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Qualitative methods II: Minding the Gap

Gail Davies and Claire Dwyer

I Introduction

In our last review we drew together work exploring interactions between the performativity of research practices and the spaces of qualitative research (Davies and Dwyer, 2007). In this, we focus on the oscillating political subjectivities mobilized in research by human geographers and other qualitative researchers. In many ways this draws on a similar body of conceptual work; one characterized here as an unsettled dialogue between a recognition of relationality in social science methods and some provocations from psychoanalytic insights. However, our emphasis is on different arenas of geographical research. We look instead to the research practices of geographers working in a variety of public, policy and political domains, to trace their engagements and achievements with different ways of articulating 'publics', whether participatory, deliberative, oratorical or computational. These are issues we have been dealing with in our own research on deliberative processes (Davies, 2006; Davies and Burgess 2004) and education, ethnicity and social capital (Dwyer, Shah and Sanghera, forthcoming; Shah 2006), and they are raising methodological questions in human geography research and beyond. What follows is organized around identification and discussion of a series of gaps this questioning has opened up – of the gaps between research context and policy application, between different enactments of public geographies, between articulation and silence, and between deliberation and calculation – within the multiple settings in which qualitative researchers are engaged.

II Mobilizing participatory research

An emphasis on the political and public intersections of research practice is now both commonplace and contested. Such impulses accompany our research in many ways: from the user-benefits box of the research application, the co-production of research with consultancies, to proliferating strands of public engagement and dissemination. Yet with this emphasis come many questions. These are especially pertinent to qualitative researchers, with their attention to the 'politics of talk' (Irwin, 2006) within research settings and engagement with varied 'technologies of elicitation' (Lezaun and Soneryd, 2007) such as

citizen juries, in-depth groups and different forms of participatory action research (Pain, 2003; 2004), which underpin action outside of research contexts.

For a start, qualitative research is increasingly expected to be mobile. Symptomatic metaphors like knowledge transfer, translational research or transdisciplinarity suggest the value of research comes from its ability to move from the contexts of production to those of application and collaboration, from university to policy; in the social sciences as much as in the natural sciences (see for example Demeritt, 2005). Yet this mobility is challenged in recent geographical reflections on participatory practice. In the process of moving outputs from research contexts to policy arenas, many researchers suggest a process of 'emptying out', as policies based on detailed case-study research are drafted according to dominant thematics and agendas rather than local specificities, content that is politically contentious is withdrawn or rewritten, or reports wilfully ignored or shelved (Bell, 2007: 549; see also Burgess, 1990; 2005).

Within participatory work in a post-structuralist and feminist vein (Cameron and Gibson, 2005), the idea of accurate representations - of issues, publics or politics - moving unchanged from one sphere to another is replaced with attention to the mobility of research participants themselves. In this conceptualization, translation is replaced with dialogue; elicitation of public views with deliberation amongst them; and social transformation emerges from acknowledgement of the fluidity and multiplicity of subject positions (Cahill, 2004; 2007). The fundamental moral imperative is still on mobility. In this, being articulate is about 'learning to be affected' (Latour, 2004: 210), being moved and touched by other entities; to deliberate is to allow yourself to be moved (Callon and Rabeharisoa, 2004). In participatory processes, deliberation seeks to displace participants and turn them into mobile entities, moved from previous trajectories through interventions, which include cognitive and affective engagements with other actors (Soneryd, 2007). Evaluation of deliberative processes is increasingly replacing assessments about accuracy with those of articulation (Davies, 2006) or active citizenship (Mohan, 2007). Successful processes are judged on the creation of "new articulations of the issues under deliberation, and the degree of mobility they generate – not only in those who are consulted, but also in those who consult" (Lezaun and Soneryd, 2007: 295). Yet the experience and evaluation of such exercises is as often about gaps, breaches and disruptions; not all are moved and not all articulations are quite what they seem.

III The (dis)articulation of publics

Reflection on these gaps is critical. As Callon and Rabeharisoa claim, there may a "price to pay [...] to create and impose strongly articulated public spaces" (Callon and Rabeharisoa, 2004: 24). They insist we engage with those who refused to be moved, who will not speak in

these public spaces, suggesting not only is silence a constructive political intervention, it may actually turn out to be at the centre of politics, and demands to be taken seriously. They develop this discussion through their encounter, as researchers, with their potential research subject, Gino, as he greets their invitation to contribute his experience of muscular dystrophy to their ethnographic study of genetic medicine with silence. Callon and Rabeharisoa understand this silence as a confrontation between two sets of demands. There are the demands of the public sphere – for visibility, articulation and argument – and those of the private – whose reasons remain opaque - but are prompted and interpreted by the researchers. As they reflect, “seen from the point of view of the person who is summoned to speak on his or her own behalf, the position in the public arena produces the by-product of a split between opinions that can be expressed and intimate convictions” (Callon and Rabeharisoa, 2004: 21). This begins to challenge assumptions about what constitutes political engagement within modern biomedicine, and others have responded to this call (Rose and Novas, 2005; Greenhough, 2006; Harding, 2006). It also presents a pertinent challenge to participatory qualitative research. In what ways do the processes we stage oblige actors to perform particular manifestations of the public sphere and how do we make sense of silence in the context of qualitative research?

One response from qualitative researchers interested in participatory processes is ethnographic attention to these moments of silence, and the dislocations between action and words they characterize. This is something addressed theoretically by Harrison who argues for attention to “that which is ‘revealed’ by and through languages’ falling short” (2007: 591). These punctuations also feature in empirical reflections of participatory and qualitative research. In their account of the Swedish “Transparency Forum” (TF) on the risks of mobile phones, Lezaun and Soneryd (2007) pay careful attention to the enactment of discussions between members of ElectroSensitive (a group who associate their illnesses with exposure to electromagnetic waves) and representatives of regulatory authorities and mobile phone companies. They argue it is not so much the discussions that reveal shifting political sensitivities, as the actions of some responding to the prehensions of others (Soneryd, 2007). As they explain,

“The same actors who denied the phenomenon of electrosensitivity actually existed *acted* as if it did. The first TF seminar was held in a place chosen for the benefit of the most severe electro-sensitives. The first thing participants did upon entering the meeting was turn off their mobile phones, wrap them up in aluminium foil, and put them in a box outside the building. They had to do the same with their electronic car keys (after they had moved their cars further away from the building if they were parked too close)” (2007: 287 original emphasis).

Whilst some participants complained of being too compliant to these requests they nevertheless “acted respectfully towards the demands of other participants. In this sense, the TF meetings caused some movement in the actors’ previously defined positions, at least temporarily” (Lezaun and Soneryd, 2007: 288). Thus both silence and action indicate other ways of being moved, which may not be reducible to discursive interventions, but which are politically relevant. These can often be revealed through ethnographic accounts, though there are dangers in seeking to restate the primacy of action as a guide to an authentic ‘voice’. Actions too can be ambiguous and incommensurable, as Komulainen (2007) suggests in her work with children (see also Holt, 2004).

Further questions thus arise about how to evaluate and act on such processes of public engagement. Perspectives vary for different constituencies. For organizers and consultants processes are judged according to the fit between processes of elicitation and theoretical models of what communication and citizenship should look like, whereas for the consulted, consultation always entails action, generating movement and surprises, as well as ambiguities, ironies and refusals (Lezaun and Soneryd, 2007). Furthermore, these disruptions, those who refuse to speak, or whose words and actions reveal different mobilizations, force us to consider again the centrality of incommensurability in the constitution of political collectivities. As Palladino and Moreira put it, it is the figure of Gino who, “raises questions, but does not answer them, and as such, keeps the calculating machine [of politics] in self-transforming motion” (2006, 13).

IV Articulating public geographies

Some of these tensions also emerge in debates around the idea of ‘public geographies’ (Ward, 2006) and commentaries on the rise of ‘new public intellectuals’ (Castree, 2006; Oslender, 2007). One distinction here is between constructions of geography as ‘relevant’ (Staeheli and Mitchell, 2005), often aligned with policy imperatives or the drive for disciplinary status, and the notion of public geographies, which are critical or political but also reflexive engagements. Parallels are drawn with the work of Burawoy (2005) on public sociology who describes “bringing sociology into a conversation with publics, understood as people who are themselves involved in conversation” (cited in Ward, 2006: 499). This emphasis on dialogue is again significant for reflecting on methodology, for these conversations are complexly situated, between actors who are inherently multiple and differently positioned in relation to defining and accessing the public sphere.

Public geographies have thus been variously defined as: the production of accessible academic work for broader ‘non-academic’ audiences; the co-construction of knowledge with non-academics; and the legitimation of non-academic or public geographical knowledges

(Birmingham Public Geographies Working Group, 2007). The 'publics' (variously constituted as international, national, local, hegemonic or counter-hegemonic) and the methods of public geographies remain contested. Some geographers have worked with activists exploring 'autonomous geographies' (Pickerill and Chatterton, 2006) or 'guerilla geographies'. Others have emphasized better writing for wider publics (K. Mitchell, 2006) or argued that 'radical, progressive *research* in the academy' should not be abandoned since the 'force of abstraction' (D. Mitchell, 2004: 26, original emphasis) is what enables critical insight. For Fuller and Askins (2007) the 'discomforting rise' of 'public geographies' requires recognition that 'publics', while multiple and in flux, are also created, and that academic geographers need to think about 'the different publics we inhabit' (13). There is disquiet too about assuming a too distant 'us' and 'them' – an 'other' created by 'us'.

The productivity, but also the tensions, around public geographies are encapsulated by Žižek's suggestion that public intellectuals "uncover 'unknown knowns', that is, 'the disavowed beliefs, suppositions and obscene practices we pretend not to know about, even though they form the background of our public values'" (cited in Castree, 2006: 402). This is to presuppose a strongly articulate and reflexive actor, someone able to move and be moved, to engage unspoken practices and public values. Yet, writing about social anthropologists as public intellectuals, Marilyn Strathern (2006) warns of the challenges involved in mobilizing intellectual identities and expertise across different interpretative spaces. In analysing the use of anthropologists as 'experts' in Australian indigenous land claims, she argues they must become stronger public critics –upholding robust disciplinary traditions of disagreement – to open up public debates about the legal process in which they are also enrolled. Tensions remain both in constituting publics and in negotiating difficult and ambivalent identities as activists, intellectuals and critics.

V Calculation, computation and its discontents

In closing, we identify one final arena in which experimentation is generating new dialogues between qualitative researchers and technologies of quantification and computation. As suggested all forms of public participation are specifically located interventions, involving different kinds of technological and political innovations. The search for ways to engage policy-makers through these technologies are raising further debates about how qualitative research can be scaled up (Valentine, 2006); articulated with quantitative research through techniques such as Q methodologies (Eden et al, 2005; Ellis et al, 2007) or analytic-deliberative processes (Burgess et al, 2007; Chilvers, 2007); and drawn into different spatializations through the computational opportunities of GIS.

In particular, there has been a recent rise in methodological reflection on the practice of 'critical GIS'. This includes issues such as privacy, access and ethics; critical analysis of the "social and institutional drivers of GIS" (O'Sullivan, 2006: 788); and public participation GIS (PPGIS). PPGIS includes both broad attempts to incorporate greater public involvement in policy-making at a range of spatial scales, and, more critically, enabling GIS initiatives with groups of grassroots activists and community organizations. PPGIS has undoubtedly opened up questions about the extent to which qualitative, non-numerical, data can be meaningfully incorporated into GIS technologies (Kwan and Knigge, 2006; Knigge and Cope, 2006; Pavlovskaya, 2006). Yet, whilst Dennis (2006) suggests there are few technical barriers to linking GIS objects (point, lines and polygons) to qualitative appraisals, there remain issues about how to deal with the richly contextual nature of qualitative data.

There are also persistent questions around how 'the public' and its geography are constituted through PPGIS. Whilst PPGIS may hold the promise of 'empowerment', not only can engagements play into or reproduce existing power relations, but additionally the "very benefits, such as improved visualization or data accuracy, can induce further injustice" (Sieber, 2006: 495). Writing about her involvement in a PPGIS project with community organizations in the Humbolt Park neighbourhood in Chicago, Elwood reflects: "a central tenet of PPGIS is its commitment to incorporating local knowledge and representing multiple perspectives, but the ambiguities of the everyday practices that negotiate knowledge production in PPGIS illustrate the challenges of doing so" (2006: 206). She agrees it is through the 'grounded practices' of PPGIS research that 'contradictory moments' may open up insight into processes of inclusion and exclusion.

This links to a set of broader reflections, not only to on-going debates about the connections between quantitative and qualitative methodologies (Bryman, 2006; 2007), but also the relationship between calculation, articulation and the spaces of politics (Barnett, 2004; Davies, 2006; Hinchliffe et al, 2007). Processes of calculation are central to the sets of technical practices, forms of knowledge and institutions that constitute contemporary politics, but their impacts are under-determined (Barry, 2002). As our understanding of both the self and our political collectivities is increasingly articulated around calculative processes – whether genetic, technological or spatial – these become of critical interest to qualitative geographers. To return to Palladino and Moreira: "every practice of calculation multiplies the very obscurities that calculation would seek to remove" (2006: 12). It is methodological experimentation and reflexive attention to the consequences of these interventions that allow us to engage critically with the political possibilities offered by this articulation between technologies, publics and participatory practice.

VI Conclusions

So what follows from drawing attention to the importance of these gaps identified in and enacted through participatory research practice? Firstly, perhaps, there is a challenge to those who seek to respond to the demands of policy-makers for more rigour in qualitative research through attention to particular versions of transparency, ethics and accountability. These gaps suggest transparency is inevitably going to be partial, and the more ethically you act in one framework the less ethical you may be in another. Too much ethical regulation may actually impose barriers that close certain topics or populations to research (Dale, 2006). All processes of public and political engagement are both contingent and complexly enmeshed in a range of social and political contexts. They are best considered not as ends, but as provocations to reviewing and developing the methodologies through which we understand and constitute political collectivities. Secondly, this then demands increasing sophistication in conceptualizing the links between spaces of public engagement and the spaces and relations of everyday life, to trace how political subjectivities may be further transformed or sustained as they move across space (Kesby, 2005), and to chart the time-spaces through which personal and political trajectories may unfold over time (Panelli, 2007). Thirdly, there is the demand to consider carefully what is not captured by these mobilizing impulses and that which resists it. As Callard argues, it is important to recognize that “not everything can shift under the weight of discursive interventions” (Callard, 2003: 304), and moreover, that our own disciplinary cultures can “make it difficult to countenance the lack of a capacity to act, or the presence of severe obstacles to a subject’s agency” (*ibid*: 306). It is in these resistances and silences that we might find new critical voices.

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