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Conference Report:

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Circles within Circles—Qualitative Methodology and the Arts: The Researcher as Artist. Dylan Thomas Centre, Swansea, UK, September 19-20 2006, organised by Frances Rapport, School of Medicine, Swansea University, UK

Key words: new qualitative methodologies, process, representation, arts-based methodology, narrative-based methodology, redefined methodology, the arts

Abstract: This short report describes a qualitative research colloquium in Swansea, UK, supported by AstraZeneca. The meeting was chaired by Frances RAPPORT and Paul WAINWRIGHT and was attended by 40 participants, representing a range of professional and academic backgrounds from the UK and beyond. The colloquium, built on the idea of links between new qualitative methodologies and the arts, sought to explore what happens when researchers and artists talk to one another; the premise was that qualitative research and the arts have much in common. Presentations from qualitative methodologists and artists were scheduled to run in parallel with one another. Artists and researchers were encouraged to discuss their work in terms of the productive process and expressive representation and to share applications and ideas. Recurrent themes centred on form, structure, content and meaning. The message that emerged from the two days was that the artistic creative process and qualitative research are inextricably bound up with these concerns. Artist and researcher take experience and seek to translate it into a form that others can in turn experience and interpret. This requires an engagement on the part of researcher and artist, a commitment to being truthful rather than being on a quest for truth. Qualitative research and the creative or performative process thus have strong similarities, of process and outcome. However, there are also fundamental differences in the social complexities of the two practices, their goals and purposes, and the intentions that lie behind them. Nevertheless, artists, performers and qualitative researchers appear to have much in common and the possibilities for future collaborations of this kind look very exciting.

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1. An Emerging "Edgelands" in Qualitative Inquiry

This brief report describes events at a recent qualitative research colloquium in Swansea, UK. The historic building where the event was held, the Dylan Thomas Centre, on the Swansea Waterfront, houses a museum dedicated to the life of the well known Welsh writer, together with conference facilities and a performance space. The colloquium was supported financially, in part, by AstraZeneca and took place over two days. The sessions were chaired by Frances RAPPORT and Paul WAINWRIGHT and the event was attended by 40 participants, representing a range of professional and academic backgrounds from the UK and beyond. [1]

The starting point for the colloquium was the idea that there is an emerging *edgelands* in qualitative inquiry; a space between established and new methods where new approaches are being developed, new theories examined, and new ways of asking and answering questions formed (RAPPORT, F. WAINWRIGHT & ELWYN, 2005). Defined as "New Qualitative Methodologies" (RAPPORT, N., 2004), these do not conform to neatly regulated patterns of events or outcomes. Rather, they argue for a relaxation of the rigid frameworks around data collection, the presentation of results and the interpretation of findings. By extending the boundaries, research can be a process of discovery, encouraging the unexpected, seeking fresh insights and theoretical perspectives and alternative epistemic positions from which to view the world. This broadening of qualitative methodologies does not simply offer adjuncts to more traditional data collection approaches, or ploys to elicit data in different ways. Rather, it presents alternative epistemic positions from which to view the world, in which the research process is a process of discovery. Those working at the *edgelands* of qualitative methodology concentrate on that process of discovery and retain a sense of the unknown, whereby the researcher takes personal responsibility for research findings, irrespective of the views of others. Arriving at a conclusive endpoint is secondary to the search for one and leaving nothing to chance is seen as counter productive to creativity. As N. RAPPORT (2004, pp.100-101) has commented:

> "For something to be true in human life, does it have to be observably replicated or replicatable (quantitative); and does a sample of events of the same kind have to be taken into account so that the representativeness of the new information can be ascertained? Alternatively, can one accept something is true if observed only by one person on one occasion (qualitative), both the manner of observation and the nature of the thing observed precluding replication? Indeed, can something be imagined to be true if it is unique, its own kind, and while implicated in other things is not them and not like them?" [2]

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This valuing of the subjective nature of particular experience is something that seems to be common to the creative arts and to qualitative research. [3]

2. Linking New Qualitative Methodologies and the Arts

The colloquium built on this idea, of commonalities between qualitative research and the arts, focusing on links between new qualitative methodologies and the arts to explore what happens when researchers and artists, talk to one another. The colloquium was premised on the suggestion that qualitative research and the arts have much in common. Like the arts, which "could not be done by rote or reduced to patterns of thoughtless habit" (WAINWRIGHT, 2005 p.84), new qualitative methodologies are dependent on the skill and ingenuity of the researcher. Like the arts, new qualitative methodologies have developed out of a variety of influences including, linguistics, music, and literature. Most particularly, the objective of the colloquium was to concentrate on two aspects of commonality: process and representation. Process, because for artists and researchers alike, the central feature of their work and their lives is the creative process, the engagement with the materials of their craft, and in this respect the process may be as important as any end product; it is in the process of creation that the artistry resides. Representation, for artists and researchers alike, is an essential consideration of how best to represent social reality—to represent what has been discovered to others, and to re-present the creative process (RAPPORT, N., 1994). These two aspects encapsulate the spectrum of activities in which artists and researchers alike are involved. [4]

2.1 The presenters

To examine these aspects, presentations from qualitative methodologists and artists were scheduled to run in parallel with one another. Artists and researchers were encouraged to discuss their work in terms of the productive process and expressive representation, encouraging the sharing of applications and ideas. The presenters, in order of appearance, were:

- Nigel RAPPORT—Social Anthropologist, holding the Canada Research Chair in Globalization and Justice at Concordia University, Montreal, Canada. RAPPORT gave a paper entitled: "A fetish for classification: fashioning identities in the context of the hospital" (published as RAPPORT, N., 2007).
- Paula GARDINER—Jazz musician and Head of Jazz Studies at the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama, Cardiff University, Cardiff, UK. GARDINER performed and discussed two improvisations in jazz based on different musical themes.
- Andrew SPARKES—Director of the Qualitative Research Unit in the School of Health and Sport Sciences, Exeter University, UK. SPARKES presented a paper entitled: "Researchers as artful storytellers: transgressing boundaries as its consequences".

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- Ballet RUSSE—The Russian Dance Company performed: Blind Girl from the "Choreographic Miniatures" of Leonid Jakobson (1904-1975) and a traditional Russian dance.
- Les TODRES—Clinical Psychologist and Professor of Qualitative Research and Psychotherapy and Kate GALVIN—Chair in Health Research and Head of Research at the Institute of Health and Community Studies, Bournemouth University, UK, discussed the topic: "Invitation to resonance: embodied interpretation".
- Clive HICKS-JENKINS—Artist, winner of the Gulbenkian Welsh Art Prize 1999 and winner of a Creative Wales Award 2002 talked about his painting of the Mari Lwyd and talked about "Drawings from the edge: mapping Trevor's death".
- Kip JONES—Reader in Health Related Social Science at Bournemouth University, UK. JONES offered a performative social scientific presentation on "Arts-based research: auto-ethnography using an arts-based response".
- Allison JAMES—Professor of Sociology at the University of Sheffield, UK, presented the paper: "Talking, walking and working: reflections on research with children". [5]

In the rest of this report we will give an overall impression of the ideas discussed and the questions raised. This is not a verbatim record but reflects thoughts and conversations that may have happened before or since the colloquium and tries to develop themes and ideas to support our claim of a close relationship between the creative arts and the qualitative research process. [6]

2.2 Structure, content and meaning

Several presenters talked about form, structure, content, and meaning, in different combinations and relationships: form or structure, of experience and of data, content of both, meaning of both. These combinations and relationships appear to be the concerns of both artist and researcher. Translation and interpretation are what we all do constantly—how else could we be in the world, have social interactions or carry on conversations?—but researcher and artist take experience, their own and others', and through translation and interpretation turn it into something else, some representation, which is then available to others, either as a fleeting and ephemeral creation (music, dance) or as a more lasting creation such as a paper, a poem, a book, a play, a painting or drawing, or a film. [7]

Much research from the qualitative or quantitative domain is about looking for similarities. In quantitative studies the objective is explicitly to determine how many times a (supposedly) identical event occurs, or how many people react in the same way to the same thing, while much qualitative work looks for commonalities, for shared experience. The problem is that assumptions of sameness may be based on a false understanding of the world. N. RAPPORT quoted George DEVEREUX: "The simple fact is, as a Roman commonsense psychologist pointed out long ago, "Si bis faciunt idem non est idem" (If two people do the same thing it is not the same thing)" (which made us think: and if

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two people say the same thing it is not the same thing either). RAPPORT talked of "The individual projecting himself" and of "The art of self expression", claiming that "This self-projection is a thing of beauty and of power" (see RAPPORT, N. 2007). He also quoted from Virginia WOOLF's 1938 essay on modern fiction. RAPPORT shared only a brief quotation, but the section of the essay from which he quoted seems to provide a useful critique of much academic writing, as well as of the novelists of whom WOOLF was writing, so we will expand the reference here. Complaining about recent and contemporary (i.e. early 20th century) novelists, WOOLF commented:

> "If we fasten, then, one label on all these books [she refers to books by "Mr. Wells, Mr. Bennett, and Mr. Galsworthy"], on which is one word materialists, we mean by it that they write of unimportant things; that they spend immense skill and immense industry making the trivial and the transitory appear the true and the enduring." (p.187) [8]

In labelling Wells, Bennett and Galsworthy materialists WOLFE suggests that "[i]t is because they are concerned not with the spirit but with the body that they have disappointed us" (p 185). The parallel with research might be that any approach that takes a materialist view and that depends on counting likenesses and similarities must be concerned with the body rather than the spirit. From Frances BACON onwards the spirit has, explicitly, been off limits to researchers adopting the values of science. [9]

Of the novel, WOOLF writes that she asks, as she finishes reading a book "Is it worth while? What is the point of it all?" (p.187) She goes on:

> "Can it be that, owing to one of those little deviations which the human spirit seems to make from time to time, Mr. Bennett has come down with his magnificent apparatus for catching life just an inch or two on the wrong side? Life escapes; and perhaps without life nothing else is worth while." (pp.187-188) [10]

What WOOLF seeks in the novel is, she admits, rather vague but she argues that "the form of fiction most in vogue more often misses than secures the thing we seek. Whether we call it life or spirit, truth or reality, this, the essential thing, has moved off, or on, and refuses to be contained any longer in such ill-fitting vestments as we provide" (p.188). But she comments:

> "[W]e go on perseveringly, conscientiously, constructing our two and thirty chapters after a design which more and more ceases to resemble the vision in our minds. So much of the enormous labour of proving the solidity, the likeness to life, of the story is not merely labour thrown away but labour misplaced to the extent of obscuring and blotting out the light of the conception. The writer seems constrained, not by his own free will but by some powerful and unscrupulous tyrant who has him in thrall, to provide a plot, to provide comedy, tragedy, love interest, and an air of probability embalming the whole so impeccable that if all his figures were to come to life they would find themselves dressed down to the last button of their coats in the fashion of the hour. The tyrant is obeyed; the novel is done to a turn. But sometimes, more and

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> more often as time goes by, we suspect a momentary doubt, a spasm of rebellion, as the pages fill themselves in the customary way. Is life like this? Must novels be like this?" (pp.188-189) [11]

If a writer could write what he chose, basing his work "upon his own feeling and not upon convention", there would, comments WOOLF, "be no plot, no comedy, no tragedy, no love interest or catastrophe in the accepted style ... Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end" (p.189). WOOLF suggests that "the task of the novelist to convey this varying, this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit, whatever aberration or complexity it may display, with as little mixture of the alien and external as possible?" (p.189) The problem with so much research is that it does attempt to portray life as "a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged" (p.189), conveying the "unknown and uncircumscribed spirit" with its aberration and complexity is historically not only something that researchers have failed to do, it is something they have actively sought not to do. It was against this context that Nigel RAPPORT talked about his study of the working lives of hospital porters and our obsession with classification. [12]

2.3 Classification

RAPPORT said:

> "I am intent on giving testimony to the experience of the individual in social milieux, the way in which the individual projects himself or herself into cultural symbologies for the purpose of expressing meaning, maintaining world-views, fulfilling ambitions ... This self-projection is a thing of beauty and of power. I want aesthetically to celebrate that achievement in my anthropological writing; I want morally to secure the right to that self-expression; I want ontologically to understand the human capacities for this ongoing individual construction of self and world. Here is anthropology as a liberal and literary science whose cornerstone is a recognition of human freedom: the right to live in terms of individual capacities for fashioning personal life-projects." [13]

This paper seemed to set the scene perfectly for what was to follow; setting up what turned out to be recurring themes about the way people express themselves, interpret their own and others' experiences and communicate their understanding. [14]

2.4 Levels of knowledge and ignorance

Paula GARDINER, taking questions following a piece of jazz improvisation on double bass, talked of levels of knowledge and ignorance. There was, she suggested, "Unconscious ignorance / Conscious ignorance / Unconscious knowledge / Conscious knowledge" and her objective when playing was to get to the unconscious knowledge and to bring it somehow to consciousness. This involved trying to play truthfully ("it is something you feel and your body knows when you have got it"), which in turn involved the possibility of approaching a

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certain kind of truth, something that one felt in the body as much as heard. Someone asked, given that the piece was a spontaneous improvisation, how GARDINER knew when to stop. The answer was "good taste". [15]

2.5 Analysing others' stories

Andrew SPARKES talked about research as analysis of other people's stories, pointing out that once a researcher takes stories and analyses them, they become different stories, which, even though this can only take us so far in our understanding, we should not wish to reject these stories or close them down. The researcher can thus be seen as a storyteller, and the reader is allowed the freedom to interpret. This brought to mind for us the work of Byron GOOD (1994), who talks abut medical narratives and reader response theory: we read or hear the stories that we create, taking the materials we are presented with but doing our own emplotment, fleshing out the characters, viewing the data through our own filters. Recognising these inescapable facts, SPARKES discussed the idea of using fictional forms to convey factual data or introducing fictional elements to convey a kind of truth, blurring boundaries between forms to convey truth without being explicitly factual. We might imagine the facts, as N. RAPPORT has remarked elsewhere (RAPPORT, N., 2003; see also WAINWRIGHT & RAPPORT, 2005) even if someone imagines something this is a kind of truth. The remainder of Andrew SPARKES' presentation was a reading of a fictionalised account of the trials and tribulations of a department head of a British university grappling with preparations for the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE). Though adopting fictional forms, this conveyed a powerful sense of embodiment within the RAE culture and captured the moral distress experienced by many academics in similar situations. [16]

2.6 Interpretation and expression of experience

Following Andrew SPARKES the delegates were entertained by the Ballet Russe, a Swansea-based company who dance traditional Russian ballet. Before the performance, the colloquium participants had a fascinating presentation by one of the members of the company, who explained something of the different traditions of classical ballet. This was followed by two miniatures, the first the Blind Girl from the "Choreographic Miniatures" of Leonid JAKOBSON (1904-1975) and the second a traditional folk dance. The Blind Girl was particularly effective as an example of interpretation and expression of experience. Neither the dancer nor any of the colloquium participants were blind, but one felt an instant recognition of the difficulties of moving without vision in a strange environment, relying on the care and support of one's sighted companion. [17]

2.7 Embodied interpretation

Les TODRES and Kate GALVIN talked about their approach to qualitative data analysis using embodied interpretation, drawing heavily from ideas of poetic form. They began with a reference to Pablo NERUDA's poem "Poetry". NERUDA wrote: "... Poetry arrived / in search of me. I don't know, I don't know where / it

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came from, from winter or a river. / I don't know how or when, / no, they were not voices, they were not / words, not silence ...". TODRES and GALVIN's use of a poetic approach reflects the challenge that faces the qualitative researcher, to find words to convey to others the content and form of experience. As NERUDA described, "I did not know what to say, my mouth / had no way / with names / my eyes were blind ...". TODRES and GALVIN are seeking an aesthetic phenomenology, an embodied and evocative interpretation, an empathic use of language with aesthetic standards, such as the use of words that open rather than close in order to "experience homecoming". When asked what kind of language, they described language "based on immersion in the world", continuing, they suggested that "language must be open enough so that people can uniquely find themselves in the language". Language is evocative and encourages us to aspire to "the excess of words and more than words can say". [18]

TODRES and GALVIN's work draws heavily from the ideas of the philosopher and psychotherapist Eugene GENDLIN. GENDLIN's work is about ways of thinking about and engaging with the implicit, what he calls a "philosophy of entry into the implicit". Our feelings and intuitions reside within the body, so for GENDLIN we need to pay attention to how the body knows, how thinking comes from language and feeling "*the more*" (the felt sense), and how important it is to examine the relationship between words and "their felt complexity in the body". Although the approach originated in psychotherapy it has been taken up in other areas, including creative writing. Les TODRES and Kate GALVIN are working towards a practice of body-based hermeneutics which involves being present to the stories and alive to meanings in the data. They ended their session by sharing some analysis of data from care-givers of people with dementia. [19]

2.8 Making sense of art

Clive HICKS-JENKINS is a distinguished artist living and working in Wales. Although now best known as a painter, HICKS-JENKINS began his career as an actor, dancer and choreographer, so he brought a wide range of artistic experience to the colloquium. HICKS-JENKINS talked about a series of works called "The Mari Lwyd", depicting a figure from Welsh folklore, but one that had particular significance in the life and death of his father, Trevor. HICKS-JENKINS had brought one work from the series, entitled "The Second Fall", and talked at length about his creative life as an artist, his relationship with his father and his father's eventual death. For HICKS-JENKINS, the Mari Lwyd, which he drew from his "own knowledge", was "a turbulent construct of ideas leading to a point". The Mari Lwyd left its folk roots as it became more central to his work, becoming in the words of Picasso, "A form of magic designed as a mediator between this strange hostile world and us: a way of seizing the power by giving form to our terrors, as well as our desires" (HICKS-JENKINS, 2002, unpag.). HICKS-JENKINS spoke about the need to allow people to make sense of the genesis of a piece of art for themselves. He suggested that there should be many possibilities to make sense of an art work and that we should resist the notion of one truth. In this respect, HICKS-JENKINS remarked, "this is what you are being given, you can make of it what you will". [20]

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2.9 Creative play

Kip JONES led the participants in a session of creative play. He had supplied a range of art materials, pens, coloured paper, magazines for cutting up and lots of glue. By the end of the allotted time the delegates had a fine collection of art works tacked to the walls of the seminar room, each one conveying something of the person and his or her experience of the meeting. These ranged from Haiku, to cut-ups, to sketches and drawings, and even to dance steps. The dance was then performed by its creator, complete with an explanatory discourse on the dance-vocabulary of swing. Many of the images, together with other pictures from the colloquium, can be viewed on-line. [21]

2.10 The ethnographic moment

Allison JAMES began the final session with a quotation from Antoine de SAINT EXUPÉRY who, in *The Little Prince*, reminds us that children must have forbearance for adults because: "Grown-ups never understand anything by themselves, and it is tiresome for children to be always and forever explaining things to them". As an ethnographer interested in working with children (as opposed to working on children) JAMES described "just talking—having conversations" with children, conversations that may often be accidental. She bases her work on accidental conversations, unheard conversations, ignored conversation; and conversations that by their very nature "obliterate" others from a social map in order to clarify "how we feature on the social landscape". JAMES explored the way in which children take part in what she describes as a style of ethnographic walking: expeditions with children around the places they know, an embodied ethnography, allowing children to show their world. This was discussed in terms of being drawn into others' activities and described as a useful means of being shown what the world is like from a child's view point. JAMES defined this as being "drawn into an ethnographic moment". She gave some moving examples from her own research, illustrating the value of sitting with children and being drawn into the ethnographic moment, allowing events to occur spontaneously which may only with hindsight reveal their real importance. [22]

3. Engaging With Meaning

We began this report by drawing attention to the recurrent themes of form, structure, content, and meaning. The powerful message that emerged from the two days was that both the artistic creative process and the qualitative research process are inextricably bound up with these concerns. Artist and researcher take experience and seek to translate it into a form that others can in turn experience and interpret. This requires an engagement on the part of researcher and artist, a commitment to being truthful rather than a quest for truth. The practice of qualitative research and the creative or performative process in artistic practice thus have strong similarities, in terms of both process and outcome. However, this is not to say that they are the same thing, and in particular not to say that qualitative research is some variant of the fine arts. There are fundamental differences in what we might call, after Alasdair MACINTYRE (1997), the social complexities of the two

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practices, their goals or purposes, the intentions that lie behind them. Nevertheless, artists, performers and qualitative researchers appear to have much in common and the possibilities for future collaborations of this kind look very exciting. [23]

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