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Mini-Review Article

Creative Qualitative Research in Behavioral Science: A Pragmatic Epistemology of Experimenting

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Abstract

This appraisal evokes the much-debated dysfunctional relationship between organizational research and practice. While research on creativity in the work place has long evidenced that actors must feel confident to be “allowed” to experiment, err, play and take risks so as to exploit all spaces of the possible, in research imprecision or mistake-making is considered taboo. We conjecture that – especially in a fast-paced uncertain research context – hearing, experimentation and happenstance are indispensable to research striving to generate relevant novel knowledge and theory, and that they are not sufficiently addressed through existing research methods. We sketch out an epistemology of experimenting, grounded in pragmatism, to remedy this gap.

Introduction

Innovation of organizational practices is happening everywhere and at a breathtaking pace. Everywhere that is, except in academia. A century after John Dewey detected fundamental tensions in the “proper relation” between theory and practice (too) much research still functions by and large in splendid isolation from praxis. Granted, the awareness among both academics and practitioners of what came to be called a ‘relevance gap’, i.e. that the output of theory often fails to have impact on what practitioners do, is well-alive (e.g., Hambrick 1994; Huff 2000; Priem and Rosenstein 2000; Rynes, Bartunek and Daft 2001; Weick, 2001; Ghoshal 2005), and there is debate on all kinds of solutions on how to deal with this dilemma [1-4]. In this short paper, we contribute to this debate along a road less travelled: the limitations of the canons of qualitative research. Happenstance, erring and experimentation are important and under-acknowledged qualities when studying organizations. While research on creativity in the work place, especially with regards to innovation, has long proven the indispensable role of erring, playing, serendipity, experimentation, and iteration so as to exploit all spaces of the possible, go beyond the obvious, find new perspectives and approaches [5], in research, even qualitative research, we still limit ourselves to classical understandings of generalizability, proof of objective truth and similar rules of good research from an essentially positivist academic community. In this effort to be “good pupils”, rigorous and objective researchers and to fully satisfy the canons of an essentially positivist academic community, we risk to pass by the true richness of the realities at hand when exploring a fast-paced, uncertain organizational world and thus remain oblivious to many powerful insights, to where the exciting knowledge often lies in the in-between of phenomena, in the liminal [6]. Mistake-making and experimenting has been confirmed to be a compelling source for novel ideas: grounded in mistakes lie novel perspectives and seemingly absurd combinations waiting to emerge (Kelley & Kelley, 2012). Yet, in behavioral research, imprecision or mistake-making is considered taboo. We conjecture that they are indispensable in all research that strives to generate new knowledge and theory, and are not sufficiently addressed in existing research methods. We purport to advance qualitative research methods by an epistemology of experimenting and iteration, such as we deploy it in such innovation methods as design thinking [7].

Discussion

Reflections are grounded in American pragmatism [8] Symbolic Interactionism [9-12], and the later scholars from Chicago school of sociology, with their rigorous use of ethnography and data collecting methods. Pragmatism situates learning and research evolutionarily within the process of living, in the shape of an intelligent and essential performance of adaptation of the species to its environment. Dewey made inquiry, rather than truth or knowledge, the essence of logic. The perspective of praxis (theory and method of action) is important and different from the perspectives of theoría (theory of understanding), epistemology (ways of knowing), and ontology (ways of being/existing). Praxis is paradoxically the least developed area within the field of behavioral research. One reason may be that management scientists see their role as that of “pursuit of truth” [13], a truth they define as something deductively arrived at from other known truths (as in mathematics), or something that is rigorously induced from observed reality (as in natural sciences). Practitioners and their problems have no major role to play in this conception of science, except as willing subjects in, or facilitators of some inquiries. Philosophers, notably Marx [14] use the term praxis in reference to the unity of theory and practice. Action learning scholars have adopted this stance [15] since, to them, theory cannot be separated from practice.

By revisiting pragmatism in behavioral research and combining it with recent experimental approaches grounded in design science we essentially propose to trust the researcher’s data-and interpretive instincts-more [16-18]. Through an ontology of experimenting, of becoming rather than being [19], that emphasizes the imperfect, irrational, messy, embodied, let the practical truth unfold. Let alternative practices of representation, such as the concept of writing-as-a-method-of-enquiry [20,21] permit us to capture the thick and rough data of organizational realities. With carter we purport that “When research is synonymous with problem-solving and crisis management, criteria of success are simplification, resolution, closure”. We claim that creative research has a different object, as it “explores the irreducible heterogeneity of cultural identity, the always unfinished process of making and remaking ourselves through our symbolic forms” [22,23]. This research is embedded in the “crisis of representation” [24,25], and integrates personal experimentations with deviations from qualitative methodologies such ethnography (Van Maanen, 1988) and grounded theory (Glaser, Strauss, Corbin, Charmaz, etc.). It synthesizes ideas and experiences in experimental methodologies and forms of representation in qualitative research and explains how such ideas led to new avenues in research methodology, in response to times of global uncertainty: “Around the globe governments are attempting to regulate interpretive inquiry by enforcing bio-medical, evidence-based models of research. These regulatory



activities raise basic philosophical, epistemological, political and pedagogical issues for scholarship and freedom of speech in the academy. The international community of qualitative researchers must come together to debate and discuss the implications of these recent developments [26]. Pragmatism and experimentation are pervasive here since, as developed above, new knowledges can arise through the quality of emergence, for example in writing about errancies and how they helped progress, as an effective game plan throughout the research process [27].

Researchers are expected to be critical thinkers but often we are just as vulnerable to succumb to taken for granted world views. Such views are powerfully cemented in our thinking and acting. Our interest, if not our duty, lies in the exploration of radical, transgressive forms that strive to open up and disrupt such consuetudinal agency and work with tools that open the self to radical transformations, allowing for uncertainty and doubt. Inspirations come from Barrett and her 'exegesis as meme' and her suggestions of novel ways of asking the validity questions [28] from Trinh's experiments wherein disrupted forms of representation with quotes, and film images juxtaposed intertextuality in ambitious discontinuous forms challenge conventional meaning, "incorporating the poetic into the analytic", and unveil "decentered realities, fragmented selves and multiple identities, languages of rupture" [29], but also from Vincs' dance research [30], Perry's creative writing research [31] and other artists' practices viewed as knowledge production and a kind of philosophy-in-action [32]. Such research approaches can be acts of necessity, born out of the struggle of representation, the need to create new forms through which to represent alternative knowledges. They are often new and individual process with little support if any. Once such theses were finished, they often became models, giving a sense of what was possible [33].

The epistemology of experimentation we propose here requires a pragmatic conceptualization, or a "pragmatic adequacy" [34] and experimentations were undertaken with loose diary keeping or "pinboarding" (Hartley, 2002), with drawings, scraps of text, bricolaged artefacts, images, sounds and more, eventually gave way to clusters and patterns of sorts. A prerequisite for this pragmatic emergent ontology is the slackening of subjectivity. Three theoretical underpinnings as to how experimentation could be facilitated, and yet provide reviewers with sufficient reassurance of scientific rigor, are:

- a) Variants of Kurt Lewin's 3-step model of change and its notion of "unfreezing" as a condition for change to be embodied [35].
- b) Andersen and Oxrighs [36-39] notion of "paradoxes of appearing", that explore that which is in flux, yet of great importance; a sensation, experienced fleetingly, that "cannot be described as though it were an object that we, as subjects, relate to (ibid., p. 9)". Rather it is moods, or what Böhme [40] refers to as atmospheres, that unify what is traditionally separated into subjects and objects (2009). Awareness of the ephemeral, the fleeting, is rare in research, or in philosophy for that matter, with the exception, perhaps, of Deleuze and Guattari [41] who wonder: "how can a moment of the world be rendered durable or made to exist by itself" (1995), and purport that this can only be done through art (ibid., p. 164).
- c) Turner's [42] concept of the liminal (1991, p. 172) developed from Van Gennep's, limen or threshold (1974), referring to initiation rituals and the space of becoming: "The liminal period is that time and space betwixt and between one context of meaning and action and another. It is when the initiand is neither what he has been nor what he will be" (1960) [43]. Metcalfe [44] purports that "the liminal is a non-stage. ...a time and space without narrative" (1982, p. 113). For scholars working between or at the limit of existential planes, at the threshold of the self (2001), the liminal space of "undoing, redoing and modifying of this very limit" is fundamental: "...rather than talking about death, I would prefer to talk about threshold, frontier, limit, exhaustion, and suspension: About void as the very space for an infinite number of possibilities" [30]. This led to a deep reflection on the notion of emergence that includes elements of our past self, who we imagine ourselves to be, our embodied relationships with others, and our belonging to what Merleau-Ponty dubbed the "flesh of the world" [45].

Pragmatic experimentation feeds in particular on the notion of truth and the concept of dialectics. The deductive and inductive ways of doing science delegate the job of determining truth to procedures that are accepted by scientists as being valid. Dialectics take the process a step further, toward abduction, recognizing that truth is a social construct. Contradictory processes and pluralism are better at producing truth in certain situations, among them the kind of situations that interest management. Dialectics does not reject the classical scientific way of doing things; it merely postulates that it is good at doing what it does in certain circumstances, such as when dealing with

physical objects or a limited class of managerial phenomena, or to put it differently, when it is hard to conceive of reasonable actors that would question the validity of the process. The corollary of the discussion is that a particular researcher dealing with a particular situation is not to seek objective truth, but to produce an input that will advance the truth-seeking process and improve its quality. Truth is not contained in any given piece of research output, but is a result of the scientific process and of the broader societal processes encompassing it. Truth is constantly refined and advanced. To produce an essential contribution the researcher must be immersed in a specific social process of truth-seeking, be a contributor to a pluralistic conversation. Frequently this can be achieved through classical scientific method, but at other times not. Objectivity "...is a characteristic not of the data, but rather of the design of the inquiring system as a whole: does it try to be open to all those aspects it deems relevant? [46]". Yet often we use all kinds of ploys to restrict pluralism. Pragmatism argues that a fair test of a belief is often the willingness to act on it. Pragmatists consider confrontation with reality through action as the principal source of doubt, which in turn feeds scientific curiosity and becomes the driving force to inquire in order to settle that doubt. Thus action and the interrogations stemming from it are what drive the agenda of Science [47].

In sum, this epistemology of pragmatic experimentation is not about producing a more authentic version of reality, of writing up qualitative research as fiction, for example. In this epistemology each artifact, mistaken path or creation in the research process is a pause in an iterative process of representation: "As a series of written representations, the field-worker's texts flow from the field experience, through intermediate works, to later work, and finally to the research text, which is the public presentation of the ethnographic and narrative experience. ... There is in the final analysis, no difference between writing and fieldwork (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003 p. 27)". This new qualitative method emerges from deconstruction, and moves to genesis and conditional representation. We allow - and give applicable examples and suggestions for - a large portfolio of different kinds of documentation and of note taking, that permits the articulation, the sketching of constructs and concepts that are not yet there. Such writing enacts the process of becoming, by exploring such theories of the in-between as Lacan's mirror stage on the relationship between body and language and Grosz's reframing of time to include serendipity, chance, becoming, and open-endedness.

The temporality of becoming is also evoked by Darwin, Nietzsche, Bergson, and Deleuze in concepts of serendipity, chance, and open-endedness: "the endless unfolding of the new, restless transformation, upheaval, redirection and digression, which ensures the impossibility of the same even through the modes of repetition that each of these thinkers sees as central to the surprise and unpredictability of difference [20]". The spatial in-between is an agar for theorizing. Kristeva introduces 'thetic', the moment when the semiotic irrupts into the symbolic in madness, holiness and poetry (1982). We advocate that such a methodology of the in-between could conceptualize research as a series of representations, each of which a pause, in an iterative and cyclical process of representation, engagement and reflection. In such a conceptualization temporality is disrupted and circular. A strategy of capturing, collection and documentation using collage, assemblage, sketching, fractal structuring, videoclipping, memoing and other multiple forms is suggested and explained, as a means to enact this concentric time of coming into being and, in the pragmatic tradition, developed into a methodological operating manual that is evidenced to satisfy such standards of scientific rigor as the research being conducted systematically, skeptically and ethically (Robson 2002).

Conclusion

As we write, we develop and experiment with concrete templates and tools to be used at each stage, with precise examples, hoping to advance these thoughts through experimentation from an epistemology to perhaps a novel qualitative research method. To this end, we reflect on such elements as:

- a) Setting the scene for the research: sharing the curiosity about a phenomenon, establishing need for inquiry, and centrality. Use words, images, photographs, etc. to arrive at the necessary precision and assertion.
- b) The practice and literature review: summarize the state-of-the-art of literature regarding the research question, drawing from a very wide array of academic fields, in our case from organization science and sociology, well into natural sciences, physics, etc. and into arts and design, etc.; go through the same process with the state-of-the-art of practice regarding the research question, juxtapose the two and discuss; freely and generously use visual material such as paintings, photographs, sculptures, performances, videos, virtual diaries, bodies of practical work, including fiction, exhibitions, events, virtual galleries, etc.; locate the research question in a temporal (historical and contemporary) and spatial context; with the goal to arrive



at both a holistic theoretical and practical understanding and a higher precision of the research phenomenon at hand.

- c) An argumentation about the methods, tools and artefacts of inquiry to be deployed: materials and tools are part of the inquiry; building of artefacts with/by respondents as empathy interviews, the process involves, even necessitates the invention of new tools, methods and/or materials; this is essential because the materials and methods normally used in our research are psychologically 'occupied', encoded, and thus orienting and constraining, even though most researchers would consider them as harmless and 'given'; justify the choices in terms of influence, critique, intertextuality, indebtedness, novel forms of expression, areas of expertise, skills, inspiration and philosophical and societal considerations; explain the precise use and process, what when, how why, for how long, etc.; what significances to be sensitive to, how to compare the work to others; what problems to anticipate; ethical issues such as invasion of privacy, confidentiality, intellectual property, etc. and how to document this process
- d) A conceptualization of the iterative research process: the interest of this type of inquiry is also, and sometimes principally, the discussion of process: diary-keeping is imperative at this stage; a constant conversation between all types of data-archival material, real-time data-and theory and practice; critical reflection, engaged scholarship, an openness for the significant moments, the accidental breakthroughs, the serendipity; understand the nature of the break-through moments and their relation to the techniques, materials, methods uses; compare with similar processes; determine the potential, if any for further inquiry.
- e) The process of writing: what is outcome? What is the role of erring, experimenting, pivoting? What is relevance? Compare with the initial research interest, possibly shifted interests, as issues emerge; use identify significant outcomes in terms of extant theoretical and practical discourse, document them in relation to process and materials; articulate elements of theoretical or practical replicability, theoretical generalization and identify value of knowledge production in terms of practice and theory.

In sum, this is work in progress. In line with our propositions, we believe in sharing reflections while they are still rough, fragile and messy and while research prototypes are running. We do this for the pleasure of inquiry and debate, and for the advancement and that of pragmatic experimental research epistemologies. Objectivity does not repose on the lone shoulders of each academic author, but can-and does-emerge from interplay, and dialogue. If one is wrong, there surely is someone out there to point this out. If somebody bothers to answer, then this article did stimulate, and permit advancement-and therefore served its most noble purpose.

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