

Qualitative Social Science in the UK: A Reflexive Commentary on the "State of the Art"

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Abstract: UK social science is characterised by an ever increasing expectation that it should be able to demonstrate excellence not only in terms of scientific and intellectual considerations. In addition, it must link its relevance and worth to a wide range of stakeholders and users of research. This "climate of change" is seen in the unprecedented level of strategic initiatives that are currently underway. The purpose of this article is to consider some of these strategic developments and how they seek to promote leading edge developments in social science methodology. Attention is focused, in particular, on the place of qualitative methodologies and methods within these developments. One of the sections of the article reports on the main findings of a consultation exercise with UK social scientists on qualitative research resources. A key interest throughout the article is in articulating the explicit and implicit agendas that are energising and motivating what may be called the "turn to methodology" in funded UK social science in the early 21st century

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Writing about the state of the art in qualitative methodology offers a wide window through which to observe some of the sometimes striking initiatives and developments that are underway within UK social science. It is also a timely moment to do so. At the time of writing this article, the climate of UK social science is characterised by an ever increasing expectation that social research must be able to demonstrate its excellence not only in terms of generally, or more locally, accepted scientific and intellectual criteria. It must also be able to articulate the potentially different ways in which it can be of wider social value and worth. Expectations for establishing "what works" have always been in place within policy research, and much research that is funded through charities. Now, though, centrally funded scientific and academic research is also expected to be able to stake its relevance and usefulness beyond the concerns of its immediate funders and sponsors, and to a wide range of so-called research "stakeholders" or "users" who are providing and/or are in receipt of services in society at large. The currents of change are immediately seen in the unprecedented level of

strategic initiatives that have been funded at the government level, through the main Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). This is the organisation charged by government with fostering high quality social science research, and which in 2005 celebrated its work over a period of 40 years. Like other UK government programmes intended to improve the outcomes and standards of services in the health, welfare, and school sectors, these ESRC initiatives might be judged (positively or negatively) as actively forwarding an agenda for change. [1]

Within this climate, academic researchers themselves have become consumers with important concerns to voice about the nature of the support they receive for their research activities. In 2003, the first author was commissioned to conduct a consultation exercise for the ESRC, the aims of which were 1) to delineate the existence and use of qualitative research resources and 2) to identify and propose ways of developing and enhancing these resources. It was important that this exercise was conducted by an academic and qualitative social scientist (not a consultant per se) to maximise its potential to shape the ESRC's long term research strategy. The scoping document that set out the case for the consultation (MASON 2002a) argued that, although quantitative and qualitative are the two main generally defined types of research methodology within the ESRC's portfolio, the resources provided are geared towards quantitative research (e.g. large quantitative data sets such as the British Household Panel Study). Indeed, little seemed to be known about the resources needed and used by qualitative social scientists at all. [2]

The purpose of this article is to consider some of the main strategic developments that are underway in UK social science, and which aim to promote "leading edge" developments in social science methodology. Attention is focussed, in particular, on the place of qualitative methodologies and methods within these developments, and one of the sections of the article reports on the main findings of the qualitative research resources consultation and the additional initiatives to which it has led. A key interest throughout the article is in articulating the explicit and implicit agendas that are energising and motivating what may be called the "turn to methodology" in funded UK social science in the early 21st century. [3]

1. Strategic Initiatives

From April 2004, a strategic focal point—the National Centre for Research Methods (NCRM)—has existed in the UK for identifying, developing and delivering methodological skills as part of a national research and training programme in the social sciences. Although more integrated in approach, the NCRM certainly does not represent a break with previous initiatives to stimulate methodologically focussed activities and goals. Rather it builds on the Research Methods Programme (RMP), which several years earlier had begun funding research projects, academic fellowships, and training programmes (making 38 awards in total). The NCRM and RMP continue to operate together. Their closely related agendas are to promote methodological advances in the context of substantive problems that are not confined to a single social science discipline; to

extend and promote existing methodologies, and foster work that improves and enhances developments in quantitative and qualitative methods; to apply existing research methods across different disciplines; and to encourage and support the development of good practice including training programmes and materials. Together they are intended to offer a "first port of call for people who want to find out about methodological developments, training opportunities or methods related events" (DALE 2004, p.3). [4]

The NCRM's integrative strategy involves the regular publication "MethodsNews", a quarterly newsletter providing accessible briefings about how the methodological agenda is being taken forward in UK Social Science. It provides up to date news on the work of the NCRM and the RMP, on the availability of awards, and information on major research resources such as SOSIG (the website which serves as a gateway to information that has been gathered by subject specialists, and that is of relevance to social science). It includes a regular spotlight on events and activities for methods training which is intended to strengthen "capacity building", or the development of a critical mass of highly skilled personnel that the NCRM is specifically delegated to encourage and support. In addition, "MethodsNews" helps with the coordinating function of the NCRM by highlighting in one place the variety of strategic initiatives that are promoting a much higher profile for methodological aspects of social scientists' work. The full set of the ESRC's methodologically focused, funded initiatives, centres, programmes and services providing UK social science with its organisational structure is indicated by the websites that are linked to the NCRM site (and are reproduced below).

- <http://www.esrcsocietytoday.ac.uk> (ESRC homepage)
- <http://www.esds.ac.uk> (Economic and Social Data Service/Qualidata)
- <http://www.ccsr.ac.uk> (Research Methods Programme)
- <http://www.ncrm.ac.uk> (National Centre for Research Methods)
- <http://www.ncess.ac.uk> (National Centre for e-Social Science)
- <http://www.sosig.ac.uk> (Social Science Information Gateway)
- <http://www.gsr.gov.uk> (Government Social Research website [Analysis for Policy & Cabinet Office]) [5]

Some further background and flavour to the strategic initiatives that are underway is given by personal commentaries, of which two—by centre directors—are mentioned here. Chris SKINNER, the Director of NCRM, writing in the first issue of "MethodsNews" (October 2004) adopts linguistic expressions more customarily associated with critical commentaries on the scientific mainstream (viz. the language of positioning theory; see HARRÉ & MOGHADDAM 2003). He comments how he and other colleagues with longstanding methodological interests "have moved from margin to centre", and now have a shared sense "of occupying a place of prominence in UK social science" (p.1). Peter HALFPENNY, Director of NCeSS (National Centre for e-Social Science) speaks in a recognisably modernist voice. His not so distant memory is of the toil involved in

data analysis using pen and paper and, how, initially this toil was replaced by use of even the earliest desk computers. But now, with the future applications of e-social science ahead, social science is "poised to leap forward" in a "step change". Although writing as people with backgrounds in social statistics and the use of new technologies in social research, the broader change agenda of which they speak is, in fact, inclusive of qualitative and quantitative methodologies. [6]

A significant consolidation of the ongoing strategic development of UK social science occurred in April 2005, with the addition of a number of distributed centres of methodologically focussed research activity of the NCRM (called "nodes") at different sites across the UK. Each of the nodes has its own programme of work including original investigations—often conceived as demonstrator projects—to answer its defining methodological questions, along with a training and capacity building programme. These nodes will remain closely affiliated across their lifespan (4-5 years) to the earlier formed centre point or "hub" of the NCRM, at the University of Southampton, and which oversees the combined work of the hub and nodes. There are currently six nodes, of which three are quantitative, two qualitative (or qualitatively led), and one is a mixed methods programme. The two exclusively or mainly qualitative nodes are "Qualitative Research Methods in the Social Sciences: Innovation, Integration and Impact" (or QUALITI, led by Amanda COFFEY, and based at Cardiff University) and "Multi-Dimensional Methods for Real Lives Research" (abbreviated to "Real Life Methods", led by Jennifer MASON, and based at the Universities of Manchester and Leeds). Details of all the nodes can be found on the NCRM website. [7]

Although the strategic focus of attention on methodology is paramount in the RMP and NCRM, other ESRC funded centres and programmes, along with those of the other major sponsors of social science research (such as the Nuffield Foundation and Leverhulme Trust), share their concern with methodological issues—albeit less centrally. One example is the ESRC's "[Social Identities and Social Action](#)" programme which was launched in 2005 to study significant developments in people's identity practices in contemporary society and, in particular, how they "create social spaces and conflictual and cohesive patterns of social relations" (WETHERELL 2004, p1). Soon after its launch a joint workshop was organised with the NCRM on methodologies in social identities research. Investigating identity practices, the stabilisation of identity, and the meanings and processes involved in identity in the making requires methodologies that are attuned to "the attempts of people with very different trajectories and from very different contexts to build communities and 'liveable' lives" (WETHERELL 2004, p1). Qualitative methodologies and methods for studying the narratives people tell of their lives (ANDREWS et al., 2001) and the wider cultural discourses that frame them (WETHERELL et al., 2001) are particularly under the spotlight in this programme, along with developing "psycho-social" methods (HOLLWAY & JEFFERSON 2000) for studying the psychological investments people make in cultural narratives and discourses. Questions are also being asked about the value of narrative methods for studying the ways in which people living next to major socio-technical hazards deal with risk in their everyday lives, as part of

research being conducted by the SCARR (social contexts and responses to risk) ESRC network (PIDGEON et al., 2003). [8]

A final strategic development worthy of specific mention pertains to the efforts government commissioners of policy research have made to engender conversations with academic social scientists about how to assess the quality of qualitative research and evidence. In part, their efforts reflect the influence of the "evidence based" research movement (EBM), which has spread beyond the sectors where it originated and remains strongest (medicine, health and social care) to social research more widely (TRAYNOR 2003). The EBM promotes the systematic appraisal of the quality or rigour of methods, and argues for using only those that pass set thresholds to inform policy and practice. Of course, within academic social science strong counter influences work against the unmediated take-up of such arguments, and any drift to dominance of ideas advocated by proponents of the EBM. For example, a powerful case has been made against reverting to "technical essentialism" (BARBOUR 2003) in the way research practice is understood and taught. Nonetheless, academic research that is charged with demonstrating, and not simply assuming, its relevance, worth and impact cannot remain immune from the demand to join other key players, such as government research commissioners and various categories of research users, in discussing questions about when evidence is considered good enough to inform policy developments, practitioners' work, and the way people live their daily lives. [9]

One concrete attempt to stimulate such an exchange of views has been made by the UK government's Chief Social Scientist (Sue DUNCAN). In this role, she commissioned the National Centre for Social Research to devise a general framework for judging the quality of qualitative research intended to be used in evaluating policy research and making decisions about public policy. The "quality framework" is now available and can be downloaded from the [Cabinet Office website](#). It is also available in book form as a guide to qualitative research practice for social science students and researchers (RITCHIE & LEWIS 2003). Discussions of the usefulness of such a research appraisal tool held at a pre-launch meeting of the NCRM suggested that it has had an impact on the way some educators think about their work (HENWOOD 2005). [10]

1.1 State of the art within the strategic initiatives

So what is considered the state of the art in qualitative research within these strategic initiatives? Of course, asking the question in this way means that the prior agendas of such schemes, and the particular projects they have selected as worthy of sponsorship and promotion, will heavily frame the answers. Nonetheless, as the strategic initiatives and the projects they select are intended to function as flagships guiding future methodological development across disciplines, and at the intersections between different constituencies of research funders (academic, policy, service), stakeholders and users in the UK, this in and of itself makes them worthy of consideration. [11]

Inspection of exclusively or largely qualitative and mixed methods projects and nodes within the RMP and NCRM, and taking into account the work of some other funded centres with qualitatively influenced agendas, together with the aforementioned government policy research initiative around the appraisal of qualitative research quality, suggests that "state of the art" status is accorded to research that does one or more of the following. [12]

i. Poses methodological questions that are of value to substantive projects, and seeks to widen its scope in terms of use, relevance or impact

This feature of excellence in research certainly derives directly from the ESRC's overarching framework for guiding the future of both methodological development and UK social science in general. The RMP set out to stimulate researchers to undertake projects that are of substantive value, and that posed novel and interesting methodological questions. The NCRM echoed very similar priorities by appointing nodes with research programmes that were defined by a methodological focus (e.g. in the field of qualitative or quantitative methods, or integrating different methods), but that explored this focus through substantive topics. Implicitly built into these priorities is the assumption that, for any single project, intersections between its methodological and substantive foci are likely to increase the study's scope, worth or value, by making its findings applicable beyond single disciplines or subject areas. [13]

Of the two RMP projects selected here to illustrate the ways in which this principle can operate in practice—by O'CONNOR, DUNN, MAUGHAN and SCOTT (2002) and by MORAN-ELLIS, ALEXANDER, CRONIN, DICKINSON, FIELDING, THOMAS and SLENEY (2003)—neither is exclusively qualitative, and this is probably no coincidence. Among a number of the commissioned projects, integration across different methods and types of data is assumed to be a preferred strategy, especially when it is used to cut across the qualitative-quantitative divide. In view of the significance attached to the principle and practice of methodological integration, the RMP awarded an academic fellowship to interrogate the assumptions on which it rests and the practices to which it leads. The fellowship entitled "Integrating quantitative and qualitative research: prospects and limits" was awarded to Alan BRYMAN (details of all RMP projects can be viewed on the RMP website). [14]

O'CONNOR et al.'s project concerns methodologies for studying families and family effects on child development. It follows an overall design that is largely quantitatively driven, in that it seeks to measure variables in the social environment, and from here to develop multi-level models of family variances and influences on child development. In addition, qualitative data and methods are brought into play as part of a mix of methodological strategies (labelled experimental intervention and naturalistic), to be evaluated for the evidence different data and methods can and cannot establish. The broader rationale for the O'CONNOR et al. study is to use the identification of controversies over basic assumptions and models, and their underlying methodological dilemmas, as a

stimulus for refining and expanding methodologies to address these areas of controversy. [15]

MORAN-ELLIS et al.'s project is concerned with investigating the integration of methodologies for studying the diverse meanings of vulnerability in everyday life and at the policy/planning level. It uses a number of small projects to generate quantitative and qualitative data at different units of analysis (geographical area, community, household, individual). The project begins with the insightful observation that little is known about the methodological "work" involved in integrating data from multi methods, and has designed a research programme to make the invisible work visible. The new knowledge generated will be transferred beyond the project itself via an advanced training programme. [16]

A defining feature of these projects is the way both step well beyond single, linear research design practices, such as simply adopting a favoured methodological approach or following a tried and tested method within a substantive field of study. Equally, each holds that substantive development will be contingent upon pursuing a more novel and demanding methodological agenda. The wider impact and relevance of the projects will be achieved in a number of ways. The first project (by O'CONNOR et al.) will support the pooling of the data and other resources it generates among other family researchers. The second (by MORAN-ELLIS et al.) will increase the accessibility of its findings and advanced teaching programme by producing a study manual with CD-Rom, and an Internet site including data from the project and methodological excerpts. [17]

ii. Takes existing methodologies and demonstrates how they can be used and extended in a digital age

As already briefly noted, the development of e-social science is envisaged as one way of initiating a "step-change" in UK social science, both in terms of technological resourcing and researchers' associated methodological ambition (HALFPENNY 2004). Within this vision, the digitisation of more information, development of even higher performance computers, and availability of new grid technologies are set to revolutionise the accessibility of data, ways of integrating it, and multi-level modelling of the intricate workings of complex social systems (HALFPENNY 2004; see also FIELDING 2003). [18]

Both of the qualitative nodes of the NCRM (QUALITI and Real Life Methods) have posted their intention of using the potential of e-Social Science, as well as building on the extended research horizons afforded by the new media (including visual), the Internet, and world wide web. Already, two projects (one by COFFEY, DICKS, MASON, RENOLD, SOYINKA & WILLIAMS 2002, and another by FISCHER, ZEITLYN, ELLEN, MARTIN, PURI, BOWMAN & BAGG 2002) funded in advance of the NCRM have begun to demonstrate possible ways of harnessing the potential of digital techniques for data analysis, modes of representation using the new media, and innovative computer-based methods for disseminating research findings and for involving users (readers) of research in research processes that entail the production, interpretation and authoring of readings. [19]

The RMP project "Ethnography in and for the digital age" (by COFFEY et al.) is investigating the impacts of new media technology on all facets of the qualitative research process, and developing an integrated digital hypermedia environment for qualitative data collection, management, analysis and authoring. These investigations and developments are being conducted by means of a digital, ethnographic, substantive study of science communication with a Science Discovery centre. [20]

FISHER et al.'s RMP project "Interactive data collection-Production/Transmission of environment knowledge" is a study of how to reduce barriers beyond anthropology to the uptake of one of its key principles and practices—that of immersion in fieldwork. The project is set to develop and evaluate grid based hardware (in the middle range) to support interactive elements of the fieldwork process. It will produce manuals, protocols, and reference tools for the on-line exchange of digitised fieldwork data, methods, and analyses. [21]

Together, these two projects take conventional ethnographic methodologies that are well established in social science, and show how they can be supported and extended by using digital technologies, combinations of new media, and computer based methods for handling diverse, interactive features of the qualitative research process. [22]

iii. Pursues under-researched aspects of qualitative research design, decision making and dissemination (especially those with ethical dimensions)

As social scientists embrace the new opportunities and face up to the methodological challenges of the early 21st century, questions are being posed about ever widening aspects of research design, decision making, and dissemination. On the one hand there is nothing new in the claims made as part of the National Centre for Social Research's Quality Framework that qualitative researchers, like quantitative, need to develop a research strategy that is *defensible in design* (i.e. can answer the research question), and *rigorous in conduct* (i.e. systematic and transparent data collection, analysis and interpretation, including their ethical aspects). In addition, though, these demands intensify once research is construed as part and parcel of social life, rather than a separate and protected domain of professional practice or expert knowledge. [23]

Qualitative researchers are in some ways better prepared than their quantitative colleagues to identify and respond to these challenges. This is because of the importance customarily attached to developing an ongoing attitude of reflection about research ethics when doing qualitative work (MASON 2002b). Such an emphasis in relation to ethics is also part of a more general commitment to the flexible, iterative, cyclical process of qualitative research design (PIDGEON & HENWOOD 2004). But in recent years, self-regulation and following guidance provided by professional bodies has been overlaid with a level of external scrutiny from formally constituted research governance and ethics committees. In the medical, health, child welfare/school and social care research sectors, these committees have legal mandates, while their terms of reference (e.g. listening to

the patients'/consumers' points of view) are closely linked into developments in other consumer and service sectors. In response, UK research councils and universities have produced their own ethics frameworks to help clarify the limits of research governance and ethical regulation, and to streamline the process of ethical clearance. In addition, the further layers of scrutiny overseeing the processes and practices of research are partly responsible for prompting a new sensitivity to areas where too little is known and which has, in turn, suggested new topics for investigation and questions that need to be asked. [24]

Three projects from the RMP pursue under-researched aspects of qualitative research design, decision making and dissemination and especially those with ethical dimensions. Two of the projects (by WILES, HEATH, CROW & CHARLES 2003 and by EMMEL, SALES, HUGHES & GREENHALGH 2003) are concerned with developing strategies to improve knowledge and practice with vulnerable groups. The WILES et al. project "Informed consent and the research process" is looking at the impact methods of consent have on the research process. It will disseminate best practice in relation to research conducted with vulnerable groups for use by social researchers and user groups, based on research in six fields of study (children, youth, old age, palliative care, mental health and learning disability). EMMEL et al. are developing methodological strategies to recruit and research socially excluded groups, by considering the theoretical consequences and additions lay accounts can provide for understanding social exclusion. A third project, by CONDON and SAINSBURY (2002), is studying the variety of practices in the selection and presentation of quotations in applied social research, and developing and testing accessibility, acceptability and impact of different ways of including quotations among a range of readers. [25]

The design and practice of quantitative, as well as qualitative, research will be informed by the outcomes of the first two studies which address issues of generic relevance across methodologies: informed consent and the risk of excluding vulnerable groups from research samples. The third study takes a detailed look at an area of qualitative research practice with broad theoretical significance, since the use of quotations has a bearing on the claims qualitative researchers often make to consider a multiplicity of perspectives and voices. The two qualitative nodes of the NCRM are set to examine a more extensive range of design and dissemination issues, including the ethical dimension of research that uses new media. [26]

iv. Systematization, comparison and extension of developments in qualitative data analysis (including media content and textual data)

Data analysis craftskills (TESCH 1990) are some of the most demanding in qualitative research, and unlikely ever to be completely tamed—not even by the most sharply focussed, disciplinary, hands-on practical workshops, or by the most richly textured, wide-reaching, international and multi-disciplinary edited volume. In recent times, there has been a plethora of international, US and UK based publications on the subject, including a number of often excellent handbooks of qualitative inquiry and data analysis (DENZIN & LINCOLN 2003; HARDY &

BRYMAN 2004; SEALE et al. 2004), inviting and accessibly written guidebooks on methodological choice (CAMIC et al. 2003; SLADE & PRIEBE in press; WILLIG 2001), and clearly exemplified, step-by-step data analysis methods textbooks, manuals and protocols (STRAUSS & CORBIN 1990; WENGRAF 2001). Nonetheless efforts continue apace to evaluate, systematise, and extend data analysis methodology and methods, along with the software tools and computer assisted data analysis packages that have developed to underpin, promote and improve their use. [27]

As presented in the portfolio of projects funded by the RMP, there are two qualitative data analysis projects representing the state of the art in contemporary evaluation, systematisation and extension programmes. The first, by ELIAS and JONES, is a project to update an earlier software development in coding for industrial/occupational applications, and to develop a new open coding product that will allow users to construct a tool for complex coding of relevant text to a defined classification structure. In addition, it will test, validate, and refine these products, utilising large scale data sets. It will, by collaborating with partners (the Office of National Statistics, ONS), also further widen the scope of such tests. The second project, by BILLIG, DEACON, GOLDING, KÖNIG and MACMILLAN (2003) aims to: rigorously and fundamentally compare the methodological and conceptual adequacy of different methods for the analysis of media content and textual data; develop a new methodology for combining newer forms of textual and time series analysis; and integrate and extend existing software to expand the possibilities of existing analytical approaches. [28]

Although these two projects seem quite particular in their aims and concerns, they can also be seen as pointing to some controversial areas in contemporary qualitative analysis. Over-reliance on the fragmentary activity of even complex coding can be argued to lead to a neglect of the interpretive skills involved in holistic reading, and in making sense of the diverse, semiotic processes involved in socially produced and contextually situated meanings. And within the thematic, theory building genre of qualitative analysis itself, coding within a defined classification structure can be seen as necessarily limiting the conceptual flexibility that is needed to undertake theoretically generative case comparisons and sampling decisions, and to make and check claims to theoretical generalisability. Nonetheless, the take up of theory defined, open coding in this project and other template (KING 1998) and framework (RICHIE & LEWIS 2003) analysis approaches suggest that there may be occasions when such "short-cut" approaches can, indeed, be useful. In relation to the BILLIG et al. media content analysis project, there may likewise be much to be learnt about the intellectual ingenuity (craftskills) involved as a team of researchers strives to retain analytical sensitivity (in this study sensitivity to the concerns of discourse/frame and textual analysis) while comparing, combining and developing methodologies, and evaluating software for use with large data sets. [29]

2. Qualitative Research Resources: A Consultation Exercise

The value accorded to qualitative social science in the UK is indicated by the commissioning decisions of the RMP, and subsequently by the appointment of the NCRM nodes. A number of their high profile, methodological, funded projects are qualitative, or include a qualitative element within a quantitatively led or mixed methods design. The value of such methods is also signalled by the interest shown in making better use of qualitative evidence by others with leading research roles and programmes in the policy arena, and who play a part in shaping the agendas of research practitioners. At the same time as these developments were taking place, though, it became apparent to members of the Research Resources Board of the ESRC, how little was, in fact, known about the resources needed by qualitative researchers themselves to conduct their research, and to produce high quality, relevant research outputs. The development of the ESRC's long term research strategy therefore involved commissioning a wide ranging consultation with UK social scientists to discern how they viewed this issue, and how qualitative social science specifically might be better provisioned. [30]

The consultancy was carried out by the authors over a 4 month period: May-September 2003. The second author was employed for the duration of the project as a full time project RA. We were both involved in the full range of activities through to writing up the first draft of the consultancy report. Interviews were conducted with 30 individuals by telephone and face-to-face, and 17 group interviews were carried out during site visits. Where an individual interview could not be arranged, an equivalent set of email questions was distributed; 20 of these were sent and 9 responses received. Of the 135 respondents who were involved in the consultation, the majority were university academics spanning a wide range of disciplines and methodological specialties (see Figure 1); a small number were research commissioners and practitioners. The field work findings were contextualised and complemented by a selective review of the literature. A participatory workshop was used to revisit important issues, questions, themes and proposals, and this "revisiting" process helped us to work up the recommendations that were finally contained in the report (see HENWOOD & LANG 2003 for full details).

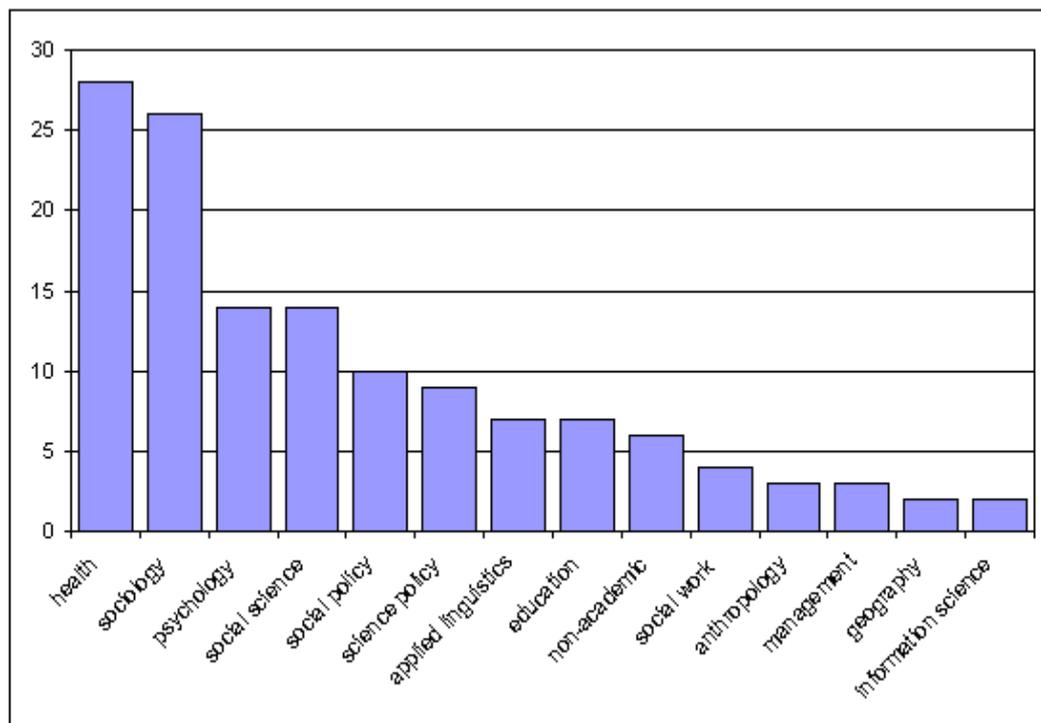


Figure 1: Distribution of respondents by discipline¹ [31]

The research strategy guiding the consultation process followed three orienting principles:

- Researchers' perceptions and understandings of their work environments provide a starting point for examining qualitative resource issues.
- The currency of the term "resources" varies, and so understandings of resource issues may differ.
- Perceptions are formed, and meanings circulate in institutional and other contexts which are themselves variable; accordingly, these possible sources of difference would require attention within the consultation exercise. [32]

Discussion in the individual interviews and focus groups, along with the content of the email questions, focussed on three main points: the state of qualitative research in respondents' specific area of work; the types of resources they needed to do their research well; and the types of resource that would improve the conduct of qualitative research. As well as being asked to articulate their own thoughts and views, participants were invited to reflect on their own and others' responses to these issues. To open up consideration of how the issue of resourcing might be differently perceived, a number of areas upon which we invited discussion were depicted in an "overview diagramme" which was shown (in some form/stage of development) to all respondents (see Figure 2). In view of

1 "Health" = social science and health, nursing, midwifery, occupational therapy; "social science" = those who define their work in cross-disciplinary terms; also those whose affiliation does not fit into other categories, including gender studies, cultural studies, disability studies.

the way such visual representations can both open up and constrain what people are able to think about and foresee, respondents were encouraged not to feel confined to the depicted topics, but rather to identify any issue of resource that might be missing from it.

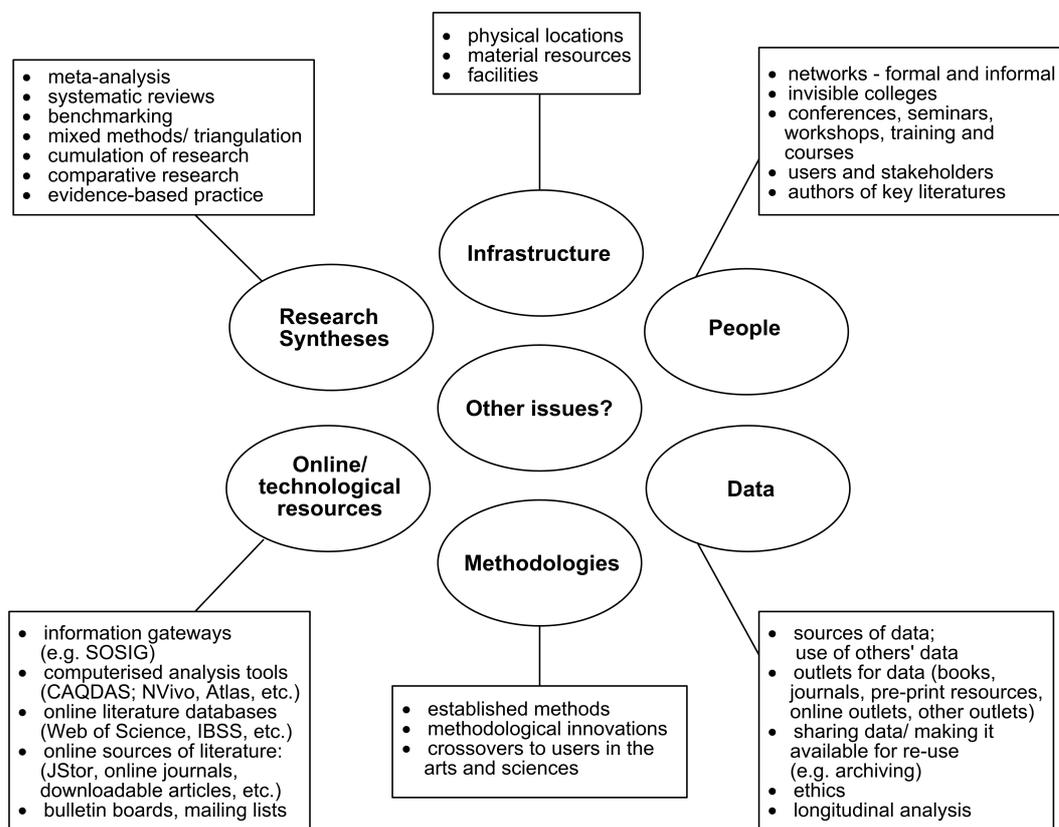


Figure 2: Overview diagram as used in Qualitative Research Resources Consultation² [33]

While the whole process is referred to as a consultation (and the whole undertaking was completed, as agreed, over a 4 month period), we approached the task far more as a time-limited research exercise. This meant that a good deal of our time and effort was spent recording and analysing the set of contributions that had been generated by the various activities in which we and our interviewees took part. We relied upon a process of detailed note-taking, used audio tapes as back up where notes were unclear or noteworthy details had been missed, read through one another's notes, and discussed recurrent issues, complexities, ambiguities and contradictions. All this was done by hand and in face-to-face interaction between the two researchers; for our purposes we had no need of computer-based assistance with the data analysis. The outcome was a distillation of issues, questions and proposals which were presented at the participants' workshop. After the outcomes of the workshop had been incorporated into our developing analysis, it was possible to draw up the findings and recommendations for the final report. [34]

2 Above are some of the main points we feel are useful in terms of thinking about qualitative research resources. You may wish to refer to some or all of them (or to none of them) in your interview. We encourage you to introduce any other issues you feel are significant.

2.1 Summary of the main findings and recommendations in the report

i. Qualitative data and research archiving

Although access is provided to archival sources of qualitative data as part of the ESRC's resource strategy through ESDS/Qualidata, UK social scientists reported making little use of them. This is in contrast to the quantitative data archives which are known to be well used. Accordingly, the report considered potential ways to expand the existing data archiving strategy, and increase the scope and uptake of these existing data sources. Digitisation and e-science offer the possibility to provide on-demand high quality data, and ESDS/Qualidata is already working towards employing these technological developments. There are relevant FQS publications on this and related themes, two of which have been co-edited by Qualidata, and in which some British authors have been involved.

- <http://www.qualitative-research.net/fqs/fqs-e/inhalt3-00-e.htm>, FQS 1(3) (Text, Archive, Re-Analysis)
- <http://www.qualitative-research.net/fqs/fqs-e/inhalt1-01-e.htm>, FQS 2(1) (Qualitative and Quantitative Research)
- <http://www.qualitative-research.net/fqs/fqs-e/inhalt2-02-e.htm>, FQS 3(2) (Using Technology in the Qualitative Research Process)
- <http://www.qualitative-research.net/fqs/fqs-e/inhalt1-05-e.htm>, FQS 6(1) (Secondary Analysis of Qualitative Data) [35]

In addition, though, we argued that it is important to find ways of addressing the limitations inherent in cold, decontextualised data deposits, if more and better use is to be made of the data sources. More and easier access is needed to details of the research process, and the background and context of the archived studies (there is a need for research- as well as data-archiving). A more responsive, interactive, participant focussed approach to archiving needs to be fostered. By way of further suggestions, we proposed that it might be valuable to establish a forum to discuss questions about the accessibility and accountability of local archives. In this regard, specific attention could be directed at: a) supporting and maximising the benefits of local archives housing valuable data and b) examining the feasibility of bringing on stream thematic collections of local archives. [36]

ii. Dialogue with policy

Although the consultation established the value and accepted role of qualitative research within the portfolio of policy research resources, it also suggested outstanding questions relating to the scope and range of ways in which qualitative research is being taken up and utilised, and whether the full potential of qualitative studies is being realised to inform policy. One recommendation, therefore, was for the ESRC to take up a more active role in promoting qualitative research in ways that can maximise its impact on the policy arena. Two possible ways in which this might be done: a) ESRC to review its current role and practices in relation to its role as the main steward of UK social science in promoting

awareness and understanding of qualitative research as a key tool for policy; b) ESRC to use this review to determine whether there is a case for rethinking or revitalising its approach to the issue, (e.g. by convening a workshop on getting research into policy). The consultation identified a possible cycle of perceptions of risk that could be responsible for undervaluing the full potential of qualitative research for policy. Distinctive aspects of the research enterprise might also be lost as part of institutional processes where actors have more to gain by copying and imitation. We proposed that such issues, and their possible role in limiting the inclusion of innovative qualitative inquiry strategies in policy research, could become a key focus of any workshop and review process. [37]

iii. Ethics committees

Respondents in the consultation exercise did not typically view ethics committees as a resource (although potentially they might be, if committees had sufficient specialist knowledge, and promoted the active involvement of researchers in an ongoing process of ethical deliberation about their projects). Rather, misunderstandings and inconsistencies between qualitative researchers and ethics committees were reported as being commonplace, and this made finding ways to deal with such difficulties a highly salient issue for the researchers if they are to maintain and promote qualitative social science in domains regulated by such committees. A key recommendation of the report was that the matters reported in more detail in that report should be referred to the ESRC's commissioned project to develop a framework for research ethics (now completed and available on the ESRC website). Subsidiary recommendations were that the ESRC could take actions to promote awareness of those characteristics of ethical practice in qualitative studies that cannot unreflectively be modelled on the guidance provided for quantitative studies (e.g. by setting up a source of on-line information). It could also take forward discussion of specific regulatory mechanisms in the light of unwanted potential increases in bureaucracy and intrusion. [38]

iv. Qualitative longitudinal research

Through the consultation process, it was established that qualitative longitudinal research has the potential to significantly enhance UK social science. Panel studies (including those with qualitative studies "added on"), while valuable in their own terms, were seen as being unable to provide a sufficiently in-depth, detailed and contextually sensitive treatment of complex issues, such as people's relationship to social change. But while these facets of inquiry are clearly identifiable as areas of strength within qualitative investigations, the ESRC was found to lack any specific strategic remit to support and develop qualitative longitudinal investigations. In the light of the significant lack of engagement of the premier UK social science research council with this issue, the report concluded that further discussion was needed of different ways in which it would be possible to advance. It also identified two main principles as being invaluable in guiding any choice of qualitative longitudinal strategy. First, combining qualitative methodologies into a flexible, comparative, and reflexive design would be neces-

sary in order to maximise the potential benefits of methodological and technological change. Second, the innovative nature of such a study would need to be fully utilised, and its potential as a testing ground for a variety of novel techniques, approaches and ideas realised. Accordingly, one of the major recommendations of the report was for the ESRC to undertake a feasibility study to look at ways for the ESRC to include a qualitative longitudinal strategy as part of its research portfolio (a study which did, in fact, go ahead, resulting in a detailed specification for a "Qualitative Longitudinal Study" late in 2004; see also later comments in this article in Section 2.2 headed "Subsequent initiatives". [39]

v. Research syntheses

Research syntheses, or the range of methods that have been devised to appraise the accumulation of knowledge on a particular topic or research question, was a matter of discussion with a number of participants. Research synthesis is closely related to systematic reviewing, which is predicated on the use of explicit procedures for deciding whether the findings and methods of individual studies meet the required standard to warrant inclusion as evidence. Neither topic was included in our participants' workshop, since we became aware of a number of funded projects already investigating and extending the use of these methods: three separate ones under the auspices of the RMP. Following completion of the consultation, a single (mixed method) node of the NCRM was appointed to take forward methods in research synthesis. [40]

The funded initiatives are addressing two main issues. First, a number of different ways are being sought to advance qualitative forms of research syntheses. An important part of the agenda of these initiatives is to counteract the marginalisation and stigmatisation of qualitative studies, given that a hierarchy of methods is assumed in systematic reviewing and the attendant method of statistical meta-analysis. Second, question-led (as opposed to methods-led) approaches are being advanced, and efforts made to demonstrate how these can successfully integrate quantitative and qualitative forms of research meta-synthesis. [41]

Clearly, developments in research synthesis are exercising the minds of the funders of national methods programmes, and the many academics who assist them in their decision making. Also, it has been remarked (by the team giving the opening speech at the launch of the NCRM on behalf of the "Methods in Research Synthesis" node) that the UK is at the forefront of developments in this arena worldwide. In our consultation, though, we thought it was equally important to address some participants' questioning of the rush to embrace such methods. Some suggested that systematic reviewing was too closely modelled on what works, that the process of standard reviewing is more than adequate to the task of bringing together and providing a balanced overview of existing knowledge in the field, and that it is unclear what it would mean to do an unsystematic review (for a published commentary, see HAMMERSLEY 2001). Other related points were that there is a need for clear thinking about, rather than jettisoning of, standard reviews, and about how they can be produced to suit their varied

functions. This process is in its early stages, but some useful work done in the United States has begun to appear, and might help to bridge the gap between systematic and standard reviewing (COOPER 2003). [42]

In our report we alluded to the long tradition of work articulating and discussing the issues of warranting evidence, generalisability of findings, and more generally establishing the credibility of qualitative researchers' claims and arguments. We also drew freely on Jennifer MASON's (2002a) carefully chosen metaphor of "scaling up" as a means of encompassing the fundamental activities within qualitative investigations that signal their reach, relevance, impact and importance (albeit while recognising some of our respondents' objections to the metaphor for over-emphasising the matter of scale). Three of our conclusions and recommendations pointed to the need to consider these aspects of qualitative research as key resources in need of further scrutiny and development. In particular, we argued for the need to i) increase the clarity of conventional reviews ii) better understand how good arguments are made for qualitative research in their various contexts of application and iii) that there is a need to support a wide range of ways to "scale up" the impact of qualitative work (including through methodological collaboration and combining, and methodologically informed data sharing; for more on this see next section). [43]

vi. Teamwork and collaboration

The ESRC identifies three main categories of research resource—data, methods and information technology. The consultation exercise suggested that there is a fourth category, people and teams, that is currently under-valued. Some referred to it as encapsulating the soft elements of research. One illustrative comment was that senior researchers, such as grantholders, can be a resource in terms of their "beingness" and not just their skills. More generally, higher level skills, such as those involved in methodological combining, were seen as primarily produced through sustained human interaction. Many respondents insisted that methodological innovation tends to feed off new, frequently inter-disciplinary cross-overs and collaborations. [44]

If the soft, people-based, teamwork, and collaborative elements of research currently are under-valued (as seems likely), we argued that it was important to ask questions about them—not from an idealised position or assumption that all teamwork is good, but by stepping back from this assumption and asking what is involved and what makes it effective (or not effective). Given the very real possibility that knowledge about what is involved in teamwork and collaboration may be lacking, we further argued from this that a strong case emerges for seeking ways of developing and improving them. In order to clarify our interest in focussing research activity in this way, we labelled our concern seeking to develop "methodologies of collaboration". [45]

Three possible approaches came forward from the consultation to take forward methodological collaboration through team-working: sponsoring research into "doing research with"; bringing researchers and stakeholders together and

facilitating research as a sequential process involving these ongoing interactions; and fostering team-working by investing in efforts to make methodologies of collaboration explicit. [46]

Our specific recommendations were twofold. 1) ESRC could usefully prioritise the promotion of methodologies of collaboration by, for example, supporting projects in each of the three areas identified by the consultation, along with any other emergent approaches. 2) As these proposals all represent potential ways of "scaling" up qualitative investigations, but the activities involved in bringing about the greater impact and reach of such studies are not obvious, the more tacit aspects of methodological collaboration were identified as being particularly ripe for investigation. [47]

vii. Technology, infrastructure and innovation

Current infrastructure provision and technological resources adequate to support the qualitative research that is being done (both by and beyond externally-funded studies) was identified as an important resource issue. This area of resourcing is not one where the ESRC is itself able to direct interventions, as "having a well found laboratory" is the responsibility of individual UK research institutions. Nonetheless the report still provided a wide-ranging assessment of these issues, based on participants' reflections on the influence of current levels of resources on their own and other people's work. Unevenness of provision (e.g. in access to computer assisted qualitative data analysis packages, and a variety of other forms of hardware and software) was a recurrent theme. Accordingly, we highlighted how there could be significant gains to some less technologically well resourced researchers if the universities in which they worked gave higher priority to issues of technological provision. Technological resources and their application to qualitative research were identified as two areas where a "future oriented" perspective, and preparedness to pursue innovation, would be particularly worthwhile. In relation to certain developments (e.g. e-Social Science), vague awareness on the part of many researchers of what it could mean to them was an initial matter that needed to be addressed. There was a much wider appreciation of the need to develop use of technology and the Internet for innovative means of disseminating qualitative research findings. Those respondents involved in working with multi-media as a means of dissemination agreed that more time and money were often needed for these than for standard forms of output. Also, they suggested that more resources could be usefully devoted in the arena of multi-media and new means of dissemination to understanding how teamwork could be effective and how to improve the processes and outcomes of collaborative work (see above section on "teamwork and collaboration"). [48]

viii. Training and development

Many points were raised by participants on the topics of training and development, reflecting the view of many that training was a central issue to research resources, and that it has a significant bearing on many other areas of importance. Views meriting particular representation in the report were concerned

with issues of how standardisation and creativity relate to each another, and the role played by differences in conceptual vocabulary and shared language in research methods training. [49]

Key participants in the consultation who were actively involved and had conducted research into research methods training, development and capacity building informed us that quantitative research is better defined than qualitative in many ways: in terms of what is considered good and bad research, in terms of what it tries to do, and what it can achieve. They strongly argued that quantitative research had benefited from this, and that work needs to be done in qualitative research on how to describe and classify in terms of a common language (also see TAYLOR 2002). [50]

In the case of training, our report made the parallel—although in some ways different argument—that a key question is how to bring together qualitative inquiry's coexisting but divergent concerns with, on the one hand, standardisation and comparability and, on the other, the particular and the unique. How do you ensure that learners receive not only a grounding in the essentials and the underlying principles of qualitative research, but also learn the place and (potentially high) value of innovation and creativity? These questions relate to the unresolved tension between the need for standardisation and a common way of talking about things and the need to maintain the specificities of qualitative work. Tension is also present between evaluating and valuing the differences involved in qualitative work, and there are some aspects of qualitative work that defy straightforward evaluation. [51]

2.2 Subsequent initiatives

The qualitative research resources report was favourably received by its commissioners, and agreements subsequently reached for two qualitatively focussed initiatives.. The aim of the first initiative, a "Demonstrator Scheme for Qualitative Data Sharing and Research Archiving" is to "promote understanding and dissemination of new and innovative approaches to qualitative data sharing and archiving" (WALKER 2004; for the full specification details see ESRC website). It is intended to play a key role in the ongoing development of the ESRC's existing qualitative data and methods strategy. Five projects have been funded to begin in 2005. The plan for the second is that it should be funded at a significantly higher level, so that it can initiate and take forward a major programme of new work on qualitative longitudinal methodology to investigate "Changing Lives and Times". Three of its specific aims, as listed in the programme specification (HOLLAND, THOMPSON & HENDERSON 2005, again see ESRC website) are to:

- "begin to realise the unique value of qualitative longitudinal research and its potential contribution to society, social theory, social policy and practice";
- "develop a programme of studies that will begin to fuel methodological enhancement in the area of qualitative longitudinal methodology, securely

based in substantive areas of research that are central to our understanding of the dynamic processes that underpin continuity and change";

- and that will have "common elements relating to record keeping methods and archiving with a view to facilitating data sharing, comparability, secondary analysis and scaling up" (HOLLAND et al., Changing Lives and Times programme specification, p.1). Shortlisted proposals are due to submit revised bids, at the second round, in September 2005. [52]

3. Concluding Remarks: Qualitative Methodology in the UK—In a State or State of the Art?

The commitment of UK central research agencies, other stakeholders and users of research, and academic researchers to quality social science is clear from the range of initiatives and developments reviewed in this article, and the state of the art principles and practices that are being pushed forward on many fronts. In conclusion, though, it is vital to also step back, to avoid any risk of appearing to promote an over-celebratory stance. [53]

A prescient comment made by one of the respondents in our review of qualitative research resources was that *"the comeback of qualitative research in terms of acceptability is bringing pressures of quality assurance, data reliability and systematic research"*. Throughout this review, issues are discussed in ways that are intended to avoid the possible return, or unreflexive treatment, of the kinds of pressures identified in this comment. Overall, a main message of the article is that social scientists are also, in different ways, demonstrating a commitment to future oriented thinking, innovation, and creativity. This, in turn, dilutes any drive to enforce over-simplified ways of improving quality assurance, data reliability, and systematic research. Rather, debates continue on a range of matters such as: How to grapple with, rather than seek premature resolution of, issues raised by the insistence that qualitative and quantitative research does (or does not) fall into two different camps? Does it matter whether research initiatives and programmes are quantitatively or qualitatively led? How best to respond to challenges that have been made to the bases and practices of expertise and authority? What significance should be attached to the proliferation of efforts to formalise judgements of qualitative research quality? [54]

Inevitably, it has not been possible to focus on all of the worthwhile initiatives in this overview. One of these is the set of recently completed ESRC funded research seminars called the "Methods in Dialogue" series. On their [website](#) the organisers of this series also offer many prescient observations about the contemporary state of UK social science. Rather than remarking upon state of the art initiatives, they gloss its theoretical foundations as being "in a state" (see below for the full remark).

"Public support for social research increasingly depends on its ability to deliver scientifically valid and reliable studies to guide policy and practice. The theoretical foundations of social science, however, are in a state. Evidence generated by qualitative

and quantitative methods is more and more seen to be conflicting, open to many interpretations, and lacking in scientific objectivity" (Methods in Dialogue Seminar Series 2005, p1) [55]

The purpose of this review has been to highlight some of the many ways in which UK social scientists are striving to meet the demands made of them to produce relevant, worthwhile research that is likely to have an appreciable impact on people's lives and society at large. It has further aimed to highlight efforts where researchers do not merely recycle taken for granted assumptions about what constitutes valid and reliable evidence. Hence, it is in sympathy with the view that social scientists need to be properly engaged with the ongoing challenge posed by conflicting interpretations and frequently presumed lack of scientific objectivity. [56]

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