



Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management International Journal

Reading the past to imagine the future
Silvia Gherardi

Article information:

To cite this document:

Silvia Gherardi , (2015), "Reading the past to imagine the future", Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management: An International Journal, Vol. 10 Iss 4 pp. 363 - 366

Permanent link to this document:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/QROM-07-2015-1316>

Downloaded on: 16 December 2015, At: 07:37 (PT)

References: this document contains references to 7 other documents.

To copy this document: permissions@emeraldinsight.com

The fulltext of this document has been downloaded 25 times since 2015*

Users who downloaded this article also downloaded:

Catherine Cassell, Gillian Symon, (2015), "Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management: ten years on", Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management: An International Journal, Vol. 10 Iss 4 pp. - <http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/QROM-10-2015-1329>

Phil Johnson, (2015), "Evaluating qualitative research: past, present and future", Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management: An International Journal, Vol. 10 Iss 4 pp. 320-324 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/QROM-07-2015-1303>

Gina Grandy, Ruth Simpson, Sharon Mavin, (2015), "What we can learn from de-valued and marginalised work/research", Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management: An International Journal, Vol. 10 Iss 4 pp. 344-349 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/QROM-07-2015-1310>

Access to this document was granted through an Emerald subscription provided by emerald-srm:313859 []

For Authors

If you would like to write for this, or any other Emerald publication, then please use our Emerald for Authors service information about how to choose which publication to write for and submission guidelines are available for all. Please visit www.emeraldinsight.com/authors for more information.

About Emerald www.emeraldinsight.com

Emerald is a global publisher linking research and practice to the benefit of society. The company manages a portfolio of more than 290 journals and over 2,350 books and book series volumes, as well as providing an extensive range of online products and additional customer resources and services.

Emerald is both COUNTER 4 and TRANSFER compliant. The organization is a partner of the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) and also works with Portico and the LOCKSS initiative for digital archive preservation.

*Related content and download information correct at time of download.

Reading the past to imagine the future

Reading the
past to imagine
the future

Silvia Gherardi

*Department of Sociology, University of Trento, Trento, Italy and
Faculty of Education, University of Oslo, Oslo, Norway*

363

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to contribute to the ten years of the journal through a personal reflection.

Design/methodology/approach – A review of the articles published in the last ten years.

Findings – I argue that what has distinguished *QROM* in these ten years are two distinctive features: reflexivity on practices of qualitative research, and openness to the application of qualitative methods to unusual research topics.

Originality/value – The main limit of the paper resides in the subjectivity of the person who has read the articles. Other readers may have different opinions and may have chosen different criteria.

Keywords Reflexivity, Time, Re-reading, Unconventional sites

Paper type Viewpoint

The invitation to participate in a celebration of the tenth year of *QROM* gave me great pleasure because it made me feel part of a community which is invisible but embedded in the materiality of a journal. I was especially pleased because it was a wonderful opportunity to sift through the journal issue by issue and see ten years of time and thoughts pass before my eyes.

This survey of the past revived a memory. It was 1987 when Barry Turner and I published a working paper from the Department of Social Policy of Trento entitled *Real men don't collect soft data*. This title came to mind as a transposition of *Real men don't eat quiche*, the bestselling tongue-in-cheek book satirizing stereotypes of masculinity published in 1982 by Bruce Feirstein. It was later, in 1999, when Alan Bryman asked me (Barry had sadly passed away) to publish that paper in the book *Qualitative Research* that he was editing. 12 years later that piece of work that we had produced for pure amusement still had an appeal.

The title that we chose attracted wide attention among our colleagues and friends. The not so implicit message was that in qualitative research a gender subtext was at work. For years both Barry and I received postcards and letters that commented playfully on the concept of “real men” by sending (especially to me) both images of very good-looking men and images of women engaged in typically male activities. At that time e-mails were still to come, and for many years I had a panel on my office wall to which I pinned the cards as they arrived. It was only on re-reading past issues of *QROM* and thinking about how qualitative research has changed that this memory resurfaced and I realized that if I had kept that material, it could now be the subject of a visual analysis of the community of qualitative researchers.

In fact, in the editorial by Catherine Cassell and Gillian Symon which presented the first issue of the journal (and which bore the demanding title *Taking qualitative methods in organization and management research seriously*), the authors wrote: “what is published in our field acts as an indication of what is expected in our field”. This sentence struck me, both because it reminded me of my first experience as an



author in this field, and because it induced me to re-read what has been published in the past ten years and think about what qualitative research will be like in the years to come. I asked myself: what is expected of a qualitative researcher today, and how does *QROM* mirror those expectations?

I shall answer the question neither in detail nor exhaustively. Rather, I invite regular readers of *QROM* and the authors who have published therein in recent years to do the exercise that I did and scan the articles published in chronological order. My experience in doing so was surprising because I realized that how I remembered an article, what I was sure that I had learned from that article, the manner in which it, in my opinion, contributed to the literature at the time when I read it, no longer corresponds to how I read it today. This observation is probably banal, for everyone knows that the meaning of a text emerges from its relationship with the reader, and in relation to other texts. Hence, ten years later, I who read the same text am no longer the person that I was ten years ago, and the text that I read ten years ago is no longer the same text because its relations with other texts have been enriched by ten years of new publications. Both of us are in a con-text that has changed. I feel bewildered. How can I “seriously” make citations by relying on my memory of the past, if what I cite is what I remember of myself and that text is what we were in the past? And is re-reading the past in light of the present not to betray what the text and its reader were in the past? These considerations created a sense of anxiety which troubled me for several days as I read the articles that I had most liked, and which prevented me from writing this contribution. I finally set my metaphysical concerns aside and accepted the fact that this encounter with the texts of the past would produce an affective reaction in me.

Hence I reformulated my question and tried to determine what has distinguished *QROM* in these ten years. I found two distinctive features: reflexivity on practices of qualitative research, and openness to the application of qualitative methods to unusual research topics. Taken together, these two features make *QROM* a journal both critical and open to new ideas.

To give an idea of how reflexivity on research practices has developed and how it is apparent in the *QROM* articles, I shall provide an example of ongoing reflection on the qualitative interview. The first issue of the journal contained an article in which two “voices” – Alan Bryman and Catherine Cassell – discussed, on the basis of their shared experience of interviewee/interviewer, the researcher interview process as a particular interview setting. This framework enabled the authors not only to investigate the asymmetry of the process and give an insider account of how intersubjectivity is formed in the process, but also to propose a reflexive perspective on a research method so pervasive as to be taken for granted in qualitative research.

A critical and reflexive perspective on interviewing recurs during the ten years of the journal. Another example is provided by Mark Learmonth’s (2006) article that drew on Derrida to discuss the paradoxes that arise from the inescapable interdependency between interviewer and interviewee. The insider account of the author’s experience leads to a reflection on alternative ways of thinking about what goes on during such interview exchanges. And some years later the reflection on “what goes on in research practices and remain mostly unspoken” takes the form of narratives from the field in which researchers inscribe themselves and their reflexive practices in the text. There are several examples of how narrative analysis is a leitmotif in *QROM* (since its first issue), nevertheless I shall cite an article (Lambotte and Meunier, 2013) that is dear to me because it deals with “making the most of the messiness of research narratives”. The authors reflect on how to build thickness into the research output and they discuss

how the concept of action nets, breaking linearity, helps to envision research practice not as a sequence, but as networks of actions that produce scientific outcomes.

In fact, from the interview as a face to face setting, interviewing as a qualitative research practice is moving towards narratives and towards the use of visually enhanced interviewing. For example, Comi *et al.* (2014) suggests using visuals not only as projective techniques to elicit answers, but also as facilitation techniques throughout the interview process. The reflective direction that the discussion of interviewing is taking in *QROM* points to the co-construction of knowledge between the interviewer and the interviewees in the research process. Much more could be said about how reflexivity is inscribed in qualitative research and is reflected in published papers, but I leave the task of discovering it to the readers.

Rather I wish to conclude with a rapid example of unusual research fields and topics. Here again the choice is difficult and my preferences are highly idiosyncratic. For example, Francesca Bargiela-Chiappini (2007) conducted an ethnography in three Cistercian monasteries and she discussed how similar segregated organizations may be approached through a methodology that she called “liminal ethnography”, where the researcher (and in this case a female researcher in a monks’ world) is always betwixt and between outside and inside worlds, in an ambiguous relational zone. *Conversatio* is the novel hermeneutical method that Bargiela-Chiappini discusses in conjunction with liminal ethnography.

Another unusual way of looking at the research setting is not related to uncommon organizations, but rather to unconventional ways of defining them. Here I am thinking of academia and how it may be conceived in terms of “dirty work”. This is what Erin Sanders-McDonagh (2014) does. Her research explores women’s involvement with nationalist movements in the UK and discusses how researching “unloved” groups, like racist organizations, can render researchers “dirty workers” if clear professional boundaries are not maintained. Yet all occupations can have a “dirty work” element that must be negotiated, and reflecting on academia and some academic research as dirty work sites may suggest timely consideration on ethics and politics in our educational institutions. This may be a shared concern or perhaps it is only a wish of a retired professor!

My journey through ten years of articles published in *QROM* was guided by the questions: what is expected of a qualitative researcher today, and how does *QROM* mirror those expectations? In my understanding qualitative researchers in the next ten years are expected to go deeper and deeper in a reflective and critical attitude towards research methodologies which, in their turn, are expected to be more and more unconventional. I trust *QROM* commitment to mirror innovation and creativity in organizational and management research.

References

- Bargiela-Chiappini, F. (2007), “Liminal ethnography: understanding segregated organisations”, *Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management: An International Journal*, Vol. 2 No. 2, pp. 126-143.
- Comi, A., Bischof, N. and Eppler, M. (2014), “Beyond projection: using collaborative visualization to conduct qualitative interviews”, *Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management: An International Journal*, Vol. 9 No. 2, pp. 110-133.
- Lambotte, F. and Meunier, D. (2013), “From bricolage to thickness: making the most of the messiness of research narratives”, *Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management: An International Journal*, Vol. 8 No. 1, pp. 85-100.

Learmonth, M. (2006), "Doing critical management research interviews after reading Derrida", *Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management: An International Journal*, Vol. 1 No. 2, pp. 83-97.

Sanders-McDonagh, E. (2014), "Conducting 'dirty research' with extreme groups: understanding academia as a dirty work site", *Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management: An International Journal*, Vol. 9 No. 3, pp. 241-253.

Further reading

Bryman, A. and Cassell, C. (2006), "The researcher interview: a reflexive perspective", *Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management: An International Journal*, Vol. 1 No. 1, pp. 41-55.

Gherardi, S. and Turner, B. (1999), "Real men don't collect soft data", in Bryman, A. and Burgess, R. (Eds), *Qualitative Research*, Sage, London, pp. 103-119.

Corresponding author

Professor Silvia Gherardi can be contacted at: silvia.gherardi@unitn.it