

# Qualitative methods: touchy, feely, look-see?

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## I Introduction

In this second report (see also Crang, 2002) I want to suggest, first, how qualitative methods are now undergoing a period of some more mature reflection and evaluation, and, second, to highlight some as yet less well-trodden paths. I want to suggest that much current work follows through a constructionist agenda – in terms of seeing people discursively creating their worlds, seeing the field as discursively constructed and indeed both the fieldwork and field worker as socially constructed. That is, we acknowledge the (co-)construction of the field by researcher and researched where ‘fieldwork is a discursive process in which the research encounter is structured by the researcher and the researched’ (England, 2001: 210). I want to interrogate the limits resulting from this ‘cross between ontological constructivism and epistemological realism’ (Crang, 2001: 221). So this report will begin with some textbooks to look at the state of play with qualitative methods. Then it will turn to the notion of the construction of knowledge and the field through autobiography before following through the issues raised by approaches engaging with performative, embodied and haptic knowledge, and finally visual approaches. Through this I want to ask whether methods often derided for being somehow soft and ‘touchy-feely’ have in fact been rather limited in touching and feeling. Rethinking notions of feeling will also be suggested as a way of working at the thorny issue of the dominance of certain forms of vision in the discipline. Building upon the theme of last year’s report, let me start by discussing the consolidation of qualitative orthodoxy in geography through textbooks.

## II Consolidating texts

A measure of the current state of the art can be found in five recent textbooks. Shurmer-Smith’s (2002) *Doing cultural geography* provides a clear linkage of theoretical

approaches with a range of methodological approaches. Beginning with a helpful setting-up of theory as something that is to be done rather than learnt as some fixed map of positions, it proceeds logically from there into the empirical 'doing' of research, linked elegantly by a discussion of framing questions, and thus pluralizes and contextualizes the 'how to' issues of methods. While addressing what we might call a standard suite – participant observation, interviews (single and group) (Bennett), field observation (Shurmer-Smith and Shurmer-Smith) and feminist method (Ekinsmyth) – it also includes discussions of official statistics (Brown), archival work (Hannam) and textual analysis (Shurmer-Smith) which push us to desanctify, or at least open up, the relationship of research with specific, we might even say privileged, modes of qualitative fieldwork and field sites. Bennett's chapter really pushes the question of what 'being there', in the field, means in terms of the production of knowledge and producing the authority of the researcher. The final section of the book raises a good mix of issues about producing something out of materials – from more conventional 'analysis' through to a frank discussion of the possibilities and limits of pluralizing 'outputs'. Less specifically focused upon qualitative methods but with a similar argument about the linkage of methods and theory is Hoggart *et al.*'s (2001) *Researching human geography* that comes from a more economic and urban geography bent – but maps into many of the same methods and structures in two chapters devoted to interviews (individual and group) and participant observation (including action research) and one on archival work. A similar connection between theory and practice is evidenced in Moss's (2002) collection *Feminist geography in practice* which moves from the positional towards the methodological. Some of the issues raised in specific chapters I want to discuss in the following section.

There are also two recent collections devoted solely to qualitative methods. Iain Hay's (2000) collection *Qualitative research methods in human geography* pitches straightforwardly at the student market, beginning by positioning qualitative work and traditions and then proceeding to specific methods. Winchester here suggests there are three streams of qualitative work, starting with 'oral methods' (from biographical to survey interviews), then textual analysis, then participative approaches – and I would highlight that this means quite a 'wordy' balance. The methods outlined then resolve into interviewing – focused upon semistructured approaches, but with nice material on listening strategies (Dunn) – thence to focus groups (Cameron) and participant observation which offers some helpful sections on observation of the 'field' as embodied interaction (Kearns), before looking at textual analysis (Forbes) which draws on semiotic and visual analysis. Then, perhaps most helpfully, the book concludes with Berg and Mansvelt on the politics and poetics of writing up reports, putting a tortured debate in clear prose.

Finally, there is the collection edited by Limb and Dwyer (2001), *Qualitative methodologies for geographers: issues and debates*. I have to declare a small conflict of interest here as a contributor to this collection, but overall the book aims for a more reflective approach than is common for 'how to' books. As such, the essays are not designed as the first source for students but aim to open out issues. Again, I will pick out specific issues from chapters later, but it is worth noting what this avowed state-of-the-art summation says about qualitative methods in the discipline. Of course the editors have to select in order to avoid doorstop proportions, and so in their introduction they list methods (pp. 5–6) they see as central, and come up with four main clusters. First are

'in-depth open ended interviews' with individuals or groups, one-off or repeated, biographical or other; second are group discussions, one-off or consecutive – though this clearly overlaps with the first category; third is participant observation, which may be overt or covert, active or passive, partisan, including a 'variety of ethnographic techniques' such as participant diaries or 'other interactive exercises'; fourth are interpretations and analyses of varieties of texts, be they archival, maps, literature or landscape and 'visual materials including pictures, films, advertisements and dramatic performances'. This last group they later (2001: 13) say cannot be fitted in the book, which is fair enough. Yet it does rather suggest that the book might almost be titled 'verbal methodologies for geographers'. My point is not to berate the editors for a choice that I suspect does indeed reflect the balance of work done, nor to deny the need for and quality of sections on interviewing, group work, interpretation and writing, but to highlight that this is a limited menu – with the two fascinating chapters about participant observation (Dowler, 2001; Parr, 2001) mostly focusing upon access – especially given the sparkling range of substantive topics covered in the collection. I would suggest this is indicative of a context where it is almost becoming *de rigueur* for a 'qualitative' thesis to include semistructured interviews. Building from these issues, I wish to start by engaging with constructing the field and positionality before moving towards thinking of the limits and implications of what may be 'core' methods.

### III Positioning the researcher

I am weary of work that divides positionality formulaically into being insiders (good but impossible) and outsiders (bad but inevitable). Thankfully, much work this year has developed beyond these approaches to further examine what are the very real issues around the relationship of researcher and researched. Skelton (2001) illustrates how a corporeal raced identity comes through in elements of comportment and tacit skills marking out 'outsiders' even as they try to show respect to local custom. On the other hand, Mohammad raises a series of questions of who gets positioned as 'authentically' able to speak on behalf of 'Othered' groups when she unpacks how her skin colour, and assumptions about her identity and beliefs, gave her a sometimes dubious access and authority to research and represent British Muslims (Mohammad, 2001), just as in a different setting Valentine (2002) explores the multiple assumptions of who is inside and outside particular research groups, and the assumptions made by participants about researcher identities that render simple dualisms untenable. Dowler (2001), researching the Northern Ireland conflict, ends up pointing up both her own outsideness and yet the banality and ordinariness of interacting with the Provisional IRA, while Delph-Janiurek (2001) illustrates how misunderstandings and crossed-assumptions litter fieldwork.

Perhaps at its most painful and strident, Smith has recently developed an extended critique of the relationships of researcher and fourth-world, Aboriginal or, as she prefers, 'indigenous people' where 'research is probably the dirtiest word in indigenous people's vocabulary' (1999: 1). Building from familiar arguments over the last 20 years, she offers a salutary outline of how histories of symbolic and physical violence intertwine – especially the pointed and tragicomic accounting for how 'systematic' research often bore more similarity to haphazard amateurism than it could

countenance. The book also develops an agenda for what she calls a 'modernist resistance struggle' (p. 107) focused around indigenous agendas, knowledge and participation. Smith offers a realistic account of the possibilities to engage with communities and develop sympathetic work at a variety of scales and also for researchers to open cracks in previous research structures, working within the system.

The ambiguities, productivities and difficulties of positionality comes through rather differently in the work of Routledge (2002) on tourist development in Goa. He engaged in quite deliberate deception and, indeed, illegal activities as part of cooperation with local NGOs. Posing as a tourist agent to interview developers, Routledge's work clearly violates nearly all the standard ethical protocols about informed consent while honouring obligations to his partner NGOs. The frisson of danger and transgression is a guilty pleasure he has to acknowledge in playing his multiple roles of researcher, collaborator, activist and publicist. This highlights the limits of increasingly formulaic protocols often used by Ethical Review Boards, in situations of unequal power – and in Goa bad faith by developers themselves engaging in illegal, as well as exploitative, actions. In a less extreme case, Bradshaw (2001) points out the limits of the often-used criteria for ethical engagement with those being researched – that of 'member checks', where participants get a right of veto or reply over the research interpretation. When this was applied to a large multinational that, perhaps unsurprisingly, objected to a critical account of their activities, it resulted in the work being embargoed.

These intractable issues put in context laudable goals of establishing commonality between researcher and researched as suggested by Al Hindi. She suggests reflexive practice may solve an inevitable problem of difference in research where 'people wish to learn from and about others because the latter are different from the former, but the fact of difference itself may distance them from one another, making such understanding difficult' (Al-Hindi and Kawabata, 2002: 106). She attempts to bypass Rose's (1997) criticisms of this strategy by separating a positivist reflectivity, striving for transparency through introspection, from a transformative feminist reflexivity where both sides reflect back on their mutual (mis-?)understandings. While applicable in some circumstances, this seems to me unable to address the limits of reflexivity in unequal situations where our understandings of their understandings of our understandings are not only bound together but also unstably threaded through a range of different performances in different contexts by all parties. My concern is that too often exhortations to reflexivity and disclosure tend to depend upon and reproduce problematic notions of a stable, tightly defined, unchanging research project conducted by a singular researcher, with one stable essential identity, both between locations and over time, and suggest the latter is also true of the researched. If different roles do appear in different contexts, they are often portrayed as circumstantial clothing, dressing ourselves inevitably less rather than more honestly to conceal some ulterior purpose. While deception can and does occur, from both parties, it is also quite important to recognize that our projects are often unstable entities which are not only presented, but actually exist, in multiple versions given to funders, colleagues, friends, family, peers and (different) respondents, none of which need be necessarily the 'true one'. Moreover, researchers are more or less unstable, at least in the sense that they may refashion themselves not only between locations but over time, and they are constituted 'within a fragmented space of fragile and fluid networks of connections and gaps' (Pratt, in Routledge, 2002: 478; see also Pratt, 2001). The transformative nature of research upon the researcher is indeed almost

a trope in itself, but serious attention to these trajectories has not always been sustained.

The importance of autobiographical trajectory to projects undertaken forms the focus of Moss's (2001) collection, which provides accounts of life experiences and their often painful, certainly complex, negotiation with academic agendas leading to specific research approaches (Knopp, 2001; Saltmarsh, 2001; Gilmartin, 2001). Moreover, researchers' backgrounds are read by informants, used and portrayed by researchers (McKay, 2002), in ways that enable and disable contacts in complex patterns. Butz (2001) discusses how his research in Pakistan included local community attempts to reshape his identity and indeed to partially incorporate him into local attempts to represent themselves as a specific audience, then as collaborator. Alternately Cook (2001) provides an elegant and salutary account of autobiography coming to be the research, as part of problematizing the 'extended field' and subjecting the people and practices of the academy to the same scrutiny normally reserved for fieldwork, in order to reveal the positionalities that also impact within the 'cultures of cleverness' of the academy. As he comments, 'a lot of people have told me it was a brave thing to do, writing that kind of PhD. Desperate is the word I prefer to use. As I said earlier, I didn't set out to write an autobiographical PhD. It was supposed to be about a fruit' (2001: 118). This points on the one hand to how auto-ethnographies 'serve to tell stories collectively about "our tribe", that is, who we are and what our rites and rituals are within academic culture' (Murphy, 2002: 251), but also raises the question whether constructivist ontologies of the world do not lead to a self-reflexivity producing an infinite regress. The risk then is that within 'this current atmosphere of publish or perish, there is much pressure to perform, and the result, in what is now broadly considered ethnography, is often a tendency toward stylistic command over representation and the textualization of "the real"' (Murphy, 2002: 251). If we follow this latter to its end point, and I would be reluctant to do so, we see 'a moment of ethnographic hypocrisy, a systematic rewarding of style over substance by trading in the rites of the field and the voice of the Other for the art of the prose and the examination of the Self' (p. 252). It is to field practice that I would now like to turn to consider approaches that emphasize the performative and haptic nature of qualitative work.

#### IV Performative and haptic approaches

The dominance of verbal approaches in qualitative work is understandable after the discursive or textual turn across the social sciences, but a recent notable trend is a shift from interpreting texts to seeing them as agents in action (Smith, 2001). Ethnomethodology has pursued this notion for a long time, studying the maintenance of everyday life as a social accomplishment. Inspired by this tradition, Laurier unpacks the notion of 'public space', as massively coded and structured, by studying 'neighbouring' as an 'occasioned activity' rather than a neighbourhood as defined by residential proximity. Based on observation in key locales, such as a neighbourhood café, and following the life of a small part of the city, through such apparently inconsequential events as 'lost cat' notices (Laurier *et al.*, 2001; 2002), it attempts to tie descriptions and actions together, to see what people do to solve ordinary problems and sustain daily life (Laurier, 2001). Its refusal to produce transcendent theory, that is to explain people's actions in academic language rather than their own, is its strength and

limit depending upon your point of view. Relatedly, Rose talks of performative landscapes with 'everyday agents calling the landscape into being as they make it relevant for their own lives, strategies and projects' (2002: 457). So the question becomes one of what is *done* not what is *represented*, through proliferating operations and practices rather than an operation of a hidden structure. These approaches show a renewed attention to *definition* of setting, *actions* within that setting and the *identification* of solving the geographical problems that are solved every day (Laurier, 2001). In this we see something of a return to the classic legacy of street-scale ethnographies, as exemplified in work on street retailers such as booksellers (Duneier, 2001) or African immigrant traders (Stoller, 2002). The latter's previous work had already added a more explicit theorization of the sensory and bodily performance of culture – by both ethnographers and informants (Stoller, 1997).

Geographers have of late been including the 'body' in their research topics but these ideas have had a muted impact in terms of thinking through qualitative research practice. Certainly the bodily presence of the researcher is now acknowledged, so, instead of the God-trick of the invisible, omnipresent narrator, we often have the researcher as a copresent interlocutor. In published papers based on interviews, however, the researcher's presence becomes quite attenuated after setting the context of the fieldwork, often still becoming a ghostly absence since we rarely get questions included in quotes – perhaps due to word limits, embarrassment or just pithiness. The body quite often ends up as providing a sort of inescapable positioning of the researcher – through race, disability or gender – but less often is it the instrument of research. We have certainly moved beyond accepting 'the researcher as a detached head – the object of Thought, Rationality and Reason – floating from research site to research site, thinking and speaking, while its profane counterpart, the Body, lurks unseen, unruly and uncontrollable in the shadows of the Great Hall of the Academy' but it may still feel like 'the Body has become the hysterical and embarrassing relative, "shut in" the academy's ivory tower' (Spry, 2001: 720). That is, we get glimpses of geography as embodied work, as corporeal performances and cultures of doing geography in different ways in different places from research to fieldclass (Dewsbury and Naylor, 2002; Nairn, 2002; Routledge, 2002). However, there is rather less on the actual processes of learning through our bodies' responses and situations – that is, haptic knowledges.

While accounts recognize the positioning and presence of bodies, along with how they are made socially meaningful, there are rather fewer that unpack the body as active agent in making knowledge. In this area, research practice seems to be lagging behind current theory. Theoretical appropriations of non-cognitive action have been critiqued, first, for downplaying the continuing power of discursive regimes, and, second, for merely inverting the division of mind and body (Nash, 2000: 656). However, it would seem that there are possibilities to expand field practice and what counts as valid knowledge – for instance, to take the example at the heart of Nash's critique, the bodily disciplines of dance. The different learnt responses required for different genres offer an illustration of how research can think through corporeal sensation, discipline and the routinization of bodily hexis (Picart, 2002). We may then begin disrupting the 'disembodied voices of academia and voiceless bodies colonized for knowledge' (Spry, 2001: 718). Certainly this is part of Parr's work by including bodily comportment in studies of illness (2001) – and it is around health that issues of bodily experience have

developed most, not just as objects of knowledge but also as part of doing research (e.g., Moss and Dyck, 1996; Dyck, 1999; MacKian, 2000).

However, I do not want to conflate performative ethnography with the performance of bodies in specific places. In some senses the denaturalizing of bodily experience, seeing it as socially shaped, has become a taken-for-granted point of theory, but research practice still seems shackled to a naturalistic sense of being there in the flesh as grounding truth claims, to such an extent that qualitative fieldwork often seems defined as the copresence of bodies. This in turn raises a couple of questions – about why researching bodies still only appear marginally when they appear the *sine qua non* of research methods, and conversely why the ‘truth claims’ of qualitative research seem so essentially, or at least perennially, grounded in the body of the researcher. Currently there are only the beginnings of a commentary in geography about non-copresent qualitative research through electronically mediated communication (Madge and O’Connor, 2002; Parr, 2002).

## V Visual methods

If copresence is the privileged ground of qualitative truth claims, it is against a foil of ‘bad’ vision. An objectifying, detached gaze forms the antithetical pole to sharing, engaged qualitative work. It is not surprising that geography seems to have moved to a disenchantment with visual approaches, since its connection to the visual has really been highlighted in work uncovering the power dynamics of specific scopic regimes of knowledge (Rose, 2000). The scopic regime in geography has been interrogated at various moments: first, presentationally, presenting the ‘world and all that is in it’, by translating expeditions and travels into pictures for audiences ‘back home’ (Nicholson, 2001; 2002) in an ontology that privileges the visible ‘realities’ of the world; second, in a more epistemological sense, geography has used visual metaphors to underly its truth claims – from the regional survey through to visualization of data (in maps, tables and charts); third, and putting these together, the ‘gaze’ of the geographer operates in a masculine economy of desire.

This is valuable work, but it means that qualitative fieldwork almost turns away from the visual to avoid accusations of ‘academic tourism’ or objectification. It also risks dismissing alternative modes of visualizing. For instance, Holliday (2000) used video diaries with participants – to enable their self-representation, and engage with issues of reflexivity and autobiography (see also Lomax and Casey, 1998). Her work is explicitly framed to avoid the disembodied, detached, thus supposedly objective but certainly objectifying, observer of the documentary tradition. Pink (2001) points out that there are traditions of alternative visions in the documentary tradition. Books by Russell (1999) and Grimshaw (2001) explore the variations in visual anthropology that have unpacked the truth claims of scopic regimes from within. Perhaps the best example Grimshaw offers is that of Melissa Llewellyn-Davies whose work moved from cinema verité to develop an almost soap-opera TV aesthetic, through which she could dramatize social action and change in communities rather than present them in a homogenized ethnographic present where individuals are made to represent cultures.

Geographers seem to use visual material principally to generate data rather than as an aesthetic product. Thus several studies use pictures in a variety of ways to generate

responses from participants; Sidaway (2000) gets students to think about visual data and the process of representing places in the field by producing images; Young and Barrett (2001) use drawings and the like to understand children's worlds; Waitt and Head (2002) examine the visual imagery in circulation among tourists; and Markwell (2000) uses photography to produce self-narratives or the critical interrogation of how material objects with images upon them are taken into our lives (cf. Garlick, 2002). However, the expressive possibilities of the visual for our work seem to be less utilized.

Using visual media to express and interrogate varied geographies through aesthetics is something that I suspect most geographers are not trained to do. Yet Sekula's (1995) wonderful work on global trade shows the potential of pictures to speak to occasions where 'for one moment the global supply network is comically localized' (p. 32). The sense of the 'comic' I think is notable as something academic prose is less good at evoking. Indeed Rogoff (2000) recently mobilized the term 'geography's visual culture' not to speak about disciplinary heritage but to suggest that, '[c]oming to "geography" in the wake of all this work, we realize that it has always been a form of positioned spectatorship'. Defining geography here as knowledge about the world, she develops an 'understanding of geography as an epistemological structure, of visual culture as the arena in which it circulates' (p. 11). She suggests that geographies of vision enable us to unpack the fantasies and desires for stable places in a world of global flows and dislocation, rather than enact a disembodied and despatialized viewpoint.

## VI Concluding remarks

Qualitative work is currently developing new and sophisticated approaches that move us well beyond what have become almost formulaic discussions of fixed positionalities. Recent theoretical work has destabilized the notion of those researched as comprising a stable, coherent community, the self-ideal of the researcher and the format of representation. While engaging with the first two points, qualitative geography seems locked in a conventional expository mode. After all that has been said about textual forms and wordplay, a lot of field-based work is still set up around a conventional data and report structure. Of course, that model is often appropriate, and effective, in getting messages across to specific audiences who may already be sceptical about qualitative work. It is often hard enough to get 'soft' qualitative work taken seriously without playing with the politics of representation: but it would be unfortunate if geography were to divide between 'fieldworkers' and 'writers' in the way that it could be argued anthropology has. Moreover, the solid grounding of qualitative fieldwork in the engaged reality of people's lived experience seems coupled to a focus upon verbal methods that paradoxically means qualitative work tends to produce very wordy worlds. So, on the one hand there is a caution about visual methods, for fear of an objectifying realism, and, on the other, a focus upon discursive construction produces forms of knowledge that are densely textured, in every sense. In this report I have suggested that the response to this need not only be more writerly texts, but also to push further into the felt, touched and embodied constitution of knowledge.

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