



Qualitative Research Methods in the Social Sciences  
Innovation, Integration and Impact

# Qualitative Researcher

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## Looking back and moving forward

Amanda Coffey

This issue of *Qualitative Researcher* contains articles which reflect some of the ways in which Qualiti, the Cardiff Node of the ESRC National Centre for Research Methods has sought to engage with methodological development and research capacity building over the last three years or more. The original aims of Qualiti included advancing innovative and ethical methodological practice, promoting the integration of different qualitative approaches and data, and enhancing the role of qualitative research in the public domain. Over and above these, we have been keen to develop the research capacity of the social science community in relation to advancing qualitative research methods in the context of new methodological agendas. *Qualitative Researcher* was established by Qualiti as one mechanism for enhancing the community of practice of qualitative research - for building networks, sharing innovative developments and engaging in reflective debate. Over ten issues we have covered a wide range of topics and issues - including mobile methods, online research, (auto)biographical research practice, participatory approaches, deliberative methods, research ethics, researcher risk and documentary methods - as well as providing a platform for sharing opportunities for, and experiences of, research capacity building. We have been pleased by the contributions and interest we have had from the UK social science community, and hope that future issues will continue to build on this work.

In this issue of *Qualitative Researcher* we are pleased to be able to report on some of the work undertaken by the Qualiti team at Cardiff. Bella Dicks and Rachel Hurdley provide an account of developing multimedia approaches for the communication of qualitative research, reporting on one of the Qualiti demonstrator projects. This project particularly

addressed the possibilities of new forms of research engagement and dissemination, including the deployment of visual methods and new technologies to represent qualitative data and scholarly argument. In this issue there is also a report from some of the work Qualiti has undertaken in relation to qualitative research and policy making, particularly in the context of the rise of deliberative methods. Understanding the ways in which qualitative research can and might be utilized in the development and evaluation of policy continues to be an important part of the agenda for qualitative methodological development and capacity building. The contributions from Qualiti are complemented in this issue by an article from a colleague from the University of Salford, Mags Adams; on soundwalking and the city. This article speaks directly to the growing interest in mobilities and mobile methods, and in multimodal approaches to qualitative research practice. We are pleased to include it here as a further illustration of qualitative methodological innovation in practice and in dialogue.

These articles provide examples of some of the ways in which Qualiti and *Qualitative Researcher* have contributed to the methodological development and research capacity building agendas of the NCRM, ESRC and social science research community more generally. I am particularly pleased that *Qualitative Researcher* has provided an opportunity for debate and dialogue, as well as report. This is, however, the final issue of *Qualitative Researcher* in its current form. Many colleagues will know that Qualiti ran from 2005-8, as the Cardiff University based phase one node of the ESRC National Centre for Research Methods. The methodological and research capacity building work of Qualiti is now being taken forward under the auspices of the



newly formed Wales Institute of Social and Economic Research, Data and Methods (WISERD). *Qualitative Researcher* will continue to be edited by a Cardiff team, and will be relaunched as a WISERD publication later in the year.

The Wales Institute of Social and Economic Research, Data and Methods (WISERD) is jointly funded by ESRC and HEFCW, and is a collaborative venture between the universities of Cardiff, Swansea, Aberystwyth, Bangor and Glamorgan. WISERD is a partner organisation of the NCRM, and in that context I hope it will continue to play an important role in relation to UK methodological development and research capacity building. Co-ordinated from an administrative hub in Cardiff, WISERD is an interdisciplinary social science research centre. Contributing disciplines include sociology, geography, social and public policy, law and criminology, economics, politics and education. The research activity and programme of capacity building of WISERD is distributed across Wales and across the partner HE institutions. The WISERD research agenda includes bringing together existing social and economic data on Wales into a comprehensive data resource for

academic researchers, policy makers and other key stakeholders; a series of multi-disciplinary and multi-method locality studies across Wales; and a programme of comparative policy analysis and policy evaluation. WISERD also has a commitment to build upon and develop existing expertise in quantitative and qualitative research methods and methodologies and to consolidating relationships between research data, research methods and the development and understanding of policy. In that spirit I hope that WISERD will continue to make a significant contribution to developing research methods in the context of substantive research questions and agendas. In relation to qualitative research methods and practices in particular we hope to consolidate and build upon Qualiti's work in relation to qualitative methodological innovation - including multimodal methods, mobile methods, Qualitative GIS and integrated / mixed methods applications. There will also be a rolling programme of training, workshops and capacity building activities in relation to qualitative research methods, with events across Wales and the UK.

In concluding this editorial, given the relaunch of *Qualitative Researcher* that will

now take place, and in my role as Director of Qualiti, it seems appropriate for me to thank some individuals who have contributed to the development of this publication. I would like to pay particular thanks to Gareth Williams who has led the editorial team since its inception, and will now be handing the task over to a new team. Thanks too should also go to Tina Woods and Bethan Charles who have provided excellent editorial assistance. I would also like to thank to all of the Qualiti researchers who have edited *Qualitative Researcher* over the years, all of whom have now moved on to new roles.

Professor Amanda Coffey was Director of Qualiti, a node of the ESRC National Centre for Research Methods from 2005-8. She is now a Co-Director of WISERD (Wales Institute of Social and Economic Research, Data and Methods). She has expertise in a range of qualitative methods and methodologies, and is especially interested in methodological innovation and research capacity building. She is currently part of the Cardiff editorial team for *Sociology*, one of the flagship journals of the British Sociological Association.

# Using unconventional media to disseminate qualitative research

Bella Dicks and Rachel Hurdley

## Introduction

This article draws on a project (funded by the Qualiti node of the ESRC National Centre for Research Methods) that investigated the implications of using non-conventional media for representing and disseminating qualitative research findings. It follows a series of previous, ESRC-funded projects investigating the methodological and empirical uses of hypermedia and multimedia for qualitative fieldwork-based research<sup>1</sup>. Following Weaver and Atkinson's early work on hypertext for qualitative analysis (1994), in 2002-2005 the team constructed an innovative, digital 'ethnographic hypermedia environment' (EHE) containing an interactive multimedia dataset, analysis and authoring<sup>2</sup>. This suggested further research was needed on the differences in meaning produced through mixed media digital authoring as opposed to traditional written print. Whilst scholarly dissemination is still dominated by print, the ready availability of new technologies allowing web-based audio-

visual media and 'hyperlinking' (clickable text) invites questions about what roles different media can play in scholarly output today. For example, can edited video-sequences be used in ways analogous to a print article? And with what effect on the integrity and credibility of scholarly argumentation?

## Multimedia and ethnography

The rich nature of qualitative, especially ethnographic, data calls for forms of representation that can do justice to the vivid and multidimensional settings from which they are generated. Ethnographic film-makers have used film and photography since the end of the 19th century to capture 'live' visual records of social worlds. Print-medium ethnographers, too, use a variety of materials, including actors' talk and narratives, visual, textual and oral data, social interactions, materials and objects, settings and landscapes. As Atkinson (2005) puts it, the ethnographer's craft involves 'paying attention

to the forms and the media through which phenomena are enacted, encoded or embodied' (ibid; para 20). None of these different kinds of data and their analysis, he argues, should be reduced to a specialist field in competition with others, such as 'visual ethnography'. Instead, good written ethnographies will convey this rich detail by describing settings, sounds and interactions verbally and by quoting verbatim speech, such that readers will get a glimpse of the real lives and contexts that lie behind the abstract notion of 'data'.

It has often been noted, however, that quotations frequently fail to convey the 'life' of the world being described (e.g. see Curtis, 2008, in Issue 8 of this publication). What started out as closely observed and finely-analysed action and talk are often represented only as sound-bites acting out roles in the author's argument. Not only does this mean that readers cannot easily grasp the range and diversity of data, nor examine their contexts; it also means that the credibility of

authors' claims has to be established through the poetics and rhetorics of writing rather than through presenting the evidential base (see Atkinson, 1990). In short, readers cannot meaningfully verify what sense has been made of which data when all they have to go on is a collection of carefully-marshalled quotes. Yet the soundness of the relationship between data and interpretation goes to the heart of benchmarks of scholarliness. In this regard, the image – in spite of its iconic powers – has occupied an often uneasy position in scholarly traditions. Whilst photographs are most often (though unadventurously) used as illustrations of the written word, ethnographic film, by contrast, has always aspired to stand alone. However, many have disputed its fitness for academic purposes (e.g. Grimshaw, 2001). Visual anthropologist Peter Biella (1992) concludes that film is an inherently unscholarly medium, since it fails to meet the major criteria of the 'scholarly apparatus'.

Hypermedia, Biella suggests, may offer a solution. It could meet both scholarly criteria and grant access to field data-records by allowing the simultaneous on-screen presentation of both film and written text. At the time of Biella's article, hypermedia ethnography was not yet technically feasible. Today, ubiquitous web-authoring software means that anyone can use hyperlinks to weave visual and aural media and text together. The challenge is whether hyperlinking can be done in a scholarly and rigorous as well as a vivid and lively way. Our project set out to test this by comparing hypermedia to the two other more established formats for ethnographic dissemination: film and print article. Can film be used for scholarly communication, contrary to its reputation? How do audiences judge its credibility in relation to print? And can hypermedia, as a mix of writing and image, enhance the meaningfulness of qualitative research dissemination?

## Project design

In the *Watching, Listening Reading and Clicking: Representing Qualitative Research in Different Media* project we set out to explore the intersection of film, writing and hypermedia through a linked authoring/audience study not done before. We used an existing multimedia dataset from an ethnography of a science discovery centre (already hyperlinked in the EHE, above), comprising written fieldnotes and other field-records, photographs,

video footage, transcribed interviews, interview audio-files, audio soundscapes and scanned documents). The project design provided for:

1. The authoring and construction of three scholarly 'essays' (namely filmic essay, print essay, hypermedia essay), using the existing dataset and analysis;
2. An 'audience' study in which one of each essay-type was presented to selected participants (involving c.40 postgraduate social science research students in total) in order to explore how they responded to the different media employed.

Our objective was to compare how, in each media-format case, a set of findings derived from qualitative research could be encoded (by us as authors) and decoded (by postgraduate students). In order to keep the scholarly content of each essay relatively constant, one central finding/argument with related exposition (already derived from analysis of the science discovery centre dataset) formed the core of each essay. It can be summarised thus:

*The science discovery centre we studied is best characterised not as a place for learning about science, so much as a space that encourages social interactions of various kinds; these cannot be said to facilitate the intended learning outcomes that the concept of 'edutainment' is supposed to address.*

Key sections of the dataset provided the evidential basis for this central claim; a major goal of the authoring process was to select appropriate media extracts to substantiate it.

## Authoring the three essays

How do academic authors normally set about conveying their arguments to readers? Fundamental to this is bringing evidence (in the form of interview quotes, fieldnote extracts, numbers, graphs, photographs) into dialogue with interpretation (the author's analytic exposition). This means the careful and selective deployment of representations of data (data-records). Quotes must be selected and delivered in a way that convinces the reader of the truthfulness and reliability of the arguments made; a craft that authors learn through long apprenticeship until it becomes second nature. How to achieve the same effect in film? To what extent, for example, can film be

said to make a distinction between 'data' and 'authored exposition'? In 'classic' ethnographic film, this effect is obtained through overlaying authoritative spoken narrative onto the moving image, with the latter functioning as illustration of the former. Today, this style has become rather outmoded, in favour of allowing filmic subjects to 'tell their own stories'<sup>3</sup>. We wanted to explore whether this newer kind of participant-focused, rather than researcher-focused, film would be seen as persuasive or credible by our audiences. Further, so as to focus on medium-specific qualities, we wanted to select a film-style (and a writing-style) that were neither particularly experimental nor contrived. In the film, accordingly, apart from two short introductory and closing clips containing talking-head narration by us as researcher-authors, the field-derived recorded soundtracks and images themselves contain all the information that the viewer sees and hears. Hence, the filmed participants become personae in a story constructed through the editing process rather than through authorial voice-over<sup>4</sup>. Adopting a similarly mainstream approach, the written essay followed the established conventions of today's typical 'research article', with standard headings and impersonal narrative.

The hypermedia essay confronted us with no blueprints or existing canon on which to model an organising structure. What the medium allows is essentially an on-screen combination of written text, audio, photographs, scanned images and video; how these are put together is largely uncharted territory<sup>5</sup>. Our aim was to produce a hypermedia output that would pass muster as a scholarly 'essay' (indeed, we intended it to be suitable for peer-review), whilst at the same time take advantage of the unconventional affordances of hypermedia technology. In order to bring evidence into dialogue with exposition, the authoring process meant selecting from our complete dataset of media files and deciding how to link these electronically to each other and to authored written text. Unlike print articles or film, both conventionally uni-linear in their structure, hypermedia involves making decisions about organising and ordering content – whether sequentially and/or multi-linearly (see Dicks and Mason, 2003; 2008). Working out this linking structure meant selecting what to link with what and how (e.g. a clickable link to a pop-up, a new page, or to a different section) – a novel way of thinking about how to structure content. Our uni-linear struc-

ture in which the reader clicks from 'page' to 'page' each with conventional headings (e.g. The Research Setting; Our Research Questions; Our findings), still offers multi-linearity in that each page contains clickable links, taking readers further into authored exposition, or into the data-records themselves. Many of these links activate short edited films designed to allow the reader to understand the research setting visually and aurally, rather than having to rely on detailed verbal description as in a print-article<sup>6</sup>.

### Designing the audience study

Once the three essays had been prepared, we recruited as many postgraduate Social Science students as we could, from two universities (Cardiff and Leeds). The participants were given a certain amount of time to read/watch/click through one of each of our completed essays and took part immediately afterwards in semi-structured interviews or focus groups designed to discover what sense they had made of it. To avoid one format influencing the other, each individual/group was presented with the essay in only one media format. However, we also conducted three additional comparative focus groups, in which one group was presented with both the written article and the film; another both the written article and the hypermedia essay, and the third a joint focus group discussing all three.

Interviews and focus groups followed an aide-memoir in two sections: the first to explore what sense had been made of the essay; the second eliciting participants' views regarding the suitability of the media-format for the communication of scholarly argumentation. In addition, a short questionnaire administered individually at the start of each interview session posed a standard set of comprehension questions across all interviews and media formats; this was to gain some purchase on the patterns, if any, of comprehension in each case, as well as to gather standardised biographical information. The ensuing interviews were audio-recorded digitally and uploaded to computer; analysis is proceeding using qualitative thematic coding.

### Findings and discussion

Our findings, in so far as they are emerging so far, suggest that the process, poetics and textuality of scholarly authoring

practices differ considerably when unconventional media-formats are used as compared to print. The greatest contrast is afforded by film v. print. Whereas the written print-article provides for a standard set of conventions that themselves reproduce scholarly criteria (e.g. references to relevant academic literature and debates; enabling argumentation to be perused at leisure; providing a clear separation between authorial voice and representation of data), film-authoring precludes some of these conventions as well as being closely tied to stylistic and genre constraints. Eschewing narrative voice-over as an authoring tool, we used the editing process instead to bring out the nuances and contingencies of our argumentation (but also the clarity - where it existed - of the data upon which that argument is based). Nevertheless, the authoring process made us recognise the impossibility of providing a clear and unambiguous statement of our argument; visual signs, as Roland Barthes and others have noted, are always more open than that. Nevertheless, we felt the resulting film managed to strike a balance between showing the openness of data-records and telling the academic story we had derived from our prior data-analysis.

When it came to testing out our film-essay on audiences, however, this balance appeared somewhat to dissolve. Initial inspection of the interview transcripts suggests participants' strong adherence to normative scholarly conventions derived from print. Most film-essay participants expressed reservations about its scholarlyness, citing:

1. a lack of clear aims and objectives
2. a lack of reference to other scholarly work
3. a lack of a clear authorial voice and argument
4. a partisan and subjective use of the data.

In relation to 1., it is interesting that audiences did not recognise our 'talking heads' introduction for what it was - a statement of aims. The second objection is a recognised failing of film as scholarly medium, and one we had anticipated. The third objection can best be explained by the fact that viewers did not recognise film-editing as authoring (being prepared perhaps to see authoring only in the form of explicit verbal narration). Since the film contained no narrative voice-over, the viewers discerned no authorial voice - not recognising that the

editing decisions made were where the authoring took place. Interestingly, some did not even recognise the extensive film footage contained in the film as 'data' at all. (Others however valued having access to the research setting; they used words such as 'lively', 'vivid' to describe this.). The written article's authority, on the other hand, was largely accepted unquestioningly, even though it relied more on telling than showing. It was felt to contain, unambiguously, something called 'data' (even though only in quote-form).

In relation to the film, audiences seemed to have contradictory responses: on the one hand they felt the film was biased; on the other it lacked a sufficiently clear authorial steer. This confirms there are powerful resistances to the acceptance of film as scientific (see Chaplin, 1994). Audiences were much more likely to discern untrustworthiness in the film; only a few pointed out that manipulations can also take place in the written article. It seems that print-article conventions are acting as a guarantor of legitimacy, whilst the conventions for securing legitimacy in documentary film (e.g. ensuring nothing is taken out of context; that editing decisions reflect analysis, etc.) are unfamiliar to social science audiences. Accordingly, the actual scholarly gains of the medium (i.e. the presentation of more nuanced, detailed and extensive parts of the data-set) are somewhat lost from view.

Analysis of data from participants presented with our hypermedia-article is still ongoing; initial analysis suggests some, albeit limited justification for seeing it as a middle way straddling the film-writing polarity. Some saw it as potentially incorporating the best of both formats, others voiced reservations about its scholarly role. In particular, our film-text integration efforts did not seem to be entirely successful with our readers; the image-based media we used (carefully-edited films and selected photograph albums included as clickable thumbnails on most pages) were seen as 'extras' adding vividness and interest, but not carrying the authoritative scholarly voice. That is still seen as lying with the written text. This may be due in some measure to the screen-design conventions we adopted (where the website 'menu', and page-titles, together with the immediate content encountered on each page, are all conveyed in written mode); if we had adopted a more image-driven navigational structure we might have forced

readers to take the image-based content more seriously – as we intended them to.

Our analysis so far is underlining our initial concerns that our research design, involving a simple contrast of three media-formats, means that it is not so much the media per se as the stylistic choices enacted that are being compared. Each media-format is itself amenable to different genre and stylistic treatments, in that each can be instantiated in a range of multimodal ‘orchestrations’. Hypermedia navigational structure can vary along a continuum from the less to the more tightly structured. And the sheer variety in the multimodal possibilities of screen-design themselves carry potent and variable semiotic affordances (e.g. choice of colour and font; spatial positioning of text v. image, and so forth). In this sense, we need to recognise that each of our three essays is simply one instantiation of representational codes. To push this further, readers are actively responding, not directly – or not only – to the medium itself in some straightforwardly McLuhanesque way, as to the specific ensemble of conventions that each instantiation deploys. Addressing these concerns would require far larger resources to enable the production of a variety of essay-styles within the paradigm of each media-format. And even then, if many essays were able to be presented to many readers, it is still the case that stylistic and genre conventions act as powerful ‘languages’ that shape meaning; they are not mere media-containers.

Nevertheless, we believe the research-design as it is can still illuminate some of the issues at stake in understanding new media’s potential role in qualitative research dissemination. These centre on the twin affordances of multimedia on the one hand and hyperlinks on the other. Multimedia affords the powers to see and hear the vividness of field data; hyperlinking makes visible the relationship between data-record and authored interpretation, providing readers with the opportunity to examine the dataset in its entirety. The project has also demonstrated the potential of both hyperlinking and multimedia for making unusual or challenging linkages between different data-records. From such linkages, new insights and even lines of analysis can potentially emerge.

<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.cf.ac.uk/socsi/research/researchprojects/hypermedia/index.html>

<sup>2</sup> The dataset was generated from an ethnographic project of a science discovery centre which explored how ‘science’ was produced and consumed through interactive exhibits. It was generated for an ESRC funded project, Ethnography for the Digital Age (H333250056).

<sup>3</sup> his over-simple opposition masks a whole century of debate in ethnographic film-circles as to what constitutes ‘correct’ ethnographic film-practice; see Grimshaw, 2001; Banks, 1992.

<sup>4</sup> An alternative, instructional format would have been an ‘Open University studio-style’ film, following print-article conventions, with researchers as ‘talking heads’ presenting the argument and illustrating it with references to data and relevant literature. We rejected this approach in favour of exploring film-derived traditions.

<sup>5</sup> Current templates include the range of commercial, educational or artistic/literary websites available on the Internet; rarely do these present an overarching argument needing narrative development and evidential substantiation, as in scholarly dissemination.

<sup>6</sup> Identifying meta-data were attached to each data-extract (e.g. pseudonyms, roles of participants, date and time of recording, technology used, etc.). From the meta-data link, readers can log in to the relevant page of the EHE – where that data-record is to be found in its entirety – and from there explore a whole network of associated hyperlinked records, hence potentially building their own analysis.

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# Hearing the city: reflections on soundwalking

Mags Adams

## Introduction

This paper reflects on soundwalking as a methodology for engaging city users in research investigating people's relationship with soundscapes and the built environment. It refers to two projects<sup>1</sup> on environmental quality and soundscapes in 24 hour cities and considers the affordances offered by soundwalking as method.

Before describing soundwalking and its utility in detail it is necessary to review the origins of soundwalks. Soundwalking is accredited to R. Murray Schafer and his team in the World Soundscape Project at Simon Fraser University in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Their aims included identifying soundscapes and components of soundscapes and primarily consisted of listening to and recording sonic environments (Schafer, 1994), reflecting Schafer's engagement with the environmental movement of the 1970s, especially his concern with the 'polluted' nature of the soundscape of that era. Subsequently there has been much engagement with the concept of soundscapes across diverse disciplines and, while this paper is not the place for a full review of the literature, it is important to note the richness and diversity of perspectives using the concept. Truax (1984) in developing his theory of acoustic communication suggests that sonic information is dependent on the nature of the sound itself and that its context is of central importance. More recently, McCartney (2002) reflects on how deeply enmeshed issues of time, memory and place are in the practice on soundscape composition. And, in their pioneering *Auditory Culture Reader* Bull and Beck (2003) provide a definitive overview of how auditory culture subtly and profoundly impacts on everyday lives, giving additional emphasis to the contextual nature of soundscapes and further pointing to the increasingly multi-disciplinary engagement with the subject.

Through their use of the soundwalk method Schafer and his colleagues identified and recorded the soundscapes of Vancouver and, later, five European villages; recording the soundwalks was a key part of their method. Another team member, Hildegard Westerkamp (1974), described soundwalking as 'any excursion

whose main purpose is listening to the environment', emphasising the educational role of soundwalking practice as a means to develop acoustic awareness. For members of the World Soundscapes Project a soundwalk was undertaken as a practice, an activity in and of itself, whether alone or in groups, and the main aim was educating others about the nature of soundscapes.

Soundwalking has since been developed and utilised in various capacities, as a research method, moving beyond its role as a practice in itself, particularly evident in research investigating sound in urban environments. Within this context it has been interpreted in various ways, being employed as an ethnographic practice whereby the researcher immerses herself in the urban soundscape, simultaneously recording, photographing and making notes (Semidior, 2006), or as a way of engaging others in the practice of listening to and describing the city in order to characterise the perceived quality of residential urban soundscapes (Berglund and Nilsson, 2006). Further to this Butler (2006) focuses on the potential of soundwalks to create multi-sensory and embodied practices through which geographers might research outside environments and links soundwalk techniques with oral history traditions to create connections between people, place and memory (Butler, 2007).

In Vivacity 2020 soundwalking was adapted and employed to develop a multi-modal method for engaging city-centre residents in research into sustainable urban environments, in an effort to understand residents' perceptions and experiences of environmental quality in 24 hour cities (Adams *et al.*, 2008). In the Positive Soundscape Project (PSP) the soundwalk method was further adapted to engage professionals involved in urban design practice and supported the development of other methods to produce metrics for measuring soundscape appreciation. This paper reflects on the development and use of soundwalks in these projects and evaluates the benefits of it as a method.

## Soundwalking with city centre residents and urban design professionals

Vivacity 2020 investigated urban sustainability in 24-hour cities, focussing on the design of urban environments and the study of environmental quality. The main aim was to influence future planning and design of urban areas and involved various methods to engage urban users, including soundwalks. The soundwalk methodology developed in recognition of the multi-sensory experience of everyday interactions with the city in an attempt to distance the research from the essentially ocular-centric focus of urban design. In acknowledging inter-modal experience, issues of environmental quality in urban areas were investigated in a more experiential manner. However, this presented the challenge of investigating sounds without developing an opposing acoustic-centric approach.

As a key objective was to understand urban environmental quality it was appropriate to exploit this multi-modal experience, recognising the importance of people's embodied participation in environments with which they are familiar. Accordingly, a set of complementary methods were incorporated into the sensory methodology including photo-surveys, soundwalks, questionnaires and qualitative interviews.

The project involved 81 residents of London, Manchester and Sheffield who each identified 10-minute soundwalks around their local residential area. Asked to focus on all their senses during the walk, not just on what they could see, they walked in silence so they weren't distracted by conversation. Walking in silence when accompanied by other people is unfamiliar to many people and so this emphasised the task in hand – concentrating on the sound and other sensory impacts of the environment being walked through. The soundwalk was complemented by a photo-survey; participants had taken photos with a disposable camera incorporating both positive and negative aspects of their local area, and had recorded these on a log sheet noting the time, date, location and a short description of the content. They were asked to incorporate all their senses into their photographs. Finally, they participated in an interview, utilising the

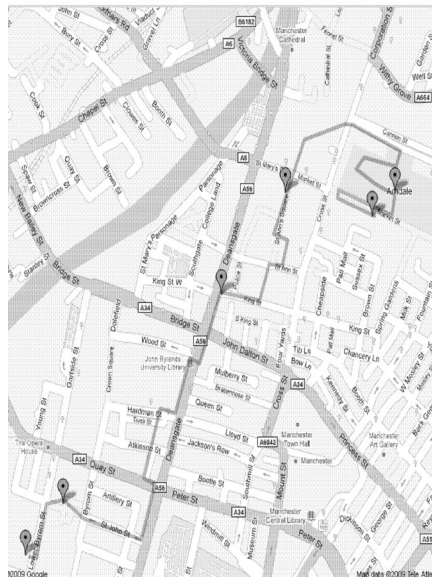


photos and soundwalk as springboards for discussion. The rationale was that this methodology immersed participants in the research prior to interview thereby producing richer and more nuanced detail at interview. Furthermore, by enabling a mutual experience of the local environment under investigation by the researcher and participant the researcher was better placed to delve in more detail and to seek clarification about aspects of local environmental quality that might otherwise have been missed.

At interview, participants sorted prints of their photographs into categories (some were related to the senses, some positive and negative aspects of the locality, others related to distance from the home) and then, by referring to the photos and soundwalk, were asked about the local urban environment. Through this process perceptions of the sensory experience of the local area were investigated, prompted by questions about the sound, smell, taste, look and feel of the area, enabling the emergence of a discussion about environmental quality, community and neighbourliness.

Developing from the investigation of senses in Vivacity 2020 came my involvement in setting up the Positive Soundscape Project (PSP), a large interdisciplinary project which aims to acknowledge the relevance of positive soundscapes by moving away from a focus on negative noise, to identify a means to effectively incorporate the concept of soundscapes into planning, and to evaluate the relationship between the acoustic/auditory environment and the responses and behavioural characteristics of people living within it (Davies *et al*, 2007).

Soundwalks were devised to take urban design professionals (architects, city planners, acoustic consultants, urban developers, environmental health officers and urban designers) out of the office to hear the city first-hand. They were conducted in Manchester (Figure 1) and London (Figure 2) with 26 participants, and involved routes containing complementary features: an urban square, a busy shopping street, a shopping precinct, an urban green space, and a pedestrianised street.



**Figure 1: Manchester Soundwalk**  
(Source: Google Maps)



**Figure 2: London Soundwalk**  
(Source: Google Maps)

'Pre-soundwalk' questions were asked to ascertain professional backgrounds and levels of expertise in urban planning and/or acoustics. General impressions of urban areas were sought in order to determine any assumptions and preconceptions, whether personal or influenced by their professional role, about the built environment. To get an indication of how those involved in urban design thought about sound, whether as noise and therefore something to be mitigated or as something more aesthetic and akin to visual landscape, they were asked about their profession's engagement with sound. Finally, they were asked what they expected to hear in the city in order to separate out expectation from

actual experience once the soundwalk itself was underway.

Again, they walked in silence and were asked to pay close attention to the physical environment, the infrastructure and what they could hear. Stopping at five pre-identified locations and listening in silence meant participants had the opportunity to experience the subtle (and not so subtle) changes in soundscape within a short timeframe, and consequently their answers to location-specific questions were more considered.

In each of the five locations in each city soundwalkers were asked what they could hear, what they liked and disliked, what dominated, what was in the background, and whether the location sounded as they expected it to. They were asked how each location made them feel and what aspects of the surroundings they thought had an impact on the soundscape, if any. They were prompted to consider spatial layout, physical infrastructure and materials and which aspects of the location made the soundscape better or worse. Finally they were asked how they valued each location and who they thought used each space.

At the end of the soundwalk participants were asked 'post-soundwalk' questions to evaluate their experience of the soundwalk, their developed understanding of soundscapes and their reflection of the interconnection of the built environment and soundscapes. By reconsidering the five locations they were asked whether they had experienced a number of different soundscapes or just one 'urban' soundscape. All bar one had experienced more than one and were asked to classify these different soundscapes. This proved difficult as people didn't have the vocabulary to talk about their appreciation of the sound environment. Many resorted to describing the different environments we'd stopped in, relating more to the physical environment and its content than the sounds heard. Some reported that the soundwalk had changed their perception and understanding of urban soundscapes as they had not previously appreciated the factors that made up the subtlety of changes in the soundscape. However, many also said it was difficult to envisage exactly how the concept could be incorporated into their profession as it currently stood as many restrictions related to formal practices and procedures, legal requirements and regulations, and determining factors outside their influence (such as the priorities of architects' cli-

ents). Most felt there was a role for considering soundscapes in planning urban developments and spaces but couldn't quite articulate how that might work in practice. Focus groups at a later stage in the project explore this in more detail.

### **Affordances of soundwalking as method**

Awareness and inclusion of multi-modal experience is something that many qualitative methodologies omit, thereby neglecting the impact of embodied participation in the urban environment. This embodied participation is fundamental to human experience and understanding and by ignoring it we risk compartmentalising our understanding of the real world into silos of knowledge that are difficult to integrate in a meaningful way. Including embodied sensory experience in the research method affords participants the time and space to consider their responses either in situ or through close reference to a shared experience with the researcher.

Soundwalking as a method engages this embodied experience by taking participants out into the environment under investigation, ensuring this shared sensory experience of researcher and participant. This benefits both researcher and participant as it leads to more detailed, nuanced and considered responses at interview and allows the researcher an opportunity to customise a semi-structured interview schedule to the shared soundwalk experience. By either following up the soundwalk with such a semi-structured interview, as in the Vivacity Project, or incorporating one into the soundwalk itself, as with PSP, clarifications and elaborations are possible, ensuring the researchers are really getting to the core issues.

Soundwalking with residents provided the impetus for them to focus on the full sensory experience of living in the city. Where people might tend to focus on negative environmental aspects when asked about environmental quality, conducting a soundwalk prompted them away from such a narrowly negative focus and encouraged a fresh reflection on an otherwise familiar urban environment. This highlighted the tradeoffs made by residents living in 24-hour cities and areas undergoing rapid regeneration and accentuated how the co-production of positive and negative sensory experiences can bring about conflict necessitating a reconsideration of city centre de-

velopment decision making processes to allow for the inclusion of subjective sensorial diversities (Adams *et al*, 2007).

Soundwalking with professionals working in the fields of urban design and planning provided the impetus for them to get out of the office and really scrutinise the relationship between the physical and audible environment. The immersive nature of soundwalking enabled them to be more reflexive, facilitating complex considerations of the connections between spatiality, urban infrastructure, city design, and soundscapes. By routing the soundwalk through a variety of urban spaces it was possible to open participants' ears to different urban soundscapes, both subtle and obvious, effectively demonstrating sonic distinctions and thus enabling more considered discourse.

So, why is soundwalking a useful practice in research terms and what does it help us do and understand that other qualitative methods cannot? Taking people out into the field and soundwalking with them brings us, as researchers, closer to the experience of another individual – by being there, by experiencing with them, by hearing, feeling, seeing, smelling what they experience – we are in a stronger position to empathise, engage and clarify. With such a mobile research method there is an immediacy to the encounters that are brought about by the walk – it allows for a prolonged engagement between the participant and the city and permits the unexpected to enter the research domain. Additionally, it challenges expectations and preconceptions by encouraging an engagement with the here and now rather than the remembered or preconceived.

With soundwalking less is sanitised than with other methods; the researcher is unable to control the variables in the outdoor environment in a way that she might in a more managed environment. A quiet space cannot be readily found in which to conduct the conversation, a pre-requirement often recommended in research method texts (see Hall *et al*, 2008 for discussion on interviews in noisy spaces). This means that both participant and researcher are responding to external cues, constantly changing external cues, which contrasts with the solitary interview situation where external interference is deliberately minimised. This has attendant implications for the analysis of the data which consists of audio recordings, and noisy audio recordings at that.

All the soundwalk recordings were transcribed and whilst the researchers listen again to the in-situ recordings, it is ultimately the transcript, the written word, which is being worked with. This raises many questions about how we use aural approaches and what can be gained from them. In our work the sonic environment is recorded and analysed by researchers for content as well as used in listening room experiments to better understand perceptions of soundscapes. However, the recordings that are used in these situations are not identical to those recorded during the soundwalk – for the obvious reason that an interview is also taking place, so a recording of the soundscape without the human voice is not simultaneously possible. There is much to be written about the analysis of sound recordings but it is not within the scope of this article to cover this in detail.

Ultimately, therefore, aspects of the soundwalk are reduced to the textual. Even in writing this paper I cannot recreate the sensory experience of the soundwalk itself; perhaps in broader research outputs I can give a flavour, perhaps create an exhibition, a soundscape sequencer, an ambisonic array, and all of these will be produced as part of the Positive Soundscape Project, but even these may be unsatisfactory when we introduce temporality (it never sounds the same twice/ it never *is* the same twice). And so in writing this account I resort to the written word and yet hope to convey some of the real affordances the soundwalk method can offer as a qualitative method, without suggesting it as an epistemological panacea.

Let me then compare it to the solitary interview which never moves beyond a textual discourse. We can then see the additional affordances provided by the soundwalking method. The interview, devoid of active engagement in the environment under investigation, has many limitations as the disembodied experience relies on memory to articulate, seemingly at first hand, what is actually being remembered not experienced.

Traditional interviews are unlikely to uncover the nuances that can be obtained when combined with soundwalking. In the case of city centre residents, an interview is very far removed from their normal everyday experience and yet walking around their local environment is very much part of their everyday experience.



rience. This affords a way in, a building of rapport, a common experience that means an interview becomes less formal and is specifically related to the environment under investigation. This was borne out by the less nuanced interviews that resulted when participants in Vivacity 2020 had been unable to take photos or participate in the soundwalks (due to mobility impairment), resulting in much more reliance on remembered environments and encounters and much less on immediate sensory engagement.

While interviews trigger memories of past practices and experiences, soundwalks allow dialogues to emerge that connect memories to the present and back again. There can be a weaving of the past and the present as the sonic environment encourages a reflection of what is and what was, and also what could be. Using the soundwalking method in effect produces the sensory circumstances that we wish to investigate, enabling participants and researchers to engage fully in those experiences.

## Conclusion

Soundwalking as a method deserves much greater attention than is currently common; it has several distinct advantages that allow it to supplement other qualitative methods that are often used in isolation. The shared sensory experience enables areas of concern and interest to become apparent that might otherwise be neglected and being in the field means participants rely less on memory than occurs in a semi-structured interview. An isolated interview about soundscapes is an abstraction and often participants don't have the language to discuss the sound environment; in combination with a soundwalk shared experiences can be referred to and understood that help overcome the challenges of articulating what can be heard. In combination with photo-surveys and interviews a deeper, more meaningful engagement with the sonic environment is possible.

Soundwalks can involve a series of discussions in a number of settings, and enable participants to turn their ear to the sonic environment, not just their intellect. This is significant as in interviews, especially with professionals, there can be much theorising and abstraction about the issues under consideration, but with the soundwalk the professional has to listen and engage with

what is actually there, not just what is expected or predicted. This helps participants be reflexive, to recognise their assumptions and preconceptions and make connections between their sensory and intellectual understandings. This reflexive process has much wider implications in relation to policy agendas and broader social issues as it raises, and helps answer, questions about relationships between people and the design of city spaces, whom they are designed by and for, the uses of public spaces and the legitimacy of those uses. Turning our ear to the city affords a reflexive practice, effectively demonstrating the relevance of subjective understandings to policy agendas.

<sup>1</sup> Vivacity 2020: urban sustainability for the 24 hour city' was funded by the EPSRC (GR/S18380/01(P)). Further details at <http://www.vivacity2020.eu/>. I wish to acknowledge the members of Workpackage Four for discussions leading to the development of a joint research method that incorporated soundwalking: T. Cox at Salford University, G. Moore and B. Croxford at UCL, M. Refaee and S. Sharples at Sheffield University. The Positive Soundscape Project is funded by the EPSRC (EP/E011624/1). Further details at <http://www.positivesoundscapes.org/>. Development of the soundwalking methodology used in this project has benefited from team discussions with W. Davies and N. Bruce at Salford University, R. Cain and P. Jennings at University of Warwick, A. Carlyle and P. Cusack at London College of Communication, University of the Arts, K. Hume at Manchester Metropolitan University and C. Plack at The University of Manchester.

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# Qualitative research, deliberative inquiry and policy making

Rob Evans, Alex Hillman, Gareth Rees, Nicola J. Ross, Chris Taylor and Gareth Williams

## Introduction

Qualitative research and deliberative methods are increasingly being drawn upon to make citizen voices audible within policy debates. Qualitative research methods contribute to this by privileging the role of local contexts and cultures in shaping meanings and interpretations, focusing on the perspectives and experiences of participants to better understand their worlds. Deliberative methods involve a different process, with participants debating amongst themselves the merits of particular arguments and perspectives, and putting forth their own recommendations to inform policy making. The complex relationships between qualitative research, deliberative inquiry and policy making was the focus of the second of the Qualiti Commissioned Inquiries, chaired by Gareth Rees (Evans *et al.* forthcoming), findings from which are drawn upon in this paper.

## Qualitative research, policy making and the rise of deliberation

Sociological debates on the relationship between qualitative research and public policy have a long history. In brief, these centre on three key issues: the barriers that restrict qualitative research from impacting on the policy process; the ways in which qualitative approaches can benefit policy-orientated research; and concerns over the rigor and standards of qualitative research (Weiss 1979; Finch 1986; Hammersley 2000; Spencer *et al.* 2004; Cho and Trent 2006). In recent years there has been a move towards the use of deliberative methods to inform policy making (Rowe and Frewer, 2005). Seeking the views of ordinary citizens is increasingly being seen as an important and legitimate part of decision-making. Informed by these discussions, we were interested in establishing whether and how qualitative research and deliberative methods were currently being used to inform policy making in the UK and the merits of these approaches for including citizen voices in policy formation.

As part of this process we chose to examine one particular context, the Scottish Government, to look at the ways in which social research was informing

Scottish policy-making. The UK, Welsh and Scottish governments all have in-house research capability to conduct policy-relevant research, each commission external research, and are also informed by relevant research evidence from the wider academic community and via Select Committees or similar procedures that allow expert testimony to be heard and questioned by policy-makers. A review of a sample of Scottish Government Social Research publications (all (68) reports published online from January to June 2007) was conducted to gauge the extent to which qualitative research evidence may be contributing to Scottish policy development.

The review indicated that research which was based wholly or in part on qualitative research methods was a common component of recent policy-research in Scotland. Interviews and focus groups were the most common qualitative methods used, but other approaches, including consultations, workshops and observations were also evident. Qualitative methods were typically employed to explore opinions, perspectives, and experiences, to gain detailed knowledge about attitudes and motivations, or to gain detailed insights into respondents' perceptions of various processes and procedures. A move towards deliberative methods was not a strong theme in the research reviewed, though it may be that the gap between research and publication meant that more of this was being done than the review was able to pick up. However, some of the consultation processes did contain elements associated with deliberative processes such as participant evaluation of evidence and discussion of recommendations. Nevertheless, this use of deliberation was somewhat qualified and the research teams invariably retained an important role, often with primary responsibility for bringing together, interpreting and reporting consultation outcomes.

## Differentiating qualitative and deliberative approaches

Deliberative processes seem to involve lots of the same kinds of activities as qualitative research – talking, listening, trying to understand the views and expe-

riences of others – and often for the same end as well, namely, articulating views and perspectives that were previously marginalised or discounted. However, deliberative approaches differ from qualitative approaches in important respects. Traditionally, in qualitative research, data analysis is the responsibility of the researcher and is often carried out away from the site or act of data collection. Participants are usually only responsible for checking or verifying the accuracy of research data and are generally not involved in data analysis. This is even true of the more participatory forms of qualitative research where, although there is more dialog, it is typically between research participants and the researcher rather than research participants themselves. In contrast, deliberative methods promote critical debate and dialogue between research participants. In these settings the role of the qualitative researcher is limited to that of a facilitator as participants themselves generate, synthesise and evaluate their own data. In doing so they must act without the specialist training and experience of the professional researcher, instead relying on more ubiquitous powers of critical and public reasoning to reach their conclusions.

Although operationalised in different ways, a unifying point in deliberative approaches is their assumption that preferences are not pre-formed and fixed but instead emerge through critical debate, scrutiny and reflection. However, some qualitative researchers are sceptical about this process and doubt whether such critical reasoning, eliminating any specific perspective in order to consider only the 'public' good, is either attainable or desirable. The emphasis on the elimination of individual perspectives and the development of a shared perspective sits uneasily with the qualitative researchers' sensitivity to context-dependence. For instance, the 'Talking Treatments' project, one of the Qualiti demonstrator projects, examined the ways in which qualitative inquiry could promote lay and expert engagement around the development of treatments for type 1 diabetes. A deliberative workshop, held as part of the project, revealed that participants did not set aside their own position and consider each others' views from the perspective of public good. Deliberation

was affected by several factors including: the resilience of previous knowledge and beliefs; the situational influence of uncountered experts; the influence of subject identities, with lay people being particularly reluctant to question the priorities asserted by patients; the reliance naturalised norms of representative democracy to resolve disagreements by taking a vote rather than reaching agreement. These findings suggest that there is an important role for qualitative researchers in systematically comparing, contrasting and analysing debate generated in deliberative processes, making explicit the ways in which perspectives and subjectivities inform and shape debates. (Evans, 2007; Kotchetkova and Evans, 2008).

### Giving voice to citizens

To explore further the relationship between deliberative inquiry, qualitative research and the policy making process we held a one day workshop that brought together a small number of key individuals with expert knowledge and experience of deliberative methods, qualitative research and policy making within the UK. The workshop provided an opportunity for policy makers, researchers and academics from a range of sectors to come together to evaluate the effectiveness of different strategies for giving voice to citizens within policy making processes. A number of important points were raised in the discussion.

Firstly, orientations towards ideas of deliberative democracy emerged as important. One advantage that might be claimed for deliberative methods over the more researcher-led qualitative methods is that they provide more direct access to what ordinary people think. In this sense, deliberative events can be seen as an attempt to re-instate the kinds of Town Hall meetings that may once have provided a local basis for democratic decision making. In contrast, when drawing upon more traditional qualitative research methods the respondents' views are always mediated by the researcher's interpretations of relevance, clarity and interest. However, some policy makers did not view deliberative events as providing access to the unmediated views of citizens, rather they saw these as producing something artificial in the sense that the opinions and views did not exist prior to participation in the deliberative process.

A second concern raised at the workshop, regarding the use of deliberative methods in giving voice to citizens, centred on the demands made of participants (e.g. time commitments and communication skills) and ways these might exclude so-called 'hard-to-reach' groups. In contrast, qualitative research, where the researcher can act as an interpreter, was felt to provide a more effective way of enabling the less well resourced, less articulate or less confident members of society to have their views included in policy debates. Concerns were also raised in relation to the expectations held by participants regarding the ways in which their views would inform policy making. Those involved in deliberative inquiry have an expectation that their views will at least be considered in policy formation, and this may lead to disillusionment with the process if these expectations are not met. In contrast, qualitative research was not felt to necessarily raise such ambitions on the part of research participants as clearer distinctions exist between the research participant, research team and policy-maker.

### Further information

This article provides a brief overview of the second of the Qualiti Commissioned Inquiries, detailing the approach used in the inquiry to address the relationship between qualitative research, deliberative inquiry and policy making. In doing so it highlighted demarcations between qualitative and deliberative approaches and discussed the relevance of each for including the voices of ordinary citizens in policy formation. The full report will be available shortly, for details see [www.cardiff.ac.uk/socsi/qualiti](http://www.cardiff.ac.uk/socsi/qualiti)

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# News and Forthcoming Events

## Training and Workshops

### NVivo8 Introductory 1 day hands-on workshop 15 July 2009

*University of Surrey*

NVivo 8, developed by QSR, Doncaster, Australia is a CAQDAS package which now integrates the handling of textual data with multimedia forms of information/data. The workshop is structured to provide step by step support for the some of the tools in NVivo.

<http://www.fahs.surrey.ac.uk/daycourses//#14>

### Questionnaire Design

8-9 October 2009

*Cardiff University*

Learn how to write effective survey questions and combine them into a meaningful questionnaire. This course combines suggestions from the research literature on questionnaire design with a very practical approach.

<http://www.s3ri.soton.ac.uk/cass/showcourse.php?id=78>

## Conferences and Seminars

### The British Society of Criminology Annual Conference 2009

29 June—1 July 2009

*City Hall, Cardiff*

A 'Mirror' or a 'Motor'? What is Criminology for? The title of the conference has been chosen to address the question outlined above, challenging participants to think about their criminological practice and the intentions that underpin the knowledge that they produce through their work.

<http://bsconference2009.glam.ac.uk/about/>

### Academy 10th Anniversary Day Conference: "The Role of Social Science in Uncertain Futures"

1 July 2009

*London*

The Day Conference will be introduced by Professor John Urry AcSS, the Academy's Events Coordinator, and chaired jointly by Professor Miriam David AcSS, the current Chair of the Academy, and Professor Cary Cooper AcSS, the incoming Chair.

To register for the Day Conference please email: [administrator@acss.org.uk](mailto:administrator@acss.org.uk).

### Lancaster Sociology Summer Conference 2009

1-3 July 2009

*Lancaster University*

The summer conference, held on the 1st and 2nd of July 2009, is a great opportunity to present your work at Lancaster, collaborate with other research students, participate in practical workshops, and have a lot of fun.

<http://www.lancs.ac.uk/fass/events/sociology/summerconference/>

### 2nd International Conference on Geographies of Children, Youth and Families

16-18 July 2009

*Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Spain*

Theme: 'Diverse childhoods in international contexts: gender and other social and cultural differences'

The aim of the conference is to provide a forum for the exchange of different knowledges, ideas

and experiences from researchers and practitioners working in variety of international contexts and disciplinary fields, who are interested in exploring and advancing any aspect of geographies of children, youth and families.

<http://www.link-wales.org.uk/uploads/geographies.pdf>

### 4th Annual International Ethnography Symposium: Practice, Politics and Ethics in Ethnographic Research

23-25 August 2009

*University of Liverpool*

The key theme for this year's symposium, 'Practice, Politics and Ethics in Ethnographic Research', will consider the political and ethical challenges involved in conducting critical ethnographic research, and the extent to which ethnography is at 'risk' from much closer forms of regulation and control researchers now face in light of the emergence of much more stringent 'ethical approval' policies and requirements set by University 'research ethics' committee, government research funding bodies and other research grant awarding bodies and institutions.

[http://www.liv.ac.uk/management/school/ethnography\\_conference/2009\\_symposium.htm](http://www.liv.ac.uk/management/school/ethnography_conference/2009_symposium.htm)

### Royal Geographical Society (with IBG) Annual International Conference: "Geography, Knowledge and Society"

26-28 August 2009

*Manchester*

<http://www.rgs.org/WhatsOn/ConferencesAndSeminars/Annual+International+Conference/Annual+International+Conference+2009/>

### 9th European Sociological Association Conference 2009

2-5 September 2009

*Lisbon, Portugal*

The topic of the Conference is "European Society or European Societies?" The aim is to consider whether we can look at European society as an increasingly cohesive entity or whether divisions of nation, class, ethnicity, region, gender and so on continue to be more salient..

<http://www.esa9thconference.com/>

### BERA Annual Conference 2009

2-5 September 2009

*University of Manchester*

<http://www.bera.ac.uk/>

## Summer Schools

### Applied Research Methods with Hidden, Marginal and Excluded Populations

10—14 August 2009

*University of Essex*

The course provides an introduction to research methods in conducting research, both qualitative and quantitative, with marginal, hidden and excluded populations, such as children, migrants, sex workers, homeless, victim's conflicts or trafficking, HIV/AIDS, drug addicted, refugees and displaced people.

<http://www.essex.ac.uk/methods/courses09/3r09.shtm>

## Qualitative Researcher ISSN 1748-7315

*Qualitative Researcher* provides an interdisciplinary forum for social scientists to share their research and discuss questions arising from the application, innovation and dissemination of qualitative research. *Qualitative Researcher* invites contributions in the form of opinion pieces and polemics that stimulate debate; brief articles presenting current empirical research projects; and reports of instances of methodological innovation. Submissions should be between 1500 and 2000 words and as a reflection of *Qualitative Researcher's* pragmatic and inclusive orientation endnotes and references should be kept to a minimum.

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