Methodological Innovations and Resources: Forms of Data, Partnership and Pedagogy

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Abstract. For the past five years, the National Centre for Research Methods (Phase III), funded in the UK by the Economic and Social Research Council, has acted as a focal point for national and international research and training activities in social science research methods. It has driven forward methodological development and innovation through its own programme of cutting-edge research, and supported capacity building for social scientists through a programme of methods training courses and development of pedagogic resources.

This session draws on research and resources developed in the context of NCRM with presentations by three of its co-directors. The presentations will range across innovations and resources relating to the considerations around participatory research through focus groups, research involving partnerships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers, and research-generated resources to build capacity in dealing with large amounts of qualitative data. This showcases some of the variety in qualitative methods development work in NCRM and shows how boundaries are being pushed. Participants will have their knowledge of advanced qualitative methods extended, and be made aware of resources available to support them.

1. Enriching the participatory potential of focus group methods

This paper relates to the inclusive or democratic turn in social science research. Increasingly researchers are seeking to shift the dynamics of research production away from doing research on people, mining them for information, towards researching with participants or recognising that the research needs to be purposeful and beneficial for participants too. One important way of doing this is by creating vibrant interactive spaces in which best use can be made of participants’ potential not just to contribute, but also to learn from each other’s contributions and come to know themselves and their own situation a little better. Focus groups (which have a history not just within market research but within social justice work) can create these spaces, especially when the researcher is alert to their participatory and transformative potential and is open to the idea of hybrids of focus groups and other methods.

Taking a Freirean approach to focus groups, Nind has been using the method to support participants’ power in the research process through embracing the praxis of their ‘naming the world’ (focus) collaboratively and by embedding the research authority in the interactive space between them. In NCRM training, Nind has been working with researchers on ways to optimise the dialogic and democratic space of focus groups. The paper will show how focus groups can be political or playful as a means of co-production. This will be illustrated through three studies. The first research design uses repeated focus groups and utilizes visual metaphors and poetic summaries to facilitate the flow of ideas between focus groups involving people with intellectual disabilities who do research and academics who do research with them. The second involves video-stimulated recall, reflection and dialogue in focus groups of teachers and learners of social science research methods. The third combines focus group, diary method and inquiry circles to foster collective, relational narratives among learners of research methods.
2. Research partnerships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers

International research initiatives that seek to address global challenges often require collaborations between western-based non-Indigenous researchers and Indigenous researchers living in and working with their communities. Despite best intentions, these collaborations may reproduce colonial approaches to knowledge production and use. They may position Indigenous researchers as junior members of the team, and research findings can construct Indigenous peoples as deficient in comparison to non-Indigenous norms, rather than also tracking the reproduction and accumulation of privilege and identifying resilience.

All research questions and methodologies are grounded in the specificities of people’s world views, and research as an activity occurs in a set of historical, political and social contexts. But some world views, methodologies and methods are accorded more legitimacy and privileged over others. Developing equitable Indigenous and non-Indigenous research partnerships means challenging perceptions of the relationship between Indigenous and Western knowledges, and what counts as knowledge and appropriate research practice.

In the ‘Indigenous and Non-Indigenous Research Partnerships’ project, Indigenous researchers: Helen Moewaka Barnes (Massey, New Zealand) and Deborah McGregor (York, Canada) and non-Indigenous researchers: Rosalind Edwards (Southampton, UK) and Tula Brannelly (Bournemouth, UK) have worked with communications expert Christine Garrington (Maltstore Communications) and graphic artist (Olivia Hicks, Glasgow) to develop a set of resources to help non-Indigenous researchers think about how they can approach working with Indigenous researchers and communities. These include an audio panel discussion of good and bad practice, blogs from Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers about issues they have faced, and a comic about effective collaboration.

3. Big qual: researching and teaching large volumes of secondary qualitative data with ‘breadth and depth method’

All the NCRM panel collaborated on a project that built on two NCRM methodological initiatives: (i) a novel, and much-needed methodology for the analysis of large sets of archived qualitative data (Big Qual) http://bigqlr.ncrm.ac.uk/, ‘breadth-and-depth method’ (Davidson, Edwards, Jamieson, Weller) and (ii) cutting edge methods pedagogy http://pedagogy.ncrm.ac.uk/ (Lewthwaite and Nind).

NCRM identified a strategic need for new methodologies and resources for analysing and teaching the analysis of large volumes of secondary qualitative data drawn from multiple studies. Large volumes of complex qualitative data are now available in repositories such as the ESRC Timescapes Archive and the UK Data Archive, presenting the possibility for conducting secondary data analysis across several, merged, qualitative studies including longitudinal qualitative projects. Data in such archives have the advantage of quality control, associated documentation that provide insight into the context of its collection and meta data that aids its discovery in topic searches. However, researchers and methods teachers are often beyond their comfort zone in dealing with large volumes of qualitative data. The Big Qual initiative developed the ‘breadth-and-depth method’ of working through the steps of putting together and analysing a corpus of data assembled across multiple archived qualitative data sets, while still remaining true to the principles that typically guide qualitative research. Using archaeology as a metaphor helped the Big Qual team to communicate the four steps of breadth-and-depth method as moving iteratively between stages akin to aerial survey; ground-based geophysical survey; shallow ‘test pits’ and deep excavation.

Drawing on the pedagogy project, the collaborative project piloted, reworked and delivered means of aiding researchers and teachers. The combined learning is written up in a NCRM Working Paper first authored by the researchers Lewthwaite and Weller, which offers a starting point for teachers, http://eprints.ncrm.ac.uk/4247/. A range of resources to support effective teaching are also now available as Open Education Resources (OERs) https://www.ncrm.ac.uk/resources/online/teaching_big_qual/
Keywords: indigenous methods, participatory methods, big qualitative data, secondary data analysis, methods pedagogy

Necessary resources: PowerPoint slide projector and computer, internet access.

Panel Structure

1- Brief context

The National Centre for Research Methods has played a key role in developing methods and methodological capacity in the social sciences in the UK and increasingly internationally. It is all too easy for developments in advanced quantitative methods and data analytics to dominate this space. NCRM also remains committed to nurturing innovation in qualitative methods and in supporting best practice in teaching qualitative methods. The panel show how qualitative methods are evolving in response to changes in the political and data landscape.

2- Objectives

The objectives of the panel are: to showcase how the National Centre for Research Methods is a rich resource for the development of qualitative methods on the world stage, to extend qualitative researchers’ knowledge about advances in qualitative methods and to connect participants with NCRM resources available to them.

3- Dynamics / Strategy:
   a. Presentation (Group Activity)

   Introduction to NCRM and the session - Rosalind Edwards (moderator) (0-10 minutes)

   b. Theoretical Exposition of the theme

   Enriching the participatory potential of focus group methods - Melanie Nind (20 minutes)
   Indigenous / non-Indigenous research partnerships: issues and resources - Rosalind Edwards (20 minutes)
   Big qual: researching and teaching large volumes of secondary qualitative data with ‘breadth and depth method’ - Lynn Jamieson (20 minutes)

   c. Application in other contexts

   All of the methods and resources presented can be applied in multiple contexts, whether used with diverse populations or applied across a wide range of datasets. Participants will be able to reflect on their practical uses in their own research and teaching. The publically funded model of nurturing methodological expertise that the National Centre for Research Methods represents is very unusual but could be taken up in other national contexts. It has demonstrated that the development of qualitative research methods and the capacity of researchers to deploy new methods is enriched by enabling methodologists to work together conducting...
important research, developing methods for that purpose and training others in their use. This, however, raises the issue of how regional and national centres for methods development can be funded, supported and enabled to collaborate. The presentation also surfaces a general issue for the research community and that is the vigilance necessary to safeguard the richness and depth enabled by qualitative methodologies and ensure the continued development of qualitative methods worldwide. When big data availability tempt researchers towards surface scraping and untheorized sifting, we advocate taking every opportunity to nurture innovation and capacity in both qualitative and quantitative research.

d. Discussion

Question and answer session (20 minutes)

4- Application of the proposal in reality / practical examples

Examples of the methods, resource and pedagogic development can be found in:


http://eprints.ncrm.ac.uk/4247/1/Developing%20pedagogy%20for%20big%20qual%20methods.pdf


5- Expected results

The panel is expected to develop knowledge of advanced methods and resources available to qualitative researchers. It will showcase the work of NCRM and stimulate discussion of wider possibilities for such regional and national methods centres and collaborations. The co-directors of NCRM welcome discussion about any of the particular methods, pedagogies and resources and hope to hear of similar examples. It may also provoke discussion of how to safeguard the richness and depth enabled by qualitative methodologies and ensure the continued development of qualitative methods worldwide.

Biographical notes

Rosalind Edwards. Professor of Sociology and a co-director of the ESRC National Centre for Research Methods at the University of Southampton. She is a fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences, and a co-editor of the International Journal of Social Research Methodology. Rosalind publications on research methods include co-editing a Qualitative Research journal special issue on approaches to ‘democratising’ research (2017), and a book on Working with Paradata, Marginalia and Fieldnotes: The Centrality of By-Products of Social Research (2016). Currently she is conducting the Indigenous / non-Indigenous Research Partnership project with colleagues from New Zealand and Canada.


Melanie Nind. Professor of Education, co-director of ESRC National Centre for Research Methods, director of Centre for Research in Inclusion at University of Southampton. She is a fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences, co-editor of International Journal of Research and Method in Education, and editor of Bloomsbury Research Methods for Education book series. Her methods publications include What is Inclusive Research (2014); Research Methods for Pedagogy (2016), The Teaching and Learning of Social Research Methods (2016). Recent projects include studies of: quality in inclusive research, the pedagogy of methodological learning, and how adults with learning disabilities are re/self-building social care.