

RISK, CREATIVITY AND ETHICS: DIMENSIONS OF INNOVATION IN QUALITATIVE SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH METHODS

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Abstract

This conference paper draws on research conducted within NCRM on the nature of methodological innovation in qualitative social science research methods, and in particular on three cases of innovation studied to explore the phenomenon in detail. The diverse cases are: netnography, child-led research and creative research. We examine the claim to a critical juncture in the emergence as innovative methods made by Robert Kozinets, Mary Kellett and David Gauntlett respectively. The research comprised a systematic search of the literature to explore the response of the academy community to publications by these authors, plus semi-structured interviews conducted with them and with individuals able to comment on developments, i.e for each case, an early career researcher applying or adapting the innovation, an experienced researcher in the area, a book reviewer of the innovator's work, a knowledgeable researcher/user of the innovation from a different country and one from a different discipline. Thematic analysis of the interview data enabled exploration of the processes involved in the status of innovation being claimed or ascribed.

Together the cases shed light on the changing social contexts that demand new research questions and responses and that lead researchers to develop novel methodological approaches. Points of interest arising in this project of understanding methodological innovation in process include issues of ethical responsibility, democratisation of research, empowerment through research and the relationship between research and the academy. The paper addresses the nebulous nature of methodological innovation and the ways in which it is about reflexivity on techniques as well the novelty of the techniques themselves. We argue that, counter to what we may have expected, in the particular cases studied the innovators were: (i) managing risks as much as taking risks; (ii) codifying their work as much as being creative; and (iii) seeking to be ethical rather than being constrained by a culture in which procedural ethical regulation works to limit methodological development. These innovators were working to balance communicating the safe qualities alongside the innovative qualities of their approach. They were operating in what are often perceived to be ethically risky domains (the internet, children, and visual methods) and it is helpful to reflect on the perceived riskiness of educational research and the particular relevance for researchers in education.

1. The nature of methodological innovation

It is unlikely to have escaped the notice of the audience for this symposium that it is more diverse in focus than the others going on at this time. Our three papers are not a random concoction, however; we are linked by our involvement in ESRC's National Centre for Research Methods, and by its remit to promote a step change in the quality and range of methodological skills and techniques used by the UK social science community, including supporting methodological innovation. It is important, I suggest, that if there are debates going on in the social sciences, and strives towards quality, innovative methods, then education as a discipline should be part of this. My colleagues have demonstrated examples in action admirably. But to promote methodological innovation we need to have an understanding of what it is and the conditions that support it. This is where our research, from the hub of NCRM at Southampton has been making a contribution

Innovation is a slippery concept, in part because of assumptions and rhetoric about it inevitably being a good thing; there are assumptions that we will know it when we see it even if we can't quite define it. Distinctions are made between innovation that is genuine -and gimmickry - and therefore a defining feature is that innovation serves some purpose beyond doing something new for the sake of it. There are debates in the literature about whether anything is ever entirely new but rather situated in a relationship with the socio-cultural (or methodological) context from which it emerges or is constructed. It is therefore contested territory as to whether methodological innovation can refer to developments in established methods, as Taylor & Coffey (2008) argue, or just to so-called new methods. Certainly many claims to innovations are, when probed, adaptations to existing methods (Wiles et al, 2011); Wild (2012) uses the term 'conceptual composting' for the way in which methods are built on each other and Rogers (2003) has referred to horizontal developments.

The issue of uptake is similarly a matter of contention. Some authors argue that a new approach or development is an innovation only if it has been taken up by the wider social science community (Taylor & Coffey, 2008) while others define methodological innovation as approaches that have not yet filtered through to the mainstream (Xenitidou & Gilbert, 2009, 2012).

There is agreement, though, that innovation is driven by complex social relations. Prior to our research there was some understanding of these and one of our goals has been to enhance such understanding. The academy brings pressures on researchers to innovate as innovation is valued by research councils and other funders, journal editors and reviewers, the exercises for the assessment of research and so on. Travers (2009) is critical of the way in which individuals' career progression relies on an ability to demonstrate novelty as well as impact, which can result in 'fads'. There has also, however, been recognition that qualitative researchers have been creatively experimenting with methods in relation to the emergence of complex new social situations and developments in particular social science disciplines, resulting in new research questions, and in response to the affordances of new technologies. New methods may be filling, what Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2008: 4) refer to as 'methods gaps' or may be responses to ethical concerns (Nind et al, 2012). We have been interested in how the tensions between the drive to innovate and the drive for credible research methods play out in the research community, how innovators describe their own journeys and how they are regarded by others in process of becoming known.

2. Three case studies

Yin (1989: 23) argues that case study enables the investigation of 'a contemporary phenomenon within its real life context; when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident'. Thus, we saw the possibility for case studies of methodological innovation to shed light on the phenomenon within its rapidly changing social context. As Phillips and Shaw (2011: 610) have argued, 'methodological choices ... are not innocent'; they need to be examined in context.

For our purposes, the cases needed to be qualitative, to have been in existence for around a decade to allow time for uptake and response by the academic community, they needed to have been identified as innovations in previous research (Wiles et al, 2006, 2011; Xenitidou and Gilbert, 2009, 2012) and they had to have a specific individual associated with their development. These criteria led us to select:

- 1) Robert Kozinets and 'netnography' - his form of online ethnography;
- 2) Mary Kellett and 'child-led' research - her advancement of children as researchers within developments in participatory research and the new sociology of childhood; and
- 3) David Gauntlett and 'creative research methods' – his development within visual methods, particularly making metaphorical representations of identity with Lego.

We are very grateful to them and apologise in advance if they are in the audience – the exposure the study has provided for them is dual-edged we know.

I need to say enough about each to give you sufficient insight before moving to the important issues to arise from the study. Netnography is positioned within a broader methodological context of online/virtual ethnography as a way of researching online communities – a methodological innovation linked to a social development. There have been rapid developments in the online world and burgeoning interest in online research methods. Hine's (2000, 2008) 'Virtual Ethnography' was an early emergent method (Hesse-Biber's (2008) in this context. Xenitidou and Gilbert (2009) identified 'netnography' as a form of online ethnography representing an innovation. Kozinets (2002, 2010) adapts traditional ethnographic techniques and presents netnography as a new, qualitative, economical, effective and unobtrusive means of studying 'naturally occurring' online communication and behaviour, and generating naturalistic data about online communities.

Child-led research, promoted by Mary Kellett at the Children's Research Centre at the Open University, is similarly a development of its time. In this case it emerged against the backdrop of the new sociology of childhood and moral and ethical standpoints about the importance of children's voice and children as social actors. It is located within a broader range of participatory, emancipatory and inclusive approaches. The innovation involves providing training and support to children to enable them to design and carry out their own research projects. Like Kozinets, Kellett (2005) has popularised her innovation by codifying her approach and publishing step-by-step guidance – this time on training children in research methods.

Gauntlett's (2007) 'creative research methods' encompass a range of visual, performative and sensory methods, particularly involving the research participant creating something (a photograph, video, drawing, scrapbook, collage or model) used within the research process, usually for data elicitation. He is particularly known for innovating with the reflective process of creating a three-

dimensional artefact - a Lego model - to metaphorically represent the creator's identity. Hence he is seeking data beyond that accessible by traditional methods and his work is located in the context of advances in visual methods more generally and a keen methodological interest in the potential of the creative process.

3. Our methods & thematic analysis

Robert Kozinets describes himself as 'the creator of netnography' (<http://kozinets.net/about>), David Gauntlett describes himself as having 'pioneered the use of creative and visual research methods' (<http://www.theory.org.uk/david/biog.htm>), and Mary Kellett describes her approach as 'a new paradigm' (Kellett, 2005). We are not concerned with evaluating these claims but with studying the social processes surrounding methodological innovation.

To explore these processes our study involved in-depth interviews with Robert Kozinets, Mary Kellett and David Gauntlett, and with five-six people who were able to comment on the innovative approaches: their usefulness, affordances, contribution to social research. These interviewees included for each case: an early-career researcher who had applied the innovation; an experienced researcher working in the same field as the innovator; someone who had conducted a book review of one of the key texts relating to the innovation; someone from a different country to that of the innovator; and someone from a different discipline to the innovator (see Nind et al, 2012, Wiles et al, in press). Interviews, conducted face-to-face, by telephone and skype, were fully transcribed and subject to thematic analysis. We also conducted a systematic search of the literature for all citations in research or conference papers to the cases being investigated (for the period 1/1/1999-31/12/2010) to explore the response to the innovations within the academy community.

The analysis culminated in a summary for each case in relation to the key themes relating to timeliness, distinctiveness, contribution, breakthrough, and future development.

4. Findings

In terms of the question of 'Why this, why now?' the beginnings of the innovation journey were not so much a plan to develop an 'innovation' a response to a unique set of motivations, for Kozinets filling a gap, for Kellett addressing shortcomings, for Gauntlett dissatisfaction with traditional methods. Unexpectedly, the desire for ethical research was an important ingredient for each. It is frequently argued that the ethics culture surrounding research stifles innovation, but in contrast, we could see how the desire to be ethical was key to fostering these methodological developments.

The process in which initial developments gained academic interest and wider uptake emerged as a complex interaction of factors including efforts to disseminate and support from champion-like colleagues who encouraged and helped build confidence as well as promoting the development in their fields. There was a point when they realised they were 'on to something'. Kozinets' papers were key to his journey. Kellett described an 'uphill struggle' prior to breakthrough in the form of the Children's Research Centre and publication of her text book. Gauntlett described a long build up to his book. Both benefitted from considerable publicity in which the CRC and the work with Lego attracted media interest. The conditions were right for these innovations to 'take off' (Wiles et al, in press): the debates were hot and the interest piqued. Other complementary work helped to create a supportive backdrop. In the case of child-led research there were also policy concerns with

children's voice and in the case of creative methods a 'cultural turn' (Friedland & Mohr, 2004) towards visual and arts-based approaches. Strategically, books setting out procedures for their method or approach were important: persuasive as well as educative. Netnography was helped by its distinctive name and social media and self-promotion played a role. The innovators were responsive to the interest and fed it, gaining momentum.

In terms of what is innovative and distinctive about these innovators, one feature is their relationship with risk; they were characterised by interviewees as courageous (as well as creative, determined, committed, enthusiastic). But the innovators were managing risks as much as taking risks – and making their methods rule-bound as much as being creative. These innovators were working to balance communicating the safe qualities alongside the innovative qualities of their approach. They were operating in what are often perceived to be ethically risky domains (the internet, children, and visual methods) and having to manage the added risk of breaking out methodologically. Nonetheless, the innovations and their promotion were seen in some way as exciting.

There were, however, reservations, firstly about the extent to which the innovations were unique. Johnson (2010) has noted how innovations may be developed simultaneously yet independently. Interviewees recognised the fit of the innovation as embedded amongst other, parallel, developments from which they were not wholly distinct. The speed of the development and dissemination also raised concerns, and interviewees valued the maturing of methods in interaction with critiques which might conflict with the rush to impact. The marketing of innovations together with their packaging or codification in a style of writing preferred by publishers was discomfiting for some. This was seen as undermining depth and creative engagement with potential to backfire. An important message from this research is that innovation is not just about new methods or techniques, but about reflexivity.

5. Conclusions

Our research suggests that when fostering methodological innovation, some caution is necessary. There is little value in fostering 'empty' innovation, and more in allowing methodological developments to happen in fits and starts, or as a slow process of maturation, as befits the social and methodological problem. Educationalists are all too familiar with innovation fatigue when educational innovations are imposed and multiple agendas coincide and conflict. We are all too familiar, also, with the scenario of the emperor's new clothes. Similarly, methodological innovations are complex social processes in complex social situations; claiming innovation has benefits and drawbacks. It might be better for the methods, rather than the academic perhaps, for methodological steps to be taken out of the limelight. It may only be with hindsight that we can evaluate their significance. A long view, as Fielding & Lee (1996) and Lee (2011), have argued, is needed to evaluate the impact of a methodological innovation, longer than our case studies methods have had as yet. Nonetheless, distrust of innovation should not prevent us from making non-cynical innovations, to responding in genuine ways to new problems and new opportunities with new methodological thinking. I invite the audience to reflect on where the methodological innovations have been in educational research, and where, if anywhere, they are needed.

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