

**In search of Montsalvatch: Making sense of interviewing farmers**

Gerard McElwee

Reader in Rural Enterprise, University of Lincoln

Lincoln, England

**A FOOLS JOURNEY**

*According to legend, Titurel, the keeper of the Grail, lived in Grail Temple at Montsalvatch on the Mount of Salvation. Titurel was reputed to be 400 years old before he was instructed to find himself a partner. He realised that he had been so absorbed in his work of protecting the Grail that he had forgotten everything else. So, he married, had children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Into the story, enters Parzifal, the great grandson of Titurel who lives a life of isolation in a forest with his mother Herzeloide.*

*Against his mother's wishes, he embarked upon a quest to be admitted to King Arthur's round table. Unbeknown to Parzifal, he had been chosen to be the future keeper of the Holy Grail and the King of Montsalvatch to replace Amfortas, the grandson of Titurel. Because she loved him so much and to try to ensure his return to her, Herzeloide, his doting mother, dressed Parzifal as a Fool so that he would be subject him to ridicule. He was indeed subject to ridicule, suffering insults and abuse as he wandered the countryside enquiring of the whereabouts of the Grail.*

*Ultimately, Parzifal succeeded in his quest to become a Knight and did eventually locate the Grail. In his journeys, he made the transition from Unknowing to Knowing Fool.*

*This short tale is a metaphor for understanding the research process.*

**ABSTRACT**

This paper presents a personal account of how an individualized qualitative research process attempts to understand farmers. A story of how the author interacts with and interviews farmers in order to understand how they and the narrator constructs meaning about what it is to be a farmer and the 'parallel world' of the farmer. Explores some methodological issues and problems about framing farmers as entrepreneurs.

**Key words:** Self narration, identity construction, entrepreneurship research, farmers, farmers as entrepreneurs, reflexivity in research.

**AIMS AND OBJECTIVES**

I will pursue three broad themes in this paper. I will explain my approach to research into the life world of farmers, provide a brief conceptualization of the farmer and will present my reflections in more detail. This implies performing the following activities: identify the methodological approaches utilized, describe the philosophical assumptions underpinning my work, discuss the process of interviewing farmers and engage in a reflexive process of my work.

My understanding of farmers as rural entrepreneurs is achieved by having conversations with farmers to consider the relationship between existing theory and practice, to develop new insights into theorizing the practice and extract local knowledge from farmers, combining both epistemological and ontological questions linked to an overarching theme of farmers as entrepreneurs.

**GENERAL APPROACH TO RESEARCH**

The research approach that I follow is relatively straightforward – and practical. I start by gathering some data in the field that I find

interesting, through interviews, through surveys and through a literature review. This helps me identify some unsolved problem or some 'missing link', something that I think I need to know in order to fully understand the field. I then try to solve that problem to find that missing piece. I think I succeed when I identify some pattern that makes what I know about the field into a whole, some unity that does not need anything else for me to understand. If necessary I start again.

This notion of a pattern may need some elaboration. I do not look for what is usually understood by pattern –for example, patterns of weather, patterns of societal or individual behavior or patterns in astronomical behavior. Such patterns stand for regularities in the 'real world' – or rather daily life – and often become 'theorized' (Gill and Johnson, 1997). Patterns to me include anything that I can recognize as having some independence as a pointer to further experiences. I refer to what I will call the 'parallel world' of the farmer-entrepreneur. This notion points to a set of activities that, if implemented by some individual, allows that individual to improve his or her entrepreneurial behavior. This pattern identifies a partly normative potential.

Whilst my methods are qualitative, I suggest that they are not qualitative because my approach is qualitative but because what I try to do does not depend on a numerical representation. Alternatively, if my data and my problem would suggest that I compute percentages, then percentages are what I do – not necessarily because the phenomena that the percentages stand for are quantitative, but rather because such percentages function as symbols that many people are able to understand, and to use when talking about the phenomena.

Other qualities make what I do recognizable as research. I may point for example to the notion of a paradigm, as introduced by Kuhn (1962) and developed by Lakatos (1976) and others. Being part of a paradigm would suggest that I might talk to

others, and share their understanding; that I am able to find patterns that have some general relevance in terms of issues beyond being practical; that I am trying to refine the explanatory power of notions like farmer.

One may also think of a description of what I do in terms of what is missing in my understanding. Being able to supply what is missing often is experienced as a miracle – and has been interpreted vicariously as a 'flash of insight' (Plato, 1970 (seventh letter)) and as a 'gift from god' (Nietzsche, 1974 (fröhliche Wissenschaft)). I do not feel quite comfortable with this interpretation. I enjoy this 'gift', but I am aware that something else is needed.

I tend to rely on intuition but aim to close that intuition as well, to make it part of what I know. I am interested in concepts like comparability, validity and reliability, therefore – but I do realize that they are but other words for the capping stone to my intuition. These three concepts are well defined in certain areas of study for example when dealing mainly with observations; they are not however, when dealing with other experiences such as intentions values and desires.

### **RESEARCH QUESTION: CONCEPTUALISING THE FARMER AS ENTREPRENEUR**

Defining the entrepreneur is difficult; indeed, as noted by Palich and Bagby (1995:426), "when tracing the development of this concept in the literature, it becomes clear that no one definition of the entrepreneur prevails". Definitions emphasize a broad range of activities the more well-known of which include, uncertainty-bearing and the sub-contractor who takes risks (Cantillon, 1755), co-ordination (Say, 1803), innovation (Schumpeter, 1934) and arbitrage (Kirzner, 1979). Defining farmers' entrepreneurial activity is perhaps even more complex as these entrepreneurs do not operate in similar business activities characterized by their urban counterparts and they are not organizational actors. They are not a homogeneous set of actors (McElwee, 2006b)

Where enterprise and entrepreneurship is explored in a rural context, studies tend to focus on the dynamics and behaviors of individuals, often focusing on farmers, as, entrepreneurs within a rural setting (e.g. Carter 1996, 1999; McElwee 2006a, 2006b, 2006c; McElwee and Robson, 2005). Carter (1998), Carter and Rosa (1998), McNally (2001) argue that the methods used to analyze business entrepreneurs in other sectors can be applied to rural businesses such as farms. However, the characteristics of the classical Theory of the Firm, capital raised by share ownership, separation of ownership and management control and profit maximization, do not readily apply itself to the farm and in particular the family farm. The relationship between the farmer and the farm business is in itself a complex issue, as the farmer can be an owner, a tenant, a manager, a sub-contractor or a combination of these which may suggest that the methods used to analyze business entrepreneurs in other sectors cannot be easily transferred to an analysis of farms and farmers.

In this sense then the challenge is to understand the differences and similarities between being a farmer and being an entrepreneur – or in other words, how the two are linked. I am particularly interested in identifying what the farmer is missing for him or her to become – miraculously – a successful entrepreneur, and hence, how he or she may effortlessly switch between the two (parallel) ‘worlds’ of being a farmer and an entrepreneur.

## PHILOSOPHICAL ASSUMPTIONS

### The fundamental question or assumption: why

Why do research and in particular research which can be described as phenomenological or indeed ethnomethodological? The answer may follow from some additional questions. Does revenue or social prestige occur? The answers to this questions is definitely negative. ‘What else is there?’ is then, of

course, the second obvious question. The answer that is implicit appears to be: because it is research!

What I like to emphasize and explore is the amazing nature of this answer which implies that there is something inherently interesting in research. Other authors appear to recognize this as well, for example Steier (1991:10), asks: ‘Why do research (if you cannot say anything about what is out there and all research is self-reflexive)?’ Alastair McIntyre seems to express something similar in his tale of the man

“who aspired to be the author of the general theory of holes. When asked “What kind of hole - holes dug by children in the sand for amusement, holes dug by gardeners to plant lettuce seedlings, holes made by road makers?” he would reply indignantly that he wished for a general theory that would explain all of these.” (1971:260)

This however, provides contradictions and paradoxes, as will be seen shortly.

### Value Judgments; different systems of assumptions

Scientists in both the natural and social sciences attempt to avoid value judgments and common sense. Max Weber (1968) suggests that value judgments should not be eliminated but subject to criticism. According to Giddens (1982:147), Weber accepts that value judgments are a basic component of human conduct. As a researcher I have to be aware of the value judgments that I and the interviewee hold and make, recognizing that when I interview farmers, they can be expected to provide me with answers that are the best they can from within their world. The difficulty is that I do not know their world or what is best in it. This world may include me – and an intention to deceive me, or not; it may include meanings of words of which I am not aware so my understanding is limited. The farmer may be moving in the spaces between the parallel worlds in which he operates and is expected to operate. This is the normative realm.

What this means is that different forms of knowledge exist simultaneously: knowledge of an individual of him - or herself, knowledge of an individual, of the properties of a collective (not known to its members), knowledge of a collective of an individual, knowledge of a collective of another collective, and so on. These distinctions appear reflected in one of the well-known Greek paradoxes: For Epimenides, "All Cretans are liars, said the Cretan". When "the Cretan" is replaced by "the Athenian" there is no problem. If not, what the Cretan knows about himself cannot be known at the same time about his or her collective and vice versa.

**Reflexivity: comparison and reconstruction of assumptions**

Daily life and research are remarkably different. Within daily life exists an 'out there' (Steier 1991.1). I do not doubt that the people who I interview, survey, question, continue to exist independently of the interviewer. I am aware that their lives have altered as a consequence of having interacted with me. None of this seems to be the case when I do research. Now I may quite reasonably doubt that the people I interview are the same I recognize in daily life. Are they equal to their bodies, or are they the history of their bodies? Do I talk to them, or to something that I make up in order to be able to talk? In the research process I am reconstructing my world but I do not necessarily have an outside view of what is happening – only of what I see is happening. I do agree with Steier, then that

"the research process itself must be seen as socially constructing a world of worlds, with the researchers are included in, rather than outside the body of their own research" (1992.2).

This raises a problem. How do I know that I am not just constructing my world, but that my construction has some substance? This problem can be solved utilizing one of two approaches. One is that I

take daily life as my 'reality', my 'out there'. If a farmer tells me something that I reconstruct as something entrepreneurial, then I may check this by exploring consequences in daily life. The other is that I attempt to 'bend back on myself', to paraphrase Steier (ibid. 3), or reflect. I consider a second 'I', or a 'Double I', to think or look at what I have done, and maybe change what I have done until something emerges that seems stable and worth maintaining. This is for me a act of recursivity.

In other words, when I am involved in research I construct what I later will reconstruct, and hence use for a comparison with my previous and constructed 'reality'. This process of reflection may go on independent of daily life. So even when I continue to have a social relationship with some of my interviewees, in daily life, I may construct or even create what they are *as entrepreneur* – continuously checking whether that is within the boundaries of the interaction. I therefore allow assumptions to change or indeed be modified until the parallel world is crystallized. The parallel world refers to a set of systematically tied assumptions which explicate and reflect the instances of farmer-entrepreneur, and which are understood. The farmer then understands the parallel world and its rules, values and mores.

This may be what Berger (1963) has called 'society in man' and is also the basis for the idea of social constructionism, which has its origins in Mead's (1934) work on social interactions, Goffman's (1969) work on events in everyday life, Gergen's (1985) work on research as a value-laden process and Shotter's (1993) work on politics and power in everyday occurrences. What is found in social studies is a parallel 'world', a world constructed by the researcher but given weight by the interviewees as instances or realizations of that world; this is the pattern I am looking for.

**Constructing the role: reciprocal construction**

To emphasize this point, I note that the interview process itself is socially constructed. The interviewer constructs the farmer *qua*

farmer entrepreneur and the farmer will construct an identity for the interviewer as researcher, interviewer, academic, etc., and thereby limit what the latter may wish to construct. Most importantly, any degree of deception does not appear to be involved. For Berger (1963) people are sincere when they take on and ascribe roles. Deception in a process of construction, or maintaining ulterior motives, requires a degree of psychological control of which few are capable. The farmer's construction of him or herself enables me to create the parallel world and simultaneously provides me with the ability to construct myself through reflexivity. How does this happen?

In interviews (or conversations), for example, I ask my questions using often rhetorical devices (and tricks?) in order to make or allow the farmer to respond. Am I being manipulative or manipulated? After the interview (or conversation), and the farmer has told me her story, I replay it all, when I drive away. And do you know, I replay *it as a story*. I recount the narration as a story to myself and to others, down the pub or in my office, in the classroom and to other farmers. I pick out tasty pieces that fit the listener(s) perception me, just as I manipulate the joke for the audience. This is what Garfinkel (2002) [might] labels 'methodogenic (respecification) redescription'. And the farmer will do exactly the same in his discussions and re-telling of the story. Is this perhaps an inversion of the power of the interviewer never to know what is being recounted by the interviewed in her subsequent retelling?

If research gives meaning by constructing a 'world' parallel to a farmer's daily life, does that 'world' have meaning itself? I think it does. It leads to what may help a farmer step into a role; it may help him or her to concentrate sufficient energy to become an example or instance of that role. This 'stepping in' is not necessarily a stable process. The role may become fuzzy and its instances (the farmers) may doubt its existence. But there is a way out. Rather

than 'ways of seeing', there are 'ways of criticizing' that stabilize the role (as formulated by John Berger (1990)).

## METHODOLOGICAL ASSUMPTIONS

### Justification through paradigms

To paraphrase Low and McMillan (1988:151) researchers can choose five levels of analysis: individual, group, organizational, industry and societal levels. The data collected on one level may help to acquire knowledge on the same or another level, but not necessarily on all levels. For example, interviewing relevant individuals may reveal the achievements of some organization, but nothing may become known about the individuals interviewed. This is especially true in the case of farmers. Although much of my information comes from the individual farmer, what I seek is the farmer as entrepreneur, as businessman, as social animal and eventually the farm as organization, as economic function, as business. This means that each time, I meet a farmer, I am in a dilemma. It is quite seductive to say something about the individuals involved and to consider them as 'exemplary'. Alternatively, I will be inclined to forget that to say something about the other levels, I may have to add to the information I collect from the individuals (e.g. by looking at what they say in terms of some framework that is external to them), so their utterances become 'examples'. It is not always possible to resolve this type of dilemma, or to do so according to a fixed plan that guarantees a clear distinction.

Another way to say what I just said is that the interviewed can be viewed *via* various lens – although a special kind of lens. They are socially constructed inasmuch that they not only help me see the farmer in a special light, but also help me locate him or her geographically, in terms of the farm, in that light. They are not simply convenient labels: they add meaning, or even may create meaning – just by being on a different level of aggregation. As argued before, this helps to acquire knowledge, but with an implicit paradox. Farmers are interviewed because they are farmers but simultaneously I

am trying to determine what a farmer may become if he or she so wishes – something the farmer may not be able to tell me, in the same way that the Cretan liar may not be able to tell me anything about his countryfolk. What this means is that I as a researcher must take care that the farmer as an individual does not become speechless about his or her role as a farmer, or entrepreneur, or as a businessperson.

Other types of lens mentioned in the literature which may lead to confusion when compared to the above. It is claimed that: “[there is a] diversity of paradigmatic perspectives to study such a complex and multi-layered phenomena as Entrepreneurship...” Seyaert and Bouwen (1999.49)

Notions like ‘perspective’ and ‘paradigmatic’ are notoriously difficult to define, although they appear to play important roles in most texts on research – not only in entrepreneurship, but also in other domains. The notion of a paradigm tends to stand for coherence among a number of researchers – in terms of the domains they choose, their interpretations and judgments of sufficiency of interpretation (Kuhn, 1962).

Neither concept seems to say much about entrepreneurship – at least not in terms of my approach to farmers and farms as no ‘paradigm’ is followed in my type of study, nor am I much interested in a perspective. What I look for is to identify the ‘world’ in which farmers live when they act as entrepreneurs. This ‘world’ may be seen as a perspective – but in my view it is more. The concept refers to a potentiality or if one prefers a perspective from the point of view of the farmer. What is it that he or she *may* do in his or her ‘world’? In other words, a farmer may step into the ‘world’ I envision, and from that position gaze at problems, difficulties, aims and achievements. Although this kind of world may differ for each farmer, both structurally and organizationally, my aim is to identify common characteristics as well as possible, potential activities. This is a

common parallel world for me also – the commonness constructed through the research process.

I am aware, of course, that by having become somewhat idiosyncratic in this sense, I have to miss out on the security one gains by being part of a paradigm, or by claiming that one’s choices are but the result of a perspective (Hussey and Hussey, 1997.54). That is a risk I think I prefer to take. It is what I think is right – although it does leave me with the obligation to justify my approach, or defend it, in some other way.

Easton suggests that researchers are so often focused on the practical aspects of the research process that ‘assumptions [are] made and values smuggled in to the decisions without the decision maker being aware of the process’ (1995.1). Following Weber, Lynd makes a distinction between the value-free and value-laden activities of the social scientist, ‘values may but should not be applied to bias ones analysis or the interpretation of the meanings inherent in ones data’ (1939.183). Burrell and Morgan (1998) organize assumptions into four categories: ontology, epistemology, human-nature and methodology.

None of this appears very helpful when I intend to take a route that is not covered by paradigmatic perspectives. Categorizations such as those of Burrell and Morgan and Gill and Johnson look backward rather than forward (as demonstrated by Burrell and Morgan’s claim that they cover ‘all’ approaches: new approaches cannot be included, therefore).

### **Justification through the criteria of validity and reliability**

The approach I develop while working on the farmers’ problem is relatively straightforward. Although I go my own way, I think I can claim that this is in line with various popular forms of thinking about research. This is not because it shares important properties with well-known methods such as the hypothetico-deductive approach. The main reason, as I wish to argue now, is that I look for



results that share the same or at least a similar quality. In these approaches the usual criteria for quality are formulated in terms of (internal and external) validity and reliability. The parallel 'world' I search for in the responses of the farmers is complete or valid when it helps me to recognize farmers as instances of that world. That recognition is reliable when it serves others as well – and hence is not sensitive to changes in use.

Justification is difficult. It may be facilitated a little by considering three sub-problems that may be easier to solve.

The first of these sub-problems would be some argument towards the type of parallel 'world' that I am interested in – as well as an argument that none of the relevant variation among respondents has been left out and none included that is irrelevant. The second would be a way to show that the structure of that 'world' is rich enough to contain individual respondents, or rather their responses. The third would be a way to show that it is non-negative: anyone stepping into the 'world' and behaving according to its constraints would experience effects that are judged negative in his or her own life or to others. It seems to me if I succeed in satisfying each of these requirements, my approach is reasonably well justified: it not only leads to something useful (third requirement), that is accessible (second requirement), but also to something that helps anticipate what may not be easily visible from the present (first requirement).

In terms of the traditional criteria like validity and reliability, it may be noted that the first requirement (full coverage of what may belong to the 'world') is equivalent to the criterion of (internal) validity. In linking responses to the resulting 'world', no errors should be made of omission or of commission. In the same way the second criterion is linked to that of reliability. It should be possible to use the 'world', as identified, to recognize whether the responses of new interviewees belong to the 'world' or not. The third criterion is linked to

the notion of external validity (De Zeeuw, 2001). It identifies whether my results are able to stand on their own feet, show stability over time such that their use leads to the expected effects, as described in the world and not to others.

Views on these criteria do not appear to be universal. It is claimed for example (Kirk and Miller, 1986.19) that 'Validity is the extent to which the answer is 'correct'; reliability is the degree to which a given procedure yields the same answer irrespective of how and when it is carried out. Both definitions appear to share at least some meaning with the way I use them.

The notion of generalisability is also referred to as external validity (Smith,., 1989), and is defined as the extent to which findings can be claimed to apply beyond the sample and the research context (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003.263). It will be clear that my definitions differ. I consider the Ritchie and Lewis definition fuzzy.

## Phenomenology

The term phenomenology can be used to describe a research perspective which is counter to positivistic forms of enquiry (Burrell and Morgan 1979, Bogdan and Taylor, 1975). The term is used here to denote the form of enquiry which I have attempted to use in the farm entrepreneurship research. Following Weber, I am particularly interested in the tradition of interpretative understanding or *verstehen* related to the life worlds of the farmer, their culture and their ways of being in and looking at the world. This is what phenomenology asks the researcher to do –not to take received notions for granted. Thus, my aim is to attempt to understand the 'subjective' experience of the farmer by listening to the ways in which they make sense of the world and ascribe and attribute value to their experiences. As Bogdan and Taylor so succinctly frame it,

"the task of the qualitative methodologist... is to grasp the meanings of a person's behavior, the phenomenologist attempts to see things from that person's point of view" (1975.14)

McElwee (2006b) suggests that little research using ethnomethodological, phenomenological, social constructionism or any interpretative approaches in the farm entrepreneurship literature exists. Indeed it is only relatively recently however that such interpretative approaches have been used in entrepreneurship research, for example (Rae, 2000, Rae and Carswell, 2000) use interpretative methods, Cope (2003) uses the phenomenological interview and Devins and Gold (2002) use social constructionism to understand the 'life worlds' of managers in SMEs. McElwee and Atherton (2005) demonstrate the predominance of the objectivist approaches in the entrepreneurship literature developing the work of Grant and Perrin (2002) who argue that new perspectives on entrepreneurship can only be achieved when the debate moves out of the 'paradigmatic cage' of positivism.

Translating and understanding the interpretive accounts of farmers, about their experiences, is of course a complex process for as Denzin and Lincoln indicate

"individuals are seldom able to give full explanations of their actions or intentions all they can offer are accounts, or stories, about what they did and why. No single method can grasp the subtle variations in ongoing human experiences" (2000.14)

As Cope suggests, phenomenological approaches are

"..inherently inductive rather than deductive, where theoretical propositions emerge from the descriptions of experience given by individuals under investigation" (2003.12)

Thus my philosophical and practical methodological approach is influenced by Weber's interpretative sociology, phenomenology and social constructionism and the contribution these approaches make to a social, rather than a purely economic understanding of the farmer as entrepreneur. The next section discusses how I have engaged in the research process.

## THE PROCESS: ASSUMPTION APPLIED

### The nature of the interview

In the above I have expressed my preference for the interview as a way of gathering data. However, I want to be more specific and use the term 'phenomenological interview' as initially proposed by Thompson (1989) and discussed by Cope where "the aim of the interview is to gain a first person description of some specified domain of experience." (2003.15)

My role as interviewer is to attempt, not always successfully, to allow the respondents the freedom to describe their experiences in detail and provide a context to allow them to do this. I explain this further below.

I concentrate on what I consider high quality findings which are of course defined in terms of methods. There is no such thing as an inherent high quality finding. These may be achieved by avoiding certain pitfalls (e.g. concentrating on certain individuals), by aiming to achieve certain goals (e.g. coverage of the field of application), and by maintaining a clear distinction between the sources of data and the product of their analysis (e.g. by realizing that what farmers tell me about their possible parallel 'world' is not the same as the 'world' I construct – as it may make use of elements not contained in the interview responses, and meant to add to farmers' problem solving ability whenever they enter the parallel 'world' I have constructed. In making these distinctions and claims I think I gloss over some other aspects of the interview that seem relevant to quality as well.

An example is that I use both unstructured and structured interviews. Unstructured interviews seek to offer respondents a choice in what account they give, and thereby avoid one of the problems mentioned above – to imply too much by the nature of the question and hence impose too much on the nature of the response. Using relatively unstructured techniques seems to give interviewees opportunities to feel free to



describe their experiences in some detail without putting them either under any pressure to respond in a particular way, as much as practicable, or indeed to push them in any particular directions. Burrell and Morgan (1979.6) stress 'the importance of letting one's subject unfold its nature and characteristics during the process of investigation'.

Gergen and Gergen (1991) argue more or less the opposite, proposing that the subject cannot be separated from the object. Whatever the interviewer tries to do will construct the/a reality of his or her subjects. The label 'subject' constitutes an example of this in itself. I still consider it a problem.

### **Respondents and interactions**

Getting data implies "[getting] inside situations by empirically generating qualitative data through interaction with a number of key respondents", as Burrell and Morgan suggest (1979.7). Actually identifying key respondents is a bit more complex. My interviewees, being farmers, are selected (chosen) using various formal criteria: age, gender, geography, size of farm etc. I also use informal criteria as well: commonsense, gut reaction and value judgment. I look for are people who are able to reflect about their activities, and are able to compare the results (as far as possible) with other activities such as being a father, a sportsman, etc.).

The meeting with the farmer usually occurs at a location of her choosing, the farmhouse, a pub, a barn, a farm office, and then an interview process is orchestrated. We talk and I attempt to stick to an agenda. I receive a story from the farmer who knows that his opinions are of interest - as otherwise he would not be interviewed. Sometimes, but not always, the interview is taped.

Farmers agree to talk to me for multiple reasons. Some farmers agree to talk because they have experienced difficulties

themselves in the past obtaining interviews, others because they see an interview as an opportunity to affect change (i.e. at government level) and the interview is a vehicle to do this. Some farmers agree because they see an interview with me as an opportunity to publicize their diversified businesses. Some are purely altruistic whereas others just like to tell stories. I am aware of these reasons because farmers have explained to me why they have agreed to be interviewed. As Boje (2007.17)) contends however, 'a story is not just the lines of telling, but the silences between the lines'. Silences can become unbearable, at least for me. I had a conversation with one farmer which degenerated into such long silences that I was unable to continue the interview in any meaningful way. This of course is a separate issue.

### **Problems**

Denzin et al (2000.3) list a number of methods for collecting data: case study; personal experience; introspection; life story; interview; artifacts; cultural texts and productions; observational, historical and visual texts. As described above, I tend to predominantly use interviews. I am aware that in doing so and in analyzing the responses, I may make mistakes. That is to say, that I may do things that prevent me from satisfying the three requirements. It is possible for example, to create contexts in which people will say whatever it is the researcher wants rather than what the interviewee wants. A fine line here exists: I want him or her to respond to my question, but at the same time to put in something that pertains to that person rather than to the image of the farmer I have in my mind. To reduce the potential for respondent to engage in this form of behavior and to avoid selecting selectively, I try to use selection criteria that do not seem related (or not too much) to my questions and their expected answers – like age, gender and location. To minimize the effects of choosing criteria that might still be related I rely on the literature. Cope (2003) sees all this as a process of 'bracketing' (temporarily suspending), derived from Garfinkel, the researcher's preconceptions

in order to mitigate bias (not satisfying the three criteria). Whilst Cope supports the aim of giving respondents freedom to 'tell their own story' he acknowledges that, in practice, the researcher has a hidden agenda, which is to achieve something that goes beyond individual responses. But I wonder if this is so.

### WHAT HAVE I DONE: RECURSIVITY AND REFLEXIVITY

In my research I have engaged in three activities: reflection, reflexivity and recursivity in an attempt to understand 1) my role as researcher and interviewer, 2) the research process 3) the actions and responses of the interviewee/respondent. This process is not linear. I am continually reflecting on what I have done and trying to make sense of it. I am continually looking at those I have had conversations with. Harold Garfinkel succinctly argues that actions and statements can only be fully understood from within the context that they were produced. So what has been produced?

After the interview the statements from the farmer are transferred and written down. To create the parallel 'world' I am interested in, I select part of the material and try to identify the activities the farmer mentions as part of his or her work, how these interact, what effects they have, how to contribute to the overall activity of being an entrepreneur. This 'world' is checked against all other interviews to see whether activities have been left out, what further interactions may be identified to add the 'world' and whether it is complete in the sense that I find it easy to identify which activities are mentioned that should not be part of the resulting parallel 'world' or which have been left out. Sometimes colleagues or students help me with this process. In this way I try to satisfy the first two requirements, and eventually the third requirement by sharing my results with some of the interviewees and colleagues and eventually by publishing them and presenting them to an audience. But. As Boje & Durant (2006.23) contend 'such

complex retrospective (sic) tellings can be quite terse, providing the hearer, with blanks and silences, fragments and discontinuities, leaving openings as invitations for dialogue' and further 'a story does not tell all, is never finished, and changes with each performance' (ibid.24). How lovely and how succinct.

But is this recursivity? When I replay the interview, I think about what I did and what I did not; I attempt to not only rerun the interview as a process but rerun the process of interviewing

I think of recursivity in non-mathematical terms but in terms of pic-images. Like the act of looking into a mirror with a mirror behind me. How many 'I's' can be seen?

Josh Sommers wonderful recursive images encapsulate this paradox.



In terms of Reflexivity I agree with Lynch (2000) who suggests that reflexivity can be a source of methodological advantage. It does not have to be associated with so called radical approaches but could and perhaps ought to underpin a good deal more research. I agree with Lynch who suggests 'As an alternative to reflexive self-privileging, I recommend an ethnomethodological conception of reflexivity as an ordinary, unremarkable and unavoidable feature of action'. (2000.26)

In this commentary I have tried to look at myself, unfolded, and to see what moves me. I attempted to 'find some way of exemplifying....rather than just offering a disengaged description' (Cooper and Woolgar: 1993). This 'unfolding' I consider significant as a process. Doing so kills some of the personal – but opens up the possibility of getting something personal back. Both appear part of reflection.

Latour (1999) has called this relation between the public and the personal a fairytale. It leads Steier to suggest that: 'perhaps the most striking outcome of taking (self)-reflexivity seriously in research. That is, by holding personal assumed research structures and logics as themselves researchable and not immutable, and by examining how we are a part of our data, our research process becomes not a self-centered product, but a reciprocal process' (1991.7).

What such a process will result in will of course depend on the constraints implied in the exchange. The need to argue with oneself imposes quite a different discipline than a fairytale. It is in this sense that Shotter (1973) appears to consider reflection part of a language game (Wittgenstein, 1968). It may be noted that such games as played in research take many different forms. One is the game where variation takes the form of variables – notably a language implicit in control (as the discussion with physical nature tends to be one-sided, albeit in principle mutual – as in the case of astronomy). Another is the game of problem solving where many people may contribute their experience to identify a problem that is solvable as well as internally valid (in my sense; see previous sections). A third example of such a game is the parallel 'world' I try to construct where farmers are invited to enter (freely, i.e. without the cost of side-effects and failure) and demonstrate an increased competency as entrepreneur.

## CONCLUSION

The research design of my work can be summarized as a plan to construct something that will help farmers perform as entrepreneurs. I called this something a parallel 'world' – a space where farmers may enter and find their inclinations, objectives and abilities magnified – just as certain exoskeletons help people to move heavy weights or fight exhaustion in times of desperation.

This parallel world approach identifies what I aim to achieve and how I want to do this. It does not call on existing categories of research methods – for example methods that use qualitative data and aim to induct meanings. Characterizing a method appears to make that method less powerful: it imprisons the researcher in certain concepts, even when reaching the boundaries of what he or she tries to do. Suppose I am a little interpretive, does that command me to be fuzzy about the domain I want to deal with, or not to think about the boundaries about my hypothesized 'world'? I do not think so.

Finally, I conceptualize my contribution using a pictorial representation. I am aware of the problems associated with two-dimensional representations not least that all of the reference points are open to multiple layering.

The table below is a crude map of my territory, linking the above concepts. The table does not show that research methodology is one of the toughest areas to feel comfortable in (although this may be gleaned from the lack of detail in the table). Insights, notions and suggestions of quality attempt to make this area accessible to everybody, whatever the level of their experience.

So what is the point of doing research? It is not that it provides authority and money. One is better off playing music as a profession. Nor is it about being admired. Only the very few can gather the laurels that are earned by the many.

<b>METHODOLOGY</b> <b>Phenomenology</b>	<b>Domain</b>	Forms of data	Interpretive Themes
	<b>An area of practice in need of change</b>	Key approaches  Stories Case Studies Interviews	Farmers as a Special Case  Farmers in an Entrepreneurial 'world'  Farmers' Skills  Methodological Issues
		<b>Generic</b>	<b>Farmer – as - Entrepreneur</b>
	<b>ENTREPRENEURSHIP</b>		

Table 1 My Territory

Neither is it about the improvement of daily life. Most of the improvements that are achieved here stem from people who live that life, from fire fighters, from traffic wardens, from business people. What is the point, then? Research is outside of daily life, but its results are paid for by daily life – by changes in how things work, by changes in society that may to a higher quality of (daily) life. This is the reward, the 'money' that induces research to be conducted. In a more complex way John Berger has said the same – although he leaves out the reward and emphasizes the reflection outside of everything else:

'Experience folds upon itself, refers backwards and forwards to itself through the referents of hope and fear, and by the use of metaphor which is the origin of language, continually comparing like with unlike, what is small with what is large, what is near with what is distant' (1979.6)

This is a significant point. Applicability is a goal of research. In any case applicability is a by-product of reflection, which ought to be the focus of any research. So the first, and for some, the point of research, is to reflect on something. The something in this case is a parallel world of farmers. Applicability of this

world emerges both as a justification and a by-product of the research process.

The process of reflection, thinking about what has happened, and reflexivity, making sense of what has happened, has been identified in this paper as central to the research process.

There is of course no Grail – it does not exist. The process of critical reflection has enabled me to become a 'Knowing Fool'

**REFERENCES**

Berger, J. (1990). *Ways of seeing*. London, Granta.

Berger, P. (1963). *Invitation to sociology*. London, Pelican.

Bogdan, R. & Taylor, S. J (1975). *Introduction to qualitative research methods: A phenomenological approach to the social Science*. New York, Wiley and Sons.

Boje, D. M. & Durant, R. A. (2006) 'Free Stories!' *Tamara Journal* 5(3), 19-37

Boje, D. M. (2007) *Storytelling Organization* London: Sage

- Burrell, G. & Morgan, G. (1979). *Sociological paradigms and organisational analysis* London, Heinemann.
- Cantillon, R. 'Essai sur la Nature du Commerce en General' <http://socserv.socsci.mcmaster.ca/~econ/ugcm/3113/cantillon/essay1.txt> (accessed on 06/04/2004). 1755
- Carter, S. (1996). The indigenous rural enterprise: characteristics and change in the British farm sector. *Entrepreneurship and Regional Development* 8(4), 345-358
- Carter, S. (1998). Portfolio Entrepreneurship in the farm Sector: indigenous growth in rural areas?' *Entrepreneurship and Regional Development* 10(1), 17-32.
- Carter, S. & Rosa, P. (1998). Indigenous rural firms: farm enterprises in the UK. *International Small Business Journal* 16(4), 15-27.
- Carter, S. Multiple business ownership in the farm sector: assessing the enterprise and employment contributions of farmers in Cambridgeshire *Journal of Rural Studies* (1999). 15(4), 417-429.
- Carter, S. (2001). Multiple business ownership in the farm sector: Differentiating monoactive, diversified and portfolio enterprises. *International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behavior and Research* 7(2), 43-59.
- Cooper, G. & Woolgar, S. (1993). The Research Process and Organisational Change: the importance of audience in research practice. Paper presented to British Sociological Association, Colchester, April.
- Cope, J. P. (2003) Researching entrepreneurship through phenomenological inquiry: philosophical and methodological issues. Working paper
- LUMSWP2003b/052, Lancaster University, Lancaster.
- Denzin, N.K. & Lincoln, Y S (2000). Introduction: the discipline and practice of qualitative research. In Denzin, NK and Lincoln, YS (eds.) *Handbook of qualitative research*, 2nd edn. pp. 1-28. CA, Thousand Oaks, Sage
- Devins, D & Gold, J. (2002). Social constructionism: a theoretical framework to underpin support for the development of managers in SMEs? *Journal of Small Business and Enterprise Development* 9(2), 111-119.
- Garfinkel, H. (2002). Ethnomethodology's program: Working out Durkheim's aphorism. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield,
- Garfinkel, H. (1967). *Studies in Ethnomethodology* Prentice-Hall
- Gergen, K. J. (1985). The social constructionist movement in modern psychology. *American Psychologist* 40(3), 266-275.
- Gergen, M & Gergen, M. in Steier, F. (ed.) (1991). *Research and reflexivity*, London, Sage.
- Giddens, A. (1982). *Capitalism and modern social theory: an analysis of the writings of Marx, Durkheim and Max Weber*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press,
- Gill, J & Johnson, P. (1997). *Research methods for managers*, 2nd ed. London, Paul Chapman Publishing.
- Goffman, E. (1969). *The presentation of self in everyday Life* London, Penguin.
- Grant, P & Perren, L. (2002). Small business and entrepreneurial research, *International Small Business Journal* 20(2), 185-211.



## McElwee

- Hussey, J. & Hussey, R H. (1997). Business research: a practical guide for undergraduate and postgraduate students *Journal of Management* 3(2), 16-28.
- Kirk, J & Miller, M. (1986). *Reliability and validity in qualitative research*. Newbury Park, Sage Publications.
- Kuhn, T. (1962). *The structure of scientific revolutions* Chicago, University of Chicago Press.
- Lakatos, I. (1976). *Proofs and refutations* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Latour, B. (1999). *Pandora's hope: Essays on the Reality of the Social Sciences* London, Harvard.
- Low, M. B. & MacMillan, I C. (1988). Entrepreneurship: past research and future challenges. *Journal of Management* 14(2), 139-61.
- Lynch, M. (2000) Against Reflexivity as an Academic Virtue and Source of Privileged Knowledge *Theory Culture Society*. 17, 26-54
- Lynd, R. S. *Knowledge for What?* (1939). Princeton, Princeton University Press.
- McElwee, G. (2006). 'Developing Entrepreneurial Skills of Farmers: A Literature Review of Entrepreneurship in Agriculture' European Community SSPE-CT-2005-006500 6<sup>th</sup> Framework <http://www.esofarmers.org/>
- McElwee, G (2006a). The entrepreneurial farmer: A Pandora's Box. *Rural Enterprise and Management* 2(2), 23-42.
- McElwee, G (2006b). Farmer's as entrepreneurs: developing competitive skills *Journal of Developmental Entrepreneurship* 11(3) 187-206
- McElwee, G & Atherton, A. (2005). Publication trends and patterns in entrepreneurship. *Journal of Small Business and Enterprise Development* 12(1), 99-103.
- McElwee, G & Robson, A. (2005). Diversifying the farm: opportunities and barriers. *Finnish Journal of Rural Research and Policy* 4, 84-96.
- McIntyre, A. (1971). *After virtue* Manchester, Duckworth.
- Nietzsche, F. (1974). *The gay science: with a prelude in rhymes and an appendix of songs* London, Vintage Books.
- Plato (1970). *The laws* London, Penguin Classics.
- Pyysiäinen, J., Anderson, A., McElwee, G., & Vesala, K. (2006). Developing the entrepreneurial skills of farmers; some myths explored *International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behavior and Research* 12(1) 21-39
- Rae, D. (2000). Understanding entrepreneurial learning: A question of how? *International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behavior and Research* 6(3), 145-149
- Rae, D., & Carswell, M. (2000). Using a life story approach in researching entrepreneurial learning: The development of a conceptual model and its implications in the design of learning experiences. *Education and Training* 42(4/5), 220-227
- Ritchie, J & Lewis, J. (2003). *Qualitative research practice: A guide for social science students and researchers* California, Thousand Oaks.
- Schumpeter, J. (1934). *The theory of economic development: an inquiry into profits, capital, credit, interest and the business cycle* Cambridge,

- Massachusetts Harvard University Weber, M. (1968) *Economy and society*, New York Press.
- Shotton, J. (1993). *Conversational realities: the construction of life through language*. London, Sage Publications.
- Steier, F (ed.) (1991). *Research and reflexivity* London, Sage.
- Thompson, C. J., Locander W. B., & Pollio, H. R. (1989) Putting consumer experience back into consumer research: The philosophy and method of existential phenomenology. *Journal of Consumer Research* 16, 33-146
- Wittgenstein, L. (1968) *Philosophical investigations* 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition New York, Macmillan.
- Woolgar, S & Ashmore, M. (1988) The next Step: An introduction to the reflexive project in S Woolgar (ed.) *Knowledge and reflexivity*. London, Sage.
- Zeeuw, de G. (2001) *On creating interfaces* unpublished memo, University of Amsterdam.
- Josh Sommers  
<http://www.flickr.com/people/joshsommers/>

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

I am grateful to the anonymous reviewers who provided some insightful comments on an earlier version of this paper.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

**Dr. Gerard McElwee** is Reader in Rural Enterprise in the Lincoln Business School, University of Lincoln, UK where he teaches, Entrepreneurship, Strategic Management and Research Methods. He is currently supervising 3 doctoral students.

Gerard is the Editor of *The International Journal of Entrepreneurship and Innovation* which he launched in 2000. He sits on numerous Editorial Boards in the area of Entrepreneurship and has been key note speaker at a number of conferences.

Gerard started life working in the Shipbuilding Industry in the North East of England, working on Oil Tankers. He developed an interest in rural issues after carrying out research and consultancy work with small rural businesses and farmers.