40

Implementation: Putting Analyses into Practice

Michael Murray

AIMS

At the core of qualitative research has been a desire by its practitioners to contribute to the improvement in the quality of people's lives. In this sense, it breaks down the traditional dichotomy between pure and applied research which has pervaded much social science research. In contemporary qualitative research there has been considerable work to improve the rigour of the approach so as to develop a sophisticated understanding of aspects of everyday life, but in doing so the desire to contribute to personal and social transformation has been somewhat underplayed. The aim of this chapter is to consider how we can reforge that connection between research and practice and to consider ways of increasing the impact of qualitative research.

Murphy and Dingwall (2003) identified three reasons why qualitative research has often been dismissed by policy-makers: (1) it is not scientific, (2) it is indistinguishable from journalism, and (3) it has an underlying agenda. It was because of these criticisms that policy-makers have often preferred quantitative research with its assurances of objectivity and impartiality. In their attempts to address such criticism some qualitative researchers have tried to mimic the standards of quantitative research. This can be the case with forms of content analysis (see Schreier, Chapter 12, this volume) of interview transcripts (see Roulston, Chapter 20, this volume), which have often sought uniformity in data analysis. However, this handbook has detailed how qualitative research has developed its own standards of rigour (see Barbour, Chapter 34, this volume) which are based less upon a positivist approach to science which seeks uniformity and more on detailing the processes underlying different interpretations of our world. The earlier dismissal of its being like journalism has been addressed by the increased theorization of the data analysis going beyond earlier concern with description to more sophisticated interpretation. As regards an underlying agenda, this is somewhat more contentious since the aim of all good research is to raise questions about the

nature of reality and to offer new insights into ways of living.

This chapter aims to further challenge these criticisms of qualitative research as being of limited value to policy-makers and other stakeholders, and instead considers how qualitative research has historically been concerned with critiquing the status quo and developing ways of enhancing quality of life. It will begin by reflecting on some of the earlier aims of qualitative research as collaborative (see Cornish et al., Chapter 6, this volume) emancipatory practice and how this potential has been reduced with the rise of expert-driven, evidence-based practice. While the original form often sought actively to involve the participants in the research process as a means of engaging them in a joint process of investigation and of challenge to various forms of oppression, the latter has sought to develop new standards of research defined by objective experts. In particular, there is a need to consider the potential 'pathway to impact' throughout the research rather than as an add-on at the end. How this is done will depend upon a range of factors, not least the various research participants and collaborators, the subject of research and the potential audience.

Historically, various traditions both within and outside social science have influenced the growing interest in qualitative methods. This chapter will briefly consider three of these traditions, namely oral history, feminism and action research, which have a common desire to link research with social change. Although much qualitative research does not explicitly draw on these traditions, it does implicitly integrate some of their principles through involving participants actively in the research process, reflecting on the purpose and nature of the research and connecting with various stakeholders throughout the investigation. Attention to these principles will further increase the impact of qualitative research. Furthermore, while a range of theories inform much qualitative research, this chapter draws on narrative and social representation theory which are particularly useful in framing interpretations. The chapter briefly considers the relevance of these theories and then a number of empirical examples to illustrate them. Finally, the chapter considers some limitations and opportunities in using qualitative research to effect personal and social change.

SHORT HISTORY

Quantitative research has traditionally adopted a 'god's eye' approach designed to produce objective evidence about social and psychological processes (Putnam, 1981). Conversely, qualitative research is based upon the researchers developing relationships with the research participants in which both shape the research outcome. These relationships open up the potential for change being a conscious part of the research process and not just a consequence of the research outcome. Such connectedness was evident in some of the earlier versions of qualitative research. Here I consider initially the influence of oral history and of feminism, which were both concerned with the emancipatory potential of research. The use of qualitative methods in both of these approaches was deliberately aimed at bridging the academic and non-academic worlds of theory and practice. This approach has been particularly self-conscious within action research which I consider subsequently.

Oral history is a form of historical research, sometimes described as a movement, which aimed to introduce the perspective of the ordinary person into discussions about history. In particular, it was concerned with working-class struggles and attempts to promote solidarity and to challenge various forms of injustice and so was informed by Marxist and other radical traditions. As Selbin noted: 'Traditionally, history has been constructed from above, composed by the victorious, orchestrated by the powerful, played and performed for the population. There is another history, rooted in people's perception of how the world around them continues to unfold

and of their place in that process' (2010: 9). This approach led to the rise of local oral history groups whose members aimed to collect and systematize the experiences of their peers and in doing so write a 'history from below'. (Thompson, 2000)

The enthusiasm for this approach has waned somewhat but its basic philosophy still informs the original desire of qualitative researchers who have been particularly concerned with exploring the lives of the disenfranchised and marginalized (see Cox et al., 2008). At the centre of this oral history making was the recounting of personal and collective stories of struggle with which the audience could identify and sympathize. Modern qualitative research often loses this concern for understanding personal and collective experiences of adversity and resistance. Further, the sense of personal agency is often discarded. Mishler discussed how, in the coding of qualitative research transcripts, the person often ended up on the cutting room floor. As he said:

> the relative absence of narratives in reports of interview studies is an artefact of standard procedures for conducting, describing and analysing interviews: interviewers interrupt respondents' answers and thereby suppress expression of their stories; when they appear, stories go unrecorded because they are viewed as irrelevant to the specific aims of specific questions; and stories that make it through these barriers are discarded as stages of coding and analysis. (1986: 106)

Similarly, Willis has argued:

> The problem with many empirical data, empirically presented, is that they can be flat and uninteresting, a documentary of detail which does not connect with urgent issues. On the other hand the 'big ideas' are empty of people, feeling and experience. (2000: xi)

In deepening the link between research and practice qualitative researchers can consider how they can maintain that sense of personal agency, as was the case with oral history, while retaining an awareness of structural factors and of the role of language in constructing our reality. This attention to the connection between agency and context has been particularly the case with narrative research (e.g. Hammack, 2012), which is considered later.

Another important influence on the growth of qualitative methods has been feminism, with its demands that other voices be heard in scientific research. Similar to oral history, feminism had a radical agenda pushing research beyond describing the world to developing ways of changing it. In particular, feminist researchers have not only researched women's experiences of such issues as sexuality and motherhood, but also been actively involved in campaigns for the rights of women and of other oppressed groups.

In reviewing the contribution of feminism to qualitative research Ussher identified five main features:

> the centrality of the critical analysis of gender relationships in research and theory; the focus on the detrimental impact of patriarchal power and control in both academic theory and professional practice; an appreciation of the moral and political dimensions of research; the view that women are worthy of study in their own right; and the recognition of the need for social change to improve the lives of women. (1999: 99)

In developing qualitative methods feminist researchers were keen to infuse their work with an action or change orientation located within an awareness of women's position in society.

Ussher continued: 'The goal of feminist research could be described as the establishment of collaborative and non-exploitative relationships in research, to place the researcher in the field of study so as to avoid objectification, and to conduct research which is transformative' (1999: 99). Admittedly, this is not restricted to qualitative research but in view of the concern with hearing the voice of women many feminists have preferred this approach. In particular, feminists were keen to expose and challenge the pervasiveness of inequitable power relations in everyday social life.

A particular influential approach within feminist research has been that of standpoint theory developed by Sandra Harding. This theory argues that it is necessary to view the world 'through our participants' eyes' (Harding, 1991) if the researcher is to grasp the experience of women. However, this approach goes further and argues that the research process itself can be used as a means of empowering the women participants. For them, qualitative research could take the form of consciousness raising by which the women participants became more aware of the various social forces constraining their advancement and how they could work together to initiate social transformation (e.g., Kearney, 2006).

A common theme of both oral history and feminist research has been a concern to involve the research participants actively in the research process. Such a concern has been central to action research. Greenwood and Levin in their standard textbook note that action research 'centers on doing "with" rather than doing "for" stakeholders and credits local stakeholders with the richness of experience and reflective possibilities that long experience living in complex situations brings with it' (2007: 1). In a recent commentary, Levin and Greenwood (2011) argue that such an approach provides an opportunity for reinventing the social sciences not as some supposed dispassionate discipline but rather one that is socially committed and engaged. This passionate commitment to forms of social action is one articulated by Reason and Bradbury in the introduction to their *Handbook of Action Research*:

> action research is a participatory, democratic process concerned with developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes, grounded in a participatory worldview that we believe is emerging at this historical moment. It seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, in pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people, and more generally the flourishing of individual personas and their communities. (2001: 1)

Of particular note in their definition is the importance of reflection in action research. Together the researchers and participants reflect on the research (see May and Perry, Chapter 8, this volume) and how it can contribute to various forms of action. Thus action research becomes more a process of mutual learning rather than the imposition of an agenda by the outside researcher.

Various versions of action research have evolved particularly in education (e.g. Atweh et al., 1998) and in nursing (e.g. Holter and Schwartz-Barcott, 2008). It is seen as a method which can ensure the involvement of the research participants in the research process and greater sensitivity to the context such that research findings can be more easily integrated into practice.

Participatory action research (PAR) developed out of the work of Latin American social scientists who were keen that their research should both reflect the interests of study participants and that through the research they could initiate action contributing to some form of positive change. Emerging in Latin America at the time of intense political strife, PAR and its developers not only were very conscious of the broader political context, but also had the desire to position their research within that context and to work with their study participants to challenge various forms of social oppression.

One of the most influential theorists within this tradition was Paulo Freire (1974) who developed a form of critical literacy theory. This theory viewed literacy not simply as the ability to read but to critique the broader social world and your position in it. He contrasted the traditional form of literacy education which he considered a form of banking, whereby the educator deposited objective knowledge in the minds of the students, with more critical literacy in which the educator and the student worked together to reflect on their circumstances and the potential for change. This transformative process he termed *concientizacion*, or critical consciousness raising.

Contemporary forms of participatory research may place less emphasis on formal

political power and instead integrate ideas from feminist and Foucauldian thought on the role of power in everyday relationships. This includes awareness of the power of the academic researcher in shaping the research process and calls for greater reflexivity in the research process (see May and Perry, Chapter 8, this volume). It also means involving various stakeholders in the research process from the outset and challenging internal power differentials.

Although qualitative research has developed from many other traditions, the connections with oral history, feminism and action research highlight the importance of active engagement of the research participants which has now become an accepted part of other traditions. Further, rather than qualitative research being considered as separate from practice, it can explore how one can inform the other. Finally, these traditions emphasize the importance of taking into consideration the broader context within which research and practice operate and so break down the classic individualism of much quantitative research and enable qualitative methods to develop a more social and relational human science. Sampson (2003) in his discussion of such a science refers to Levinas's ethical imperative to be responsible for others, which provides qualitative research with a moral dynamism often lacking in quantitative research. Similarly, Anne Inga Hilsen in her commentary on the ethical dimensions of action research refers to the relational ideas of the Danish philosopher Knud Logstrup who argues, in Hilsen's words, that 'we are not only necessary to each other; we constitute each other's life-worlds, or, as he quotes Martin Luther, "we are each other's daily bread"' (2006: 26).

THEORETICAL BACKGROUNDS

A range of theoretical traditions inform contemporary qualitative research (see Maxwell and Chmiel, Chapter 2, this volume). We are concerned not with the internal quality (see Barbour, Chapter 34, this volume) of the research but more on how can we maximize its impact. To that extent we explore two particular traditions. One is more concerned with the character of the research participants and how their 'voice' can be more effectively heard. The second is concerned with the broader world of meanings within which the research is conducted.

Narrative research and in particular life story research (see Esrin et al., Chapter 14, this volume) places the whole person at the centre of inquiry as a social and historical being who connects with the social context. In understanding the person's story the researcher gives life to something which may appear abstract to the policy-maker. In their study of lay juries in the British health service, Barnett et al. (2006) noted how resistant lay people were to evidence that was presented in an impersonal manner. Rather they were keen to know who was presenting the evidence. They sought additional personal information which could provide a level of real-life feeling to more impersonal accounts. This illustrates how qualitative researchers can increase the impact of their work by drawing attention to the personal stories behind their analyses.

In their study of the impact of life stories on sexual policy-making, Frost and Ouellette (2011) considered the case of Laurel Hester. Laurel was a New Jersey police detective who was diagnosed with terminal cancer. The local council denied her the right to transfer her pension to her long-term, same-sex partner. Laurel publicly defended her right and attracted widespread publicity. When she won the right other jurisdictions accepted that pensions could be transferred to same-sex partners and finally the state legislature enacted that right in legislation. This case has implications for narrative research in the sense that it illustrates the power of a single story, widely told, on social policy. Stories provide an opportunity for the listener to go behind the research and to explore connections with their own lives.

The link between narrative research (see Esin et al., Chapter 14, this volume) and

narrative practice provides an opportunity to explore narrative further as a theoretical framework for change. While much of narrative research has been concerned with the stories told about past events, we can also consider narrative in its subjunctive sense to develop new opportunities. Polletta has noted the power of narrative to convince others of the legitimacy of an argument. As she noted:

> Most recent theorizing about narrative has attested to its value for disadvantaged groups. Personal stories chip away at the wall of public indifference, scholars argue. Stories elicit sympathy on the part of the powerful and sometimes mobilize official action against social wrongs. Where authorities are unyielding, storytelling sustains groups as they fight for reform, helping them build new collective identities, link current actions to heroic pasts and glorious futures, and restyle setbacks as way stations to victory. (2006: 2–3)

This future narrative orientation can also be used in more clinical settings as a way of involving clients in the process of change. It has been established that not only do narrative interventions promote more emotional reactions in clients, but they are more likely to build their confidence for change (e.g. McQueen and Kreuter, 2010). There is also evidence from cancer screening programmes that narrative interventions are an effective way of reducing perceived barriers to health care (Dillard et al., 2010).

Through participating in collaborative research the participants can develop a new narrative orientation. Williams et al. (2003) reported a study in which they considered the use of narrative as a framework for promoting collective action. In this study a group of women shared their own individual stories of exclusion and identified commonalities in their experiences. Through this collective experience they began to explore collective ways of challenging oppression, some of which brought them into conflict with family members. However, their group solidarity provided them with the support necessary to persist with challenge and illustrate in action the power of the new resistant narrative.

In developing ways to increase impact qualitative researchers need to consider the popular knowledge context within which they work. One theory which is particularly important here is social representation theory, which is concerned with the shared understandings of a particular group or community (Moscovici, 2000). These social representations shape our understandings of social reality and our social relations. Research which is concerned with change must take these social representations into consideration.

Jodelet deliberately links social representation theory with action research in her comments:

> Researchers deal with the study of SRs not only as a toolbox to understand their reality, but also as a path of action upon it, thus illustrating Lewin's principle (1963): 'No action without research; no research without action.' (2012: 79)

She further develops this argument:

> all social intervention whose objective is social transformation depends on groups' potentialities among which figures their proper knowledge. All intervention focused on change of social reality implies an emphasis on popular knowledge, the necessity of taking into account in the interaction between the researchers and the social groups. Also appears the importance of working on lay forms of knowledge, in terms of consciousness-raising and formulation of new necessities and identities. (2012: 79)

Her argument is akin to that of Freire with its emphasis on consciousness raising. To have an impact, qualitative researchers need to develop an understanding of how others view the world. This is increasingly important in our multicultural world where different social representations held by different groups often clash. Certain social representations have greater power than others because of the availability of resources, particularly the media in Western society, and other forms of communication associated with other social institutions, for example science, religion.

In developing their argument qualitative researchers need to be aware of this context.

For example, the power of science in Western society with its emphasis upon measurement and experimentation can lead to qualitative research being portrayed in a negative light, especially in the popular media. Jovchelovitch terms this process that of legitimation:

> Legitimation relates to the positioning of knowers in the social fabric and the resources they hold, material and symbolic, to have their knowledge recognised. In other words, it is a process that relates to the power of different systems of knowing. (2008: 27)

Thus qualitative researchers need to harness particular resources to challenge particular dominant social representations of science and to gain legitimacy for alternative forms of knowledge production. They need to be aware of how different forms of knowledge are viewed and explore ways of conveying the legitimacy of their approach.

WAYS OF GENERALIZING

Many contemporary qualitative researchers focus on the potential of their research to contribute to personal and social change. This argument has been developed by Barreras and Massey (2013), who introduce the concept of impact validity to describe 'the extent to which research has the *potential* to play an effective role in some form of social and political change or is useful for advocacy or activism'. In developing their projects the researchers are concerned about how their impact can be maximized outside of academia both during and after the research.

Qualitative researchers continue to work in a society which is dominated by demands for scientific evidence. Thus the qualitative researcher has to convince the other of the value of their findings and the consequent need for certain changes. One problem faced by qualitative research concerns its generalizability (see Maxwell and Chmiel, Chapter 37, this volume) or transferability from one setting to another. Here, in particular, it has been found wanting by many policy-makers who have been strongly influenced by the standards of evidence-based science – what Denzin (2011) has called the elephant in the room. Instead Denzin argues that we should reflect upon the purpose of our research and set our own standards:

> there is more than one version of disciplined, rigorous inquiry – counter-science, little science, unruly science, practical science – and such inquiry need not go by the name of science. We must have a model of disciplined, rigorous, thoughtful, reflective inquiry. (2011: 653)

This means engaging with but not being pressurized by the standards of positivist inquiry. One of the foremost of these standard debates has been around generalizability, which has been based largely on statistical arguments around sample size. Realizing that they cannot satisfy positivist standards in terms of sample size, qualitative researchers are concerned about theoretical generalizability.

Mishler reflected on this debate in his early work. He noted that 'the critical issue is not the determination of one singular and absolute "truth" but the assessment of the relative plausibility of an interpretation compared with other specific and potentially plausible alternative interpretations' (1986: 112). The argument has to be plausible not just to the researcher but to the audience. Thus in developing his or her interpretation the researcher has to justify clearly why researchers argue in a certain way with reference to a particular theoretical framework. Thus the researcher may engage with the research from a different theoretical background in developing his or her criticism. In literary criticism this approach is accepted on the grounds that there is no one single truth but multiple interpretations based upon different theoretical traditions. Within qualitative research this acceptance of different interpretations is conditioned by a desire to move beyond understanding to developing impact.

Several researchers have recently argued that pragmatism offers a solution to the epistemological challenge of accommodating

contrasting interpretations. Pragmatism considers knowledge as a tool for action such that interpretation which enhances the capacity for positive change is favoured by the researcher (Cornish and Gillespie, 2006). Keleman (2013) has taken this argument further by exploring how the researcher can involve the community in developing actionable knowledge using a range of methods such as storytelling, drama and community action.

Over the past 20 years a major challenge facing qualitative researchers has been the rise of evidence-based practice. This was an exciting development which tackled many of the vested interests within policy-making and instead argued for an approach based upon objective scientific evidence. However, the equation of supposed quantitative objectivity with science in this new approach initially placed qualitative researchers at a disadvantage. This disadvantage has been challenged in two ways, first by critiquing the nature of science and, second, by critiquing the role of evidence in decision-making.

The evidence-based approach has been particularly influential within health care where it was clear that various vested interests had traditionally influenced resource allocation. The accumulation of evidence from randomised controlled trials (RCTs) on the efficacy of drugs and other interventions helped to highlight which ones were appropriate to prescribe. This has led to the development of the Cochrane database of such evidence for a wide range of interventions. However, there are a number of criticisms of such trials including the ignorance of variability in efficacy, the neglect of context, the relative disregard of processes, etc. These criticisms provided an opportunity for qualitative researchers to introduce their work to contextualize the evidence base. Qualitative research can now be submitted to the database and included in systematic reviews of interventions (Hannes, 2011).

This is a major initiative and an opportunity for qualitative researchers to have a broader impact in the health field. However, there is a tension in that researchers attempting to have their research included on this database may attempt to ensure its acceptability to more quantitative researchers. In combining with quantitative research there is also the danger of mixing epistemological assumptions and sliding into the positivist camp. There has been the development of several nuanced procedures to address these concerns through the identification of certain sensitive quality criteria. The Critical Appraisal Skills Program (CASP) tool (Public Health Resource Unit, 2006) is one example of such a procedure. This tool assesses research quality on the basis of 10 criteria: clear statement of project aims; appropriateness of qualitative methodology; appropriateness of research design; appropriate recruitment strategy; clarity of data collection; details of the relationship between researcher and study participants; ethical issues; details of data analysis; clarity of findings; and value of the research. While these criteria do not need to be used as a blueprint for quality, they can still be a useful guide to ensure that qualitative researchers are aware of factors that can improve the broader acceptability and impact of their work.

In a recent review of qualitative research on pain Newton et al. (2012) highlight the value of the CASP criteria. They note that qualitative research has gained widespread acceptance such that there is now less need to argue for its legitimacy but rather to focus on the details of the particular approach adopted. One concern they noted was the lack of reference to reflexivity, which has not historically been considered by more positivist researchers. This clear positioning of the researcher in the research report introduces the issue of values and standpoint which were highlighted by oral history and feminist researchers.

The search for qualitative evidence can also be criticized as being akin to the traditional one-way direction assumed within classical knowledge transfer models. These models rest upon the assumption that the ‘other’ has little knowledge to contribute to the process. The alternative knowledge exchange model is more participatory in its

assumptions as is the more recent knowledge sharing approach (Wang and Noe, 2010). The various government research councils have been keen to expand knowledge exchange. In the UK this move has been coloured by the debate about the impact of research which may be difficult to demonstrate for many researchers, especially in the short term. The UK research councils provide a useful guide to exploring different forms of impact (www.rcuk.ac.uk/kei/Pages/home.aspx).

In addition, it is important to be aware that decision-making in health care and elsewhere is not based solely upon research evidence but on a variety of other factors. While qualitative research can be included as evidence, the acceptability of such research depends upon the reader. It is here that the qualitative researcher can be at a disadvantage as the reader may still apply standard quantitative criteria to judge qualitative work (see e.g. Lewin et al., 2009). Further, it is not just the perceived scientific status of research which is important, but its perceived relevance to a particular situation. As Burton and Chapman (2004) emphasize, the reader tries to connect the 'evidence' from research with his or her local knowledge of the situation and decide on the extent of match. Thus once again the qualitative researcher has to connect with that local knowledge if he or she is to have an impact.

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH AND CREATIVE ARTS

The previous sections have considered some historical and theoretical ideas about increasing the impact of qualitative research. This section further develops these ideas through more detailed consideration of two research projects which have incorporated some of these ideas. Both of these projects were concerned with researching the character of dominant social representations of ageing and ways of challenging these representations through artistic interventions.

It is well established that older people often report social isolation and loneliness. The Call-Me project was designed to increase our understanding of the process of growing older in a disadvantaged urban neighbourhood. It was also designed to explore the processes involved in developing and the value of participating in local social activities (Murray et al., 2013; Middling et al., 2011). From the outset the project was participatory with both the older people and a range of community stakeholders including city council officials and housing regeneration officers. The project was designed to enhance the confidence of the older people through both the activities they developed and the publicity generated around these activities, which attracted media attention and the attention of policy-makers. This broader impact was expanded through workshops with various stakeholders in which the main project findings were further discussed.

The participatory nature of this study illustrates the various opportunities to involve the study participants in increasing its impact. In many ways, the project design was similar to that developed by Caroline Wang and her colleagues (e.g. Wang et al., 2004) in their photovoice method (see Banks, Chapter 27, this volume). The photovoice method involves engaging participants in critiquing their community through the process of taking and exhibiting photographs of the community. These photographs then become the focus of an exhibition which provides an opportunity for the participants to expose the deficiencies in their living conditions and the need for additional resources. Thus the research participants become active advocates for change.

In the Call-Me project the artwork developed by the older residents was displayed in the community as part of an exhibition to which other community residents and various stakeholders were invited. This provided the opportunity for the project participants to both showcase their work and argue for additional resources (Murray and Crummett, 2010). This advocacy on the part of the

participants was supplemented by the researchers in their workshops with the stakeholders.

Although practically the project was underpinned by ideas from PAR, it was also influenced by concepts from narrative and social representation theory. In the interviews and focus group discussions (see Barbour, Chapter 21, this volume) with the older participants, they shared their narrative accounts of living in a disadvantaged community and the perceived social representation of their community by outsiders as being not only disadvantaged but of limited talent. Through participating in the arts and other projects the older people were able to gain confidence and to challenge this negative social representation. Through this collective action the older participants were able to demonstrate to others their capacity. Thus the research moved from understanding the experience of growing older to involving older people in a challenge to the dominant negative social representation of ageing and of a disadvantaged community.

In this study detailed life story interviews (see Roulston, Chapter 20, this volume) were also conducted with a sample of key stakeholders who were involved in a range of community development activities. In the analysis of the structure and content of these interviews the emotional connection between the community workers and the residents was identified as being central to their work (Murray, 2013). They were passionately engaged in a project to address issues of social injustice and provide opportunities for disadvantaged people. They offered a vision of a better world and worked to engage people with that vision. In his description of stories of change, Selbin noted that people are often 'asked to rise above their present, often dreary circumstances and imagine a new future, to set out a new vision to which they can aspire and yet which somehow is made to seem within reach, even if there are at times substantial demands for self-abnegation and sacrifice' (2010: 30). The narrative of the community development worker was also infused with examples of disappointment and setbacks. To overcome the emotional load of such setbacks the workers required a broader values commitment to the importance of their work – it was not just a job but part of a broader movement for social justice.

Although focusing on the role of the community development worker, the findings of this subsidiary project can be applied to the qualitative researcher. It illustrates the importance of emotional commitment to the research and an acceptance that research findings may not connect with a particular audience because they challenge certain established views. A longer view of the potential impact of research is necessary.

Another study of social representations of ageing used a local theatre as a means of both collecting and disseminating ideas from the research. The New Vic theatre in the Potteries district of the English Midlands has a historic reputation for active engagement with the local community. This theatre was established by Peter Cheeseman in the 1960s and had a remit to represent and engage local residents (Elvgren, 1974). Over a period of 50 years it developed a substantial reputation for its theatrical productions, which took up local issues and encouraged local discussion. In many ways Cheeseman was developing many of the ideas of oral history as performance (Watt, 2009). The actors interviewed local residents about their everyday experiences and from this material developed documentary dramas about local issues designed to raise awareness of those issues and promote further discussion. The Ages and Stages project (Bernard et al., 2013) explored not only the character of social representations of ageing, but how they were challenged in a particular theatrical context.

The project developed over three strands. The first explored the substantial archival material which Cheeseman had developed over the years and which provides a veritable treasure trove of audiovisual material of all sorts about life in the local area. The second strand was a series of extensive individual

and group interviews with audience members, volunteers, theatre employees and actors, and those who were sources for the original documentaries. The third strand brought these two strands together in the development of a new performance about the project, and about growing old.

Frequently in the interviews there was discussion about the growing social isolation that can come with ageing. The theatre provided an opportunity to combat the supposed inevitability of such isolation both as an audience member and as a volunteer. A dominant image of ageing is one of loss. As people grow old their children often move away from the family home and they lose connections with work colleagues. When one partner in a couple dies the experience of loss of social contacts is accentuated. The theatre provided an opportunity to resist this social isolation. Also, the many social roles which people have in terms of the family and work can fade as they grow older. The theatre can provide a new sense of purpose. Finally, there was mention of the mental decline which is often considered another consequence of ageing. The older people were aware of this public image and sought ways to combat this – involvement in the theatre even as an audience member was such an opportunity.

Through participation in the theatre the older participants deliberately challenged the negative social representation of ageing as a period of decline and social exclusion. This was done in an everyday manner through attending as an audience member or in a more active manner through becoming a volunteer at the theatre. The project team was keen to take this challenge to a higher level through the development of a theatrical performance. A play was developed in collaboration with some of the study participants, some members of a youth theatre group and some professional actors. This play was developed in a workshop fashion led by the theatre director of education using material from the interviews. It was designed both to describe the process of growing old and to ask questions of the audience. Subsequently the play was performed to a wide range of audiences including young people and residents of nursing homes.

At the centre of this project was a reflection (see May and Perry, Chapter 8, this volume) on ways of increasing the impact of qualitative research findings. The original theatre used the material from interviews with local residents to develop a corpus of knowledge about local issues which were used to develop 'docu-dramas' about those issues. The performance of these docu-dramas then provided a means of promoting greater discussion about those issues which generated considerable media interest evidenced in the archival material. In the research project the experience of growing older detailed in the many interviews was then transformed into a play, the performance of which in different venues promoted widespread discussion.

Both of these projects illustrate how the impact of qualitative research is not just a process of dissemination but rather one of active and often emotional engagement with different communities of interest. By involving participants in the research process they can become the agents of change themselves.

OPPORTUNITIES AND LIMITS

While qualitative research can provide an opportunity to develop an understanding of human experience, it is often not sufficient to convince others of the need for change. As we noted earlier, the dominance of positivist science can lead to the disparagement of qualitative research. It is for this reason that many qualitative researchers have embraced mixed methods (see Morse and Maddox, Chapter 36, this volume). By combining qualitative with quantitative research it has been argued that it is possible to benefit from the strengths of both. There are various concerns about the naive adoption of this approach which can potentially reduce the critical edge of qualitative research. To

protect against such slippage Steinitz and Mishler (2001) have argued for the central importance of values in qualitative research to ensure that the critical potential of qualitative research remains central. In addition, reference to mixed methods frequently overlooks the potential of combining different qualitative methods. Thus, rather than relying upon interviews, which is by far the most common qualitative method, researchers should consider other methods including group discussions, written and video diaries, ethnography (see Gubrium and Holstein, Chapter 3, this volume), performative research (e.g. Gray and Sinding, 2002), etc.

Similarly, the qualitative researcher needs to seize the many opportunities provided by new technology. We have already detailed the benefits of using the creative arts to expand impact. To this innovation can be added the use of social media, websites, blogs, graphic novels and multimedia as ways of reaching out to different audiences (see Marotzki et al., Chapter 31, this volume). Involvement of the research participants in the design and operation of these methods can further enhance their potential.

Another challenge faced by all researchers is the cultural and historical specificity of research findings. Within qualitative research this awareness of context is central. By considering how the actor engages with the context, the qualitative researcher avoids the traditional reification of human action in quantitative research. For example, in exploring smoking behaviour quantitative researchers have sought to identify the individual personality attributes and attitudes which predicted such behaviour. Murray et al. (1988) in their qualitative study of smoking among young adults detailed how they deliberately used smoking as a means of engaging with their social world. Smoking was an important tool for managing one's position in a particular social setting, for example initiating social relationships, signalling to others as regards your mood, marking time, etc.

The findings of a research project are not sufficient in themselves to promote change. They need to convince the other of the validity of the argument and of the need for some form of change. If the project is participatory then the research participants become aware of the conflicting social representations and the obstacles to change. For wider impact there is a need for qualitative researchers to explore various partnerships. Steinitz and Mishler (2001) explored the potential of partnerships with oppressed groups in society. Other partnerships can be with various stakeholders who have a role to play in providing services to particular groups in society. Finally, policy-makers should not be considered a group apart but also as potential collaborators in research. Policy-makers are members of society prone to a range of competing interests and are looking for solutions to pressing social problems. Qualitative researchers can connect with policy-makers through providing a conduit for the voices of excluded citizens. They can actively engage policy-makers throughout the project but maintain the potential to criticize and expose inadequacies in social policy. Without the potential to critique, qualitative researchers risk being co-opted by more established interests.

NEW DEVELOPMENTS AND PERSPECTIVES

Qualitative research has garnered widespread respect in the scientific community. However, the widespread acceptance of positivist science means that qualitative researchers are often placed in a defensive position when presenting their work to policy-makers. In trying to expand their impact, qualitative researchers need to explore new approaches to engaging both with the public and with policy-makers. I have introduced some of these in this chapter but it is necessary to return to some of the original points to develop perspectives.

Research is an active engagement with the social world. It is not simply the collecting of data but rather the development of a practical

understanding of the world through a dialectical process. This practical understanding is informed by our theoretical imagination as Willis argues:

> ethnography needs a theoretical imagination which it will not find, 'there', descriptively in the field. Equally, I believe that the theoretical imaginings of the social sciences are always best shaped in close tension with observational data. (2000: iix)

Here, Willis is emphasizing the importance of the theoretical imagination which constructs an understanding of the world in interaction with the data. You are not imposing a pattern on the world, neither are you collecting patterns. As Willis continues:

> Imagination is thereby forced to see the world in a grain of sand, the human social genome in a single cell. … They should not be self-referenced imaginings but grounded imaginings. (2000: iix)

In looking to explore the potential to transfer the interpretation to another setting, these grounded imaginings need to consider what is the nature of that new setting and what are the problems facing it. In many ways all qualitative research projects are case studies which need to connect with the setting within which they are conducted.

The past generation has seen major social issues confronting society and policy-makers. Qualitative research can contribute substantially to understanding these issues. Some questions can encourage further reflection:

1. What is the contribution of a particular qualitative research project to practice? There is a need for ongoing critical engagement with the social world and acceptance of the moral responsibility of the researcher to contribute to beneficial change.
2. How are the research participants involved in the research? Qualitative researchers need to reflect upon the ways research participants and others are involved in setting the particular research agenda and in all aspects of the research process.
3. Who is setting the bigger research agenda? In this time of intense competition for research funds qualitative researchers need to reflect upon the broader assumptions behind particular research trajectories which are promoted by funding agencies.
4. What do you get out of the research? There is an ongoing need for personal reflection of your role in the research process.

In terms of perspectives qualitative research has come a long way since its recent rebirth. It is now accepted as a central approach within social science. It has evolved as a challenge to the dominant quantitative approaches. However, in the future there will remain the ongoing resistance from those who want definite answers which seem to be more easily provided by quantitative researchers. While qualitative researchers can continue to refine their tools of data collection and analysis, the extent to which they can translate their findings will remain crucial to their success.

In addition, a focus on method to the neglect of theory can become a form of fetishism (Moscovici, 1972). There remains the challenge of connecting method with theory and with practice. The importance of this praxis orientation is evident in Lewin's frequently quoted comment that progress in cooperation between applied and theoretical psychology 'can be accomplished … if the theorist does not look toward applied problems with highbrow aversion or the fear of social problems, and if the applied psychologist realizes that there is nothing so practical as a good theory' (1951: 169).

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