EMERGENT INQUIRY: THE 'NEW' QUALITATIVE RESEARCH?

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What are the current challenges for qualitative research?

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

Navel gazing is an occupational hazard.

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

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

It's the old 'marketing not sales' message.

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

I am arguing that we must evolve a different perspective on qualitative research which develops, and makes better use of, the wide range of skills and abilities which are inherent in qualitative practice but which, I believe, are currently under acknowledged. I think it is time to really take on the role of business consultants, without the ambivalence and prevarication that has limited us in the past. To do this effectively, we need to develop greater confidence, we need to integrate research and consultancy to a much greater extent, we need an

open acknowledgement that the researcher is integral to the research process and outcomes and, above all, we need a more fluid, 'unbounded' understanding of research itself.

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

Qualitative research is particularly well placed to make this shift. It has already developed many of the skills, experience and ways of thinking which are appropriate to this new paradigm. However, we still cling – overtly or covertly – to the tail coats of traditional scientific method, even though science itself has moved on. I am suggesting a more unbounded form of research - 'emergent inquiry' - as a new perspective on qualitative research; a perspective in which we view scientific method as a discipline, not a set of rules, in which knowledge can be fed from a broad pool of experience and where we acknowledge that research is, by definition, a creative and collaborative process.

But, if we remove the traditional constraints from research – or at least remove them from centre stage - is this still research? Are we then losing the baby with the bath water? If we change how we practice then we need to change the 'frame of reference' for qualitative research – how it is legitimised - so that it more accurately fits what it is we are actually doing?

In this paper I am meandering between these themes, attempting to link them and draw some implications for the future of qualitative research and in particular:

- The changing 'world order' and themes that shape this world
- 'Emergent Inquiry' and how it might fit into this new world
- How this can be a legitimate form of qualitative research?

The changing world order

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

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

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

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

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

to re-read the book and realise that, thirty five years on, we are living the future he predicted.

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

Themes that shape our world

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The end of certainty: In a post modern age it is difficult to hold on to a belief in absolutes. Social constructionism has become the cultural 'norm', as we come to accept that we construct our world, each differently, but within

cultural parameters, rather than live in a world of black and white, universal rights and wrongs:

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

Those of us with teenage children do not need reminding of this; a teenager's world view of, say, rights and responsibilities, is likely to be very differently constructed from that of her parents. Our parenting styles today reflect this shift; we are much more likely to be liberal and egalitarian than were our parents. Authoritarian parenting is less appropriate in this age.

Following on from the assertions of social constructionism, that we construct our world, rather than merely observe what is 'out there', is the notion that all knowledge is created not discovered. This may be taken for granted in some qualitative research circles, but it is still contentious within the scientific world. 'Objectivity' is a hard concept to let go of.

The 'living present': There is a view, arising from Complexity Sciences and gaining wider acceptability, that all we can ever know is the present moment. We are continually reconstructing our past, in the light of the present and of an anticipated future.

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

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

The death of 'personality': Not so long ago, psychologists talked about 'personality traits', which remained constant regardless of context. Amongst people in general there was a view – and often there still is - that to change your mind shows a lack of moral fibre. Think how politicians are vilified for swapping parties or even re-considering views they first expressed years before.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The future is now

The research we are carrying out today has to relate to people's future needs, not those of the past, although we are drawing on the past to create knowledge. However we cannot assume a linear relationship between the past and the future. How, then, do we answer the 'as if' questions? Just as Toffler talks about 'education in the future tense', so we need to deal with 'research in the future tense'. Increasingly we need to help our clients answer the questions that they do not yet know they have. How do we go about doing this? What can we learn from complexity sciences, social constructionism and relationship psychology which will help us to anticipate the future?

There has been a great deal of work carried out over the years on the nature of creativity and idea generation, which indicates that these are essential components of successful business development. If we accept that knowledge is created, not discovered, then it is important that our abilities to encourage a creative orientation in ourselves, our clients, our research participants is finely honed.

The growing importance of leadership

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

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

Do we see ourselves as leading, as showing spontaneity and a greater ability to deal with the unknown? This is not a characteristic that we would associated with the traditional researcher role, but I would argue that it is essential for a

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new researcher role where there is a requirement to make informed decisions, strategic recommendations, creative leaps with limited time and partial resources.

Finishing before we begin

The speed of expected turnaround from research to feedback is accelerating. We've all experienced it; the phone call the next morning – what were the 'findings' from last night's groups? There is no time for consideration. We feel we have to respond. We are the research experts, aren't we? Historically, we have put ourselves in the position where we accept the project and, in doing so, we **own** the problem and have to deliver the solution. With a faster and faster turnaround and expectation of 'results', do we just need to think faster? Is this about developing the ability to assimilate, prioritise and generate knowledge more quickly so that we can make fast but appropriate responses or do we need to re-think the context that puts us in this position? Is attempting to 'give our client an answer' – adopting a linear approach to knowledge   and passing it on like a fatted calf - the most useful way of creating and conveying knowledge? Are there better ways in which clients can 'know' the research findings?

I link therefore I am

According to Complexity theory, 'relationship' and interconnectivity – within the context of structure and constancy - are what engenders change and innovation. Unfortunately, this thought has been taken on board as a mantra by many organisations, under the guise of 'relationship marketing'. You know the ones; complete strangers phone and promise to be your new best friend and are undeterred when you tell them, whilst eating your long overdue supper, that you already have a best friend. They have read the manual, but have not grasped the essence of it. Relationships, by definition, are fluid, changing, cannot be reified. I digress.

If we emphasise relationship over structure, i.e. if we shift our attention onto the way in which we co-create our world, rather than focusing on actual objects or events, then this has a profound effect on how we understand knowledge and knowledge creation. We begin to understand these as socially constructed and more fluid. The importance of networks and viral marketing is highlighted. We start to consider breaking down boundaries so that more interaction can occur. This leads us to question the linear model of much qualitative research where, to paraphrase, clients develop their thinking in isolation from the researchers, then hand it over, like a gift, at the briefing stage. The researcher ventures out and conducts the research, then comes back and delivers the 'findings' to the client on a platter. Over-egged, but you recognise the pattern. There is an inevitable tension in forcing non-linear processes, such as

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knowledge generation, into this sort of linear structure and much of the essence of knowledge is lost in the process.

Finding the creative edge

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

Research as social construction

We construct our world. It is an intensely creative process and cannot be otherwise. Research is, by its nature, a process of construction, not discovery, as we select what we pay attention to, interpret, structure and develop knowledge in ways that make sense to us and, we hope, to our clients. We have no option but to interpret what our senses perceive and the way in which we interpret sensory input is influenced by the prevailing world view or paradigm as well as our personal experience. The greater the diversity of input into a research process, the greater the potential range of ideas that emerge. Engaging clients, customers, creatives, whoever else may contribute in some way, as co-creators, into the research process can only increase the scope of our knowledge and options. However, this does not necessarily mean that all contributions are equal or that the process needs to be egalitarian – there are judgements to be made about how best to manage the involvement of different parties in the process.

The researcher as integral to knowledge creation

With the current emphasis on co-creation and shared knowledge, there is a danger of underestimating the input of the researcher. 'Interconnectivity' and 'relationship' are often interpreted as 'out there'; person to person, group to group, client to researcher, researcher to 'consumer'. However, co-creation can equally be applied to the researcher's 'conversation' within him or herself. It is what Ralph Stacey, from a complexity perspective, refers to as 'silent conversation', in which the individual is effectively going through the same

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processes 'internally' as the team may be engaged in 'externally' in conversation with each other. Symbolic Interactionist, G.H.Mead refers to this internal conversation and problem resolution as the 'parliament of selves'. The analysis, interpretation and presentation of knowledge generated through research are hugely skilled activities which have taken a seasoned researcher years to hone. The reflections, connections, intuition and inspiration which go into generating knowledge from 'data' – and that distinguish knowledge from data – what we loosely label as 'analysis' - are the kernel of qualitative research. Co-creation does not imply equal or similar input. If it did there would be no point. It is the diversity of experience and perspectives of everyone involved that create genuine innovation.

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

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

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

But we are timid. We are timid in two ways. Firstly, we often hang on to an outdated model of research, with a linear structure, hidebound by research protocols which emphasise monitoring and control, in a world that needs ideas and inspiration. Then we conform to a system that 'divides and rules', which further limits our potential: We separate 'consumers' from 'clients', our professional selves from our personal selves, 'research' from 'implementation', 'data' from 'interpretation'. We 'allow' our clients to define the problem rather than helping them to explore and identify it as part of the research process. We are also timid in that, too often, we avoid speaking out, voicing our opinion, for fear that we will not be considered 'proper' researchers. Our own views are carefully laundered for client consumption.

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

How could we begin to change this?

What do I mean by 'emergent inquiry?'

Recalling the title of this paper, you may be wondering where 'emergent inquiry' comes in. What is this thing? Is this another fad, like the shift from 'research' to 'insight'? Well it depends on whether the shift is in understanding and practice or only in name.

By emergent inquiry, I mean the sort of research which is open to, and builds on, ideas wherever they come from, which is not constrained by research convention – although it is rigorous in its approach; research which is creative in intent, which engages feelings, beliefs, intuition as well as intellect. You could say it is holistic research. It is not hidebound by role; researcher, client, consumer, employee, but allows each person to bring different perspectives to the inquiry on the basis that greater diversity encourages greater creativity and more – and better - outcomes. I would regard emergent inquiry as a 'mind-set' or a way of practicing, rather than a formalised approach to research.

But what does this actually mean in practice?

I would see emergent inquiry as involving three interwoven and fluid strands or themes. All of these are ways of pushing back the parameters of research; making it more in line with 'real life'; richer, messier, more contradictory. Essentially, it is moving from a linear to a non-linear perspective.

Acknowledging and welcoming emotional input

The separation of mind, body and emotion, introduced by Decartes in the mid 17th century and now largely discredited by neuroscience, is alive and well in the world of marketing research. Opinion, feeling and emotion are still concealed inputs to research; we act as if they do not exist whilst unavoidably employing them in every decision we make. It is time to accept the breadth of our personal research input; to accept that our emotional experiences are valid input to research. Our opinions are not random or irrelevant. They arise in response to the interaction with our research participants. As such they are really important and, indeed, are the basis of research consultancy. Research is as much experiential and emotional as cerebral. What we experience, what we feel – and what others experience and feel - is a valid research input. If we attempt to cut out this out, then we revert to literal interpretation; to taking what people say at face value. Experienced qualitative researchers have always accepted that this is the case. I'm not saying something new, but I think it needs greater emphasis. By openly acknowledging the importance of emotion, we broaden the scope of the research process; it becomes more true to 'real life' situations and in this way it enables more relevant knowledge generation.

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Accepting that research input comes from a wide variety of sources

When people say that we need to integrate research from different sources, they usually mean that qualitative research needs to be married up with other 'respectable' forms of research input, such as desk research, data bases, quantitative research. I'm not dismissing these research inputs, but it is not what I mean here. I am talking about the researcher – along with everyone else involved in the project – keeping their eyes and ears open and gathering clues and inspiration wherever it is to be found. This could be in newspapers, in 'idle' conversation, in past work, in sudden inspiration. Knowledge is all around, if we can recognise it.

Many years ago a young female planner commented to a research colleague who was about to embark on a new product development project on bras: "We haven't include women over 35 in the sample because, by that age, they don't care about saggy breasts."
The planner did not see my colleague, a 'woman over 35', as a potential source of knowledge. She was just the researcher. The 'consumer' was someone else. Out there.

We all do it, all the time; we do not 'see' what can be useful, we label people as 'consumers' – as if the rest of us weren't, or as if this is all they did with their lives. We forget our chameleon nature. The more we can get out of role – client, researcher, consumer – whilst still using the experiences, knowledge, skills that are associated with that role, the more connections we can make and the more creative our input. Our 'parliament of selves' can have full reign.

Extending the research inquiry to include problem exploration with clients, co-creation of knowledge and 'implementation'

Defining the problem is at least half of the solution and yet often we are willing to work with a 'problem' that is ill though out or unclear – which hasn't been given the attention it deserves. We 'accept' it from the client with only perfunctory questioning. This may be fine when the project is fairly simple, but for larger or complex problems and projects, it is just not good enough. And more and more projects are complex, because we live in increasingly complex working environments.

It is important that we work with clients on problem definition. It is a critical part of our consultancy role. This may mean facilitated workshops with clients including a relevant mix of stakeholders from within the organisation, and possibly from outside as well. And, iff this is part of our task, then it needs to be costed as such. However, this is a sensitive area. The role of 'client' implies knowledge of the problem. A client is 'supposed' to be able to define

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the problem and know what steps he or she needs to take to 'solve' it. But, as the process consultant, Edgar Schein points out, the client 'often does not know what she is looking for and indeed should not really be expected to know'. We need a change of expectations and working relationships between clients and researchers before problem definition is widely accepted as a valid area for extensive discussion and analysis.

Similarly, working with clients, and possibly other interested parties, on drawing out the implications of the research knowledge and how to progress beyond this stage is a key part of consultancy and maximising the benefits from the research.

I am not suggesting that we share the whole research experience and analysis with our clients. We are good at analysis, we have the experience and honed skills. To attempt to share analysis in the early stages would probably be time-wasting and unproductive for everyone. But, once we have developed findings, sharing these and developing them further with the client in order to work out how best to spread the thinking, knowledge and problem solving throughout the organisation is good practice. There is no formula for this. We need to stay flexible to determine at what stage co-creation is useful and when it is counter-productive or a waste of resources. We also have to work closely with those in the research or insight departments, so that this is a co-operative task, rather than being seen as external researchers encroaching on the planning or internal organisation functions.

Where does this take us?

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

Emergent inquiry means that we work together, everyone involved, to create something that is meaningful in the context of the problem. Judi Marshall, an academic researcher, describes this process as 'living life as inquiry', which she describes 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.

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

(Marshall, 1999:155-171)

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

What then are the underlying assumptions of this approach?

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

➤ Curiosity and openness to whatever emerges is the starting point; to be engaged with the problem (even if not the product area) is a pre-requisite. Why bother to struggle with creative solutions to a problem you find boring? 'Money', I hear you cry! But creating possible solutions to problems is part of being alive. If you help define the problem, there is much more interest in helping to 'solve' it.

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

➤ Knowledge is constantly moving on, being re-created. It is never static. We can get a fix on a particular research problem or issue and create potential solutions - and this is generally good enough for our purposes - but it is always work in progress, not the final solution.

➤ Our role is to facilitate the creation of knowledge, but we do not have sole responsibility for delivering 'an answer' to the client. It is

important that the thinking, guidance, potential routes that we offer can be further worked on with our clients, so that there is the greatest possible input to decision making. Working on the potential directions together, either as part of the feedback session or at a separate session afterwards is the most fruitful way of bringing all the knowledge together – rather than the more common sequential process, in which the researcher is dismissed whilst the client group decide what to do with the 'findings'.

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

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

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

Commercial qualitative research has become wedded to the small group. In psycho-dynamic circles, the large group is a well used format and the differences between small and large groups has been written about extensively (Stacey 2003, Dalal 2002). Psychological research suggests that large groups (20+) often provoke deeper, more primitive feelings. They are more emotionally charged. Working with large groups has parallels with working within organisations and often triggers off

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patterns which replicate organisational conflict and problem resolution. Equally, they may replicate viral marketing patterns or the development of cult brands. It is time, as qualitative researchers, that we explored the possibilities of large groups for our practice.

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

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

Given that emergent inquiry is a way of thinking as much as a methodology, it could take many forms, depending on the needs of the research project. It might mean facilitating a multi-client workshop to help define the problem for the research. It may mean convening groups or creative workshops or day-long sessions with a diverse mix of customers and clients, perhaps including creative artists or forum theatre. It may mean setting up self-managed learning sets within client organisations where employees can discuss the research implications and what they feel they need to do to develop and progress them within their particular departments. It may mean reading up about a subject and integrating this academic learning into evolving hypothesis from ongoing research. It may mean an intensive day running viewed consumer groups interspersed with client sessions to develop ideas to be fed into subsequent groups. It may mean sitting in a darkened room and allowing a host of inputs and different impressions and thoughts to incubate until the creative insight emerges. The main thing about emergent inquiry is that it should not be prescriptive, but grow out of the problem to be addressed.

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

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

So, what stop us doing this?

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

How then can we justify it to our clients?

Time to change the way we understand reliability and validity?

We have a cultural heritage which says that 'Science is objective'. Within a mainstream cultural paradigm, i.e. current Newtonian science, then 'Science is objective' is good enough for everyday use, but when exploring new areas, pushing back the frontiers, science is never objective, as any scientist will tell you. Objectivity always exists within a particular world view. It is always relative.

Last week I was on the west coast of India, propping up a late night bar and sipping a Honey Bee, the local hooch. I drift into conversation with my fellow bar propper, who turns out to be an academic qualitative researcher from Scotland, in India to carry out a project on call centre effectiveness. It's true, honest. Anyway, both fuelled by Honey Bee, we embark on a heated and exaggerated debate about complexity and social constructionism. After some initial baiting from me, he explodes with:
"I'm not interested in this post modern crap. Look, that there is a table. And that's a chair. And that. That, right up there is the moon. Isn't that the moon?"
"Only because I come from the same tradition as you," I reply smugly.
"Look any fool can see it's a moon. It's a moon! Here", he shouts, turning to the barman who is observing this charade with some amusement,
"What's that up there?"
"Well, I'd say it was a heavenly body", replies the barman, mildly, whilst stacking his shelves.
"Ah-ha. I rest my case", I slur, downing the rest of my Honey Bee.

New scientific theories are the result of curiosity, engagement, inspired guesswork, a linking together of previously unconnected assumptions or empirical observations. They are always creative acts in which the scientist is a key player. It is only later, when the theory becomes established that the scientist distances him/herself from the discovery and it becomes a 'fact', supposedly independent of its creator. New understanding always starts with this curiosity and engagement; connecting the previously unconnected. This is 'edge of chaos' stuff and it is where true inquiry and original thinking is located.

At various times in the history of commercial qualitative research, there have been debates about the 'guru' vs the 'business' approaches to qualitative research. The former elevated the gifted individual, the artist whose work could not be carried out by anyone else. The disadvantage of the guru was also its strength – the work could not be carried out by anyone else! It is difficult to run a company on this basis. The 'business' approach really took off in the early 80s, when qualitative research boomed and, cashing in on the growth,

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companies became more business-like and needed to create a more streamlined – perhaps mechanistic - approach to qualitative practice. Whilst this was profitable and enabled a larger work force, the research often lacked inspiration, because it was formulaic.

I am not suggesting a return to either the era of the guru or the formulaic business model. Emergent inquiry is, essentially, as process of shared learning and understanding. The knowledge is not vested in one individual, the researcher, who is deemed to be the 'expert', but is spread across all of those involved. One of the drawbacks of the traditional model of research, in which the researcher goes off, does the groups and then reports back on the 'findings' is that the researcher is locked into the expert role and the client can only ever have second hand or propositional learning. In doing this, we create a problem for ourselves by each understanding only a part of the picture. Rumi, the 13th century Sufi teacher, clearly illustrates this problem though the story of the blindfolded men examining an elephant:

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

How many times have you agonised over how to best convey very complex, highly charged, emotional laden content derived from the research situation, within the clinical setting of a client board room. For real change to happen, we all, clients included, need to have experiential as well as propositional learning. Sure, we have made some efforts; clients are locked behind one way mirrors in viewing labs, sneaking in so the 'consumers' can't see them. MDs are chauffeured in to experience life in an inner city pub for an hour. Ethnographic research takes the inquiry to the participants, rather than vice versa. But often this is not an equal exchange.

I am suggesting that, in emergent inquiry, there are no 'experts', but there is 'expertise' in a variety of areas, which need to included. I am suggesting that the research process is not linear and partial, i.e. briefing, fieldwork, presentation, the report, but complex, layered, messy. It more accurately reflects real life.

To get back to reliability and validity. If we accept that objectivity is relative and represents a particular world view, i.e. it is 'objective' because we, as a culture, believe that it is and because it is a view shared with other people, then validation of qualitative research knowledge comes, not by reference to an inappropriate set of rules, e.g. the traditional 'scientific' way of validating knowledge which is used for classical science, but from a process of personal

and shared reflection, reflexivity and questioning the underlying basis for assumptions and theory. Ultimately it comes from an assessment of all those involved, about whether the knowledge makes a useful contribution to the ongoing decision making, within the current context.

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

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

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