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Qualitative methods and interpretative strategies: Are you enchanted or are you alienated?

Gail Davies and Claire Dwyer

I Introduction

Since the last report on qualitative methods (Crang, 2005), much has been going on as normal within the practical procedures of doing qualitative research. Human geographers continue to study texts, to conduct interviews, to convene groups and to engage in ethnography. Indeed, it is hard, though perhaps not impossible, to imagine what a radically new form of qualitative research practice might look like. So, for the time being, this suite of methods remains the backbone of qualitative research in human geography. Yet, we would like to contend that whilst these activities continue as before, there are changes in the way they are being conceived and carried out, and related to this, there are transformations in the way these methods are being used to make claims to understanding and intervening in the world. In the first of our three reports on qualitative methods, it is this link between qualitative methodologies and interpretative strategies we would like to reflect on.

This perhaps takes us away from the procedural preoccupations of a traditional methodological review and into the diverse contexts in which innovations are occurring, to reflect on their motivations, their conceptualisations and their interpretations. It makes an already tricky task of summary more difficult. There are a wide range of conceptual starting points for this shift, which draw inspiration variously, and sometimes reciprocally, from non-representational theory (Thrift, 2004a; H. Lorimer, 2005), complexity (Urry, 2005), performativity (McCormack, 2005; Szerszynski et al 2003), phenomenology (Bennett, 2001; Sheller, 2004), and attention to the ontological politics of doing social science research (Urry and Law 2004). However, we want to argue a similar set of questions about the operation of conventional research methods do accompany these trends, even if this is sometimes just to make explicit what has become commonplace.

If looking for a provocative metaphor and some opening arguments, then a good starting point is John Law's methods (anti)textbook *After Method: Mess in social science research* (Law 2004). From this it is possible to derive elements that describe some, if not encapsulate all, of these impulses. Firstly, and above all, there is rejection of singularity; of the operation of social science research methods simply to generate clarity, precision and reduce uncertainty and ambiguity in our understanding of the world. This is not to argue that existing

methodological repertoires are irrelevant, nor that empirical research is futile (though it does raise thorny issues for simplistic approaches to the orthodoxy of triangulation). Rather, there is the suggestion that we need to revise our understanding of what social science investigations achieve as particular ways of framing and interfering with the world. There is commitment to understanding all research as performative; that our methods help enact the real in different situations (Law and Urry, 2004; Makussen, 2005). Thus we have to figure out what it means to engage with the world, both in methodological practice, but also in our choice of interpretative strategy and ethical aspirations (Bennett, 2001). In place of the pursuit of certainty in generating representations of the world, there is recognition that the world is so textured as to exceed our capacity to understand it, and thus to accede that social science methodologies and forms of knowing will be characterised as much by openness, reflexivity and recursivity as by categorisation, conclusion and closure.

We explore these issues below through three themes recurring in recent qualitative research in human geography: questions of agency, embodiment and emotion; being within nature; and the performativity of place. Concluding, we reflect briefly on the politics of these forms of qualitative research, raising questions we intend to explore more explicitly in our review next year, perhaps anticipating that practical experimentation and critical dialogue may make such political interventions easier to evaluate.

II Embodiment and emotion

As ever with trying to characterise some kind of shift, much may be newly vital, but the strands coming into dialogue have long and complex histories. Geographers employing qualitative methods have traditionally been attuned to the emotional and embodied practices of their research encounters, something highlighted by feminist and humanist geographers (Bondi, 2005a). This lineage is revisited in work on emotional geographies (Davidson et al, 2005; Bondi and Davidson, 2004; Davidson and Milligan, 2004) and geographies of affect (Thrift, 2004c; McCormack, 2003). Yet there are differences in approach. Bondi and others identify tensions between traditions in feminist geography, which have emphasized the emotional quality of social life but prioritised individual accounts of experience, and non-representational theory which foregrounds non-cognitive ways of knowing (Bondi, 2005a; see also Thein, 2005a; Tolia-Kelly, 2006a). Nevertheless, it is possible to suggest, as Law does, that 'the nature of the person is shifting in social theory and practice', as 'agency is imagined as emotive and embodied, rather than cognitive' (Law 2004, p3). Albeit drawing on different theoretical perspectives, research practice increasingly acknowledges the relational, emotional and affective dimensions to doing research in different settings, reflecting on the personhood of the researcher (Bennett 2004); the emotions of the researched (Bondi, 2005a;

Browne, 2003; Ansell and van Blerk, 2005; Richardson 2004); different methods for invoking the emotional; and the implications for strategies of interpretation.

All of these might be said to contribute to reformulating what it means to 'know' something, and thus to open up social science research to the different kinds of knowing evidenced through embodiment or emotionality. Such experiments require that researchers are open to worlds conceived as full of sensibilities, as forms of knowing shift from comprehension to apprehension. While geographers remain interested in dance and movement (McCormack, 2005), music has recently become the focus of research seeking to access alternative ways of knowing (Anderson, 2004a; Anderson, 2005). Wood and Smith (2004) analyse musical performances using a range of experimental qualitative methodologies, which they describe as 'observant listening' and 'participant sensing'; while Morton (2005) employs 'performative ethnography' to access the 'intricacies of embodied practice' in Irish traditional music performances. For Wood et al. (in press) working 'in and through the practices of musicking', including spaces of practising as well as performing, is a means to explore these 'unspeakable geographies'. Through these, and other methods, the accounts of geographical research are increasingly animated, and at times re-encharmed, by a range of emotional repertoires including fear (Pain, 2006; Panelli et al, 2004), phobia (Davidson, 2003; Segrott and Doel, 2004); love and desire (Gabb, 2004; Kawale, 2004; Thein 2004, 2005b), grief (Hockey et al, 2005), memory (Anderson, 2004a; Tolia-Kelly, 2004) or boredom (Anderson 2004b).

Many of these examples seek ways of going beyond words, or indeed are suspicious of words as means to articulate emotions and affect. Understanding 'non-cognitive thought as a set of embodied dispositions' (Thrift, 2001, p.36), geographers have sought further ways of knowing through embodiment. Thus, while geographers continue to draw attention to the embodied experience of doing fieldwork and the importance of race, class, gender and sexuality in how bodies are read by others and meanings co-constructed (Bain and Nash 2006; Malam, 2004; Vanderbeck, 2005), they are also engaged in research which foregrounds embodied experience, whether working alongside participants to understand manual labour in India (Waite, in press; see also Whitelegg, 2005; Hanna et al, 2004), sharing the embodied mobilities of cyclists and drivers (P. Jones 2005; Laurier, 2004; Sheller, 2004), or reflecting on the embodied nature of academic work itself (Davies et al, 2005).

Writing up such research ultimately returns researchers to moments of interpretation and representation. Yet fuller awareness of the emotional, affective and embodied dimensions of social life requires new approaches here too. Geographers have turned to narrative analysis (Wiles et al. 2005), insights from psychotherapy (Bondi 2003a, 2003b, 2005b) and other more performative repertoires for making sense of interview data. Attention is focused on '*how* people talk about experiences and situations as well as *what* they say' in studies of South

Asian migrant women's health (Dyck, 2006, p.10) or on co-constructed narratives of emigrant women outworkers in Australia (Sutherland, 2004). In discussion of interviews with migrant and refugee women in Canada, Dyck and McLaren (2004) illustrate how the story-telling of the interviewee, 'telling it like it is', both produces and challenges their categories of analysis. As Latham argues, 'the notion of performance helps to deflect us away from looking at depth (in the sense of a single unified truth) and directs us towards detail (in the sense of a fuller and more variegated picture of the interviewee)' (2003, p2007). This is illustrated in Hyams (2004) account of listening for the 'meaningful' silences in her group discussions with young Latina women. In Rose's (2004) work on family photographs it is the moments beyond words, an interruption of meaning (or 'punctum'), which are used to explore the 'complexity and unpredictability' of women's ambivalent engagements with the emotions of motherhood.

III Being in nature

It is not only the nature of the person that is refigured; social science's engagement with nature itself is being reconceived. As explored elsewhere (Castree, 2004; Smith, 1998) the traditional deconstructive position on nature has been to expose and oppose dominant representations of nature as embodying conservative social ideologies. The critical background to this approach is broadly embedded in a narrative of disenchantment with nature, suggesting nature has lost its meaning for us, either through Weberian processes of rationalisation or through Marxian considerations of alienation. Thus 'nature' is replaced with institutionally framed relations of power. This narrative of alienation and dispossession continues to be refined (Olwig, 2005), yet there are other arguments. Some draw on material understandings of complexity and non-linearity to suggest this legacy draws on narrowly nineteenth century visions of nature as determining and unmalleable; others on the ethical implications of thinking beyond humanism to suggest, in different ways, that cultivating affective attachment to the world is valuable for ethical life (Bennett 2001; Whatmore, 2004). There are thus growing numbers of researchers suggesting we have to approach nature within the social sciences otherwise, and offering indications of the methodological resources to do so. Much of this revolves around different notions of *being* in nature, in the changing ways being and agency might be framed for more-than-human actors and in the multi-sensual locations in which social science research within nature takes place.

From the first of these, it is possible to identify points at which qualitative research practice is challenging the categorical delimitation of the human and animal boundary. In narrating and interpreting human and animal actions, anthropomorphism is no longer proscribed. In fact, some recent articles reveal an abundance of the different morphisms now admitted, in charting those instances 'where technomorphisms, zoomorphisms, phusimorphisms, ideomorphisms, theomorphisms, sociomorphisms, psychomorphisms, all come together'

(Latour, 1993, p137). The charisma of non-human animals figures prominently in the networks of modern conservation practice (J. Lorimer, 2005). An encounter between cow, researcher and computerised cowshed evokes reflections on subjectivity and moral orders in modern farming (Risan, 2005; see Holloway, 2004; Richardson, 2004 and Sellick, 2005 for other agricultural examples). The metamorphosis of carrots into edible stuff positions resistance to biotechnological modification in the continuities between human and non-human matter (Roe, 2006). The agencies of plants are revealed in the garden as forces of enchantment, bringing about a shift to a different kind of gardening practice and ethical attachment to nature (Hitchings, 2006). Companion animals remain the archetypal exemplars, and the positive potentialities of anthropomorphising animals is used to explore the spatially situated activity of dog walking in the park (Laurier et al, 2006) and elsewhere (Fox, 2005). Taken together, such work offers considerable resource for thinking about how we live with the multiple entities that are named in nature, and critically about how they might continue to live with us (see also Bingham, 2006).

Nevertheless, the non-human actor does not have to be natural. Electronic pets emerge as sites to experiment with new forms of lively engagement (Thrift, 2004b); indeed the changing 'intelligencings' of the tool bearing human, or *tool-being*, becomes central to what it means to be human in the world (Thrift, 2005). Woven into some of these retellings of the relations between humans and the more-than-human worlds they inhabit is admittance of a non-reductive evolutionary perspective, which brings geography back into tentative dialogue with aspects of biology – particularly some forms of ethology and neuroscience (Halligan and Haddock, 2005). For both human and non-human animals, replacing *Descartes' Error* (Damasio, 1994), that is an emphasis on 'cogito ergo sum', with 'emotio ergo sum', opens the way for attention to the connections between all actors in situ through modes of articulation, which include the corporeal, affective, behavioural as well as cognitive. Whilst much discussion in this vein moves quickly from questions of theory to questions of ontology, here and there more explicit explorations of what this means for qualitative social science research practice are beginning to appear.

Methodologically, what stands out is the different ways of carrying out research whilst being within nature (see also H. Lorimer, 2005). Geographers have been carrying out ethnographies and interviews walking around botanic gardens and domestic outdoor spaces (Hitchings and Jones, 2004). They have been following both conservation scientists and their feathered and furry objects of study around urban and rural habitats (Hinchliffe et al, 2005; J. Lorimer, 2005). Anderson (2004, p261) suggests his tactic of 'talking while walking' facilitates deeper understanding of his environmental activist respondents. Beyond geography, Szerszynski et al's (2003) collection supplies rich elaboration of what it means to perform social science research at the mobile boundaries between different disciplines and between nature and culture. These renewed nature studies have shifted from the centralised sites and

sights of nature organised through the hide, natural history museum or zoo, to the mobile practices and technologies of engaging with nature in the field. Geographers out walking in nature (Wylie, 2005), have recovered moments of 'exhilaration and epiphany' in nature and elsewhere that challenge the traditional narratives of alienation.

Yet reporting back from such embodied explorations is never easy. For geographers, as for other field scientists, there is the challenge of conveying these experiences into other spaces, whether negotiating the skilful positioning of dictaphones on the move (Hitchings and Jones, 2004) or experimenting with alternative forms of enacting nature (Giannachi and Stewart, 2006). Yet this ambiguity can be productive, using these as points for ethical and experimental reflection on the spaces of knowledge production, whether recovering the ambiguous and affective performances of scientists in the field (Waterton, 2003; J. Lorimer, 2005) or conversely the writing capabilities of water voles (Hinchliffe et al, 2005). Even in analysis of traditionally stabilized textual forms, such as the representation of nature within art (Bartram, 2005; Rycroft, 2005), or writing about the 'unnatural' in literature (Kneale, 2006), the emphasis has been to recognize alterity and undecidability within the ebb and flow of cultural sign systems.

IV Performing Places

The shifts identified in conceptualising the social and natural world also provoke geographers into new engagements with a key integrative site for geographical inquiry, that is place. These include attempts to capture the ephemeral, the fleeting, the immanence of place, as well as pay attention to the interrelatedness of place through engagement with ideas of performance, embodiment, memory, haunting and the spectral. Such research offers resistance to a further dichotomy, between the 'material' and 'immaterial' (Latham and McCormack 2004), challenging the search for a 'grounding' in place and raising questions about the possibilities of finding alternative methodologies for understanding and intervening in the meaning of place.

Drawing both on traditions of the psychoanalytic in geography and ongoing interest in the work of memory and remembrance (Keil 2005), recent work on the city has used metaphors of ghosts (Battista et al. 2005) and angels (Pile 2005) to engage with spectrality – that which cannot be seen, perceived, or classified, yet exists as a powerfully felt presence. In particular, geographers have used notions of haunting and the uncanny to interpret city spaces including Berlin (Till 2005), Pretoria (Hook 2005) and New York's Ellis Island (Kelly and Morton 2004). For Millington (2005) the framing of the Palace Hotel in Southend-on-Sea requires not only understanding negative local social constructions of asylum seekers, but also the notion of melancholia or mourning.

Responding to the call for more performative engagements within urban spaces, P. Jones (2005) relates how he sees, understands and uses the city spaces of Birmingham differently as a cyclist commuter and how he performs (albeit in a particular able-bodied and gendered way) the city. In a different vein, one perhaps elided in the more celebratory and energetic engagements with the urban, Dyck (2005) reminds us of the everyday care-giving practices and the often 'taken-for-granted, mundane routine activities of women's lives' (p233), arguing that such activities reinvigorate our understandings of place-making through stretched out sets of social relations. Work on emotions is also attentive to the ways in which emotions are made through places. Conradson (2005) uses a study of respite care in Dorset to argue for a relational notion of selfhood through landscape (see also O. Jones 2005); while Tolia-Kelly (2006b) illustrates how for British-Asian women the English landscape is refracted through a diasporic lens.

Making sense of place through engagement with what cannot be easily seen or narrated, but is instead imagined or felt - corporeally or more viscerally - challenges existing methodological interventions. Invoking the absurd can be a deliberate strategy to look anew at the mundane and the everyday. Drawing from previous work on the Situationists, Pinder (2005) explores the possibilities of a set of practices, including walks, games, investigations and mappings, which offer experimental modes of urban exploration or 'psychogeography' (see also Phillips 2004). He focuses on examples from New York, which involve exploring the city through artistic practices – a human-sized chess game played out across the streets, and the experimental walk 'The city system: New York', where walkers' movements are directed by chance events such as a car horn or the appearance of pigeons. In Paris, Fenton (2005) joins surrealist Jean-Pierre Le Goff on a walk tracing an imaginary geographical clock face with the aid of Tarot cards; while in London Battista et al. (2005) conduct a treasure hunt inspired by Richard Wentworth's art project at Kings Cross. If such explorations are sometimes critiqued for being too celebratory and paying insufficient attention to structural constraints, Reid's (2005) discussion of the performance art of Sandra Johnston in a loyalist area of East Belfast highlights the radical and transformative potential by engaging with powerful gendered forces of spatialized order and control. These practices offer possibilities for critical intervention through chance encounters, new discoveries and re-imaginings. They are an opportunity to 're-enchant the present' (Fenton 2005, p.425), but also alternative ways of writing the city to include 'all kinds of media, registers and modes of performance' (Pinder, 2005, p.403). We can also see in this work a revitalisation of geography's disciplinary identity through alternative evocations of exploration or fieldwork (Gibson-Graham 2004, Bassett 2004).

V Conclusions

In collating these examples, it is important to note that these trends are not the preserve of geographers, and moreover they are not limited to academia. In identifying sites of methodological innovation from which to take inspiration, Thrift, Law and others cite the experimental practices of market researchers, management consultants and product developers, attending to forms of knowing that exceed cognition through taste panels, dramatisations and enactments (Law, 2004, p3) or articulating the creativity of consumers as they remake technological forms (Thrift, 2006). Through this elision of methodological innovation with new forms of creative capitalism, critical questions about the politics of this shift in social scientific investigations thus materialize. What are the subject positions we might want to defend or refute within these new associations? How might interpretations that express enchantment link to those that articulate political resistance? How and where might this emphasis on performativity be made subversive, rather than disabling?

We don't pretend to answer these questions here, and in fact many of the answers only emerge in the context of local interventions. Throughout the papers reviewed, such practices are used to open up space for political and interventionist possibilities through revealing the importance of affect, encounters with non-humans and the imagination of place to broader processes under study. At times the tone does tend to the celebratory, but, for the most part, this is done with recognition that each of these sites is central to the way that capital itself is increasingly animated by a range of affective processes, including relationalities with non-human worlds, and by the complex contingencies of place. Thus, in finally addressing our title questions, we suggest it is not a matter of either/or, for processes of alienation and enchantment often run in concert. What perhaps has changed is these tensions are now recognised as unavoidable: all methods involve forms of social practice that in complex ways interfere in voicing and patterning of these more-than-human worlds, and moreover they do so in contexts already overdetermined by the material, corporeal and, above all, affective encounters of late capitalism.

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