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07 April 2008

Version of attached file:

Accepted Version

Peer-review status of attached file:

Peer-reviewed

Citation for published item:

Crang, M. (2003) 'Qualitative methods : touchy, feely, look-see?', *Progress in human geography.*, 27 (4). pp. 494-504.

Further information on publisher's website:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1191/0309132503ph445pr>

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Qualitative Methods: Touchy, Feely, Look-See

Introduction

In this second report I want to build on themes I flagged last year to suggest first, how qualitative methods are now undergoing a period of some more mature reflection and evaluation, rather than advocacy, and second to highlight some as yet rather less well trodden paths. I hope to unpack some of the implications for current work and suggest how it follows through a constructionist agenda – in terms of seeing people discursively creating their worlds, seeing the field as discursively constructed and indeed both the fieldwork and field worker as socially constructed. I want to interrogate the limits of contemporary practice which I have suggested tends towards being ‘a cross between ontological constructivism and epistemological realism’ {Cragg, 2001 #366, page 221}. That is, we acknowledge the (co-)construction of the field by researcher and researched where ‘fieldwork is a discursive process in which the research encounter is structured by the researcher and the researched’ {England, 2001 #795, page 210}. This is not to say people are writing classically realist ethnographies, but geographers tend to still push criteria of logical consistency and reliability that depend upon notions of realistic representation. So this report will begin with some textbooks to look at the state of play with qualitative methods. Then it will turn to the notion of the construction of knowledge through work on autobiography. Then I want to follow through some of the methodological issues raised by approaches engaging with performative, embodied and haptic knowledge, and finally visual approaches. Through this I want to ask whether methods often derided for being somehow soft and ‘touchy-feely’ have in fact been rather limited in touching and feeling. Rethinking notions of feeling will also be suggested as a way of working at the thorny issue of the dominance of certain forms of vision – or after Hal Foster {Foster, 1988 #783} visuality in the discipline. Building upon the theme of last year’s report, though let me start by discussing the consolidation of qualitative methods in geography through some notable textbooks and guides.

Consolidating texts

We might look at the state of play through five textbooks which speak to qualitative methods to a major extent and two or three other methods texts of note. Shurmer-Smith’s *Doing Cultural Geography* {Shurmer-Smith, 2002 #782} is a collection, heavy on the pedagogic aids favoured by publishers, written by a small group of closely connected authors, which provides a clear linkage of theoretical approach with methods. I am not here going to assess its utility for teaching – though I should quickly say it has much to commend it – instead look at the range of approaches it suggests. Beginning with a helpful setting up of theory as something that is to be done rather than learnt as some fixed map of positions, the book goes on to put humanism, Marxian thought, post-structuralism, post-colonialism and feminism into play. It proceeds logically from there into the empirical ‘doing’ of research – linked elegantly by a discussion of framing questions. Framed around the sub-discipline of cultural geography the book is able to pluralise and contextualise the ‘how to’ issues of methods. Thus by including discussions of official statistics (Brown), archival work (Hannam), and textual analysis (Shurmer-Smith) the book pushes us to desanctify or at least open the relationship of research with specific we might say privileged modes of fieldwork and thus field sites. The collection does include what we might call a more standard suite – participant observation, interviews (single and group) (Bennett), field observation (Shurmer-Smith and Shurmer-Smith) and feminist method (Ekinsmyth). Indeed Bennett’s chapter really pushes the question of what ‘being there’, as Geertz might put, in the field, means in terms of the production of

knowledge and producing the authority of the researcher. The final section of the book raises a good mix of issues about producing something out of materials – from more conventional ‘analysis’ through to a frank discussion of the possibilities and limits of pluralising ‘outputs’ - where some display media are not really very helpful (I did like the brutal, short and effective commentary on student posters) and others such as performances run into problems of academic acceptability. Less specifically focused upon qualitative methods but with a similar argument about the linkage of methods and theory is Hoggart, Lees & Davies *‘Researching Human Geography’* {Hoggart, 2001 #799} that comes from a more economic and social urban geography bent – but remarkably enough maps into many of the same methods and structures in two chapters devoted to interviews (individual and group) and participant observation (including action research), and one on archival work. A similar connection between theory and practice is the evident concern of Pamela Moss’s collection *‘Feminist Geography in Practice’* which moves from the positional towards the methodological. Most of the chapters are supported by personal case studies, and while occasionally variable in quality they present an engaging and accessible set of guides and ideas for students. Personally I found the closure of each section with ‘study material’ fairly unhelpful since it seemed pitched somewhere between rhetorical and ineffable questions and then project-type exercises, and the boxed research tips at the end of chapters were too schematic to function as more than aide-memoires (one starts first bullet point in a list ‘make a cold call’, then point two ‘use your networks’) but I know publishers do push this sort of stuff into texts. Some of the issues raised in specific chapters I want to discuss in the following section.

There are also two collections solely devoted to qualitative methods in geography. My library has finally received Iain Hay’s collection *‘Qualitative Research Methods in Human Geography’* {Hay, 2000 #821}. This pitches straightforwardly at the student market with an extensive glossary, beginning by positioning qualitative work and traditions then proceeding to specific methods. Winchester in positioning qualitative work suggests three streams, starting with ‘oral methods’ (from biographical to survey interviews), then textual analysis, then participative approaches – and I would highlight that this means quite a ‘wordy’ balance {Winchester, 2000 #836}. The methods outlined then resolve into interviewing – focussed upon semi-structured approaches, but with nice material on listening strategies {Dunn, 2000 #814} - thence to focus groups {Cameron, 2000 #812} and participant observation which offers some helpful sections on observation the ‘field’ as embodied interaction {Kearns, 2000 #828}, before looking at textual analysis {Forbes, 2000 #815} which draws on semiotic and visual analysis. Then perhaps most helpfully, the book concludes with a chapter on the politics and poetics of writing up reports {Berg, 2000 #811}, putting a tortured debate in clear prose with good sections for students on objectivity, the first person and positionality.

Finally, there is Dwyer and Limb’s *‘Qualitative Methodologies for Geographers: Issues and Debates’* {Limb, 2001 #801}. I have to declare a small conflict of interest here as a (tardy and minor) contributor to this collection, but overall the book aims for a more reflective approach than is common for ‘how to’ books – tending to dwell on dilemmas and issues a little more than usual, with less exposition and advocacy. As such the essays are not designed as the first source but perhaps better used as opening out issues once students know the basics. It concludes with an interesting range of 5 vignettes of undergraduate research projects which are really interesting of themselves, though I have a slight fear that they may prove all too successful ‘inspirations’ to students. Again, I will pick out specific issues from chapters later, but it is worth noting what this avowed state of the art summation says about qualitative methods in the discipline. Implicitly, the confidence to develop critical discussions, to put chapters advocating different lines next to each other suggests we are beyond a phase of novelty for qualitative methods (for my sins I should fess up to my argument over the predominance of and problems with grounded theory being rather put in its place by Peter Jackson’s elegant use of discursive repertoires {Jackson, 2001 #787; Crang,

2001 #366}). But of course the editors have to select in order to avoid doorstep proportions, and so they list methods {Limb, 2001 #386, 5-6} they see as core coming up with four main clusters. First, there are 'in-depth open ended interviews' with individuals or groups, one off or repeated, biographical or other. Second there are group discussions, one off or consecutive – though this clearly overlaps with the first category. Third, there is participant observation which may be overt or covert, active or passive, partisan including a 'variety of ethnographic techniques' such as participant diaries or 'other interactive exercises'. Fourth, there are interpretations and analyses of varieties of texts, be they archival, maps, literature or landscape and 'visual materials including pictures, films, advertisements and dramatic performances'. This last group they later (page 13) say cannot be fitted in the book, which is fair enough. And yet, it does rather suggest that the book might almost be titled 'verbal methodologies for geographers'. My point is not to berate the editors for a choice that I suspect does indeed reflect the balance of work done, but to point out that this is something of a limited menu – with the two fascinating chapters about participant observation {Dowler, 2001 #803; Parr, 2001 #802} mostly focusing upon access. Otherwise we get clear sections on interviewing, group work, interpretation and writing. I would suggest this indicative of a context where it is almost becoming *de rigueur* for a 'qualitative' thesis to include semi-structured interviews, and students get almost twitchy if they do not have at least a few – to at least complement participant observation or some other method – and I even have postgraduates asking if a 'qualitative' thesis has to have focus groups. That said, the range of topics covered from children, to race, to politics, to health, to consumption, to rural women, to the environment, to science fiction readers is really sparkling. In the rest of this report then I wish to start by engaging with the issues of positionality that come through these collections before moving towards methods less practiced.

Positioning the Researcher

I confess I have become rather weary of student work containing a paragraph of apologia (normally for their whiteness and middle classness) before proceeding with business-as-usual for their dissertation. And I am also rather sceptical of work that divides positionality in qualitative research formulaically into being insiders (good but impossible) and outsiders (bad but inevitable). Thankfully much work this year has developed beyond these approaches to further examine what are the very real issues around the relationship of researcher and researched. Perhaps at its starkest, most painful and strident Smith has recently developed an extended critique of the relationships of researcher and fourth world, aboriginal or as she prefers 'indigenous peoples' where 'research is probably the dirtiest word in indigenous people's vocabulary' {Smith, 1999 #798, page 1}. In some senses it makes familiar arguments from much anthropology of the last twenty years, however its salutary outlining of the way histories of symbolic and physical violence intertwine is well worth reading – especially the cautions as to whose agenda is being pursued, and the elegant, pointed and tragicomic accounting for how 'systematic' research often bore more relationship to haphazard amateurism than it could countenance. The book also develops an agenda focusing upon an agenda for what she calls a 'modernist resistance struggle' (page 107) focused around indigenous agendas, knowledge and participation. Smith offers a realistic account of the possibilities to engage with communities and develop sympathetic work at a variety of scales and also for researchers to open cracks in previous research structures, working within the system. Skelton meanwhile illustrates how a corporeal raced identity comes through in elements of comportment and tacit skills marking out 'outsiders' even as they try and show respect to local custom {Skelton, 2001 #792}.

The ambiguities, productivities and difficulties of such work comes through in the rather different work of Routledge on tourist development in Goa. He engaged in quite deliberate deception and, indeed, illegal activities as part of cooperation with local NGOs – utilising the resources at his disposal in part to overcome their learnt distrust of, or at least distaste for, researchers {Routledge,

2002 #418}. Posing as a tourist agent to interview developers Routledge's work clearly violates nearly all the standard ethical protocols about informed consent and honesty, while at the same time clearly honouring obligations to the partner NGOs. The frisson of danger and transgression is a guilty pleasure that is acknowledged, as overall the project highlights the multiple roles of researcher, collaborator, activist and publicist as they are played out. Routledge draws on a wide range of skills as academic author writing for the NGOs, as an experienced activist, as a researcher and as access point to university resources – with as he admits different degrees of success depending upon the criteria used to judge the work by peers, by locals, by NGOs and so forth. What this highlights is the limits of increasingly prescriptive and formulaic ethical protocols, often being driven by Human Subject or Ethical Review Boards, in situations of unequal power and in Goa bad faith by developers engaging themselves in illegal, as well as exploitative, actions. In a less extreme case Bradshaw points out the limits of the often proposed criteria for ethical engagement with those being researched – that of 'member checks', where participants get a right of veto or reply over the research interpretation {Bradshaw, 2001 #414}. He points to the problems when this is applied to a large multinational who, perhaps unsurprisingly, objected to a critical account of their activities – resulting in the work being embargoed. Dowler meanwhile researching the Northern Irish conflict ends up pointing up both her own 'strangeness', despite shared aspects of identity with catholic Irish participants, and the banality and ordinariness of interacting with the Provisional IRA {Dowler, 2001 #803}. Delph-Janiurek illustrates how misunderstandings and crossed-assumptions litter fieldwork {Delph-Janiurek, 2001 #428} while Valentine explores the multiple assumptions of who is inside and outside particular research groups, and the assumptions made by participants about researcher identities and the multiplicity of both sets of identities that render simple dualisms untenable {Valentine, 2002 #785}. While on the other hand Mohammad raises a series of questions of who gets positioned as 'authentically' able to speak on behalf of 'Othered' groups when she unpacks how her skin colour, and assumptions about her identity and beliefs, gave her a sometimes dubious access and authority to research and represent British Muslim experience {Mohammad, 2001 #791}.

These intractable issues put in context laudable goals of say establishing commonality as suggested by Al Hindi. She points out that there is an inevitable problem of difference in research where 'people wish to learn from and about others because the latter are different from the former, but the fact of difference itself may distance them from one another, making such understanding difficult.' {Al-Hindi, 2002 #784, page 106} and suggests a solution through reflexive practice. Here she attempts to by pass the criticisms Rose made of this strategy in this journal {Rose, 1997 #804} by arguing that Rose conflated a positivist reflectivity, striving for transparency through introspection, with a transformative feminist reflexivity where both sides reflect back their mutual (mis-?)understandings. While this may work in some circumstances it seems to me to rather miss the point about the limits of understandings in unequal situations where our understandings of their understandings of our understandings are not only bound together, but unstably threaded through a range of different performances in different contexts by all parties. My concern is that too often protocols on disclosure and indeed reflexivity tend to depend upon and reproduce problematic notions of the stable tightly defined unchanging research project conducted by a singular researcher, with one stable essential identity, both between locations and over time, and quite often suggest the latter is also true of the researched. If different roles do appear in different contexts they are often portrayed as circumstantial clothing, dressing ourselves inevitably less rather than more honestly to conceal some actual or ulterior purpose or identity. While deception can and does occur, from both parties, it is also quite important to recognise that our projects are often unstable entities which actually exist in multiple versions given to funders, colleagues, friends, family, peers and (different) respondents none of which need be necessarily the 'true one', and then that we are more or less unstable, at least in the sense that we may change not only between locations but over time as we learn from doing our work and as Routledge cites Gerry Pratt the researchers themselves are

constituted ‘within a fragmented space of fragile and fluid networks of connections and gaps’ (page...). The transformative nature of research upon the researcher is indeed almost a trope in itself but serious attention to these trajectories has not always been sustained.

Some recent work has though begun to push the autobiographical trajectory of researchers as of importance to the projects they undertake, especially the collection by Moss {Moss, 2001 #421}. Thus there are the accounts of life experiences and background and their often painful, certainly complex negotiation with academic agendas leading to specific research approaches {Gilmartin, 2002 #647;Knopp, 2001 #420;Saltmarsh, 2001 #646}. Amongst these the use of background as a resource that is read by informants, used and portrayed by researchers, that enables and disables contacts in complex patterns comes through rather than simple notions of membership of a community. David Butz discusses how his research in Pakistan included local community attempts to reshape his identity and indeed to partially incorporate him into local attempts to represent themselves, as a specific audience then as collaborator, during a long period of field work and how these in turn have informed his theoretical approaches {Butz, 2001 #644}. Alternately Ian Cook provides an elegant and salutary account of autobiography coming to be the research, as part of problematising the ‘extended field’ and subjecting the people and practices of the academy to the same scrutiny normally reserved for field work, partly for practical reasons, partly to unpack notions of the exotic other, used in marketing marketing exotic fruit, and valorising research. His PhD ended up being focused on the production of knowledge about exotic fruit including, indeed especially, through research, including his own, and what he calls the ‘cultures of cleverness’ in academia. As he comments ‘a lot of people have told me it was a brave thing to do, writing that kind of PhD. Desperate is the word I prefer to use. As I said earlier, I didn’t set out to write an autobiographical PhD. It was supposed to be about a fruit.’ {Cook, 2001 #419, page 118} And of course this opens up the limits of whether constructivist ontologies of the world do not lead to a self-reflexivity producing an infinite regress. Thus Malcolm Ashmore produced a doctorate about doing his doctorate, following the inescapable logic that sociologists of science have pointed out science constructs facts not finds them, but sociologists have tended to claim that insight as a finding, rather than itself a construction of sociology, though of course Ashmore’s own insight about this is itself, he is quick to point out, a construction {Ashmore, 1989 #46}. What Cook’s work points to is not just this logic but where Murphy claims auto-ethnographies ‘serve to tell stories collectively about “our tribe”, that is, who we are and what *our* rites and rituals are within academic culture’ and thus how we might argue that within ‘this current atmosphere of publish or perish, there is much pressure to perform, and the result in what is now broadly considered ethnography is often a tendency toward stylistic command over representation and the textualization of “the real”’ {Murphy, 2002 #729, page 251}. If we follow this analysis, and I would be reluctant to do so, we see the risk of ‘a moment of ethnographic hypocrisy, a systematic rewarding of style over substance by trading in the rites of the field and the voice of the Other for the art of the prose and the examination of the Self’ (page 252). Less pejoratively, it is certainly the case that the definition of an ethnographic self through field practice is something that in itself would resonate equally with classically trained ethnographers. It is to field practice that I would like to turn now to consider approaches that emphasise the performative and haptic nature of qualitative work.

Performative and haptic approaches

The dominance of verbal approaches in qualitative work is understandable after the discursive or textual turn across the social sciences, and the focus upon the construction of the field which entails thinking of the field as composed of activity and practice. One tradition that has pursued this notion for a long time is an ethnomethodological one, studying the maintenance of everyday life as a social accomplishment. Inspired by this tradition Eric Laurier has looked at ‘neighbouring’ as an

‘occasioned activity’ rather than a neighbourhood as defined by residential proximity, to unpack the notion of ‘public space’ as massively coded and structured. This work has thus been based on observation in key locales – such as a neighbourhood café - and following the life of a small part of the city, through such apparently inconsequential events as ‘lost cat’ notices {Laurier, 2002 #107;Laurier, 2001 #417}. Laurier’s work is thus an attempt, as he puts it to tie everyday descriptions and actions together, to see what people do with language in order to solve ordinary problems and sustain daily life {Laurier, 2001 #809}. This work calls for an engagement with the field, and epistemologically resists attempts to produce transcendent theory – that is it resists explaining people’s actions in academic language rather than their own – which is its strength and limit depending upon your point of view. Similarly Rose talks of landscape as performative, with ‘everyday agents calling the landscape into being as they make it relevant for their own lives, strategies and projects’ {Rose, 2002 #839, page 457} so the question becomes one of what is *done* not what is *represented*, as proliferating operations and practices rather than a an operation of a hidden structure. For our purposes it points to a renewed attention to *definition* of a setting, *actions* within that setting and the *identification* of who is acting in as Laurier puts it ‘an everyday geographical problem solved everyday’ {Laurier, 2001 #809}. In this small scale attentiveness we see something of a return to the classic legacy of street scale ethnographies, such as recently exemplified in work on street retailers such as book sellers {Duneier, 2001 #805} or African immigrant traders {Stoller, 2002 #806}. The latter was introduced in Stoller’s previous work along side a more explicit theorisation of the sensory and bodily performance of culture – by both ethnographers and informants {Stoller, 1997 #807}. There is a humanist lineage to geographical attention to the senses but recent work has rather shaken up the notion of the centred individual.

Geographers have of late been including the ‘body’ in their research, but it would I think be fair to say that these ideas have had a muted impact in terms of thinking through qualitative research. Certainly the bodily presence of the researcher is now acknowledged, so instead of the God-trick of the invisible, omnipresent narrator we often have the researcher as a co-present interlocutor. Though if we are honest looking through papers published based on interviews the researcher’s presence becomes quite attenuated after setting the context of the field work quite often the researcher forms a ghostly absence since as we rarely get questions included in quotes - for reasons we may speculate upon of word limits, embarrassment at all our stumbling inadequacies or just to make quotes short and accessible. The body quite often ends up as providing a sort of inescapable positioning of the researcher – through race, dis-ability or gender – but less often is the body the instrument of research. We have moved beyond accepting ‘the researcher as a detached head – the object of Thought, Rationality and Reason – floating from research site to research site, thinking and speaking, while its profane counterpart, the Body, lurks unseen, unruly and uncontrollable in the shadows of the Great Hall of the Academy’ though it still may feel like ‘The Body has become the hysterical and embarrassing relative, “ shut in” the academy’s ivory tower’ {Spry, 2001 #728, page 720}. That is we get glimpses of research as embodied work rather than just voices, as a corporeal performance drawing upon our physical actions, as specific corporeal cultures of doing geography in different ways in different places {Dewsbury, 2002 #813;Routledge, 2002 #418} including embodied, gendered experience of ‘the field’ in classes too {Nairn, 2002 #764}. However, there is rather less on the notions of haptic knowledge, of proprioception, that is of learning through our bodies responses and situations. Recent controversy has surrounded geographical appropriations of dance as a non-cognitive action that escapes the discursive, partly since such an escape seems a contestible, and partly since we risk keeping intact the previous division of mind and body and merely inverting which is celebrated {Nash, 2000 #810, page 656}. However, it would seem that there indeed possibilities to learn about expanding field practice and what counts as valid knowledge – for instance, the bodily disciplines of dance, with different learnt responses required for different genres {Picart, 2002 #727} may at least begin to put us in touch with our own bodily hexis as a way of doing things. We may begin disrupting the disembodied

voices of academia and voiceless bodies colonised for knowledge {Spry, 2001 #728, page 718}.
Certainly this is part of Parr's work

However, I do not want to conflate performative ethnography with the performance of bodies in specific places, nor is it simply a matter of adding in senses {Drobnick, 2002 #781}.

{Madge, 2002 #429}

Visual

Lury 1998 3 freeze, frame and fix 'Retrodictive prophecy is thus identified as a key aspect of the power of the image in prosthetic culture'

Grimshaw visceral and performative in Rouch as oppose to intellectual in MacDougalls' works, p100-1; Melisa Lewellyn-Davies, development of TV aesthetic – soap opera as social action and change.

{Sidaway, 2000 #7}

{Sekula, 1995 #9}

{Russell, 1999 #423}

{Rose, 2000 #405}

{Rogoff, 2000 #579}

{Nicholson, 2002 #409}

{Nicholson, 2001 #427}

{Pink, 2001 #408}

{Waite, 2002 #406}

{Young, 2001 #426}

{Markwell, 2000 #410}

{Lury, 1998 #780}

{Lippard, 1999 #474}

{Lomax, 1998 #717}

{Smith, 2001 #385}

{Smith, 2001 #8}

{Reed, 2002 #770}

{Pratt, 2001 #796}

{McKay, 2002 #794}

{Valentine, 2001 #387}

{Powell, 2002 #833}