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Introduction to the Special Issue: "Curiosity and Serendipity in Qualitative Research"

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Qualitative research today is firmly established in most social science disciplines. The sheer quantity of published work and "method talk" about qualitative research is impressive, but however precise the articulations of methodological techniques or criteria, they do not seem to suffice. New ways of analyzing, theorizing, and understanding qualitative research also develop from unexpected findings, surprising experiences in the field, or even the subtle metamorphoses of a given research project during its methodological journey. Serendipity, or "happy accidents," is an inevitable aspect of qualitative research, yet seldom discussed. The role and meaning of curiosity and serendipity was highlighted at the ESA RN 20 Midterm Conference on Qualitative Methods at Lund University, Sweden, 20-21 September 2012.¹ Participants were invited to report on, exemplify, discuss, and expand their curiosity and serendipitous findings in relation to a series of well-known methodological and topical themes. Apart from more than twenty-five

¹ The conference was jointly hosted by the School of Social Work and the Department of Sociology. Generous funding was received from: The European Sociological Association; The Swedish Research Council; The City of Lund; The Department of Sociology and the School of Social Work, Lund University; The Faculty of Social Sciences, Lund University.

parallel sessions, the conference program included a number of keynote speeches by internationally renowned scholars in the field of qualitative research. Many conference participants have asked for the speeches in print. In this special issue we are happy to present the speeches by Paul Atkinson (Cardiff University), Margarethe Kusenbach and Donileen Loseke (University of South Florida), Thomas Luckmann (University of Constance), David Silverman (Goldsmiths' College, London University), and Malin Åkerström (Lund University).² The contributions will be introduced and published in the order they appeared at the conference.

Åkerström opened the conference arguing that serendipity is not only a phenomenon for the natural sciences but also occurs within the social sciences. However, she claims, we seldom speak about our work in terms of astonishing findings. Åkerström's point is that by sticking to a scientific ethos, the researcher raises the chances of serendipitous findings: for instance, by avoiding conventionality, adding a grain of disobedience, as well as retaining curiosity. Curiosity seems to be a prerequisite for serendipity, yet curiosity is not enough for granting serendipity; only the prepared mind will be able to recognize, and realize the meaning of a happy accident when it occurs.

In the joint keynote speech by Margarethe Kusenbach and Donileen Loseke, they regret

² The speech by Barbara Czarniawska will be published elsewhere (Dingwall, Robert and Mary Byrne McDonnell, [eds.] *Sage Handbook of Project Development and Research Management in the Social Sciences and Humanities*). The lunch session with Jaber F. Gubrium, who was interviewed by Anne Ryen, was primarily based on the chapter "Analytic inspiration," co-authored with James A. Holstein. The chapter will be published in Flick, Uwe, (ed.) *Sage Handbook of Qualitative Data Analysis*.

that much research on emotions have forced the social to the background in focusing on how individuals experience, manage, and display their emotions. They suggest a distinctly sociological view in which the questions concern "how people make meanings from cultural resources, and how these meanings make culture." Their contribution is a result of a fruitful (initially informal) collaboration in which they approach emotions from opposite directions: How can it be that events of international concern (such as the attacks of September 11, 2001, and the death of Princess Diana) tend to evoke the same feeling among vast heterogeneous groups of people? How can it be that people who seem to share the same cultural codes (such as, for instance, people living in mobile homes) tend to experience such diverse emotional patterns? Kusenbach and Loseke claim that distinguishing personal, subcultural, and cultural stories is essential in understanding emotions, as they harbor emotion codes and knowledge on *how* to feel. By "bringing the social back in" they see potentials for new connections between the micro and macro social worlds of meaning.

In reflecting on his long research career, Thomas Luckmann led us through a chain of events that changed the study of society and language into the emergence of the communicative paradigm in sociology. He reminds us that present-day researchers' assumptions of (re)constructions of reality might be taken for granted, despite the fact that it was unthinkable not too long ago. It took several theoretical battles and some "discoveries" of older traditions of the philosophy of language and social philosophy before language was viewed as communicative processes and

social reality as constructed through interaction. Yet, crucial for this change was not only theoretical advancements, Luckmann maintains, but technological innovation: the tape- and video-recorder made it possible to broaden the scope of the social sciences. Instead of studying merely the products of social interaction – for instance, food, factories, legal codes, or jails – the technology now admits the careful study of the production processes *per se*. For this purpose, Luckmann asserts sequential analysis, in which the researcher step-by-step traces “the processes by which social reality is constructed and reconstructed,” to offer the best empirical foundation for several social science fields, particularly the sociology of knowledge.

During a lunch session, David Silverman presented the fourth edition of his book *Interpreting Qualitative Data*, and took the opportunity to discuss the question “What counts as qualitative research?” Like Luckmann, he emphasizes the importance of the sequential organization of actions (including talk), assured that sequence is consequential for what we say and do. Silverman claims that the potential of qualitative research is underestimated: “Why can’t qualitative research study behavior?” He regrets the common practice of avoiding questions of social organization in favor of individuals’ perceptions, attitudes, and experiences (to and of

behavior). Silverman specifies his critique of the present state of qualitative research with the help of numerous examples from previous supervision of doctoral students and a published interview study. He concludes that the analytic endeavor of qualitative research is and should be different from journalism.

The last of this issue’s speeches were held by Paul Atkinson, who also gave a much appreciated taste of live opera singing. Creativity is essential to the ethnographer, Atkinson says and underlines that generating ideas involves playful imagination more than data coding techniques. If anything, the methodological textbook industry with its emphasis on mechanical data procedures threatens to restrain whatever curiosity was there initially. With examples from various fields – the glassblowing studio, an opera company, and printing works – he points out creative strategies for generating ideas in ethnographic research. Just like art, craft, and performance, the creative processes in research are indeed dependant on careful, methodical, and repetitive work, Atkinson argues, “but such work is never mechanical.”

With this combination of inspiring texts we hope to stimulate researchers in the common effort to enhance the momentum of qualitative research.

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