

A LION IN THE MIST: WHY DOES QUALITATIVE RESEARCH KEEP UNDERSELLING ITS STRATEGIC POTENTIAL?

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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 true¹. 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

¹ 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.

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.

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 mindblowing! 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 NLP¹ slogan which should be emblazoned on the letterhead of every marketing related organisation: “The map is not the territory” (7).

¹ Neuro Linguistic Programming

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' 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, uncontaminating¹. 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.² 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

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

² See Tim Baker and Martin Callingham's 2003 MRS paper for a good description of the historical roots and development of research

‘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 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 do that. 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 started¹with research

¹ I will talk in more detail in Part 3 about the the ‘beginning’ and ‘end’ of the research process

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 Complexity¹ 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)

¹ 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 mindblowingly 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 exists 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 at 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 large¹. 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.

¹ A good introduction to the issues around language and how it affects perception is given in Vivian Burr's "An introduction to Social Constructionism"

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

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 technique¹ 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

¹ 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

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. 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.¹ On the whole, their relationships with their clients are more ongoing than that of

¹ 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

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 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 present - 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 Shotton'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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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.