



The Qualitative Report

Volume 17 | Number 44

Book Review 3

10-29-2012

Kitchen Stories: A Review

Dan Wulff

University of Calgary, dwulff@ucalgary.ca

Sally St. George

University of Calgary

Sandy Harper-Jaques

Alberta Health Services

Lorne Jaques

University of Calgary

Follow this and additional works at: <http://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr>

 Part of the [Quantitative, Qualitative, Comparative, and Historical Methodologies Commons](#), and the [Social Statistics Commons](#)

Recommended APA Citation

Wulff, D., St. George, S., Harper-Jaques, S., & Jaques, L. (2012). Kitchen Stories: A Review. *The Qualitative Report*, 17(44), 1-10.
Retrieved from <http://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol17/iss44/3>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the The Qualitative Report at NSUWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Qualitative Report by an authorized administrator of NSUWorks. For more information, please contact nsuworks@nova.edu.



Qualitative Research Graduate Certificate
Indulge in Culture
Exclusively Online • 18 Credits

NSU
NOVA SOUTHEASTERN
UNIVERSITY

LEARN MORE

NOVA SOUTHEASTERN

Kitchen Stories: A Review

Abstract

Using four voices, we created a movie review of *Kitchen Stories*, a Scandinavian movie ostensibly about a research project, but with layers of meaning extending beyond research into relationships, wider communities, and teaching. As friends and colleagues, our co-authored review/essay allowed each of us room to elaborate numerous themes that can inform and support a variety of researchers and practitioners. This writing also confirmed our belief that contemporary movies can be evocative learning devices for professionals.

Keywords

Movies, Research, Neutrality, Conversations, Relationships, Teaching

Creative Commons License



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 4.0 License](http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).



Kitchen Stories: A Review

Dan Wulff and Sally St. George
University of Calgary, Calgary, Alberta, Canada

Sandy Harper-Jaques
Alberta Health Services, Calgary, Alberta, Canada

Lorne Jaques
University of Calgary, Calgary, Alberta, Canada

Using four voices, we created a movie review of Kitchen Stories, a Scandinavian movie ostensibly about a research project, but with layers of meaning extending beyond research into relationships, wider communities, and teaching. As friends and colleagues, our co-authored review/essay allowed each of us room to elaborate numerous themes that can inform and support a variety of researchers and practitioners. This writing also confirmed our belief that contemporary movies can be evocative learning devices for professionals. Keywords: Movies, Research, Neutrality, Conversations, Relationships, Teaching

For many the kitchen is the center of the home. It is the most common meeting place for families and friends and the place where food and drink meet stories, conversations, gossip, homework, art projects, playing games, and news. Kitchens are the sites of joy, heartache, dismay, instruction, arguments, tears, worries, support, and love. This is true for us and we watched *Kitchen Stories* with these experiences as our contextual backdrop.

Kitchen Stories is a clever Scandinavian film, a unique story about kitchens and research (not a likely combination for a film). The film's director, using a research project storyline, produces a variety of themes and vantage points stirred together which we embraced to produce this review. Four of us watched this movie together as our entertainment one evening. Each of us took the film in through somewhat different lenses and of course we then shared our ideas at a kitchen table!

Sandy noted that the movie highlighted the implausibility of observational neutrality in research by showing us the irrepressible human tendency to connect. Lorne saw the larger macro context wherein all research ultimately is nested (whether visible or not). Dan could not help but notice that research is wholly entwined with our lives more generally; to speak of them as separate in the first place is folly. As Sally will be teaching a new doctoral qualitative research class soon, she concentrated on seeing the movie as a teaching device using research ideas in a contextual and storied way so that research could come alive for students.

We will present these four vantage points each in turn and propose the use of this movie as a multi-faceted learning tool in research or practice classes. A brief review from the "Time Out Film Guide" (2012) explains the movie plot in this way:

It's the early 1950s, and Sweden's Home Research Institute, having created the perfect kitchen for the national housewife, sets its sights on the Norwegian bachelor. The plan is simple: an inspector installs himself on a stepladder in the volunteer's kitchen and for weeks logs all movement and business in the room. While the scheme's originator flies back and forth across Scandinavia, ever more debauched and remote from research, an officious manager loses control of the exercise as inspectors drink themselves out of a job or, more likely, break the code of silence and distance which the task demands; conversations, even friendships ensue, none more poignant than that between the initially taciturn and suspicious farmer Isak (Calmeyer) and his intended overseer Folke (Norström). This is wonderfully warm hearted and entertaining cinema from one of Norway's most distinctive talents. Striking camerawork and design, pitch-perfect playing and writer/director Hamer's acute eye for the revealing detail all add up to a pantry full of enjoyment and often absurdist subversion.

You can also view the trailer for the movie at <http://www.moviefone.com/movie/kitchen-stories/17060/video/kitchen-stories-trailer/1126007>.

The Myth of Neutrality (Sandy)

As I watched this film, I reflected on the roles of the observer and the observed. After careful training in scientific observation and the neutrality of the observer, Folke travels from Sweden to Norway with his travel trailer in tow. Folke's assignment is to collect data about a bachelor (Isak) by observing Isak's activities when he is in his kitchen. Both men are provided with rules about the scientific endeavour and how they should interact (or rather, *not* interact) with each other. Folke's assignment is to observe and record Isak's movements in the kitchen. He is not expected to consider Isak's context, history, or circumstances. He is a "neutral" observer. That is to say, Folke has been trained to collect data in a non-judgmental manner free of personal bias, opinion, or curiosity. He is not expected to look beyond the boundaries of the kitchen. For his part, Isak is expected to carry on his usual activities in the kitchen, that is, to prepare food, eat, visit with his friend, answer the telephone. Folke sits in a very tall stool in a corner of the kitchen, reminiscent of an over-grown director's chair. From his perch high in the corner of the kitchen, Folke assumes the role of an objective, neutral savant as he silently monitors and carefully records Isak's movements in his kitchen. As the story unfolds Folke's observations shift from a neutral stance to become curious about and involved in Isak's life, and then as he and Isak gain greater understanding of each other, Folke's view becomes deeply empathic. So, too, Isak's initial abhorrence for this situation shifts from resigned acceptance to curiosity about the observer and a desire for involvement with him.

At the outset of the film, the viewer is invited to believe that an observer, who is properly trained, can maintain a stance of neutrality and objectivity. This is similar to early views in the fields of psychotherapy and social science research. The belief in an external, correct reality that could be revealed, dissected, and understood led theorists to

postulate that the observer could be separate from the person being observed. Furthermore, a therapist or researcher could maintain an unbiased perspective and could uncover truth; and, in *Kitchen Stories*, the belief that research could be conducted in a sterile and “hands-off” fashion. As the story evolves, the viewer of the film also becomes an observer and I, as one of the viewers, began to observe the impossible task of just observing! Each of us makes sense of our own world and of the experience of others from the foundation of our own experience. It is impossible to be neutral observers (White, 1989).

Furthermore, the viewer is asked to believe that subjects who are observed are not affected by being observed. With minimal dialogue and nuanced acting, Folke and Isak illustrate that neutrality and one-sided observation is impossible, a fiction. In the story, Folke becomes more interested and curious about his subject and Isak becomes more responsive and engaged with Folke’s presence. The two men begin to share food. They have conversations – Folke speaks in Swedish and Isak responds in Norwegian. A reciprocal relationship develops. As a viewer of the film, I found myself drawn in, feeling emotions and developing opinions about the interactions between these two men. In many ways, the story of Folke and Isak is a metaphor for the process that of involvement that evolves during a qualitative research study. Folke discovers that he cannot confine his observations to the kitchen. He becomes curious about Isak’s point-of-view, his history, and his situation. Isak realizes that he cannot *not* be impacted by the observer. He becomes curious about and more open to interacting with Folke. Through their kitchen dialogue, the two men gain deeper understanding of each other’s experiences and lives. As the story of these two men evolves, the viewer becomes aware of the rich layering that is part and parcel of qualitative research.

The Macro Context of Research (Lorne)

The film exposed/introduced several interesting macro-scale sensitivities between Norwegians and Swedes that serve as a backdrop to the research process and emergent relationships. These include:

- 1) Suggestion of disparity between the relatively wealthy, more sophisticated Swedes who study the poorer, rural, and backward Norwegians,
- 2) A rather arrogant (from a research perspective) presumption of sufficient cultural homogeneity such that their “findings” from Norwegian men might be applied to other places (Sweden and beyond), and
- 3) Swedish neutrality in the war emerged on a number of occasions as a factor that distinguished historical political differences between the observer and observed.

The idea of the “other” (see Fawcett & Hearn, 2004) in this context is interesting as it relates to how research across cultures/international borders is neither innocent nor simple. The research or “the study” can be seen as symbolic use of a rather neutral or benign theme (kitchen habits among single men) focussed squarely on a much deeper

one: specifically, the exposure of enduring sensitivities between sovereign, if closely related, cultures. The everyday ordinariness of kitchen activities serves as an example of how intrusive the “gaze” can be – how even the simplest tasks/activities are subject to the filters and, at the same time, can be profoundly illustrative of the historical, political, and economic context.

The film highlights cultural difference and tension. As an example, the initial mistrust between Folke (the researcher) and Isak (the research subject) clearly impacts the research even from its beginnings. Despite the culturally-based differences and the methodological sanctions against forming relationships between the observed and the observer, Isak and Folke succumb to their desire to connect with one another, getting to the point where they can speak about, if superficially, some of the tensions related to the positions their respective countries took during World War II.

When undertaking research across borders, the recommendations to (a) establish rapport/relationship, (b) deal with language, (c) clarify delimitations and acknowledge limitations, and (d) take time to identify one’s own biases or the factors that will affect their perceptions are all conveniently absent in this portrayal of a “positivistic/empirical study.” The director subtly, but effectively, makes the point that “it” is all about relationship anyway. Ultimately the international/inter-cultural differences and tensions are confronted and addressed in the context of the relationship that inevitably emerges among the characters. The interactions were presented as a natural and desirable outcome of placing these two people together in such close proximity. They would ideally have been sanitized, neutralized, and controlled in a rigid observer-subject method. The differences and tensions along with common interests associated with their backgrounds, including nationality and culture, are productively allowed to emerge as a natural outcome in the film.

At another level this story is also an illustration of the transition that began to take place in research methodology during the 1950s and early 1960s when this film was set. In the decades that followed, the logic-based/positivistic approach began to be critically examined. Researchers in the social sciences in particular began to seek qualitative approaches that acknowledged the impracticality of removing relationship from the equation. The film illustrates the transition to, or at least the need for, more humanistic research approaches, such as the interest in participant-observer approaches that became popular and before participatory research methods emerged. Acknowledgement of this transition was accomplished for the most part indirectly and symbolically but it was confronted overtly in an interaction between two researchers, “*What the hell are we doing here?*”, “*up on our pedestals and think we understand everything simply by observing them.*” “*We have to talk to each other*” (Folke & Green, ~ m48:00).

Relationships and Research (Dan)

Research is a relational activity – even research that focuses primarily on the technical processes involved in conducting research rigorously or “scientifically.” When humans are involved in any activity, there are many levels of impact in all directions. Designing research is based on some understandings of the world and what should be studied. Conducting research with humans is an act of engagement on some level. People have reactions to actions in their worlds.

This movie demonstrates that a research project is simultaneously about a host of relationships, and those relationships most assuredly make a difference in the lives of the people involved. As I watched the film, I sensed that the research plot was just one storyline with which to describe the development of a relationship between people who had not known each other before. It was a process of developing a strong relationship that began painfully slowly (Isak wouldn't even answer the door). Then step-by-step, the relationship grew. This was a love story of sorts—the research being the reason for coming into contact was just a device to show how these two men became close. For me, the relationship was the focal point of the film and the research activities were just the means by which a relationship was started and grew.

Taking this further, all interpersonal interactions—no matter how prescribed or formulaic—are *prima facie* examples of human relationships. In research venues, we may elect to downplay the relational aspect: “If we presume the social world is composed of separate individuals, and employ methods consistent with this view, we shall find (low and behold!) a world of starkly separated selves” (Gergen, 2009, pp. 234-235). Relationships can take on many forms, some appearing in such an individualistic way that we may be easily tempted to not characterize it as a relationship at all. In *Kitchen Stories*, all the while the researcher, Folke, was working to evolve a carefully controlled and “uninvolved” interaction with Isak, the relational tension was steadily showing the audience the “back story” that was simultaneously at play from the beginning – Isak refused to meet Folke who was persistently knocking on his door (and windows) in order to engage in the research enterprise. Step-by-step, Isak and Folke engaged with a variegated set of interactions that grew closer, eventually leading to a wholesale refusal of the objectified research arrangement.

Relationships are constantly under construction—even the so-called objective ones. I find it comforting to know that our best efforts to be unaffected by others and unaffacting of others are doomed—relationships seem to be fundamental to humans.

Teaching Qualitative Research in 2½ Hours (Sally)

Imagine that you have been given the assignment to teach a masters or doctoral level qualitative research class 2 weeks before the start of the semester. Sometimes we panic and take hours to choose just the right texts, and in the end usually overload the course with materials and overwhelm students and ourselves. Don't worry, I have a suggestion for a quick course outline/syllabus based on a movie that is sure to capture all that we would deem important and necessary for a qualitative research course in 2½ hours of viewing. At once one could teach a qualitative research class and prepare students for writing for publication.

Kitchen Stories is a Nordic film about research and inquiry inclusive of the theory of knowledge generation, researcher positioning or standpoint, question formation, sampling, data collection, analysis, unintended consequences and situations, ethical dilemmas, fieldwork, project integrity, value of research to those who are researched, rigor, evaluation, and politics of inquiry. Now doesn't that sound like enough content for one course? Let me take each aspect point by point, to provide preparation for viewing. Each aspect is accompanied with some additional resources found on the *TQR* website that could be helpful for teaching.

Theory of knowledge generation. The stage is set for a positivist rendition of coming to know through one human observing another. There is lots of room here for discussion about the limitations of this theoretical stance.

Researcher positioning or standpoint. In this movie the researcher or data collector is staged as neutral and distant with no influence on the data collected (see Finlay, 2002; Madill, Jordan, & Shirley, 2000; Zafar, 2011).

Question formation. The question for the research is clear. What is being attempted is a follow-up from a study in which the movements of Swedish housewives were studied to reduce their movements and create more efficient ways for them to keep house. The study in the movie is a spinoff and looks for the same things only with a different sample. The question of focus is what are the movements of single men in their kitchens (see McCaslin & Wilson Scott, 2003)?

Recruitment and sampling. The recruitment was through volunteer involvement. The participants were promised a horse and so single men volunteered to be observed in their kitchens over a period of several weeks. We learn that some of the volunteers were sorry they had volunteered including our main character, Folke (see Byrne, 2001; Coyne, 1997).

Data collection. Data collection took place by having the observer record the single man's movements graphically as well as notations that led to frequencies and descriptions (see Byrne, 2001; Coyne, 1997).

Analysis. This was the aspect in the movie that was illustrated with the least detail, probably because the head researcher (who has some ethical problems of his own) was responsible for this task and while he held a major role in the conducting of the overarching research, was a minor character in the movie (see Bailey & Jackson, 2003; Patton, 2002).

Unintended consequences and situations. The nature of relationships, issues of power, who is observing whom, research as helpful or interference are all played out (see St. George & Wulff, 2000).

Ethical dilemmas. Ethical dilemmas were in abundant supply. The often resulted from the unintended consequences and situations and presented the questions we always have about the relationship between the researcher and the researched (Folke and Isak), the meanings of confidentiality and exclusion (Grant) and informed consent (Isak), coercion (every participant will get a horse) (see National Health and Medical Research Council, 1995; Orb, Eisenhauer, & Wynaden, 2001; Van den Hoonaard, 2002).

Fieldwork. Clearly Folke experiences an uncooperative "subject" (Isak); the monotony and isolation of some fieldwork (see Truscott, 2004).

Project integrity. The manager is rule-bound and threatening; the head researcher (appears seedy), while appreciative of creativity and uniqueness seems careless and unconcerned about the rigor of the project (see Carnevale, 2002; Creswell & Miller, 2000).

Value of research (to those who are researched). It seems that the bachelors are all imposed upon, with the prospect of no return for their time or opening their home (the initial promise of a horse for those who volunteered turned out to be instead just a small wooden horse) (see Morse, 2002).

Rigor. Suffice it to say that the rigor is sorely and yet understandably compromised by the lack of planning for the ethical dilemmas and unanticipated developments (see Barbour, 2001; Davies & Dodd, 2002; Johnson, 1997; Koch, 1994; Shenton, 2004).

Evaluation. Only one voice of evaluation for the project and its merit was heard and that was the project manager (see Ambert, Adler, Adler, & Detzner, 1995; Anastas, 2004).

Politics of inquiry. What endeavor does not have political overtones or drama? This story has political divisions built in as the Swedes are researching Norwegian bachelors. For example, they use their own language rather than the language of the other (or the researched) and their histories are fraught with disagreement and judgment that is instrumental in the research project (see Anfara, Brown, & Mangione, 2002; Peck & Secker, 1999).

The End

Kitchens are places where parts become wholes: where ingredients are mixed together to form something new. Kitchens are also the “heart” of many homes, places where important and trivial conversations take place. They are places where connections occur. In this movie, the kitchen becomes the heart of the story (or stories)—a story of the evolving relationship of two men, the story of post war peoples, and the story of scientific endeavour.

Our reviewing team of four agrees on many things but foremost among them is that this film has great merit for people for whom research informs practice. It invokes humour, tension, personality and the ridiculous to expose the frailties of research of all types: positivistic/quantitative *and* qualitative. We believe that the film holds great potential as a teaching tool for students and practitioners at many different levels—all of whom need to ask the difficult questions about the meaning of relationships.

This movie is well worth watching for its enjoyment value and for its deeper meaning.

References

- Ambert, A-M., Adler, P. A., Adler, P., & Detzner, D. F. (1995). Understanding and evaluating qualitative research. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 57(4), 879-894.
- Anastas, J. W. (2004). Quality in qualitative evaluation: Issues and possible answers. *Research on Social Work Practice*, 14(1), 57-65.
- Anfara, V. A., Jr., Brown, K. M., & Mangione, T. L. (2002). Qualitative analysis on stage: Making the research process more public. *Educational Researcher*, 31(7), 28-38.
- Bailey, D. M., & Jackson, J. M. (2003). Qualitative data analysis: Challenges and dilemmas related to theory and method. *American Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 57(1), 57-65.
- Barbour, R. S. (2001). Checklists for improving rigour in qualitative research: A case of the tail wagging the dog? *BMJ*, 322(7294), 1115-1117.
- Byrne, M. M. (2001). Sampling for qualitative research. *AORN Journal*, 73(2), 494, 497-498.
- Carnevale, F. A. (2002). Authentic qualitative research and the quest for methodological rigour. *Canadian Journal of Nursing Research*, 34(2), 121-128.
- Coyne, I. T. (1997). Sampling in qualitative research. Purposeful and theoretical sampling; merging or clear boundaries? *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 26(3), 623-630.
- Creswell, J. W., & Miller, D. L. (2000). Determining validity in qualitative inquiry. *Theory into Practice*, 39(3), 124-131.
- Davies, D., & Dodd, J. (2002). Qualitative research and the question of rigor. *Qualitative Health Research*, 12(2), 279-289.
- Fawcett, B., & Hearn, J. (2004). Researching others: Epistemology, experience, standpoints and participation. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 7(3), 201-218.
- Finlay, L. (2002). "Outing" the researcher: The provenance, process, and practice of reflexivity. *Qualitative Health Research*, 12(4), 531-545.
- Gergen, K. (2009). *Relational being: Beyond self and community*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Johnson, R. B. (1997). Examining the validity structure of qualitative research. *Education*, 118(2), 282-293.
- Koch, T. (1994). Establishing rigour in qualitative research: The decision trail. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 19, 976-986.
- Madill, A., Jordan, A., & Shirley, C. (2000). Objectivity and reliability in qualitative analysis: Realist, contextualist and radical constructionist epistemologies. *British Journal of Psychology*, 91(1), 1-20.
- McCaslin, M. L., & Wilson Scott, K. (2003). The five question method for framing a qualitative research study. *The Qualitative Report*, 8, 447-461. Retrieved from <http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR8-3/mccaslin.pdf>
- Morse, J. M. (2002). Enhancing the usefulness of qualitative inquiry: Gaps, directions, and responsibilities. *Qualitative Health Research*, 12(10), 1419-1426.

- National Health and Medical Research Council. (1995). *Ethical aspects of qualitative methods in health research: An information paper for institutional ethics committees*. Canberra, ACT, Australia: National Health and Medical Research Council. Retrieved from <http://www.health.gov.au/nhmrc/publications/synopses/e27syn.htm>
- Orb, A., Eisenhauer, L., & Wynaden, D. (2001). Ethics in qualitative research. *Journal of Nursing Scholarship*, 33(1), 93-96.
- Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative research & evaluation methods* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Peck, E., & Secker, J. (1999). Quality criteria for qualitative research: Does context make a difference? *Qualitative Health Research*, 9(4), 552-558.
- Shenton, A. K. (2004). Strategies for ensuring trustworthiness in qualitative research projects. *Education for Information*, 22(2), 63-75.
- St. George, S., & Wulff, D. (2000). The unanticipated in qualitative inquiry. *The Qualitative Report*, 5(1&2). Retrieved from <http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR5-1/stgeorge.html>
- Time Out London. (2012). Film review of *Kitchen Stories*. Retrieved from <http://www.timeout.com/film/reviews/78795/kitchen-stories.html>
- Truscott, D. (2004). Fieldwork, participation and practice: Ethics and dilemmas in qualitative research. *Science Education*, 88(5), 811-812.
- Van den Hoonaard, W. C. (Ed.). (2002). *Walking the tightrope: Ethical issues for qualitative researchers*. Toronto, ON, Canada: University of Toronto Press.
- White, M. (1989). *The world of experience and meaning* (workshop handout). Adelaide, Australia: Dulwich Centre.
- Zafar, A. (2011, January). [Researcher's positioning and knowing in qualitative research](#) (Powerpoint slides). Presented at the 2nd Annual Conference of *The Qualitative Report*, Ft. Lauderdale, FL. Retrieved from <http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/TQR2011/zafar.pptx>

Author Note

Sally St. George and Dan Wulff are Associate Professors in the Faculty of Social Work, University of Calgary, as well as family therapists and clinical supervisors at the Calgary Family Therapy Centre. Both serve on the Boards of Directors for the Taos Institute and the Global Partnership for Transformative Social Work, virtual organizations dedicated to the promotion of social constructionist principles in the helping professions. Dan and Sally are Co-Editors of *The Qualitative Report*.

Sandy is a clinical nurse specialist and clinical supervisor of two Alberta Health Services mental health outpatient programs in Calgary, Canada. Her clinical work includes walk-in single session therapy, provision of on-going systems oriented therapy to adult clients, supervision and consultation. Sandy has published on topics such as single session therapy, supervision, family focused treatment of depression and commendations.

Lorne is an Associate Professor in the Faculty of Social Work at the University of Calgary. His work has taken him to more than thirty countries as well as to the United Nations in New York. He is drawn to the remarkably similar social complexities of small rural villages and super-sized multi-lateral organizations. His research interests are focused on mid/late career international humanitarian engagement, social capital and global/local development practice.

Contact information: dwulff@ucalgary.ca

Copyright 2012: Dan Wulff, Sally St. George, Sandy Harper-Jaques, Lorne Jaques, and Nova Southeastern University

Article Citation

Wulff, D., St. George, S., Harper-Jaques, S., & Jaques, L. (2012). Kitchen stories: A review. *The Qualitative Report*, 17(Rev. 19), 1-10. Retrieved from <http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR17/wulff.pdf>
