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Innovation in Qualitative Research Methods: Possibilities and Challenges



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Abstract

Methodological innovation is seen as a significant feature of UK social science research. This is also seen as a desirable and necessary part of ensuring the sustainability of UK social science within the contexts of global economic competition and an expanding knowledge economy. Furthermore, attention to methodological innovation is increasingly being made by the various funding agencies in the UK higher education system. This paper attempts to consider the role of innovation in social research and methodological practice in more detail. A key focus of this paper is on innovation of qualitative research methods, based largely on the authors' own experiences of the development of new methodological practices in qualitative research and related research capacity building activities. We offer a framework for how we might identify and define methodological innovation in qualitative research before considering the main challenges of innovative developments and/or practice, including the routinisation of methodological innovation, risk-taking, and, finally, research capacity building.

Introduction

Claims of methodological innovation are increasingly made as part of the standard repertoire of research reporting. Moreover, funding opportunities for social scientific research increasingly invite and encourage the demonstration of methodological development and innovation. Innovation in social research has increasingly been seen as a desirable and necessary part of ensuring the sustainability of UK social science within global knowledge economies, in line with a commitment to place innovation at the forefront of research and development. The recent significance given to innovation in social research, combined with a desire to enhance the research capacity of the social science community, has led to a number of investments and initiatives. In the UK this has included the Research Methods Programme, the Researcher Development Initiative and the establishment of the National Centre for Research Methods, all funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). In this paper we consider some of the opportunities and challenges of attempting to embrace innovation in social research, particularly in relation to qualitative research methods, and in the context of contemporary debates about innovative methodological practice and research capacity building.

The opening sentence in the UK governmental cross-departmental report, *Science and Innovation Investment Framework 2004-14* states that ‘the nations that can thrive in a highly competitive global economy will be those that can compete on high technology and intellectual strength - attracting the highest-skilled people and the companies which have the potential to innovate and to turn innovation into commercial opportunity. These are the sources of the new prosperity’ (HM Treasury et al 2004: 1). This sentiment is developed by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) in their strategic plan, where

‘breakthroughs’, ‘leading-edge research’ and ‘new discovery’ are all acknowledged as important to expanding knowledge and understanding;

‘[Research] can spark scientific breakthroughs, offer new historical insights, or change the way in which societies work. However, harnessing its potential depends on its effective dissemination. Those who produce leading-edge research, and work to disseminate and apply its findings, should expect to receive recognition and support. Those who rely on their work should have the reassurance that the investment of public funding is sustainable and well targeted. In a rapidly changing world, Britain remains at the forefront of new discovery’ (HEFCE 2005:5).

In the 2006 Delivery Plan of the UK Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC 2006a) ‘innovation’ was referred to 18 times. In the ESRC annual report for 2005-06, ‘innovation’ was referred to 32 times (ESRC 2006b). In both documents the commitment to the strategic development of a national social science research infrastructure is emphasised, set within a context of ensuring that UK social science retains a leading position. The emphasis on research methods and methodological innovation is noteworthy;

‘The continued development of a national social science infrastructure is essential [...]. The ESRC has a unique role to play in achieving this objective, by both taking the lead in developing a coherent and comprehensive data infrastructure and by fostering methodological innovation to ensure that it is fully exploited’ (ESRC 2006a: 14).

The establishment of the National Centre for Research Methods in 2005 was heralded as a response to this objective, concerned with the ‘design and implementation of a strategic

research agenda that will facilitate methodological innovation in quantitative and qualitative research and their cross-fertilisation, ensuring that the UK is at the forefront of international developments in social research methodology' (ESRC 2005a: 25). Thus the intended mission of the NCRM was to;

'...provide a strategic focal point for the identification, development and delivery of an integrated national research, training and capacity building programme aimed at: promoting a step change in the quality and range of methodological skills and techniques used by the UK social science community; and providing support for, and dissemination of, methodological innovation and excellence within the UK' (ESRC 2006b: 61).

This mission is exemplified within the key stated objectives of the NCRM, as listed on the Centre's website (<http://www.ncrm.ac.uk/>);

- to advance methodological understanding and practice;
- to enhance the UK international profile in methodological excellence and to ensure that the UK is at the forefront of international developments in social research methodology;
- to play a strategic role in the promotion of high quality research methodology that involves inter-agency initiatives, including but not limited to those funded by the ESRC; and
- to co-ordinate and to add value to the existing investments of the ESRC that are concerned to enhance the methodological sophistication and techniques and skills of current and future generations of social researchers.

The emphasis on innovation is not confined to methodological practice in and of itself. Indeed the ESRC have been keen to situate innovation in social research within broader contexts, not least the maintenance of a robust social science research base. A demographic review identified an ageing UK social science workforce as a potential barrier to protecting future research excellence in the UK. There are also specific concerns over the recruitment, retention and capacity of the next generation of social scientists in some key disciplines and methodological areas (ESRC 2005b). Thus innovation can be conceptualized as part of a broader response to future recruitment and training across UK social science, and therefore to the future health of the UK social science community. A set of initiatives designed to ‘provide a structured career path for the next generation of researchers’ includes various enhanced studentship and fellowship opportunities, linked studentships, a first grants scheme and ‘an innovation pool to encourage the development of innovative research training’ (ESRC 2006a: 12).

The desire to innovate within social scientific research is hence situated within the contexts of global competition and the knowledge economy, and as a response to two sets of factors. First, innovation is seen as a necessary condition for responding to the ever increasingly rich and complex data available for understanding the social world – ensuring social scientists have access to the best data sets, and the most advanced techniques, strategies and tools for collecting and interrogating data. Second, there is recognition of the need for innovation as a matter of survival – not only in the production of new knowledge, but also in the capacity of future generations of the academic labour market to (re)produce this knowledge. Hence training and capacity-building are inexplicably linked to the development of innovative research and methodological tools and techniques. However despite these prevailing discourses of and support for innovation, there has thus far been little critical attention paid to

what innovative research or methodological practice might look like, and what challenges this brings for both the social science community itself, and to those who use social scientific research. In the remainder of this paper we attempt to further this discussion, by considering how methodological innovation might be defined, practiced and sustained. We particularly focus on qualitative research methods in this paper, although hope that the points we raise will have resonance across the methodological spectrum. The ideas and considerations presented in this paper are based on the authors' involvement in various research capacity building activities within the social sciences and particularly, their involvement in one Node of the ESRC National Centre for Research Methods that is primarily concerned with new methodological developments in qualitative social science research.

Defining innovation

Innovation, by its very nature is a slippery concept, hard to define and identify. Standard dictionary definitions play around with phrases such as introducing changes, new ideas, and using new methods and ideas. The UK Department for Trade and Industry's 2003 Innovation report defines it thus; 'Innovation involves the creation of new designs, concepts and ways of doing things and their exploitation and subsequent diffusion through the rest of the economy and society' (DTI 2003). This is potentially helpful in articulating both 'invention' (innovation in relation to new ideas and approaches) and 'application' (exploitation and diffusion of those new ideas and approaches) as aspects of innovation. We could also argue that implicit in such an understanding or definition is some notion of benefit or beneficiary – innovation has thus having favourable outcomes of some kind. Such a definition is not perfect, nor necessarily easily transferable to social research methods and methodologies. However it does enable us to begin to ask some key questions in relation to innovation and innovative research practice. These include; (1) What constitutes 'new ideas' (or new

designs, concepts or ways of doing things)? – what is *the* ‘innovation’ (noun)?; (2) What constitutes the *successful* diffusion, exploitation or application of these new ideas?; and (3) What are the benefits and/or beneficiaries of methodological innovation and how can these be assessed? Conceptualising innovation in these terms also enables us to recognise the social context of innovation. Innovation (or innovating) is a social process – involving a range of social actors – including both the innovator(s) and the users of the innovation (either in relation to the idea itself, or the outcomes/products of the idea).

What counts as methodological innovation or innovative research practice will be perceived differently by different people. At a very general level, innovation claims can be lodged against anything the *innovator* thinks is innovative. Research artefacts such as applications for research funding or academic journal articles are replete with such claims, not least as a way of indicating the originality or potential contribution of the research. Similarly innovation can be identified by users or readers of research where none is explicitly claimed by researchers themselves. As both Forbes (2003) and Travers (2006) have noted, the pressures to claim innovation in relation to social research are considerable and, as such, innovation claims must also be located within socio-political contexts. In a review of ‘cutting edge’ research in the UK, Forbes notes that ‘belief is an important factor’ and that ‘cutting edge’ (and by implication innovation) is a widely used metaphor;

‘...succeeding in creating expectations about and evoking interest in activities at the boundaries and the expected, suggesting keenness and sharp focus, where attentive agents do clever, effective and startling things. The new is definitely privileged over the old and hitherto undisturbed. At another level, the term conveys a sense of dangerousness and excitement’ (Forbes 2003: 271).

Travers (2006) points to competitive research funding arenas, where demonstrations of methodological innovation are almost prerequisites to success. Travers is sceptical about many innovation claims, arguing that, when unpacked, they rarely offer anything especially new or insightful, but are made in order to attempt to demonstrate that research is worthy of funding, or texts worthy of reading (or buying). He also raises concerns about how far innovation claims have actually transformed research practice, and thus whether they are sustainable and transformative in the medium and long term.

Such questions of definition raise interesting and challenging issues for innovation in social research practice and methodologies. Given the contemporary drive toward innovation in relation to social scientific research and methods, it does however seem important to try to define and identify what might count as innovation. As social researchers are increasingly urged to demonstrate innovation, and at the same time initiatives are up and running to develop innovative methods in order to enhance research capacity, thinking through the understandings of methodological innovation seem to us to be increasingly relevant. As an exercise to help think this through a little further, in the next section of the paper we begin to sketch what might be considered as innovation in relation to qualitative research methods. We then follow this with a more general discussion of the implications of such understandings for research practice and capacity building.

Identifying innovation in qualitative research methods

In a survey of editors of the main social science journals in the UK, reported as part of a study on behalf of the Academy of the Learned Societies for the Social Sciences, approximately 20% of social science research was perceived to be 'cutting edge' (Abrahms, Riddington and Forbes 2004). In a related study, Forbes (2003) reports that in a questionnaire

sent to the editors of social science journals across a range of disciplines, and Research Assessment Exercise panel chairs, the bulk considered less than 25% of research output to be cutting edge. Forbes (2003: 276) also noted that ‘some editors reported that they published much less cutting edge research than they saw. It was not uncommon for an editor to report that about 25% was cutting edge, of which a fifth would find its way into the journal. [...] cutting edge does not necessarily mean the best’. Editors reported advances in research methods and methodologies, many of which relate specifically to qualitative research methods. Main advances reported included performative practice, network approaches, emotional geographies, and sonorous geographies (‘soundscapes’). Specific methods mentioned included biographical studies and narrative approaches, visual methodology, longitudinal methods, focus group methodology and strategies for participatory research. The most exciting methodological developments were commonly seen to be the integration of existing methods and methodologies. It was also noted that cutting edge work could include the ‘empirical implementation of advanced methodology’ and the ‘application of ideas from one part of the discipline to another’ (Forbes 2003: 279), thus recognising both issues of application and disciplinary context in understanding innovative or cutting edge methods. This leads us back nicely to the DTI definition of innovation, invoked earlier in this paper. As a way of understanding or classifying innovation in relation to qualitative research methods, the DTI model can usefully be applied – thus focussing on ‘new ideas’ (the innovation), the application of those ideas (sustainability and transference), and the potential and measurable benefits of innovative research practices.

The process of identifying what might constitute a ‘new idea’ in qualitative research methodology is an interesting exercise in itself. The scope and development of qualitative research in recent years means that in fact, we are not short of innovative claims for

qualitative research. Such claims can be classified in a variety of ways; for example – a new design of method, the development of a new methodological concept, or a new way of undertaking qualitative research. From this, it becomes possible to identify some different forms of innovation in qualitative research. These forms might encompass;

New designs or methods

- New ways of collecting or generating data (e.g. on-line interviews or observations, enhanced use of photography and other visual methods, sensory ethnography, soundscapes, eliciting creative writings from respondents)
- New analytical techniques (e.g. the development of new software packages, undertaking critical discourse analysis)
- New representations of qualitative research (e.g. visual ‘texts’, using hypermedia, ethnographic fiction, multilayered and multivocal texts)

New concepts

- Generating new ways of thinking about research (e.g. drawing on autobiographical practices, practitioner-led research, multimodal research practices)
- Developing new methodological concepts (e.g. hypermedia ethnography, qualitative longitudinal research)

New ways of doing research

- Working with new participants or new groups (e.g. research with young children, suicide victims, hard to reach populations)
- Combining methods and methodologies (e.g. textual with visual, qualitative with quantitative)

- Cross disciplinary research (e.g. linking geography and education, critical psychology and social policy)
- Responding to changing research landscapes (e.g. enhanced ICT capacities, new ethical challenges and guidelines)

Thus innovation in qualitative research methods does not necessarily have to mean designing a completely new method, it can be as much as about practice as design – thus embracing tried and tested methods with new participants, or sharing methodological expertise across and at the boundaries of disciplines might be considered innovative in these terms. It is important however to also note two other things at this point. Firstly many, if not most, social science researchers employing qualitative methods continue to use conventional approaches and this in and of itself is no bad thing. Indeed a tried and tested approach, utilized well and appropriately is ‘safer’, one might argue, than ‘trying out’ new and ‘risky’ approaches that may not generate data or analyses. A challenge for the social science community is indeed to ensure that ‘conventional’ (as opposed to ‘innovative’, if it is possible or desirable to make such a distinction) methods continue to be further developed and enhanced, to ensure they generate the best possible data and analyses. It is a matter of semantics as to whether this kind of routine methodological work could also be considered to be innovative or ‘cutting edge’, ensuring that methods are developed in response to new challenges or changing research environments. Secondly while there has been considerable impetus in methodological development and innovation (the ‘new ideas’), little attention has thus far been paid to the more general application or exploitation of these developments, nor to the (perceived and real) benefits and beneficiaries of methodological innovation. These are points to which we now turn.

Claiming and communicating innovation in social research methods

One of the dilemmas of attempting to identify methodological innovation is that it is difficult to provide examples of innovations not yet claimed, and thus much easier to draw on current understandings and claims of innovative research practice. Nonetheless an organising framework, such as that indicated above, does begin to set out some of the kinds of innovation claims possible within the current climate of qualitative social research practice, and indeed may also help us to identify innovative possibilities for future development. However, following from definitions such as that indicated by the DTI innovation report, we would want to suggest that the 'new' idea is not in itself enough to warrant a claim of innovation. Rather, innovations must be successfully applied, if the claim is to be substantiated in research practice. Thus, for our purposes here, we can begin to think about how the application or exploitation of innovation in qualitative social research might be measured. We might usefully think about this in terms of key stages – broadly chronological – but open to debate as to how many stages must be satisfied in order for the innovation claim to be sustained. Classic diffusion studies can usefully be drawn upon here (for example Rogers 2003), in identifying what these stages of communication might be, and could look something like the following;

1. Initial diffusion of the new idea or innovation.
2. Utilisation of new idea or innovation by early adopters.
3. Utilisation of new idea or innovation by second adopters – providing a critical mass for wide acceptance.
4. General 'consumption' of new idea or innovation.

The first stage of innovation encompasses the primary innovation claim. Initial diffusion is the process by which an innovation is communicated through certain channels, over time and among the members of a social system. In terms of social research this claim is usually communicated by ‘innovators’ themselves (researchers developing or undertaking innovative research practice) through, for example, a research proposal to funders (setting out the potential of methodological innovation), an early research note, website communication, conference paper or journal article. Of course it is also possible for others to identify innovative research practice, where the researcher themselves makes no such claims. The diffusion or communication of the innovation thus does not always come (at least initially) from the innovator themselves. However for innovation in social research methods to become acknowledged and incorporated into practice, we would argue that users, advocates or ‘adopters’ are required – members of the social science community at least persuaded by (and preferably willing to try and further develop) the innovation. Early adopters of a methodological innovation could be a small group or community of qualitative researchers – perhaps those who regularly ‘refresh’ their methodological expertise, perhaps by regularly reading qualitative methods journals and/or attending conferences and workshops focussing specifically on qualitative social science. They might be the research grouping built around the initial innovator, or perhaps a special interest group – childhood researchers drawing on innovative visual research practices with children perhaps, or qualitative researchers with a particular ICT interest embracing digital technological techniques. These early adopters might be thought of as critical friends, and may help to shape or refine the development and future diffusion of the innovation. Wider application or exploitation would then come with a critical mass of second or further adopters and supporters of the innovation. This consolidates the process of the innovation becoming more widely accepted as normative or acceptable research practice, and thus embedded within research cultures as a legitimate means of

generating knowledge about the social world. In terms of qualitative research methods, this would most likely be the wider group of qualitative researchers – including those who teach qualitative research methods to new researchers – though could also include the wider social science community, a particular discipline or sub discipline, or ‘readers’ of the research who are particularly persuaded by the data or outcomes that are generated.

This leads us to a consideration of an often overlooked aspect of the incorporation of innovative methodological practice within mainstream social research – the wider and more general ‘consumption’ of the new idea (or the data and analyses generated from the new idea or practice). This includes the acceptance of the innovation amongst the social scientists who are perhaps unlikely to adopt or use the new method but who would need to be able to understand the methods, or consume the methods, when used by others. This group would also include the ultimate users of social research, such as policy-makers and practitioners. In many diffusion studies it is assumed (and based on evidence of real innovations) that the momentum generated from the utilisation by the second group of adopters would mean its diffusion becomes self-sustaining with little additional intervention. However, the research community use methods and methodological innovations in ways which require technical knowledge in order to become consumers. In effect social researchers are required to become ‘technicians’ of the innovation and *not just* consumers of it. For innovative research practices to be widely disseminated and accepted within the social scientific production of knowledge, some technical understanding of the innovation and its outcomes is therefore necessary. In other words it is necessary for the diffusion or dissemination of the methodological innovation to include information on how it was developed, how it coped or was amended in practice, how it relates to the theoretical propositions underlying its development, what its perceived weaknesses and limitations are or might be, how it has been or could be modified

and so forth. Thus we would want to argue that ultimately innovation in social research must be 'transportable', not just transferable. It must have a grammar that makes it comprehensible to the multiple audiences of social scientific research, not just to those already embedded within the particular methodological approach or paradigm.

We have said very little thus far about the reasons for methodological innovation, beyond an argument for social science generally to update, refresh and develop. Innovation normally comes with perceived benefits or beneficiaries. In the practice of social research these benefits could be multiple and varied. There are a number of different ways of conceptualizing the perceived benefits of any methodological innovation. For example;

- greater, 'better' or different data;
- researching new settings or populations;
- greater efficiency;
- more impact;
- better understanding;
- improved knowledge;
- better or enhanced research relationships;
- improved ethical practice; and
- more complex analyses.

This list is by no means exhaustive. Nor are benefits mutually exclusive. Moreover benefits of one kind may indeed compromise or limit the method in other ways. For example, innovation for the purposes of different forms of data may not necessarily be more efficient (in terms of time, resources, skills and training required) as a method of data generation, but the enhanced understanding deriving from the analysis of the data may be worthwhile

nonetheless. It is also easier to assess benefits that are more readily measurable or observable – for example datasets or data forms that are new, or a henceforth un(der)researched population which can be better accessed through the new method or approach. It is somewhat harder to assess less tangible benefits – improved knowledge, better understanding or greater impact, for example. Nonetheless we would want to make a case for ensuring that methodological innovation does not take place in a vacuum, divorced from understandings of what might be gained (and lost) from the ‘cutting edge’ development of new methods. An argument, then, against innovation for innovation’s sake. Critically appraising the benefits of methodological innovation is important – both for the purposes of utilisation, and for the overarching aim of social scientific research to improve or develop our understanding of the social world. And yet this aspect of methodological development in social science research is often overlooked. It is typically the case that innovation in qualitative methods, for example, usually means the development and adoption of new skills, technology and approaches, with little attention paid to the benefits or payoffs of these new methods in *comparison* to, and in association with more conventional approaches. It is perhaps useful here to make a distinction between innovation and creativity, where the latter might be defined as the capacity to generate new ideas; a necessary but not sufficient condition for being innovative. Innovation, we would argue also requires careful and critical reflection, particularly in terms of selecting good ideas and exploiting their potential, and in a willingness to reject new ideas or approaches that do not, in the end, offer benefits of one sort or another. This suggests that to be innovative requires not only creativity and risk-taking, but also the components of evaluation and improvement. Innovation should lead somewhere.

Challenges for methodological innovation

Innovation in social research methods, as part of a desired step change in social scientific research, raises a number of challenges, particularly, we would argue, in terms of communication and appraising the benefits and beneficiaries. In this final section of the paper we indicate what some of those challenges might be and how the social science community might respond. An overarching theme here is recognising the *processes* of innovation – ensuring that ‘step change’ or ‘cutting edge’ methodological developments are appropriately contextualised in terms of research practices, cultures, capacity building and consumption.

Innovation as repair and maintenance

A key issue is *when* to innovate, the implication being that there is (always) a need for innovation. To an extent it could be argued that the embryonic development (the creative aspect) of an innovation is continuous, as methods are continually developed and enhanced as part of routine research practice. But at what stage does this creative process become ‘innovative’ and indeed established or accepted as research practice? It may be helpful to consider that the creative process of methodological development is similar to the notion of repair and maintenance – an approach also employed by Graham and Thrift (2007) to better understand modern cities. The idea here is that small weaknesses or ‘problems’ with existing methods or methodologies, however identified and in whatever form they appear, are best dealt with by slight modification or ‘tinkering’ as part of routine methodological repair and maintenance. This could include adjustments of interview techniques to suit new settings or respondents, or adapting visual methods to encourage participation by young people, for example. Such modifications of existing methods are routinely dealt with in everyday research practice, by ‘everyday’ innovators, who may not identify themselves as such. This would suggest there is, to an extent at least, a routinisation of methodological innovation. If

this is the case, and we would want to strongly argue in its favour, then the issue is raised as to how such developments are communicated and articulated. How do we recognise and transport such innovations in to the research practices of others, especially if we take on board the DTI acknowledgement that many innovations are the result of ‘a succession of individually modest improvements to products or services over their life cycle’ (DTI 2003: 19)? If these routine modifications are not recognized and articulated in practice, the question, then, is how will these ‘modest improvements’ lead to long term innovation and ultimately methodological improvement. This then is a challenge of ensuring that ‘routine’ methodological practices are communicated in ways which are accessible and transportable to other research practitioners and the wider social science community.

Methodological failure and the taking of risks

It follows that innovation often arises out of an incapacity of existing methods, services or products to ‘do the job’ they are designed to do. If we take for granted that there is an ongoing process of repair and maintenance within social research practice, it follows that more radical developments or departures may only come with methodological dissatisfaction, absolute failure or the inability to repair and maintain the existing method any longer. But how do social science researchers identify whether the methods being used are ‘broken’, redundant or not working appropriately? It is difficult to acknowledge methodological failure within the current political economy of research whereby any findings to emerge from a ‘broken’ method would have to be discarded, and where social scientific research is open to critical scrutiny. Moreover, where methodological weaknesses are discussed they rarely indicate *absolute* failure? It is hard to envisage the wholesale failure or rejection of a qualitative method for example. However, it is important to recognise that reporting methodological concerns is essential for the future development and innovations of

qualitative methods. This leads us to a further challenge – that of recognising that not all creativity in research methods will necessarily lead to sustained innovative research practice, with recognisable benefits to be exploited. We need to build into the development of new methods and methodologies greater critical reflection, alongside a greater acceptance of experimentation and risk-taking. New methods, techniques and approaches should, of course, be tried, but should also be critically evaluated and indeed ‘allowed’ to fail. We have to ask: do we know if we have improved our methods or not, and if so how? Do they really produce better data, different data? Are they more efficient at getting the data or information we require? Are the analytical tools used more transparently? Are our research relations really better? Not only does such critical reflection on methodological innovation have value in their development but it also makes the process of utilisation and exploitation much easier if other researchers can be persuaded of the added value of the new methods. This raises particular challenges for social scientific research, especially where that research is publicly funded. It is hard to argue the case for the funding of ‘experimental’ research (in terms of research that may not actually produce useful data or analyses, in ways that are readily consumable). Similarly, methodological development is rarely useful unless it occurs within the context of substantial and real research problems and projects. Indeed UK initiatives such as the ESRC National Centre for Research Methods emphasise ‘innovative methodological development within the context of substantive research problems and applications, with an emphasis on transferability to other disciplines and research fields’ (<http://www.ncrm.ac.uk/about/index.php>) And thus there are moral and ethical issues with experimentation and innovation too – social scientific research inevitably involves funders, collaborators, participants and organisations – making it extremely difficult to deliberately set out to develop and test methods that may indeed fail.

Research capacity building

Methodological innovation also raises a number of issues for research capacity building work, particularly because of the often interdisciplinary nature of methodological innovation. For example, as the Academy of the Learned Societies have indicated (Abrams et al 2004), one of the most exciting opportunities for innovative research practice is in the cross-disciplinary adoption of qualitative methods. However, movements occurring on the fringes of traditional disciplines or fields of study do not lend themselves easily to training and research capacity building activities that more usually operate within disciplinary boundaries. By their very nature 'new' or 'innovative' approaches may be the hardest to exploit given they are often at the 'edges' of mainstream disciplinary or academic thinking. Developing capacity building work that spans disciplines (with different vocabularies of meaning and registers of understanding) is no easy task. Social science disciplines are generally poor at talking to each other anyway, with scholars often resistant to or ignorant of complementary work in other disciplinary areas. This makes cross disciplinary learning problematic. Moreover what is claimed as innovative in one discipline may well have been around for years in others – this is particularly so with regard to some recent innovative work (and claims) in qualitative research practice (for example visual methods have a long history within social anthropology, while being relatively new and innovative within sociological and educational fields). We would want to argue that these interdisciplinary challenges of communication, collaboration and weak disciplinary groundings pose enormous difficulties for the development and adoption of new methods and innovative methodological practices, which, thus far at least, are relatively under-theorised and understood.

As we have indicated above, sustaining innovative methodological and research practices relies on successive and successful adoption by the wider research community. This raises

issues of transparency and clarity – a need to ensure that methods, approaches, successes and failures are appropriately and comprehensively reported to aid understanding, critical reflection and adoption. It also makes the distinction between technical knowledge and consumer knowledge an important one, with some implications for more general research capacity building. There are communities of practice that need to be able to understand and evaluate the outcomes and outputs of methodological innovation, even if they do not have (nor wish to acquire) the technical knowledge required to employ the method firsthand. Readers or consumers of social scientific research need to be able to make informed judgements about data and analyses arising out of social research, including those of course that have utilised innovative approaches. The outcomes of innovations in research methods must be accessible to those who wish to use social scientific research and data – be they the wider academic community, policy makers, civil servants, practitioners or other publics. Hence there is a job of work in explaining innovative approaches for social science audiences, providing consumers with the appropriate resources to make sense of and use new methods, data and analyses.

Finally we would want to raise some more general observations about the provision of a research capacity building infrastructure which is supportive of methodological development and innovation. Innovation requires creativity, opportunity and critical reflection. And it is essential that for methodological innovation to occur we need to identify the circumstances where these will prosper. While technical or methodological training has an important place in building research capacity, so too does the development of a support culture that fosters experimentation, critical appraisal and work at the boundaries. Developing inter-disciplinary opportunities for communication, networking and collaboration are as important as the provision of skills based training. Above all, for innovations in research practice to be

transparent, sustainable and beneficial, research capacity building needs to be related to real research problems and settings, appropriately contextualized, dialogic rather than didactic, and inclusive of the research consumers.

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