


# Emerging Researcher Perspectives: Finding Your People: My Challenge of Developing a Creative Research Methods Network

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Research is not a solitary process. Yes, we work as individuals through our specific research foci trying to answer our personal research questions. However, research does not happen in a vacuum. To build on these existing ideas and develop them further, we rely on what has been done before and what others are doing at the same time. The importance of having a network of colleagues was a particular focus in the keynote speeches of the Qualitative Methods Conference 2018 in Banff organized by the *International Institute for Qualitative Methodology*. Many speakers referred to the process of “finding your people.” Indeed, the principle of having a close network of colleagues working on and through similar issues and concerns chimes with me. But as yet, I still feel isolated within the world of qualitative research.

My focus is on using creative methods within research, which I approach as an all-encompassing term that includes artistic and arts-based work but also the broader sense of creating, making, and doing. Of course, there are academics and researchers who focus on embodied aspects of research (Chadwick, 2017), on performative and artistic creations and research as arts and arts as research (Barrett & Bolt, 2014), on research using creative methods (Mason & Davies, 2009; Nind & Vinha, 2014; Orr & Phoenix, 2015; Tarr, Gonzalez-Polledo, & Cornish, 2017) and bridging the gap between arts and sciences (Leavy, 2015). So where does my feeling of isolation stem from? Is this something that needs to be addressed at all? And if yes, then what can be done?

Upon reflection, the first reason for my feeling of isolation and loneliness is due to differences in interpreting what makes and should make creative methods. Over time, qualitative research has experienced a wide range of changes and developments, from the linguistic and narrative turn (Atkinson, 1997) or the participatory turn (Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995) through to the reflexive (Foley, 2002) and creative turn (Kara, 2015). Driven by the understanding that research should not be something that is done *to* a participant but should truly consider the relationship between the researcher and the researched—a

relationship that is characterized by differentials in hierarchy, power, and authority. With researchers becoming more consciously aware of these differentials, they are actively seeking to overcome them by including participatory elements into the data collection stage (Nind & Vinha, 2014; Tarr et al., 2017). Additionally, creative methods such as those based on arts activities (Bagnoli, 2009), the use of visual materials (Mason & Davies, 2009), or photo-elicitation (Orr & Phoenix, 2015) can render interviews less daunting for research participants and thus foster an environment more conducive to relaxed conversations. However, for many such studies, the arts-based approach is not employed intentionally and consciously but more as a tentative attempt to redress ethical concerns around the researcher–participant relationship. In turn, the focus within data collection does not lie on the participants’ creations as a form of data but on the participants’ contributions to interviews and surveys. Ultimately, the output or creation is not used.

My research explores people’s experience of fibromyalgia, a contested illness that is characterized by a range of changeable and variable symptoms such as persistent widespread pain, sleep disturbances, cognitive dysfunctions, and psychological disorders (White & Harth, 2001). The experiences of fibromyalgia symptoms are so complex that those diagnosed with the condition often struggle to express what and how they feel. Their pain is not simply pain (Scarry, 1985): It can be throbbing, pulsating, burning, stinging, flashing, and the like. Therefore, in order to get as close as possible to the participants’ experiences and to help participants express what is difficult to put in words, I use metaphorical representations and objects

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that are collected in identity boxes (Brown, 2017; Brown, 2018a; Brown, 2018b). What sets my method apart from many other creative research methods is that I view the outputs and creations, the objects and the identity boxes themselves as data.

On the surface, this distinction may appear negligible. In reality, however, viewing creations as data results in significant differences, especially in relation to analytical approaches and the conception of what constitutes research on the whole. In the studies using creative methods for elicitation purposes as stimuli for interviews, the data sets are the interview transcripts, thus the data are ultimately still textual. Once we start considering creations as data, then the approach to analysis needs to vary with the kind of data we are presented with. If, for example, the research participants submit a poem, then the textual analysis in the traditional sense through coding and generating themes ought to be combined with a literary analysis of the poem. Similarly, photography, paintings, sketches, and collages would require an artistic analysis; and compositions, musical tracks, and songs would need to be considered for their musical and lyrical features in addition to the meanings the participants ascribe to them. What follows from this is the truly interdisciplinary nature of research and analysis and the broad and deep knowledge required by the researcher in order to be conversant in all of these different kinds of analyses to do the data justice. Being a researcher then means being a bricoleur, drawing on a variety of disciplines, employing multiple strategies, and ultimately using whatever works (Denzin, 2016). Also, for the data to be recognized for what it is and for its power and values to be explored and shared adequately, dissemination activities, too, need to change for nobody would expect to see an essay or academic article in lieu of a painting by Picasso or a sonata by Mozart. Equally, then, if we place the same kind of relevance to the data created or generated through research, dissemination cannot merely be through the written word but must in itself be a creation in a form that is suitable to portray the participants' messages.

Although researchers using the existing paradigms of creative methods do end up with a certain amount of messiness and nontradition in their data, the purposeful employment of creative methods I pursue does, however, not stop with messy data, it spills over into messy analysis and messy dissemination. My work therefore feels nontraditional in every sense and at every level, from data gathering through to publication. There are researchers who focus on messy data or on different forms of expression and dissemination. And on my own, I struggle to make sense of and deal with the level of complexity brought on by this kind of working. I continue to be eager to meet researchers who, like me, seek to combine complexity at and across all levels.

Secondly, the feeling of isolation within the qualitative research communities arises due to the wide geographical and disciplinary spread among academics dealing with creative methods. Researchers from a wide range of disciplines, such as health, education, geography, arts and drama, and located all over the world, from the United States in the west to Australia in the east, employ creative methods. Many of these researchers are still strongly tied to and connected with their disciplines

and their geographical locations. For example, within the United Kingdom, there are qualitative research methods groups and networks in existence: within the scope of educational research in London, relating to health research in the West of England, or as part of a sociology department in the Southeast of England, and so on. However, such groups do not necessarily meet or communicate with one another to exchange their ideas; the issue being the disciplinary and geographical ties.

Thirdly, the existing frameworks for university evaluations and academic promotions also play a significant role in developing feelings of isolation. Evaluations, research excellence frameworks, and promotions are often linked to and based upon innovative and unique contributions to fields of studies. An atmosphere of competition often ensues. Instead of sharing practices readily and openly, academics are forced to protectively hog and hold on to their ideas until they are formally published in relevant and reputable academic journals. Early career academics and doctoral students, if they wish to forge a career in academia, should ensure that their names become attached to and linked with new developments and ideas. Once, academics are on a career track they are often required to specialize and develop deeper knowledge of a narrower field of study rather than cultivating broad and interdisciplinary connections. In practice, this means that we all attend our very own discipline-specific conferences, symposia, and workshops. Consequently, it's challenging to meet with like-minded researchers, as they do not necessarily attend the same events as I do.

Finally, disciplinary standards often stipulate specific ways of working and using creative methods for data collection, analysis, and dissemination may mean researchers are stepping outside the comforts of these disciplinary conventions. Of course, this is exactly the space where innovation and originality thrive and develop. However, there is a danger that researchers enter a philosophical and epistemological minefield: risking being seen as less scientific and "academic" in their approaches. It is therefore understandable that researchers remain in the safe zone of existing paradigms, perhaps experimenting with more risky approaches in their own working areas only rather than outing themselves in the wider world of qualitative research.

Considering the risks of associating oneself with and being linked to the kind of research with creative methods I am pursuing, it is not surprising that I feel isolated and lonely. This brings us back to the questions of whether this is at all relevant and what should be done about it. For me, a healthy network of qualitative researchers using creative methods is necessary. As stated above, research does not happen in a vacuum or in isolation but builds on existing work and ideas. However, as long as researchers appear in pockets of practices as individuals within their own disciplines and fields, rather than as a strong, coherent network of like-minded colleagues, we all spend a significant amount of time and energy developing rather than furthering foundations because we do not begin to build enough upon each other's work. Consequently, we tend to reinvent the wheel in our respective disciplines. Conferences are sometimes helpful in connecting researchers from different disciplines, but

the reality of conferences is such that there is often too much information in too little time, and once the practicality of everyday academic life takes hold again, the connections fade away.

It's time for qualitative research to experience a new era, where disciplinary boundaries become more blurred and fuzzy, and where data become messier. It is therefore up to those of us working on that cutting edge of qualitative research to prepare the necessary conditions and theories for the next generation of researchers in creative methods. With stronger connections in a creative methods network, researchers dealing with the creative methods could benefit from exchanging thoughts at conferences. We could be each other's sounding board for ideas, which in turn would result in longer term collaborations and thus true methodological innovations.

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