scientists. Our (internal) clients want results and the answer.”

Steve, the eternal cynic, is irritated that we don't just ‘get on with the knitting’.

“Why do researchers keep going on about this stuff. Why don't they just do what they can do well. There's nothing wrong with just going out there and doing groups and depths. Why does everyone go on all the time about wanting to be more important than this, about wanting to influence strategy?”

He has a point. Although I would argue that we've always ‘influenced strategy’. Julie points out that it is important that the research is sturdy and robust, if they are to sell it to their internal clients. We are back to the objective or subjective debate. I agree. We cannot swop the objective for the subjective. Again, I find myself struggling to convey – or to fully understand myself – what I mean by this ‘beyond objective/subjective’ perspective.

Marcus, a strategic consultant, has an interesting viewpoint:

“I wonder if you've gone far enough. You talk about changing the paradigm, but you don't want to let go of what you have. As strategic consultants, we have to sell ourselves on our past performance and our promise. Sometimes I wish we had a prop, like you have research. You've got it and you want to chuck it away!”

And I'm conscious that he's right. I want to have my cake and eat it. I espouse focus groups (they're really useful etc), because of course they are the bread and butter and I don't want to lose this. And, at the same time, I want to be let out of the box. But can I plausibly have both? I smile at Marcus, conscious that he



knows exactly what this is about. He is not attacking me, just pushing me further.

I feel I can explore what I am feeling too. I do not feel constrained by the fact that these are my clients. I trust that they will respect my honesty. It feels liberating.

When we finish, people are still arguing as they leave the room. They are cross and excited and energised. So am I.

Why does this session feel different? It is alive, feisty, as if things have shifted, new perspectives are emerging. The staleness has, for the moment, evaporated. This is conversation as 'improvisation'. I have enjoyed myself because I have not felt 'guarded'; I have felt fully engaged. And I feel as if my thinking has shifted. It feels OK to talk in this open way. But will this knowledge we have created quickly become codified and lose value? Can it be 'managed' to prevent this happening?

Interestingly, whilst there has been no follow up to the RUA session, much has resulted from the GRA meeting. Perhaps this reflects the differences that I felt between the two sessions.

Julian, from the GRA, phones to commission a project.

"I'm afraid it's going to be a 'bat and ball' job", he says.

He is referring to my comments at the 'Lisbon' session when I argued for more shared conversation, especially at the beginning of a project, rather than written briefs being sent, written proposals returned and little real communication in between.

"But", he continues, "I think I can persuade the (internal) client to meet up and talk through the objectives before you write the proposal"

"Well, that's progress then, isn't it?" I reply, pleased that something has shifted. We have a meeting with the internal client in which we jointly air the issues, the hurdles, our way of working together. Everyone involved feels that it has been very useful. We are likely to do it again, next time.

Julia has also come up with a project. It is exploratory; defined by the need to understand and develop thinking rather than the methodology. She is happy for me to handle it in whatever way I feel is appropriate.

These are the sort of projects I am interested in, the sort of relationships I want to foster with my clients; where there is equality and mutual respect and creative licence to develop a project organically, i.e. without becoming too fixed on the methodology, just letting it evolve.

## **Where is this leading me?**

I have been trying, throughout this project, to explore the processes of change and continuity as they impact on my working practice; to move from a feeling of staleness, 'stuck-ness', to one of excitement, engagement and novelty. On the face of it, it is hard to see why this is so difficult. The latter state is clearly better than the former. However, it has become clearer, in the process of reflection and reflexivity throughout this process, that there are many constraints which impede change in my practice; the fear of being different, of conflict, of being pilloried. I have also become more aware of 'abdicating responsibility' as a way of blocking change. At the same time, I have become clear that there are a number of strategies and processes that can facilitate changes in my practice and also in the way in which qualitative inquiry is developing. A central theme is 'letting things happen' which involves a combination of incubation, 'silent conversation', cognitive bracketing and improvisation. I am also interested in how solitude may contribute to the processes of continuity and transformation.

What are the implications of all this for qualitative inquiry? I think many of these issues reflect the enabling constraints of our profession. Challenging some of these constraints opens up the possibility of transformation of both my

practice and the industry as a whole. It is an ongoing process. I do not yet know where this may lead.

# **Project 4**

## **Commercial qualitative research as a process of emergent inquiry; moving towards a new way of practicing**

### **Introduction**

As commercial qualitative researchers we have never been quite sure how to position our industry. What is it that we really sell to our clients? Personally, I am frequently challenged by this. Am I a qualitative researcher? A business psychologist? A management consultant? A change agent? A market researcher? A strategic consultant? All of these descriptions are technically accurate and there is something of the fashion statement about which I choose on a particular occasion. Armani or Littlewoods?

I have been aware of 'identity' as a contentious issue ever since I started working as a qualitative researcher, more than 25 years ago. Different practitioners regularly defend their idiosyncratic positions on their practices. Recently, I wrote a defence of qualitative research in a trade magazine, in response to a client article which claimed that 'research cannot be creative'. In my view it is not possible to have 'non-creative' research, but there are some practitioners and clients who view research as primarily 'data gathering'. Then there is the 'voice' of qualitative research in the higher echelons of management. No research conference goes by without someone giving a paper lamenting our absence in 'the board room'. But why should we think we deserve to be there? Or, equally, why aren't we? Whether we believe we should or shouldn't be there is dependant on how we define our role; how we see ourselves.

The reality is that qualitative researchers are not an homogenous breed. In fact, so disparate are the theoretical perspectives of practitioners that Miriam Catterall, one of the few academics who has examined the theory and practice of commercial qualitative research in depth, believes that the only common ground for qualitative researchers is that they all 'conduct focus groups' (Catterall 2001:77). In fact, I would disagree with even this definition.

So why does all this matter? Is it just a question of labelling; different researchers applying their skills in different ways, just as some lawyers do conveyancing and others criminal law?

I believe the problem is more deep rooted. It is not just a matter of different researcher styles or areas of work. These ambiguities and contradictions seem to be intrinsic to commercial qualitative research practice; they are issues for the industry as a whole, for researchers and clients and how they work together. This confusion about what we call ourselves and what we do as practitioners seems, to me, to be at the heart of my inquiry. As I often experience it, different, apparently conflicting, roles are fighting for supremacy; on the one hand there is the 'objective researcher' assuming detachment, on the other the 'engaged inquirer and sense-maker'. Then there is the role of researcher and that of consultant; often I have found myself switching between the two in a sort of dance with my clients, sometimes in synch, sometimes at odds. Crudely, I sell research, but I am a closet consultant and the two are often at war. It reminds me of the famous experiments with 'split brain patients'<sup>18</sup> in which, as the right hand reaches out to pick up an object, the left hand grabs it and draws it back (Gazzaniga 1973:87-100); a classic double bind.

Yesterday's post provided a good example of the way in which we, as qualitative researchers, constrain ourselves by our definition of 'research'. As a Member of

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<sup>18</sup> The two hemispheres of the brain were surgically separated, often to control severe epileptic seizures. This resulted in the two hemispheres acting, in some ways, as separate organs, arguably with separate thoughts, emotions, consciousnesses.

the Market Research Society (MRS), I received a membership mailing. It contained a ruling on disciplinary action taken against one of the largest UK market research companies. The complaint had been upheld by the MRS on the grounds that ‘the market research had not been carried out in accordance with the requirements of B1 of the MRS Code (*marketing research must always be carried out objectively and in accordance with established scientific principles*)’.

This highlights a dilemma. Whilst the intention of the Code is honorable and designed to protect professional and public interests, ‘B1’ can, at best, be applied to survey research. I believe it is not only irrelevant to the way in which I practice, but my practice explicitly contravenes the letter and spirit of this aspect of the Code. However, I remain a member of the MRS because many of my clients, including government agencies, will not employ companies who are not members and do not adhere to the MRS Code of Conduct.

It is clear that there is considerable strain between research practice – at least amongst certain researchers – and the theoretical position demonstrated above which we, as a profession, claim to adopt. Whilst I would regard Kuhn’s (1970) notion of the paradigm – the beliefs, values, techniques shared by a given community - as rather rigid, in that it seems to deny that theoretical diversity is a feature of any community of practice, I find his thinking on the paradigm shift particularly useful in understanding the divisions that are growing within the commercial research community. The paradigm which has served commercial research reasonably well for decades appears to be ‘in crisis’ (Kuhn 1970:83), in that it no longer reflects the beliefs, values and techniques that inform qualitative research as it is currently practiced.

I am moving towards the view that our whole way of practicing – and purchasing - commercial qualitative research is essentially flawed. I believe that we have chained ourselves to a very narrow definition of ‘research’ which we are then forced to circumnavigate in order to practice effectively with our clients. I suspect that this is the main reason why, in the past, I have found my practice so constraining. It is also possible that it prevents the industry as a whole from

evolving . In this project I want to move towards a professional practice which is informed by a clearly articulated philosophy of social science and an understanding of how knowledge is created with rigour; knowledge which is integral to the theoretical understanding that informs my practice.

## **Central Themes of this Project**

In its broadest interpretation, the core themes of this project are:

‘What do we mean by research?’

‘Can we articulate an identifiable research method, i.e. fundamental or regulative principles which determine our methodology and meet our research needs and those of our clients?’

These questions take me into the realm of philosophy of science and the ongoing debates such as realism/idealism, whether research is a distinctive kind of activity, how we understand meaning and so on. The debates between naturalists (and their assumption that scientific method can be used as a model for social sciences), interpretivists, in their varied manifestations (who disagree) and reconcilers, such as Weber, who wish to bridge the divide (Seale 2002:27) have been long running and it is outside the scope of this project to explore these discourses in detail - although the different philosophical approaches will arise during the course of exploring my practice.

Firstly, I am starting from the premise that there are competing philosophies of social science at work within commercial qualitative research which have not been sufficiently articulated or worked through and, as a result, have led to a sense of ‘stuck-ness’ and frustration within the industry. Naturalist and Interpretivist strands vie for supremacy in a manner which the philosopher, Roy Bhaskar, describes as the ‘primal problem’ of the philosophy of social sciences (Bhaskar 1989:66). Durkheim’s (1982) rules of sociological method suggest that empirical detachment is a precondition for scientific knowledge (Lazar 1998:15)

and in some respects this perspective is still alive within the qualitative research industry. On the other hand, qualitative practice incorporates a range of different Interpretivist stances which I will discuss later in this project and in the synopsis. The issue, as I see it, is not so much that there are different perspectives, but that, as an industry, we have little theoretical understanding to support the perspectives we *are* employing and to build on them. We have cut ourselves off from our history and traditions<sup>19</sup>. The result is that our understanding of why we practice as we do is based on precedent and experimentation rather than theoretical understanding. Debate therefore tends to focus on ‘Who is right?’, rather than using diversity of perspectives as a way of jointly developing our practice. One theme throughout this project is therefore articulating these competing philosophies as a means of becoming ‘unstuck’ and enabling a more coherent philosophy to emerge.

The second, related, theme of this project is how to locate and legitimise ‘emergent inquiry’ within the wider field of commercial qualitative research, in such a way that it is seen as part of qualitative practice but can also change perceptions of what qualitative practice means. To do this, I will be drawing primarily on four bodies of knowledge; commercial qualitative research literature (Ereaut 2002, 2004; Imms 1995, 2002; Gordon 1999, Mariampolski 2001), academic qualitative research (Gummesson 2001, 2003; Caterall 2001; Lincoln & Denzin 2003), ‘practitioner’ literature (Schein 1999; Schon 1983) and some of the literature on complex responsive processes (Stacey 2001; Shaw 2002; Griffin 2002).

Specifically, in this project, I will be exploring the ‘dance’ with clients and, in particular, the oscillation between *either* the researcher *or* the consultant role. I will reflect on what is happening in situations when I act ‘as if’ I am just a researcher or ‘as if’ I am a consultant. But, more importantly, I will explore those times when I am not aware of playing a role at all; the experience of being

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<sup>19</sup> I have discussed the reasons for this in my summary of the commercial qualitative history, in Project 1.



both researcher and consultant *at the same time*. I will explore research as a process of emergent inquiry, and emergent identity, fed by a myriad of ‘aspects of self’<sup>20</sup> - researcher and consultant amongst them – along with the process of gesture-response with my clients and research participants. I want to understand what this might mean in terms of client relating and what I am commissioned to do.

As part of this process, I will explore what it means to be ‘confused’ in my professional practice. As I write the word ‘confused’, I find myself shying away from it. To be ‘confused’ seems incompatible with being ‘an expert’ (Schein 1999:7)<sup>21</sup>. I set myself up as an expert in qualitative research so, I reason, I must hide the confusion; it is shameful to show confusion. From a complex responsive processes perspective, however, confusion and uncertainty are inherent in emergent continuity and transformation of patterns of human interaction - and therefore are essential to innovation (Fonseca 2002:3). Undoubtedly an ‘expert’ role is more comfortable and it is easier to revert to the familiar role of ‘researcher’. But, if I want the possibility of new patterning of interaction; greater engagement with the process, the possibility of transformation, it may be useful to ‘live with the confusion’, rather than actively trying to resolve it. And I have to be careful not to dichotomise; perhaps I can be an ‘expert’ *and* be ‘confused’ at the same time. Following on from my exploration of ‘silent conversation’<sup>22</sup> (Stacey 2003:237), I would understand that it is the interaction between different roles or aspects of self; including researcher, consultant, as well as interaction with others, that provides diversity and potential novelty. Through this interaction engagement, confusion, conflict and opportunities for transformation arise. And, paradoxically, this may bring a sense of liberation from roles.

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<sup>20</sup> I discuss ‘aspects of self’ in more detail in Project 3

<sup>21</sup> I will discuss Schein’s thinking on different models of consultation, including the ‘Expert’ model, later in this project.

<sup>22</sup> See Project 3

I have been using the terms 'role' and 'identity' loosely here. It may be useful to explore what I mean by these terms, given that they are themes running throughout this paper. However, I have decided not to do so at this stage. By examining these themes, I risk reinforcing the status quo, when I am trying to tease out a different way of understanding the qualitative research process. I will return to this discussion later in the project.

Instead, I will start with narrative, focusing on a number of recent interactions with clients and research participants. I will explore ways in which our different understandings of research were played out in the interaction and how we together attempted to either 'resolve' confusion or, more importantly, how 'staying with the confusion' could sometimes change the nature of the interaction, the relationship and the understanding of what research 'means'. In particular, I explore the development of my practice as I move from a more traditional 'researcher' relationship with my clients and interviewees, to one which is explicitly a process of emergent inquiry. In order to do this, I need to explore the relevance of different philosophies of social science to my evolving practice.

In narrative 1, I explore what happens when I attempt to avoid role confusion by reverting to the 'safe' researcher role. In narratives 2, 3 and 4, I reflect on situations when I do something different, when I challenge this classic researcher model and allow the process of emergent inquiry to develop.

# Narrative 1: Exploring the nature of the relationship between researcher and client

## Defining the research task

Whilst mulling on the implications of emergent inquiry and role confusion for my research practice, manna arrives from heaven. It takes the form of a project which challenges the traditional role of commercial ‘qualitative researcher’ and forces me to contemplate an identity which is broader, less defined. The call comes from John at the GRA<sup>23</sup>.

“We have a project that may be up your street. It’s on communications for The Department<sup>24</sup>. They want some research – a communications audit. It needs very sensitive handling and some very strong strategic thinking.”

It sounds like a very interesting project and we are keen to take it on.

John sends over a brief which the GRA has prepared, based on an earlier meeting with The Department.

At the initial briefing meeting: It is just John and Colin from the GRA and me and Rosie. It’s the blind leading the blind.

“What did you think of the brief?” asks John.

Rosie and I look at each other.

“We couldn’t understand what it was talking about,” I reply.

“Neither could we!” replies John.

We all laugh.

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<sup>23</sup> GRA Communications, a pseudonym, is the research buying arm for a wide range of government departments. It is commissioned by a particular department, selects the external research organisation to be used from its roster and acts as research planner in the process. Nowadays, GRA Communications is our biggest client. We work with about 20 different research buyers within the GRA, for a variety of government departments.

<sup>24</sup> The Department acts as a client to the GRA. It is a commercial arrangement. The Department is entitled to use external sources, if it chooses. As such, the GRA are very conscious that The Department has a choice and that they need to keep their client happy.

“It’s a bit of an odd job, half research and half management consultancy”, adds Colin. An old Sufi adage pops into my head; ‘When the pupil is ready, the teacher will come’.

John and Colin explain the project to us as best they can. We need to find out about ‘communications’ for each of The Department Units; who, why, what is involved, and to provide recommendations which will help with the restructuring of ‘communications activity’.

We play around with some ideas, testing out possible approaches. The meeting could not strictly be called a briefing. We are together attempting to understand the nature of the problem; it is an exploratory conversation with the aim of joint diagnosis, similar to what Schein (1999) would describe as process consultation. We do not have a budget for the project. We do not know who we will need to talk to. We do not really know what we need to talk to them about. But could we write a proposal?

Well, yes.

We do.

Twelve pages of it.

We suggest talking face to face with the Heads of all of the Units within The Department – 32 in all - as well as other individuals, as appropriate. Essentially we would be attempting to understand ‘communications’ in terms of each Unit and their target audiences and how these related to the Department as a whole.

## **Negotiating the framework for the research**

The Department team has read our proposals and want to move to the next stage. We set up a further meeting: Rosie and me, John and Colin from the GRA, Barry and Brian from The Department. We have not met The Department team before and we are at that milling stage, when no-one wants to take charge whilst we size

each other up. None of us knows what we need to do, but no-one will acknowledge this; uncertainty and confusion are taken as signs of weakness. This is quite different to the initial exploratory meeting with John and Colin; here, all parties are intent on maintaining their defined roles; client, researcher, 'broker'. This keeps the uncertainty and confusion at bay, but also limits conversation about the real difficulties of the task we are engaged in.

"Why don't you go through the proposal with us?" suggests Barry.

"Or you could fill us in a bit about The Department", I reply.

"Well, Barry got in first," retorts John.

I start talking, tentatively at first, but gradually expanding on our suggested approach. But as soon as I can, I hand over to Barry. I feel it is important to our understanding at this stage that we hear Barry and Brian talk about the issues, how the project has come about, what they want to get out of it, what they intend to do afterwards.

Barry starts talking. He explains how The Department 'grew organically'; Units were set up and then 'split off', assuming a large degree of autonomy. Although there is a central Communication Group in The Department, the new Units wanted their own communications people. As a result, The Department, until recently, has acted as a 'loose federation'. This had led to confusion and duplication of effort and, at worst, to press scandals, as contradictory messages were conveyed. This latter issue has resulted in an Independent Review, the appointment of a new Minister and a re-structuring of The Department which will involve centralisation of support services, stricter branding guidelines, clearer lines of communication, greater co-ordination of Units. The overall aim is a huge reduction in expenditure and greater cohesion within The Department as a whole. However, not everyone in The Department is happy with this new arrangement. Many enjoy their fiefdoms and will not easily relinquish power.

The strategy is clear: "In future line managers who are involved in communications will have to report to the Communication Group", explains Barry. The trouble is, "We don't know who these people are or what they do." It

gets worse. “If you ask them what they do, they’ll each redefine their job so that it involves very little communications. In that way they think they can continue as they are”. So. We have The Department, whose sole reason for existence is ‘communications’, in which no-one is prepared to admit that they work in ‘communications’ for fear that their power base will be eroded. And we are being brought in to ferret out ‘the real truth’.

It is our job to discover what each Unit does, who does what within the Unit, how they do it and how they judge the quality of what they do.

“Anything we can tighten down and exert some rigour on; how things are achieved and how they are evaluated will be a benefit,” explains Barry. “We want this research to be a backdrop, to create understanding that we can use to build a ‘tool kit’ to evaluate communications. It needs to be evidence based.” And I realise now that it is at this very early stage in the project - or perhaps even earlier - that the patterning of our relationship with our clients is forming and it will set the tone for the whole project. I am adopting a traditional researcher role; I listen, I absorb. I do not challenge or question.

But my heart sinks. I never know what people mean when they talk about ‘communications’ in this way. How is it possible to separate ‘communications’ from the content of those communications? Barry talks about the messiness of ‘communications’; how they need to be ‘tidied up’, ‘streamlined’, ‘channelled from the top’, ‘controlled’. And I wonder if we can do this. I’m excited by the prospect of working with The Department, but it’s clear that their views on the nature of ‘an organisation’ are different to ours.

I begin to explore these views with them.

“You’ve said in your brief that a key objective is to examine how communications are planned, specified, managed, delivered, evaluated. What if people do not know? What if they cannot answer these questions?”

Barry and Brian look puzzled. I think they are questioning whether I have really grasped the purpose of the project.

And I realise that we have very different understandings of what communication ‘means’. Their view is based on a ‘sender-receiver’ model in which information is collated, prepared, delivered and the effectiveness of transmission evaluated. I am approaching, asking the question, from a perspective of emergent communication, i.e. the assumption that the processes of communication are necessarily complex, messy, often ill-defined and that shared meaning is created in the process. Our perspectives are so divergent that I do not know how I can begin to bridge the gap.

The Department team wants us to continue the project beyond the research into the next stage, the development of a ‘tool kit’ to evaluate ‘communications’. We neither want, nor know how, to create a ‘tool kit’ which can span a multitude of communications, from a range of different Units, targeted at a huge variety of audiences from ‘terrorists’, to ‘the general public’ to ‘the Prime Minister’. We could have questioned, probed our clients’ understanding of a ‘tool kit’. But we didn’t. Instead we chose to remain silent, in the belief that it is better to challenge from a position of strength, i.e. once we had carried out the research. Rosie says, diplomatically, “Why don’t we see what comes out of this stage. Maybe it will make sense to develop a ‘tool kit’, maybe not.” “We could always work through the issues in a workshop with the people you choose to develop the ‘tool kit,’” I add.

## **The Consultant meets the Researcher**

So why is it that we do not challenge our clients’ understanding of ‘communications’ and how people in the Units might understand it? Why do we not question what they mean by a ‘tool kit’ and encourage them to think through what is needed? Is it not our responsibility to thrash out these issues before we progress with the job?

Thinking about it further, I realise that often, in the past, we have not challenged our clients overtly at this stage, in spite of the fact that, theoretically, this is the time for establishing how we will work together. At this initial stage, I feel that I lack knowledge of the clients' business; I do not yet feel equipped to challenge their views. I believed that my role was to try to understand client viewpoints, not necessarily agree with or challenge them. More pragmatically, we want the project and it has not yet been commissioned; I do not want to lose it. But, perhaps most importantly, I have felt that I needed to be immersed in the research itself before my views could evolve and find expression. So, I allow all this preliminary conversation to wash over me, believing that sense will not come by endless theoretical discussions but from the research process itself.

Initially, I saw this position as similar to Schein's notion of 'process consultation', which emphasises the evolving role of the consultant in helping the client define, 'own' and find remedies for their problems:

...trying to be explicit up front about all one's hopes and expectations is not very feasible or fruitful because neither party knows enough about the evolving reality of the situation to make a good estimate of what they will give and what they expect to receive.

(Schein, 1999:235-6)

However, on reflection, I think this is disingenuous. Schein's position is one of engagement in the present whilst, at the same time, acknowledging the unknown future. Mine, on this occasion, was one of mild disengagement which did not, I suspect, give sufficient attention to this initial meeting with the client and did not see it as part of the research process. Rather, I viewed it as simply a prelude to the research; I was concentrating on appearing engaged rather than actually engaging. I could justify this stance, as adopting a 'traditional researcher' role. However, I think it is more accurate to say that I simply did not regard this preliminary client meeting as important.



What I have described in the narrative above is how all of us, in this second meeting, adopted and together reinforced the traditional researcher-client roles. I assumed the role of ‘researcher’<sup>25</sup>, standing outside, impartial, reluctant to voice an opinion before I feel confident of my ground; before I have generated the knowledge, become an ‘expert in the problem’. However, I did not feel comfortable in this role. I strongly disagreed with the clients’ perspective. I wanted to intervene, express my opinion, but I did not. I felt constrained by the power dynamics. The Department, as ultimate client, was determining the agenda. If I disagreed with them, this would reflect badly on the GRA, who had chosen us to take on the project and who are our biggest client. It would also, possibly, have lost us the job. Faced with this ‘role confusion’; disagreeing with the clients’ approach but unwilling to voice my concerns, I did not ‘stay with the confusion’ and attempt to explore our thinking together. I did not take a ‘consultancy’ stance and open up the conversation. Instead, I retreated into the safe and familiar ‘researcher’ role – aided and abetted by my clients. If I am to move towards research as a process of emergent inquiry, it is important that I challenge the assumptions I made in this situation.

Are there other ways of being in this situation which do not depend solely on my researcher role? ‘What, for instance, might the ‘consultant’ have done?’ In the role of consultant I would, perhaps, be exploring both the client’s assumptions and also my own. I would not, could not, be challenging from the perspective of the ‘researched’, I would need to start from a different perspective. What might this be?

And, as I think about it now, the answer is obvious. It is the same process that happens in the research situation itself. Historically, I have always divided ‘the research’ from ‘the client interaction’; seen them as separate processes, talked about the linear pattern of client relationship and the rich, complex patterning of

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<sup>25</sup> In this instance I am referring to the traditional researcher role of observer, data gatherer, collator of information etc., rather than the interactive/emergent researcher role that I am moving towards.

communication in the research itself and how richness is lost in the funnelling of learning for client consumption. The conversation that is needed with the client is the same open, curious, exploratory conversation I would have in the research itself. ‘What do you imagine a tool kit would give you? What do you want to achieve with it? And so on. This is not ‘challenging’ in the sense of undermining the client’s position by demonstrating my ‘expertise’ – as I feared doing in my meeting with The Department. Rather it is coming from a position of what Schein describes as ‘actively searching out of one’s areas of ignorance’ (Schein 1999:11) in order to engage in mutual exploration. This, in turn, may lead to a deeper understanding of the research needs. It does however, require me to put aside the traditional researcher role, In such a situation, my authority, my legitimacy, would come from being aware and in the present; contributing that which might help our mutual understanding. It could be described as an ‘engaged researcher’ role, rather than a client-supplier, or indeed a detached researcher role.

## **Linking the Theory and Practice of Qualitative Research and Consultancy**

If I am moving towards an understanding of commercial qualitative research as a process of emergent inquiry, why am I so pre-occupied with consultancy?

I am following two strands of thought. The first is that, if the nature of commercial research is to change, then we must think differently about what we regard as ‘valid sources’ for knowledge creation. Historically the ‘researched’ are defined by a discrete research sample; clients are not a research source unless specifically defined as such. Equally, the researcher him/herself is not overtly acknowledged as a resource, although inevitably he/she is. I want to explore ways in which both clients and researchers are enabled to work together in such a way that the process of creating and defining the ‘research problem’, contributing

to its 'solution' and continuing the ongoing conversation within the client organisation is openly acknowledged and legitimised as part of the research process; this I would call research consultancy. Hence my interest in the nature of consultancy.

Secondly, I am interested in certain 'practitioner' approaches to research and consultancy (Schon 1982, Shotter 2003, Schein 1999) which seek to explore and explain the two in terms of an ongoing process of rigorous knowledge generation which spans the classical sciences and the research sciences. This is a theme that I will pursue further in my synopsis.

In order to develop and articulate my own understanding of research consultancy as a process of emergent inquiry, I will draw on four different perspectives, before attempting to position my own thinking within this field:

- (i) A 'classic' research approach which regards consultancy as an activity separate from research (Gummesson 2000)
- (ii) Current perspectives in commercial qualitative research (Ereaut 2002; Lillis 2002; Hedges 2000)
- (iii) Process Consultation (Schein 1999)
- (iv) A complex responsive processes perspective (Stacey 2001)

The first three of these perspectives I will explore at this stage. The fourth perspective, that of complex responsive processes, I will include towards the end of this project, as a preliminary to drawing together my own perspectives and positioning.

## **(i) Gummesson's Perspective on Research and Consultancy**

Gummesson's basic premise is that (academic) research and consultancy are distinct paradigms (in the sense that Kuhn:1970 uses it), although they 'could also overlap' (Gummesson 2000:19). As such, an over-riding theme in his work is the separation and definition of the two roles and an exploration of whether it is possible to work with both at the same time.

I find his approach useful in that it clearly described the difficulties, the ambiguities, the contradictions and the often sheer impossibility of carrying out action research ('qualitative research', as I would term it), if we start from a position of separating 'basic' research from 'applied' research - which Gummesson describes as 'close to consultancy' (ibid: 5). He quotes Bergstrom and Soderman, who 'assume that integrity characterizes the academic researcher, whereas efficiency is typical of the consultant' and goes on to describe how they 'discuss the desirability of bringing integrity and efficiency together to form a greater degree of professionalism among both academic researchers and management consultants' (ibid:72). I would expect integrity and efficiency to be aims for all research and consultancy, whether academic or commercial, and I find myself railing against this polarisation of roles; attributing different characteristics to each.

In teasing out different strands of the 'consultant' and 'scientific' paradigms, (ibid: 172) and in trying to define different aspects of qualitative research, Gummesson creates what I believe is a stream of false dichotomies; basic research vs applied research, the scientific paradigm vs the consultant paradigm, the positivistic vs the humanistic schools, the expert consultant vs the process consultant, procrustean science vs 'letting reality have a say on its own terms', 'the mainstream scientist who is serenely detached' vs 'the action scientist [who] is deeply involved'. Separating complementary aspects in this way can, I believe, lead to a mechanistic understanding of the research/consultancy process, whereby the whole is seen as the sum of the parts. I am not suggesting that these

aren't useful aspects to explore but I believe that, by creating 'paired opposites', their interconnectedness is lost; one defines the other. 'Opposites' can become reified and this makes it almost impossible to work with both at the same time. Not surprisingly then, Gummesson concludes that:

..it is difficult to establish criteria for good research and good consultancy respectively that would allow the same individual to take on both roles to the satisfaction of both the academic and the business community.

(ibid:17)

However, Gummesson disagrees with my interpretation of his work (Gummesson 2004). He argues that he never assumes that 'the whole is the sum of its parts' and, although I read his explication of the consultant/researcher role as divisive, this was not his intention.

The idea, to set one statement against another in the yin and yang sense, is not to claim that the world is 'either-or' (as many researchers seem to think, academic or commercial) but to be more clear. The world is both-and, and so is yin and yang....We live in the Western scientific paradigm (or mythology) that things are either-or and most academics have great difficulty in understanding the both-and aspect. A lot of people talk about the yin and yang 'dichotomy', but I hardly meet anyone who knows what it means...The great problem is still to do action research and *balancing the dual roles of being involved and detached at the same time.*

(Gummesson 2004, my italics)

However, even accepting that Gummesson's dichotomies represent 'both-and' rather than 'either-or', he is still left with 'dual roles' which need to be 'balanced'. In Gummesson's view, the dual roles of academic researcher and consultant cannot be combined without compromising one or both. - and I find myself wanting to protest, 'But we, as commercial research consultants, do it all the time'.

As I allow my irritation to mellow other, more intriguing, questions take its place. In particular, I want to understand how it is that we *do* do it and what it is we do that allows it to happen. And also, I am conscious that I am 'protesting

too much'. I have, in the earlier narrative, described a situation where I did *not* do it. I *did* separate the research and consultancy roles and treated them as either-or stances. Effectively, in the situation I described, I acted 'as if' I was 'just' a researcher. And I am conscious that I am using the term 'consultant' loosely here, to indicate help or advice I may offer to a client over and above my research role. In the course of this project, I will develop a clearer understanding of what consultancy means in the context of my own practice.

I am conscious that there *are* times, with clients, when I feel that I am able to be both researcher and consultant— and many other things - at the same time. What, then, is the difference between these times and the situation I described earlier? I think this integrated approach is possible when my client and I know and trust each other, when we have an established pattern of working in this way, built up over time, when I know the particular company or market very well. I tend not to behave in this way with new clients, when I am unsure of my ground, when I am unfamiliar with the market or the client company. What stops me here – apart from the obvious 'playing safe'?

And I suddenly realise: it is largely because there is no legitimised basis for this integrated approach. There is no substantial body of knowledge or practice – at least within commercial qualitative research – to support this position, and there is, I believe, limited practical acknowledgement of it on the part of most researchers and clients either. Those of us who have come to work in this way have developed our practices more or less independently of each other. It is only recently that some qualitative researchers have started to talk together about how we understand what we do. 'Positivist' research has decades of precedent to support it. Adopting the role of commercial research consultant (or whatever we come to call it) has no such support. It has no established legitimacy. It is dependent on the personal authority that the individual researcher can muster in the moment during the interaction with his or her clients. Until we, as (a particular breed of) qualitative researchers, can build and legitimise a shared

philosophy of practice, then our behaviour will always be erratic; situationally bound.

I would argue that a competent qualitative researcher is constantly working to achieve good research *and* good consultancy – *at the same time*. I'm not saying that it's easy or conflict-free - as Gummesson himself says, 'within action science, role conflict and ambiguity are part of the researcher's day-to-day life' (ibid:119) – but the intention, on the part of the commercial researcher, is to create something more than a mere 'accommodation' of the two roles. I am moving towards a position which does not dissect in order to understand but looks at the ongoing experience in the 'living present'<sup>26</sup>, informed as it is by a myriad of roles and past experiences, the ongoing interaction and expectations of the future.

A key difference between Gummesson's perspective and mine is, I believe, how we understand 'role'. I will, at this point, take a short detour to explore different understandings of role and how they inform practice.

## **Different Perspectives on Role**

Role, in its everyday usage, is often taken to mean a set of relatively static responsibilities, accountabilities, reporting relationships etc. Within an organisational context it can describe one's position in a formal hierarchy. Although a particular role is apparently centred on the individual, nonetheless, others recognise and respond to it; it prompts a particular kind of relationship and, in this sense, it is defined in relation to other roles. Gummesson uses role in this everyday sense:

Different roles are adopted to gain access to companies and their employees. There are three possible avenues of approach: via the

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<sup>26</sup> As discussed in previous projects

*researcher role, the consultant role or the role of employee* (including board director and owner).

(Gummesson 2000:33)

However, clearly, a person is not just 'a role' and in a post-modern world we can no longer hide behind our roles. Whereas Gummesson uses a static definition of role to illustrate the difficulties of combining roles, e.g. the researcher and consultant roles, Hirschhorn (1997) advocates a more dynamic interpretation of role. He discusses the tension between the 'role' and the 'personhood' and the need to balance the two appropriately. He arguing for a greater 'role-person balance' (ibid:52) in working relationships, i.e. neither hiding behind the role nor denying its importance. Nonetheless, role is still defined as a fixed entity.

Schon's (1983) interest is in how the nature of role can change over time. He introduces the concept of 'role frame'; a way of constructing a definition of one's practice. When a situation arises which cannot be understood in terms of the 'role frame', he suggests it can evolve through 'frame experiments' (ibid:63), i.e. when the practitioner is confronted with demands that seem incompatible or inconsistent with the 'role frame', he may introduce a 'frame experiment' in order to find a way of integrating, or choosing among the incompatible elements. If this can be achieved, then 'role frame' may change. Although Schon moves away from a static view of role, he nonetheless seems to have a rather mechanistic understanding of how role evolves.

All of these ways of understanding role start from the position that role is consciously adopted by the autonomous individual and the characteristics of this role are located in the individual. Griffin (2002), coming from a complex responsive processes perspective, has quite a different understanding of role, which emphasises emergent processes:

The roles emerge in interaction and there is no question of an individual choosing a mask, or role by and for him/herself. Its emergence and its



meaning is social. As groups evolve and develop a past they begin to recognise various members in roles, one of which is leader.

(Griffin 2002:195)

This definition of role is, by its nature, relational. A leader, for example, emerges from social interaction as a consequence of recognition by the group members. Griffin acknowledges that this understanding of role is quite different than its everyday meaning and differentiates between the 'idealisation of leader, the cult leader' and 'the functionalising of the ideals in the everyday conflicts of interaction' (ibid:195), i.e. he distinguishes between 'the leader' and 'the process of leading'.

I would differentiate my thinking from that of Gummesson, Hirschhorn and Schon in that, like Griffin, I would view roles as themes that pattern our experience and which emerge in interaction. As such, research knowledge, consultancy skills and a myriad of other aspects of self could potentially be called forth in the living present as a process of silent conversation and interaction with others through which knowledge is created. Shaw describes this as a 'temporal rather than a spatial logic' that is, concepts 'emerging in a continuous flow of present experience' rather than being positioned 'as a conceptual map' (Shaw 2002:121) Consequently, there is no need to reconcile the 'conflict' between the research and consultancy roles. Instead, these different 'aspects of self', in interaction with others, can provide diversity resulting in continuity and transformation. I would understand this process as the continual evolution of identity.

## **(ii) Research and Consultancy from a Qualitative Research perspective**

Discussion of the multi-faceted nature of the qualitative researcher role has been ongoing within the commercial research arena for many years, but it is only recently that the 'dual role' of researcher-consultant has been explicitly explored

(Ereaut 2002, Lillis, 2002, Hedges 2000). Ereaut (2002: 12-27) discusses this area in some depth. However, rather than focusing on the difficulties - perhaps impossibility - of integrating the roles, she explores the processes whereby the commercial researcher works with the paradox; how the dynamic tension between the 'research' and 'consultant' roles emerges and how this tension must be managed. She describes the 'dual role' of the qualitative research consultant as both 'committed partner', in terms of the commercial alliance with the client organisation, and 'pure researcher' who must treat the client's 'assumptions and intentions in a detached or impartial way, as materials to be *analysed, questioned and checked out* against some kind of external world' (ibid: 15). Ereaut points out that 'this is *not* the same as being 'objective' in a classical scientific sense but means being impartial as to the *outcome* of the analysis...an essential skill of the commercial researcher is to hold both positions simultaneously (and to resolve any conflicts that might arise between them)' (ibid:15). In effect, Ereaut is incorporating elements of process consultation by regarding the client's assumptions and intentions as part of the research inquiry.

Gummesson's position, as I interpret it, i.e. emphasising the differences between research and consultancy, contrasts with that of Imms and Ereaut, who assert that 'effectively the intertwining of method, researcher, hypothesis and outcome, result in what we have come to refer to as the '*all-at-once-ness*' of qualitative market research' (Imms and Ereaut 2002:8). This suggests that research and consultancy, whilst still regarded as separate roles, occur in parallel and feed off one another. Ereaut expands on this in a subsequent book:

It (all-at-once-ness) suggests that although there are discernible stages to a qualitative project, many of the critical operations that ultimately provide the value of the research actually pervade the whole process. In this respect, 'analysis and interpretation' go on all the time in the researcher's mind (and in conversation between researchers in a team), before during and after fieldwork)

(Ereaut 2002:3-4)

Do I, like Imms and Ereaut, believe that ‘I should hold both positions simultaneously’? Do I believe there are two positions – researcher and consultant - to hold? I would argue that I do not adopt one role or another. I start from the position that all research implies consultancy. Research does not just ‘happen’. Similarly, all consultancy requires research – whether this is traditional data gathering and analysis or utilising one’s own past experience. However, the consultant, Peter Block (2000), has a different take on this. When talking about the way in which research may be used in consulting, he differentiates between the ‘Research Approach’ and the ‘Action Approach’ and states that ‘Research is aimed at simply understanding something and treats the understanding itself as enough’ (Block 2000:176). I do not believe that we can ‘conduct research in a vacuum’. It inevitably involves choices in what we attend to, how we create meaning from this and it provokes social sense-making in ways that potentially change the research situation.

Both Gummesson – and to a lesser extent Imms and Ereaut – talk about the ‘research’ and ‘consultancy’ roles in a way that implies that they are ‘things’; fixed and unchanging. It is difficult to envisage any sense of movement. If we can think of them as aspects of the process of emergent inquiry – and possibly emergent identity – then there is more of a feeling of fluidity; of the gesture and response of interaction, between roles, between individuals, calling forth different manifestations of role or different aspects of self. Increasingly I am entertaining the view that research and consultancy are, to all intents and purposes, the same process.

### **(iii) Process Consultation**

Both process consultation and, arguably, commercial qualitative research trace their roots back to the work of the social psychologist, Kurt Lewin, in the 1940s. Lewin, in attempting to bridge the gap between pure and applied research, aimed to develop a practical social science which both described the world and was informative about how we might change it. (Shaw 2002:126). He advocated co-

operative research, i.e. working 'with' people, rather than 'on' them. However, over the years, the disciplines have diverged, so that currently there is little practical connection between the two; OD developed within organisations, whereas commercial qualitative research has been largely used by organisations to research stakeholder groups outside the organisation. Given my interest in emergent inquiry which incorporates research and consultancy and given the common heritage, I am therefore particularly interested in exploring process consultation.

Schein (1999) defines the over-riding goal of process consultation as establishing an effective helping relationship, based on the central assumption that 'one can only help a human system to help itself' (ibid:1) He describes three models of consultation:

- (i) The Expertise Model
- (ii) The Doctor-Patient Model
- (iii) The Process Consultation Model

In brief, the Expertise model assumes that the consultant can provide a service which the client is unable to provide for himself, whereas the Doctor-Patient model is based on the diagnosis of a problem which the consultant can solve. Process consultation, which Schein favours - although he acknowledges that the other models can also be useful on occasion - emphasises **joint** diagnosis and passing on to the client the consultant's diagnostic and problem-solving skills. Schein defines process consultation as 'the creation of a relationship with the client that permits the client to perceive, understand, and act on the process events that occur in the client's internal and external environment in order to improve the situation as defined by the client' (ibid 20).

Schein explores the tacit assumptions on which these alternative models of consultancy are based and suggests that the consultant or 'helper' must choose the most appropriate model of helping, to use. However, he stresses that all three

models imply that help is the primary function of consultation and he assumes that the person seeking help ‘often does not know what she is looking for and indeed should not really be expected to know’ (ibid:5). Furthermore, he believes that ‘the helping process should *always begin in the PC mode*’ because until we have inquired and removed our ignorance and tested our assumptions, we do not know if it would be safe or desirable to shift into the Expert or Doctor mode’ (ibid:19). Schein perceives these three modes as discrete in form and sequential in function.

What the consultant must be really expert at, then, is sensing from one moment to the next what is going on and choosing a helping mode that is most appropriate to that immediate situation and that will build a helping relationship. *No one of these models will be used all the time. But at any given moment, the consultant can operate from only one of them.* The experienced consultant will find herself switching roles frequently as she perceives the dynamics of the situation to be changing.

(Schein 1999:22)

So, what relevance does Schein’s process consultation have for commercial qualitative research practice and, in particular, what can it contribute to the development of research as emergent inquiry? Commercial research has historically acted on the basis of the Expertise Model and, often, this has served it well. When the client is a research buyer who is familiar with qualitative methodology, when he/she has clearly defined the research problem, when we are brought in as experts to offer advice on how to approach the problem, carry out the research and offer our recommendations then, by and large, and Expertise model is appropriate.<sup>27</sup>

However, as qualitative research has moved outside its historical confines, boundaries have become blurred: Research buyers are no longer confined to the ‘research department’; clients are increasingly struggling to define ‘the research problem’; recommendations cannot be handed over as neat parcelled offerings; they are messy, conditional, need exploring, owning. All of this reflects the

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<sup>27</sup> The work we did with Glamex which I introduced in Project 2. is a good example of this.

complex, unpredictable world that we inhabit. Researchers are still brought in as ‘experts’ but, in order to develop an effective helping relationship, we need to be more than this. We need to be able to help the client to define what the problem ‘is’, how we might express it, whether or not research will help them and if so, what research might mean in the particular context. Therefore, instead of seeing ‘the research itself’ as ‘the main course’ and the client contact – the initial briefing and the presentation of findings - as starter and pudding, we must view the meal as a never-ending banquet. Inevitably this means greater emphasis on consultation – and this does not at all deny the importance of research in the process. Rather, I would see it as re-defining research to include the ongoing processes of exploration with clients, stakeholder groups, customers, staff etc. Effectively, consultation becomes part of emergent inquiry.

Can Schein’s process consultation contribute to this broader understanding of research? I find Schein’s elaboration of three modes of consultation very helpful in making sense of some of the conflicts that exist within my practice. It has enabled me to perceive ‘research’ in a broader and more flexible way, as I have discussed above, rather than in terms of formalised research structures.

However, there are areas of Schein’s thinking that I would challenge. Firstly, I would not regard the modes as discrete and mutually exclusive. Rather, I would understand them as themes running through my interactions; at times some themes might take precedence, at times others, but they are always potentially interacting; never discrete. My experience is that, when I am acting as if I am ‘just’ a researcher, then I feel disengaged, partial. When different themes (researcher, consultant etc.) are operating, as appropriate, and engage together and with others, I feel whole, alive. In practice, I believe this means more creative engagement. Secondly, Schein stresses that the consultant must ‘choose a helping mode that is most appropriate to that immediate situation’. This implies conscious, individual choice, whereas I would see these ‘modes’ emerging as self organising patterning of interaction. There is also, for me, a difficulty about the consultant who is, apparently, in control, autonomously

choosing a helping mode whilst the person being helped, according to Schein, 'should really not expect to know' what help they need. Two things strike me; although Schein claims this is not an 'Expert' role – and he would presumably regard the expertise as related to process rather than content – it is not necessarily how it would be perceived by the person being helped. Secondly, Schein seems to be making no allowance for 'confusion' on the part of the consultant; confusion which, as I discussed earlier, may foster innovation.

However, formally incorporating consultation as part of the research process, presents an interesting dilemma for qualitative researchers. It requires a shift in the type of relating between us and our clients; a more collaborative relationship. It also requires a redefinition of our role, identity and possibly training. Currently, because we do not charge for consultation, there is a temptation to do it half-heartedly – and often less than competently - and clients can underestimate its importance or deny its existence. If we openly acknowledging that we have a consultative function, then we must address it seriously, more professionally, so that clients understand and support what we are doing – and we must charge for it.

## **How am I now thinking about 'emergent inquiry'?**

I will briefly pause at this point, to review where I am and how my thinking is moving. In the process of developing and honing my understanding of what I mean by 'emergent inquiry', I have been knocking up against a variety of alternative perspectives. I am exploring the idea that the contradictions and conflict between research and consultancy, which Gummesson problematises (Gummesson 2000:125) and which Ereaut believes require conflict management (Ereaut 2000:15) can actually provide the potential for transformation; the creativity, intuition, those leaps that take you 'somewhere else' which may

emerge from interaction between different 'roles'<sup>28</sup>. Instead of focusing on the 'problem' of the opposing research and consultant paradigms, I want to focus on the way in which the diversity which these different 'aspects of self' offer may help generate new meaning. I have also been exploring the notion of broadening my understanding of 'research', to include aspects of process consultation with clients and others and, in doing so, moving from an 'event' model of research to one which is more fluid and process oriented.

However, it is time to return to my practice. What does emergent inquiry mean 'in practice'? I have chosen three vignettes, each involving a recent interaction with a client or research participant where there has been a different type of connection which might be described as 'more emergent inquiry than traditional research'. To some extent, in each case, it was my intention to change the patterning of the interaction. However, it did not always turn out as I had anticipated and each of the situations developed in ways that I could not have foreseen. I will briefly reflect on each of these narratives, before trying to draw out common themes and link them to my developing understanding of emergent inquiry.

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<sup>28</sup> I use this term here in its everyday sense, rather than in the sense that Griffin uses it.



## **Narrative 2: Shifting the nature of the relationship between researcher and ‘researched’**

I am coming to the end of The Department job. I receive an email from Colin. Richard - a senior figure in the Department - to whom many of my interviewees report, would like to talk to me. It is not appropriate to interview him in the same way as the Heads of the Units, because he has no operational control, but I am not sure how I ought to talk with him. I arrive early. Unlike the other research participants, he has his own, plush office, with two worn leather sofas. I sink into one; he sinks into the other. He is feisty but friendly; I feel reassured. I decide to simply throw the conversation open.

“Well, you wanted to see me. I’m very happy to talk about whatever you want. Why don’t you just fire away?” I start off.

He looks surprised. It occurs to me, for the first time, that he, like me, may be feeling a little uneasy about the meeting.

But he takes up the conversation.

He starts to explain why he thinks the proposed changes within The Department are a bad idea. He is forthright and articulate. I am writing furiously, as well as taping the conversation. Writing can act as a way of preventing me joining in the conversation. I am engaged elsewhere, so the other person feels compelled to continue talking, to fill the gaps. As a researcher, this is useful; I can act as a catalyst, without over-contaminating. I ask Richard a few questions as prompts, but basically it is a monologue. He is making the most of this opportunity to express his views.

I find myself agreeing with Richard, feeling excited, wanted to question him, not in that neutral way designed to encourage him to go on, but to engage with and explore his ideas, to really join in the conversation.

I decide this is what I will do. I put down my pen.

I describe some of my experiences with Communication Group and the views of other people I have spoken with. This is not, in itself, an unusual thing for me to

do; I never pretend to be a neutral interviewer. However, the extent to which I do it and my willingness to express my own opinions *is* unusual. This prompts Richard to open up further and we have a very interesting, useful and animated conversation for an hour or so.

I had intended to anonymise Richard's comments and embed them within the report. However, I received a specific request from the commissioning client that the interview with Richard be written up. I faced a dilemma. We interview people on the basis that what they say is confidential. This is agreed up front. I could not pass on Richard's comments without his permission. I would need to summarise his views, send them to him, ask him to 'authorise' them. He would then return them to me, I would forward them to the GRA, who would send them on to The Department. It all seemed very complicated. I emailed Richard and asked if he would be prepared to speak directly to Brian, the commissioning client. He replied that he was too busy, but he would be happy to sign off my summary if I forwarded it to him.

I was irritated at what I saw as game playing. Why could they not just talk to each other? No wonder there were such problems with 'communications' in The Department. Nonetheless, I prepared the summary. Rather than sanitising it by putting it into the third person, I decided to leave it as a transcript; I felt this gave it more impact. I just tidied it up and removed my voice. Richard approved it without change. I realised, belatedly, that he wanted his comments in writing. He wanted them included in the report and he wanted them to be attributed to him. The intermediate client at the GRA, when he had read Richard's transcript, suggested that we leave it out of the final report and send it separately. I argued (successfully) against this and included it.

This episode raises a number of ethical issues for me. What was I doing under the auspices of research? Could this be considered research at all? To what extent were my actions 'contaminating' the research? I allowed, encouraged, Richard to set the agenda for the meeting. This is a grey area because the

agenda, in theory, is set by the commissioning client. Would I have been so relaxed about it if I had sensed that Richard would be saying things that I disagreed with? But then I made the decision to join in the conversation; not in a measured, self-monitoring way, but by expressing my concerns, trying out ideas, exploring Richard's ideas. I was a very active participant in the conversation. In doing so, I inevitably influenced its content and direction. Then I took the transcript and edited it. I made the decision to leave it as transcript. I not only tidied up Richard's words, but I also edited out my own. To the unaware reader, it looked as if Richard was engaged in a monologue, not an animated conversation.

Why did I do this? I was concerned that The Department would feel that I was overstepping the mark if they realised the way in which I had 'conducted the interview'. So I hid behind my researcher role, avoiding the confusion of not knowing how to act in this unfamiliar situation. If I did not feel strongly about the subject matter, would I have acted in this way? How can I say I was acting as a researcher when I was, by the way in which I acted, 'biasing' the findings.

And yet, as I think back upon the meeting, I believe that this was an appropriate way to have behaved in that particular situation. The conversation would have been useful if I had simply acted as a sounding board; Richard is an interesting man, with well considered views. However, by joining in the conversation, we changed from a formulaic interaction – interviewer-interviewee - to a more fluid one. By sharing our thinking and experiences, we together moved our thinking on. It became a process of emergent inquiry which, I think, we both benefited from and which contributed a new dimension to the research.

However, I then withdrew. Having moved from the safe 'researcher' role, to engage in 'emergent research' and challenge an accepted way of thinking and behaving, I then scurried back. Anxiety prompted a default, researcher position. I edited out my contribution to the conversation before sending it on to the client. In doing so, I was being subversive; I was unwilling to stand up and

justify my actions. I guess I cannot overthrow years of training in a day. There is a process of learning, of trial and error, as I explore the possibilities of a different way of practicing.

What might have happened if I had left the transcript unedited? Almost certainly it would have provoked a reaction from The Department. Or would it? I really have no way of knowing.

I have included this vignette because it highlights some of the benefits and dilemmas of emergent inquiry; it offers the possibility of a more engaged, potentially more creative way of practice in which I, together with my research participants, can create new meaning. However, it flags up the issue of research ethics. I need to be able to argue for emergent inquiry from an ethical standpoint. On this occasion, I did not feel sufficiently able to defend my actions by reference to an established theory of practice and a strong ethical position. I therefore avoided putting myself in a position where I could be challenged. This is work in progress; work that I intend to develop further in my synopsis.

### **Narrative 3: Liberating the research paradigm**

I have known Jane, the Market Research Manager of a multi-national company, for many years and, from time to time, I have worked with her. She phones about a possible project. She has been asked to evaluate the effectiveness of the company's Annual Report and Review amongst a range of stakeholder groups; including investment analysts, pensions specialists, financial advisors, pressure groups and small investors. Would I like to write a proposal for the work? Two other research companies have also been invited to tender.

I write the proposal and am invited in to talk further about the project. When I arrive, there is a large group sitting around the table; the internal communications team, a couple of research buyers, two people from the publications company. Jane announces that there has been a problem. Senior management is concerned that talking to investment analysts and other large investors could 'open a can of worms'; they have already vetoed talking to pressure groups and environmentalists<sup>29</sup> Could we cut analysts and large investors out of the sample? This would also reduce the budget.

Previously I would probably have agreed; analysts would be difficult to get hold of and hard to set up interviews with, particularly during the summer months. I would have just gone along with the general anxiety – settled for a quiet life. On this occasion, I make a conscious decision not to do this. I felt it was important for the company to maintain dialogue with its stakeholders; by hiding away, for fear they might be attacked, they were more likely to provoke the very attack they were attempting to avoid. I did not know how it would be received, but I decide to speak out.

"I think it's really important that analysts and large investors are included. They are key stakeholders. You need to know what they think. You're spending

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<sup>29</sup> The company is embroiled in environmental controversy at the moment

£700,000 producing the Report and Review and you're trying to save a few grand on the research and shy away from the people that really matter.”

“The Board is nervous about someone going in to their key investors and something going wrong,” explains the Communications Director.

And I understand what she is saying.

“They see us as ladies with clipboards, don't they? They're worried that we'll blow it”

“Well, yes. All they know about research is what they hear about focus groups from the media.”

“Well, tell them it's consultancy. That it's ongoing dialogue with their stakeholders. It's important for the analysts to be able to tell you what they think, what they need. It's just as important for you to understand what they want. On the whole, people are pleased to be involved in this sort of exercise. They feel that companies care what they think. It's a form of PR as well as research.”

“Yes. That's it. I'll explain it as a consultation exercise. That puts it in quite a different light”, replies the Communications Director, cheerfully. The meeting becomes very animated and we continue as if the broader sample has been confirmed.

Sadly, the Board could not be convinced. They did decide to commission us to carry out the project, but it was reduced to four focus groups amongst small shareholders – safe territory.

‘Research’ is such a strong glue of enabling constraint that locks us all into a pattern of interaction; clients, researchers, research participants. Just re-framing our practice; substituting ‘consultancy’ for ‘research’, created a palpable change in the room; it was a real ‘Ah-ha’ moment. It allowed us all to see the potential of the project and to view it in a broader, more useful way. I am not suggesting that we substitute ‘consultancy’ for ‘research’ as a general principle; this would simply perpetuate an either-or approach. But, in this situation, it changed

people's perception of what we were doing and, in the process, the nature of my intervention and, to some extent, my identity.

I had not planned to position us as 'consultants', although I had been thinking and writing about consultancy over the previous weeks. We were 'stuck'. There was general agreement in the meeting that we needed to talk to financial analysts, but the Board was blocking this. No one knew quite what to do and I felt that I should offer a solution; I was the 'research expert'. However, instead of suggesting the 'obvious', i.e. that we would limit the audience for the research in order to move on, I deliberately prevaricated. This felt uncomfortable. It challenged my 'expert' role. But by 'staying with the confusion', another possibility emerged. We would become 'consultants'. And suddenly a new avenue presented itself. Increasingly I am finding that, when I do not try to play to role and allow 'solutions' to emerge, then the role become irrelevant but, at the same time, knowledge and experience are evoked; different themes are called forth and interact, along with those of others in the room. This, it feels, is identity continuously being re-created.

## Narrative 4: Refusing to be a researcher

Martin sends me an email.

*Sheila*

*This thing won't go away.*

*John<sup>30</sup> asks "Could we get a date to meet with Campbell Keegan to discuss how we might tackle the brand architecture research?"*

*Sheila, would you be prepared to come in again and meet the client for what I think could be a briefing meeting, (assuming that there is a project there)?*

*Regards*

*Martin*

My heart sinks.

This 'project' has been going on for months – eight months to be precise. Rosie and I have had two meetings with the client team, I have had an additional meeting on my own. We have written a proposal which we have revised three or four times. In all, we have spent about five days on this 'project' – none of them paid. On the other hand, this is GRA, our main client. We cannot lose the baby with the bath water.

On the previous occasion, when I met with this client team, I had tried to kill off the project. I could have taken their request at face value and agreed to take it on, even though I knew it was a waste of time and money. Martin, my primary client, knew this too. We might have colluded in the folly, in order to 'play the game'; to provide John, the internal client, with what he wanted. In one sense it would keep everyone happy.

However, partly as a way of exploring how my practice might change, particularly at these early stages of a project, and partly because the project was so patently foolish, I had decided not to go along with this. The objective of the

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<sup>30</sup> John is an internal client of Martin's. he works in the Strategic Consultancy Unit



research project was to develop the ‘brand architecture’ of a particular service amongst socially deprived user groups. In practice this meant exploring with these individuals whether they wanted an additional branding over and above the name of the support service that they were familiar with. And, assuming that they did, we needed to determine which of two options they preferred. We have worked quite extensively with these user groups on similar issues – as, I knew, had other research companies. There was ample evidence to suggest that users had no interest in an umbrella branding and little motivation to conceptually explore a hierarchy of inter-connected brands. Most were struggling to stay afloat, assailed as they were by health, housing and financial problems. Brand architecture was not a high priority.

In the past I have left such meetings having agreed to do the research, but feeling dishonest and dissatisfied. Rosie and I have then moaned loudly to each other about the futility of our practice whilst we banked the cheques. This time I decided I would do something different. I questioned the reasons for the research. I expressed my opinion that it was a waste of time and taxpayers money. I felt as if I was taking a risk in speaking out. This is our main client and they do give us a lot of interesting work. At the same time it felt liberating to speak honestly. I was conscious that this might lose us not only the current work but future, more interesting, work; they might well simply move on to a more compliant research company.

“This is not a research issue. It is an internal issue. It is something that the DSI<sup>31</sup> need to decide amongst themselves. Make a decision and be consistent in implementing it”, I said.

Having decided to speak out, there was no going back.

On this occasion, it was my clients who were confused. They had come to the meeting intending to brief me, the researcher, but I was not acting as a

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<sup>31</sup> DSI is the ‘third tier’ client. DSI commissioned the Strategic Consultancy Unit (John). SCU commissioned the PIAnning Department (Martin). Martin, potentially, commissioned me. All the others are on salaries. I am the only one who is self employed.

researcher. And if I was not going to behave like a researcher, they could not behave like clients. I had put them in a difficult situation. I was challenging their legitimacy. The power dynamic had shifted and I was assuming a leadership role, rather than a supplier role.

“We know, but the DSI cannot make decisions. They want to use the research to make the decision for them”

“But the research won’t give them an answer, because people don’t care. If they want help, it would be better to organise an internal facilitated workshop which would help them to reach a decision”

We tried to explore how we could go forward together without resorting to the palliative of research. I could feel their anxiety and confusion; they did not know what to do. I too felt uneasy, unsure what to do next. Eventually, Martin said, “OK. I think we need to go away and think about this a bit more”

The meeting ended awkwardly and I left wondering if I had done the right thing. The ‘research’ model of client interaction would mean that I ‘received’ the brief with, at best, an open mind and, at worst, concealing my doubts. It is at the presentation of ‘findings’ that I can express a view, possibly couched in the language of my ‘respondents’. Here, I was expressing my views vociferously, ‘up front’. I was not only challenging the research model; I was challenged the business one. Having invested five (unpaid) days in this project, I had blown it out of the water. As I walked back to my car, I was feeling rather despondent. OK, so I had retained my integrity, but where did that get me? I was not acting as a traditional ‘researcher’, otherwise I might have kept quiet, taken the work and expressed my views in the presentation. I was not acting as a businessperson, because I was acting against my own financial interests. I could really not be classed as a consultant, because I was not employed in that role.

But, of course, I am not just a role. As I mull on this now, I see that my identity, if we take this to mean the interaction between different aspects of self and those of others, emerged in the interaction. In Damasio’s (2000) terms, this felt like a

‘whole body’ experience. I felt very engaged, involved, thought at the same time, exposed, precisely because I had stepped out of role.

The next day, I received an email from Martin:

*Sheila*

*I'd just like to say thanks again for the time you have spent with us on this (non) project. We have really appreciated your input.*

*We'll be in touch when something appropriate (and sensible) arises.*

*Regards*

*Martin*

Then, two weeks later, when I think the project is dead and buried, the email from Martin arrives. Will I come back in for another meeting ‘to discuss the brand architecture research’?

How to respond? The researcher in me wanted to agree to another meeting. Feeling disgruntled and hard done by, I would have gone in, feigning jollity, and gone through the procedure again, in the hope that some work would result – that the five days already spent would not be wasted. I tried to suspend that automatic reaction and think about what I wanted to do. I did think I could help. The help, however, was in facilitating their decision making, not conducting further research. If I was going to join in the thinking, then I wanted this to be overtly acknowledged, not treated as a by-product of a failed research project. In this particular situation, consultancy (fed by research know-how) was most relevant.

I replied to Martin’s email:

*Martin*

*Well, what to do about it all...*

*I'm very happy to come in and help ferret out whether there is a project here.*

*The issue from our point of view, though, is the amount of time we've already spent on this without remuneration.....Can I suggest that you/Strategic*

*Consultancy pay for half a day of my time. If we can treat the session as a*

*workshop, we may, between us, be able to get to the bottom of what DSI really wants – and needs – to find out what/whether research is the way to do it. It would be worth the expenditure if it saves another four meetings about it.*

*Regards*

*Sheila*

Martin responded:

*Sheila*

*Thanks for this. I have been very conscious (to the point of embarrassment) of the time you have spent on this with no reward. I think it's very reasonable to charge for any further time spent on this.*

*I am awaiting John's response. Talk to you soon.*

*Regards*

*Martin.*

If I go back in to talk to them, it will be different. The patterning of our relationship has been changed by this earlier meeting. And it will also be different because they are paying for my time. This will change the expectations on both sides. By paying, they would be acknowledging that the exploratory meeting, in itself, is part of the research process, not just a prelude to it.

But, on reflection, I think there is further learning here. I suspect that John, from Strategic Consultancy, felt undermined by the way in which I acted. By questioning the validity of the research in the way in which I did, I was implicitly criticising how he was doing his job – especially given that he was the 'Strategic Consultant'. Yes, you could say I was 'acting as a consultant', but the way in which I was doing this was to flaunt my superior 'expertise': I 'knew' what the research would 'find out'; I 'knew' the project was 'a waste of time'. This may not have been the most useful approach to 'consultation'. It is probably not what Schein would describe as 'establishing an effective helping relationship' (Schein 1999:1).

Each of these three narratives, in different ways, reflects experiments; attempts – part intention, part chance - to move from a narrow ‘role bound’ research model to a process of emergent research, which is more fluid, inclusive and ongoing. However, although intuitively I feel that this is a positive move, I need to be able to support it by a strong theoretical perspective and ethical position which is shared amongst (some of) my community of practice. It is this aspect that I still need to develop.

I will return now to the fourth of the perspectives I outlined earlier, that of complex responsive processes, which I will explore in order to help me position my own thinking.

#### **(iv) A Complex Responsive Processes perspective**

A complex responsive processes perspective is quite different in its approach to the other perspectives I considered earlier. Although I have expanded on Stacey’s thinking in previous projects, it is perhaps useful to re-cap here, because it has particular relevance to my interest in the notion of ‘emergent inquiry’. Stacey, by understanding human relating as inherently pattern forming, does not need to look for causes of coherent human action in concepts such as mental models or reified polarities (Stacey 2001:93). Focusing on emergent processes and interaction in ‘the living present’ makes dissection irrelevant. Instead, Stacey suggests that ‘Transformative Teleology’ offers a single causal framework in which the process is one of perpetual construction of the future as both continuity and potential transformation at the same time:

The movement of human action is, therefore, fundamentally paradoxical in that it both sustains identity (the known, sameness, continuity) and, at the same time, it creates the novel, that is, variations that have never been there before (the unknown, difference, discontinuity). The process of human actions is that of perpetual reproduction of identity, with the potential for transformation. There is no optimal, mature or final state, only the perpetual construction of the known and the unknown, at the same time. The future is unknowable but yet recognizable.  
(Stacey 2001:163)

For Stacey, Transformative Teleology replaces the dual causal framework of Rationalist and Formative Teleology upon which mainstream thinking is founded (ibid:26-27).

What relevance does this have for the development of emergent inquiry? I believe this perspective is very relevant in that it privileges emergent identity, rather than fixed roles. This means that research and consultancy (or more accurately, researching and consulting) can be viewed as two – amongst many - aspects of the patterning of ongoing interaction in the living present and it is in this diversity and possible conflict of interaction, that novelty may emerge. Emergent inquiry can therefore be understood as the perpetual construction of shared meaning within a community of practice. It is ‘unknowable but yet recognizable’, i.e. to be valid and reliable the community must agree that this is so. They must recognise the ‘truth’ of the meaning created. This seems, to me, to be moving towards a concept of ethics in relation to emergent inquiry.

There is a danger that ‘the living present’ can give the impression that it is ‘conflict free’ because the focus is on emergent identity. Gummesson raises this issue when he states, ‘To pretend there is no problem (of conflicting roles) is not to be constructive or reflective. Instead, I try to explain how the two roles (researcher, consultant) can *reinforce* each other’ (Gummesson 2004). However, Stacey does not view ‘the living present’ as avoidance of conflict. On the contrary, he stresses the importance of diversity and conflict; they are essential in creating the potential for transformation. (Stacey 2000: 105).

I have talked generally about identity and ‘emergent identity’ throughout this project. It is time I was more specific about what I mean by these terms and linked them to my understanding of emergent inquiry within my community of practice, before summing up my thinking so far.

## Different Perspectives on Identity

Traditional psychological explanations of identity tend to focus on 'identity formation', for example Erikson (1959) differentiated between, firstly, the identifications of the child with significant people in his/her environment and, secondly, through a variety of different experiences and roles, the integration of these identifications resulting in 'achieving identity' (Erikson, quoted in Hilgard and Atkinson 1967: 466). Frankl, on the other hand, proposed that 'man should not, indeed cannot, struggle for identity in a direct way; he rather finds identity to the extent to which he commits himself to something beyond himself, to a cause greater than himself.' (Frankl 1973:20) Both explanations tend to focus primarily on the individual and view the social context as supportive i.e. its function is to provide a stimulus for the development of the individual.

Social psychology adopts a broader perspective, with much of the discussion centring around the issue of whether the social or the personal has primacy in determining identity. Goffman (1968), for instance, talks in terms of 'social identity', by which he means the way in which we might 'anticipate (an individual's) category and attributes' and subsequently transform these 'normative expectations, into righteously presented demands' (ibid:12); crudely, we carry out a status check to 'place' an individual within an appropriate social grouping. This is a rather different interpretation of identity; one that is socially evolved. However, although there is more acknowledgement here of the social, there is still an underlying assumption of separation between the individual and the social; of examining the way in which the individual behaves within a social context.

A complex responsive processes perspective (Stacey 2001) views identity as inextricably personal and social at the same time, because identity is created, on an ongoing basis, as the patterning of our interactions with self and others whereby, 'in the movement of the living present, social and personal identities

are recreated and potentially transformed as people together construct their future' (Griffin 2000:117). However, I do not want to imply that identity is fixed. I prefer Griffin's description of 'themes of identity' (ibid: 21). Identity, by this definition, is therefore always emergent and relational.

## **Why role and identity matter in developing a new way of practice**

I have been circling around the issues of role and identity in this project in an attempt to make sense of some of the contradictions and ambiguities that exist within the qualitative research industry at present. The 'role' (in its traditional sense) of the commercial qualitative researcher has, I believe, become very distanced from 'identity', i.e. what we call ourselves bears little relationship to how we practice. This raises many questions, such as; so what is it that we *really* 'do'? Can this activity be considered research? If not, what is it? In what sense, if at all, are qualitative researchers a homogeneous group? If they are not homogeneous, what working practice am I actually referring to? Exploring the ways in which our role and identity emerge matters, because it shapes – and is shaped by - the way in which we, as researchers and clients, work together.

However, if we understand role in Griffin's sense, as emerging in interaction, then role and identity are inextricably linked. If we take identity to be the patterning of interaction with self and others, then roles are integral to this patterning.

But we are still left with the difficulty of what, as qualitative researchers, to call ourselves.

I am not alone with this difficulty. Over the last few years, there has been a growing debate within market research, about 'the future of the industry' (Wills & Williams 2004:3). Wills & Williams suggest that we need to develop a



‘Customer Insight’ industry which embraces a range of disciplines including database management, financial and planning data, feedback from sales and customers etc. They postulate a radical re-structuring of the market research industry:

We need a professional body for the Customer Insight industry that represents all the Insight areas involved. The name ‘Market Research Society’ can only be used to represent the market research specialism. The MRS should provide the lead and drive the development of such an Insight body. But in doing so it must face the stark choice of either transforming itself into that Insight body, with a new name...or it must remain separate but then act in concert with that new body.

(ibid:14)

Part of me acknowledges the sense in this approach. Clearly I believe that what we currently offer, as qualitative researchers, is more akin to customer insight than traditional market research, so there is logic in re-positioning the market research industry in this way. But my heart is not in it. This is not really where I sense qualitative research is going or how I would like it to evolve. It does not move away sufficiently from the traditional research model. It simply shifts the attention from the structural activity that we are engaged in, i.e. market research, to the end product, i.e. customer insight. This is no mean feat, but it does not challenge the rather limited way in which we currently understand qualitative research practice.

## **Reviewing my current thinking – where is it leading?**

Within this project I have been attempting to develop an understanding of commercial qualitative research consultancy as a process of emergent inquiry. By emergent inquiry I mean a process in which all parties involved; clients, researchers, stakeholders – and others - are jointly involved in ongoing development of understanding and direction, which is not constrained by the requirements of the traditional research paradigm. I have been developing this

understanding from the perspective of complex responsive processes, taking 'research' and 'consultancy' to be themes that pattern experience which are called forth in 'the living present', rather than competing roles which are in conflict or which need to be managed.

I have also been exploring how process consultancy can inform emergent inquiry; encouraging a broader, more fluid practice by enabling clients to better formulate their business problems – and engendering a spirit of inquiry which will continue within the organisation after the 'research itself' is completed. I have explored how consultancy might be understood explicitly as part of the emergent inquiry process, not as a covert 'add-on'. I need to continue to develop the understanding that has emerged in this project together with others practitioners who are also struggling to change the nature of our practice.

This approach will challenge not only my own perceptions, but also those of the people I work with. They will not always be welcome. And it means that I must constantly reflect on and be reflexive about the way in which I am interacting at any moment in time. In particular, broadening the notion of research to encompass a form of process consultation may be quite difficult, even if this is what is required, because it confounds expectations. It will require a shift in how clients position us and how we interact. I need to continue 'testing the water', allowing the different roles or 'aspects of self' - researcher, consultant, all the others, to inform emergent identity in 'the living present'.

However, in order for emergent inquiry to be viewed as a viable alternative to traditional commercial qualitative research, there is a need to account for practice in a way that is transparent, rigorous and plausible within the existing qualitative research community; including researchers and clients. It also needs to demonstrate a clear ethical position, especially given the accepted standards of the MRS Code of Conduct, which has been developed from an established classical research perspective. This is an area that I have explored in my synopsis.

# Epilogue

Three years on: how have my thinking and practice changed? I have attempted in these four projects and my synopsis to illustrate, through my narratives and reflection fuelled by reading and peer discussion, the changes in my professional practice. Perhaps the most striking change is a renewed interest in my practice; an interest in the processes of inquiry; what knowledge 'is', how it can be understood and how it is jointly created and legitimised. Alongside this, I have developed a greater curiosity about how other, related disciplines, such as process consulting, social science, as well as complex responsive processes and social constructionism, understand these issues and explored the relevance of this thinking to commercial qualitative research.

I have become less complacent in my practice; less inclined to accept the status quo, for 'a quiet life'. This has not always made my working life easier. In a sense it has created more frustration as well as more satisfaction. Viewing qualitative research from a process perspective means that I will more readily challenge and explore thinking – my own and my clients' - during the early stages of the research project, because I would now view client interaction as part of the research process. Equally I am less hide-bound by research structure and regard it more as guidance than rule. This can raise ethical issues and provoke conflict with clients - these need to be addressed as part of the research process. I encourage more client participation in the development of research recommendations and I will encourage ongoing conversation about the research within the client organisation, rather than presenting the research findings as 'fact'. However, increased co-creation does not mean that individual qualitative research skills and thinking are less important. The 'silent conversation' of preparation, analysis, creating meaning from 'data' is still of primary importance. Most importantly, I feel able to legitimate my research approach with more

confidence, rather than borrowing from an inappropriate ‘positivist’ epistemology or falling back on qualitative research thinking as simply ‘intuitive’ or ‘an art’. In practice this means that the ‘default’ mode, i.e. reverting to the ‘classic’ researcher stance, is not necessary – I feel I can support my approach to ‘emergent inquiry’ from a stronger theoretical position.

So, what are the implications of my research and what contribution have I made to the professional practice of commercial qualitative inquiry? For many years, I have distanced myself from the qualitative research community, feeling rather defeatist about the ‘state of the profession’. However, during the course of my doctoral research, I have become very aware that there are other commercial qualitative researchers who have, over the last few years, also become interested in the issues that I have been exploring here. After decades of disinterest in the theory of qualitative research there is, suddenly, a groundswell of interest within the profession in re-examining and re-defining qualitative research practice. I am now keen to be part of this ongoing conversation and have recently participated through speaking at industry conferences (last year and next year), convening client workshops, writing articles for trade publications, liaising with research user organisations and, shortly, being part of an academic/commercial qualitative research forum which aims to develop some shared understanding of practice.

I would see my contribution to my professional practice as offering a perspective on qualitative research as ‘emergent inquiry’; inquiry which is not circumscribed by a ‘classic’ research paradigm but which, as I described earlier, is informed by rigorous thinking, reflection, experience, intuition, creativity and bodily resonances of the ongoing interaction between and within practitioners, clients, research participants – and the recognition by clients that qualitative research can help their decision making. This way of understanding research is, I believe, liberating for our profession; in that ‘inquiry’ is taken as intrinsic to the process of organisational – indeed all – life, not confined to ‘research projects’ and the ‘researcher’ is openly acknowledged as part of the inquiry process.

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# Appendices

1. Conference Paper given at the joint AQR/QRCA research conference in Lisbon: April 2003
2. Accompanying conference presentation

# **A LION IN THE MIST: WHY DOES QUALITATIVE RESEARCH KEEP UNDERSELLING ITS STRATEGIC POTENTIAL?**

**Paper given at the AQR/QRCA Conference:  
30<sup>th</sup> April - 2<sup>nd</sup> May 2003**

**Winner of the 'Best Paper' award**

**Sheila Keegan  
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**With many thanks to Rosie Campbell and Gill Ereat for their comments and  
suggestions on this paper**

# Abstract

If you believe the doom merchants, qualitative research is dead – or at least in its death throes. Management consultants have stolen our thunder. Qualitative techniques are fundamentally flawed. Focus groups are discredited. We are forever locked out of the boardroom.

Personally I think this is a load of nonsense. But it is, nonetheless, dangerous nonsense. It is dangerous because it distracts us. It allows us to moan about the ‘world outside’; those who do not understand and appreciate us. What it stops us doing is looking calmly, closely and critically at what it is that *we* do to co-create this situation; celebrating what we do well... and changing what we do not like.

This paper attempts to continue the conversations that have increasingly sprung up over the last few years around the nature of *what it is that we do, how we do it and how we can do it better*. It draws on some of the recent thinking in Relationship Psychology, Social Constructionism and Complexity sciences and seeks to challenge some of the assumptions that have got us where we are today... but also limit where we will be tomorrow.

**Part 1** explores some of the ways in which we currently undersell our potential; the ‘*How do we do this?*’

**Part 2** examines – and questions - the basic assumptions and underpinnings of our profession which both enable and constrain us in what we do; the ‘*Why do we do it this way?*’

**Part 3** plays with the notion of ‘qualitative research unleashed’; setting qualitative thinking free from its historical bondage. The, “*So what now?*”

# Part 1: Let sleeping lions lie?

## Here and now

For three decades we've heard the same laments: Research is undervalued. Researchers are too low down the pecking order. Why are we, qualitative thinkers and practitioners, not in the boardroom in this allegedly consumer driven age? How can we achieve more status? Why is it that the management consultants and ad agencies get all the glory? The laments seem to get louder as time goes on. There seems to be even more to moan about today than there was thirty odd years ago when qualitative research was in the ascendancy – some would say its prime. Are we the fallen angels, tumbled from guru status to filing clerk, just as air stewardesses have toppled from geisha to waitress?

Although times have changed, the gripes have not. And to some extent, it is true<sup>1</sup>. There has been no obvious change in the degree to which qualitative research is employed in the service of 'strategic thinking'. By and large, qualitative research has failed to permeate large organisation business strategy. There is much talk, certainly in UK circles, about qualitative research being at a 'crossroads' - sufficiently familiar and well-understood for research buyers to see little that is 'mystical' in its processes but, arguably, insufficiently understood to achieve its true potential. Some talk about the imminent split in the industry; data factories to churn out the numbers and 'meta-analysts' to integrate and interpret (1) (2). There is carping about the commoditisation of the 'focus group'. There is talk about the damaging competitive impact of various 'consultancies', from branding to forecasting to futures.

So, if we really believe that these moans reflect the true state of our practice, rather than just a way of letting off steam, why have we not done something about it? Why have we not managed to change things so they are more to our liking?

Clearly moaning hasn't worked. Its time to do something different. And there seems to be a groundswell of voices saying that it is time to re-examine what we do that limits our ability to make the most of the considerable skills, experience and intuition that we possess – what shall we call it - the Qualitative Perspective? Qualitative Thinking? – at the moment there is no descriptor that adequately encapsulates what we offer.

This paper is intended to lend another voice to the groundswell, to keep the conversation going, to explore the possible futures of qualitative research..... It is not measured and prescriptive. I hope my thoughts will provoke and stimulate other conversations; different thinking. I believe we can make what we do more fun and more exciting, as well as more useful. If so, all well and good.

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<sup>1</sup> Although I could just as easily make a strong argument for the meteoric success of the qualitative industry, both in terms of its commercial growth and the way in which it has spread its tentacles into all areas of our society.



I'm going to start with the premise that we undersell ourselves in what we do. Maybe you disagree? Maybe you're right – that in your case you don't. But I have spoken to enough qualitative researchers over the years to feel that this is a common perception and I have often felt it myself. So I will act on the hypothesis that there is some truth in this assumption.

## So, in what ways do we undersell ourselves?

I think there are a number of ways in which we do this – probably many more than I have touched on below, but I hope I have provided enough examples to give the general idea. I think all of these examples are underpinned by a particular, historical way we have of viewing what we do, which is so ingrained in our way of thinking that we do not even see it. This underpinning has become what the Social Constructionist, John Shotter (3) would describe as 'rationally invisible'.

### Playing 'Hide and Seek'

One way in which we undersell ourselves is by playing 'hide and seek'. Let me put it more bluntly. I don't think we are honest about what we do. We are constantly hiding, peeping out to gauge the mood and the tolerance of our clients from behind our methodology, our 'expert' position, our 'objectivity'. We hide our 'true' selves behind the mask of 'research', in the misguided belief that this will make what we have to offer more authentic or more acceptable (4). I question whether this makes it more useful.

Let me give you a small example. Since I have been pondering on this strange 'hide and seek' behaviour, I see it everywhere. (Until recently, it was so much a part of my everyday life that I never noticed I was doing it. As they say, 'to the hungry man, everything looks like food'.)

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 ennui engulf me. And then, implicitly, 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. If I did carry 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. We act **as if** we are '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**. 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.

And this suits no-one, does it? Not us, the researchers, because this is how we earn our living. Not Jane, because she wants 'hard evidence' from research to back up her decisions. She wants 'facts' from me, not more opinions.

Think about how often this happens. We talk about 'consumer insight' as if 'consumers' were zoo animals, rather than ourselves. Viewed groups are run in a more mechanistic way because clients are viewing. We talk for two hours to a group of women about hair colourants. Do we know at the end of it if their mother has just died, if their child is sick, if they have just found out that they are pregnant? Probably not. Will it affect their response in the group? Undoubtedly. But we tell ourselves that we are only interested in them as 'hair colourant users'. I could go on....

We reduce things to a mechanical system because "only a mechanical system can be clearly understood and transparent" (5). 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 perceiving everything that is happening everywhere in the universe". (6) Truly mind blowing! 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 forget that wonderful NLP<sup>1</sup> slogan which should be emblazoned on the letterhead of every marketing related organisation: “The map is not the territory” (7).

Playing these games results in us ‘hiding our light under a bushel’. If we stopped playing ‘hide and seek’ and were more honest about what we do – without the ‘prop’ of a narrowly defined definition of research – it would become clear that our skills are much more powerful than we let on.

### **Boxing ourselves in with our own ‘identity’**

We define ourselves by our methodology, not by what we can do for our clients (8). A business strategist offers a promise, a vision. We are ‘qualitative researchers’; we offer groups or depths or new fangled alternatives (and then we spend our time debating which technique is ‘best’, rather than developing better ways of creating new meaning).

Reminds me of that lovely Sufi story:

“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.’(9)

Too often we offer a means, not an end. We search where it is easiest to see rather than where we are more likely to find the answer. And, having defined ourselves in this way, we become tighter and tighter in our definition, perhaps in the hope that by doing this, we become more professional, our position more inviolable - locking ourselves within our castle. We allow ourselves to become focused on sample structure and recruitment criteria, on validation and findings, little realising that we are “*looking for the key where there is light*”. Even when we feel this is not the right way, it is hard to break out. We are part of a self-reinforcing network; researchers, clients, ‘consumers’, maybe the world, the universe. We are afraid to argue otherwise.

Why do we do this? I think it dates back to the roots of qualitative research; our tradition of scientific enquiry, academia and the drive for reproducibility, which I will discuss in more detail in Part 2 of this paper. Qualitative research drags the Newtonian ball and chain of scientific rationalism behind it – and this holds us back.

There's nothing wrong with the 'qualitative' part. Qualitative thinking, qualitative inquiry, a qualitative perspective. All of these are open, curious, ‘evolving’

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<sup>1</sup> Neuro Linguistic Programming

descriptions of what we do. But somehow, when you add 'research' to it, it seems to close down. It becomes 'unearthing', not 'creating'. Fixed, not evolving. I don't believe it is the word 'research' in itself that is the problem. 'Research' in the Oxford English dictionary is defined as '*Careful search or inquiry...endeavour to discover new or collate old facts by scientific study of a subject, course of critical investigation*'. I think the problem lies in how we have come to view the meaning of the word; dry, boring, inward looking, risk averse. Change the meaning to 'learning' and you have a completely different perspective. 'Qualitative learning' sounds forward looking rather than constantly looking over its own shoulder. A much more powerful perspective.

### **Setting ourselves apart; becoming invisible**

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<sup>1</sup>. We report back.

Of course, we all know that this is not true. Clients and researchers alike. Because, of course, we can never be outside of 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 choose to pretend that we don't.

It's easy to just dismiss all this as the age-old 'Can research be objective?' chestnut. Historically, commercial (and other) research has been defined by 'objectivity', 'impartiality' etc.<sup>2</sup> Although, arguably, quantitative research still aspires to this position, the pretence that qualitative inquiry can be 'objective' has long been abandoned. However, the alternative, based on either/or thinking, is that, if it is not 'objective', then it must be 'subjective'. This is no easier a position to hold for either researcher or client.

From a researcher perspective, 'subjectivity' can seem to undermine credibility. We have all, I suspect, at some time in our histories, got 'carried away' with enthusiasm during a presentation, only to be brought up sharp by the client's, "*So is this your opinion or a research finding?*" And, at the time, realising we had overstepped the mark, we probably backed down and made some spurious distinction between the two; between findings and opinion. As if it was possible! According to accepted wisdom, research based largely on the researcher's opinion, lacks professional

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

<sup>2</sup> See Tim Baker and Martin Callingham's 2003 MRS paper for a good description of the historical roots and development of research

grounding. From a client perspective, what weight does 'subjective' opinion carry and how can he justify paying for it.

In practice, of course, it is more complex. An expectation of 'objectivity' and 'subjectivity', interwoven and ill-defined, exists amongst both researcher and clients – but this is not overtly acknowledged or explored. Often it results in confusion and switching back and forth between the two perspectives in an attempt to reconcile the ambiguity. I believe that this issue is ignored because it is too problematic for the industry to address. But it is an issue that, whilst enabling qualitative researchers – to some extent - in their current practice, constrains the way in which the industry can develop. It is a theme I will come back to later.

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 (10). The mind/body split does not exist. It is a fiction. We all know this intuitively, 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”  
(11)

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.

The more I think about this issue, the more interesting it becomes. It means that, when we are 'conducting research', we are learning in a 'whole body' way, not just intellectually. We can't help but do this. Our physiology is changing. Our emotions are responding. And much of this is happening at a non conscious level. Not only is this an expanded view of how we engage with a research situation, according to Damasio it is inevitable and essential. If we see engagement and learning in this 'whole body' way, then the separation between 'objective' and 'subjective' simply becomes meaningless. We just cannot engage rationally without emotion.

And, of course, this 'whole body' engagement does not happen in isolation. In a team – or a group discussion - it can become intensified, an 'alignment' of energies. As Peter Senge puts it:

“..when a team becomes more aligned, a commonality of direction emerges and individuals' energies harmonize. There is less wasted energy. In fact, a

resonance or synergy develops, like the “coherent” light of a laser rather than the incoherent and scattered light of a light bulb. There is commonality of purpose, a shared vision, and understanding of how to complement one another’s efforts. Individuals do not sacrifice their personal interests to the larger team vision; rather, the shared vision becomes an extension of their personal visions.” (12)

And it does not stop there. When we ‘present our findings’, the ‘whole body’ learning may again come into play through the expression of our emotional responses and intuitions - if we allow it to that is. However, Senge’s description of an ‘aligned team’ is a far cry from the average research presentation, which is usually much more on the lines of a sender-receiver model of communication. How would it be if we aimed for an ‘aligned team’ perspective instead?

‘Whole body’ learning/communication and ‘aligned teams’ offer us a radical alternative to the current ‘Observer’ model. I’m not saying it would be easy to shift, but surely it’s worth us exploring what it might be like to practice in this way.

### **Pretending that we are ‘just researchers’**

We spend our days exploring, explaining, re-constructing. We are the interpreters of other people's worlds. At the most basic level, we select what is important and what is not. But on a much more sophisticated level, we create narratives, we perform, we ensnare and convince. And even while we do all this, like traditional witchdoctors, we all know - us, our clients – that we are pretending; that what we are doing is colluding in the fiction that we are delivering rational research findings (more or less); that it is not a story we are weaving but ‘fact’. We pretend that we do not select and interpret and create.

We move from the group discussion (say) which is, on one level at least, open and visible – although it exists like the tip of an iceberg, with the dark forces of inchoate meaning swirling beneath - to the presentation. And in between there is what? The Analysis. But we do not talk about that. This is the secret part that is not open to explanation or exploration. At least as far as our clients are concerned.

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 thing 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. This is the hidden territory, largely ignored and smoothed over, perhaps because we lack the insight or ability to really understand it ourselves. How then can we expect clients to respect this ‘analysis time’, when we do not value it ourselves? It is little wonder that requests for ‘top-line feedback’ the next day come quick and fast. And, whilst we may privately moan about how unreasonable this is and how ‘clients do not understand us’, we still, by and large, do it, thereby

reinforcing the client's view that it is 'easy' - a low key element in the research process.

We, as researchers, know that this – ‘The Analysis’ (for want of a better word) - is the most important bit. When the transformation takes place. When we continue the process of sense-making started<sup>1</sup> with research participants, creating ideas and weave our thinking into a plausible and useful story to tell our clients.

Does this sound shocking? The idea that we ‘make it all up’? That we tell stories? Maybe it does not fit with how we like to see ourselves? However, much has been written by Psychologists, Social Constructionists and advocates of Complexity alike, which attempts to explain how we make sense of our experience. The emphasis is on the constant processes of construction and re-construction of reality, within the frames of language, culture, experience. We re-create our past, we do not recall it. And each time we remember it, we change it. The same is true of our future. As Karl Weick, the organisational psychologist puts it:

“..in a social constructionist world, our future is not just a matter of prediction and control, but a matter of how those within it are involved in producing it”  
(13)

Ralph Stacey, who broadly adopts a Complexity<sup>1</sup> perspective, puts it another way:

“...in this way of thinking, knowledge is not stored anywhere and then retrieved to form the basis of action. Rather, knowledge is continuously reproduced and transformed in relational interaction between individuals.”  
(14)

Weick stresses how we are driven by plausibility, rather than accuracy and, ultimately, the need for a ‘good story’!

“If accuracy is nice, but not necessary in sensemaking, then what is necessary? The answer is, something that preserves plausibility and coherence, something that is reasonable and memorable, something that embodies past experience and expectations, something that resonates with other people, something that can be constructed retrospectively but also can be used prospectively, something that captures both feeling and thought, something that allows for embellishment to fit current oddities, something that is fun to construct. In short, what is necessary in sensemaking is a good story” (13)

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<sup>1</sup> I will talk in more detail in Part 3 about the ‘beginning’ and ‘end’ of the research process

<sup>1</sup> There is a lot of debate about the meaning of the term ‘Complexity’. As far as this particular issue is concerned, the main point is that Complexity – or Complex Responsive Processes, as Stacey prefers to call it – concentrates on the relationships between people or things, rather than the objects themselves. From this perspective, all behaviour is social, in that it is brought forth in response to the gesture of the ‘other’.

Now that's a jolly good explanation of what happens in qualitative 'analysis' if ever I heard one! And it suggests that 'analysis' is a damn sight more creative and mind blowingly skilful than simply collating findings.

Many, so called, 'new' methodologies contribute to this dismissal - or at least downgrading - of the 'invisible' and highly creative process of 'analysis'. And, in so doing, elevate the 'research' (in its traditional and limited sense) element of what we do at the expense of the creative, generative part. Ethnography is useful and informative - in its place and as a complement to other approaches. But it is not a substitute for well thought out, creatively evolved ideas and directions. At worst, it panders to the growing client demand to 'get involved'; to experience research 'in the raw', to be entertained and titillated. This is reality research. Ergo. Everyone (read, any old fool) can do it.

### **Disowning our ideas**

We undersell ourselves in other ways too. Often we allow ourselves to become invisible and masquerade as 'just researchers' by not 'owning' our ideas. We fight shy of voicing a clear, personal opinion, for all the reasons we have talked about so far. We are fearful that we will be seen as biased, not objective, unprofessional. We couch our opinions in muted tones.

Own up. How often, in a presentation, have you attributed strong or contentious opinions to research participants as a way of avoiding possible flak? We use passive rather than active tenses to distance ourselves from the conclusions we draw, as if they have invented themselves, without our participation. It's a cat and mouse game of owning and disowning our ideas. And it suits everyone. The ad agency can pick over our ideas and claim them for themselves whilst simultaneously bemoaning the fact that 'research kills creativity'. The client can claim 'research says...' and so have a fall guy up their sleeve if it all goes 'belly up'. We, as researchers, can stay on the fence and not have to suffer the consequences of our mistakes.

So, all in all, these are some of the ways in which I think we undersell ourselves. You can doubtless think of more - or you may simply disagree that we do it - but I'll stop here. It's perhaps more interesting to move on now and briefly look at how this way of practising came about and ...yes, where we might go from here?





## Part 2: Why is that lion hiding away in the mist anyway?

### So why do we do it?

If there were not distinct benefits for us in acting in this way, in underselling ourselves, we would not do it. We would change our behaviour. So. Why do we continue as we do?

### **We've always done it this way and we know no better.**

Like sheep following the well worn track, we trudge on, following the footsteps of our elders, making slight meanders to change the track, but never really re-evaluating whether or not this is the best route to our destination. And, why change, when we've made a lot of money doing it this way. If we set ourselves up as consultants, without the prop of research, would it be so lucrative? Possibly not.

But this is the view of the cynic. There are always those who seek to change the way things are. However – and you may disagree with me here - I do not see much attempt to change things. Not really. Not fundamentally. And I think this is because there is something much deeper than complacency or avarice at work. I think it is to do with the way in which we view the world and the very deeply ingrained, 'rationally invisible' assumptions about **how it is**, a Newtonian model which has existed for several hundred years, almost without challenge, until quite recently.

### **We are trapped on the eternal see-saw of objectivity OR subjectivity, unable to abandon one or the other and unable to reconcile the two**

So, to come back to this issue that I touched on earlier. This, I believe, is the real issue, the real hurdle to be overcome before we can venture into pastures new, rather than playing at the edges. But it's a big issue and a complex one. Pompous as it sounds, it requires a new way of thinking and there is much work to be done in trying to make sense of it all.

Anthony Tasgal (15), in his excellent paper at the 2003 MRS conference, discusses how Newtonian science lies at the root of this duality. He describes how a reductionist and mechanical perception of science has pervaded our thinking, resulting in 'physics envy' and a dominance of evaluative science over art and creativity. One consequence is the ubiquitous mentality of 'Arithmocracy'; if it moves, measure it. If you can't measure it, it doesn't exist. He goes on to talk about how new sciences are, finally, throwing all these assumptions up in the air. In particular, ideas from the Complexity Sciences, such as 'self organisation' (spontaneous development of order out of complex systems), 'edge of chaos' (where continuity and stability co-exist and form new patterns), the fiction of 'control' and, above all else, the patterning of relationships that are the basis of our world are causing us to radically re-assess who.

what and how we are. As Tasgal, quoting the biologist S.J. Singer, so nicely puts it, 'I link therefore I am'.

I'm right with him there. It's not the place here to dwell on these things for too long, but if you haven't already, do read his paper. His focus is on how thinking from Complexity Sciences can help 'put the art back in marketing'. I'm particularly interested in how we can put the art – or the heart – back into qualitative research.

So, after that little diversion, let's get to the nutty problem of the objective/subjective see-saw. Our recent learning from a variety of disciplines – Damasio's work on neuro-science and consciousness, Weick's explanations of how we make sense of our experience, Stacey's (14) theories on the essentially social nature of all human activity, to name but a few - strongly suggests that the objective/subjective divide is not a true reflection of reality. It is a by-product of a fairly recent 'world-view', a way of perceiving the world which emerged some 350 years ago, around the time of Descartes. Undoubtedly this way of thinking emerged because it was useful. It is questionable whether it is still as useful nowadays in the much more complex world that we now inhabit. I would go so far as to say that, in some situations, it is positively unhelpful.

I believe that, at the very least, we have to let go of the notions of 'objectivity' and 'subjectivity' as 'fact' and restore them to their rightful places as metaphors – useful tools for making sense of our experiences, but having no grounding in reality, in how things 'really are'. Once we can do this, we may stop trying to satisfy the demands of seemingly contradictory masters – and being doomed to fail.

Let's look at this a little more closely. It seems to me that these conflicting faces of qualitative research, be they storytelling vs rationality, data gathering vs interpretation, divergent vs convergent thinking are all part of this same confusion of metaphor and reality.

John Shotter (16), a Social Constructionist, has something to say about this. He distinguishes between classical sciences which are ordered and rule bound and research sciences which 'inquire into possibilities not yet actualized'. In his view;

'inquiries into participatory action research draw on the same processes of human communication and interaction as those in fact used in natural sciences, when viewed as unfinished, unsettled research sciences'.

He presents a fairly convoluted argument but, basically, he seems to be saying that there's not really that much difference between what we regard as 'pure' science and action research (for which read qualitative research) if you view them as existing along a continuum in terms of their development. 'Pure' science e.g. physics, starts out with the participants needing to develop a 'grammar' (language, constructs) in order to understand one another. 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. 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 they feel they are on solid ground, they cut the umbilical cord, adopt the posture of ‘observer’ and pretend that the structure was all there from the beginning, waiting to be discovered, rather than being created. Not that any of this is done deliberately, you understand.

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 chiasmically relate them in a meaningful relation with each other’.

I apologise if I have rather laboured this issue, but Shotter is one of the few people I have so far come across who ‘takes the bull by the horns’ and seriously looks as how we can start thinking differently about this apparent contradiction between ‘objectivity’ and ‘subjectivity’. And it is only by getting to grips with it, that we can start thinking about how we might look at it in another way.

I was quite taken with the quote that one of the speakers this year’s MRS Conference opened with: “Advertising has not yet found its Newton”. He attributed it to Lord Saatchi. My first reaction was to laugh at the delusion of grandeur. My second was to smile in recognition. Qualitative research, too, has not yet found its Newton. Maybe the time is right to expose the shortcomings of the Newtonian assumptions underpinning qualitative inquiry and explore radically different perspectives.

### **But have we got the bottle to stand there naked?**

Begin, for a moment, to visualise what it would be like to abandon the objective/subjective duality. For a start, we could no longer be the bearers of ‘truth’. Or, at least, not in the same way? I’m not even sure if we could be called ‘researchers’. So what would it be like to abandon that comfort zone (in spite of all its two-edgedness)? Without the researcher persona, who are we? Who would take us seriously? We would stand, naked, before our clients (or should I say alongside them) and be judged solely on our own merits. No research participants to hide behind. No ‘other voice’ to shield us. Just our ability to be ‘in the moment’, using all the resources we can employ; rational, intellectual, historical, creative, along with others, to make sense of the situation we find ourselves in. **Just** this. Imagine it!

And if it all goes belly up, will we share the responsibility? If we have been part of the decision making, contributed our expertise, with or without the trooping of focus groups, are we culpable? Where does that leave us? And then, are we absolutely sure that we want to change our relationship with our clients – perhaps have an ongoing

relationship or work on a day rate? Although, at the moment, we may feel dismissed, rendered impotent, when the project ends and the clients retreat back to the inner sanctum, if we're honest, there's often, also, a sense of release. Another job finished. Onwards....and onwards.

## **So, why would we want to change it?**

In many ways our current niche is a comfortable, safe place to be. What are the advantages of changing it?

### **It's safe, but unchanging**

In qualitative research there is no-where to go. What you do at 20 is what you do at 50. You may - or may not - get more recognition for it. You may be feted as a guru - or cast out as a 'has been'. You may direct a number of younger, more energetic qualitative researchers to do as you once did. You may change sides and become a client. You may get out of qualitative research altogether. You may argue with me all you like, but I remain unbending. There is no gradual evolution of the qualitative researcher role as there is in so many other professions. We have to create our own interest in the job.

### **We are capable of MORE**

Qualitative thinking encompasses a wide range of skills which, I believe, are undervalued. Worse than this, they are unrecognised. And, what is more, they are undervalued and unrecognised by those of us who exercise them all the time. So it's hardly surprising that they are undervalued by those who have not personally developed them.

### **The climate is changing**

New thinking is starting to follow us. Neuro-psychology, Systemic thinking, Complexity, to mention a few, are all feeding the way that we, as a society, are beginning to understand ourselves. They are colouring our perception of what it means to be conscious and how we construct and act in our world. Suddenly qualitative thinking and, in particular, our relational way of understanding the world seems more 'normal' and, at the same time, more sophisticated. It is time we capitalised on our strengths. Time for the lion to come out of the mist and stand proud.

## Part 3: Looking at the lion close-up

### So where might the possible futures for qualitative research lie?

I believe that change will only happen when we begin to understand what it is we are doing that limits us. And, following that, when we understand that there are options. Finally, as our confidence grows, we can begin, tentatively, to exercise some of these options, but we cannot know what effect these changes will have. As Peter Senge (12) puts it:

“Small changes can product big results – but the areas of highest leverage are often the least obvious”

### Our way of thinking and our language defines our perception

This is an area where there has been much discussion both within qualitative research and amongst all manner of ‘communication’ schools and gurus in the world at large<sup>1</sup>. Virginia Valentine (17) gave an excellent paper at last year's MRS conference on how current research discourse and language limit our potential - and the need to move on from it. She summed up her paper with:

"The MR discourse is based on a set of taken-for-granted assumptions and unconscious cultural beliefs that actually encode the old imagery of researcher as backroom technician, rather than strategic thinker and boardroom action-maker. We will not finally shed this image until we break our codes, change our discourse and change our language."

It is clear that so much of our research language is passive, static, retrospective. It is the language of butterfly collectors who catch, name and mount their specimens. **But this is not what we do.** We are more like naturalists. We are in a world where relationships shift, perceptions evolve, where there is constancy and change at the same time. We need a new language if we are to encourage new perceptions; if we are to re-define what we do. The language needs to be open, creative, intuitive, exploratory rather than closed, defining, controlling, enumerating. We're talking....

- inquiry, not research
- thinking, not reporting
- participants, not consumers
- ideas, thoughts, not findings
- approach, not methodology
- conversation, not presentation
- discussion, not briefing

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<sup>1</sup> A good introduction to the issues around language and how it affects perception is given in Vivian Burr's "An introduction to Social Constructionism"

But it's not just words. The words are the easy bit. It's the mind-set, the discourse that generates the words, that we really need to address. Otherwise we end up with surface froth but no real change. On the other hand we have to start somewhere and changing language is a start, provided that we keep remembering that the language is 'the map, not the territory' and the territory is what we are trying to change.

However, we have known all this for a long time. Yet still we cling on to the assumed certainties of the old order. When will we be brave enough to really let go of it and try something different?

### **'Insight' is not enough**

We have become bored rigid – well, I have, at any rate - by 'consumer insight'. 'Insight' is the word on everyone's lips. Research managers have become Insight Managers. Every client brief seems to plead for deeper or different 'insights'. A while back we ran a couple of three hour workshops to explore the meaning of 'Clean'. We used drawing and psychodrama and magazine tears and CVs of Mr/Mrs Clean with our participants - every device you could think of to get to the bottom of 'Clean'. At the end of all this, the client who had sat stoically throughout the whole process turned to me and commented in a fretful voice, 'I'm not sure we've really gone deep enough into this. Have we found the insight'. Give me a break!

On the other side of the fence, every thrusting research company promises 'more insight' through the latest technique<sup>1</sup> or the extraordinarily well honed perceptions of its particular executives.

But what do we mean by 'insight'? Insight, to me, is a big word, an even bigger idea. Insight comes from experience - of the world inside and outside research. It is the product of a fertile and creative mind that is forever making connections, across disciplines, across cultures, anywhere and everywhere there may be something useful to connect with. Insight is making sense of things in new ways. Thinking the unthinkable.

And even this is only the starting point. We need to **experience** 'insight' rather than learn 'about' it. Insight, like a ripe mango, is best relished in the moment (and probably in the bath). It cannot be captured or preserved or 'owned by the company' - at least not without diminution. It is a state of mind, not a commodity.

As Ralph Stacey puts it:

"Knowledge assets, therefore, have this paradoxical aspect: they must be codified if they are to become an asset but once this happens, they lose value"  
(14)

If we take 'insight' to mean a way of being, a way of life, then I'm all for it.

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<sup>1</sup> One I particularly liked was 'living with a teenager for a week'. Clearly they hadn't got one of their own or they would never have invented such a form of exquisite torture

Conversations, discourse, bouncing ideas about. This is what insight is about. And we need lots more of it. If we mean a re-positioning of 'understanding the consumer', then let's not bother.

### **Marriage or a one night stand?**

Currently our model of research, inevitably, reflects the world view it grew out of. We are outsiders: Observers, by tradition. We interface with the client world at the briefing and debriefing and possibly during the 'fieldwork'. Our model is that of 'qualitative research as event'. This implies fixed nuggets of information, a snapshot taken at a particular moment in time. We bring our treasure back to our client, like the fatted calf, to be dissected and eaten. And then we go away until our client is hungry again. It's based on a sender-receiver model of communication (a model that has long since been abandoned in advertising) rather than, for example, the complex gesture-response patterning of relating that current Complexity theories postulate (18).

Management consultants have a very different model. They start from within (metaphorically!) the company and look outwards.<sup>1</sup> On the whole, their relationships with their clients are more ongoing than that of qualitative researchers. A marriage, rather than a one night stand, you might say. What if qualitative research adopted this model? How would it be if we viewed qualitative inquiry as a process? How would this change our perception of it? How might we do this? For instance, how would we define the beginning of the project? Why, for example, do we not start the research process within the organisation? Surely this is the place to begin the exploration; to have conversations, rather than rely on the often quite sterile 'briefing meeting' in which the client deposits a sometimes undigested - and indigestible - set of objectives on the researcher: Objectives which cannot be properly discussed or questioned because 'it has already been decided'.

If we are serious about questioning the assumptions we make in our own practice, why do we not also, more often, question the assumptions, habits, discourses which underpin the way in which our client organisations operate and which, inevitably, colour the nature of the research aims (19)? We pay lip-service to doing this, but how often do we really do it. I mean **really**. And why not? Because we will seem obstructive, time-wasting? But this is only because we – all of us, researchers, clients - are not used to working in this way. We don't really acknowledge the need for it - or that it is all part of the bigger process of sense-making. If we were 'married' – oh all right then, if we were having a long term affair – it would feel more natural, because the relationship would be different. The relationship, of course, affects what we feel comfortable saying and how we say it.

Currently, it has to be admitted, there is sometimes a relief in delivering the news and running from the scene of the crime. But it also means we are forever Outsiders. Why are we (us and our clients) so afraid of commitment? We worry that we will 'put all our eggs in one basket'. The client worries about our 'objectivity'. If we

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<sup>1</sup> I'm not suggesting that we emulate them, other than in the specific sense of exploring how their different mode of operating affects the nature of their involvement

accept that 'objectivity' is a red herring and that all research is created rather than discovered, then this is less of a problem.

The beginning is where we define it. At the moment we usually define the beginning as the briefing meeting, the end as the presentation or the report. Lets see what happens if we try to change that.

### **We 'create' our 'findings', we don't 'discover' them**

Why are we so squeamish about admitting this? We know it's true. Our instincts and experience tell us that it is so. And we are backed up by all sorts of academics beavering away in academic institutions, writing learned tomes telling us that it is true. So why are we still playing this silly game of make-believe?

We co-create stories with our research participants and we continue this process of making sense of it all afterwards, during the 'analysis' and during the 'presentation', in a way that is plausible and useful for the task we are engaged in. **And this is OK.** It's not something to be ashamed of. It is something to celebrate. 'Discovering' things and categorising them is comparatively straightforward. According to Damasio, it utilises a less evolved part of our brains than that involved in creative thinking. Using our 'whole body' to engage with an experience, in conjunction with others, means that our rationality, intuition, creativity, bodily responses are all part of the picture, all 'aligned' and working together. 'Objectivity' and 'subjectivity' become irrelevant.

Do not for a moment think that this involves a diminution of skill. On the contrary, it is skill at a higher level (or, more accurately, of a very different type), because it harnesses all of our past experience and future visioning whilst, at the same time, incorporating 'whole body' experiences. In a sense, it is an acute centring in the present but with a simultaneous awareness of past and future - what Stacey describes as 'the living present':

“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, while 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.” (20)

And, what is more, to continue this process of sense-making with our clients would be even more fruitful. In olden times, when I was a trainee researcher, I worked for Peter Cooper. I remember adrenelin-fueled taxi rides whilst we frantically constructed our thoughts before arriving, late, to the presentation. Bursting with ideas, developing them as he talked, Peter scribbled with red indelible pen on a wind-on acetate sheet. The 'presentation' was vibrant, alive. Clients (at best) felt that they were part of the creative process and therefore felt relaxed about joining in. Compare this with



today's offering. Pre-prepared Power-point charts, so slick that no-one dares to contradict them. This is the stuff of Shotter's 'classical finished' sciences, not the stuff of research sciences which 'inquire into possibilities not yet actualised' (16).

This creative, evolving approach requires a degree of relaxation - not in any sense intellectual relaxation - but in terms of our need for controlling the processes of research. Could we contemplate that? As a way forward for qualitative inquiry, it could be very exciting. But have we got the bottle?

## **The edge of sanity**

Is this all sounding rather like that 60s dream world – the world of idealised, mushroom induced reveries? Well, maybe it is to me too. But, nonetheless, I think it is important that we give ourselves permission to dream – to fantasise about how it might be different, to 'future-cast' (11). Otherwise, how will we know what is possible?

And I do think that there is a way that we can start to loosen the chains of our Newtonian heritage and learn to live with the paradox; to be objective and subjective at the same time. More than this, for the one to enhance the other, because that is how it works within our bodies. We just have to acknowledge this and let it happen.

**Just!**

And we can start with, 'So what should we call ourselves?'

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## Sheila Keegan, Founding Partner, Campbell Keegan Ltd

Sheila has practiced as a qualitative researcher and consultant for more than twenty years. She started her research life as a research buyer with Yardley of London and then fled the commercial world to spend extended periods of time wandering around Asia and South America. Finally, returning to the UK and deciding it was time to be grown up, she joined Cooper Research and Marketing and then Business Decision Ltd before co-founding Campbell Keegan Ltd with Rosie Campbell in 1983.

Campbell Keegan is now run by Sheila and Rosie as a consultant partnership. Much of the work they are involved in is public sector/social research and consultancy. The company is also heavily involved in organisational consultancy; broadly within the areas of change and communication - which effectively is what all research based consultancy is about.

Sheila is a Chartered Psychologist and NLP Coach. She is currently undertaking a doctorate in Organisational Change and is exploring how Complexity thinking can influence organisational development. She has given papers at the AQR, MRS, ESOMAR. As an antidote, she is a keen photographer, travel writer and radio journalist.



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# **A Lion in the Mist**

**Why does qualitative research keep  
underselling its strategic potential ....**

**...time to emerge from the mist and roar?**

*Who are we?*

*Do we want to change....*

*.... or just accept the status quo?*



As a qualitative researcher, how  
do you see yourself ?

Like this.....?

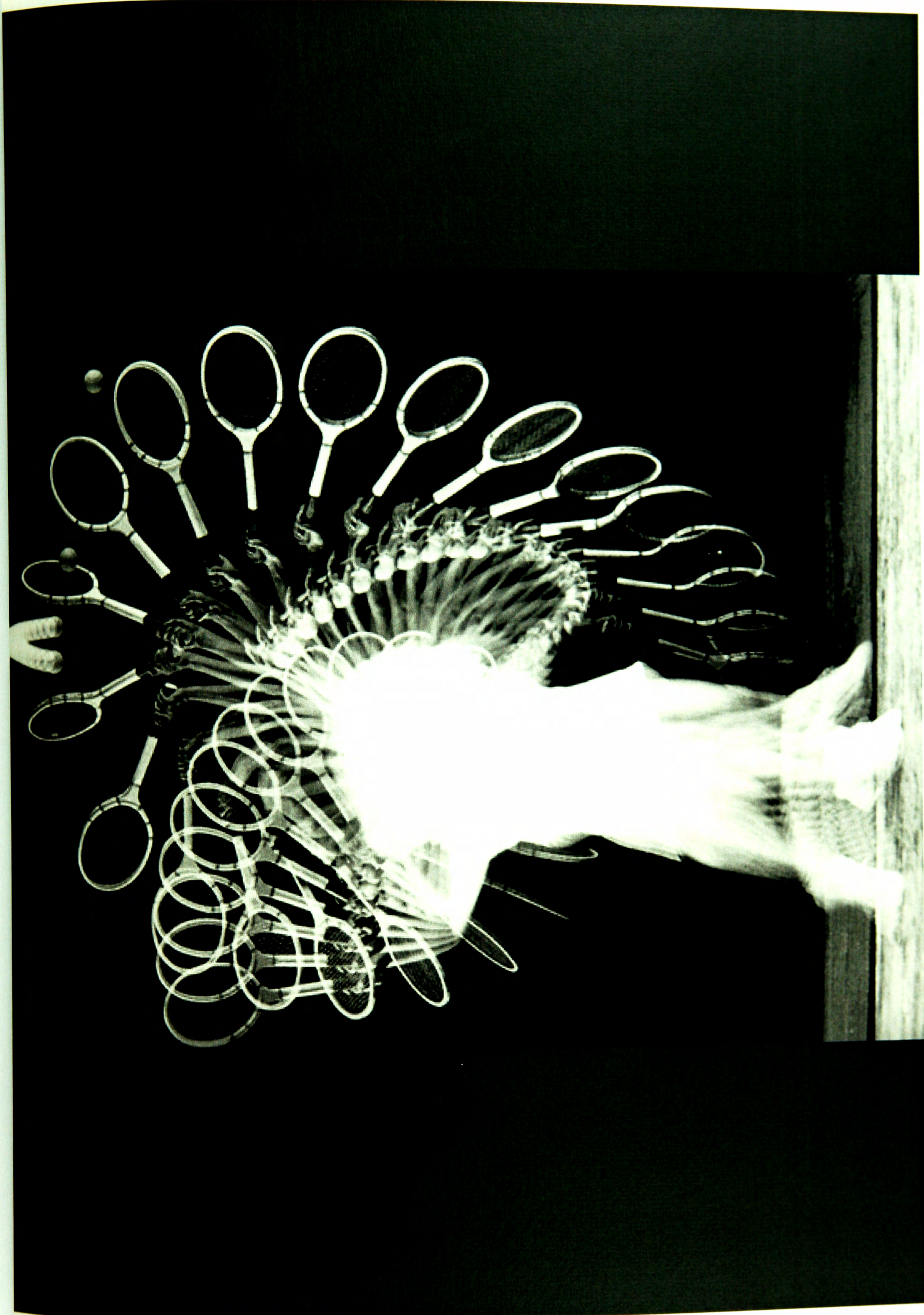




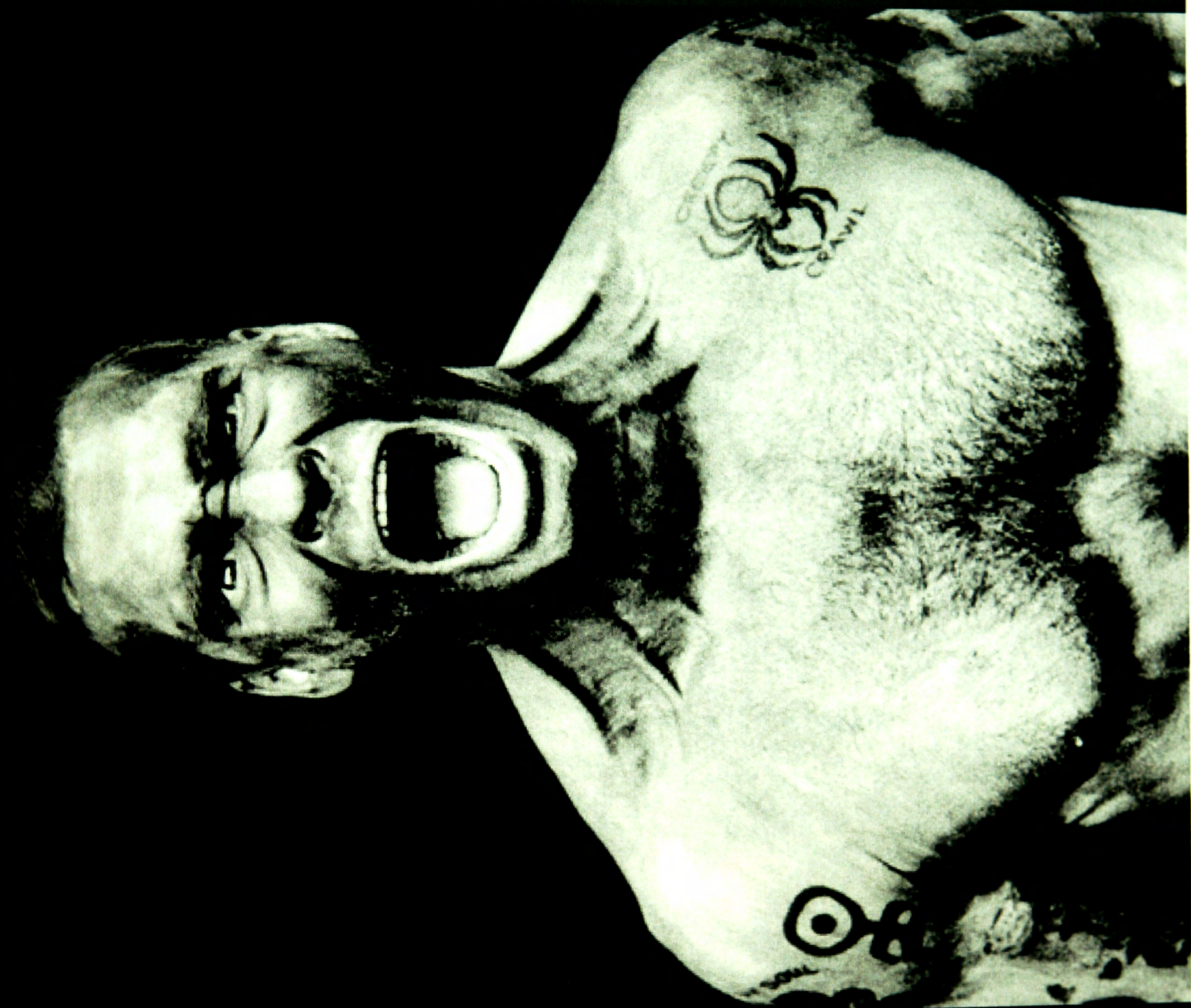


*Or this?*











**Or maybe even this?**





*and how would you like to see yourself ?*

**Let's look at how we are now  
and how we might be different**



how we undersell ourselves

why we do it?

how might we do it differently?

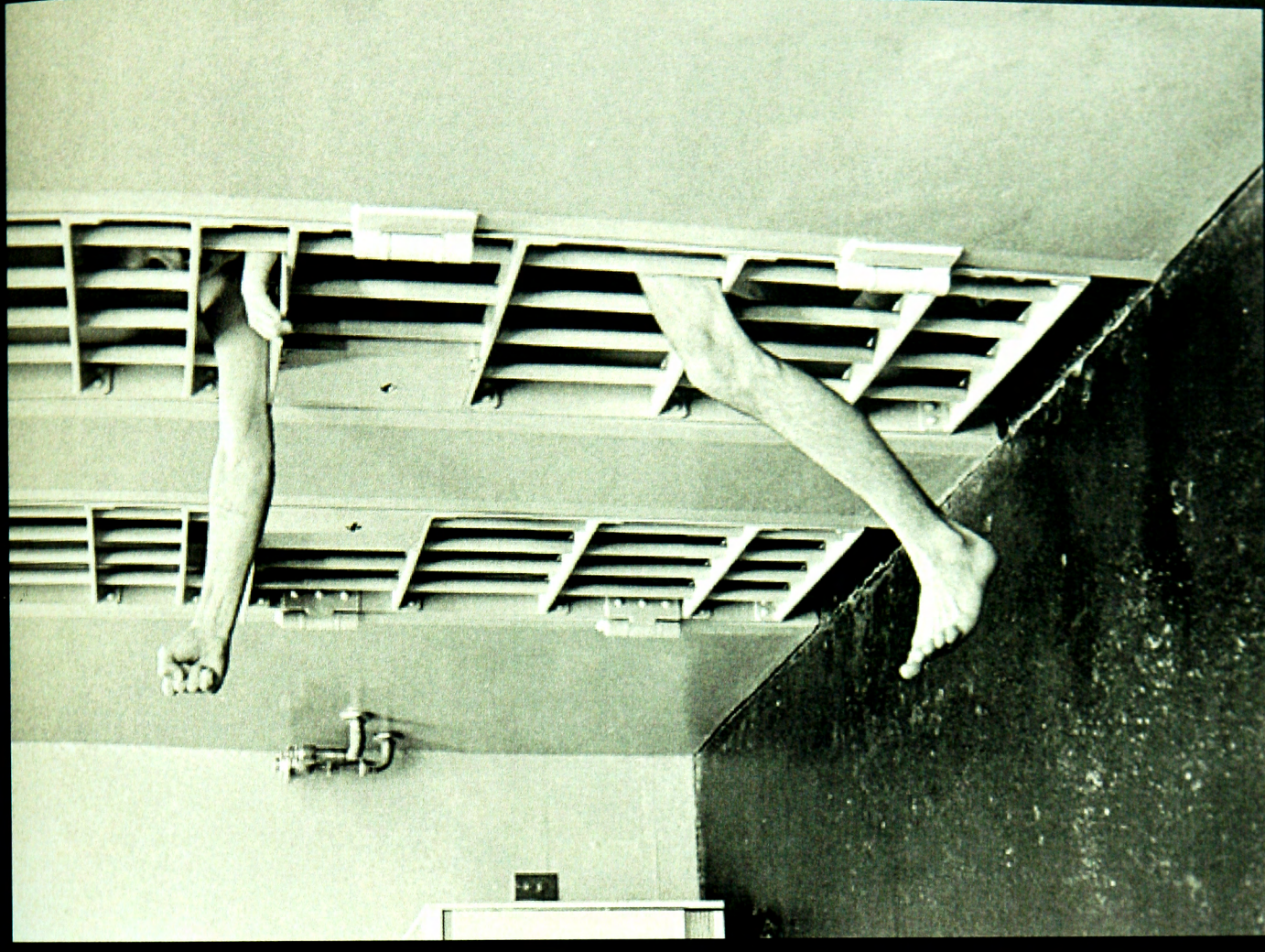


So, in what ways do we  
'undersell' ourselves?



**Boxing ourselves  
in ...**

**...defining ourselves  
by methodology, not  
our thinking**





*Playing 'Hide and Seek'*

*pretending to  
be scientists;  
rational, in  
control*





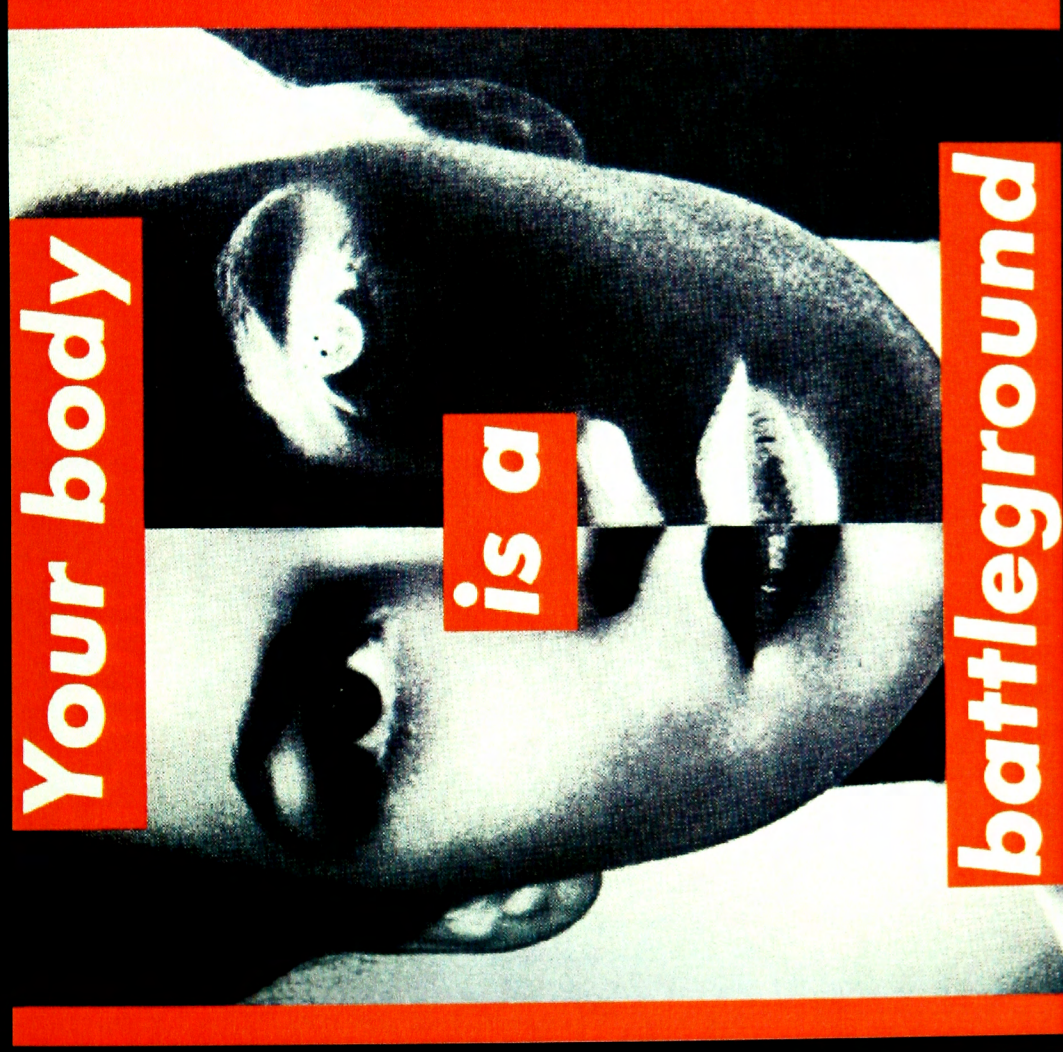
Standing apart; being 'Observers' .....



...as if we don't influence what we observe



Splitting ourselves into 'mind' and 'body'

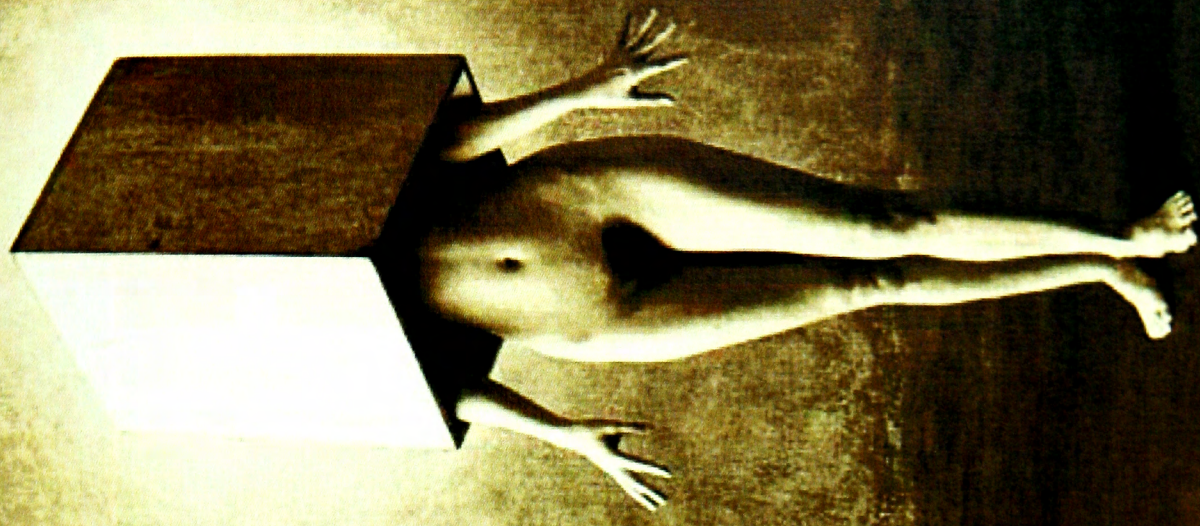


losing sensory and intuitive learning



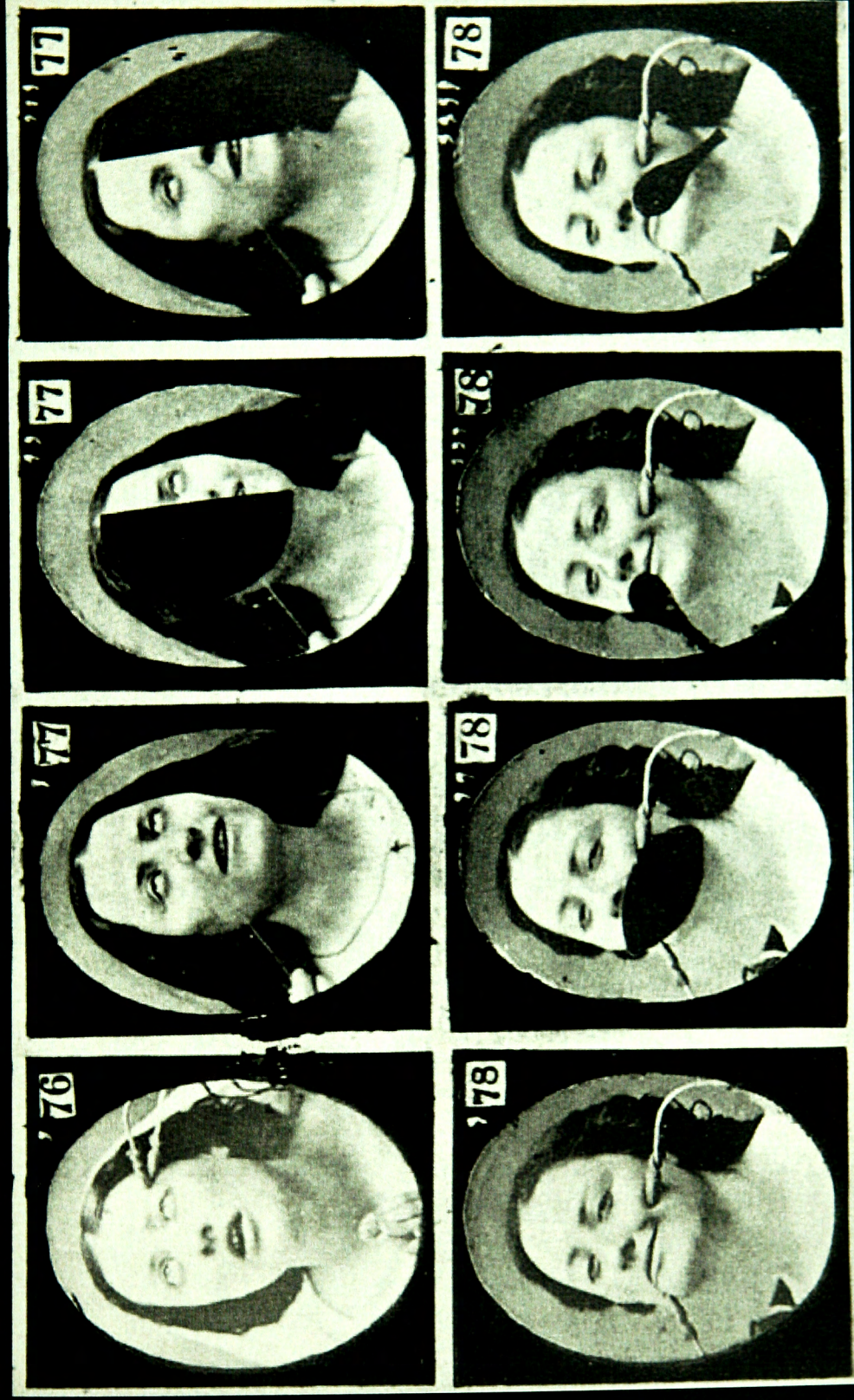
**Becoming invisible**

**hiding our 'true' selves  
not owning our ideas**





pretending we are just researchers



not sense-makers, storytellers, sorcerers

*So, why do we do this?*



*We've always  
done it this way*

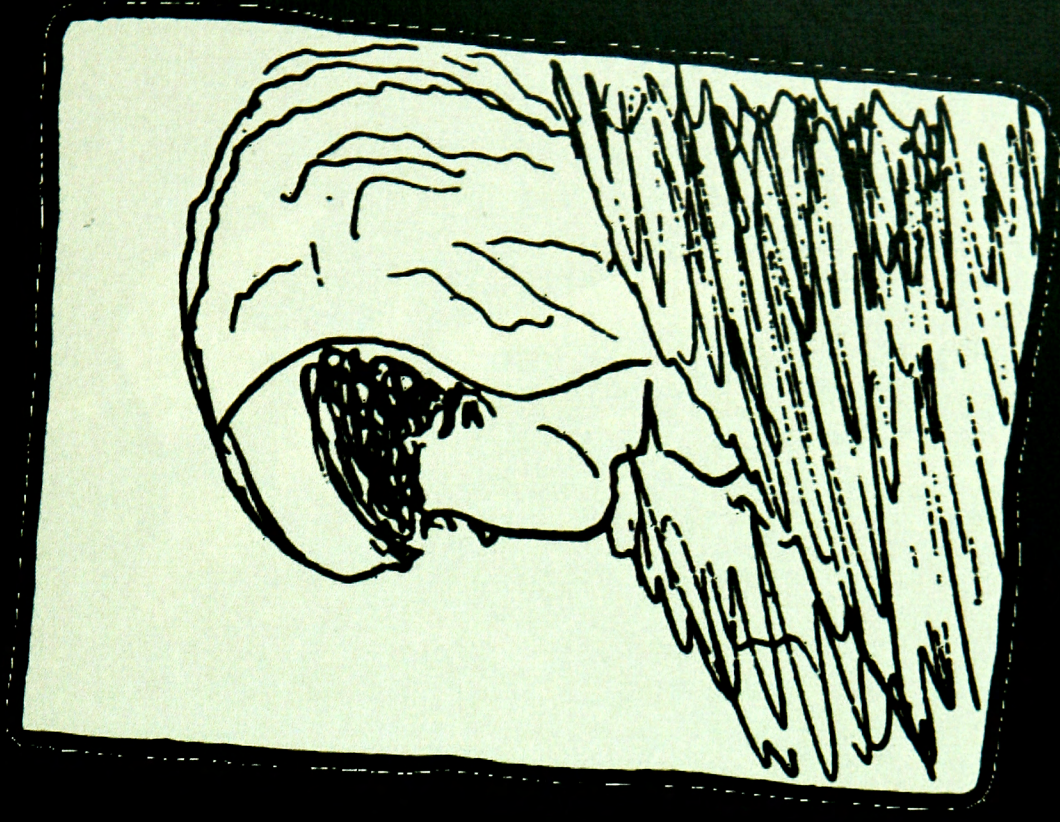
*we know no  
better*





**We are trapped on the  
eternal see-saw of  
objectively or  
subjectively**

**unable to abandon one  
or the other and unable  
to reconcile the two**





*We haven't the bottle  
to stand there*

*naked without the*

*'researcher' cloak*





So why change ?

it's safe, but boring

we can do more

the climate is right; new thinking is  
following us

*and how might we think about changing?*



Our way of speaking, thinking and  
discourse is based on an outmoded  
'scientific' model

To change our identity we need to  
change our discourse and our  
language

*“The MR discourse is based on a set of taken for granted assumptions and unconscious cultural beliefs that actually encode the old imagery of researcher as backroom technician, rather than strategic thinker and boardroom action maker. We will not finally shed this image until we break our codes, change our discourse and change our language”*

*(Virginia Valentine)*



*Insight is not enough*



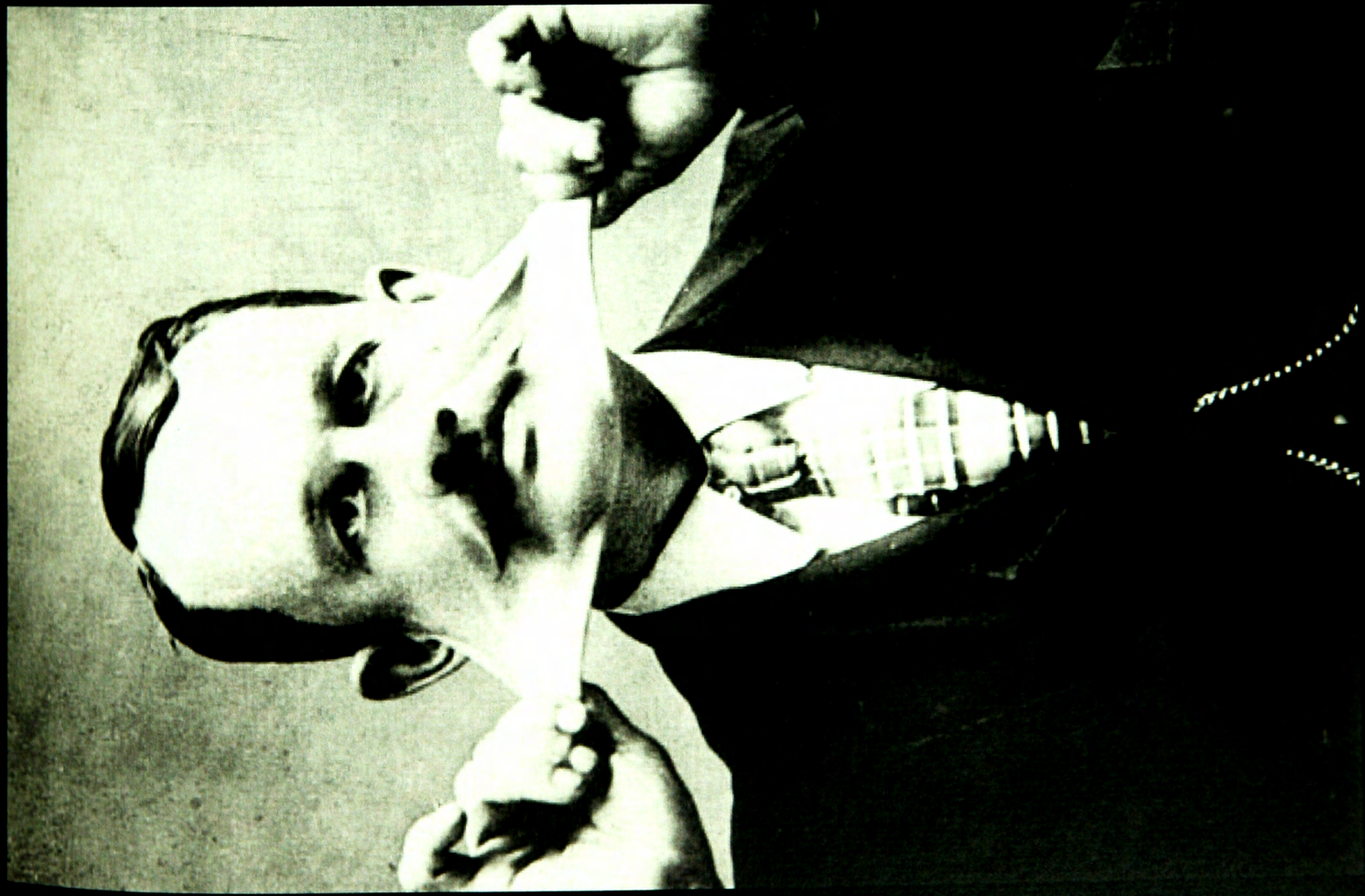
*it's what we do with it that counts*



**Real insight involves:**

**Gathering ideas where they can be found  
Adding experience, intuition and skill  
A fusion of research and implementation**

**all  
research  
creates  
change!**





**Choose a new beginning  
and a new ending**

**Qual as a process  
not an event**

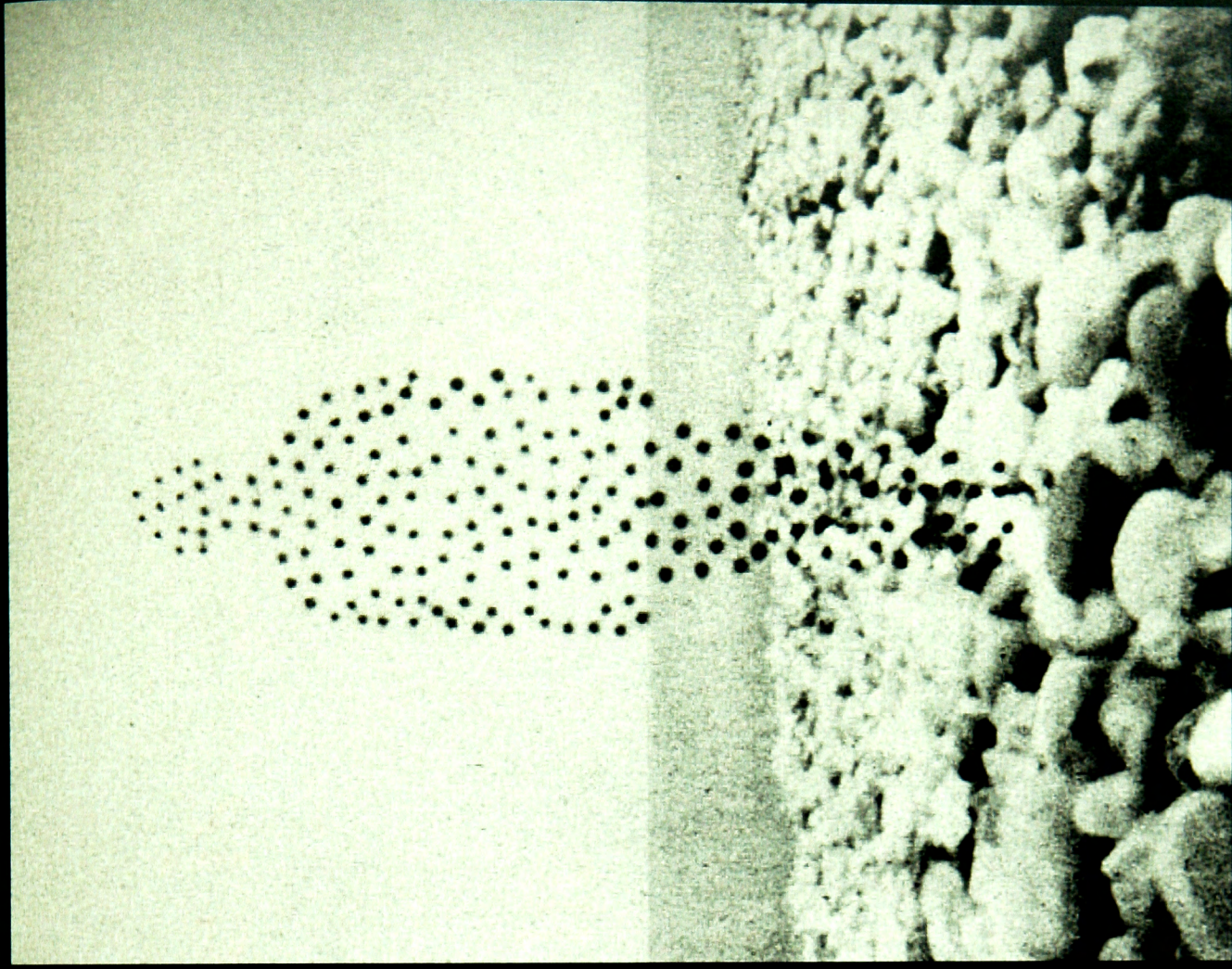


Put the objective/subjective  
debate to one side

Learn to live with the paradox;  
be both at the same time



**Celebrate  
what  
we  
create**





**So, the challenge is.....**

**Can we abandon the  
reductionist, mechanistic  
model of qualitative research?**

and embrace a broader, more  
holistic perspective on what we do?



Can we be  
artisans?

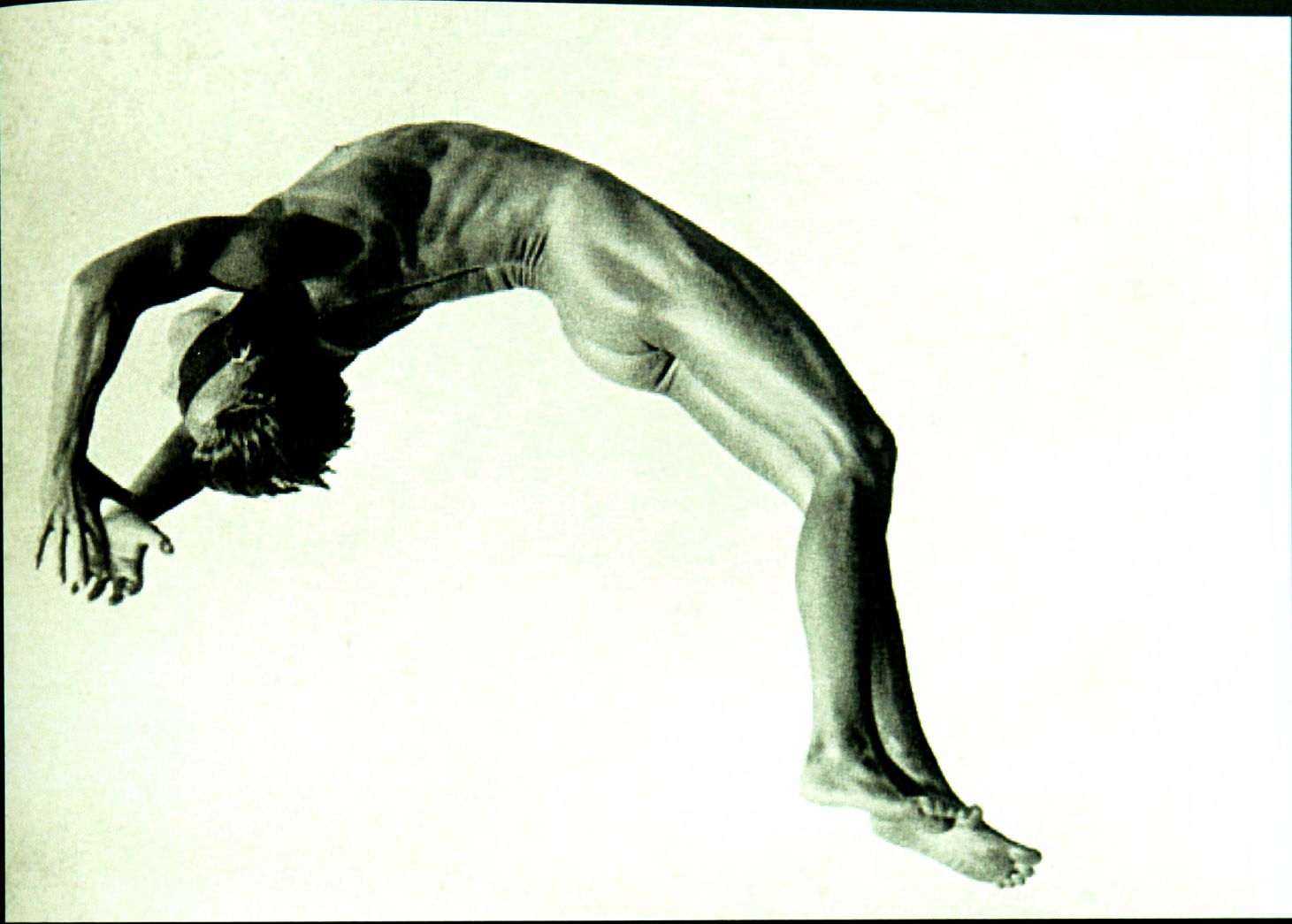




or dancers







**maybe even  
visionaries**

Can the lion stand up proud and roar?



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