

# 'Close work'

## Doing qualitative research in the voluntary sector

Edited by Pete Alcock and Duncan Scott

Foreword by Cathy Pharoah

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# Foreword

The collection of writings in *'Close Work'* is intended to set an important marker for researchers' commitment to using – and improving – qualitative research to explore the voluntary sector in the UK. The development of this publication over the last two years has run parallel to the emergence of the Voluntary Sector Studies Network (VSSN) as a formally constituted group for researchers engaged in voluntary sector studies. This timing is significant. Like the VSSN itself, *'Close Work'* is the outcome of a great deal of thought amongst leading voluntary sector researchers not only about the appropriate content for voluntary sector studies, but also about the purpose, methods, ethics and audience for such research.

The editors of *'Close Work'* believe that, if the voluntary sector is to be fully illuminated, a range of research approaches is needed to redress what is currently an imbalance. Much of the most influential and best-funded voluntary sector research throughout the 1990s was dominated by an economic paradigm (What is the economic value of the sector? How much does the sector contribute to GDP? How fast is its economy growing?) and was almost exclusively quantitative. CAF has been a

main contributor to the research programme, both through its own work and through funding a major international comparative research programme based at the Johns Hopkins University. But policy makers are clearly now persuaded of the significant economic role of the voluntary sector and, as they invest increasing amounts of money in developing its capacity, are beginning to look for more evidence of the difference it makes to society. The voluntary sector has an informal and complex nature, and is highly engaged with people in many different ways – as members, volunteers, beneficiaries, activists and donors. The use of qualitative research techniques will be increasingly essential if its social meaning and impact are to be grasped.

We hope that this collection of writings will demonstrate to policy makers that qualitative research can bring a deeper and fuller understanding of the voluntary sector on which to base initiatives. We also hope that it will stimulate voluntary sector researchers to use and develop qualitative research techniques further and, in particular, that the publication of this work by VSSN members and associates will represent a catalyst for the emerging activities of the VSSN.

Cathy Pharoah  
Research Director  
CAF

July 2005

# Introduction

*Pete Alcock and Duncan Scott*

This collection of writings describes and discusses forms of qualitative research about voluntary organisations and community groups in Britain. They have been written by academics, researchers in voluntary organisations and independent consultants. The primary audiences are:

- academic researchers, particularly those interested in policy issues
- policy makers in both the public and voluntary sectors
- workers and volunteers in the voluntary and community sectors
- students of social research, social policy and public management.

This is not an instructive text; there exist plenty of general texts in that vein (e.g. Gilbert, 1993; May, 1997) as well as others focusing specifically on qualitative research (e.g. Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995; Silverman, 2000). Nor is it a report of any particular research project on the sector, although each writing is based on discrete pieces of research carried out by its author. Finally, it does not aim to provide any direct guide to policy or practice for policy makers or practitioners, although again the policy and practice implications of the research are addressed in a number of the writings, particularly in Section 3.

Rather, the primary focus of the writings is to illustrate the potential of, and the challenges facing, a range of qualitative research approaches concerned with different aspects of voluntary and community action. The opportunities and challenges of qualitative research are described, and all the writings are rooted in contexts familiar to voluntary organisations and community groups. In part at least, this is because the book has its origins in the discussions about research on the voluntary sector that have been developing for a number of years within the academic voluntary sector community and in the annual research conferences held by the National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO).

Following the production of an earlier book which explored eight themed case studies of different dimensions of voluntary action (Scott et al, 2000), the authors became increasingly concerned that, despite the policy significance of the voluntary sector, relatively few such qualitative studies on the sector had been published. A research workshop at which qualitative research issues could be discussed was therefore organised at the NCVO on 25 April 2002 to follow up the debates initiated at the annual research conferences. Around two dozen researchers presented papers at this workshop, and a selection of these has been edited for this publication by the Charities Aid Foundation (CAF).

## Quantitative research

It has been conventional to think of social research as consisting of two main approaches, the quantitative and the qualitative. The former is particularly concerned with the use of numeric measures of social phenomena to produce generalisable conclusions. To obtain such measures requires the careful use of different forms of sampling and the administration of questionnaires. These facilitate relatively efficient ways of collecting information from large numbers of people, often over wide geographical areas. Aggregate and anonymised data can then be collected for analysis via computer-based statistical packages.

Much research on the voluntary sector has indeed been quantitative. Of that research, the international comparative studies based at Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, USA, are the largest and most prominent (see Salamon and Anheier, 1997; Salamon et al, 1999, Anheier et al, 2001). UK-based quantitative work includes the series of 'Almanacs' produced by NCVO, of which there have been five from 1996 to 2004 (Wilding et al, 2004). These provide basic statistical data on the size and shape of

the voluntary sector, and are innovative in their sub-sections on Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. Equally important are the charity statistics constructed by CAF and published mainly in *Charity Trends*, of which there have been 25 annual editions (Pharoah et al, 2004). These chart the different sources of finance for the voluntary sector, including corporate, state and individual giving. Comparable quantitative research from government can be seen in the Home Office Research, Development and Statistics Directorate and their analysis of the different streams of central government funding (Home Office, 2001).

Policy makers feel comfortable with quantitative research. It can provide 'big pictures' of broad trends and appears to be solid and reliable. But statistics often emerge from very varied response rates; furthermore, questionnaires are frequently misinterpreted by respondents, and are costly to administer and complex to analyse. More broadly, they are unable to capture the differentiated detail and dynamic of social life at organisational, group and individual levels. This is where qualitative research has the potential to contribute.

## Qualitative research

There are encouraging signs that policy makers do now want to explore the uses of qualitative research. It is becoming clear that, whilst social surveys can produce valuable quantitative data, their emphasis on aggregates prevents the consideration of many aspects of contemporary social life. For example, we live in a society in which rapid social changes are taking place. Urban, suburban and rural housing patterns reflect some of these changes, but increasing attention to issues of social cohesion (the salience of racial and ethnic identities, overlain on income and gender inequalities, for example) requires more discriminating research approaches. Qualitative research can claim to offer access and insight into the detailed complexities of different social worlds.

Two recent publications confirm government moves towards more qualitative approaches, at the same time reminding readers of how much more work remains to be done if the policy and practice potential of qualitative research is to be realised. The first of these publications (Murphy et al, 1998) considers the relevance of qualitative research in health assessment. Over twenty pages of references are provided, if only to demonstrate the considerable

body of qualitative work in the health field. Indeed, it is likely that the most developed use of qualitative research approaches – observation and documentary materials rather than just interviews and focus groups – is taking place in the Department of Health (Spencer et al, 2003: 55). Fourteen annotated 'selected studies' are offered as exemplars (Murphy et al, 1998: 261–70), considering such issues as parents' stories about their encounters with health professionals, responses to emotionally disturbed children, and the relevance of both quantitative and qualitative approaches to the study of private and NHS oncology clinics. There are many parallels here for students of voluntary action.

It is important to note recognition of qualitative research as containing the:

*capacity for studying socially meaningful behaviour, holistically, in context and with due attention to the dynamic, processual nature of social events and interactions. (ibid, 6)*

It is also, however, salutary to learn that the 'Gold Standard' in evaluative work remains singularly attached to more quantitative approaches (ibid, 83).

The second publication (Spencer et al, 2003) attempts to identify qualitative evaluation frameworks. From a scan of around 600 government reports, it concludes that only five contain enough relevant detail to allow discussions of their methodological quality. This appears to be an interesting finding in view of the point made above about the Gold Standard. Key conclusions from a more focused scrutiny of around 300 references produce a core two-page bibliography of 29 qualitative evaluation frameworks. The point is made that qualitative criteria are likely to be much more context-specific, implying that theoretically led approaches provide more focused evaluation instruments.

Research evidence, from all traditions and perspectives, is therefore important because of the ways in which it contributes to our understanding of social action in general and policy fields in particular. This is increasingly – and openly – recognised by governments, with their emphasis on evidence-based policy making and the associated slogan 'What Works'. Similarly, research evidence can play a part in the development of voluntary organisations and community groups; and the larger, more formal and national voluntary organisations (such as the NCVO and CAF) often have specialist research sections which carry out and commission policy-orientated research.

Part of the problem about raising the profile and use of qualitative research in relation to voluntary and community sector policy and practice, however, lies in the persistence of simplistic notions of what is involved. Too many people, including some proponents of qualitative approaches, continue to advocate a narrow range of perspectives and techniques. One caricature here is the lone researcher spending successive months slowly gaining access to what is a very limited social landscape. Another rather simplistic view is that qualitative work is synonymous with semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions, often conducted relatively quickly.

Furthermore, despite the range of qualitative approaches identified in the government literature mentioned above, the most popular method identified there was the interview. The need to widen the qualitative portfolio was clear but so too were the implications of widening – namely that observation and participation would require different research competencies. The potential of the whole qualitative field was underlined by a call for ‘support, education and guidance for non-research experts’ (Spencer et al, 2003: 110).

However, over the last few decades, qualitative research has been evolving to become ‘a complex, inter-connected family of terms, concepts and assumptions’ (Denzin and Lincoln, 2003: 3). The qualitative researcher in the first decade of the twenty-first century is likely to employ a larger variety of approaches than their counterpart in the 1970s. At that time, there existed a strong concern to fashion qualitative approaches that would be as close to the quantitative tradition as possible. There was much talk of ‘quasi-statistics’ and ‘grounded theory’. Now, as many as ten overlapping qualitative sub-perspectives are identified (Spencer et al, 2003: 33). For example, the earlier anthropological tradition is often termed ‘ethnography’; there are references to the role of symbols and language (symbolic interactionism, ethnomethodology or constructivism), as well as calls for social criticism from a number of social territories such as feminism, Marxism and cultural studies. Over the relatively short period of time of a decade, some sub-perspectives have evolved and changed, with feminists, for example, concluding that, ‘the democratising potential of qualitative methods may be less justified than was at first hoped’ (Oakley, 1999: 164).

Empirical applications of feminist principles, such as a qualitative study of young women in youth club settings, have thus concluded that attempts by the researchers to make their work participatory are often seen by the subjects as an imposition (Morris et al, 1998: 222). Reactions by the researchers have led to ‘writing without being over-looked’ (ibid: 227). The point of this example is to underline the variety of sub-perspectives and their continuing evolution in response to experience and discussion. Now, the qualitative researcher is not seen in terms of a surveying metaphor (triangulation and trigonometry) but ‘the central image for qualitative inquiry is the crystal not the triangle.’ (Denzin and Lincoln, 2003: 8).

However, the writings in this collection do not fit into one sub-perspective of qualitative research. Nor do they simply ‘represent’ the most recent tendencies. Some aspire to the more traditional qualitative approaches (Halfpenny) whilst others are clearly pre-occupied with ‘emancipation’ (Ledwith) or with de-constructing the multiple qualitative dilemmas (Russell and Scott). All reveal different aspects of the challenges and the potential of qualitative research in furthering our understanding of the complex and dynamic worlds of voluntary and community action.

## Summary

This text cannot claim to be an exhaustive and comprehensive review of qualitative research on the UK voluntary and community sectors. The contributions presented here have resulted in large part from the invitations and responses to the 2002 workshop mentioned above and from the editorial process which has followed from that. These contributions have been grouped within three broad areas, which provide the sections of this collection of writings (see below).

Each of the original contributions was based on recent empirical research and led to a tape-recorded discussion at the workshop. Transcripts were produced from these and were subsequently used by the editors to narrow down a final set of contributors. The editors sought material that contained sufficient empirical content to attract non-research specialist audiences within the voluntary and community sectors, whilst linking it within the broader academic research literature. Collectively, the aim was to bridge the empirical/reflective and

practical/academic divides that have sometimes developed within research in the field – although inevitably most of the individual writings probably fall more squarely into one side or other of these familiar divides.

Although most of the contributions represent chapter-length discussion of research and its implications, some shorter accounts are also included. These shorter accounts point up key issues in a more focused form, as a contrast to the more discursive discussion in the longer essays.

## Structure of the collection

This editors' introduction outlines the origins of the collection and its intended audiences. It is followed by a short account by Peter Halfpenny arguing that quantitative and qualitative approaches should not be seen as polar opposites.

### SECTION 1 – CRAFT

Two different issues associated with doing qualitative research:

- John Glasby and Jill Manthorpe examine the role of historical analysis of the voluntary sector, using the example of the Birmingham Settlement to explore some of the opportunities and challenges posed by historical work.
- Lynne Russell and Duncan Scott examine the research process and discuss how getting physically and socially close in social research settings can be a mixed blessing in practice.

### SECTION 2 – PHILOSOPHICAL, ETHICAL AND POLITICAL ISSUES

Two essays and two shorter accounts describe and discuss some of the issues which affect the design, direction and destination of qualitative research:

- Angela Ellis reflects on research into local participation in rural community development and concludes that 'messy methods' still need analysing.
- A shorter account by Margaret Ledwith explores the question: If research is not neutral, what are the implications of this?

- Katharine Gaskin discusses the process and practice of some of her recent research and reflects on the particular importance of philosophical, ethical and political issues in qualitative research.
- A short account by Rob Macmillan examines material from a study of rural community development projects and considers how the concept of time affects qualitative research.

### SECTION 3 – USE

Two essays and a shorter account consider practical and policy-related aspects of usefulness:

- Paul Robson describes his research on user involvement in the governance and management of voluntary organisations and discusses how the research approach varied and why.
- A shorter account by Colin Rochester focuses on collaboration between voluntary sector practitioners and researchers, based on work with eight organisations in the field of HIV/Aids.
- Pete Alcock looks at the impact of research on policy makers and draws upon qualitative research with an umbrella body to address how policy makers might use research.

Qualitative research consists of a wide range of partially related perspectives and methods, each of which must confront a set of dilemmas (see Hey, 1999: 106–8). It is hoped that the contributions to this book will help all those who do qualitative research on the sector, or who read and use it, to reflect on these dilemmas and even seek to overcome them.

- How do we ensure that our theoretical or explanatory frameworks are clear and central?
- How important is the personal contact in close encounters?
- How do we cope with the practical problems arising from individual and organisational unpredictability?
- How do we address the professional tensions derived from the frequent gap between findings and resources?
- How do we recognise and appropriately address the ethical and political questions latent in all researcher–researched relationships?

# Some uses of the terms 'qualitative' and 'quantitative' in social research

*Peter Halfpenny*

When research is described as 'qualitative', it is commonly contrasted, at least implicitly, with quantitative research. The aim of this short account is to remind readers that these two terms are used to describe a variety of markedly different contrasts and that confusions are therefore rife. Four such different contrasts are described below but there are many others, for example 'descriptive' versus 'analytic', 'relativist' versus 'scientific', 'unstructured' versus 'structured', 'flexible' versus 'fixed'. I have two arguments: first, that many of the contrasts are overstated, especially in research methods textbooks, making sharper distinctions than operate in the actual conduct of social research. The second is that the contrasts do not divide into two distinct sets of social research activities, one qualitative in all respects and the other quantitative throughout. Good social research is more inventive than that. (The argument presented here is not new, of course. See Halfpenny, 1997: 49–64 for a review of some earlier accounts.)

At the simplest level, the contrast is between words and numbers. The important point here is that, as expressions of social research data, both are similar in being reconstructions of a flow of raw experience that requires substantial codification. Transcripts of talk are presented in sentences, transforming the original speech stream into more or less grammatical sequences of words. A process of reduction is involved, stripping off content and context. This might be more dramatic when the end point of the coding process is a number, but the difference is one of degree and not of kind. When deploying either form of data in descriptions or explanations, analysts' interpretations add back in both content and context in order to draw out and make intelligible the patterns in the social world.

At a second level, the contrast is between informal, unstructured methods of data collection and more formal, structured ones. The dividing line is drawn in different places in different texts, for example between participant observation and structured questionnaires, or between semi-structured and structured interviews. This highlights that the distinction is less rigid than is often portrayed. Most procedures through which social research data are collected can be more or less structured. For example, an observer can map who interacts with whom for how long over what issues into a rigid grid, just as a questionnaire can invite respondents to dwell in their own terms on those issues that are most salient to them individually. Moreover, both sorts of data collection – those portrayed as qualitative and those described as quantitative – can produce social research data in the form of numbers and words.

At a third level, the contrast is between the case study and the sample survey. The difference between them is often cast in terms of generalisability, with the claim being that the latter provides grounds for generalising and the former does not. However, it is possible to generalise from a case, for example if it represents a homogeneous population (such as the local branches of a national charity when investigating organisational structure) or if it is an extreme case used to test a hypothesis (for example, a test of the claim that obtaining income from government constrains voluntary organisations' campaigning could be tested by examining one agency receiving a large proportion of its income from government). Conversely, sometimes a sample is not a reliable basis for generalising to the population from which it was drawn, for example if it suffers selection bias or if there is a poor response rate from its constituents (as occur in many surveys

of voluntary organisations' income). There are also studies that start with one case and enlarge to embrace a sample, as cases are added one by one until no further variation between cases is observed (saturation sampling). Moreover, both case studies and sample surveys can be conducted using structured and unstructured methods of data collection, and produce data expressed as numbers and words.

Finally, there is the contrast between approaches, the two relevant ones of which I will label interpretivism and positivism, the former sometimes being described as qualitative and the latter quantitative. It is here that fundamental differences are found, since different approaches to describing and understanding the social world – different explanatory objectives – can be articulated in terms of opposed philosophical presuppositions. Positivism, with its commitment to the unity of science, takes there to be no essential difference between the natural and social worlds, and with its commitment to empiricism, gives experience primacy in grounding knowledge. In contrast, interpretivism separates the natural and social worlds on the basis that the latter is pervaded by meanings in a way that the former is not, and maintains that knowledge of these meanings is derived from more than the evidence of our senses: it is available to us through the process of 'verstehen' (from the German word for 'to understand'). The explanatory objective of positivism is the identification of causal relations between observables, for example the socio-economic determinants of charitable giving, whereas the explanatory objective of interpretivism is understanding the interpretive frameworks through which groups make sense of their interactions, for example, the reciprocity relations embodied in gift-giving.

My second argument is that explanatory approaches do not entail specific generalising strategies or methods of data collection or forms of data. Thus there are *not* two coherent sets:

(I) interpretivism + case study + unstructured methods + words

(P) positivism + sample survey + structured methods + numbers

Confusion reigns when the term 'qualitative' is used to describe all levels in (I) and it is mistakenly assumed that each level entails the others, and when in parallel the term 'quantitative' is used to describe all levels in (P) and it is wrongly assumed that each entails the others. Instead, research can be qualitative in one respect and quantitative in others, and vice versa – inventive social research can mix and match. An interpretivist (qualitative) study of the culture of a community's gift-giving might involve a (quantitative) sample survey using (qualitative) unstructured interviews to produce (quantitative) data coded into numbers. It might, therefore, be better to avoid these confusing catch-all terms 'qualitative' and 'quantitative' or, if they are used, to specify precisely what aspects of research they encapsulate.

If we turn away from simplified schemata presented in methods textbooks – against which my two arguments are directed – to the rich complexity of empirical studies, we find a more blurred picture in which data types, methods of data collection, case studies and surveys, and different approaches are freely and inventively mixed in pursuit of insights into the topics researched. For example, research on the social ties that engender community allegiances in urban areas have varied from large-scale structured surveys to measure networks (Fischer, 1982) to local ethnographic case studies (Whyte, 1943) yet both contain qualitative and quantitative elements, in some senses of those terms. Combining these elements in one study is far from unusual, as is illustrated by a study of the impact of contracts on volunteers which very effectively mixed detailed case studies of 15 voluntary agencies, a structured questionnaire sent to 360 agencies and in-depth interviews with 12 senior officers in order to provide a rounded picture of the contract culture (Russell and Scott, 1997). Only a fine-grained description of the methods used, which delves behind the simplistic application of the terms 'qualitative' or 'quantitative', enables one to fully assess how soundly grounded are the results of the research.

# Section 1: Craft

# The use and abuse of history: researching the voluntary sector through case-study analysis

*Jon Glasby and Jill Manthorpe*

Methodological and practical issues when undertaking case studies of the voluntary sector form the focus of this essay. A number of the other contributors to this book set out the potential for case studies to illuminate organisational structures and dynamics, and the choice of case study methods has a long and influential tradition in the social sciences in the UK and in the United States in particular. However, this approach can be too simplistic, with insufficient analysis or reflection. In this essay, we draw on our own experiences and the work of others to explore the dimensions of case study research in this area.

The essay concentrates on case studies that take a historical perspective. This presents particular challenges:

- In theory, a case study approach uses a wide variety of sources and data. However, over the years, the volume of material and personnel available may be reduced as documents are lost and people move on.
- A case study approach may expose and clarify the dynamics of a group or organisation. However, over time these may be forgotten or reinterpreted.
- Case studies may be particularly helpful when organisations seek to understand their own positions, and this may assist in their reformation, as the shorter account by Rochester in this volume testifies. Nonetheless, dialogue with those who have moved on may be difficult or impossible, and the potential for influence through the use of historical evidence may be limited or impractical.
- Although, as Alcock suggests, in his essay later in this collection, case studies may enable the capture of outcomes and impact that are intangible, case studies drawing on the past may

never be able to construct such evidence.

- Finally, one of the real difficulties with case study work from the past is that the voices of users of services and those of other local people are often never recorded, and so are lost forever.

This essay employs as exemplars research carried out in Birmingham for a centenary history of the Birmingham Settlement (Glasby, 1999) and in Hull for a 40th anniversary celebration of the work of the Hull University Social Services Organisation (HUSSO) (Manthorpe, 2002). The essay is organised around three main themes:

- The application of a rigorous historical approach using case study material from the past
- Interpretations of the past and its ideologies
- A consideration of the craft of historical research.

We start, however, with a brief summary of the main messages from the two pieces of research mentioned above and how the historical analysis employed in each helps to illuminate the present.

## THE BIRMINGHAM SETTLEMENT

Research into the history of the Birmingham Settlement (Glasby, 1999) was commissioned to celebrate the Settlement's centenary in September 1999. Founded in an impoverished area of Birmingham's inner city by a group of upper-class women active in the city's sizeable voluntary sector, the Settlement developed from a small-scale local concern into a major social agency with a large budget and considerable experience of poverty issues. As its archived records and local historical studies reveal, its origins lay in providing accommodation for

five people and in six small projects with an estimated annual running cost of £250.

Current documentation shows the Settlement is now a large and influential organisation with 120 members of staff, 250 volunteers and 24 projects ranging from children's services to day care for older people, from community-based training to employment support and from debt advice to energy efficiency. It has an annual turnover of £3 million. In addition to its focus on the local community, records show an unfolding of works across the city, nationally and sometimes even internationally, with the aim of supporting those in poverty, developing effective ways of overcoming social disadvantage and helping people help themselves. In the process, its papers provide evidence of involvement in a series of collaborative projects, working in partnership (before the term was so fashionable) with local people and the general public, with the voluntary and private sectors, to develop new responses to previously unmet needs. The archives reveal that on several occasions a number of ventures went on to become independent organisations in their own right, receiving support from the Settlement until they were sufficiently strong to be able to function independently. Since 1999, the material from this study has been used to produce a centenary history of the Settlement, which not only raised money for the centenary appeal but also helped staff to understand the nature and heritage of their organisation and celebrate its achievements. At the same time, material has also been used for academic purposes in a University PhD on the role and nature of voluntary action and in comparative research exploring trends in the UK and US voluntary sectors (Glasby, unpub.; Rogers and Glasby, 2001).

## HULL UNIVERSITY SOCIAL SERVICES ORGANISATION (HUSSO)

Smaller in size and scope, but similarly complex, the history of HUSSO reveals a student-led organisation, its origins only partially accessible through the memories and personal mementoes of its founder. As the early minutes and press clippings reveal, students at this medium-sized university began to organise themselves as volunteers in the 1960s and participated in a range of community activities in inner-city deprived Hull, such as

painting and decorating or visiting isolated older people. Its annual reports and the memories of those who were volunteers demonstrate the growth of volunteers' activities over the years, with student volunteers participating in sport and leisure activities, in educational work, in holiday schemes and refugee support. They also reveal the drawing back from some activities, such as welfare rights work and (temporarily) prison visiting, and the difficulties of finding volunteers at times or of sustaining their commitment. Relationships with other agencies in the city appear, from the records, to have been closer at some times than at others, but this is only evident (and is thus one-sided) from the HUSSO records. The documents and personal recollections also reveal some periods of tension between the local student group and what emerged later as a national umbrella of student community action groups. This was partially confirmed by a visit to the national organisation of student community action groups, although its records of past correspondence with local groups were very limited. Nonetheless, this historical overview reveals a picture of a small voluntary organisation that has involved thousands of young people as volunteers and, from the accounts of its organisers, was instrumental in inspiring among some of them a desire to work in welfare or public services or to continue as volunteers. From a survey of university teaching staff, the research also provided evidence that the student volunteers across the years had gained from their experiences.

## 1 The rigour of a historical approach

Case studies belong to a long tradition of research in the social sciences and continue to be used extensively, both in traditional disciplines such as history and sociology, and in practice-oriented fields such as social work, health policy and education (Yin, 1994). Defined by Yin (1994: 13) as 'an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident,' the case study has a number of advantages as a research strategy (Edwards and Talbot, 1999; Feagin et al., 1991; Grbich, 1999; Stake, 1995; Yin, 1993, 1994):

- It allows for past and present study.
- It permits an analysis of continuity and change over time.
- It provides a holistic approach that enables a detailed analysis of the phenomenon to be studied.
- It enables the generation of theoretical propositions that may be generalised to other phenomena.
- It sheds light on the study of the relationship and interaction between the phenomenon under study and its context.

Taylor-Gooby (2002) has recently compared quantitative and qualitative approaches in studies of international policy making. He argues that case studies permit a more fine-grained interpretation, one that reveals greater instability and illuminates differences, as opposed to statistical analyses that tend to mask such differences and stress stability and resilience (Taylor-Gooby, 2002: 619). In the voluntary sector, case studies have shed light on particular changes, and a historical dimension is generally part of any study in providing background to the type of organisation and its activities. Indeed, case studies have often focused on times of change. Examples of these include Scott et al's study (2000) of the processes of introducing a more corporate structure into a voluntary organisation, and studies of the impact of local government reorganisation on the partnership relationships and viability of voluntary groups of all types in particular areas (Craig and Manthorpe, 1999).

With regard to the nature of the voluntary sector, a case study approach has a number of specific advantages. The voluntary sector is extremely diverse and has changed substantially over time. Against this background, a case study approach is a useful means of shedding light on such complexity, since it enables the detailed exploration of a real-life organisation, of the way it has evolved and of the factors that have helped to shape its history and work. In addition to providing a greater insight into the role and nature of voluntary agencies, this approach can also begin to compensate for some of the limitations of research on the UK voluntary sector, including its concentration on larger charities and philanthropists (see, for example, Whelan 1996) and its frequent focus on national rather than local bodies.

Finally, a case study approach has the benefit of shedding light on the role and contribution of the voluntary sector. This is explored in more detail below, but the voluntary sector has at times tended to

suffer from particularly politically motivated approaches. Often, academics have not treated voluntary action as an important subject in its own right but as a means of arguing a present standpoint about the current UK welfare state. As we explain below, this is an approach that not only does a major injustice to the voluntary sector, but which also runs the risk of creating a biased and inaccurate view of the sector's role and nature.

## 2 Interpreting the past and its ideologies

Typically, attempts to comment on the history and role of voluntary action have tended to focus not on the voluntary sector in its own right but on contemporary attitudes to the state and to state welfare. In particular, those who are firm advocates of statutory welfare provision tend to emphasise what they see as the negative features of voluntary provision (such as its localised and *ad hoc* nature and a tendency in some organisations to be paternalistic and slightly patronising in approach). Others, opposed to state welfare, emphasise the virtues of voluntary action (such as its capacity to innovate and the importance of individuals and communities working together to protect the more vulnerable members of society), contrasting this with what they see as an overly bureaucratic and inefficient state apparatus that encourages people to become dependent on state welfare and removes incentives for self-help.

A summary of the approaches adopted in commenting on the history and role of voluntary action – developed further by Glasby (unpub.) – shows three distinct viewpoints:

- *Fabianism*, which tends to emphasise the negative aspects of voluntary action and the need for state intervention. Even where writers do not adopt an explicitly Fabian approach, they tend to underestimate the role of the voluntary sector and view it as little more than a stage en route to statutory welfare.
- *Neo-liberalism*, which sees the nineteenth century as a 'golden age' of self-help and philanthropy before widespread state support removed the incentive to provide for yourself and your family and made a growing 'underclass' of people overly reliant on state welfare.

- *Welfare pluralism*, which emphasises the flexibility and innovation of the voluntary sector as a means of overcoming perceived limitations in statutory services.

Of course, the danger with these three approaches is that they are so focused on present political debates that they lay themselves open to the criticism of neglecting the voluntary sector altogether, seeing it merely as an adjunct to the seemingly much more important topic of the role of the state. As Maria Brenton (1985: 3) argues:

*On an ideological level, a crucial factor ... is the value attached to the role and responsibilities of the state. Competing ideologies with regard to the legitimacy and extent of state intervention that have been developed and crystallised largely into party-political positions are the base for determining both the scale of support for voluntary alternatives to statutory services, and the scale of substitution being proposed. Should we dismantle the statutory social services and replace them with voluntary ones? Should the state provide a basic minimum and leave the rest to be augmented by the voluntary sector? Should the two systems continue side by side, each developing those functions and capacities it seems good at?*

Another problem with this approach is that it can lead to broad-brush and oversimplified accounts of what is a complicated and diverse field of study. At its worst, moreover, this tendency to use the past to justify a present standpoint can lead to an accusation that researchers are simply ransacking history in order to find 'evidence' to back a current and ideologically motivated standpoint. This is a danger that has long been recognised by historians, who are very critical of such a methodologically flawed approach. As the eminent Tudor historian, Geoffrey Elton (1967: 65), suggests:

*They begin with the assumption of a social purpose stated ... and they then eliminate any use of history which does not contribute to this purpose. For this reason they ... fall into the deterministic error of choosing from the variety of history the line of events and detail which leads to their own present position, their preconceived end; everything else, if they do not ignore it, they explain away. The right approach would surely start from the other end.*

As a result, a historical case study approach is a crucial way of focusing on what individual voluntary organisations were actually doing: the projects they

ran, the tensions they experienced, the impact they had and the way in which they changed over time. This not only tells us much more about the role and nature of voluntary action than previous approaches, but it also begins to build up a large amount of evidence to take back to the debates outlined above about the best way of providing services and about the role of the state. Thus, the focus of research is changed altogether, from interpreting the past through the eyes of the present to seeking to understand the past in order better to understand the present.

### 3 The craft of historical research

Although a historical case study approach is important for all the reasons set out above, it is not easy, and people interested in the history of voluntary action are likely to come across a range of practical and methodological barriers. Drawing on our experience of researching case study voluntary organisations, this section identifies some of the factors that may assist or otherwise in undertaking a case study.

#### ACCESS TO MATERIAL

Both studies outlined at the beginning of this essay were conducted as commissions and this proved invaluable in setting out a rationale for the research and, not surprisingly, in achieving access. Documents from the voluntary sector are not often in the public domain and organisations may receive little press coverage or fail to attract much external interest. Few organisations can afford the risk of outsiders witnessing internal strife or difficulties. Alternatively, respondents may be selective or simply forgetful. Access to voluntary organisations is therefore not without its difficulties. There may not be much available in the form of documentation and individuals may have moved on. Snowballing techniques may be the only means of tracing people, but this is rarely comprehensive. As Bowling notes (1997), such interviewing needs an imaginative and persistent approach. Some of those contacted may, by chance, have kept documents or have photographs, but others may not. Any study of smaller voluntary sector groups, and some of the larger, should be prepared for:

- few records – some illegible, many incomplete
- some events or activities that were simply never written down in the first place
- formal records which give an official view of events, but which are often quite upbeat and optimistic (for example, annual reports), without capturing the difficulties and tensions experienced by the organisation
- a limited organisational memory, particularly if there has been high turnover of staff or volunteers
- the disappearance or demise of founders
- difficulty in confirming or refuting points or interpretations.

As a result, part of the case study approach may therefore involve a process of detective work and a simultaneous process of conservation as material is uncovered in the course of the research. Traditional qualitative methods of research can be employed, such as advertising for respondents and interviews (structured or otherwise). Also useful is a time line or chronology, which can help to note the order of events, perhaps with a key known event used to structure or jog a person's memory.

## MAINTAINING ARCHIVES

In addition to gathering data for the research, work may uncover material that might usefully be conserved. Ideally a voluntary group will be interested in keeping its own records for other than accountancy purposes, and some will be expert in this area. Others, however, may not feel that this is important or may doubt that anyone would be interested. Specialist assistance from information officers or librarians may be available at local level, but general principles for researchers should be that it is worth asking groups to:

- label items such as art-work, photographs and videos
- recognise that 20 or so copies of an old annual report are not really worth keeping – but that a couple are and should be labelled, and safely stored, preferably consecutively, in a file (also labelled)
- recognise that minutes, agendas and letters can be useful, but so too are 'human stories', letters of appreciation, complaints, publicity materials, recruitment posters and so on
- store a few cardboard box files (adequate for smaller groups), with material clearly labelled, and ensure these are not lent out without safeguards.

However, by far the best way of preserving historical material for the future is to explore the possibility of creating a formal archive with a local library. In the case of the Birmingham Settlement, for example, the hundred-year history of the organisation was preserved both through an in-house collection of material and through papers formally maintained by the local studies section of the city library. Access to the archive could only be obtained by a letter of permission from the Settlement and material could only be used in the library itself. This meant that the Settlement retained control over its own records, but that very rare and irreplaceable material was kept in a protected environment for the future. Even here though, there was scope for error, and research for the Settlement's centenary revealed a large number of photos (some dating right back to 1899) which the organisation did not seem to know it had and which were found in an envelope in a filing cabinet. Once discovered, these amazing photos of Birmingham's back-to-back houses and inner city (now long since demolished) could be archived and preserved for posterity.

## USER PERSPECTIVES

The difficulty of learning from the history of smaller voluntary organisations is nothing compared with the challenge of learning what users' or beneficiaries' perspectives were. This area is remarkably under-researched in the voluntary sector as a whole, where users are like shadows – at the receiving end of innovations, services, support, perhaps – but where little is known of how they received or perceived these innovations and services. Users' details may be difficult to find and children or adults who are engaging with volunteers through statutory health or social care services may have their interests protected or access controlled by research governance processes. Recent research has also shown how user involvement in voluntary organisations is varied but often limited (Robson et al, 2003).

There is a range of possible techniques to counter this. In the case of the Birmingham Settlement, for example, adverts in local papers and local radio shows uncovered a number of people who had used services at the Settlement from the 1930s to the present day. Some of these people were still in touch with others they had met at the Settlement and could provide further contacts. At the same time, the

Settlement set up a local history project, with children from the Settlement's youth clubs interviewing older people who had come to the Settlement as children in the 1940s and 1950s. By sitting in on this process, the researcher was able to get a sense of what the organisation was like then and now and to see its impact on different generations of young people across the years.

## Conclusion

Overall, this essay has argued that case study research can provide an insight into the workings of voluntary organisations and that historical case studies offer a more historically rigorous way of understanding the voluntary sector than previous approaches that have sought to use the past in order to justify present positions. However, historical research can be extremely messy, time-consuming and incomplete, demanding a range of different approaches. As Robert Yin (1993: 32) has suggested, the case study method:

*does not imply any particular form of data collection ... The important aspect of case study data collection is the use of multiple sources of evidence – converging on the same set of issues.*

As a result, the case study approach has an inherent requirement to triangulate data from as many different sources as possible to provide 'the best information available' (Edwards and Talbot, 1999: 54), acknowledging the need to corroborate data from multiple sources while at the same time recognising

that the researcher can only work with those sources of data available to him/her.

If we were to offer our top five tips to voluntary organisations and researchers interested in historical case studies, we would say that:

- 1 History is an important part of who we are and of how we got to where we are today – although the concerns of the present may distract us, it is vital to retain a sense of the importance of history and to preserve material that may be of interest in the future.
- 2 If your organisation lacks the capacity or expertise to do this itself, contact a local library or university to explore the possibility of some archival support.
- 3 History can be dangerous when it is misused; always check that anything you read with a historical dimension seems to be genuinely trying to understand the past for its own sake and in its own right, not merely using the past to justify the present.
- 4 Historical research is rewarding, but it is also difficult and requires the use of as many different data sources as possible to gain the best possible overview available.
- 5 Ultimately, the only way to understand what really happened in the past is to live through something ourselves (and even then we would only get a very partial and limited view). As a result, all we can do is to get as broad and as detailed an overview as possible, based on the evidence available to us (and to be honest about the limitations of our understanding and sources).

# The challenge of qualitative case studies: close encounters of a paradoxical kind

*Lynne Russell and Duncan Scott*

For over a decade we have worked together on a number of qualitative case studies of voluntary organisations. At the outset (1991–92), we were compelled (by the pre-conceptions of a funder in favour of survey research) to ‘make a case’ for case studies. The argument for a partial or total investment in qualitative case studies was eventually a persuasive one – that this was the best way to understand rather than merely describe particular contexts. However, over the years our growing experience has given rise to a number of difficult questions:

- How close to the ‘truth’ does the qualitative case study bring us?
- What level of self-consciousness and inter-personal social awareness should the fieldwork researcher bring to the process of data collection and analysis?
- How useful in practice is the detail and complexity of case study research to the research audience – whether the practitioner or the policy maker?

The trigger to this third question was the observation that, even after long-term association with a core sample of voluntary agencies over the course of several research studies, and despite close attention to detail (or perhaps because of it), it was still not possible to make definitive statements as to whether the policy phenomena which had prompted these various studies were to be welcomed or rejected.

Typical of the publications produced were the reports on the mixed fortunes of voluntary organisations as a result of increased contract-based funding (Russell, Scott and Wilding, 1995) and the

uneven experiences of volunteers in an emerging contract culture (Russell and Scott, 1997). In the first of these studies, voluntary organisations were seen to be growing, but in ways which were skewed by external policy imperatives and new statutory funding streams, sometimes even at the cost of the organisation’s core mission where this continued to struggle to attract financial support. In the second, it emerged that some volunteers (but by no means all) experienced greater job satisfaction in their increasingly formalised roles, but that despite their operational importance they were strategically invisible. The emerging central paradox of ‘close encounters’ appears to be that excavating greater amounts of field data may itself partially hinder rather than assist ‘conclusive’ reporting and prescriptive recommendations. However, we derive some reassurance that our research accounts have accurately reflected the experience of at least a segment of the voluntary sector, from two sources:

- The fact that the research findings were accepted by the case study organisations when presented with our sometimes critical draft accounts of their worlds.
- The extent to which other voluntary organisations have identified with these accounts, and with the research conclusions presented and discussed during dissemination events.

We therefore make no apology for the demands placed on policy makers by the description and analysis of complex organisational realities – even if we cannot claim these to be universal and

unqualified truths – and we continue to undertake detailed case study research (most recently on the development of social enterprise by voluntary organisations).

In this essay we will focus on some of the central issues and practical problems relating to qualitative data collection and to analysis and interpretation. Experienced researchers will recognise the dilemmas, processes and events, but we in the research community frequently fail to acknowledge in print the imperfect database and the lack of neutrality that are inescapable elements of the case study process.

## Research contexts and processes

The remarks made in the following sections arise from our experience of undertaking qualitative case study research in particular organisational and policy contexts over the past 11 years.

The fields of enquiry included:

- Changing levels and patterns of voluntary sector funding (Russell, Scott and Wilding, 1993) [21 sample agencies involved in the delivery of welfare services, primarily in respect of older people or children]
- The impact of the development of the ‘contract culture’ on voluntary organisations (Russell, Scott and Wilding, 1995) [17 sample agencies, 14 of which were included in the first study]
- The impact on volunteers of the contract culture (Russell and Scott, 1997) [15 sample agencies, 12 of which were included in the earlier studies]
- Rural deprivation (Scott and Russell, 1999) [an evaluation of one case study agency; interviews were conducted with a wide spectrum of individuals internal and external to the organisation]
- Key organisational issues within the voluntary sector, including infrastructure, stakeholders and accountability, managerialism and the impact of external agendas (Scott et al, 2000) [four agencies, each of which was the focus of study in relation to a single research theme; all four had been involved in the first three studies above.] (NB Russell and Scott contributed four of the eight case studies discussed in this particular publication.)

- The impacts of New Deal for Young People on voluntary sector participants (Scott et al, 2002) [single interviews within six new case study agencies involved in a range of activities which included international aid, community transport, environmental work, advice and information]
- The development of social enterprise by voluntary organisations (Pharoah, Scott and Fisher, 2004) [two new case study organisations, representing half the core data of this study].

With the exception of the evaluation of the impact on voluntary organisations of their involvement in delivering New Deal for Young People (2002), the research relationship in each study was always longer than the one-off qualitative interview or day visit, and so can be described as a ‘case study’. The first study, for example, involved a minimum of three lengthy semi-structured interviews and the collection of detailed financial data with finance officers or treasurers. These interviews were supplemented by telephone conversations and the collection of relevant documentary information about the organisation. This level of involvement was typical for the first three studies listed and for the fifth. For the kinds of small to medium-sized locally based voluntary organisations which comprised the bulk of the sample, the process was clearly very demanding of their time and resources. Nevertheless, all but one of the original sample continued to be willing to be included in each subsequent research exercise over the following years. The four agencies involved in the 2000 study had thus maintained a research relationship with us for eight years, and workers from two of them travelled from the north of England to attend the final dissemination event in London.

The most recent study (on the development of social enterprise) has similarly involved a total of around a dozen research ‘encounters’ with each of the case study agencies (including semi-structured interviews, observation of and participation in key external and internal events, and evaluation of internal documents). Instead of these taking place over an eight-year period, however, they were undertaken over a much shorter period of time – between nine and twelve months. The several research studies can thus be seen to describe a hierarchy of research contact, but typically the relationship with sample agencies has been intensive and/or prolonged, and it is this kind of case study research that we have in mind in the following discussion.

## Close encounters in the field: the advantages

In a later section we will touch upon the particular challenges for the research process created by the closeness between the fieldworker and the case study agency that develops as a result of prolonged and/or intense contact. First we should touch upon the advantages. As already suggested above, the strength of the case study approach in terms of research outcomes is that it has the potential to take us beneath the skin of the organisation –at least one layer of it! It is not simply a matter of accessing more detail – but of accessing different kinds of information, of getting closer to the trade-offs, tensions, contradictions and conflicts which form a crucial part of organisational life and which influence the processes of organisational change. In case study research we have:

- the opportunity to explore issues from different perspectives
- the opportunity to be present as events occur (the moment at a management committee when the treasurer unexpectedly resigned, the internal training seminar, a royal visit) and to observe the attendant reactions and responses
- the opportunity to track over time the negotiation and implementation of organisational change, whether in response to internal or external events.

In addition, we would argue that the closer relationship which develops between the researcher and researched in case study work (the fact that the researcher becomes better informed over time and is therefore a more focused interviewer, together with the fact that they are a familiar and increasingly trusted face) can allow difficult truths and illuminating stories to emerge.

In *Moving Pictures* (Scott et al, 2000), for example, in a case study around the internal impacts of statutory agendas, the chief officer of one voluntary organisation was prepared to reveal her discomfort about her organisation's covert and ambiguous relationship with the local authority. At a time when this agency was one of the lead organisations in a concerted campaign against local authority grant cuts to the voluntary sector, they had also been approached privately by social services to extend their services and were therefore in the midst of privately negotiating substantial increases in their own funding:

*Don't ask me where this additional money is coming from. Meanwhile a number of organisations are being cut. A few have been wiped out completely. I think to myself 'How can I represent the voluntary sector in meetings about cuts while this organisation is getting such an increase?' But it's not about me ... (Scott et al, 2000: 54)*

Her discomfort at the fact that her organisation had simply been offered significantly increased funding by social services (at the same time as she was a member of a cross-sector subcommittee set up to define a corporate strategy which would remove anomalies in voluntary sector funding and define more open procedures) was so great that the story was initially told in confidence and was not to be quoted in the research report. In the event, with sufficient camouflaging of the organisation, its location and the key players, the voluntary organisation did agree to its inclusion.

Thus the relationship which evolves in undertaking qualitative research has the potential to take you beyond the mission statement, the financial accounts and chairman's report, or the public image of the organisation presented by chief executives for public consumption. However, one of the questions raised at the start of this essay concerned how close to the 'truth' the closeness of the qualitative case study brings us. There are several characteristics of the process of qualitative case study research which have the potential to inhibit or enhance data collection, to cloud apparent reality with illusion or even reveal very different 'realities' within the case study organisation.

## Qualitative case study research: the truth, the whole truth and ... ?

The answer to the question raised in this heading depends on a number of factors:

- Are respondents willing to tell you what they know?
- Does the respondent actually have the knowledge that you expect them to have?
- Has the research captured the different perspectives which might exist within any one organisation? Do individual respondents have a rounded or partial view?

- What other 'data' sources are there?
- Is the fieldworker always prepared to report the research data fully to his/her research managers?
- How true to the original data is the interrogation and analysis presented by research managers in the final research report? How collaborative is that process?

## CO-OPERATION AND 'TRUTH' TELLING

A question we rarely ask ourselves is why people agree to participate in case study research, which by its very nature tends to be intensive, time consuming and challenging. In our most recent study, the chief executive of one of the sample organisations asked very explicitly at an initial meeting, 'What's in it for us?' Given the level of extended access we were hoping for, this was an entirely reasonable question. Selling the idea of participation in voluntary sector research often emphasises some or all of the following:

- The importance of the issue – to the sector as a whole, to organisations such as theirs, to their clients, to other stakeholders or the wider community
- The contribution that the particular study will make, and hence the significance of their own contribution
- The audience for the research findings – reconfirming the status of the study and connecting the agency to a wider policy medium
- The research team's credentials – relevant research experience, who the funder is, who in the agency's organisational world the research team is connected to
- Guarantees of anonymity
- The participant's access to a range of research outcomes – reports, seminars, and so on
- An honorarium or fee.

That this process is necessary reminds us that, even though participation might enhance the profile of the case study organisation in some way, or provide a platform for airing grievances or simply afford a therapeutic opportunity for a busy manager, the research activity is peripheral. Thus an interview with a CAB manager took several twists and turns because the latter had (initially at least) other things on her mind:

*She had forgotten I was coming ... When I arrived she was in a meeting with her treasurer; then she had to fix the photocopier; then she had to make an urgent*

*phone call; then a new volunteer needed a training manual; then she had to speak to the New Dealers in the office. After she had made us both a drink we began ... It was a very long interview and at the end she seemed to have no desire to let me go. I had been there for over four hours by this time. (Research Worker)*

Additional problems in relation to data collection arise where case study research takes place over an extended period. As the fieldworker becomes a familiar face, there is sometimes less seriousness amongst interviewees – less preparation, less focus during the interview, an increased probability that interviews will be delayed by the late arrival of the interviewee, or be cancelled at short notice, or even forgotten altogether.

However, even while the research activity is peripheral, it remains potentially very damaging to the case study organisation and, despite the development of the research relationship and an increasing level of trust between researcher and researched, the latter will remain concerned to protect their organisation, even to the extent of undermining the research process in which they have agreed to participate. One of the paradoxes of 'close encounters' is the extent to which sensitive information is freely given by the respondent and is simultaneously censored. How often do interviewees in case study research preface their remarks with a statement that they would not want the ensuing narrative to be published? Organisations will obviously be very concerned to protect their relationships with external stakeholders such as their funders. Depending on the degree of openness within the particular organisational culture, there may be greater or lesser sensitivity about the impact of the research on internal relationships. Nevertheless, the dilemma for the case study researcher is how to achieve the research objectives without compromising either the individual interviewee or the organisation.

One phenomenon we had not anticipated when embarking on a sequence of studies involving the same core group of sample agencies was that over time our key contacts would move within their own organisational hierarchies and that this could have an impact on the research relationship. Thus when the senior worker of a local project within a national children's charity later assumed a regional management role, not only did her new role

appear to make her much more guarded in her accounts of events, but the processes involved in negotiating access to the local project became more formalised and difficult, and the organisational layers involved in commenting on the draft report became more numerous. Our relationship changed to the extent that for the first time the organisation insisted on a right of veto over inclusion of their material in the final report, even though confidentiality would be assured by disguising the case study agency. In the end, this right of veto was not used by the organisation. Their sensitivity, however, was perhaps understandable as the research focused on what the organisation clearly felt had been the betrayal of key stakeholders; their claimed ethos in relation to their users had been overridden by their relationship with their chief funder to the extent that they had colluded in withholding information about the future of the service from both service users and volunteers. These were very uncomfortable 'realities' in relation to a service which had had its roots as a self-help project.

That example illustrates not only the significance of occupational status, but also the impact of an unequal relationship between a voluntary agency and its main funder. In interviews where a salient feature (whether race, gender or social class) is contested, for example, where a consensus about its meaning and importance has not been established, it is common for interviewees to be particularly careful:

*Socially acceptable responses are particularly likely to represent convenient ways of dealing with interviewers rather than expressing the respondent's actual view. (Fielding, 1993: 145)*

In this case, the sensitive interviewer must learn to anticipate how far, for example:

*inadvertently, women often mute their own thoughts and feelings when they try to describe their lives in the familiar and publicly acceptable terms of prevailing concepts and conventions. To hear women's perspectives accurately, we have to learn to listen in stereo, receiving both the dominant and the muted channels clearly and tuning into them to understand the relationship between them. (Anderson and Jack, 1998: 156)*

Other examples of the need to 'listen in stereo' include:

- deference to the university researcher
- uncertainty about disclosing managerial mistakes
- (in some contradiction) sometimes an over-enthusiasm to share organisational dilemmas and doubts with a newly entrusted 'friend'.

In qualitative research, the ability to appreciate such subtleties is central to the success of the research:

*All we sociologists have are stories. Some come from other people, some from us, some from our interactions with others. What matters is to understand how and where the stories are produced, which sorts of stories they are, and how we can put them to honest and intelligent use in theorising about social life. (Miller and Glassner, 1997: 111)*

## ASSUMED KNOWLEDGE

There is an assumption on the part of researchers that, having followed a process of recommendation, sampling, referral and vetting, the selected interviewees will be able to answer our questions. But how much do respondents actually know? Their location within an organisation may suggest to us that they are well placed. In practice, that same location may exclude them from the level of awareness that we anticipate. For example, in the third of the research exercises described above, we initially made the assumption that the volunteers we surveyed and interviewed would be able to comment on the changes in their role since the negotiation of a service contract by the voluntary organisations for which they worked. However, over half of those surveyed proved unaware that they were even involved in the delivery of a statutory contract. This in itself was an important finding in relation to the status of the increasingly busy but marginalised volunteer, but it presented a real challenge for interviewers in their face-to-face discussions with volunteers about the impact of the contract culture!

The location of respondents within an organisation may also be significant in preventing them from admitting that they do not have the knowledge we expect them to have. Thus:

*The Chief Executive talked to me about what the organisation needed volunteers to do and the different type of volunteer now needed. But in contrast to her responses to other questions, her replies on volunteers suggested that in reality she had very little detailed knowledge of that dimension of the organisation.*

*On the other hand she was not prepared to say 'I'm not the person you need to speak to'. There is a desire by the interviewee to demonstrate that they do have the knowledge you expect. (Research Worker)*

## WHOSE TRUTH? THE PARTIAL PERSPECTIVE

The 'truth' of any situation or dynamic will be refracted through different perspectives within the organisation. When different people are interviewed from different locations, their versions of events and their interpretation of the world around them may differ significantly. This emerged strongly in exploring the issue of increased managerialism within one organisation reported in *Moving Pictures*. Here, organisational growth and financial constraints had given rise to the introduction of a new management structure which created vertical divisions between service areas and between core functions, together with an increasing number of horizontal layers in the management hierarchy. The new structure was intended to help focus management, and to facilitate financial accountability and strategic planning. The view of the chief executive was that it was beginning to be successful and that the changes had been accepted by the staff. The view elsewhere in the hierarchy was very different. For at least one of the senior managers the fragmented structure was continuing to prove an unwelcome innovation; it had undermined mutual support between workers, information flows within the organisation and responsiveness to clients. The juxtaposition of these different views more accurately reflects the reality of organisational life than either one perspective or the other, and there may be myriad other accounts which the research (constrained by time and resources) could not reveal.

## OTHER FIELDWORK DATA

So far we have focused on data collection through the qualitative interview. What is also crucial, however, is the development of:

*methods which loosen the grip of talk and text on our research imaginations... (Mason, 2002: 239)*

For example, although the lengthy delay to the interview described above (see page 17) may have been frustrating for the field worker, the account of what was going on in the room at the time actually

provides an immediate insight into that particular research context. These unplanned moments create additional opportunities to observe the organisation, to chat to other workers, read notice boards, collect any literature available to service users and generally to become aware of the physical and social environment.

It is perhaps not a coincidence, for example, that the organisation which was the location of a case study of the development of increasing managerialism within the voluntary sector also resembled an outpost of a social services department – with a shopfront façade, a reception area with glass partitioning separating client and receptionist, an electronic security door into the office area, labyrinthine corridors eventually taking you upstairs to the chief executive's large office with conference table, polished desk and so on. This was in marked contrast to the small, volunteer-dependent community care organisation with which we explored the impacts of an under-resourced infrastructure. The working environment here (an office shared with local playgroup equipment) included a toilet with no hot water, the absence of a fridge, and frequent struggles with the photocopier because the organisation could not afford the maintenance contract. One research interview here was suddenly interrupted when the interviewee, the admin worker:

*got up and plunged her hand into the waste paper basket, angrily pulling out a glossy leaflet. It was a brochure advertising an expensive publication aimed at helping voluntary organisations attract charitable funding. 'We can't afford to buy things like this – we would have to fundraise first just to afford it!' (Scott et al, 2000: 8)*

The research data is thus the sum of the pre-arranged interview and the chance encounter, the formal observation of agreed events and fortuitous foraging in the public and private spaces of the organisation. They are all a legitimate and important part of the research process. It is worth remembering that:

*the idea that individuals cannot express everything in which we might be interested in words has long underpinned observational methods, but there may be elements of social experience which cannot be readily observed either. I am referring to the processes of thought, feeling, emotion, sentiment and so on. (Mason, 2002: 237)*

## THE FIELDWORKER/AGENCY RELATIONSHIP: TOO CLOSE FOR COMFORT?

We have referred to the 'closeness' of the case study research as shorthand for the opportunity that this approach provides for the collection of qualitatively different data than that which is available through other research approaches. There are dimensions to the 'closeness' developed by the fieldworker, however, which research managers might find less than helpful in their quest for 'truth'.

It is perhaps understandable that, in developing mutual understanding, the social research relationship can become a social relationship as well – at least to a limited extent. Certainly in longitudinal studies the boundaries can become blurred; the fieldworker is invited to attend organisational events and functions outside the time frame of the research (whether International Women's Day or a poetry reading by service users); there are spontaneous hugs at a chance encounter and the fieldworker is asked to provide an interviewee with a reference for a job application! The relationship has clearly extended beyond one delimited by the research. This does not necessarily harm the research process – except insofar as the dynamic towards this relationship leads to a lack of discipline, and 'cosy' mutual recognition takes the place of sharper interrogation.

Although different from the inter-personal 'closeness' which can develop as a result of a prolonged research relationship, it is also important to mention here the initial mutual 'recognition' which can arise between researcher and interviewee as a result of the perception of shared value systems and social characteristics. Thus, there may be different degrees of convergence between interviewer and interviewee dependent on their age, gender, social class, ethnicity and marital status, for example. In many contexts, a greater convergence can facilitate the interview and encourage wider and deeper disclosure. Social convergence may even lead the way to more-sensitive analytic insights. On the other hand, social convergence may encourage the replacement of research discipline with a less formal social relationship.

However, in practice it is difficult to verify the impacts of social convergence. It is often impossible, for example, to isolate the relative

importance of social characteristics from:

- personal qualities such as the social skills and the professional experience of the interviewer
- the contingent circumstances surrounding the interview.

This may be one reason why, despite the salience of gendered realities in many voluntary and community organisations, so little is written about them, and why Lynne Russell has had great difficulty in identifying whether and how far the research processes and outputs in the studies identified above (see page 15) were affected by the high degree of social convergence she experienced with the majority of interviewees who were female, professional, middle-aged managers.

Focusing on gender, however, it is also arguable that the wider underdevelopment of sensitivity to social characteristics in qualitative social research in the voluntary and community sector also owes much to a combination of the following:

- The genuinely held belief in the positivist approach to professional research that high technical skills render social contextual influences of marginal significance (a feature of the research culture)
- The hegemony of those beliefs within the voluntary and community sector (VCS) which assert the dominance of progressive, egalitarian policies and practices; the presence of large numbers of women is therefore regarded as being of secondary, even negligible, importance (a feature of VCS culture)
- The general underdevelopment of qualitative research in VCS settings which has created a high degree of uncertainty about its use and development; many managers and researchers are unaware of the qualitative repertoire, let alone its strengths and weaknesses (a feature of both VCS and research cultures).

As our final section concludes, it may well take the development of more comparative and reflective field research approaches – where, for example, male and female qualitative researchers pro-actively monitor and discuss their experiences of gender – before the easy rhetoric of social convergence is tested more stringently. So, while 'closeness' may feel more comfortable than distance, it remains well-nigh impossible to fully separate out its advantages and disadvantages.

What we are able to say is that a first step towards a more discriminatory appreciation of the significance of different social characteristics might begin with a review of enhancing and inhibiting influences.

## RESEARCH TEAM DYNAMICS

Research tasks are not always conducted by a single individual; divisions of labour lead to different degrees of 'closeness' to the case study agencies. This gives rise to particular challenges in relation to disclosure by the fieldworker and interpretation by research managers. In the course of the research it is often possible that the closeness between fieldworker and agency becomes greater than that between the research team. The fieldworker can begin to feel a loyalty towards, and responsibility for, the case study agency which inhibits him or her from making particularly sensitive data available to the rest of the research team – particularly if, at the point of sharing that information, they relinquish any control over how it is subsequently used.

*There is always a tension between the interviewer who has been to the coal face (and comes away with an ingrained, detailed and sometimes intuitive impression of the issues, tensions, personalities, feelings and rationales) and the research manager who sees no more than the words on the page and wants to put a particular analytical slant on a particular anecdote or sound bite. (Research worker)*

## Conclusions

Qualitative social researchers clearly must work through a number of paradoxes, but their journey is nearly always worthwhile. Despite the practical and analytical challenges presented by case study approaches, the resulting perspectives and data can certainly enrich our understanding of voluntary and community action.

We have discussed several ways in which the outcomes of qualitative research can be influenced and how 'closeness' may reveal partial truths rather than whole ones. Interviewees, no matter how carefully sampled and inducted, may not in fact have the knowledge we expect them to have. Even when they do have the required knowledge, they may prove reluctant to disclose it. Their location

within the organisation will make some feel vulnerable and others (perhaps at a more senior management level) culpable when revealing what are often awkward truths. However, even when disclosure is achieved, the case study researcher has to be aware of the extent to which it is only a partial view constrained by the interviewee's organisational location and coloured by organisational contexts, social characteristics and the relationship between interviewee and fieldworker. The latter in turn gives rise to the final tension to be negotiated – the potential conflict of loyalties between fieldworker and case study agency on the one hand and field worker and research team on the other. The closeness of the fieldworker to the case study agency may inhibit disclosure where there is a concern that the data has the potential to damage the case study organisation or individual interviewee.

The implications for qualitative field researchers are more severely practical. We would urge them to:

- rescue their reflective field diaries from the customary appendicised ghettos – the main text can be strengthened by sight of their research journey
- begin, therefore, with a 'Research Diary' which attempts to move beyond the sanitised accounts of mechanistic social behaviour and provides insight into the profoundly human, inconsistent, forgetful, ever surprising and exciting dimensions of close encounters
- take seriously the serendipities of field research life – the postponed interview, the wrong turning, the overheard anecdote
- engage in comparative reflection, whereby the social characteristics of interviewer/interviewee, the motivations of the latter, and the many-sided social worlds of organisational life become part of the data
- in short, to ground their work more explicitly in the physical, social and emotional worlds of the case study participants; to do otherwise is to reinforce the irony of so many close encounters whereby closeness is a dry and narrow thing devoid of all its rich potential.

(See also Miczo, 2003: 484–7)

Qualitative case study researchers do get physically and socially close to their interviewees and their contexts; and their detailed accounts are all the richer for that. But as they attempt to dig beneath

the surface, the new knowledge acquired may in fact be jostling with new illusions. This is the paradox of 'close encounters'. On the one hand, we can heap complexity upon complexity, and demand that aspirant qualitative researchers become even more burdened with a sense of the enormity of their task, the need to get close but attempt detachment, the need to interrogate

themselves as well as the wider organisational context for the individual research interview. On the other hand, a degree of relief may be obtained if the research task is seen as involving art as well as science, and the research outcome as involving illusion and paradox as well as any singular clarity and conclusiveness.

Section 2:  
Philosophical, ethical  
and political issues

# Messy methodologies, processes and issues: exploring some of the realities of undertaking qualitative research

Angela Ellis

## Introduction

*Quite unlike its pristine and logical presentation in journal articles ... real research is often confusing, messy, intensely frustrating and fundamentally non-linear (Marshall and Rossman, 1989: 21)*

All researchers must choose from a range of methods; that choice is mainly based on the nature of the research issues, but is also inevitably influenced by the researchers themselves. The experiences reflected upon within this essay are predominantly drawn from my doctoral research into local participation in rural community development. However, many of the issues and experiences run true for the ongoing research projects that I am involved with on voluntary action. As such, while this essay draws on very personal experiences of one particular piece of research, the issues have a wider relevance for other areas of qualitative research.

My doctoral research was an attempt to move beyond previous studies of rural development, which tended to concentrate on quantifiable indicators of development. Taking a more critical look, I wanted to begin to understand the processes behind, and the factors influencing, participation in rural community development. Qualitative methods were judged to be more appropriate in addressing these issues, because they provided tools that allowed me to get to grips with the 'why' and the 'how' questions, rather than just the 'how much'

questions that are better suited to quantitative techniques. Qualitative methods enabled me to explore questions such as how communities, and individuals within them, come together to act as a local development group; who, why and how people participate; and how others become excluded.

The use of qualitative methods also reflects a number of wider trends within both academic and policy discourses. For example, changing rural development policies and practices are increasingly concerned with qualitative aspects of rural life. Within social sciences, qualitative methodologies are also more fashionable. For example, increasingly attention is directed to the definitions, behaviours and intentions of those under study, focusing on the processes and contextual details (see for example, Knorr-Cetina, 1981; Eyles, 1988).

Beyond these conceptual issues, on a far more personal level, the chance to explore qualitative methods has always been attractive to me, as a result of the high level of interaction with 'the researched' that is involved in such methods (not forgetting, of course, the methodological issues associated with these interactions – for example, that while this may provide us with richer data, it may also lead to greater levels of researcher bias). The experiences that qualitative research entails and the associated potential of enhancing my interpersonal skills were also appealing. Even the choice of methodological approach is therefore shaped by my/our own subjectivities.

Within a qualitative approach a broad range of methods can be employed, from participant observation to focus groups, to interviewing, to textual discourse analysis. Each of these methods can vary from the structured to the unstructured with all shades between. The exact methods chosen for my doctoral research (interviews and observation) were felt to be the most appropriate to get the information needed. The purpose of this essay, however, is not to go into detail about the methods employed, the reasons for the selection, or the advantages and disadvantages of different research methods. Instead, the aim is to reflect upon my experiences of undertaking the research – to highlight some of the more messy and problematic (the less frequently talked about, and, for the researcher, often more uncomfortable or challenging) realities of the research process itself.

Over the past decade or so a more critical approach to qualitative research has been called for which seeks to position the researcher within the research process and acknowledge the impact this may have (see for example, England, 1994; Katz, 1994; Kobayashi, 1994; Sidaway, 1992). The call for reflexivity mirrors a growing acknowledgement that, just as each interview is a social event (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995), so all knowledge is socially constructed (Saltmarsh, 1997). This essay takes up this challenge to be more reflexive. In doing so, it follows my research journey across rural Wales, highlighting the issues that I faced en route.

The essay starts with a brief outline of the methods employed at different stages in the research process, then goes on to explore some of the main issues that, for me, underlie all stages of the research process: the researcher's positionality; the extent to which a researcher is inside or/and outside the field; power relations between the researcher and researched; the extent to which researchers can give something back to those they research; a tendency to occasionally slip into 'tabloid journalism'; and the danger of being drawn into disputes.

## Research realities: detailing the research process

Most researchers start with a systematic methodological outline. However, once we 'hit the field' things become far more complex. This section

provides further details of my research into participation in rural community development, both to help situate the reader within the research, and to start illustrating some of this 'messiness'.

In order to explore the realities of 'bottom-up' rural development in the context of Wales, the methodology employed within my research was divided between three main stages, each representing a geographical scale: national, regional and local.

### NATIONAL LEVEL

At the national level, I used secondary information and interviews to develop a broad understanding of the key issues and players in the national rural development scene. Data was gathered on rural development policies and from as many organisations as possible, while I focused more intensely on each of the agencies within the particular programme under study.

From these nationwide processes I selected two rural development agencies to become the main focus of the research. The two groups were selected mainly on the basis of their very different approaches to rural development, their adoption of very different definitions of 'community', and their differing geographical contexts. However, the selection of the case study groups was also influenced by other factors such as the level of interest generated for the research, and the fact that other agencies had already been studied widely. As such, even at this early stage in the research it is possible to see how I was making subjective decisions that would shape the research process and findings.

### REGIONAL LEVEL

The next phase of research involved analysis at the regional level, focusing on each of the two case study areas and the relevant rural development agencies within them. I spent two weeks in the offices of each of the two rural development agencies, interviewing and observing staff. The interviews were very much influenced by the varying levels of knowledge the staff had on the rural development programme, but also by their interest in the more theoretical issues of grassroots development. Some respondents were far more aware of the issues involved and were very

interested in sharing their experiences and opinions with me; for others, their concern was predominantly with the practicalities of implementing their specific projects:

I had very different experiences in each office as a result of the very different approaches to development that the groups had taken and the differing dynamics within each office. For example, the office of development agency A was a very businesslike environment and I had a good relationship with the manager and the staff alike. This environment and the relationships within it inevitably affected me as a researcher; it was a very positive environment and this influenced my attitudes towards the developments enacted.

In contrast, within rural development agency B the manager was far more remote. At the same time, I developed very close relationships with the staff, especially two of them with whom I spent hours discussing the ups and downs of community development. We developed a very honest relationship and they were some of the few people with whom I divulged and explored my own personal opinions. The smaller and less businesslike environment of the office provided a more informal space for more casual relationships to develop between the staff and myself. We spent hours discussing theoretical issues and implications, conversations that were very rarely touched upon within the discourses of agency A. Again, strive as I might to be objective, these discussions and experiences inevitably affected my perceptions of the development processes enacted.

During this period of research eight case study community development groups were selected for more in-depth research. The final selection was based on information about the groups, along with my decision to study a range of 'communities', and a desire to represent varying stages within the development process. Consultation with the development officers, management and participants of the community groups themselves also influenced the decisions. Again, different subjective influences clearly exerted themselves upon the supposedly systematic research methodology.

## LOCAL LEVEL

The most intensive research was carried out into those eight case study communities, four in each of

the two selected regions. The main research method employed at the local level was interviewing. Interviews provide an opportunity to study subjective meanings and motives; they allow the researched and subsequently the researcher to describe, interpret and understand the relationships that quantitative methods can merely describe. They also allow easier comparison between groups than would be possible under less structured methods such as observations (see, for example, Oppenheim, 1992; Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995; Sarantakos, 1993 for discussions on the use of interviews).

Over a period of 18 months, from 1998 to 2000, I undertook well over 100 interviews with participants of the local development groups and with non-participants from within the communities. Most interviews lasted approximately one to one-and-a-half hours, although they did range from thirty minutes to four hours in one case! The interviews were predominantly undertaken in interviewees' homes but many were also carried out in the group's meeting place, at respondent's places of work or, as in one instance, literally in the (a) field!

The first problem I faced was one of language. All interviews were conducted through the medium of English. Although undertaking a course in Basic Welsh in my first postgraduate year, I could converse in Welsh little beyond 'sut ych chi?' (how are you?) and 'diolch i' (thank you). While all respondents were proficient English speakers and were happy to be interviewed in English, the fact that some were not free to use their mother tongue was inevitably problematic on occasions. For example, some respondents noted that as they spoke in English they were translating from Welsh. This was a tiring process and one that occasionally made it hard to express very personal sentiments, or made people feel slightly uneasy. As one respondent said:

*Mira: Being as Welsh is my first language sometimes if I say something it might not come out right, so you will have to excuse that.*

*AE: Sorry, that is my fault for not being able to speak Welsh ...*

*Mira: Oh no, not at all. It is just when you are used to speaking Welsh, I think in Welsh and I translate and sometimes it comes out wrong!*

Others felt that certain words in Welsh could not be translated into English and as such I would miss out on the deeper meaning of certain sentiments,

especially concerning 'community'. For example, the actual translation for Gwerin is 'common folk', but in reality it is a far more positive concept than the translation suggests, capturing what was felt to be a distinctly Welsh sentiment of both people and place that could not easily be translated into English.

All interviews were recorded in detail. The vast majority of interviews were recorded both on tape and in note form. Several interesting issues emerge from the use of tape recorders. Some respondents appeared to have thought up speeches which they wanted to perform and practised quotes which they wanted recording before I could get on with the interview. In extreme cases I was unable to steer the conversations away from the topics prioritised by the interviewee (often of little relevance to the research). Issues also emerged over material gathered once the tape recorder was turned off, both at the start and end of the interview and at requested points during it. There were also technical problems about what to do when recording failed. Writing notes provided protection against technical failures but at the same time it was an exposing practice as respondents could see what I was choosing to record or to leave out. To counteract this, respondents often said 'write this down' when they had a point they wanted to make. Frequently, these were points of praise to particular individuals within the community, or some other piece of information irrelevant to the research.

Interviews were then transcribed as verbatim script, a long and arduous process that was often quite painful! Listening to the reality of leads missed and silly questions asked, and the realisation of my erratic command of spoken English, never became easy.

In addition to the interviews, I undertook observation through attending community group meetings and events such as project openings. Morris and Copesake (1993:46) contend, 'Observation emphasises the situation, whereas questioning emphasises the respondent'. Through observing various aspects of the community development groups, I was able to see how relationships develop within the group and how the participants' roles within them become contested and negotiated.

However, as the research progressed and I spent considerable periods of time with certain community groups, it became hard to sustain the position of non-participation as I was drawn into the group's activities and discussions. Not only was I expected to contribute to the meetings and

discussions in different ways and at different times, but I also wanted to participate as I often became frustrated when groups lacked the knowledge that I had on certain issues or, worse, when they had been given misleading information. Despite my frustrations I felt that it was nearly always inappropriate for me to participate in such a way. For the early meetings I took notes during proceedings and then reflected upon what took place in my research diary immediately afterwards. However, after attending meetings for a prolonged period, note taking during them became increasingly uncomfortable, and the reflections in my research diary became the sole method of recording the meetings.

My research experiences at the local level were very different between the two areas. For me the differences were exaggerated by my experience of living 'in the field' in area A, while travelling to and from the field in area B. Living in a delineated field within area A for periods of time made my role as a researcher more explicit, whereas constantly travelling to and from the field in area B over an extended period of time made my position more ambiguous and informed consent harder to maintain. Katz (1994) contends that the researcher's identity in the field is often ambiguous and ambivalent and my experiences confirm this: I found myself shifting between different kinds of position and playing the multiple roles demanded of the researcher during fieldwork and indeed during individual interviews. My own self-identity was both ambiguous and changing (see Routledge, 1996 and Maxey, 1999 for similar, though more pronounced, discussions).

## The darker side of qualitative research: some underlying issues

I found (and continue to find) fieldwork, and indeed the entire research process, a very personal experience, one that I become totally entwined in and in turn one which becomes totally entwined in me.

To start on a positive note, the use of qualitative methods enabled (and continues to do so in my ongoing research) a unique, in-depth insight into the underlying structures and processes influencing

participation and the experiences of those involved. Qualitative research also had the advantage of facilitating high response rates and the development of a strong sense of rapport between interviewer and interviewee – an essential ingredient if we are to get beneath surface facts and figures. Further, qualitative research provided a quality and variety of information that I felt was unattainable through quantitative methods. I also found (and continue to find) qualitative research to be an enriching experience both for myself as the researcher and (I hope) for the researched.

However, while many aspects of these experiences were positive, there were also many that were continuously uncomfortable. I faced many dilemmas throughout the research process (see Widdowfield, 2000, for an interesting discussion on emotions in research). It is reflections on these more problematic or challenging issues that are often, at least until recently, missing from methodological textbooks – they remain the ‘darker’ side of qualitative research both in terms of the lack of exposure they receive and the uncomfortable feelings they can evoke in researchers. It is these aspects of qualitative research that the rest of this essay focuses on.

## POSITIONALITY

*We do not parachute into the field with empty heads and a few pencils or a tape-recorder in our pockets ready to record the ‘facts’. (England, 1994:84)*

The positioning of the researcher within the context of his/her research has become increasingly important to qualitative research, as it is increasingly recognised that fieldwork is a dialogical process that is structured by both the researcher and the participant (England, 1994). We must seek to position ourselves as researchers within the research process and acknowledge the impact this may have on data collection and the ‘knowledge’ produced. Research is a process, not just a product, and so we cannot ignore the making of research findings. As England contends (ibid), any researcher is positioned by his or her age, gender, race/ethnicity, sexual identity and biography.

For my part, I undertook my doctoral research at the age of between 22 and 24 years (considerably younger than most of the researched), I am female, middle class, English, and I was a student who had lived in Wales for a few years but was brought up

on a farm in the heart of the English countryside. My motivations for doing the research stemmed both from a theoretical insight into the issues of participatory rural development and from practical experience of rural development within the villages in which I grew up. These facets of my identity inevitably influenced the research in various ways, some of which are expanded upon below.

All these factors and facets may enable or inhibit certain research methods and insights within the field; how we deal with these issues is critical to the outcomes of our research.

## INSIDER/OUTSIDER

It is also important to consider the extent to which we are both inside and outside the community under study. Eyles (1988) argues that a researcher must be close enough ‘inside’ the community to grasp the significance of common-sense perceptions and behaviour, but far enough away to remain a critical commentator and provide a conceptual understanding of the world. A researcher cannot (often) be a full member of a group, nor a passive observer, nor a total outsider.

Personal details can locate the researcher inside and outside the field. For me, the greatest distance created between the researcher (myself) and the researched was the fact of my non-Welshness. I was not even able to speak the language. Conversely, closeness was generated from being a farmer’s daughter, from having been brought up in the countryside and so being familiar, and able to empathise, with many of the issues faced by rural communities and individuals within them. In the preliminary stages of the interview, when the researcher explores the nature of the researched, but the researched also seek to explore the researcher, I could see how people who initially felt distanced by my Englishness relaxed and grew closer to me as I was invited to reveal more about my rural background and experiences of other ‘community-based’ initiatives and activities.

As such, some elements of our personal background are a disadvantage and serve to distance us from the researched, whereas other elements facilitate the establishment of a rapport and enable people to identify with you personally; empathy is established through a common background. How we negotiate such positions becomes very important to the

research process, and inevitably to the very findings of the research itself.

## THE INEVITABLE POWER RELATIONS

Power relations lie at the core of all social research (Keith, 1992). They influence access to groups and the structure and conduct of the interviews (Winchester, 1996). While it is often assumed that it is the researcher who maintains power – after all, it is they who determine the nature of the questions, the way in which they are directed and indeed how they are interpreted – the flows of power are not always entirely one way (ibid).

Who I was perceived to be (from the standpoint of different informants) greatly affected the dynamics of each interview situation. This had both positive and negative effects. Beyond my Englishness (as discussed above), my relative position according to my gender and age was particularly apparent. Winchester (1996) contends that, while femininity is perceived as being relatively powerless, this may assist women interviewers in getting in the door and being given sensitive information. I had similar experiences: while I often felt relatively powerless as a woman, I was also aware that I gained access partly because I was approaching potential respondents as a woman. However, this relationship occasionally became more problematic when I was forced by the interview situation and relationship to condone remarks or gestures that I might not otherwise have tolerated (see Winchester, 1996 for similar, although far more pronounced, experiences).

Despite potentially being in a relatively powerful position as a middle-class, well-educated academic, my perception of myself as being a relatively inexperienced researcher and being totally dependent on the researched seemed to override these 'advantages', and my powerlessness was again highlighted. Through unintentionally but unavoidably exposing these weaknesses to the researched, I felt ever vulnerable. England (1994) and Smith (1988) recognise that acting as a supplicant, exposing your weaknesses as a researcher dependent on whoever is being researched for their superior knowledge, information and guidance, shifts power over to the researched. Exposing reliance on others for this 'insider' information can be used as a positive tactic; through pleading ignorance the researcher is able to ask

questions it is not possible for an insider to ask. While this was a successful tactic in most communities, it became increasingly difficult in the communities that I had been following for a long time, since they assumed that I knew all the background information already and so were less willing to answer basic, but important, questions.

## TRADING INFORMATION: THE ECONOMY OF TRUTH

Oakley (1986) argues that interviewing should be a two-way street; the interviewer should expose something of themselves and so give something back to the interviewed. Mooney (1994) contends that this 'trading of information' is more a research tactic whereby, as a result of our answering questions on our lives, the researched will expose more about theirs. For me, the concept of giving something back to the respondents was as important as 'trading information'. Indeed, I am sure that most of us engaged in research within the voluntary and community sectors (and elsewhere) are keen to give something back to our respondents. But what can we offer, how much can we give back, and how much can we reveal of ourselves?

What I could offer participants in return for their information and how much I revealed of myself were very much dependent on the specific contexts of each interview and on the interviewee. Burgess (1984: 202–3) contends that research and, more specifically, the interview process are a question of lies and truths, openness and secrecy. All concerned are 'economical with the truth' in terms of how much the researched reveal of themselves and their knowledge of the research questions, and indeed how much we as researchers reveal of ourselves.

First, many respondents requested detailed information about me, about my research and my standpoint within it. The level of detail I gave and how honest I was about my objectives varied. In terms of personal information, I never lied about who I was but I frequently failed to correct false assumptions interviewees would make about my background as I feared that to do so would be to further distance myself from respondents. Although they were never major issues, I often felt dishonest, especially when the interviewees had revealed particularly personal information about themselves. Nonetheless, I justified this as I felt that to have

corrected an assumption may have made the respondent feel uncomfortable.

In terms of my research, in a vain attempt to minimise any interviewer bias, I tended to limit the details of my perceptions on the research at the beginning of the interview. However, I often divulged more within the course of an interview, especially during those that developed into more interactive conversations where we shared similar viewpoints. Other respondents requested feedback and information about the specifics of the rural development programme under study, about the activities of other groups, and on what non-participating community members had said about their group. By providing some of this information I was able to feel I was giving something back, which for me was a very positive experience (see Maxey, 1999 and Routledge, 1996, for their experiences of giving something back in terms of writing articles on the activism in which they were involved).

What I gave back varied from providing basic information on the rural development programme under study and other rural development grants available to groups, to a lengthy (57 page) report written for one rural development agency and the community respondents, describing the projects and processes I had been researching. However, this process was not always unproblematic as I was ever conscious of often contradictory responsibilities towards limiting my influence on the research, my responsibility to the gatekeepers (both the rural development groups themselves and community leaders) and also to respondents in the wider community. When research is commissioned we also have responsibilities to our funders. As such, I tended to give very little away and inevitably adopted a position which (on the surface) appeared in line with the particular respondent.

## TABLOID JOURNALISM

A tendency within me to occasionally slip into the mode of a 'tabloid journalist' also created an area of personal concern. England (1994) recalls how she would listen sympathetically to interviewees talking about their life, while all the time thinking 'this would make a good quote'. I found myself experiencing similar thoughts. I developed a tendency to become disappointed if within the course of an interview I did not get some juicy scandal or village gossip! Alternatively (especially at

the end of a long week of interviewing), I occasionally began to see individuals as a resource: I wanted to get in, get the information, and get out. To guard against this I tried to reduce the number of interviews I held on each day, so as to be able to spend more time with each respondent and be relaxed without wanting to rush between each appointment.

## EMBROILED IN LOCAL DISPUTES

*There is one woman in the village who we call 'Devil Woman' as she won't let the children play on the grounds of the school ... You shouldn't go and speak to her. (Quote from a research respondent)*

The above quote from one of my respondents illustrates the ways in which a researcher may become embroiled in local disputes (particularly, perhaps, when researching in the community sector). To interview the person in question would have been disloyal, but not to do so would have been to risk taking sides or to miss important research findings.

Respondents may seek to draw you into community politics and expect you to take one side or the other. On one occasion, during a meeting that had been called in an attempt to resolve conflicts between two community groups, I found myself sitting around a table exactly in the middle of both groups. Members of both groups were whispering in my ear, often making insulting comments about those on the other side. It was a very uncomfortable situation and one that I found hard to deal with. I managed to remain neutral by limiting my response to either party to a nod or head shake, trying to look completely non-committal, or indeed simply pretending I had not heard the comment – a tactic made easier by the meeting environment!

Such situations are not only uncomfortable for us as researchers, but may also jeopardise the research process. This may become particularly problematic if our gatekeepers are central to the conflict, as our apparent alliance with such individuals may influence our access to and relationships with others (see Mason, 1996; and Keith, 1988). Maintaining neutrality and learning other methods to deal with such situations become important practices to add to the researchers' repertoire, not only in terms of self-preservation (as a researcher and a reflexive individual) but also because it may be that

continuing to witness precisely these tensions between individuals, groups or communities lies at the heart of the answers to our research questions.

## Concluding thoughts

Having first highlighted my relatively clean and systematic approach to the qualitative methods employed within one research project, but then going on to expose my dilemmas as a researcher, I hope to have highlighted some of the 'messiness' that inevitably lies behind any (apparently ordered) methodology.

While this essay has focused on my experience of undertaking one particular piece of research, drawing on mundane and exceptional incidents to illuminate my stories, most of the issues remain true, to greater or lesser extents, for other projects I have been involved in to date. Indeed, conversations with

other researchers indicate that they ring true for other people in other circumstances, but they remain largely absent from many textbooks on qualitative methods. By sharing these very personal accounts and reflections, I hope not only to have stimulated discussion on some of the dilemmas that run alongside the delights of undertaking qualitative research, but also to have provided a point of comparison for other researchers in what can be an isolating experience. Undertaking qualitative research is an extremely rewarding experience, but it is never a linear, objective, process.

As for what happens when we have completed the research and analysis and move on to the write up and finally to getting our research findings 'out there', the picture gets messier still. Indeed, these are perhaps the biggest dilemmas faced by all researchers (see Barton, 2002 for an interesting discussion).

# Emancipatory research for social justice practice: a cautionary tale

*Margaret Ledwith*

Research is never neutral. At every stage of its process, it is permeated by structural power reproducing power relations and dominant ways of seeing the world. Thus, if we employ research methods uncritically without situating these within an emancipatory paradigm, we inevitably and unwittingly reinforce the status quo. Even emancipatory research which is overtly situated within a praxis of liberation can be delusive. As researchers we are powerful, but with the best of intentions we can delude ourselves, naively claiming our research as collaborative, mutual, reciprocal. Vigilance and a courageous exposé of the weak spots in liberatory research are vital if we are to evolve methodologies fit to sit within a critical praxis.

Here, in an attempt to illuminate my point, I want to explore the elusive and often insidious nature of power in the research process in relation to my collaborative research with Wendy. This is set within an argument that locates deeply personal lives on a continuum with the profoundly political determinants of those lives, thus locating an axis for transformative change.

Wendy and I found our lives woven together by an accident of circumstance. All those years ago, in the mid-80s, we likened our coming together in the process of community development to Gramsci's concepts of the organic and traditional intellectual (Ledwith, 1997). I was the outsider coming into Wendy's community, Hattersley, as a community development worker; Wendy was organic to her community and an activist in the process of social justice. Both of these positions brought about a sense of dislocation from our inherited lives, giving rise to deep critical questioning and a shared commitment to

transforming the injustices that we witnessed in the everyday lives of Hattersley people. For seven years we worked in partnership, developing our theory and practice, sharing each other's ups and downs, and creating a history in common. With others we pioneered the first credit union in the north-west of England, we developed Hattersley Women for Change, we shared our Christmas Days at a community party, and much more.

Research was pivotal to this process. I registered for a PhD with Ralph Ruddock at Manchester University in an endeavour to keep my practice critical; Wendy pursued her professional youth and community qualification, also at Manchester University. For me, this was the point at which I experienced the dissonance of research methodologies which did not sit comfortably with the ideological base of my practice. It was also the time in which participatory action research was becoming more widely understood (Reason and Rowan, 1981). The notion that the research process in itself could be emancipatory was exciting and consonant with my practice, and I seized it enthusiastically.

Now, more than a decade later, Wendy and I have come together to develop auto-ethnography as an emancipatory action research methodology within a participatory paradigm. We suspect it has the potential to offer radical community work praxis an approach to research which gets to the heart of lived experience by exposing the way in which our identities are shaped in the world, linking deeply personal lives with profoundly political forces. Remember, though, that its purpose is only relevant when set within a process of collective action for social justice. The axis of the personal and political locates points of intervention for critical practice in its commitment to a more fair and just world.

Our approach has been to use dialogue and the posing of critical questions in a problem-posing (Freire, 1972), deeply reflexive way to focus an interactive inner and outer process of exploration of our personal stories and the times which shaped them. Peering into the depths of our experience, we explore the inner recesses of our memories, those places where our formative and often painful experiences have been hidden. And we analyse these personal stories in relation to the socio-cultural institutions that construct our lives in a complex, overlapping, interlocking framework of privilege and discrimination.

*Back and forth auto-ethnographers gaze, first through an ethnographic wide-angle lens, focusing outward on social and cultural aspects of their personal experience; then, they look inward, exposing a vulnerable self that is moved by and may move through, refract, and resist cultural interpretations ... concrete action, dialogue, emotion, embodiment spirituality, and self-consciousness are featured, appearing as relational and institutional stories affected by history, social structure, and culture which themselves are dialectically revealed through action, feeling thought and language. (Ellis and Bochner, 2000:739)*

It is this inner and outer reach that leads us to believe that auto-ethnographic research is relevant; its potential to locate the deeply personal with the wider political context gives us greater insight into the nature of power and subordination in ways which close the gap between human being and human knowing. (Reason and Bradbury, 2001)

A decade after my departure from Hattersley, and one hundred miles apart, I approached Wendy with a 'good idea': 'We could do some important work together, research a book, a continuation of our partnership, based on true collaboration ...' I tried to inject some enthusiasm, but my stutterings became more apparent in the face of her non-response, and eventually faltered completely as my own inner doubts got in the way. Was this really mutual? Or was I encouraging Wendy to jump on board my wagon, with me at the reins? The difficult silence was broken: 'Are you suggesting that I should be the one left standing alone in my underwear in public? I don't think so. You join me. We'll strip off to our underwear together!' I felt embarrassed, exposed, challenged. Unable to respond in the moment, I fudged around the edges,

but was inwardly aware that what I had defined as collaborative action research was an assumption that I could occupy the rather safe role as objective outsider, whilst levelling my middle-class gaze at her working-class story. She had the insight to recognise this and the courage to name it. Today, we are writing that book, *Personal Narratives/Political Lives*, and she has successfully exposed me in my underwear! We stand alongside each other exploring the inner recesses of our life experience, and analysing the forces that have differently shaped very similar experiences, in our case across the difference of class. Rather than focusing solely on the structures of disempowerment, a top-down perspective, we now question the essence of white, middle-class privilege in a more truly collaborative way (Fine et al, 1997).

Wendy's challenge, and my courage to engage with it, brought us together in deeper, mutual trust and respect. I emphasise these values because they must frame any research that intends to go more than skin deep. Critics have questioned the practicality of such research, suggesting that trust is somehow synonymous with time, and so financially impractical. Others have heralded it as pushing the parameters of qualitative research. It is my opinion that research which claims to be emancipatory must be founded on trust and integrity. In my experience, it is possible to trust immediately on meeting someone, because we 'know' intuitively that they have integrity. Equally, it is possible to spend years never reaching that place when these qualities are absent. These are fundamental community work values, and they are embedded in the skills which frame every encounter in community. I suggest they have little relationship to a time dimension.

My emphasis here is that this approach to research is merely an extension of good community work practice. It is about paying full attention to our true being: 'our true being reaches beyond thought to the simple experience of everyday life' (Quinney, 1998:68). This builds on previous research in which personal autonomy is identified as the basis of collective action (Ledwith and Asgill, 2000). Doyal and Gough (1991) argue that personal autonomy is a basic need which is a pre-requisite for critical autonomy and collective action, and that social exclusion and marginalisation harm people by not only restricting their right to participate in society, but by precluding the critical autonomy that leads to collective action. Peter Reason takes a step further,

claiming that participation is inextricably part of our sense of meaning and purpose in the world, and so goes beyond the personal and political to the spiritual dimensions of life (Reason, n.d).

Recently, Morwenna Griffiths (2003) has added to my thinking in locating self-esteem as the basis of collective action for social justice. She beautifully names arrogance as the feeling that is maintained by competition with others, and winning; yet diametrically opposed is self-esteem, which is maintained by co-operation, by wanting everyone else to share in it. By naming self-esteem, as a political concept, and conviviality and reciprocity as transformative values, we just begin to get a glimpse of how every encounter is either diminishing or flourishing, and thus how values, feelings, ideology are the basis of criticality. This moves nearer to the heart of a postmodern praxis of difference. In other words, our identities, shaped by every aspect of our social difference, directly impinge on our self-esteem. This is precisely why respectful encounters in research are the basis of transformative change. Our weakness in practice is the all-too-often failure to move this to collective action. 'Little stories' link voice to narrative by:

*taking the particular perspective of an individual seriously; that is, the individual as situated in particular circumstances in all their complexity [and by linking this] to grander concerns like education, social justice and power. (Griffiths, 2003:81)*

As a result of this research, my altered consciousness takes me ever more critically into the essence of collaborative research and issues of power. I attempt to deal with this by using the ideology of my research to frame reflexive, ethical questions. For instance, I have the status to pursue a publishing contract, but do I have the right to do this without Wendy's co-authorship? On the other hand, to what extent are we deluding ourselves if Wendy accedes to my ideas by putting her name alongside mine? Or perhaps there is a stage at which she can legitimately claim the ideas as hers, just as I have absorbed ideas that have been introduced to me. How can we ensure that criticality defines every encounter? These issues of power and status are multi-layered, but if we are vigilant and persistent in our engagement with them, we stand a chance of getting nearer to the core of a transformative praxis for a more fair, just and sustainable future.

# Be aware, be very aware: philosophical, ethical and political issues in qualitative research

Katharine Gaskin

*Theories, concepts, ideas, power, values, experience and self-identity of researchers and researched interact in the processes involved in formulating and responding to questions, in producing and interpreting data ... and in drawing conclusions. Differences in social class, gender, age, disability, sexuality and ethnicity interact with all of these and with the very processes of interaction and interpretation. (Everitt and Hardiker, 1996)*

So it's hopeless then. There is clearly no way we can arrive at a clean, objective research process and results which are not contaminated by all of these biases, hidden and overt. We might as well pack up and go home.

Philosophical, ethical and political issues affect all research but they are particularly important in qualitative research, because the human element is so prominent. True, a survey questionnaire may carry all sorts of biases but it is in the human interaction and interpretation in qualitative research that these factors can really come into play.

We are told that qualitative research must be 'theoretically informed' and value-based. In fact, it always is, but the theory and values may not be articulated or even acknowledged. They may be contained within the research brief, reflecting the perspective of the commissioner of the research, be introduced by the researcher – or be an interaction between the two.

Criticism of qualitative research stems from the accusation/fact that 'the researcher is the research instrument'. Findings and conclusions ultimately rest on the researcher's judgement. Even in more

progressive research approaches, this remains true. While we are all familiar with reports and studies which claim to 'let the people on the estate/young people/the charity's users speak for themselves', we also know that these voices have been filtered through the researcher. Not only in interpreting the information collected, selecting and highlighting, deriving thematic structure, but in the initial construction of the research questions and instruments, can the researcher influence the research outcomes.

I have witnessed the interpretation of research data, both quantitative and qualitative, where a clear bias rules. I have seen cross-tabs thrown out because they don't support the general thrust of findings. At the most basic level, if you have 39% in favour, 37% against and 24% don't know, do you have 'little more than one third opposed' or 'a sizeable majority not in favour' or 'positive and negative views evenly balanced'? The researcher's agenda will often determine the choice. It is down to conscience how this is presented. This is why the most important quality any researcher must have is integrity – and this is probably most true of the qualitative researcher.

Just practise saying 'Do you think charities are trustworthy?' (as in a focus group), placing the main emphasis on each word in turn, and you will hear how you invoke a whole world of potential bias. Then try it with different inflexions. A measured, low tone which comes down at the end implies 'yes', a rapid high delivery that gets higher at the end hints at scepticism and suggests 'no'. Carrying out focus groups and interviews requires the strongest focus to

be on the part of the researcher, to deliver neutral questions with no hidden prompting, no implicit invitation to respond in a certain way. And of course that doesn't even consider the version 'Do you think charities are untrustworthy?' Just another way of asking the same question, right?

## What are some of the issues we have to consider?

- What factors determine which method is to be used? Pure research considerations, or other determinants like the funder's agenda or the budget?
- What frames the questions? The search for truth, or the search for particular answers?
- What are the power issues in the interaction between researcher and researched? And can they be overcome?
- What is the 'empathy–detachment' continuum? And can the researcher choose his/her position or is it out of his/her hands?

This essay reviews four pieces of qualitative research carried out by the author, with reflection on the implications. Before that, a friendly reviewer of this essay suggested a short paragraph on my background. It goes like this: BA, work for charity, MA at LSE, research post, MA/PhD in the USA, research on American racism, co-ordinator in community co-operatives, founder of charity of American co-operatives, farm worker, counsellor in non-profit alternative health centre, research post on black community involvement, community development worker, social policy research director, freelancer .... varied, interesting and bringing me into contact with a wide spectrum of the human condition.

In the initial seminar which launched this essay, I suggested rather simplistically that qualitative research was especially effective in fulfilling four functions, namely to **identify**, **elaborate**, **explain** and **reveal**. The examples below and on the following pages (loosely) exemplify these.

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## Identify: public trust in charities

*Aim:* To identify the factors causing low public trust in charities

*Context:* Public trust surveys showed that charities were sinking in public esteem, along with most other institutions. Meanwhile, charities as always were desperate to increase donations and support from the public.

*For:* NCVO/Third Sector Consortium on Trust and Confidence

*Methods:* Ten focus groups with different characteristics, including volunteers, donors, professionals, social security claimants

*Report:* *Blurred Vision: Public Trust in Charities* (Gaskin and Fenton, 1997)

### *Key findings*

- The boundaries of the charity sector are becoming increasingly blurred as it assumes roles and practices common to the public and private sectors, particularly marketing and fundraising tactics.

- The public demands more transparency and accountability from the sector.
- Charities are facing a crisis of public confidence, strongly linked to a crisis of identity within the sector.

### *Choice quotes*

'You feel like, if you've given ten quid, then they've spent it on mailing things back to you.'

'Charities are rather blurred now. I think something that was perhaps more easily definable some years ago, has become a very vast, confused and very distant kind of machinery.'

### *Outcomes*

- Further research including a survey
- Theory building – postmodernism, individuation, globalism
- Action by charities to increase accountability and restore public trust

## Reflection and assessment

Focus groups are an obvious method to take the temperature on issues. The only other feasible method would have been one-to-one interviews. This may not have produced such strong findings – and would have been much more time-consuming and expensive.

However, it is necessary to acknowledge the group mentality factor in focus groups. You can see participants getting into the swing of an attitude, particularly where you have a strong voice or voices. Of course, groups can produce radically different perspectives but it is easy for a certain tone or thrust to be set and for others to follow it.

The researcher must not be lazy and welcome a (possibly artificial) consensus because it is going to make analysis easier. A huge responsibility is to coax the less vocal members of the group to speak up and to create a climate in which minority opinions are as valid as majority ones. The researcher must convey approval of the advancing of opinions but not of the opinions themselves. This reinforces people's confidence that they are not making fools of themselves, and encourages them to talk more. Vigorous nodding, a smile, a 'that's an interesting point' – you visibly see people relaxing and gaining conviction in their ability to contribute something of value.

The groups in this research were very varied. Some were comfortably off, very middle class, and confident in their opinions. They viewed me as a fellow professional but not quite equal, because of my freelance status – a bit unstable for most of them. I dressed smartly, made myself appear at ease in their presence, spoke well and used an educated vocabulary. Participants required little prompting and enjoyed the intellectual discussion (and the sound of their own voices!).

It was not all plain sailing. A 'religiously committed' group, all attached to church charities, tested my neutrality when several members roundly condemned homeless people. I remained inscrutable through phrases like 'lifestyle choice' and 'they'll only spend it on drink and drugs'. It is not the researcher's role to argue, but it is acceptable to question 'Does everyone feel like that?' Thankfully, some did not and challenged their peers.

Then there was the group of stressed-out, low-income people, to whom I must have come across as from a different world. They were clearly drawn by the token payment and not by any fascination with what was for them a pretty low priority topic. I downplayed the differences, dressing casually and speaking colloquially. I did a lot of smiling and nodding, threw in more prompts when people looked blank, and we got a terrific discussion going. (And they were much more kindly about the problems which underlie homelessness.)

As with many focus groups, it was a subject on which most people did not have pre-formed opinions. This is likely to happen when you spring a subject on people cold and it is something that has not been strongly salient to them previously. So, as groups progressed, a vague knee-jerk approval of 'charity' began to clash with their incensed accounts of bombardment by mailshots and marketing bumf. A lot of participants said the group had been educational and stimulated their thinking about these issues.

The researcher always wonders if these newly minted opinions would hold firm over time and in different settings. However, the groups hit on the same factors undermining their trust in charities with reassuring consistency. This gives confidence that the results are genuine and represent a consensus across a wide spread of personal characteristics.

## Elaborate: young people's attitudes to volunteering

*Aim:* To elaborate what young people really think about volunteering and volunteers

*Context:* The National Survey of Volunteering showed a marked decline in young people's rates of voluntary work and higher incidence of negative attitudes, compared with their older counterparts. So what's going on then?

*For:* The Institute for Volunteering Research

*Methods:* Focus groups again – different types of young people, from private-school students to volunteers to disaffected youth – but with a twist! The discussion focused on five key questions with sets of cue cards showing possible answers (for example: Who volunteers? 16 options including 'people who like to help others', 'do-gooders or busybodies' and 'middle-aged and older people'). Subgroups of four or five group members were given a few minutes to sort the cards into a top, middle and bottom pile, and we then discussed their choices together.

*Report:* *What Young People Want from Volunteering* (Gaskin, 1998)

### Key findings

- A wish-list with the acronym FLEXIVOL – flexibility, legitimacy, ease of access, experience, incentives, variety, organisation, laughs
- Recommendations for shaping and marketing volunteering for young people

### Choice quotes

'I think if you're giving them something, then it's got to be flexible to suit you.'

'It's not that young people don't care. They are put in that position by society. You've got no responsibility, no say in what happens. So there's this problem, but they say "you can't solve it, you're too young".'

### Outcomes

- Further research
- Shaping of Millennium Volunteers
- Revision of charities' youth recruitment strategies and voluntary opportunities

### Reflection and assessment

Most people are uncomfortable sitting still for one-and-a-half to two hours, with people they do not know, talking about subjects that may not be particularly dear to their hearts. With teenagers and young people, forget it! The cue cards worked even better than hoped. Not only did they focus the discussion, they meant the time was broken up by movement and activity, so participants' attention was more or less held for the duration. In addition, the less confident and vocal ones were obliged to join in, but in a non-exposed way, and, having broken the barrier of silence, found themselves offering opinions and taking part in the general discussion.

Another bonus was that the sorting of the cards allowed some quantitative validation of the qualitative findings. Merely by apportioning a 1, 2 or 3 to the cards in the piles, we could produce a simple table which showed the ranking of the statements or cues across 16 subgroups, with an average score. Thus, while the discussions led to the conclusion that flexibility in volunteering was crucial, it was reassuring that this was backed up by a top score for 'flexible work and working times' in the ranking of things young people look for in volunteering. The instrumental emphasis of youth volunteering was validated by a close second for 'training and a reference or qualification'.

Did the provision of possible answers bias the findings? Well, maybe. But all possible answers – positive and negative – were presented and it was down to the young people to pick the ones they liked or disliked. It was again reassuring, for instance, that almost all sub-groups placed 'incompetent amateurs' as an answer to 'who volunteers?' in the bottom pile. Also low down were 'white people' and 'middle-class or well-off people' – good on the youth! – but unfortunately also close to the bottom was 'young people'. Accurate, if nothing else.

As for power issues, I started at a disadvantage because while (as we all say) I feel 21, I certainly don't look it. Indeed I probably looked very old to some of the young people, but all I can aim for is not to look like a teacher, job-centre advisor or

their mother. It probably helped that I came out of the blue and was not immediately classifiable as a recognised authority figure. So it was casual wear, trainers (except for the private school – those posh teachers can be very intimidating ...) and informal speech. But no ‘youthspeak’; it embarrasses young people when older people say ‘cool’ or ‘made up’. ‘It’s just sad!’

Again, lots of positive feedback is important with young people who lack confidence, especially when they are in an alien setting. It is quite poignant to see the pleasure on some undervalued teenager’s face when his tentative

comment is rewarded with ‘That’s a good point, Ryan’. You get the feeling he has never made a good point in his life before – or certainly that no-one has told him. Oh, and remember to use their names. Scribble them on a plan of the seating at the first introductions, secretly check them when someone is talking and use them correctly!

Again, it is hard to see how the research could have produced the results using a different method. Individual interviews would have been very taxing, I think, for some of these youngsters, and I have no doubt that the group setting made them feel more secure.

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## Explain: charities’ attitudes towards ethical investment

*Aim:* To explain charities’ inaction on ethical investment

*Context:* An earlier survey indicated positive intentions to invest funds ethically, but there had been poor take-up. Why were these intentions not fulfilled?

*For:* The Charities Aid Foundation

*Method:* One-to-one telephone interviews with the Finance Directors, CEOs and Chairs of Trustees in 41 charities, large and small, in a wide range of fields. Also interviews with investment experts, literature and web-site review.

*Report:* ‘Whose Business? Ethical Investment and the Charity Sector’ (Gaskin, 2001).

*Key findings*

- A pyramid typology that explained variation by charity characteristics: super-ethicals, special interest ethicals, general ethicals, ethical prospects and ethical inactives
- Recommendations on overcoming barriers

*Choice quotes*

‘There is a fine line from being reactive to the next stage of being proactive.’

‘If we lose money on a conventional investment, that’s just the market; but if we lose on an ethical investment, that’s our bad judgement.’

*Outcomes*

- A strategy to amend and promote ethical products and network more widely to raise awareness across the sector
- Further research

### Reflection and assessment

This was a short piece of work, commissioned with an immediate start, so it meant a telephone blitz without the preamble of a warm-up letter. With cold-calling, the challenge is to convey what you want, establish yourself as named, responsible and trustworthy, authenticate the source (i.e. it was not a sneaky way of flogging them an investment product) – and all within two minutes. So the responsible professional voice came out and a neat introductory summary was honed. The words ‘confidential’ and ‘anonymous’ got top billing, so respondents immediately felt reassured. I always emphasised that I did not expect them to talk now but could we arrange a time at their convenience? Interestingly, the less pressure applied in this respect, the more prepared many were to talk there and then.

The willingness of so many senior staff in national/global charities to discuss their finances upon being cold-called by a complete stranger was gratifying (disconcerting?). Of course, there were those few respondents who endlessly postponed the interview/did not return

calls/missed the appointed time. *When so many are so capable, what's with this lot?* (A common mantra, I think, for voluntary sector researchers!) However, the sample was 'loose' – as long as I covered a range of charity characteristics – so I had the luxury of dialling another number if one proved impossible to pin down.

A bonus for me was learning about the comprehensive ethical stance taken by several charities, and the innovative use of charity pressure to 'engage with the enemy' to achieve socially responsible corporate practice. This was a relatively new area for me and, unlike some research topics, I started it not knowing all the answers ... (self-deprecating tone, please!)

I learned early on in the interviews that simply asking 'Why haven't you made ethical investments?' provoked a negative reaction. I subsequently changed the wording and implied an understanding of the barriers (greater empathy) to encourage explanations rather than defensiveness.

This method was the only way to get these findings. A written survey would not have elicited the level of detail, the subtlety of attitudes and, probably, the response rate of the personal contact. Besides, it was a written survey that produced all the declarations of ethical intent. Focus groups would not have allowed individual situations to be fully described and explained, and there may have been some protectiveness of participants' own charities. More practically, getting 50 senior charity staff into groups in two weeks was just not feasible.

In a similar piece of research about charity trustees, the one-to-one interviews were followed by focus groups. To these groups, I put the major findings and themes which emerged from analysis of the interview data and got their feedback on how valid they were. Then the groups had a guided discussion of solutions, strategies and ways forward. This sequence of individual data gathering, analysis and group review is very satisfying and gives great reassurance on the validity of the findings.

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## Reveal: The Black and Minority Ethnic Twinning Initiative

*Aim:* To evaluate the impact and mechanisms of partnering mainstream charities with black and minority ethnic (BME) voluntary organisations in the development and promotion of BME volunteering

*Context:* A Home Office consultation exercise had confirmed that the BME sector lacked resources and infrastructural support. BME volunteering was alive and well, but impeded by a variety of barriers.

*For:* The Home Office Active Community Unit

*Method:* Case studies of each project. Telephone interviews and visits to all 19 participating organisations. An interim and final project questionnaire (with largely qualitative responses), volunteer satisfaction questionnaires; analysis of monitoring data, reports, programmes, publicity materials; calculation of volunteer value.

*Report:* *Joining Forces – The Black and Minority Ethnic Twinning Initiative: Evaluation and Good Practice* (Gaskin, 2003).

### *Key findings*

- Great successes and gains in mutual understanding and capacity building were achieved through the partnerships.
- BME volunteering is constrained in BME organisations by limited resources, opportunities and attitudes; and in white-led organisations by ignorance of diversity, monocultural systems and public image.
- Changing the image of 'volunteering' and emphasising skill gains and job prospects was a key way to attract many BME people to volunteering

### *Choice quotes*

'It has been very beneficial to be helped and given advice "from the horse's mouth" about how best to involve BME volunteers rather than a piecemeal, unco-ordinated approach as before.' (mainstream charity)

'One of the most successful achievements has been overcoming the myths and misconceptions

that the BME community has about volunteering.’ (BME community organisation)

#### *Outcomes*

- The report was published by the Home Office and widely disseminated.
- Organisations took up the models of good practice. The British Association of Settlements and Social Action Centres (bassac), for example, has launched a Progress through Partnership initiative using the report as a blueprint.

#### **Reflection and assessment**

This is like many programme evaluations I have carried out. The researcher employs a battery of methods to gather as much information and ‘feel’ for projects as possible. In those with more organisations or projects involved, case studies are usually a selected sample, but in this evaluation all the organisations in the project partnerships received the same scrutiny.

The multiplicity of methods and triangulation of perspectives, common in programme evaluations, helps ensure that a full picture is built up of the way the project is operating, how well it is meeting its objectives and what the catalysts and impediments to progress are. Examining the programmes developed and the publicity and other written materials produced gets beneath the surface of the project and any gloss that project personnel may put on it, consciously or unconsciously.

It never fails to be informative when one moves from the written data – documentation, questionnaire responses etc. – to the qualitative interaction. However strong the picture conjured by the materials, meeting the people and seeing the place are always revealing.

One project, for example, appeared to have management and communication problems, but it was hard to put a finger on the reasons for this. That was until I arrived for my visit and the project worker refused to see me because she did not feel prepared. I said I would spend the morning with other people and see her in the afternoon, giving her two or three hours to ‘prepare’. I watched in amazement as the director of the organisation tolerated her rejection of this offer and told me, as

if routinely, ‘There’s nothing I can do – she’s a strong woman’. Say no more!

And it was through the qualitative interaction that I understood why one project had not, on paper, achieved all its objectives. The worker was terrific but received no support from within the organisation. Instead of development work, at which she excelled, she was tied up with administrative and secretarial tasks. And senior staff had, despite repeated pleas, made no effort to provide additional support. She did not dare put this on paper, and the senior staff would not write about it either, but in person it was clear what the dynamics were.

It was not useful to lay personal blame for such problems. Instead, they became part of the picture of the constraints on the BME voluntary sector – cash-strapped, with high staff turnover – and the larger political context in which it operates.

The issue of researcher power was particularly sensitive. I am not black nor do I belong to any minority ethnic group. Indeed, initially I refused the invitation to tender because I felt the evaluation should be black-led. But I have worked in and with many BME organisations and communities and was persuaded.

When I contacted each organisation, I attached a brief outline of who I was, which listed some of my experiences, as well as emphasising my independence from the government funder. I considered it was reasonable to let organisations know who was evaluating them, but the message was transparent – ‘I am not one of them’ i.e. not part of the ‘white power structure’. I knew they would all see through this instantly, but I also knew many would give me credit for trying and would reserve judgement. In the event, I felt I established good communication and gained a degree of trust with most. Sometimes I did this by empathising and positioning myself against the oppressions which they cited.

I was never unethical but I judged how necessary it was to show my hand in order to gain their confidence and genuine information. If they had felt I would report straight back to their funder masters, they would understandably have protected their position and hidden weaknesses or problems. One or two could not take that step and maintained a complete façade. I knew I was being

'played' for all they were worth. But I did not let on and I had the triangulation by other sources and

a complete understanding of their suspicion of white authority to navigate this treatment.

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## Conclusions

### METHOD AND FRAMEWORK

It is clear to most researchers that method is not always chosen on pure research grounds. I think I have been lucky because most of the research I have done has, in my opinion, used appropriate methods. (I also, as a freelancer, have the scope to turn down work where I think the method is inadequate.) Even so, time and budgetary considerations frequently limit the ideal methodology: Are eight focus groups as good as twelve? Surely two or three visits to case study organisations are better than one? There is always more that can be done to explore research questions, but one has a non-negotiable minimum. 'Good enough' was the watchword in a major research centre I worked in ...

Choosing methods and research questions on political grounds is the biggest risk. Everitt and Hardiker (1996) proposed a value base for practice and research that includes the principle:

*People's problems can never be fully understood if they are seen solely as a result of personal inadequacies. Issues of oppression, social policy, the environment and the economy are ... major contributory forces.*

I am sure the research world today would accept this, but applying it may not always be as straightforward. Taking as an example the research on young people's attitudes to volunteering to explain declining participation, the following analyses could be made. Certainly each popped into my head at some point during the groups.

- *Personal inadequacies*: young people are spoilt, self-centred, materialistic, hedonistic, 'apathetic', 'the disconnected generation', don't care about others and lack a sense of social responsibility.
- *Economic analysis*: youth unemployment, great emphasis on formal training and getting a career, omnipresence of consumer goods (designer labels, new technology), low income

- of young people, costs of being a volunteer.
- *Political analysis*: disenfranchised youth, alienation from mainstream politics, Thatcher (Blair?) legacy, cynicism about politics and spin, scepticism about the political power of charities, charity as a palliative 'letting politicians off the hook'.
- *Social policy*: on volunteering, on education and training, the infrastructure for youth volunteering, benefit restrictions, co-option/professionalisation of the voluntary sector, the sector's policies on youth volunteering (minimum age limits, menial roles).
- *Social environment*: consumer culture, youth culture, peer pressure to be 'cool' rather than a 'goody-goody', images of masculinity, low family and school support, lack of information about the voluntary sector and opportunities for involvement, exposure of charity fraud tainting the whole sector.
- *Oppression*: young people feel disempowered, stigmatised, given little trust and responsibility, resentful of authority, their lives controlled by others, determined to exercise what little choice they have, plus the interplay of different oppressions – class, ethnicity, gender, disability, culture, family.

Clearly, the explanation for falling youth volunteering embraces all these factors and the key is how young people experience all of this. As Everitt and Hardiker (1996) note, research must accept people as:

*active agents in constructing and making sense of the realities they encounter ... the importance of understanding situations from the perspective of the participants.*

Thus the report on young people's wish list for voluntary work concluded:

*These are not unreasonable demands by a selfish generation, but practical preferences in the context of young people's lives. Their reasons are well thought out and represent some difficult choices as they negotiate their way through the pressures and freedoms of adolescence and early adulthood. (Gaskin, 1998)*

It is clear to see how a funder or researcher could choose to make any of the above paradigms dominant in framing the research or interpreting its findings. And, of course, had it been structured in a particular way, there are no prizes for predicting the tenor of the findings it would have produced.

## RESEARCHER POWER AND POSITION

Those who research the 'less powerful' – young, poor or elderly people; patients; service recipients; BME people, etc. – have to face the power issue head on. A participant may be acutely aware of status differences and feel intimidated and at risk of exposing self-perceived inadequacies. A well-recognised consequence is that he or she is often eager to please, to say what he or she thinks the researcher (or other professional) requires or expects.

The researcher is in a position of power, yes? Ah, but actually the researched has most power because they have the knowledge the researcher seeks. I often start groups with 'There are no right or wrong answers – it's only about what you think'. The researcher would do well to recognise where the power really lies and to do everything possible to equalise the status of the interaction.

In fact, most people like to be asked. The 'powerless' are not used to it but they have plenty of opinions. Sometimes you can see genuine surprise on their faces that you want to know what they think. They may not be as articulate as well-educated people and there may be potential gulfs in how issues are conceptualised, and *whether* they are conceptualised. An interviewee may, for example, focus on personal, concrete events and experiences, while the researcher is thinking concepts and hypotheses. However, communication is always possible and it is the researcher's job to find the channel and open it.

It seems quite petty to change clothes and speech for different research subjects, as I have admitted above. Rather calculated, manipulative. But the researcher can be a chameleon and I think that's OK. Or better than OK, essential. The key objective, of which the researcher must never lose sight, is to plumb the depths of people's opinions – to help them (a) discover that they have opinions on this topic and (b) express those opinions. Therefore,

there has to be some degree of trust in you as a researcher and a minute amount of liking for you as a person. It is said that humans form their impressions of new people in the first 30 seconds. The researcher needs that to be positive, or at least neutral. So you want to strike those you are researching as non-threatening, non-judgemental and having just enough in common that they feel they can open up to you.

I generally emphasise my freelance status because I find that many research subjects, particularly the 'powerless', are intimidated by institutions (universities) of which they have no experience and possibly a negative impression. I also always put my independence up front when I am doing large evaluations and the programme funder is funding the evaluation too. Professionals and organisations may feel a university source is more reassuring, but I have never found it a problem.

Above all, there must be genuine curiosity about the person's unique life experience and views. The researcher must care about each individual and, for the duration of the interaction, focus entirely on their value as a person and as a potential source of information. Respect – an overworked word, but it is the key. I confess to being caught out when, a little jaded and with only this last group to do, I look around a roomful of rather unprepossessing faces and think 'I'm not going to get anything interesting from this lot'. And then each is inspiring in his or her own way. There are fascinating stories, unique insights, amazing lives, and I feel duly humbled.

So we are a sounding board – detached – and a catalyst – empathetic. We have to find the knack of spanning the spectrum. We listen, the coolly objective researcher, mentally logging useful points; and we interact, the human being, caring about them and their lives at least for the duration of the encounter (and on occasion for some time afterwards). We have to marry the personal and the political and see how the individual fits into the theoretical, and vice versa.

It's not easy, but it's not hopeless. As researchers we try to span these continua and do honest work. Let's acknowledge how much our take on life – philosophy and politics – affects everything we do, and get on with it. But be aware, be very aware.

# Taking time seriously: adding temporal depth to qualitative research in the voluntary sector

*Rob Macmillan*

A temporal perspective in social research involves a suggestion that researchers take time (more) seriously when identifying issues for research, framing research questions and in research design. It seeks to make more explicit the different ways in which time may affect what is examined and how it is examined. Arguably, no research design, in the voluntary sector or elsewhere in the social sciences, can ignore questions of time (Bechhofer and Paterson, 2000: 113), but research in this area has so far predominantly been quantitative.

Recently completed doctoral research undertaken at the University of Durham addressed issues of time in two distinct ways. It involved, first, an extended and, secondly, a 'real-time' examination of several case study voluntary sector projects, all of which were seeking to tackle disadvantage in rural areas in the north of England. The projects were supported by community development workers employed by a Rural Community Council.

Extending the duration of research involvement with individual cases was a deliberate strategy designed to overcome some of the shortcomings of conventional 'snapshot' cross-sectional case study approaches. In these, the priority given to comparison across cases at more or less frozen moments in time runs the risk of what Walker and Leisering (1998: 19–20) call left- and right-hand 'censorship'. This can lead to the neglect of how organisations originate and how issues and processes might emerge (left-hand censorship) and how they might evolve, develop and 'end' through time (right-hand censorship). Stretching the timescale of a research engagement (for example, as

'a year in the life of a project') offers the possibility of capturing change in more of its totality, and of tracing complex causal relationships through time.

Voluntary sector projects all seek to achieve something (for example, the establishment of a particular service or more intangible things such as 'more capacity', community involvement, or regeneration) over a particular time period. An important line of enquiry concerns what can be achieved over this time, particularly given that funding is predominantly time-limited. It is also important to consider to what extent the development of projects (or organisations, or specific issues) should be examined retrospectively, through archive and biographical approaches, or ethnographically as a continually unfolding present. Shadowing activities and events in 'real time' potentially facilitates a deeper understanding of everyday processes and practices in the voluntary sector as they occur.

Qualitative research with 'temporal depth' involves a number of methodological and ethical considerations. A strategy of 'being there' at potentially key moments, as they happen, has the potential to add to our understanding of the processes through which voluntary sector projects and organisations function. This may be extended to allow researchers to witness at first hand how issues and processes evolve over time. A real-time study may provide some safeguard against the concern that retrospective accounts suffer from failing and selective memory, from guesswork, and from reinterpreting the past in the light of subsequent events. Researchers might thus be able to add to the

validity of their claims by their own presence as 'fly on the wall' witnesses.

However, extended 'real time' research involvement also runs the risk that researchers become too familiar with a research setting or group of respondents. This risk may take several forms. Being gradually 'socialised' into the norms and perspectives of participants, or becoming increasingly accustomed and desensitised to the everyday rhythms of a research setting may diminish a researcher's 'critical distance'. During an extended research engagement, researchers may find that they come to adopt uncritically the perspectives of their respondents, to the potential neglect of other voices, perspectives and interests. Similarly, researchers may begin to take things for granted and risk losing sight of significant features of a research setting or of longer-term incremental change. One of the case study projects in the doctoral research involved just such an extended engagement amongst a core group of respondents associated with a particular remote rural community-based project. A new worker from outside the area was brought in on a temporary basis to assist the project, and was interviewed for the research. But their perspective on the power dynamics within the core group of respondents was challenging and, to me as the researcher, somewhat surprising. Consequently, it forced me to reassess my own carefully constructed perspective, and to reflect upon whether my extended real-time fieldwork had perhaps led to the development of an over-familiar, over-smooth account of the project.

Where longer-term and/or deeper relationships between researchers and participants are developed, particular ethical dilemmas can arise. As time goes by, researchers may increasingly be taken for granted by participants as merely 'a part of the furniture', depending on how inconspicuous they manage to make themselves. In consequence, participants might reveal more of themselves than they originally intended. The contrast here is with more-formalised research methods such as single semi-structured qualitative interviews. For example, a respondent is perhaps more likely to give a neater,

more rational kind of account in a single interview for an hour or two in the context of a short term case study research project than in a longer term study. For researchers the prospects for probing beyond the natural guard that might be assumed in such a research encounter is likely to be somewhat limited. Over a longer time period, however, stronger relationships of trust may develop between respondents and researchers. At this point the research engagement, involving successive interviews with the same people, alongside the 'hanging around' associated with observational methods, may increase the chances of researchers witnessing the messier side of the everyday life of voluntary and community organisations.

The ethical dilemma arising in this case is based around the potential loss of control faced by respondents. Having originally given consent to research, informed or otherwise, an extended involvement may leave respondents feeling in a weaker position to withdraw or renegotiate access. These dilemmas may be exacerbated when researchers seek to write about some of their observations and findings, especially with regard to difficult or sensitive issues. An extended involvement, with the likelihood of stronger bonds of trust and even friendship, may increase the prospect of perceived betrayal.

To mitigate some of these dilemmas, researchers may need to be as open as possible in advance about what the research is likely to involve and what difficulties may arise. Respondents may feel more comfortable negotiating some form of written agreement (or even 'compact') about the conduct and use made of the research. This may include discussions over tactics for disguising and anonymising case study settings and respondents. In addition, during the study itself researchers may need periodically to re-establish roles by, for example, reminding participants gently that they are taking part in research, and that 'anything they say or do might be taken down in evidence', even if this may disrupt the flow of potentially illuminative research evidence.



## Section 3: Use

# The use of qualitative research methods for investigating user involvement

*Paul Robson*

This is a discussion of our experience of action research with voluntary organisations that were planning to develop and increase user involvement in their governance and management. The essay explains why we chose a qualitative approach, and includes background to the research and discussion of issues and lessons. The specific issues covered include:

- how the research approach varied between organisations
- getting users and professionals together
- access to service users
- group and individual interviewing
- keeping up momentum.

## Why a qualitative approach was chosen

The project explored processes of change. We were assisting a number of organisations in planning and making changes to their policy and practice and then reflecting and learning from that experience. The dynamic nature of the relationships between individuals and groups in the organisations pointed towards using an action research approach which would include gathering qualitative data from different participants. We aimed to involve users as a key group in this relationship and as such were combining 'organisational' and 'empowerment' approaches to action research (Hart and Bond, 1995).

The distribution of power between different stakeholders or interest groups in the organisations was an important part of our investigation. We

needed to understand who had power and influence (Drake, 1994), how they used it and how its distribution could change. We felt that power and influence could not be measured adequately by quantitative indicators. Research and practitioner accounts indicated that, for example, counting the number of service users on a governing body or who took part in a consultation exercise did not necessarily reveal anything about whether they had any influence or impact on decisions.

The experience of using services from the receiving end is different from that of the people and organisations delivering those services. This has been recognised for many years. A study in the late 1960s of social case work found that the expectations and assumptions about the purpose of case work was significantly different for professionals and clients (Mayer and Timms, 1970). A qualitative approach was valuable in giving users' experiences voice within the research and within organisations that set out to help them. Managers and professionals were, we felt, more likely to have the confidence, opportunity and motivation to speak up; users may try to speak up but often have their voices drowned out by more-dominant groups.

Experience, identity and priorities characterised the differences between groups of professional staff and service users. We could not therefore rely on professionals to speak on behalf of users (Charles and DeMaio, 1993). These issues needed detailed description from the different perspectives to be understood. Not much would have been revealed by being able to say that X% of users of a day centre for people who are homeless were dissatisfied with

the service, except perhaps that there is a need to find out more about in what ways they are dissatisfied and to compare this with the perceptions of the staff running the service.

## Project beginnings

The project began with practitioner experience of attempts to involve service users in the work of voluntary organisations. These were organisations set up and run by groups of trustees and managers drawn from religious groups, social welfare and health professionals (current or retired) and business people. They were therefore not self-help groups or user-led.

In one voluntary organisation there were practical difficulties in getting the parents of disabled children to come to meetings to discuss service development. Additionally, the trustee group resisted parental involvement for some years, even as observers at its meetings. Another organisation had been set up as a source of support for those caring for people with enduring mental health problems. As user involvement in mental health services became more common, the purpose, priorities and control of this charity were brought into question.

## FOUR PHASES OF THE PROJECT

### Phase 1

We wanted to check out our assumptions and plans with service users. We decided to consult with representatives from user-led organisations by meeting face to face or by sending a summary of our proposals. We had been advised by a representative of the funding agency (Joseph Rowntree Foundation) we were to apply to that this would be not only valuable for designing the study but also important tactically. The user movement had some influence through both formal and informal connections with funders.

Our proposal got very little feedback from the people we sent it to. We were told informally that this probably reflected user organisations' priorities and lack of resources. A request for help from a researcher they had never heard of was probably one of many and was well down their list of important issues to tackle. We did meet with two representatives of a self-advocacy group for people

with learning difficulties and a well-known researcher and member of the disabled people's movement. We received constructive criticism and support of our plans.

### Phase 2

A small questionnaire survey followed up by in-depth interviews confirmed that managers found it difficult to involve service users as much as they would have liked. The purposes and methods of involvement reported in the survey revealed two distinct approaches: consumerist and democratic. It was clear that organisations did not consciously adopt one or the other but mostly developed mechanisms for involving users that meant a mix of the two approaches (Robson, Locke and Dawson, 1997). These results led to the design of the action research project to help organisations:

- (a) review their current position regarding user involvement
- (b) make plans for developing it
- (c) implement and evaluate the plans.

It was practitioner experience and researcher interest that started this project. The need for more work on understanding and supporting the process of change as desired by these organisations had been supported by the findings of the first two phases of the project. This reflected a growing momentum within a range of bodies to tackle issues of user involvement. Consequently, funders were willing to continue their support and it was not difficult to interest managers in organisations to take part.

### Phase 3

This was the first action research phase. We selected 12 organisations from over 30 applicants to take part in reviewing and planning their user-involvement approach and activity. We targeted organisations that were not clearly user-led, defining a user-led organisation as one in which most of the governing body and most or all of the staff and volunteers were current or potential service users. Each organisation was offered support from a researcher and we held two practice exchange meetings for users and staff in all the organisations. Eleven organisations completed the eight-month reviewing and planning process (the twelfth withdrew following an internal change of plans).

Qualitative data was gathered through one-to-one interviews, group discussions and facilitated workshops within organisations, and presentations and discussions at the two practice exchanges. Each organisation also provided relevant documentation and produced its own report. At the end of the fieldwork phase, an evaluation questionnaire was sent to the participating organisations to get further feedback on the outcomes and process of the action research.

## Phase 4

In this phase, 4 out of the 11 organisations were selected to work on implementation and evaluation of their plans over 18 months with further support from the researchers. We remained in contact with the other seven organisations and they were invited to a final practice exchange.

## Are there differences of approach for different organisations?

In phase 3, the reviewing and planning of user involvement, we aimed for a single approach with all the organisations. The focus or 'unit of analysis' in case study terms (Yin, 1994) was the relationship between those who made the decisions now and the service users who were directly affected by those decisions. Therefore, direct contact between members of the research team and service users was an explicit objective. We knew from our previous work that developing user involvement could become a management-led activity or 'management project'. We wanted to bring service users together with those who currently made the decisions (managers, staff, trustees). This happened to some extent in all the organisations.

In practice, what we did varied because we were operating within the context of the current relationship between users and professionals in that setting. This meant that if, for example, meeting together was not something that staff, as professionals, and service users had done before – or at least not to talk formally about services – then we could either follow this pattern or challenge it.

In one organisation the culture seemed paternalistic. We were presented as researchers from a university (and therefore presumably important) in London (implying we had taken the trouble to travel some distance to see them). As such, we could have become part of the pattern of 'us' (managers, staff and visitors) and 'them' (disabled service users). We avoided this in the following ways:

- We were a team of joint project leaders, one of whom was a disabled woman and one of whom was a non-disabled man. This meant we crossed the boundary of, or broke the rules of, the structure and culture of the situation in this region and organisation. We were therefore able to communicate with all stakeholders and challenge assumptions.
- We focused on the goal of bringing the voice of users to the fore as part of the action research process. This ensured that we did not get sidetracked into concentrating on a paper policy or accepting that users were apathetic.

In a large national organisation we struggled to have any contact with service users, as they appeared so distant geographically, hierarchically and socially from the managers who signed up for the project. The research process reflected the organisation's dynamics by making it difficult to get in contact with people and then to get them to meetings. Current user involvement was focused on representation at a confusing array of meetings, groups and forums. On reflection, our plan to hold group sessions to discuss current experiences of involvement in committees and working groups, including why people do not go to meetings, was perhaps ill advised. Low attendance (one or two people) at some meetings meant that they were in effect interviews.

In a small drop-in and advice centre we had a different kind of access to users. This was an open centre and anyone could drop in at any time. The first visit consisted of the researcher meeting with the director in the separate (locked) offices. On subsequent visits, the researcher spent time in the drop-in and chatted to a few people, although it turned out that one of these was a volunteer and not a service user. Spending time in the drop-in became a feature of the work, partly because the director and other staff were so stretched that appointments with them were rarely on time. One user befriended

the researcher and on subsequent visits welcomed him as 'my favourite university student'. There were also more-formal interviews and meetings with users of the drop-in and staff. However, informal contact with users and experiencing and observing the drop-in gave the researcher valuable insights.

The context of this service allowed and encouraged more-informal contact with users. It is difficult to gauge whether this approach had any impact on the outcome of the action research in this setting. At least the users were probably less wary of the researcher when it came to presenting a summary of findings to a users' meeting.

However, managers in most of the 11 organisations had the power to act as gatekeepers and determine whether there was a joint meeting. In three of the organisations where a joint meeting did not take place, the method of communication between users and current decision makers was for service users, mostly in groups, to talk confidentially to the researchers and for the researchers to report, usually in a written summary, to managers.

Our aim of supporting organisations through a process of change meant that we wanted to combine challenging the status quo whilst not making the project appear disruptive or a burden to staff and managers. To achieve this, we were flexible in our approach with managers as well as with service users as described above. We agreed a plan of work with managers or in some cases with a small steering group of managers and users.

## **Access to service users: 'Why didn't they just go and talk to the users?'**

We had designed the research to focus on the distribution of power between users, managers and trustees in voluntary organisations with a traditional charitable structure i.e. not user-controlled or self-help. We knew from phase 2 that some managers identified a problem with increasing user involvement in practical ways. If power was to be shifted, then it made sense to work with those who had it as well as with those who wanted it. Our working hypothesis was that, for users to have more influence, existing holders of power such as managers would need to change their practice.

Whilst one key unit of analysis was the relationship between users and current decision-makers, we were also interested in the workings of each organisation as a whole. Therefore we needed access to staff, volunteers and documents as well as service users. Service users may have been able to give permission for us to interview them about their experiences or what they thought of the organisation. However, if we then wanted to find out about other perspectives, such as the running of a user group and why it did or did not manage to get its suggestions taken up by staff, we would need to talk to staff and managers too. We also thought, at the time, that it was proper to approach service users through staff. On reflection, this may have been because it was necessary or it may to some extent have been because it seemed easier than direct contact.

We knew that an aspect of the relationship between users and staff in some organisations was that users could be 'protected' by staff. This may have been out of concern for their welfare but could be construed as infringing on their right to make their own decisions about participation in an activity, in this case a research interview or discussion group.

Ultimately, in simple practical terms, it was not usually possible to make direct contact with a group of users from one organisation or one service. What are their names? What are their addresses? We would have risked raising the suspicions of the staff and probably users as well, whose expectation would most likely be that communication from a researcher would come via staff. On the other hand, we could easily contact a voluntary organisation through an advertised address and usually a named manager from a website or annual report.

We could have tried to contact users through user-led organisations such as the British Council of Disabled People (BCODP), People First or the UK Coalition of People with HIV/AIDS. At the time we did not try this for three reasons. First, there was no guarantee that the members of these groups would be using the services of the organisations we wanted to study. Secondly, our experience of consulting with user-led groups on the need for this type of project had not led to strong relationships. Thirdly, active members of self-advocacy groups would be more likely to be people with some confidence and skills in speaking up and taking part in decision-making. We wanted to involve service users who did

not usually get the opportunity to speak up in the organisations we studied.

There were some issues of access to service users and questions about their level of interest in taking part in this project. This was put to us in terms of either their low level of interest in any consultation or participation activity, or scepticism about the project's objectives because it had started with managers and ourselves as researchers. However, we found that, once we had established direct contact with service users, they seemed reassured that this project was a genuine attempt to support them with progressing their own objectives within the project. We identified some factors that helped good relationships with users:

- We made it clear that we were independent from the managers and trustees of the organisation.
- We promised anonymity in reporting views and confidentiality.
- We made it clear that the project was jointly managed by one disabled and one non-disabled researcher.
- We operated together in most group discussions.
- We recruited and trained a person who had been homeless and who used support services for homeless people to interview users in a drop-in centre.
- We demonstrated a willingness to listen to and record the issues raised by participants.

There were some occasions where our relationship with users was not always positive. In one organisation a user on its project steering group complained that we did not seem committed to their organisation and that we had not made effective relationships with users. We made direct contact with this person to discuss their concerns and explain our approach.

## INDIVIDUAL OR GROUP INTERVIEWS?

We used a mix of both individual and group interviews or focus groups. In general, we preferred groups where this was practical because, in addition to seeing the interaction between participants (Morgan, 1988), we believed that they supported each other simply by their presence. In individual interviews, people who are not used to being interviewed may also be nervous about the interviewer's and/or service provider's reactions to what they say – which could result in little or no

response. In a group situation, hearing others speak up can give confidence to those who otherwise might not have contributed. This was particularly true in cases where discussion was free ranging rather than focused on a particular issue of involvement.

## Keeping up momentum

The initial commitment of all the organisations was similar. In practice, their commitment – measured in terms of practical cooperation and responses to findings – varied over time. The variation in commitment was strongly linked to the role of our main contact in each organisation, who was usually a middle or senior manager. We relied on this person in most organisations for most of the duration of the research to facilitate each step of our work. In some cases we developed relationships directly with service users or other staff or trustees as well.

In one case our role and development of user involvement both seemed dependent on the level of commitment of the project coordinator, our main contact. The coordinator of this community organisation initiated, as part of its involvement in our project, a user group and negotiated a grant (from the research project) so that it could operate autonomously. The group met regularly and focused on the question of how to spend the budget and other issues that were important to them, such as social activities for families and education in their community language for children. Some individual users benefited from the experience of becoming involved in that they gained influence and confidence they had not previously had.

After a year there seemed to be a generally heightened expectation that users could play more of a part in the running of the organisation. At the same time the staff were discussing wider development of user involvement in the organisation. However, the momentum of the user group became dissipated following uncertainty about what to focus on next and the increasing burden on a few individual volunteers who ran it. The project coordinator, who had initiated the group, took the lead in preparing a proposal for funding a worker who would support the group. The bid was unsuccessful and the coordinator decided not to pursue other funding sources. Apart from the

funding bid the manager appeared to keep a distance and, with other staff, expressed frustration at the group's 'dependence' on them for facilitation and administrative support.

Our role had been to discuss the development of the group with staff and its members and to raise wider issues of user involvement. However, we found that the user group appeared to act as the primary user involvement activity and attempts to raise the issue of user involvement in governance or service development did not result in any action.

## Lessons

We have been able to draw a number of important lessons from our experience on this project.

- Stories of users' experiences of using services and involvement in decision-making were vital to the value and quality of this kind of research. Our findings demonstrated that, despite many good intentions, a distance can develop between the perceptions of professionals providing services and people who use them. We met many professionals who empathised with users and were able to respond to needs effectively. However, it was also clear that they could never know what it was like for that individual in their particular situation. Our findings reflect Barnes' (1995) work with carers' panels in Birmingham in which carers identified characteristics of good services in terms that were not commonly used by professionals.
- Users' own words often challenged the assumptions of professionals, managers and researchers. For example, group discussions with service users nearly always included the topic of terminology, and often a dislike of the term 'user'. This proved a useful starting point for exploring participants' views of how they thought the staff perceived and treated them and also their perception of their ability to influence change (Robson, Begum and Locke, 2003). Our experience confirms Beresford and Croft's (1993) assertion that only the people involved in a participation activity can know what it is like and so have to be part of any evaluation of it.
- The project had a joint project leader and interviewer who identified themselves as current or former service users and who were identified as such by people in the organisations we worked

with. Our experience suggested that their involvement enabled this project to engage effectively with a range of stakeholders and issues. First, they were able to establish a rapport with service users in one-to-one and group interviews. Their role and motivations were sometimes challenged by interviewees and they were able to explain and discuss these issues as part of the process of facilitating change in these organisations. Secondly, in organisations where there was a predominant culture of separate roles for disabled people as service users and non-disabled people as staff, the participation of a disabled person in a senior research and development role challenged assumptions.

- As researchers, we found ourselves playing two roles that we could not always keep distinct:
  - (i) We were independent researchers, with an outsider view on the organisations we were working with.
  - (ii) We were part of a 'project' to change the balance of power in voluntary organisations that were not user-led, so that service users would have more power and influence over decisions that affected their lives.

Some service users, individually and in organised groups (the user movement) supported this project; we supported it from personal experience and commitment; the funder of the research explicitly supported this second aim too.

- There was a risk of the research becoming a campaign if the researchers were perceived to challenge existing power structures on behalf of service users. Some people in the organisations seemed threatened by our presence and commitment to develop user involvement although many supported its aims and saw it as a source of help. We recognised that we were dealing with politically sensitive and sometimes emotional issues and therefore had to tread carefully. Our aim was to play the role of a critical friend to managers and staff.
- The aim of the research was to provide understanding about an issue and provide some practical benefit to the organisations taking part. There was a tension between doing things that were useful to the organisations in a practical sense and things that were useful in a research sense – i.e. contributing to our understanding of what was going on – but that were not always of immediate practical benefit. This was the case where our findings were not what managers

expected or wanted. Managers are often focused on finding out which mechanisms of user involvement work and which do not. Or, they want to find a structural change that will demonstrate that users are genuinely and fairly involved. We had examples of both. In one case the managers did not get what they expected in feedback from users about services and involvement. However, they took this on and responded positively. A manager in another organisation was not pleased with the messages received from service users and criticised the research as invalid because it used a small, and therefore unrepresentative, sample of people. This issue relating to the boundary between 'research' and deliberate involvement in changing things emerged as an issue in Barnes' description of work with carers' groups. She 'strayed beyond the confines of research' and into areas 'more often considered in discussions of group work and developmental work' (Barnes, 1995: 239).

## Where are the researchers in the system?

An awareness of the multiple accountabilities to be managed in a project of this nature was important. We had to balance our duty to the participants in the research (who were made up of different interest groups anyway) with our responsibility to the funders and to professional codes of conduct, so a clear agreement at the outset of the project was important. Negotiating, and renegotiating, this agreement as necessary was a useful part of the process of development for organisations and the research alike. Our agreements included: the role of the researchers and our values or position; who had control over what was done; access to participants; reporting; publishing; and anonymity.

We suggest that it is not always an advantage to make such an agreement too tight as this would not leave room for manoeuvre. Barnes (1995) found it useful to be able to shift over time from gathering the views of carers so as to evaluate a new programme of services to providing leadership, facilitation, advocacy and a channel of communication with decision-makers (Barnes, 1995: 236).

Controversial findings, for example discrepancies between managers' and users' views, need sensitive handling if they are to aid understanding and lead to

positive change. The approach of this project was to bring together groups – usually users and managers – with different perspectives and power positions. We knew therefore that we would need good negotiation and presentation skills to ensure that we could keep good relationships with all parties throughout the research process. Although we did not use it at the time, the concept of the researcher as a critical friend is helpful.

## Conclusion

Our experience raises questions about:

- who initiates research
- the different terms on which people participate in research
- dealing with political influences during research
- being 'involved' (as opposed to 'detached').

Others have raised these kinds of questions over a period of time, highlighting enduring themes.

Beresford (1992) asks questions about user-involvement research (amongst others) such as:

- Who initiates it?
- Who defines the problem?
- How is information gathered and by whom?
- How is data analysed?
- Who develops skills?
- How are results disseminated?
- How are results used?

Beresford (2002) returns to the same issues to discuss how our kind of research fits into the wider frameworks of user involvement and user control. He distinguishes between participatory research, which aims to involve users, and emancipatory research, in which every aspect of the process is controlled by users and is intended to be emancipatory for the participants. We were clearly working in a participatory way in this project by this definition.

We now face questions about how to pursue our research interests in this area. Should we only respond to requests for support from user-controlled projects and organisations? Should we try to initiate relationships with user-controlled organisations with the aim of finding opportunities for collaboration or to offer our skills and experience as a resource? Or, should we continue to pursue problems and issues that we identify and aim to involve users as and when we can in the process?

## Case study: from management-led to user-led

This organisation was a provider of residential and training services for disabled people in a region of the UK. It had a turnover of £2 million a year and over 100 disabled people using its services. A manager in the organisation decided there was a need to develop user involvement beyond the present six-monthly audit of services and a satisfaction survey, and applied to be part of the action research project described in this essay.

A steering group was started with two managers, one service user and two researchers. The working group was confident that the organisation as a whole was responsive in its services and had developed strong mechanisms for user involvement using a consumerist approach. However, there was a commitment to taking user involvement further and so we agreed plans to develop a democratic approach to user involvement which would include a policy statement on user involvement and exploration of an individual membership scheme.

We agreed to meet with some groups of service users in residential homes and others who were part of a training programme aimed at getting people into work. The purpose of the groups was (a) to consult on a draft user involvement policy that had been produced by one of the managers and (b) to find out users' views of services, involvement in decision-making, and whether and how they wanted to be more involved, in particular in the governance of the organisation.

The managers and service user on the steering group identified that a central problem of increasing user involvement was apathy amongst users, and expressed some scepticism about the likely success of getting people to the group meetings. We relied

on them to organise these meetings and invite the participants. In practice the turnout was very good. Over 50 service users (from a total of approximately 300) took part in five different groups.

We perceived the organisation as being very professional and somewhat paternalistic in its view of service users. This was reflected in their assumption that most people would not come to the group meetings. Comments at the meetings gave the impression that people had come because they had been told that we were important visitors and that the organisation wanted to give a good impression. Our conclusion was that, even if service users came to the meetings because managers thought it was important, at least they were then given an opportunity to express themselves about issues that concerned them.

The message from the focus groups was that there were: improvements that could be made to existing services; new services that were needed; not enough opportunities for users to express their views; pressures on a small number of users to speak for others; and not enough disabled people employed by the organisation. A small number of comments were made about the draft policy on user involvement.

We produced a plan of suggested actions and identified with users what they could do and what the organisation could do to improve services and involvement. The managers were expecting feedback on their draft policy. What they got was some criticism of current services, suggestions from users about how they could be made more responsive to their needs, and some ideas about increasing involvement in governance. The managers were surprised at some of the feedback but responded positively, including plans to support a user forum and to employ a disabled person to facilitate it and other initiatives.

# Collaborative research: challenges and pitfalls

*Colin Rochester*

Basing research on an explicit collaboration between voluntary sector practitioners and researchers is a strategy which, despite the challenges and pitfalls for the researcher, offers a number of advantages and rewards. This short account will draw on the experience of a study conducted by the author and colleagues (Harris et al, 2002) at the LSE's Centre for Voluntary Organisation to explore the advantages and difficulties involved in the collaborative research approach. (For a more detailed account, see Rowbottom, 1977.)

The research was commissioned by the members of a consortium of eight independent organisations working in various parts of the UK in the field of HIV/AIDS, who were interested in joining together in some form of organisational collaboration. Seven of them were based in cities with significant populations of people with HIV/AIDS – from Brighton, Bristol and Oxford in the south, to Coventry in the Midlands, Leeds and Manchester further north, and Glasgow across the border. Working with annual budgets of the order of £300,000 to £350,000, their paid staff and volunteers provided a range of advice and support to people with HIV/AIDS as well as engaging in health promotion activities aimed at preventing the spreading of the condition. The eighth was a larger, longer established and better-known agency working in the Greater London area but with a national profile – the Terrence Higgins Trust.

Informal and personal links between the managers of the seven agencies based outside London had provided them with mutual support and the opportunity to share information and experiences for some years before the study took place. And they had begun to lead to more-formal arrangements –

first as a Regional Managers Group and subsequently as the HIV Alliance UK. As well as placing mutual support and information sharing on a more organised basis, the formation of the Alliance offered the possibility of developing common standards and policies and a single voice for HIV/AIDS agencies outside London.

The chief executives of the eight organisations thus shared an interest in principle in forming a more robust kind of institutional alliance but had no pre-conceived idea about what form this should take. Initially, moreover, they had different ideas about what kind of organisational arrangements were desirable and many were concerned about the possible risk to their agency of losing its independent identity. In order to help move their agenda forward, the members of the consortium asked us to conduct an independent study which they could use to inform their discussions and decision-making.

The approach we adopted was a form of action research known as social analysis – a collaboration between key organisational actors and an independent analyst which aims to improve the understanding of, and facilitate change in, social institutions. One distinctive technique used in this form of research is written feedback from the analyst in the form of notes from in-depth interviews which have been 'cleared' by the interviewee to be shared with the other participants as an accurate statement of their aspirations and concerns. While data was also collected from other sources – agency and policy documents, interviews with external stakeholders and a review of research-based and grey literature – these 'cleared' records of interviews with the key actors in the developing alliance were at the heart of the research approach (Harris and

Harris, 2002). They were the product of semi-structured conversations of two to three hours' duration in which we explored the aspirations and anxieties of the managers, their perspectives on the kinds of services that would be needed in the future and the organisational challenges of providing them, as well as the more practical issues of striking a balance between a co-ordinated response to a changing policy environment on the one hand and the preservation of the individual identity and distinctive character of their own agency.

The final output of the study was a 20-page report to which the 'cleared' interview notes were appended. This consisted of three sections. In the first we reviewed the managers' views on the rationale and motivation for collaboration; the issues and concerns it raised for them; the possible allocation of functions between a national body and its local organs; issues of authority and governance; and what they saw as the non-negotiable 'bottom-lines'. The second section looked at ways in which the experiences of other voluntary sector organisations could inform the discussion of the options for organising on a national basis. The third presented three models of collaboration which represented the options open to the participating organisations.

After a short period in which the study participants had time to digest the contents of the report, we facilitated a discussion between the eight managers. This did not follow the course the research team had anticipated. Discussion was opened by one of the participants who was in some difficulty about how to proceed – 'the report accurately represents my views at the time,' he said 'but I see things differently now that I have thought about the report and the views and concerns of the other managers'. It rapidly became clear that this was a universal feeling and the meeting, with surprising ease and speed, opted for the most radical model – the creation of a single amalgamated national body which preserved and extended the Terrence Higgins Trust 'brand' rather than a federal solution that could achieve some kind of balance between maintaining the identity and independence of the local agencies on the one hand and a national presence that could press for high quality services for people with HIV/AIDS on the other. The research process had led them to the view that the unitary model was the most effective means of addressing their over-riding concern to protect and enhance services for their user group.

At the same time, the researchers learned some important lessons about the drivers for institutional alliances in human services agencies and in the voluntary sector. Existing theoretical frameworks drawn from the for-profit literature were unsatisfactory and failed to take account of the complex web of internal and external factors involved in this case study, of which policy pressures, pragmatism and the personal values of key managers were particularly important.

The fact that the project achieved outcomes that were valuable both to the chief executives who commissioned the research and to the researchers underlines the advantages of the collaborative approach. But it may obscure some of the challenges and limitations of this research strategy. A major limitation is that the conditions for a collaborative approach may not be as favourable as in the case example. The success of this partnership was founded on unusual levels of trust and mutual understanding. One of the chief executives concerned – indeed, one of their informal leaders – was a former postgraduate student at the CVO and was thus able to provide an initial conduit of understanding between the commissioners and the researchers. Trust and understanding were further developed by the fact that the researchers had previous voluntary sector experience as practitioners and managers; a collaborative research approach is comparatively straightforward for scholars who have an 'insider' rather than an 'outsider' view of their role. Furthermore, seven of the chief executives had a history of working together, which created high levels of trust within that group.

Secondly, the issue of access to high quality data was not as simple as it might seem on the surface. True, the approach meant that the chief executives wanted us to have high quality data and gave us their time and also access to sensitive documents. On the other hand, their decision to keep the development of their thinking very close to their chests meant that some sources were closed to us; we were not able to talk to anyone in the eight agencies apart from the chief executive and could only interview those external stakeholders with whom the participants were willing to share their ideas.

Similarly, we were privileged to be able to study the making of an organisational alliance as it happened rather than retrospectively with all the limitations

involved in that. On the other hand, we were not able to follow the story beyond the decision to establish the new organisation since our commission had come to an end. In other words, the very successful collaboration only lasted as long as the needs of both partners coincided.

In any case, are we in danger of overstating both the extent to which the project represented a genuine collaboration and the significance of impact of the researchers' participation? Is this a much more mundane example of research acting as a catalyst for change or perhaps legitimating a process that was already in motion? It is certainly the case that a process of growing collaboration had begun before the involvement of the researchers and this made the outcome of the project possible. But the surprise experienced by the participants at reaching the decision they arrived at was genuine; without the in-depth exploration of the issues through the interviews and the opportunity to gain a fuller understanding of one another's aspirations as well as their anxieties, it is difficult to believe they would have arrived at this destination. That their surprise was shared by the research team is evidence that we were part of the same process. Unlike a catalyst, we

did not produce change without being affected by it ourselves.

The collaborative approach has limitations as well as advantages. And it is not for everyone. Even the case study example, with the unusually helpful conditions under which the match was made and its substantial achievements, represents a kind of compromise from the researcher's point of view; he or she needs to be comfortable with the limitations on his or her ability to set the agenda and to determine every aspect of the research design. It is perhaps a research strategy for people who can combine a long-term view of the scope and purpose of their research activities with a short-term pragmatism that enables them to identify ways in which collaboration, despite its limitations, can help them move some way towards their longer-term goals. It may also be best applied to the task of developing better explanations of organisational issues and challenges. In short, it is an approach that can be used with confidence by the growing number of researchers who straddle the boundary of theory and practice – those for whom the term 'pracademic' has been coined.

# Engagement and influence: using qualitative research within the voluntary sector policy community

*Pete Alcock*

## Context

The role and scope of the voluntary sector in the UK have never been broader and more significant to the development and delivery of social policy than they are now, at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The size of the sector continues to expand across a number of dimensions. This is charted in some detail in the NCVO's biennial *Almanac* (Wilding et al, 2004) reviewing data on the sector, which most recently revealed that the total income of the sector had risen from around £11 billion to around £21 billion in the ten years from 1991 to 2001, and that between 1995 and 2002 the sector had created around 91,000 new jobs. The voluntary sector is bigger than ever.

At the same time our understanding of the sector, including its growing breadth and diversity, is developing as the range and focus of academic research on voluntary action expand. The contributors to Harris and Rochester's (2001) collection on voluntary organisations and social policy explore issues such as social exclusion, contracting, regulation, partnership and volunteering. We know more about what the sector does.

Furthermore, the work of the sector is becoming a matter of greater concern for policy makers and policy planners. The recognition by government that the sector does play a key role in delivering a range of social services has led policy makers to pay renewed attention to how the sector is developed and supported. This has led to the development of the national *Compact* with the sector (Home Office, 1998) and various codes of

guidance produced by the Home Office on good practice with the sector, followed by local 'compacts' with the sector at local authority level (Craig et al, 1999 and 2002). It is also taken up in the Treasury's recent review of the role of the sector in service delivery (HM Treasury, 2002a), and followed up through the funds provided for infrastructural support in the sector that have flowed from this. The sector has a key role on the policy agenda.

Perhaps most importantly, the growing role and diversity of voluntary action have led the sector itself to explore more closely how it is developing and what the major issues facing voluntary organisations are. Here, of course, the national umbrella organisations play a key role, most notably the NCVO, who in the 1990s commissioned a thorough review of the role and development of the sector in the Deakin Commission (NCVO, 1996), and more recently have continued to provide a public lead in exploring the key issues facing the sector, such as service delivery (Etherington, 2002). The sector needs to understand and represent itself effectively.

All of this suggests a growing need for research on voluntary action, and research which can address the wider range of issues now facing the sector and the different audiences who might have an interest in hearing about and acting upon its findings.

- There is a need for policy makers, in particular in both central and local government, to understand the structure and workings of the sector and to ensure that their relations with voluntary organisations are informed by an

understanding of these.

- There is a need for those representing and supporting the voluntary sector to understand its complex and diverse nature and to ensure that representation of the sector is informed by an understanding of its real dynamics and dilemmas.
- There is a need for voluntary organisations themselves to understand their own structures and workings, both collectively (identifying those concerns which organisations share and can collaborate on) and individually (all organisations need at times to reflect and take stock).

Voluntary sector research is therefore a central element in policy development and policy practice. Policy makers and practitioners concerned to improve and develop the role and operation of the sector have an interest in being able to draw upon relevant, robust (and recent) research findings which address the issues of concern with which they are wrestling. However, this means that the research which is carried out on the sector must address the concern of policy makers and practitioners, must explore the issues on which they need information and guidance, and must provide its findings in a form (and a format) which they find relevant and accessible. To influence a policy agenda, research must be (and must be seen to be) policy-relevant.

## Research

Research, especially research directed at policy makers, is frequently conceived of as comprising large-scale measurement and mapping of voluntary action, seeking to capture and to represent the scale and the range of voluntary action by collecting data across the range of voluntary organisations. Such research is inevitably therefore of a quantitative nature. Statistics can provide us with a summary of (even a graphical representation of) the big picture, and can do so in a way which (according to statistical canons at least) is representative of the world it is seeking to depict. Government databases used in research on the sector, such as the list of top charities (Caritas Data, 2001) or the Labour Force Survey (see ONS, 2000), tend to be compendia of statistics; and the NCVO *Almanac* (Wilding et al, 2004) is drawn largely from a range of quantitative data sources.

It is also the case that policy makers especially tend to like statistics. Statistics have the apparent

assurance of representativeness, and hence authority; and they are generally easy to quote and to summarise – although, as most statisticians know, many shorthand summaries of quantitative data can conceal as much as they reveal. When policy makers seek information from existing research, and indeed when they are commissioning the collection or analysis of new data, they generally look for surveys and statistical summaries.

However, there are some inevitable and significant limitations to the understanding that we can gain from quantitative research. Statistics cannot tell us much about the structure and dynamics of the voluntary sector or about the dilemmas and the compromises faced by voluntary organisations. To explore these dimensions of voluntary action we need to undertake qualitative research; and, as the contributions to this collection of essays reveal, qualitative research can provide a very different, but complementary, perspective to our understanding of voluntary action.

As the other contributors discuss, developing and operationalising qualitative research is a complex, and reflexive, exercise. Just as in the gathering and analysis of quantitative data, there are epistemological dilemmas to be addressed, methodological protocols to be followed, analytical tools to be employed – and academic caveats to be entered. The literature on qualitative research is as voluminous, and sometimes as obtuse, as that on statistical methods (Gilbert, 1993; Mason, 1996; May, 2002; Silverman, 1998), and we cannot hope to survey it all here.

The main dilemma facing qualitative researchers concerned to balance credible research with policy engagement, however, is that of the contradictory demands of relevance and independence. Whilst some qualitative researchers have argued that the way ‘to ensure that research is both “manageable” and “relevant” to the practical administration of social affairs is for it to be disciplined by the demands of policy’ (Booth, 1988: 246), others have asserted that the role of the researcher is that of offering only ‘cognitive resources’, where the researcher contributes to the stock of knowledge, which policy makers then decide whether to use (Hammersley, 2002: 98).

This seems to be an irresolvable dilemma – research will only be relevant if it addresses the demands of policy makers, and yet researchers cannot allow

themselves to become 'technicians and legislators' (Hammersley, 2002: 98). However, a recent review of the role of qualitative research in policy making carried out for the Cabinet Office suggests that such tensions can, and should, be overcome. The authors of this study reviewed a wide range of qualitative research conducted for government-funded policy analysis and evaluation and interviewed the researchers, the policy makers and the commissioners of policy research. They then developed a framework for the use of qualitative research in policy making based on four guiding principles and 18 appraisal questions (Spencer et al, 2003). The guiding principles for such qualitative research were:

- contribution to wider knowledge and understanding
- defensible research design to address evaluation questions
- rigorous conduct of research through systematic and transparent data collection and analysis
- credible claims based on well-founded arguments about the significance of findings.

If these principles, and the appraisal questions that follow them, can be adhered to, the Cabinet Office authors argue, then qualitative research should be able to attain the joint goals of relevance and credibility. And, though some may still dispute the independence of any research which seeks to address and inform a policy agenda, it is our view that qualitative research on voluntary organisations can also meet the evidence framework identified in the Cabinet Office paper, providing that the researchers approach these issues openly and transparently.

In the next three short sections of this essay, therefore, I explore the role that qualitative research can play in influencing policy development by ensuring that the context and the concerns of policy makers and policy practitioners are addressed within a research process that is both rigorous and credible and at the same time able to present its findings in a relevant and accessible form. To do this, I draw on recent case study research in which I have been engaged for voluntary sector policy makers and practitioners. This research was commissioned by policy makers, and to that extent it was clear that they were already committed to the use of qualitative data to address policy issues. However, the research team was also concerned to ensure that

it was able to engage in robust and defensible research practice, within a limited budget. This meant that as researchers we would have to work closely with the policy makers in the design, development and delivery of the research.

## Engaging with policy and practice

Regional Action West Midlands (RAWM) is an umbrella body aiming to promote and develop the voluntary sector in the West Midlands. Like other similar bodies in the other English regions, it is supported by the Regional Development Agency (Advantage West Midlands), and also receives funding from the Home Office Active Communities Unit and the National Lottery Community Fund. It was established in 2000 in part to mirror the growing importance of the regional dimension of policy making and delivery which was flowing from the devolution of powers and resources to the Regional Development Agencies, and more generally to provide a further stimulation to the contribution of the voluntary sector to improving service delivery and quality of life across the West Midlands.

As a new body with a relatively new brief, RAWM was concerned as an early priority to seek to gain some knowledge and understanding of the size and structure of the voluntary sector in the region and the kind of concerns and issues which voluntary organisations were facing where regional umbrella action could help to make a difference. In order to take this forward, RAWM decided in 2002 to commission some research to provide them with data about voluntary action and voluntary organisations within the region. One of the main dimensions of this research was a mapping exercise aimed at providing an overview of the sector. This was to be delivered by the NCVO research team working jointly with academic researchers at the University of Birmingham.

A major dimension of this was a quantitative overview, drawing on national and regional statistical databases and, to some extent, mirroring at the regional level the national statistical mapping carried out by the NCVO in their biennial Almanac. In addition to this quantitative picture, however, RAWM was also keen to commission qualitative research to

explore in more depth some of the experiences and the concerns of voluntary agencies across the region. This was based upon a clear recognition that the issues and problems that individual voluntary organisations were facing were likely to be of broader interest and relevance to practitioners and policy makers across the region. The research was thus designed to include both quantitative and qualitative dimensions, with the University of Birmingham team taking primary responsibility for the qualitative work.

The research was commissioned by a voluntary sector agency concerned with policy and practice in the area, and with a view about the kind of information needed and issues to be explored within, in particular, the qualitative research. The research team also comprised researchers in a national voluntary sector agency as well as an academic institution. The linkages between research, policy and practice were thus intrinsic features of the project from the outset. This was reflected in the design and development of the research, as well as in the analysis and dissemination of the findings.

RAWM had wanted the qualitative research to employ a mix of case study and focus group work, to allow for some in-depth analysis of particular organisations, and to ensure that emerging questions and issues could be explored within a mixed context representing local policy makers and practitioners within the sector, although the relatively limited funding available for the overall project meant that the scale and depth of both dimensions of the work were inevitably constrained. The case studies and the focus groups were then developed by the research team in active dialogue with the commissioners of the research. This included:

- a series of meetings between the commissioners and the research team to discuss and agree data sources
- discussion with the commissioners about the distribution of potential research sites, although the sites themselves were chosen exclusively by the research team
- discussion and agreement with the commissioners over the themes emerging to structure the analysis of research findings
- the involvement of the commissioners in agreeing the constitution, although not the membership, of the focus groups
- the presentation to the commissioners of an early version of the data analysis, and their provision of feedback on this.

It was through this process that it was agreed that the case studies should be selected to include a range of different agencies from a number of different settings across the region: from small to larger organisations, in rural and urban locations, and engaged in different forms of service delivery. Further, it was agreed that particular themes would be taken up in more depth in each of the case studies, and would each then form the basis of particular focus group discussion. The idea behind the focus groups was to explore the emerging findings from the case studies with a mixed group of practitioners and policy makers drawn from key agencies within the region. The groups were provided with summaries of the case study data and emerging questions prior to the meetings, and each group was facilitated by a member of the research team. A summary report of the focus group discussion was sent to all participants for comment and review.

Given the scale of the research, it was decided that there would be four themes, four case studies, and four linked focus groups.

The four themes were:

- Infrastructure and core costs
- Quality and quality assurance
- Delivering public services
- Employment

The four case studies were:

- The trust – small, rural, community
- Environmental regeneration – medium, urban, issue focus
- Older People's Services – medium, mixed, service focus
- Housing and Community Care – large, urban, generic, black or minority ethnic (BME)

The four focus groups were each held in different locations in local umbrella agencies across the region, with different invited audiences representing:

- the host local umbrella agency
- another local umbrella agency
- two to four local voluntary organisations, including one BME organisation
- the local authority liaison or contracting department
- the government office for the regions
- the local volunteer bureau
- the Local Strategic Partnership body, or equivalent
- the Countryside Agency
- the Regional Development Agency

The research was completed in early 2003 and was published by RAWM (Alcock et al, 2003) and launched at a regional conference linked to their Annual General Meeting. The report contained the findings of both the quantitative and the qualitative research structured around a series of chapters exploring key issues for the sector – scope and structure, income generation, employment, expenditure, assets and liabilities and contribution to the social economy. In all cases, however, the presentation of the data concluded with summaries of key issues and implications for policy makers and practitioners. These were also co-ordinated and developed in a concluding chapter entitled ‘Implications for West Midlands Policymakers’.

The policy implications were drawn from analysis of both the quantitative and the qualitative data, suggesting that where these are planned and developed together they can deliver complementary research findings. The qualitative research, however, was instrumental in uncovering and exploring in some detail the dynamics and the dilemmas facing voluntary organisations across the themes identified in the research.

In the case of the quality and quality assurance theme, for instance, the following implications were identified:

- Support in the development of monitoring proforma and systems. Organisations find themselves developing such forms on a bespoke basis as their needs develop. Standard forms and procedures which could be developed for organisations’ use could be of use.
- Signposting for specialist advice relating to quality standards. Organisations are doing quality work but need help in assembling the evidence. The sector’s needs are wide and organisations often do not know who they can contact for advice which is often specific to their area of activity.
- Dissemination of information on quality practices throughout the voluntary and community sector is required.
- Networks on a regional or sub-regional basis which are organised around areas of activity may provide for information sharing.
- Funders need to recognise the long-term nature of quality work and its impact upon core costs. If the sector is to deliver over the longer term, the sector requires investment in the costs incurred in ‘quality’ work.

The research also sought to identify exemplars from the case study research which could illuminate the issues identified for external audiences. The case study research on the theme of core costs, for instance, revealed that in this organisation, the ‘youth trust’, there had been a major shift in activity from the provision of drop-in facilities and joint working with other local agencies, to a focus upon outreach work with youth groups. What the case study revealed, however, was that this was largely the product of the fragility of the resource base for maintenance of the core premises where the organisation was based, which were lost when a fire escape to the adjoining premises was closed off.

The trust’s premises constituted an extremely high running cost. A three-storey building they rented provided a café drop-in on the ground floor, with offices and rooms for other work and activity on the upper floors. These upper floors included a computer suite (obtained through project funding) and an art room, both of which were to be rented by statutory youth and social services in order to provide additional income for the trust, for example in the school holidays. A developer bought the adjoining building, turning it from commercial into residential premises. This meant that a room on the other side of the trust’s fire door became a flat and the escape was sealed to the trust. The youth worker using the premises for the trust was aware of the change, but did not recognise its significance and did not inform the Board. It was only when the annual fire inspection was carried out that alterations were revealed and the implications realised. Without a fire escape, the trust could not use the upstairs rooms, so these could no longer be let out to provide additional income. As a result, the cost of the premises themselves became prohibitively high. The trust thus had to leave the building and concentrate instead on outreach work.

There is not the space here to explore all of the findings from this qualitative research, nor its many implications for the regional policy and practice communities. However, one of the themes provides an interesting example of the way in which qualitative research can help to identify and illuminate issues of significant importance for policy and practice that have not been widely explored, in particular in quantitative research.

## The role of voluntary organisations as employers

Discussion with the commissioners of the mapping research and with local umbrella organisations within the region had revealed that the role of voluntary organisations as employers was beginning to emerge as a key issue for many in the sector. Yet a preliminary review of the literature revealed that this was an issue which had not featured much in previous research. A recent collection of papers on voluntary organisations and social policy in the UK contained no chapter focusing directly on employment issues (Harris and Rochester, 2001), and there were similar absences in recent journals and conference papers. In part this can be explained by an understandable concentration upon volunteering and community participation within much of the policy and research literature, for these are arguably the essence of voluntary action. There has also been considerable analysis of funding and management issues, which frequently makes indirect reference to employment through discussion of either the impact of funding decisions (Russell et al, 1993 and 1995; Unwin and Westland, 1996; Alcock et al, 1999) or the responsibilities of managers and trustees (Batsleer et al, 1992; Billis and Harris, 1996; Paton, 2003). But, whatever the reason, the role of voluntary organisations as employers has not been widely explored.

Yet at one level employment is clearly a key issue, because the number of jobs in the sector is growing. The NCVO *Almanac* in 2002 revealed that employment in the sector grew by around 5% between 1998 and 2000, following a growth of 10% between 1995 and 1998 (Jas et al, 2002). In 2002 the sector was employing 569,000 workers (including the self-employed and those on government schemes), revealing a slight slow-down in growth of 1.1% between 2000 and 2002 (Wilding et al, 2004). This compares with 21 million in the private sector (which grew by 1.7% over the same period) and 6.2 million in the public sector (0.4% growth). In overall numbers the sector comprises just over 2% of the UK workforce (Wilding et al, 2004).

Many voluntary sector organisations are therefore now employers, even if in many cases this only extends to one or two part-time contracts for former volunteers. However, becoming an employer imposes a wide range of rights and responsibilities

on organisations. These are important responsibilities, not least to safeguard the position of employees; but many voluntary organisations may be ill equipped to appreciate, and to implement, their duties as employers. This was certainly borne out in our qualitative work, and from the case study and focus group work a number of particularly pressing issues emerged. In particular these included:

- being a good employer
- the problems of management
- the provision of training and career development
- the difficulties encountered in recruitment and retention.

These are discussed in more depth in a separate paper (see Alcock and Mason, 2004); but the conclusions which emerged on each are summarised below.

Most voluntary organisations aspire to be good employers, and certainly all the respondents felt that this should be their goal. This means that they need good information on their rights and responsibilities and that they need to communicate these to managers and employees. Pay and conditions of service need to be kept under review, where appropriate in consultation with staff trade unions. Organisations require policies on investment and development in human resources and the structures and systems to see these through into practice. Being a good employer involves an ideological commitment; but it also requires strategic and practical action, and here many of our respondents felt that they, and the sector more generally, still had some way to go.

*There has been a cultural change from one where I knew every member of staff, interviewed and employed them, knew their training needs, supervised them daily...[to current management arrangements] where we were thinking of having a human resources department. But that is another core cost we haven't budgeted for. (Senior manager and founder member)*

A major element in the improvement of employment practices is the application of appropriate management. However, the recruitment and training of managers was in itself a major employment challenge identified by our respondents. Securing appropriately skilled and experienced managers was a problem for all of our respondents. In particular the tension between the external recruitment of qualified managers and the internal promotion of

staff who knew the work of the organisation was a real, and unresolved, one.

*We could do with more management skills; but when attracting people externally it's a problem. We've a wide variety of services, and for this within the organisation that's not a problem. But when people come from outside, it becomes a problem as they're not used to it. We had a manager who came from Social Services, and they found it very difficult ... it's become easier to promote people from within, people who understand the culture of the organisation. (Senior manager, social care organisation)*

Our respondents were aware that investment in human resources meant, in particular, a commitment to provide training and development for their employees. Here too, however, there were uncertainties and problems. In the focus group, in particular, our respondents explored the distinction between generic and service-specific training needs. Many organisations in practice aimed to provide specific training themselves, but recognised that much generic training could not be provided in-house. However, most had experienced problems in finding and accessing good externally provided training, or found this too costly to access, both in terms of fees and time commitments. Often, accessing externally provided training involved mixing a range of different services from different providers – 'it's a cocktail of training, just like the cocktail of funding', as a senior manager said. There was therefore a strong view that co-ordination and collaboration in the provision of training at local level would be a great benefit to the sector, especially to those smaller organisations unable to provide much training themselves.

More generally, the management of employment relations meant that organisations needed to have effective policies and practices for recruiting and retaining staff. In part, this was a question of pay:

*You can't pay the salaries to get the people with the relevant skills so you end up paying those people who are really developing themselves – those are the only ones you can afford to attract; and then you realise that you don't have the skill base to develop yourself further, because you can't afford to pay people who have. So that's been a lot of hard work, to develop the organisation so that we can afford to pay people with the appropriate skills to assist us. (Manager, social care organisation)*

Respondents also recognised that employment opportunities, wage structures and occupational benefits (such as pensions) were having a significant beneficial effect on the securing and maintaining of good quality employees within the sector. Yet addressing the problems outlined above remained one of the most difficult hurdles they had to experience, in part because of the lack of a strategic approach to such issues within the sector more generally. It is significant that here, as in the other issues mentioned above, one of the most consistent messages was the need for co-ordination and collaboration between organisations in developing and delivering employment policies, especially at local or regional level.

Small voluntary organisations in particular felt that, although they were aware of many of the employment issues facing them, they did not have the expertise or the capacity to respond to all of these themselves – although this was a sentiment endorsed by larger organisations too. In the focus group work in particular, respondents discovered that most of the employment problems that they were experiencing were shared by other organisations across the sector. From this it was a natural step to conclude that some of the responses to these problems could be shared too. In addition to the many particular policy demands which arose from this research, therefore, there was one clear general one: co-ordination and collaboration across the sector would help voluntary organisations to improve their policy and practice towards their employees.

This was an important conclusion in this context because it has clear, and important, implications for a wide range of policy makers and practitioners concerned with the future development of the voluntary sector. There was much identified here that individual voluntary organisations and umbrella agencies, such as RAWM, could be doing within the sector. The report to the commissioners outlined a long list of implications and recommendations (Alcock et al, 2003). There were important messages too for government policy makers operating at both national and regional or local levels. Policy makers wishing to promote and support the further development of the sector, especially where this will lead to increasing employment opportunities and responsibilities within it, can learn much about priorities for support from research such as this.

## Addressing the policy agenda

The identification and dissemination of findings with important implications for policy and practice was thus a key feature of the RAWM research, as the discussion of the example of voluntary organisations as employers reveals. The experience of this engagement with policy and practice led the NCVO (the lead partner in the RAWM research team) to consider what role further qualitative research might play in their own policy development, and in particular how such research might be developed and used to inform their engagement with policy agendas for the sector being pursued by central government.

The Treasury cross-cutting review of the voluntary sector (HM Treasury, 2002a), and the discussion of the role of the sector in the 2002 Comprehensive Spending Review, concluded that:

*[t]he Government needs a voluntary and community sector that is strong, independent and has the capacity, where it wishes, to be a partner in delivering world-class public services. (HM Treasury, 2002b, para.30.2).*

The clear message here is that of the expectation of a continuing, and probably growing, role for the sector in service delivery and the recognition of the need for support to the sector to fulfil that role appropriately. This led the Treasury to identify additional resources to help the development of the sector, including a £125 million 'Futurebuilders' Fund, to support infrastructure and capacity building, to be rolled out following consultation with major agencies in the field.

This emerging policy agenda provides a significant opportunity for agencies such as the NCVO to participate in, and to influence, government policy planning, as recognised by Etherington (2002). To take up this opportunity effectively, however, the NCVO needs appropriate, and accessible, research on the issues which the sector is facing in its involvement in the delivery of public services and the kinds of support and investment which would be of most value to it in promoting this.

To explore some of these issues the NCVO has therefore commissioned further case study research with researchers at the University of Birmingham to identify some of the 'opportunities and pitfalls' for voluntary action within the new public services. As

with the RAWM work discussed above, this is a small-scale research project, as resources are limited. The initial phase of the work was based upon six case study sites in urban locations in London and the West Midlands, although additional funding has meant that the work is now being extended to cover a further six rural case studies, where it is anticipated that some practice issues may be significantly different.

The case studies have again been selected to cover a range of different agencies in terms of size, structure and location, although in this research the focus in all cases is on the delivery of services in the social care and health fields, as this is the area where the growth of voluntary action in public service delivery has been greatest in recent years and where further expansion is likely to remain significant. In this research also, themes have been identified in discussions with NCVO and with local umbrella agencies, and these are being used to provide a focus to the case study work.

The themes in this research include:

- the securing of contracts – procurement, competition, core costs and front-line activities
- service provision – performance standards and good practice
- human resources – skills and competences, employment practices and volunteering
- added value – the provision of community-focused and user-friendly services
- managing relations – the role of local compacts and links with contracting agencies.

This case study work, like the RAWM project before it, has been established within what many academic researchers would refer to as an 'action research' framework. The design of the project, the methodologies to be adopted, the identification and selection of the research sites and the development of the research themes have all been conducted in dialogue with the research contractors, and with the aim of addressing the policy and practice concerns with which they are seeking to engage.

This raises some questions perhaps about the independence, and even the integrity, of the research; and certainly it is the case that such work could not be conceived of as traditional 'objective' or evaluative research activity. However, the fact that the concern with policy and practice is built into the conception and structure of the research means that

the findings have an immediate and ongoing relevance to those in the policy and practice communities concerned with such issues. As a result, therefore, qualitative research findings are geared towards the concerns of a policy and practice audience, and one which on this occasion is seeking to utilise such findings in an immediate engagement with the national policy process.

## Conclusions

Policy makers and practitioners in the voluntary sector need relevant and accessible research which addresses the concerns with which they are engaged in their daily work. Although traditionally it has often been assumed that such research is most accessible and relevant if it provides a broad, and representative, statistical overview, it is clear from our work that qualitative research on the sector can also provide policy makers and practitioners with information and analysis that can inform and influence their work. Indeed, qualitative research can provide a perspective which complements broader statistical findings and which permits issues of structure, dynamics, contradiction and compromise to be explored in ways that are not possible within quantitative investigation. Only qualitative analysis could have revealed, as in one of our RAWM case studies, that a shift from drop-in work to outreach activity was largely the product of building work on adjoining premises leading to the, unnoticed, loss of a fire escape.

However, in order to ensure that qualitative research is both relevant and accessible to policy makers and

practitioners, researchers must recognise the need to address the interests and concerns of these agencies in the design and development of their research. This may not always mean adopting the more direct 'action research' framework employed in the research reported here; but it does mean ensuring that identification of research themes, and the selection and location of research sites, should be informed by a prior and developed understanding of the policy contexts and practice agendas within which the voluntary organisations to be studied are operating. Again, as the case of our 'youth trust' revealed, this includes for instance an understanding of the shared funding sometimes needed to secure and maintain core infrastructural support.

Furthermore, it means ensuring that the analysis and presentation of the research findings address these contexts and agendas directly, and provide accessible summaries of policy implications and pointers to good practice (too late though this was for the 'youth trust'). And, if such research is to have a significant impact within the policy and practice audiences for which it is intended, it is also essential that the dissemination and publication of the research findings are directed appropriately at these audiences and in forums and formats with which they will expect to access and engage. Policy makers and practitioners will use qualitative research; indeed, they increasingly need it to make sense of the rapidly changing world in which they are operating; but they will use it only if it addresses questions which they recognise and provides answers which they can understand and use.

# Conclusion

Pete Alcock and Duncan Scott

## Looking ahead

Two key themes underpin both the original design for this book and also the contributions that constitute its major content:

- Qualitative research covers a range of approaches much deeper than the short-term interview or focus group and much wider than the stereotype of the lone anthropologist in some exotic corner of Tibet or Tower Hamlets.
- Qualitative approaches do not need to set themselves up in opposition or as a substitute for their quantitative ‘cousins’; they can provide complementary information, if their sponsors and practitioners are able to maintain a constant and open dialogue about their strengths and weaknesses.

The publication of this book is a first step towards understanding these themes in relation to research on the voluntary sector. It serves to remind qualitative researchers of the rich potential in their approaches, and it aims to look ahead to the future development of such research. What is clear from the contributions to this publication is that the next critical step is to convince policy makers and field-based practitioners, in and around the voluntary and community sectors, that a greater use of qualitative research is both desirable and necessary.

## Why qualitative research?

The conventional response to the above question usually begins by looking at the research portfolio. One of the most useful contemporary examples is provided by Spencer and colleagues in their adaptation of earlier work by Michael Patton, a distinguished US researcher (Spencer et al, 2003: 60). Here we read of the similarities and

differences between traditional (quantitative) and qualitative approaches; creatively, distinctions are then made between the latter and the criteria that are called ‘artistic and evocative’ and ‘critical change’ criteria. For example, whereas the traditional approach might be primarily concerned with rigorously checked evidence to support causal hypotheses, alternative qualitative approaches might emphasise different criteria as depicted in the sample of themes in the box below.

Traditional	Qualitative	Artistic	Critical
Evidential – rigour ↓ Causal hypotheses	Multiple perspectives ↓ Understanding	Stimulate and provoke	Expose injustice ↓ Build capacity

The contributors to this book have been chosen to illustrate many of the issues associated with the qualitative–critical spectrum. But, if we are ultimately interested in convincing policy makers and practitioners that qualitative approaches should be adopted, then conventional responses may be ‘starting at the wrong end’. Instead of laying out all the characteristics of the different forms of qualitative research, at least as much time should now be spent on the contexts within which policy makers and practitioners need to act on a daily basis. So, the question ‘Why qualitative research?’ is answered by interrogating the context:

*the aim in qualitative research, I suggest, is to try to understand people’s behaviour as necessarily making sense within the context in which it occurs.*  
(Hammersley, 2002: 88)

Of course, ‘contexts’ are infinitely variable in terms of micro-level detail, but it is our view that some

common themes are discernible (see Blackman, unpub). Thus qualitative research should be used when:

- there is limited overall knowledge of a policy/practice field (e.g. the dynamics of voluntary organisations and community groups when delivering contracted services)
- there is uneven knowledge and understanding of the depth of detail within a specific context (e.g. the effects of increased activity on VCS workers and volunteers)
- the chief actors in the above fields and contexts may (a) feel they know little about an issue (e.g. inner-city residents faced with proposals for local Strategic Partnerships) (b) feel unable to articulate their feelings about an issue (e.g. HIV/Aids within an ethnic community)
- the broad shape and significance of an issue is generally understood, but the complexities are harder to identify (e.g. the impact of budget cuts/programme closures on sub-sets of the VCS)
- the issue is apparently so uninteresting that few people know about, or are committed to, it (e.g. the potential of neighbourhood-level re-cycling schemes)
- the issue is so high profile and politicised that most people have strong and assertive positions (e.g. housing policies for former sex offenders, or asylum seekers and refugees).

It is not difficult to identify the scope of such propositions. For example, the Home Office has just produced what they term a 'Government Map' of Civil Renewal Research (Active Citizenship Centre, Home Office, 8/2/05). This is a very helpful table that maps research from nine government departments (from Cabinet Office to Office for National Statistics) against five related policy themes (from community engagement to citizen involvement in service delivery). It is possible to make creative linkages across the more than 60 named research initiatives, within the broad civil renewal agenda. Unfortunately, what we have is really only a table and not a map, because there are no 'contours', either within the tabular presentation or the accompanying text. This is where qualitative research, with its focus on the dynamics, detail, uneven and reluctant knowledge, and so on, will surely be useful. But, given the variety of contexts within these research initiatives (from consumer experience of the criminal justice system, to longitudinal research with migrants), there are some other important questions.

## How can useful qualitative research be developed?

The most common approaches to demands for greater usefulness centre on communicative strategies – if more stakeholders are involved more often and earlier, if reports are more accessible in terms of their language and brevity, if dissemination strategies are imaginative, and so on. All of these issues are important, but they presuppose that the principal actors within the overlapping research, policy and practice worlds:

- have a confident understanding of what we call the 'landscapes of interaction'
- understand the 'brokering' and 'go-between' roles necessary in the exchanges between research policy and research practice
- can promote the necessary knowledge and skills required for such hybrid roles as 'policy researcher' and 'research practitioner'.

(c.f. Locock and Boaz, 2004)

Some competent qualitative researchers (perhaps not enough) are emerging in higher education and in the voluntary and community sectors, but we are less confident that sufficient attention has been paid to the ways in which qualitative researchers are trained and helped to develop close and effective relationships with the worlds of policy and practice in which they must work.

The contributors to this book, often implicitly and almost unconsciously, identify different ways in which their academic knowledge and understanding were compelled to interact with and be shaped by their field relationships. In one case (Ledwith), these relationships were contained within the social interactions of two people; in many instances, this dyad was reproduced in multiple interviewer–interviewee relationships (Russell and Scott); but most common are the journeys of researchers across the boundaries of policy and practice institutions (Gaskin, Alcock and Rochester), even within and between communities (Ellis). Given that the very essence of qualitative research (especially where the portfolio of data collection approaches moves beyond semi-structured interviews and/or focus groups) involves using different levels of field relationships, then the further development of such approaches demands more systematic attention to social contexts and social skills.

However, there are some (limited) grounds for optimism here. One of the most comprehensive reviews of the potential of qualitative approaches in relation to policy and practice (Spencer et al, 2003; see also the closely related text from the same team, Ritchie and Lewis, 2003) attempts to identify and discuss what may be termed the key 'qualitative concepts' (Spencer et al, 2003: 105–9). Twelve such concepts are presented, discussed and refined, about half of which, in fact, do not appear specific to qualitative research (e.g. clarity of enquiry design, well-founded argument, etc.). But most of the rest address more-qualitative issues (e.g. understanding of subjective meanings, presentation of depth, diversity, subtlety, complexity). Most interestingly, two are about context: that the aims and purposes should be contextualised; and that there should be a clear understanding of context throughout. This is potentially very significant. It is argued that at the heart of any qualitative research not only should there be transparent attention to the traditional methodological issues, but also that these should be

grounded in the immediate physical and social worlds, the latter of which are not seen as mere background, but as integral to effective qualitative research.

If policy makers and practitioners are to be persuaded that qualitative social research can be of use, then researchers must integrate a concern for both methodology and context into their designs. They must endeavour to show, through the various stages of their work, how this integration of method and context varies in shape and content, and what skills (academic and social) they employ to manage the variation. It is our hope that the examples in this book begin to illustrate the different forms that such integration can take, and the potential insights that follow from it.

Perhaps the next step is for a second volume that looks more squarely at the influences of social context on that exciting range of social research approaches which we call '*Close Work*'.

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