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QRJ Editorial 2019

QR in reflexive mode: The participatory turn and interpretive social science

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As editors of this journal for the past five years, we are handing over QRJ to the next editorial team with both anticipation and a sense of caution. The field of qualitative research (QR) is in remarkably robust shape which the new team is excellently placed to nurture, while being aware that the current period in which researchers work is one of continual social upheaval, anxiety and uncertainty. This provokes new questions and challenges about the role of qualitative research in knowledge-creation, given the complexities and precarities of human existence in globally and environmentally insecure and deeply unequal times. Some of these new questions, including post-qualitative work, as well as political and ethical critiques of holding on to the term qualitative (as we wish to do), question fundamental assumptions about the ability of research to shine its light and reveal truths or realities. How can we hold the world still so that it can be interrogated and explored by a researcher using something called methodology? New suggestions and approaches from a variety of disciplines, theoretical directions, politico-ethical standpoints and geographical locations reflect an ongoing and multi-stranded response to the collective traumas of our times. These have only become more visible and debated than in the fledgling Internet days of 2001 when the journal was founded. Below, we take this opportunity to reflect on some of these changes and to suggest how qualitative research continues to flourish amidst a healthy plurality of approaches, offering – within

the turmoil – essential footholds for navigating the complexities and uncertainties we currently face.

Past commentaries on QR – including by ourselves (Dicks et al, 2016) - suggest that it offers a diversity of challenges. Taken out of context, it is not immediately obvious how to understand what this comment should be taken to mean but, viewed in relational terms, a first step would be to distinguish between who/what is doing the challenging and who/what is being challenged. By making such dynamically framed, action-oriented, and narratively meaningful distinctions, it is possible to improve the prospect of identifying some of the very different challenges facing qualitative inquiry past and present. It is also a way of raising questions about which challenges should be considered most relevant and/or pressing, how they should be prioritised, and if and how they can be met. Some of today's challenges may turn out to be less significant than others. For this reason, it is important to bear in mind the ways in which current challenges may (or may not) help configure the future (called future presents).

Of course, a more obvious way of unpacking QR's offer is by taking up longstanding issues as part of a more conventionally pedagogic approach. Here challenges posed are part of discussions of well-known arguments in favour of QR for i) providing in vivo/thick descriptions of practical actions, situated interactions and everyday sense-making; ii) reading talk and text about lived experiences for narratively/discursively constituted meanings and to investigate wider socio-cultural framings and dynamics; and iii) elucidating material-semiotic processes, so that it is possible to specify ways of studying the embodiment and performance of worldly practices along with the intelligibility of social worlds. Arguably, such challenges can be met – even by qualitative bricoleurs (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000) - by paying attention to the affordances of different forms (and modalities) of qualitative data and its potentials for

theorisation (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996; Atkinson and Delamont, 2005).

Indeed, over the course of the five years since we assumed the role of editors of QRJ, we have been struck by the increasing volume of submissions addressing types of collaborative research using creative and arts-based methods. These aim to include participants more actively in the research process and, although this is not new, it has become more prevalent in the past five-ten years or so as researchers have sought to 'democratise' the research process (Edwards and Brannelly, 2017). Some of the by now well-established methods, such as peer-to-peer research or photo-elicitation with participant-generated images, can have destabilising effects on unequal power relationships between participants and researchers and question how diverse and minority voices are included/excluded, whilst the 'multimodal turn' (Dicks et al 2006) has played its part in sensitising researchers to the use of modes of data beyond the verbal, including visual, aural, embodied, tactile and multisensory methods. Multimodal research more readily recognises the range of ways in which social relations are made and unmade in non-verbal ways, encompassing embodied, tactile and object-focused modes of interaction (e.g. Woodward, 2016; Jewitt and Mackley, 2018). Multimodal studies have recently been employing a variety of 'playful' and artistic methods, often including the involvement of artists and creative practitioners, using participatory theatre, dance, drawing, collage-making, video-diaries, object curation, story-telling, creative workshops, among others (e.g. Lyon and Carabelli, 2016). By allowing a focus on knowledge-production outside of verbal language and by focusing on the co-production of research agendas not fixed in advance but emerging in dialogue with participants, such methods lead us to reconsider what counts as data, who produces knowledge, and how we should conceptualise perennial issues in QR such as rigour, evaluation, transcription, analysis and 'writing-up'.

In this way QR, as a field of inquiry, provides a comprehensive route map into a characteristically reflexive way of approaching social and scientific inquiry (Willott, 1998; Seale, 1999; Dean, 2017). Reflexivity makes realisable what is otherwise difficult to grasp: non-foundational, epistemologically diverse practices (Scott, 1998) and ways of using theory to inform (not determine) analysis while using data to guide (not limit) theorising (Layder, 1993; Henwood and Pidgeon, 2003). It involves, but cannot be reduced to, researchers' awareness of how their own identity positionings affect the research processes, and the extent to which they reflect on their immediate and wider research relationships. For reflexivity to be productive, it has to be supported by a portfolio of interpretive (as opposed to top-down theory-driven) methods, capabilities, practical skills, and other kinds of research resources (e.g. identity positions, theoretical sensitivities, data, materials, writing genres, technical platforms and devices) – all of which are necessary for researchers to do their analytical and investigative work. It is important to have this route map and portfolio of methods and resources available to social scientists so that they can be discerning in their use of well-established stand-alone inquiry methods, but also because it shows how such methods have, over time, come to take their place as part of more complex, combined, multi-methods designs (Flick, 2018). Today, qualitative researchers increasingly need to be able to take account of an epidemic of more creative/inventive methods (Lury and Wakeford, 2014), adding further grist to the mill of QR's ways of puzzling with and through its use of methods (Henwood et al, 2018; Henwood, 2019).

The purpose of this editorial is to consider whether there is any further value in considering QR's offer within a different, highly contemporaneous frame: as an invitation made to others to participate and respond? Offering is, of course, already researchable within certain qualitative styles of inquiry – most especially ethnomethodology (where it is considered as a members' method), conversational analysis (where it is topicalised) and

ethnolinguistics (which concerns all manner of particularities of linguistic expression). It strikes us, though, that there could be something rather intriguing about the very idea of offering and its changing practices in increasingly privatised public spaces and within the current social, political and cultural climate. There is, for example, a contemporaneity to offering others a chance to participate in various forms of public life, through a widening of consumer-centrism. Here increased responsiveness to the *user experience* – that is already thoroughly embedded in commercial activities - is being made into a universal driver of solutions to problems of wider societal importance. Offering consumer-citizens a chance to respond has become constituted as a new socio-political form, facilitated by networked computing and social media, one where responsiveness to new initiatives is taken as an indicator of success in promoting more active – and interactive - civic engagement. As an idea - and a practice - offering people a chance to respond has gained considerable traction among those seeking to increase trust in governing authorities. The “human-centred design” of cities and local government is increasingly dependent upon the development of smart data, platforms, products, services and systems initiatives, with their capability to foster public trust through their operational intuitiveness, (lack of) friction, and accessibility (<https://datasmart.ash.harvard.edu/news/article/how-user-experience-ux-can-build-greater-trust-local-government>).

So what key questions are emerging for QR from this set of socio-economic, political and cultural contours? Does offering opportunities to participate in, respond to - and directly benefit from, new kinds of experiences, services and products in civic space/public life have similar affordances in social science? An initial entry point for considering this issue is to consider what is happening to research governance and ethics. What kinds of offers are being made here? In what ways are they proving challenging? It is particularly noteworthy how science, technology and research governance have come into closer alignment through cross-cutting

ideals of participation, engagement and inclusive practice. Anticipate, reflect, engage, and act (AREA) has become the ethical framework of choice for engineering and physical sciences. Social scientists have become necessary collaborating partners in efforts to fit both basic engineering science, and applied technological research, into AREA's specification of how to promote responsibility in technological research, development and innovation (<https://epsrc.ukri.org/research/framework/area>). Here it is important that social scientific ethics frameworks continue to co-exist as important sources of professional guidance and reflection, rather than simply serve as remnants of past ethical sensibilities. They need to continue to operate as means of understanding more nuanced research relations and data protections, so that accumulated knowledge of possible uses and abuses of such relations and data can remain intact. At a moment when a condensation of new practices is likely to emerge, old ideas and practices might appear to be replaceable by new ones deemed to be more of their time. So is it timely to ask prescient questions about whether ideas about society's ways of valuing data have appeared in QRs methods space, and as part of welcoming the shift to inclusive, participatory ethics, voice and responsiveness?

QR's contemporary participatory offerings can be approached, vernacularly speaking, as a kind of earworm that speaks in a small but insistent way to peculiarly important problems and issues of the day. Participatory methodologies and methods have a longstanding place in many disciplinary spaces of QR. Recently, they have animated in QRJ cross disciplinary arguments for creating spaces for inclusion (Caretta and Riaño, 2016) and democratising social science (Edwards and Brannelly, 2016; Henwood et al, 2016). Participation appears alongside many similarly evocative, terminological sounding phrases today that are positioning knowledge-making as a co-production involving different stakeholders. These are important phrases and ideas if— as they promise — they will set up virtuous cycles and circles of research in relation to things that matter — also

known as matters of care and concern (Latour, 2004; Puig de la Bellacasa, 2011). There are clear opportunities for researchers too (Dicks et al, 2016), if they are able to enter into dialectic where it possible to be responsive on demand. Yet, with change comes risks. Have we as yet asked some of the most basic interpretive questions, of the kind that are common in the risk field (see eg Boholm, 2015; Henwood, 2019; Oloffson and Zinn, 2019), about whether changes are also perceived as bringing about possible harms? If not, this may be important to do as one part of considering not just the promises involved, but the wider challenges of taking up a more co-productive approach and its pioneering participatory knowledge-making practices.

So what are the possible uncertainties and risks in knowledge-making that merit consideration, and are most timely at this juncture, in QR? This editorial suggests that, as we move forward into the future, we will need to avoid creating an overly abstract consumer demand and knowledge-provider response dialectic in science-society relations. But how easy will it be to find ways of navigating and enacting this safely in our investigative practices? Many of QR's more longstanding virtuous offerings (considered earlier as part of a conventionally pedagogic approach) are no longer considered to be epoch-defining. According to the post-qualitative turn, we no longer bask in the heyday of the turn to qualitative method. But that does not mean that there needs to be an epidemic of consternation over how it is possible for QR to establish reasonable ways of knowing or deciding how to act. QR still provides some of the most scientifically potent, socially acceptable, practical ideas about knowledge-making of a kind that can be considered as having real world importance. Working qualitatively to produce insights – and from here make claims about what we have found out by way of meaningful results, can still serve as useful society-wide reference points for making judgements about contested truths and falsehoods. This is the case even if QR is increasingly understood as being concerned with non-

representational fields and objects or, alternatively, with struggles over world-making that involve morality-shifting and powerful identity claims.

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