Qualitative research is a creative, non-linear, experiential way of thinking and working which is in tune with the approach of process consultancy. It is time to separate this valuable qualitative thinking from the formulaic ‘research’ label that limits it and openly celebrate its valuable contribution towards collaborative, creative idea and knowledge generation.

**KEYWORDS:** Creativity, co-creation, knowledge, networks, complexity

**Qualitative research:**

Why is it that qualitative research, which is endemic within the private and public sectors, which underpins most marketing campaigns, public service communications and much organisational change, has such a low profile in public perception? Worse still, why do media pundits who have recently discovered it—and who usually cannot tell the difference between a focus group and a pub brawl—feel entitled to slag it off or offer the derisory ‘Government by focus group’ clichés?

Qualitative research, for those who are not familiar with it, is broadly about understanding the why’s and how’s, rather than the how many’s. It explores people’s attitudes, their beliefs, aspirations and fears and how these can shape behaviour in relation to others and within particular contexts. By appreciating people in this more holistic way, it is possible to anticipate and predict their future needs or actions—to some extent—and develop this knowledge further in the light of client needs. There are many ways of carrying out qualitative research. Within the commercial arena, focus groups have been the dominant methodology for many years, although increasingly other approaches such as ethnography, semiotics and NLP are employed. To give some idea of the breadth of its application; recently we have conducted projects ranging from developing strategy for a government teenage road safety campaign, assessing the effectiveness of a shareholder magazine,
developing cosmetic advertising, to working with the Cabinet Office helping to implement internal communications strategy. Yet, although it is ubiquitous, qualitative research is still a Cinderella. It has an air of invisibility about it; it is often misunderstood.

I believe there are three reasons for this:

- It is what women were once supposed to be; the strength behind successful men! What ad agency is ever going to admit that creative inspiration came from a focus group and not their creative team? How often does a marketing manager honestly acknowledge that research was a key input into a successful product innovation?

- Qualitative research has, for years, been hide-bound by a scientific paradigm which, I believe, is both restricting and unnecessary. Whilst most successful qualitative researchers work around these restrictions, they nonetheless seem increasingly anachronistic in our post-modern world. However, their legacy is a backroom culture within research; a certain diffidence, an unwillingness to blow the qualitative trumpet.

- The term ‘Qualitative Research’ describes a method, not an outcome. So—the thinking goes—anyone can run a focus group. Nowadays, it seems, almost everyone does. However, employing qualitative research in a way that enables corporate communications, organisational change or future strategy development, requires considerable skill, experience and knowledge. It is easy to denigrate qualitative research if all you see is a travesty of it. We need demarcations for qualitative research, like Eskimos have for snow.

A time of re-birth

I am suggesting here that qualitative research—or more precisely, qualitative thinking—has never been more relevant in a business context than it is today. I am also arguing that we must evolve different perspectives on qualitative research which develop, and makes better use of, the wide range of skills and abilities which are inherent in our practice but which, I believe, are currently under acknowledged. It is time for qualitative researchers to come out of the closet, to adopt the mantle of business consultancy, without the ambivalence and prevarication that has limited us in the past. To do this effectively, we need to appreciate research and consultancy as different aspects of the same process. We need an open acknowledgement that the researcher is integral to the research process and outcomes and, above all, we need a more fluid 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 givens, where there are few certainties, traditional models of qualitative research have lost their relevance and need to be re-assessed. We must begin with the ‘world out there’—or rather the new ways in which we are making sense of the world—and build an understanding of research which mirrors this—and which better matches client needs. And to do this, we need a new research paradigm.

Qualitative research, I believe, is particularly well placed to make this shift. It already encapsulates 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 tailcoat of traditional scientific methods, even though science itself has moved on. I am suggesting a more evolutionary form of research—‘Emergent Inquiry’—as a new perspective on qualitative research in which we view scientific method as a useful 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, before trying to define emergent inquiry too closely, I want to go back to basics. What is it we really want research to do for us now, today, in our work with organisations?

**Research in a changing world**

Our research paradigm must reflect the way we in which we make sense of the world. How can we best employ research to help organisational thinking? If we look at some of the current themes that are shaping our working lives, they may throw light on this:

**THE FUTURE IS NOW**

Research has to relate to people’s future needs, but we cannot assume a linear relationship between past and future. How, then, can research inform strategy? Just as Alvin Toffler in his groundbreaking book, ‘Future Shock’, talked about ‘education in the future tense’ (Toffler 1970:360), so we need to think about ‘research in the future tense’. Increasingly we need to help our clients answer the questions that they do not yet know they have. This demands creativity, intuition, insight which goes far beyond simple data gathering.

There is much work that highlights the importance of creativity and idea generation as essential components of successful business development (Earls 2002, Weick 1995). It is essential that we encourage a finely honed creative orientation in ourselves, our clients and our research participants.

**RESEARCH AS SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION**

We construct our world. It is an intensely creative process and cannot be otherwise. Research, by its nature, is a process of construction, not discovery and we inevitably reflect the prevailing world view as well as our personal experience. As such, the researcher can never be ‘objective’. But it is precisely this rigorous, contextualised subjectivity which is the greatest strength of qualitative research.

**I LINK THEREFORE I AM**

As in all business areas, the expected turnaround for research ‘results’ is accelerating. There is little time for reflection. 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? Are there better ways in which clients can ‘know’ the research findings?

According to Complexity theory, ‘relationship’ and interconnectivity—within the context of structure and constancy—are what engenders change and innovation. 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 research model, in which the client ‘hands over’ the research brief, the researcher then ‘finds the results’ and hands them back to the client. There is an inevitable tension in forcing non-linear processes, such as knowledge generation, into this sort of linear structure and much of the essence of knowledge is lost in the process.

By adopting a more genuinely co-operative process of knowledge generation, we side-step
this linear model and create working patterns which are conducive to harnessing different ways of thinking and different types of knowledge in pursuit of a satisfactory business outcome.

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’, between individuals. However, co-creation can equally be applied to the researcher’s ‘internal conversation’; what Ralph Stacey, from a complexity perspective, refers to as ‘silent conversation’ (Stacey 2003:237). The individual is, effectively, engaged in the same processes ‘internally’ as the team may be engaged in ‘externally’. The internal reflections, connections, intuition and inspiration which go into generating knowledge—what we loosely define as ‘analysis’—are the kernel of qualitative research and it is important that we protect them.

FINDING THE CREATIVE EDGE

The ‘edge of chaos’, at its simplest, 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. Supposedly, this is where creativity emerges. If this is so, if the ‘edge of chaos’ is where change and new thinking happens, is this not 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 insight 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 how we might encourage others—clients, research participants—to stimulate their creative potential as well.

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.

Commercial qualitative research is seeing a resurgence of creative techniques. Approaches such as Creative Workshops (Holmes & Keegan 1983) and Breakthrough Events (Langmaid & Andrews 2003) are increasingly being used to reposition ‘re-search’ as ‘future-search’.

THE IMPORTANCE OF LEADERSHIP

Working life is not only about fixed, learned skills or knowledge. Increasingly it is about acting authoritatively, making an ‘appropriate’ or ‘good enough’ decision in an uncertain situation, in which there is insufficient knowledge and too little time to assimilate it. Informed improvisation becomes the name of the game (Griffin 2002).

Do researchers see themselves as leading, as showing spontaneity and a greater ability to deal with the unknown? These characteristics are not traditionally associated with research but they are essential to informed decisions, strategic recommendations and creative leaps with limited time and partial resources. We need to
emphasise leadership skills within the qualitative mix.

**Where does ‘emergent inquiry’ fit in?**

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.

I picture emergent inquiry as involving three interwoven and fluid 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, we are moving from a linear to a non-linear perspective.

**ACKNOWLEDGING EMOTIONAL INPUT**

The separation of mind, body and emotion, introduced by Descartes 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 move us, whilst unavoidably employing them in every decision we make (Damasio 2000). It is time to accept the breadth of our personal research input; to acknowledge that emotional experience is 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 critical and, indeed, are the basis of research consultancy, which is as much experiential and emotional as cerebral.

Experienced qualitative researchers have always accepted the importance of emotion in research. I’m not saying anything 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 closer to ‘real life’ situations and thereby enables more relevant knowledge generation.

**KNOWLEDGE IS ALL AROUND**

When people talk about integrating 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, connect with it and allow it to feed our thinking.

Often we do not ‘see’ what can be useful. We label some people as ‘consumers’—as if the rest of us aren’t, or as if this is all they do with their lives. We forget our chameleon nature. The more we can get out of role—client, employee, 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.
RE-DEFINING BEGINNINGS AND ENDINGS

Where does research begin and end? I think we need to broaden our perspectives on this. Defining a relevant research problem is at least half the solution and yet too 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 for fairly simple problems, but for larger or complex ones, it is just not good enough. And more and more projects are complex, because we live in an increasingly complex environment.

We need to work with clients on problem definition. Process consultants would take this as given, but it is not traditionally part of the researcher role. If, however, we redefine our role as ‘research consultants’ then it is essential, although it can still be a sensitive area. Historically the role of ‘client research buyer’ involves definition of the problem and knowledge of what steps are needed to ‘solve’ it. But, from a process consultancy perspective, the client ‘often does not know what she is looking for and indeed should not really be expected to know’ (Schein 1999: 5). A change of role expectations between clients and researchers is needed before problem definition can be openly acknowledged as a valid research area.

At the end of the project, the traditional research model decrees that the researcher hands over the ‘findings’ and walks away. To be involved in strategic planning or implementation is deemed inappropriate; it is in conflict with the ‘objectivity’ of the researcher. As a result, the researcher, by now a repository of knowledge which is not easily transferred as ‘findings’, is dismissed and a valuable resource is lost. By contrast, a ‘process consultancy’ model implies developing the research knowledge within the organisational context, so that learnings from the research can be disseminated and developed. This requires a co-operative working arrangement, which is more flexible and less role bound than at present.

What are the practical implications of emergent inquiry?

- Curiosity, openness, an engagement with the problem is a pre-requisite. Emergent inquiry is not prescriptive; there is no standard methodology; each problem requires its own approach.
- Shaping the research question is central to the process of emergent inquiry; it will inevitably influence the outcome. Encourage clients to allow time for this. Set up workshops to explore the inquiry. Invite different stakeholders, foster diverse opinions.
- Learn to ‘access [your] ignorance by actively figuring out what [you do] not know’ (Schein 1999: 98) without fear of appearing stupid. In this way the questioning becomes part of the research process, rather than a challenge to the client’s authority.
- Knowledge is evolving, never static. We can specify a problem and create potential solutions—and this is generally good enough for our purposes—but it is always work in progress. Encourage a view that knowledge is an ongoing process, not a ‘thing’.
- Trust your emotional learning in a research situation, but be reflective, rigorous and disciplined about ‘emotional’ content in just the same way as you are with ‘intellectual’ content.
- Our role is to facilitate the creation of knowledge, but it is not our responsibility to solve the client’s problem. Work with clients to develop the research knowledge within the organisation. Suggest dissemination Workshops, learning reviews, informal work teams.
New and creative thinking occurs when we are outside our comfort zone. It is our job to encourage people to think the unthinkable, do the undoable. This has implications for inquiry processes. Commercial qualitative research has become wedded to the small group, whereas in psycho-dynamic circles, the large group is an established approach (Stacey 2003). Working with large groups has parallels with organisational life and often triggers off patterns which replicate organisational conflict and problem resolution. Equally, they may replicate viral marketing patterns or the development of cult brands. Select the inquiry approach to best fit the nature of the inquiry.

Role boundaries are a distraction to learning. It is useful to start from the assumption that everyone has more to contribute to knowledge generation than they consciously know or can easily access. The contribution people can make encompasses the personal as well as the professional.

Often the inquiry process calls for creative techniques to encourage all of us to think differently; role play where client teams can experience what it is like to be a customer, painting or drawing where customers express their feelings about a service experience, writing the CV or obituary of a brand—the whole spectrum of psychographic and enabling techniques which qualitative researchers have developed over the years in order to help generate and cultivate ideas and their potential development. Utilise these. Develop your own.

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 partially, ‘converted’ to this way of working, we tend to play safe. It is easier to stand back, relying on traditional research boundaries, not openly voicing our opinion. In doing so, we undervalue ourselves.

Qualitative researchers, like other consultants, needs to evolve to meet organisational needs. However, qualitative practice already encompasses many of the ways of thinking, connecting, problem solving that most organisations are striving to achieve. It is a creative, non-linear, experiential way of thinking and working. We need to stand up and celebrate this. We need to separate the valuable qualitative thinking from the formulaic ‘research’ label that limits it. We need to drain the bathwater out of the baby.

REFERENCES


BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Dr Sheila Keegan is a Chartered Psychologist and Founding Partner of Campbell Keegan Ltd, a qualitative research consultancy working in the private and public sectors with issues broadly related to change and communications.

Sheila can be contacted at: Sheila@campbellkeegan.com (020 8742 7435)