

## Approaches to democratising qualitative research methods

Qualitative Research  
2017, Vol. 17(3) 271–277  
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DOI: 10.1177/1468794117706869  
journals.sagepub.com/home/qrj



Voices advocating radical challenges to traditional research practice and to our conceptions of how and what sort of knowledge is generated by researchers, have grown louder over the past decades. They have questioned the model of research that positions the people who are the focus of study as subjects, and those who research them as experts who can analyse and evaluate. They have called for a fundamental transformation of the nature of research, to centre alternative perspectives and ways of knowing, to reset research agendas around issues that are important to those who have been pushed to the societal margins, and to research those issues collaboratively.

Advocates of these approaches have found a wider academic audience internationally, not least among qualitative researchers. The democratisation of research has been identified as one of the key methodological challenges of the 21st century (Crow, 2012). Reasons put forward for a transformation of conventional paradigms in qualitative and other research processes are ethical, political and pragmatic. They range across projects to address social justice and transform society (e.g. Mertens, 2009). Such endeavours encompass principles of democratic dialogue and participatory equality for all those involved in setting agendas for and practising research (e.g. Gustavsen, 2001) and the empowerment of those who are treated as the subjects of research. Other rationales concern cultural appropriateness and validity (e.g. Kirkhart, 2005). They also stretch to instrumental considerations around the recruitment of research participants and the need for research to demonstrate that it has an impact (Crow, 2010). These sorts of ideas about the transformation of research may also be linked to theorising about ‘democratisation’ since the mid-20th century, identifying the emergence of expectations of equal relationships and choices in lifestyles, coupled with calls for ‘dialogic democracy’ involving consultation and participation in decision-making within society generally (e.g. Beck and Beck Gernsheim, 2002; Giddens, 1992, 1998). These societal shifts may be echoed in the practice of social research.

This special issue of *Qualitative Research* brings together articles exploring the challenges posed both by, and for, the disruption of conventional research practice and implementation of democratic, transformative and collaborative knowledge production. Contributors reflect on the conduct of their research projects and on methodological issues in different international and local contexts. The special issue covers a range of alternative approaches to conventional research paradigms, aiming to promote dialogue between them. In this editorial we lay out the shared endeavours, but also the

distinctions in the democratising research philosophies included in this special issue. We also point to some of the opportunities and challenges that may be on the horizon for transformative qualitative research methodologies.

## **Approaches and contents**

A range of emancipatory, and primarily qualitative, approaches to research that include and prioritise the values and practices of marginalised and colonised groups have emerged internationally, and begun to mature. These approaches seek not only to change conventional relations of engagement in the research process, but also to transform fundamentally the whole nature of research, in terms of what counts as knowledge and who produces, owns, uses and benefits from it, with implications beyond that for wider social relations. Such epistemologies and practices have had to establish themselves largely in isolation from each other, with exponents focusing on the struggle to develop and legitimise their methodological approaches.

This special issue brings together some alternative qualitative research methodologies that, while they have quite different foundations, share a common aim of disrupting the imbalances of power between researcher and researched. Their underlying philosophies bring insight to bear on shared sets of questions around who owns the research issues, who initiates them, in whose interests the research is carried out, who has control of research, how power relations and decisions are negotiated in creating knowledge, who the research is for, what counts as knowledge, who is transformed by it, and whose is the authorial voice? The contributors to the special issue, who are all leading scholars in their international field, address these sorts of issues, drawing on their practice of alternative approaches.

The epistemologies and methodologies included here encompass four distinct but linked, sets of approaches: inclusive, co-production, decolonising/indigenous and feminist ethics of care.

### *Inclusive methodologies*

Inclusive research is an umbrella terms encompassing participatory and emancipatory philosophies where people who are the focus of the research are involved in its design and conduct. The methodological approach aims to ensure that the research is of concern and benefit to the research participants, reaches and represents their grounded knowledge, and treats them with respect (e.g. Nind, 2014; Walmsley and Johnson, 2003). Within this vein, Melanie Nind's (University of Southampton, UK) contribution to the special issue considers the challenges for inclusive qualitative research practice through a focus on a collaborative partnership project involving academic researchers and people with learning disabilities.

### *Co-production methodologies*

Co-production research denotes an engaged scholarship, where researchers and participants collaborate to design, conduct and disseminate research. The approach disrupts

normative methodological practice with the aim of ensuring relevant research impact (e.g. Durose et al., 2011; Martin, 2010). In this issue, Helen Kara (weresearchit, UK) uses autoethnography to look at the relationship between activists and researchers. She raises difficult issues about identity and power in co-produced activist research. Umut Erel (Open University, UK) and colleagues provide another viewpoint on co-production through reflections on their use of participatory theatre methods to challenge imbalances of power between participants and researchers, and more broadly.

### *Decolonising/indigenous methodologies*

Decolonising and indigenous research is a movement across colonised countries that aims to detach what counts as knowledge, its production and how it is used, from imperialism. The methodological approach seeks to create a space for different ways of knowing through the use of methods that are meaningful to indigenous peoples as experts on their lives and environments (e.g. Chilisa, 2012; Kovach, 2009; Smith, 2012). Here, Helen Moewaka Barnes and colleagues (Massey University, New Zealand) explore 'go along' visual methods for placing the indigenous Māori concept of *wairua* (spirit or spirituality) at the centre of research approaches; and Bagele Chilisa and colleagues (University of Botswana) address an African-based relational approach to community engagement in the research process utilising oral traditions and processes.

### *Feminist ethics of care methodologies*

Feminist ethics of care promotes a situated research approach as an activity involving attention to relationships and responsibilities in specific context. As a methodology it pushes beyond normative principles and abstracted notions of practice to place care at the heart of research practice (e.g. Edwards and Mauthner, 2012; Gilligan et al., 2003). In this special issue, Tula Brannelly (University of Southampton, UK) and Amohia Boulton (Whakauae, New Zealand) pull out some of the knotty issues faced where indigenous and non-indigenous researchers work together in colonised contexts, and the application of a feminist ethics of care to address colonial power dynamics and support participatory practice.

Brannelly and Boulton's explicit consideration of the use of ethics of care as a methodology to negotiate participatory approaches within a postcolonial context indicates the potential cohesion between approaches to democratic qualitative methods. Indeed, our division of methodological approaches above might be seen as arbitrary given the synergies between shared transformative interests. Other contributions to the special issue also point to this, and might be just as easily slotted into one methodological approach as another. For example, Nind's discussion of a collaborative project between academics and people with learning disabilities could be considered a co-productive as much as an inclusive approach. In her influential text on transformative methods, Donna Mertens (2009) offers an overarching 'metaphysical umbrella' that embraces indigenous, inclusive, participatory, democratic, feminist and other alternative approaches to knowledge production. She argues that they have in common basic beliefs and methodological implications in addressing: '(1) the tensions that arise when unequal power relationships surround the investigation of what seem to be intransigent social problems and (2) the strength found in communities when their rights are respected and honored' (p.10).

This commonality may be the case. Equally though it is important not to elide approaches and obscure important and useful distinctions under an umbrella of ‘democratic methods’, as in the overarching title of this special issue. While Chilisa and colleagues’ discussion of an African-based relational paradigm to facilitate community research engagement could, on the surface of it, be viewed as an inclusive as much as a postcolonial/indigenous methodology, this would iron out a crucial difference. While a starting point for inclusive methods is ‘how the world positions who you are’ for marginalised groups such as disabled people, the foundation of postcolonial methods for indigenous peoples will be ‘who are you and where you come from’.<sup>1</sup>

The umbrella term of ‘democratising qualitative methods’ may also be seen as culturally loaded. Western notions of liberal democracy, for example, centre on individual rights to participation in decision-making – with a focus on individuals as ‘owning’ their knowledge about their experiences and on using research methods to enable them to voice it. Such ideas of democratic qualitative methods can sit uncomfortably with the world views of more collective societies, where knowledge about experiences and traditions may be regarded as held by and having implications for the group and environment as a whole, and accountability and responsibility is held in common.

It may then be helpful to envisage the ‘democratising qualitative research methods’ label, not as subsuming inclusive, co-productive, decolonising/indigenous and feminist ethics of care methodologies, but as standing for approaches that intersect, articulate and overlap at points. Within this framework, as well as a collection of discrete articles in a special issue, we have sought to create a space, albeit limited, to make use of the constructive overlaps and frictions across the different ‘democratic’ qualitative methods. In the spirit of collaborative dialogue at the heart of these methodological approaches, each of the contributors to the special issue has contributed to a final reflective commentary on our editorial and the broad field of ‘democratising qualitative methods’ from the perspective of the particular epistemological and methodological approach they have discussed. Such exchanges of views around synergies and divergences may have a role to play in the future of democratised qualitative methods, knowledge production and use.

## **Opportunities and challenges on the horizon**

At the start of this editorial we noted the identification of democratic research practice as a key methodological challenge. There are, however, developments in the context for social research that may raise challenges for its pursuit. In other words, just as transformative approaches have begun to mature, they may also face new opportunities and challenges that sit alongside longer-standing practices of marginalisation. Here we flag up two topical developments that create critical tensions for alternative approaches to research methodologies, knowledge production and knowledge use.

One of these developments is the context of austerity, with constrained resources for research across a range of public and third sector research funders. The result is often an increased focus on policy-driven priority research areas and particular sorts of evidence knowledge on the part of funding bodies and services. Such developments may marginalise alternative, democratic, qualitative research approaches or co-opt them for instrumental effectiveness, just as much as they may open up spaces

for disrupting hierarchies and transforming knowledge production and engagement. Nikki Hayfield and colleagues (2014) review the need for shifts towards less resource intensive qualitative methods in an age of austerity, while Max Haiven and Alex Khasnabish (2014) argue the necessity of what they refer to as pre-figurative research – research that starts to imagine what research might look like in a ‘revolutionary world-to-come’ and enacts it in the present – when an age of austerity individualises expectations of escape from marginality and precarity.

The other development is the increasing availability and use of big data and computer technologies in social research, where the background frameworks structuring what knowledge gets collected and how it is analysed may cut across democratising qualitative approaches, just as much as open access and the extent of the data available may serve transformative purposes.

Big data are considered the ‘new’ methods (Burrows and Savage, 2014). They blur the boundaries of qualitative and quantitative research, promising qualitative analysis on a scale previously usual to quantitative work with large digital datasets. The potential (and seduction) of big data is the scale and availability of large sets of data that may be analysed for emergent social practices, promising easy access to massive amounts of data. On the one hand, this may make access to data more democratic, with marginalised groups able to obtain material relevant to topics they have identified as important to them, and to engage in analyses with transformative potential. On the other, as commercial enterprises realise the monetary value of the vast and ever increasing information they hold, access to it is shrinking, and social researchers employed in these businesses conduct research outside of the academy. While we certainly face a digital future, it is also certain that we will be faced with increasingly complex decisions and interactions on the digital stage.

Democratisation of research is concerned with ensuring that people who experience marginalisation influence research at every level of the process, to identify what it is that is important to research, and how the community may benefit from involvement. Big data is not contextualised, and opportunities for democratic research that are informed by context and experience are removed. Democratising methodologies immerse researchers within communities, undertaking relational work up close. Big data, on the other hand, has been described as a gaze from 30,000 feet (boyd and Crawford, 2011). Yet big data gives the illusion of being produced ‘in the wild’, as providing unmediated and direct access to people’s beliefs and experiences, when in fact it is just as socially mediated and constrained as any other form of data (Tinati et al., 2014). Collecting data without consent has obvious implications for research ethics, (boyd and Crawford, 2011), but also for the veracity of the data for research purposes (Elliott, 2016). Proponents seek to de-theorise and de-philosophise research, with emphasis on behaviours, relegating the need for interpretations of human experience and generation of social theory, pertinent to much social research.

In this new future, as yet there is a lack of specific reference to how inclusive or coproduced research will fit. Researchers are encouraged to work alongside computer scientists to create algorithms to pursue more sophisticated analysis where computers suggest patterns in data sets that may be of interest for researchers to investigate (Elliott, 2016). Dana boyd and Kate Crawford (2011) identify that the computational

turn in data collection and analysis are creating new methods in knowing and defining social life, and that these new ways of knowing need to be critiqued for their limitations as they immerse (Burrows and Savage, 2014). Limitations of big data are rarely acknowledged and representation is claimed by the sheer numbers of individual episodes, not necessarily people.

In this special issue, we have brought together discussions about cutting-edge methodologies created to further the aims of the democratisation of research to reach communities who face constant marginalisation, and who require additional work for their often silenced voices to be heard. The contemporary context throws up new challenges in developing democratic research practices, to extend the reach of the principles that guide transformative, inclusive, co-produced, indigenous and 'care'ful research.

### Acknowledgements

We would like to give our thanks to the reviewers who have made a valuable contribution to this special issue through their supportive (anonymous) comments to authors:

Manulani Aluli-Meyer (Hawaii), Vivienne Bozalek (South Africa), Marion Bowl (UK), Christine Bigby (Australia), Rajan Datta (Canada), Ruth de Souza (Australia), Sara Kindon (New Zealand), Oliver Koenig (Austria), Pranee Liamputtong (Australia), Deborah McGregor (Canada), Peter McKenzie (Australia), Iva Strnadova (Australia), Joan Tronto (USA), Stacey Wilson (New Zealand).

### Note

1. Thanks to Mel Nind for this point.

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