

## **Reflecting on a Research Seminar - Qualitative research in an age of austerity: Exploring the pitfalls and possibilities of 'resource-lite' methods one-day seminar**

Exhibition and Conference Centre, University of the West of England (UWE), Bristol, 25

October 2012

Word count: 2,449

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## **Reflecting on a Research Seminar - Qualitative research in an age of austerity: Exploring the pitfalls and possibilities of 'resource-lite' methods one-day seminar**

In October 2012 the authors attended a one day seminar entitled *Qualitative research in an age of austerity: Exploring the pitfalls and possibilities of 'resource-lite' methods*. The event was funded by an award from the Qualitative Methods in Psychology Section (QMIP) seminar competition and organised by members of the psychology department at the University of the West of England (UWE) (Victoria Clarke, Debra Gray, Nikki Hayfield and Naomi Moller). Qualitative interviews remain a dominant method of data collection within psychology (Potter & Hepburn, 2005) and the focus was on alternative qualitative data collection methods that require fewer resources and place less financial and time demands upon the researcher than traditional face-to-face methods. In the first section of this paper we provide a brief report of each talk. In the second part we gather the themes that arose during the day and consider the issues raised and how these have impacted on research and teaching.

The day started with Victoria Clarke and Naomi Moller (UWE, Bristol) presenting "*Brian rubs his nipple and then David Beckham appears in the smoke*": *The joys and challenges of the story completion method*. While story completion tasks (SCTs) have been used extensively as a projective technique (see, Kitzinger & Powell, 1995), and analysed quantitatively in developmental research (e.g., Laible, Carlo, Torquati & Ontai, 2004; Page & Bretherton, 2001), Clarke and Moller reported on how they have been using SCTs *qualitatively* (as first discussed by Kitzinger & Powell, 1995). In doing so they move beyond an attempt to uncover something about the 'individual' towards considering what these stories tell us about the social contexts in which they are written. They and their students have utilised

SCTs for topics such as sex education, perceptions of a fat counsellor, transgender parenting and sexual refusal, and these examples were used to illustrate design, piloting, and implementation of the method. SCTs are indirect and non-intrusive which means that social desirability 'bias' (that often exists around sensitive topics) may be minimised and participants may be able to discuss topics in an abstract way rather than divulging their own experiences. Large quantities of rich data can be produced within a short time and without transcription. However, data may be hard to predict and vary in content and quality; for example, participants sometimes use humour and fantasy within their stories (as demonstrated in the participant quote used in the title of their talk) that can be difficult to interpret. It could be challenging using this method outside a student sample; hence more work is needed to explore the use of this method in qualitative research.

Virginia Braun (University of Auckland, New Zealand) presented *Sex(y) bodies surveyed: Using qualitative surveys to research sensitive topics* where the focus was in part on the flexibility of survey research. Qualitative surveys can be creatively designed to move beyond the traditional 'question and answer' format by including video or audio clips that participants respond to, or in the case of one survey, a drawing task. Further, there is flexibility in how qualitative surveys can be distributed, from traditional hard paper copies, to Word versions sent via email, or technological tools such as survey websites (e.g., Qualtrics ([www.qualtrics.com](http://www.qualtrics.com)) and SurveyMonkey ([www.surveymonkey.com](http://www.surveymonkey.com))). Additionally, surveys can be an efficient way to collect qualitative data because the researcher does not need to be present, there is no transcription, and if using survey software, no data entry. For participants, surveys may be more convenient and less daunting than face-to-face methods and offer the opportunity to challenge the researcher on the questions they ask; although

similarly to SCTs, interpreting unanticipated responses may prove challenging. Braun showed examples of surveys she and colleagues had used to explore views on pubic hair and experiences of orgasm and sexual pleasure. Such sensitive topics are particularly suited to surveys because participants are offered privacy and anonymity. Braun discussed the range of designs that can be used so that perceptions and views, or experiences and behaviours, can be explored. She reflected upon the variety of responses that can be gathered and the rich and meaningful data analysis that can result.

Fiona Fox (University of Bath) presented *Keeping up with the kids: A survival guide for online focus groups with young people*. Her research on young people living with a visible difference began with face-to-face focus groups in mind. However, attendance issues such as time and transport, alongside the sensitivity of the topic (young people may be hesitant to discuss their visible difference with a stranger face-to-face), meant that she moved to online 'chat room' style focus groups. For Fox, the benefits of this method were the convenience and cost-effectiveness; increased participation due to young people's interest in the Internet; participants' ability to participate without being seen; and the potential of participant control enabling a more equal researcher/ researched relationship. However, there were also pitfalls. Those who do not have Internet access or are not technologically competent cannot participate and technical issues such as chat-rooms 'crashing' are possible. Language and communication can also be an issue, particularly with young people, where online-chat 'codes' tend to be used (for example, 'lol': 'laugh out loud'; 'brb': 'be right back'). Online focus groups may require researchers to 'keep up with the kids' both in terminology and in the overlapping conversations and sometimes fast paced nature of chat rooms, versus delayed responses and silences at other points, and Fox advocated piloting to

become accustomed to this. Other factors to consider with online research include cultural considerations such as time zones and participants speaking or writing in other languages besides English, as well as participants' location when participating, for example, where others could look over their shoulder.

In *Public places, private spaces: Using Skype as a research medium*, Paul Hanna (University of Brighton) provided an insightful exploration of online technology. Skype is an online video call service ([www.skype.com](http://www.skype.com)), where two people can see and hear each other over the Internet using a webcam and headphones / speakers. Hanna highlighted that Skype is free to use for one-on-one video conferencing and group audio interactions (although not for group video conferencing); environmentally and user friendly; and widely accessible through mobile phones and computers. While there is some potential for system crashes and inconsistent streaming, Skype does have an instant messaging option that provides a backup option if the video / audio element crash, and this feature could also be useful for those who would prefer to type rather than talk. Hanna noted that Skype could be considered an amalgamation of telephone interviews and face-to-face interviewing and suggested that it is perhaps 'the best of both worlds' in that (like telephone interviews) researcher and participant can be in their own personal space and participate when convenient but (like face-to-face interviews) there is a visual and interpersonal element.

As with SCTs and surveys, diaries have often been used quantitatively, particularly within health research (e.g., Milligan, Bingley & Gatrell, 2005). Penny Furness (Sheffield Hallam University) ended with *Pearls and perils: Using the diary as a research tool*. In her research, participants were asked to write qualitative diaries about their experiences leading up to, during, and after, facial surgery. Diaries have been associated with participants facing

barriers to keeping their diary, and retention problems (see, Furness & Garrud's 2010 report of their research for further discussion of these issues). To address this, Furness made six monthly telephone calls to participants, and included information from these discussions in her analysis. Some participants underwent facial surgery around the eye area and associated visual problems impacted participants' ability to write. Others experienced depression, which made diary completion burdensome and perhaps contributed to variation in the quality and quantity of data. However, she found a number of 'pearls' in using diaries. When participants wrote lengthy and meaningful prose that captured their life events, the data collected was rich and of similar depth to that collected in interviews. However, others wrote short and simple sentences, even about seemingly major events such as the surgery itself. The richest data was written at the start of the process when the diary was novel, perhaps because participants suffered from 'diary fatigue', or maybe because events no longer seemed as important to record as they recovered from surgery. Many participants wrote entries at the time of the event and their intricate stories helped to situate occurrences in the context of their wider lives.

In delegate discussions during questions and over lunch a number of themes arose from the speakers' presentations. The first was the potential that alternative methods hold in allowing qualitative research to be more accessible to students, who may lack the confidence or skills to conduct qualitative interviews (particularly, as discussed during and after Virginia Braun's talk, when the topic area is a sensitive one). Accordingly, such methods can enable less experienced researchers to overcome their lack of experience and the associated ethical issues that may arise in face-to-face contact. The idea of encouraging students to engage with these methods is one that has effectively been put into practice by

UWE academics supervising undergraduate students during their final year psychology research projects. A number of students supervised by Nikki Hayfield have used surveys to gather rich and meaningful data around sensitive topics such as sex education and LGBT individuals' experiences of drug use. These resource-lite methods are also particularly suited to undergraduate research due to the short time frame in which students must collect data to complete their project and there has been an increase in students at UWE using not only surveys, but also SCTs and vignettes (a method similar to SCTs, see Braun & Clarke, 2013; Finch, 1987). For example, Nikki has supervised students who have used these methods to explore topics such as understandings of a lesbian 'coming out' and perceptions of gay males and homophobic hate crime. It is clear that such methods can be used appropriately as an efficient and effective data collection tool for novice researchers. The potential of these methods also extends beyond their use in undergraduate projects and the Story Completion Research Group (SCRG) at UWE has developed and grown over the last two years. Additional academic staff members have joined Victoria Clarke and Naomi Moller, and Masters students have undertaken research placements within the group, which has led to plans for conference presentations and publications.

Another theme was how data collection choices affect recruitment and the researcher/researched relationship, with the sense that these methods can enable participation and a more equal balance of power when the participant is granted more control. Although Fox and Hanna argued that using the Internet and associated technologies such as SurveyMonkey and Skype can allow researchers to recruit participants and conduct research in a relatively resource-lite way, these methods can also mean that some participants are excluded due to lack of accessibility or necessary skills; some wider discussions on the day

related to the inclusion and exclusion of participants. However, as Internet access becomes increasingly common it may be that it is not only the privileged members of society that can participate online and it seems likely that any discomfort with technology will decrease over time. Nonetheless, there may be technological mishaps that can potentially lead to data being lost, leaving participants and researchers feeling frustrated. Further, there is some work required to convert data from survey software into a format that is suitable for analysis. However, despite these types of limitations a key theme of the seminar was the quality of the data that these researchers had collected. A final theme was the notion of innovation in recognising the potential of existing methods and developing and adapting these (for example, Clarke and Moller's development of SCTs, traditionally used in quantitative and/or essentialist designs, for use in qualitative and/or constructionist research, and Braun's inclusion of additional tasks in surveys design).

Following the conference speakers' presentations, the attendees' discussion, and our own teaching and research, we have concluded that using 'resource-lite' methods (such as SCTs, surveys, diaries, Skype, and Internet chat rooms) can be novel, accessible and fun. They can also generate data as rich as that produced in more traditional face-to-face methods (such as interviews and focus groups) with much less researcher or participant resource, especially with appropriate design and piloting. It was clear from the enthusiasm of the seventy or so attendees that resource-lite methods of data collection are an important part of the on-going conversation within qualitative psychology about suitable data collection techniques.



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