Arguing for an interpretive method

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In this paper I ask how one can argue the choice of a qualitative method, or rather an interpretive method, a term I prefer for reasons which will become clear. The task of arguing methodology is one of the major accomplishments demanded by formal or academic research, and postgraduate research students who are required to defend their methodological choices often encounter difficulties in doing so. The choice of a qualitative methodology seems to exacerbate the difficulties, partly because there is a remarkable ambiguity and incoherence in the resources available for the task.

For many reasons, the task is philosophically daunting, not least because it is represented as a 'philosophical' task which few researchers feel confident about and where current thinking has deconstructed some of the conventional ways in which 'philosophising' could be done in the past. This presents a painful dilemma, since it seems we cannot avoid being more philosophical about research choices while we lack resources to do it with much success.

In this paper I therefore explore a number of related themes, motivated by my experiences with postgraduate research students and their difficulties (and mine) with methodology. In summary, I argue that -

- It is doubtful that qualitative methodology can be argued in general philosophical terms of the kind generated by debates around paradigm. I share the view that it is misleading if not impossible to justify a qualitative approach by representing it as having a paradigmatic or deep philosophical difference from 'quantitative methodology'.

- However, researchers must reckon with forces pushing research thinking in this direction including the way 'methodology' has been understood in behavioural science, and the conformism of scholarly work and its desire for orthodoxy in the face of relativising critiques of knowledge and inquiry.

- Thus it might be better to give more attention to understanding research as practice, making the locus of argument the process of inquiry and the agency of the researcher, where methodology as something constructed not given, something which develops hand-in-hand with the theorising of the 'research problem'.

- At the same time, a method can be argued in terms of main traditions of interpretive research. Traditions provide typical methodologies grounded in developed rationales and theorisations of human inquiry. It is these research traditions which are paradigmatic for 'qualitative research' and which mediate for us the debates surrounding the rejection of 'positivist' science and the search for alternatives models of inquiry.

- 'Qualitative research' can thus be framed within a specific tradition, such as Weberian social theory, which seeks to interpret social action in terms of the subjective meanings of participants. Such a tradition frames the problems of

an interpretive method in particular ways and provides particular understandings of research practice, a set of concepts which may act as reference points or 'touchstones' for the researcher, including for example: the relationship of problem and method; the nature of inquiry as a negotiated process; the concept of participant and researcher perspectives and constructs; the researcher's agency and reflexivity and so on.

Clearly what I say about interpretive method (including my preference for this term) reflects my own making as a researcher and my allegiances are to a cluster of research traditions including symbolic interactionism and Chicago school sociology, Schutz's social phenomenology (Schutz 1967) and its descendant, ethnomethodology (Garfinkel 1967; Heritage 1992). We need to turn to such traditions in order to construct and argue an interpretive method, and it is through them we construct our identity and practice as 'qualitative researchers'.

In the first section I examine some of the difficulties of 'arguing methodology' and explore some of the reasons for these. I then suggest some potential reference points for arguing an interpretive method which participates in the Weberian verstehen tradition, and finally, briefly describe an example of interpretive method in a national study of indigenous education.

Methodology as a problem

Why is arguing for a methodological position fraught with difficulties? It is partly that producing a coherent argument is intellectually taxing and difficult in the writing. Beyond this, there is the fearful question of what authority underwrites the position taken on qualitative inquiry. In academic research there is strong normative pressure to ground an argument in what various authorities say, reinforced by the ubiquitous texts on research methods, among them the more expensive American cultural products in this genre. However, authorities are less authoritative these days given the continuing critique of human science and long-running debates about the nature of educational research and its 'paradigms'. These debates have both liberated research from its positivist shackles but at the same time have increased the uncertainties surrounding research practice.

Perhaps because 'qualitative' research is supposed to be less justifiable than 'quantitative' methods (usually in terms of some formulation of behavioural science), there is uncertainty about what counts as 'qualitative' research as well as its basis in some normative sense. Thus some scholars have rushed to provide philosophical prescriptions which assumed that qualitative methodology is inherently different from other 'types' of research. It seems that qualitative researchers typically want some deep philosophical basis to justify their choice of a qualitative research method. Some have thought that it was their task to try and develop an unanswerable account of an alternative paradigm, a case in point being so-called naturalistic inquiry (Lincoln and Guba, 1987). Thus there are both philosophical and practical traps in the very notion of qualitative methodology constructed as paradigmatically different.

It may be helpful to try and name some of the sources of confusion about methodology in social research. I will refer to these under the headings of orthodoxy, of critique and of paradigm.

(a) Orthodoxy

Questions of methodological adequacy tend to resolve into questions about conformity to ideas and practices. We have an unprecedented breakdown of orthodoxy in human research - for example, the view prevailing in the nineteen - sixties that valid educational research entailed the practice of experimental science.

However, if heterodoxy rules and we now are able to 'choose our paradigm', then why is methodology so troubling a domain? Should not this be a straightforward matter given a coherent statement of paradigm?

Aside from the lack of a coherent statement of an alternative paradigm, there are troubles caused by the very idea of methodology, which is after all an artefact of behavioural science, even when disciplines such as psychology have been weakened as rationales for research. The normative idea persists that research activity is 'rule-governed' and that valid research requires conformity to a set of proper practices. Methodology is understood as a technical and instrumental process applied to a given type of research problem. Methodology is construed in terms of masterfulness of the rules of method, rather than its construction through and as inquiry. Sometimes 'qualitative research' is regarded as a unitary type of methodology (eg Miles and Huberman, 1984).

Unfortunately, research textbooks perpetuate a view of research as the following of rules rather than the application of ingenuity to problems arising from particular theoretical interests in certain contexts of inquiry. This is not only true of those idealised expositions of the 'scientific method' still to be found in bibles of behavioural science such as Kerlinger (1992). Unfortunately, concepts of 'qualitative methodology' can still be thoroughly construed in terms of behavioural science orthodoxy. Indeed, some qualitative methods texts have argued this way with a splendid thoroughness (for example, Goetz and LeCompte's discussion of ethnography). Students are particularly vulnerable to these methodological prescriptions where they have little knowledge of the debates in interpretive and critical science around the idea of alternative rationales for inquiry (eg Finch, 1984; Bulmer, 1985; Hammersly, 1989,1991; Garfinkel, 1967; Schutz, 1967; Carr and Kemmis, 1987; van Manen, 1992). Thus it is important to be aware of the way the category 'methodology' is constructed by authoritative texts.

(b) Critique

Another source on uncertainty about methodological argument for qualitative research can be traced to the waves of critique of scientific and humanistic knowledge in recent decades. A dominant scientific paradigm sets the rules of method and or at least sets unambiguous norms for what counts as valid research practice in the 'epistemic community' (Kuhn, 1970). If in late modernity there are only competing 'regimes of truth' (Lather, 1991) then any methodology can be exposed as resting on assumptions about knowledge and reality. The 'logos' of any method can be subject to withering critique and shown to be tenuous. There is a sense of research as walking on dangerous ground. For this reason, the contemporary relativising critiques of human knowledge are as unsettling as they are liberating.

This sense of epistemological uncertainty is most keenly felt in fields where disciplinary knowledges are weak or lacking. Disciplines embody research traditions and accepted methodological possibilities. It is harder to ground a methodological argument if a field has poorly developed research literatures and offers few developed rationales for inquiry. Adult education (Foley, 1995) and nursing are two current areas which lack research traditions. It is not surprising then, that nursing should turn to phenomenology as a theoretical resource for the development of professional knowledges of nursing practice (eg Crotty, 1995).

This leads to the important point that the development of theoretical perspectives is a key element in developing a view of methodological adequacy. One implication of this view is that theory and method are closely linked and the development of a

methodological argument is better done in terms of the substantive issues arising from the research.

 (c) Paradigms

A third source of confusion about methodological argument is due to the trouble that paradigm theory has caused to thinking about research. What began as a powerfully subversive critique of the domination of behavioural science building on Kuhn's work (Kuhn 1970) has lost its critical edge. Indeed, the idea of methodology has become confounded with that of research paradigm (McIntyre, 1995). Thus paradigm is often discussed in loose terms as a basis for methodological choice - thus, 'this research problem seems to require a naturalistic or humanistic paradigm'. What this does is to pitch the question of methodological choices into some philosophical nether ground of competing theories of knowledge which are strictly unnecessary to the argument about what design and methods might be appropriate and workable for a given problematic.

The criticisms of Walker and Evers of 'paradigm theory' (1988) are telling when applied to formulations of paradigm couched in sweeping claims of epistemological difference in aid of justifying a qualitative approach. There are better ways to argue for qualitative method than from generalities that are philosophically dubious and unhelpful in terms of research practice. Particular qualitative methods make particular claims, generate their own problematics and for this reason need to be argued for in their own terms and from knowledge of the research traditions in which they are embedded. A good example of this claim is the long struggle of Hammersley and his colleagues to have ethnographic traditions understood critically (cf Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983).

It is not necessary to expound a research method in terms of its supposed paradigm in order to justify methodological choices. In fact, I argue that writers who attempt to do this have given us a travesty of the sociology of science. The sociological meaning of a scientific paradigm is less about conscious methodological choices than it is about taken-for-granted, pre-theoretical alignments with particular research traditions and their institutionalised knowledge (McIntyre, 1993), that is, not conscious methodological choices at all.

This confounding of 'methodology' and 'paradigm' is perhaps least helpful in the area of qualitative research, particularly when qualitative methodology is set up 'against' quantitative methodology as if this were a paradigmatic difference, a difference that can be quickly shown to be insubstantial. More helpful is the approach of recent handbooks of qualitative research (such as LeCompte, Millroy and Preissle, 1992) which identify a range of particular research traditions and their theoretical concerns and associated literatures.

Thus paradigms which appear to promise certainties for grounding a given methodology have increased uncertainties by opening up imponderable questions about knowledge. Hence it may be better to argue within a given research tradition and its associated theoretical and methodological resources, and from the particular circumstances and context of inquiry.

Researcher understandings

To what kinds of grounds can the researcher turn to argue an interpretive method given these uncertainties? Can one avoid resorting to idealised versions of 'qualitative inquiry' on the one hand and on the other, to a technology of analysis

that renders invisible the researcher's interpretive procedures and their account-producing activity?

There is merit in a view of methodology which brings the locus of argument closer to research practice - in this case, within a phenomenological tradition of social research. I do not claim much that is original in this account and it can readily mapped on to those discussions of interpretive sociology already referred to.

This account will refer to 'researcher understandings' to describe those ill-defined assumptions which are implicated in accomplishing the method as a set of social activities (interview talk, accounting practices, text production, data definition and so on). These understandings are 'constitutive' in the sense that they construct the research process as a negotiated set of activities. There are, of course, questions about how these understandings are themselves constructed by other discourses or ideologies.

I argue that 'good' interpretive research is contingent on the ways in which a researcher works with material at hand, with highly situated understandings of their own activity. I assume that these 'understandings' give play to a range of pragmatic and other values including creativity, documentary thoroughness, procedural methodicality, reflexivity of analysis, descriptive richness, textual elucidation, conceptual power, participant validation and so on. Much more could be said about these and other values, but it is worth noting that they appeal chiefly to practice not to vague philosophical generalisations about methodological axioms or dogmas about how the meaning of 'quality' in qualitative method.

I think it is possible to formulate a number of reference points or 'touchstones' (Walker) or researcher understandings that can be employed in arguing an interpretive method. I have drawn on those understandings which are important in negotiating my own practice an interpretive researcher, including the supervision of research students and the teaching of research courses. I can only hope they reveal not too much of the philosophical confusion and dogmatic solutions to uncertainty that I have criticised.

They include:

- Problem-and-method constructions
- Inquiry as process
- Participant perspectives
- Participant constructs
- Reflexivity of the researcher

(a) Problem-and-method constructions

A first reference point is the nature of the problem-posing activity of the researcher. The grounds for an interpretive method go back to the decision to frame a problem in interpretive terms. Precisely what these 'interpretive terms' are is half the difficulty. If one is appealing to 'phenomenology' in so framing an approach, then what theorisations of 'phenomenology' are meant? How do these set up parameters for framing the 'problematic' of inquiry? This is not simply what 'problem' is defined for research, because in 'making' a problem the researcher is already prefiguring relevant theory and method.

It may be that the options for 'method' depend on how the 'problem' is understood and what the researcher thinks they are doing with this problem. There is an

interplay of problem and method, and indeed, problematising within an interpretive approach will implicate thinking about the inquiry process as a whole. Clarity about the problematic helps to clarify the inquiry process, just as working through the process and method reflexively clarifies the 'problem' and what the researcher thinks they are 'doing'.

Going further, problems and methods do not exist in an interpretive vacuum as empirical-analytic orthodoxy often suggests. Rather, pre-constituted ways to think about research in a given field make available problem-and-method constructions. The notion of 'exemplars' in Kuhn's discussion of paradigm - which Masterman (1970) called 'construct paradigm' - has been neglected. Further, the dominant research traditions and the knowledge disciplines in field constrain what is researchable, what counts as relevant theory and what are appropriate methodologies. Thus an interpretive method can be argued in terms of the way research traditions and their associated disciplines do (or do not) make available 'problem and method constructions' to inquiry.

Empirical-analytic science has enshrined the idea that 'problem' is prior to the methodology 'applied' to it. It is possible to argue an alternative view, that problem and method are co-defined through theorising the problem. This may be a better way to argue methodology, one which is suggested by an hermeneutic concept of science (for a discussion of educational research, see Usher and Bryant, 1984, Chap 3; Carr and Kemmis, 1987).

(b) Inquiry as process

A second reference point is a concept of inquiry as a process constituted through researcher activities. The interpretive researcher is (at least in the Weberian verstehen tradition) positioned within the social world, a member who has both access to the available resources of member knowledge and is captive to them, yet struggles to transcend them (though this possibility is given short shrift in much contemporary thinking).

The researcher's presuppositions are not contaminating material to be avoided from an objectivist position but the stuff of interpretive work. A tenet of Weberian interpretive sociology is the importance of understanding the typificatory devices by which ordinary constructions of the world are achieved as the for building 'higher order' theory. The researcher's knowledge is made out of 'common knowledge' (common in the multiple senses of worldly, frequently occurring and shared).

One implication of this position is that inquiry is a negotiated process. An authentic interpretive method never tries to escape (and it never can) its own constitutive processes. This understanding of the embeddedness of inquiry draws attention to the power of the researchers' own assumptions in accomplishing the process of inquiry.

The difficulty here is that these assumptions are 'background understandings' and therefore hard to make explicit precisely because they are embedded in inquiry (McIntyre 1995). Hence the view that researchers need to confront and critique their own practice and uncover its hidden constitutive assumptions. At the back of this understanding is an important notion of the researcher as social actor a notion that has been well expressed in the idea of the researchers' praxis or agency in bringing research worlds into being (Lather 1986). In arguing for an interpretive method, therefore, one approach is to focus on what key assumptions are active in making the inquiry process what it is.

(c) Participant perspectives

A third reference point is the construct of 'perspectives'. In social theory, 'perspective' is a privileged term, for example, in Mannheim's understanding of knowledge as ideological, or socially organised. If the researcher is just another participant and captive to the social world being researched, then it follows that an interpretive method will need to be theorised in terms of the perspectives which researchers and participants employ in regard to the research process. To say this is to reject the naturalistic fallacy that the world presents itself unproblematically for study and to recognise that it is only available through our constructions of it. As Hammersly and Atkinson point out in their critique of ethnography, qualitative researchers can uncritically take a position of naturalism and not foreground their reliance on taken-for-granted assumptions about the social world.

The term 'perspective' clearly does not only refer only to theoretical perspectives but to backgrounded and untheorised understandings. Perspective can (in Schutz's terms) be theorised as a fluid organisation of social knowledge which is brought into play in a given situation, generating schemes of interpretation which, for example, enable meaningful actions in that setting. Such schemes often operate as background understandings.

An interpretive method has to be argued in terms of what is theorised and a recognition that this very activity is foregrounding and problematising some aspects of the grounds of everyday experience. It is about what 'constructions' are being brought into play through inquiry via the researchers' constitutive assumptions. Thus interpretive researchers foreground how participants' perspectives are to be recognised, elicited, exhibited, examined, analysed or 'known'. Any research situation can thus be theorised in terms of the social practices by which researchers do their work. For example, Schutz's famous phrase of the 'reciprocity of perspectives' as a condition for social interaction suggests one among several understandings of researcher and participants which routinely constitute the 'inquiry process' (see Garfinkel, 1967).

Thus making out an interpretive method relies on foregrounding the way the researcher works with their own and other's 'perspectives' in constituting an inquiry and producing a research account.

(d) Participant constructs

A fourth reference point is that of the 'constructs' which participants employ to make sense of their social world. If perspectives organise social meanings, then they are rich in member 'constructs' which are accountable, reportable and analysable by members. This poses a key problem for interpretive method - what categories are employed to represent member meanings and what relationship these have to the member meanings themselves. To put this another way, researcher knowledge has to be understood as generated in terms of the relationship of researcher and participants 'constructs'. Thus the importance of the Weberian concept of 'ideal types' or constructs as the currency of social research, and the problem of how research represents the meanings which participants 'reveal' in their conversations, responses, reflections or other accounts.

Students who want to carry out an analysis of their interview transcript can often be unclear about what they are doing (quite apart from the problem of how to argue the adequacy of their procedures). Perhaps they have not theorised the nature of their interpretive activity as such, or understood that interpretations have to be generated, bringing into play their own 'stock' of constructs in the analysis, in order to make

the 'accounts' of others yield up their meanings. The might be a naive assumption that these accounts have self-evident meanings there for the reading.

Thus a key area for arguing interpretive method occurs theoretical problems of generating knowledge from accounts such as transcripts. The researcher's own theoretical perspectives provide constructs and schemes of interpretation which are deployed in attempting to 'do justice' to the meanings exhibited in such accounts. The researcher then develops their interpretive account around a set of key constructs which can be shown to correspond in some sense to the member meanings. It is possible to theorise this as Schutz did in his discussion of the problem of 'meaning adequacy' and perhaps derive from it an account of the problems in establishing a valid analysis (Schutz 1967).

This is one point where it is possible to problematise the achievement of the analysis and to foreground the difficulties as issues of interpretation. Much of the justification of interpretive research is formulating the 'glossing practices' by which researchers reconstitute the understandings of participants. Thus theorising an analysis is about constructing the 'ideal types' which are the basis for reporting and accounting for the analysis.

(e)   Researcher reflexivity

A fifth reference point is the possibility of awareness of 'method' as a process that can be inquired into, since it is accomplished through the researcher's interpretive activities, including the writing of accounts. Tis is the idea of the reflexivity of inquiry - the researcher examining their own meaning producing activities. This is consistent with the emphasis on the researcher as an agent.

Behavioural science notions of methodology as technical rationality tend to reify the process of doing research. Garfinkel's ethnomethodological critique of the scientific pretensions of sociologists shows how this technical rationality denies the ways in which research is 'accomplished' by the ordinary activities of researcher and their reliance on commonsense understandings of social situations (Garfinkel, 1967). This technical rationality denies (while it exercises) the power of the researcher to bring realities into being through method.

If any research process is constituted in and through researcher perspectives, then interpretive researchers cannot avoid the challenge to be 'reflexive' about their practice, and reflexivity is often nominated as a touchstone for qualitative research (eg in Hammersly and Atkinson 1983; Scott and Usher, 1996; Lather, 1986). In theory, any interpretive method can be deconstructed into its constitutive assumptions ad infinitum, since as Garfinkel pointed out in a memorable phrase, professional researchers and laypersons are both subject to the 'irremediable indexicality' of their account giving practices. Processes of explication generate their own texts and constitutive properties which then (might) require explication.

Hence, ethnomethodology suggests, the infinite 'reportability' and 'analysability' of interpretive methods requires an argument be made out in pragmatic terms, where certain features are problematised from among the many innumerable background understandings in play. The argument has to be shifted to what aspects of method, for whatever purposes, are selected for explication, justification and so on. This brings the argument back to the researcher's very purposing.

These reference points are offered as tentative guides to arguing an interpretive method. In a limited sense they can be illustrated in the following example of research.

An example

Recently some colleagues and I completed a project on factors affecting the participation by indigenous Australians in vocational education and training (McIntyre et al 1995), one of the first projects funded by the Australian National Training Authority. We described the process as 'interpretive and collaborative' for a range of political, ethical and pragmatic, as well as 'methodological' reasons. It is interesting therefore to ask in what sense was the method 'interpretive' and how was it argued for.

Obviously, this project was not interested in purely academic justification for the approach taken, because the researchers had to account to a range of interests besides those of academic peers. Perhaps a point to be made first is that once it is accepted that 'methodology' is really process constructed by highly situated understandings, then a range of grounds for method become valid and relevant. Here, the methodological justifications appealed to political and ethical values. Our argument was couched in terms of assumptions about what was problematic about doing research on or about Aboriginal Australians. For example we began -

> A key assumption of the research, formed early in the planning stages, was that the cultural issues must be central. The project recognised that 'participation in education and training' is a social and cultural activity, where culture and identity can be reinforced or challenged by educational institutions. The research therefore used methods and approaches that would explore whether educational institutions were accommodating Aboriginal culture and identity, not just how well indigenous Australian students were adjusting to mainstream institutions. The project recognised that Aboriginal experiences of education have often been those of exclusion and cultural oppression.

We went on to argue in typical fashion that sample-survey methods were not appropriate because they would inhibit us exploring - and prevent indigenous Australians voicing - their experiences of vocational education and training. Our assumption was that these experiences are of conflict and cultural domination, and that non-Aboriginal researchers have often been historically complicit in this. The 'cultural issues' are issues of the institutional power of white culture and the problematic nature of its interaction with Aboriginal cultures, especially in educational sites. Thus we argued -

> At an early stage, survey methodology was rejected as a culturally inappropriate way to explore the views of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners and teachers, first, because of the long history of indigenous people being 'objects for scientific study' and secondly, because such methods can easily distort or silence the voices of indigenous people. The advantages of surveys, including the ability to reach a representative sample and collect and process data in a cost-effective way, work against the aim of this research to bring out the cultural issues.

> ... Indigenous Australians often say that they are 'over-researched' because social and medical research has historically treated them as objects for study. Research is often experienced as yet another form of colonisation, where people have little or no control over the form of the research or the uses made of the information. Research can be a means of expropriating indigenous knowledge and culture for 'white' purposes, however well-intentioned this may appear. The most appropriate form of research with indigenous people is one which is participatory ... (McIntyre et al 1995, 35).

In an important sense, the researchers were answering to their Aboriginal collaborators in the project. 'Bringing out the cultural issues' was a key problematic defined early in the project's life. Further discussions with Aboriginal colleagues then led to formulating the particular nature of the interpretive approach, while

clarifying the work that indigenous researchers might do in carrying out interviews with them in Aboriginal communities. It also meant that 'Aboriginal voices' had to be prominent in the writing up of the report not filtered through researcher commentary, and this had effects for the way quotations were embedded in the research texts. Then, if the nature of the problematic was to bring out Aboriginal education as a cross-cultural and culturally conflictful experience, the 'method' would have to do justice to the perspectives of participants.

What then were the 'constitutive assumptions' of the process? The interview went from being thought of as a highly structured questioning to one which was spoken of as 'thematic' in a Freirian sense of the generative themes of life, work and learning. The interview had to work as a conversation between two Aboriginal adults exploring of the person's life and educational pathway. Thus the idea of educational experiences being embedded in a 'pathway' story' came to be an organising construct for the interviewing. The pathway story was mapped on a large paper to begin the interview and then explored systematically through a number of themes - the persons reasons for enrolling, their entry to the institution, the first course experience and so on. The thematic approach had to be workable and explicable to both the indigenous interviewers and their respondents. Though much more can be said about this, the researchers were able negotiate collaboration in terms of pre-existing staff-student relationships and understandings about the meanings of a culturally appropriate research process.

The pathway maps were later represented in narratives which could be deployed in the research report to demonstrate the holistic nature of the Aboriginal experiences of mainstream education and training, as well as gender and inter-generational differences. These are fleetingly suggested in the following examples:

> Alice was born in north-western NSW and is nearly fifty. She went to the mission school but was excluded from high school because she was Aboriginal. She worked as a domestic in the town and then moved to Sydney where she did factory work and later was married. Moving to the north coast she worked briefly in TAFE and then moved back home to raise her family, doing seasonal work such as cotton chipping for years. She then helped in a women's refuge, doing on the job training and becoming permanent, and assisted at the preschool. At about forty years of age, she started general skills in TAFE and is currently doing her Certificate in Adult Further Education.

> Tom grew up on a mission near a coastal town where he went to primary school. After attending high school in the town, he worked briefly as an apprentice painter before joining the railways and doing factory work in Sydney. He then worked as a storeman and fork lift driver for the government department for a number of years before moving back home where he worked in an Aboriginal medical centre, ran a shop and worked as a salesperson before starting a course to train for work in an Aboriginal nursing home, concurrently with a TAFE course. He is currently gaining work experience at the local hospital.

Such stories were meant to represent the holism of the learner's accounts, to give some feel of their biographies and the meshing of life and educational experience in Aboriginal culture. This suggests how key assumptions made in the writing of research accounts effectively 'make out' the nature of the inquiry. Another example of writing research might be a decision to report on each of the themes using quotations from the interviews not within the researcher commentary, but by setting these Aboriginal voices in bold alongside it as parallel texts, signifying a problematic relationship of texts which might also mirror a problematic relationship of cultures. These writing qualities were also important reflections of other key

assumptions: the desire to generate a coherent account of learner experiences in relation to institutional cultures and practices on the basis of indigenous perspectives. In turn, the adequacy of the interpretation was made out in terms of the qualities of this researcher account, as well as its dependence on the information from the learner and institutional stories.

Conclusion

I wrote an earlier version of this paper moved by the trouble caused for students by the expectation that they will provide a methodological justification for qualitative research. I have found it helpful to jettison the baggage which loads the idea of 'qualitative methodology' and locate the argument closer to research practice within a specific tradition of interpretive research. I have tried to show how a tradition such as Schtutz's social phenomenology can provide resources for theorising interpretive method and guides to practice. Referring to an example of recent research, I suggest that an interpretive method is constructed in a highly situated way reflecting the purposes of the research, and that method can be argued from the particulars of the inquiry. This is in contrast to the view that qualitative research is best argued from philosophical generalities or in terms of a rules of method.

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