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### Innovation in qualitative research methods

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## **Innovation in qualitative research methods: a narrative review**

### **Abstract**

This paper reviews methodological innovation in qualitative research. It comprises a narrative review of 57 papers published between 2000-2009 in which claims to innovation in qualitative methods have been made. These papers encompass creative methods, narrative methods, mixed methods, online/e-research methods and software tools. The majority of claims of innovation are made for new methods or designs with under half claiming adaptations or adoption of existing methodological innovations. However, there was limited evidence of wholly new methodologies or designs; papers related either to adaptations to existing methods or innovations, or to innovations involving the transfer and adaptation of methods from other disciplines, primarily from arts and humanities. Nevertheless, these innovations have the potential to make an important contribution to qualitative research practice. The rate of diffusion of the innovations appears greater for visual, performative and narrative approaches. Ways to share developments in 'routine' innovations of established methods need to be identified.

Key words:

Methodological innovation; qualitative research; narrative literature review

## **Introduction**

There is increasing interest in innovation in social research methods, partly fuelled by funding opportunities for methodological innovation<sup>1</sup> as well as trends within research reporting (Crow et al., 2009; Taylor and Coffey, 2009). The purposes behind innovation in research methods are liable to be varied and research in this area raises a number of questions, such as, what is innovation, what has motivated it, why do researchers innovate and what difference does it make? There is limited published exploration of these issues (Taylor and Coffey, 2008; 2009; Xenitidou and Gilbert, 2009; Travers, 2009). Defining what constitutes innovation is a complex issue. Innovation is not necessarily confined to the creation of new methods and can equally be applied to advances or developments of ‘tried and tested’ research methods (Taylor and Coffey, 2009). Taylor and Coffey define innovation as ‘the creation of new designs, concepts and ways doing things’ (2008: p.8) and embrace the UK Department of Industry’s idea that innovation has to be diffused or applied; in effect to have proved beneficial and to be taken up by the wider social science community. In contrast, Xenitidou and Gilbert (2009) in their study of international innovation in research methods identified innovation as research practices that have not yet filtered through to the mainstream.

The role of research-funding bodies in stimulating or discouraging innovation has been noted (Gwyther and Possamai-Inesedy, 2009). Travers (2009) considers that the competitiveness of book publishing and grant applications

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<sup>1</sup> For example, the UK ESRC National Centre for Research Methods, [www.ncrm.ac.uk](http://www.ncrm.ac.uk)

forces researchers to emphasise novelty or innovation; a view echoed by Taylor and Coffey (2009). In a review of sociological research methods in America, Platt (1996) also examined the influence of funding bodies, but concluded that although they play a part, there are other important factors that affect the development of research methods, such as societal, political and ideological pressures. Institutional culture is another aspect that may determine methods used, generated and disseminated (Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2006). Xenitidou and Gilbert's (2009) study found that there were key institutions with a concentration of innovators and innovations, indicating that institutional context plays an important role.

It is generally recognised that an innovation should not just be gimmickry, attracting the favourable opinion of book or grant reviewers in the same way as novelties are marketed in the retail industry, nor be in response to the latest wave of enthusiasm. Rather it should have genuine origins in attempts to improve some aspect of the research process (Taylor and Coffey 2008), such as enabling the role of emotions to be investigated more effectively, or to facilitate more meaningful collaboration with participants. However, it is not easy to judge the effectiveness of innovations in improving the research process, particularly when these aspects have featured little in the literature hitherto (Brannen and Edwards, 2007). Taylor and Coffey (2008, 2009) argue that while evaluation of innovations is essential for methodological development and diffusion, there is limited scope for developing and testing methods within the constraints of research funding.

If innovations are to be anything other than development by an individual for an individual's own use, then diffusion must take place. However, as Roger's (2003) classic work on the diffusion of innovations shows, the process of diffusion from development of an innovation to its take-up by the wider community is not straightforward. Rogers (2003), among others (Greenhalgh et al., 2005; Russell et al., 2004) has demonstrated the significance of social relationships in how innovations are diffused and the process whereby they are adopted or rejected. The importance of 'opinion leaders' and 'champions' as well as interpersonal networks to spread knowledge, understanding and acceptance of innovations are identified as crucial. The need for resources and technical know-how to ensure innovations can be taken up has also been noted (Greenhalgh et al., 2005; von Hippel, 1998).

There has been limited research evaluating the innovations that have taken place in qualitative research. Studies have been conducted through: personal networks and snowballing techniques to identify innovations and innovators (Xenitidou and Gilbert, 2009), a survey of academic gatekeepers to identify views of 'cutting edge' methodologies (Forbes, 2003) and a Google book search of the use of the term 'innovation' (Travers, 2009). These studies indicate innovations in qualitative methods in performative methods, visual methods, internet and e-research approaches and participatory research. This paper seeks to build on this research by exploring the claims made for innovation in qualitative social science research methods in publications over the last decade. The paper comprises a narrative literature review which explores the following questions: i) what claims for innovation in qualitative

methods are being made and what is the basis of these claims?; ii) in what areas are innovations being claimed?; iii) what are researchers' motivations for developing these 'innovations'?; iv) to what extent are these 'innovations' diffused?; v) what are the implications for qualitative social science of these innovation claims?

### **Exploring diverse data**

This paper draws on the approach to narrative literature reviews outlined by Dixon-Woods et al. (2006) and Popay et al. (2007). Our aim to explore the claims authors made for methodological innovation was complicated by the fact that authors inevitably make their claims for innovation within publications in a range of ways; not all could be expected consistently to provide the information that we sought. The challenge was how to approach the 'missing data' when elements were absent within papers, without resorting to judgements based on our own understandings and preconceptions rather than the original authors' perception. Our aim was to explore authors' claims only and to minimise the influence of our assumptions, interpretations and opinions in extracting data from papers. This was inevitably difficult in cases where authors were not explicit in their claims. Our evaluation and categorisation of papers is therefore, to some degree subject to our interpretations of authors' innovation claims. Discussion within the team was used to inform our decisions about the claims for innovation being made by authors.

As our review explores the claims that authors make concerning innovations in research methods, we searched publications from peer-reviewed journals so that authors' claims had been scrutinised by others in the field, indicating that the claims were deemed reasonable. Journals listed by the social sciences' bibliographic databases were searched for 'method' or 'qualitative'. Those databases that did not provide search facilities on journal names were examined manually. We identified 22 journals. Those relating exclusively to statistical methods and those that were not fully peer-reviewed were excluded (n=3), then the aims and scope were explored on each journal's website and those that stated a specific interest in research methods were selected (n=14).

The 14 journals were searched from 2000 to 2009 for the terms innovat\*, new, novel and emerg\* in the title or abstract; 210 were identified. We noted during perusal of this sample that a few papers related to research methodology development used terms such as develop, evolve, adapt. We decided not to widen our search strategy for this current review as it would capture a higher proportion of irrelevant papers, but we acknowledge that the semantics we chose for the search mean potentially relevant papers could have been missed. From the papers that were identified, we excluded those that did not use the target word in connection with research methods and those that were not in English or were primarily quantitative, leaving 57 papers from ten journals. A large proportion of the discarded papers used the target word in relation to research findings rather than the method employed. A full list of the papers identified is available as an annotated bibliography (Author, 2009).

These papers were all reviewed and information extracted from them about the innovation, the features claimed as innovative, the stimulus for the innovation, its benefits and any caveats or guidance. If antecedents to the innovation were cited, these were noted. A forward citation search was also carried out to identify diffusion of innovations. This information was summarised into a database which was used to guide our discussions about the nature of innovation claims.

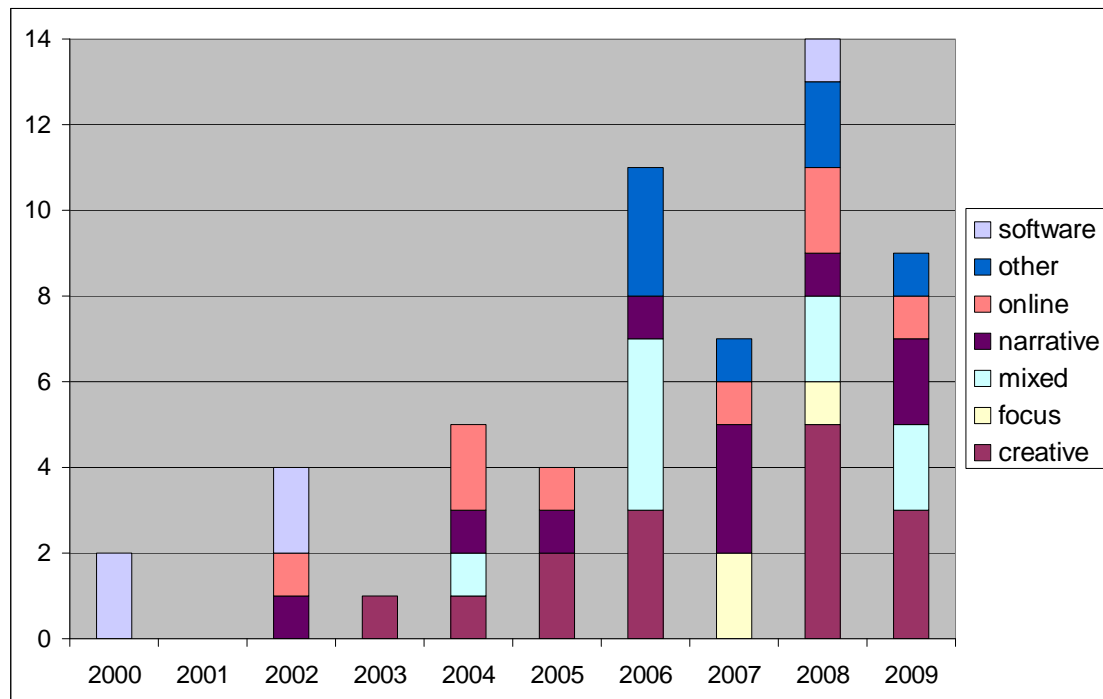
### **Sites for Innovation**

The papers encompassed many disciplines, although two-thirds were uni-disciplinary. Sociology, education, psychology, social work and anthropology were represented well, but other disciplines such as media studies, geography and health care were also evident. There was considerable cross-fertilisation between disciplines, with methods taken from market research into sociology (Pevey and McKenzie, 2009), from anthropology to hypermedia design (Duncan, 2004), literature to education (Otto, 2007), amongst others. The use of arts-based approaches, drawing on methods from arts and humanities was particularly prominent. The authors were distributed widely across the globe, but North America and Europe represented 80% of the sample. This bias is unsurprising given that we confined the sample to English language papers and we recognise that methodological innovation is not confined to the English speaking world, a point we return to in our discussion.



The distribution of papers claiming innovation across the decade under review was more clustered towards the mid to later years; almost three quarters of the 57 papers were published between 2006-2009. This supports Travers' (2009) claim that there is increasing pressure for researchers to present their research, and their research practice, as innovative. Papers focusing on creative and performative approaches occurred more frequently in the later years, reflecting the growing interest in these approaches (see Figure 1). Innovations relating to narrative and on-line methods were evident across the whole period indicating the longer time frame in which these methods have been growing in popularity and use. This was in contrast to the papers relating to software development which mostly clustered at the earlier years.

Figure 1: Distribution of papers per year by topic



The majority of innovations claimed were at the level of methods, techniques or tools with only a minority (10 papers) focusing on methodology. The innovations focused on a range of different types of research method or approach which we grouped into six categories which describe the focus of innovation claimed with an 'other' category for those papers which were not easily classifiable. The types were: i) creative methods 15 papers that employed art, drama, dance, poetry, photography or a combination of these with the aim of engaging participants or audience in a more holistic way, giving scope for emotional and moral as well as intellectual responses; ii) narrative methods ten papers describing techniques for collecting, analysing or presenting narratives, including auto-ethnography. Several of these papers explored participatory approaches to research afforded by narrative methods; iii) mixed methods nine papers, describing techniques for combining and analysing different types of qualitative data or qualitative and quantitative data; iv) online and e-research methods eight papers widening the scope of online research, using synchronous and asynchronous text facilities, blogs and a graphical online environment; v) software tools six papers, describing software to assist in, or enhance, the analysis or sharing of a range of qualitative data; vi) focus group methodology three papers that addressed different aspects of the method including managing the process of data collection and enhancing the trustworthiness of analysis. The 'other' category comprised seven papers, one describing the use of a radio phone-in programme in research (Weller, 2006); and six presenting methods to improve an aspect of the research process, including validity (Cho and Trent,

2006), analysis (Tate, 2007; Wasserman et al., 2009), quality of questionnaires (Hak et al., 2006), relevance to practitioners (Kahn et al., 2008) and the presentation of cross-lingual research (Lincoln and Gonzalez, 2008).

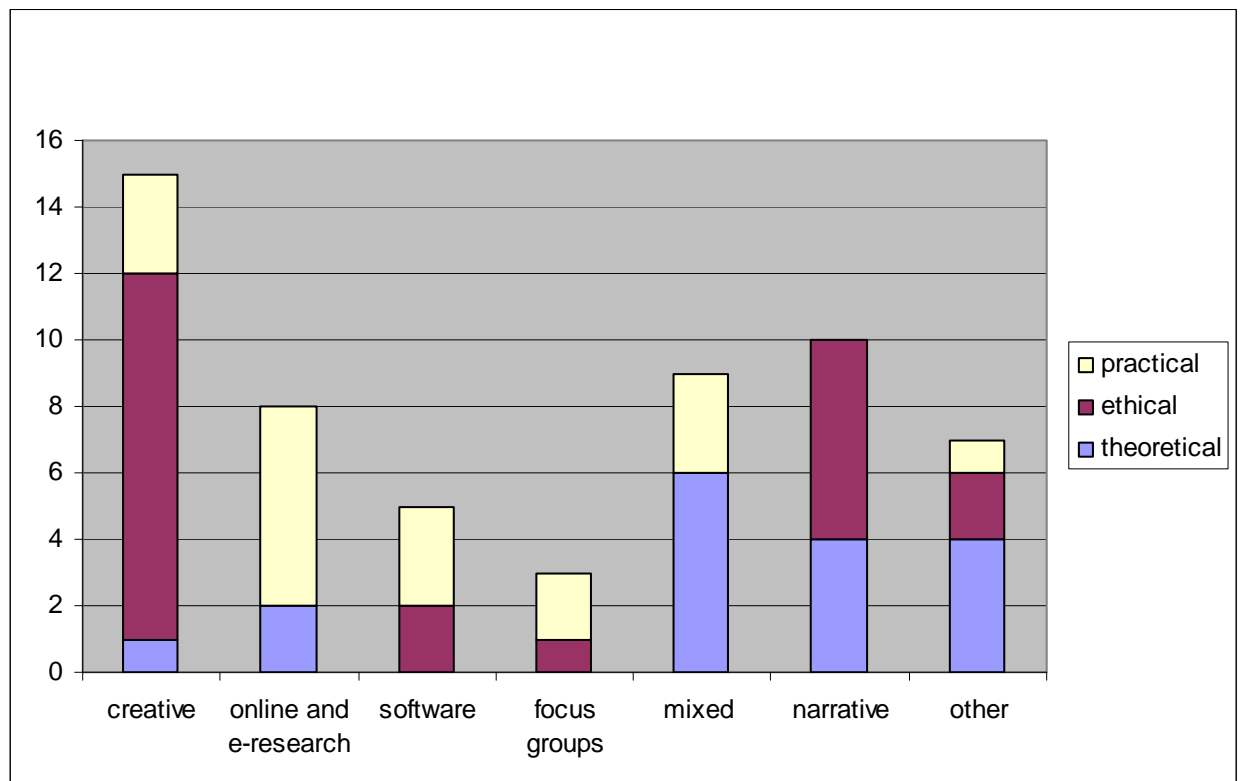
The topic areas in which innovation is claimed reflect the trends towards, and the current popularity of, particular types of methods and approaches.

Approaches with a focus on what we have called 'creative methods' comprising arts-based and performative approaches were the largest group of innovations among the papers identified. Innovations in these areas draw largely on traditions within Arts and Humanities disciplines. These sorts of approaches broadly comprise what Denzin and Lincoln (2000) refer to as the 'seventh moment' of qualitative research and are viewed by many researchers in the UK and North America as the methods that 'up-to-date, well-informed' researchers should be using (Alasuutari, 2006: p.513). The same might also be said of developments in e-research and narrative methods, both of which have become popular over the last decade.

Authors' motivations for innovating appeared to arise from theoretical, moral or ethical, and practical roots. Moral or ethical roots for innovations accounted for more than a third of the papers and related to the desire to improve knowledge, especially with regard to the emotional aspects of a topic in order to present a holistic picture (e.g. Borum, 2006); or related to empowerment and acting fairly to participants either by increasing collaboration or reducing risk of harm. These motivations were particularly prominent in relation to creative approaches and narrative approaches (see

Figure 2). Eighteen papers demonstrated more practical origins of innovations, arising from research praxis which is the response of experienced researchers to challenges in their work. These innovations were made to improve recruitment (Matthews and Cramer, 2008), the quality of participant responses (Scott, 2004) or their engagement with the research process (Doornbos et al., 2008); or to facilitate data handling (Secrist et al., 2002) and analysis (Fielding, 2000). Innovations arising from practical considerations appeared prominent in relation to on-line and e-research. The remaining 17 papers had been inspired by theoretical reasons, either to improve shortcomings within the research process such as validity (Cho and Trent, 2006), analysis (Wasserman et al., 2009) or data collection methods (Tsoukalas, 2006).

Figure 2 Type of motivation for the innovation by topic



### **Innovation, adoption or adaptation?**

None of the authors defined their understanding of innovation when they used the term. It was applied to adoption of well-published approaches such as auto-ethnography (Wall, 2006), to adaptations of established methods such as focus groups (Peterson and Barron, 2007), and to innovations such as the introduction of a series of participant drawings as longitudinal data (Richards, 2006). So in some cases the innovation related to the use of an already established innovation, in others it related to what Taylor and Coffey (2008: p12) have termed 'routine' innovation involving the 'repair and maintenance of existing methods', while others related to more novel innovations.

Understanding what claims the author was making for their innovation, in terms of innovation stage, proved difficult and our decisions on the categorisation of papers was reached following substantial reading and discussion of papers. We attempted to categorise papers according to four of Rogers' (2003) stages of diffusion of innovations, namely 'innovation', 'early adopter', 'early majority', 'late majority'. However, the information provided in the papers about antecedents, and subsequent explorations of diffusion of the innovation identified in further publications, was insufficient to enable us to do so. Diffusion in qualitative research methods is marked by far greater adaptation than in Rogers' classical model; much innovation in social science research methods involves adapting established methods rather than inventing completely new methods. We therefore amended the categories to 'inception', 'adaptation' and 'adoption'. Claims for innovation at the inception

level are those in which authors claim to be using a new method, approach or tool or when the setting in which the research is conducted intrinsically affects the research process so that it is, in effect, a new or novel method, e.g., the online environment (Hinchcliffe and Gavin, 2009; Hookway, 2008). Claims for innovation which are adaptations are when an author claims an established method has been adapted or changed; for example, Mahoney (2007) adapted an interpretive ethnographic approach in order to achieve greater collaboration. Claims for innovation relating to adoption are when an author claims they are taking a method into a new discipline or sphere, for example story completion questions used in the study of attitudes to offenders (Gavin, 2005); or a novel combination of methods is used, for instance use of quantitative, textual and visual analyses in combination (Lockyer, 2006); or an example of an innovative method is applied, for example Simhoni (2008). This categorisation is hierarchical in terms of the level of novelty that is claimed with adoption involving the lowest level of novelty. We should reiterate here that this categorisation of papers was done on the basis of what authors appeared to be claiming and not our interpretations of innovatory nature of the methods described.

Using these categories, the majority of papers appeared to claim innovation at the inception level (32 papers). One third (19 papers) appeared to claim innovation through adoption of a method into a new discipline or sphere of work, and a minority (six papers) claimed innovation through adapting a method to use in a particular context. Box 1 provides detailed illustrations of claims within these categories.

### **Box 1. Examples of 'innovation', 'adaptation' and 'adoption'**

Thirty-three papers were classified as inception, six as adaptation, 18 as adoption.

#### Inception: a new setting for research

Online graphical (virtual) environments represent a new sphere for sociological enquiry, but to study it a researcher has to enter that environment him- or herself. Online participant observation in such an environment requires innovation because the personae, environment and interface between all components are different from real life. Williams describes the impact of the researcher's choice of avatar on potential respondents; the importance of becoming technically adept so that communication is not hindered by inappropriate movements; and the ethical implications of interviewing fellow avatars in 'private' versus 'public' spaces in the virtual environment. (Williams, 2007)

#### Adaptation: an existing method is altered or expanded

The authors recognised the potential of the Listening Guide (Brown and Gilligan, 1992) for analysis of narrative data in a way that addresses both the personal story ('inside') and the impact of situational realities ('outside'). The Listening Guide's four 'readings' (ways of looking at the data) are adapted by the authors in order to analyse the narrator's conscious, subconscious and inter-relational stories, together with acknowledging the effect of the wider dominant discourse(s). (Doucet and Mauthner, 2008)

#### Adoption: a method is taken into a new discipline or sphere

After extensive interviews with Holocaust survivors, Rapport was faced with the challenge of representing their experience in a way that honoured the effect it had had on their lives. She turned to writing poetry to represent one interviewee's story so that the wording could reflect the person's voice and the medium convey the emotive realities. Rapport chose to juxtapose images as an intrinsic part of the presentation. The use of images and poetry is not new, but an example of this genre of creative presentation of research findings. (Rapport, 2008)

The fact that the majority were claiming innovation at the inception level (at least according to our interpretation of author's claims) is initially surprising.

The definition of inception appeared to be used in these papers to apply to 'new ways of doing things', what are in effect adaptations to established methods, as well as to new methods, concepts and designs (Taylor and Coffey, 2009). In this formulation, anything that deviates from an established

method and has, to the author's knowledge, not been done before is an innovation. It was certainly the case that claims for innovation at the level of inception covered topics with varying levels of novelty: from new approaches to analysis in grounded theory (Wasserman et al., 2009) to the use of 'post-it' notes in focus groups (Peterson and Barron, 2007). Some authors may have been overstating the case for innovation in a bid to get their work published (Travers, 2009) but the innovations identified may still be useful for the social science community to know about. This raises issues about the value of presenting methods as innovations and whether and how such innovations are and can be diffused in the interests of the qualitative research community.

### **Diffusion and take-up of innovations**

Critical evaluation of methodological innovations is essential to their development and subsequent uptake yet there are few opportunities for researchers to experiment with methods and to evaluate their effectiveness at addressing social research questions. As Taylor and Coffey (2008) note, this may be detrimental to encouraging the development and experimentation of methodological innovation through critical reflection. Most authors made direct claims that the purpose of the innovation had been successful or had specific benefits within the context of their research. It was less usual for authors to evaluate the appropriateness of the innovation in relation to other methods although some authors did provide guidance to others about their use.



Successful innovations that authors noted had met the aims intended were, for example: a *theoretically* driven method to improve the transparency of grounded analysis (Wasserman et al., 2009); a new methodology for literature review arising from the *moral* conviction that practitioners should be fully included to improve relevance of the results (Kahn et al 2008); and, the *practical* need to overcome geographical and recruitment difficulties resulting in using internet-based groups (Matthews and Cramer, 2008; Scott, 2004). Some authors conveyed a contrast between the aims and subsequent benefits of the innovation. Richards (2006), for example, used participant drawings with the aim of enhancing the expression of emotional aspects, but claimed benefits that were of a more empirical nature, namely the method had been effective at demonstrating changes in knowledge, confidence and skills. A cross-cutting theme in both motivation for the innovation and its benefits was that of facilitating the expression of emotion and essence in data collection or dissemination, through a wide range of media including poetry (Furman et al., 2006), drama (Saldana, 2003), dance (Picart and Gergen, 2004), metaphors (Pevey and McKenzie, 2009) and art (Glass, 2008).

Few authors in our sample identified failures. This may be because success stories are easier to write and get published, but it may also be that researchers are reluctant to report failures or do not think it is useful to do so. One paper described the use of video and still photography to collect data for the purpose of evaluating components of a community development programme, and was able to advise how to avoid the difficulties the author, drafted into the project at a late stage, had experienced due to lack of

appropriate skills, planning and monitoring (Mason, 2005). Another invited participants to compile memory books between two sets of interviews in a longitudinal study of identity formation in adolescence, and whilst the books provided unique data in some instances, the authors were open about how the medium suited some more than others (only about half compiled a book) and that having the books in the second interview as a prompt did not increase the length of interview compared with those who did not produce memory books (Thomson and Holland, 2005).

Some authors were prepared to provide caveats or guidance for use of the innovations. These included: limitations of the method itself, such as participants having varied success in engaging with a story-completion task to investigate attitudes to sexual offenders (Gavin, 2005); limitations of the data obtained, such as the introduction of quantitative techniques into focus groups (Grim et al., 2006); limitations of the tool created, for example a tool designed to summarise diverse data (Bessell et al., 2008). Other issues authors address encompass ethical questions, such as those faced as an avatar conducting participant observation online (Hookway, 2008); the method's validity, such as embodied interpretation (Todres and Galvin, 2008); possibilities for developing the method, such as Kacen (2002) raises regarding participants titling their own stories; and practical difficulties such as Weller (2006) describes following her experience of using a radio phone-in as a means of engaging young people in a debate about citizenship.

Assessing the diffusion of innovations claimed in these papers is difficult given that we do not know from these papers what, if any, diffusion strategies were adopted by authors. Exploring citations of these papers is one way of exploring diffusion, although this gives only a partial picture. A forward citation search of the papers was conducted using Google Scholar to discern any patterns in uptake. Just over half of papers had between 0-3 citations. However, there were some papers that were widely cited; nine papers had 12 or more citations, the highest number of citations being 40 for a paper on ethnotheatre (Saldana, 2003). There was a higher citation rate for the papers in the adoption category, which is expected given the innovation has begun to be diffused and consequently a greater number of people are likely to be aware of it. The majority of the nine papers with 12 or more citations were those where innovations were classified as relating to adoption of an existing innovation (six papers, including Saldana's (2003) paper). Innovations reported in the other three papers were classified as inception and these related to on-line methods (Sade-Beck, 2004; Hookway, 2008) and validity (Cho and Trent, 2006).

There was a markedly higher citation rate of the papers on online and software innovations (Fielding, 2000; Bourdon, 2002; Holge-Hazelton, 2002; Sade-Beck, 2004; Hookway, 2008), the papers on auto-ethnography (Duncan, 2004; Wall, 2006), the paper on ethnotheatre (Saldana, 2003) and the paper on validity (Cho and Trent, 2006). The profile of citations for Cho and Trent (2006) contained a high proportion of doctoral theses, and the disciplines covered in journal publications citing this paper were wide and included sport,

management and criminology as well as research methods journals. The citations from Saldana's (2003) paper were weighted towards journals and the range was even wider, demonstrating the interest in performative presentation of research across many disciplines. Sade-Beck's (2004) combination of online and offline interviewing to explore the use of bereavement support groups has been cited by authors in education, health and anthropology, with a third of citations occurring in theses.

Google Scholar citations, or indeed citations in general, are not necessarily a good indicator of diffusion. The process whereby innovations or developments in research methods are diffused involves a range of processes. In academia diffusion occurs from dissemination of research as well as through opinion leaders or champions of methods and interactions within networks. Unlike Rogers' (2003) classic model, which assumes a centralised point from which diffusion occurs, and a product that has to be adopted or ignored without adaptation, research methodology innovation follows the more complex and organic path which Rogers (2003) describes and in which adaptation is more common and diffusion is more 'horizontal' than top-down. We return to the issue of diffusion in the discussion.

## **Discussion**

This sample, taken from peer reviewed journals that had an explicit interest in qualitative research methodology, proved a varied one, both regarding topic addressed, type of innovation, discipline of authors and their geographical location. It is important to note that not all innovative methods used during

this period will have been identified by this process; only those authors who explicitly claimed innovation were identified. Interestingly this excluded papers published in two special issues on innovative methods in which the authors made limited reference to the innovative nature of their work (Taylor & Coffey, 2009; Crow et al, 2009). The sample would clearly have been very different if the methodology to select it had been different, as is evidenced by the sample described in Xenitidou and Gilbert's paper (2009)<sup>2</sup> which has only one individual in common with ours. Their method of seeking people or centres with a reputation for innovation is a fluid and relational one, in contrast to our method of exploring published papers. A different strategy again was employed by Travers (2009) who identified a sample of books claiming innovation in qualitative research via Google. Even with these differences, our sample highlights a focus on e-research and creative methods as did Xenitidou and Gilbert (2009) and Travers (2009).

This review provides further evidence of the trend towards researchers making claims to innovation identified by Travers (2009) among others (Coffey and Taylor, 2008, 2009; Forbes, 2003). However, while we agree with the view that researchers are encouraged to make claims for innovation in the interests of obtaining publications and research funding, an exploration of these papers indicate that the claims made are not without substance. We agree with Taylor and Coffey (2008) that innovation should be defined as new ways of doing research as well as new designs, methods and concepts and, using this definition, some claim for innovation is justified. It is certainly the

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<sup>2</sup> Xenitidou and Gilbert's study focused on all social science research methods, not just qualitative methods.

case that there is very limited, if any, evidence of wholly new methodologies or designs in this sample of papers but the development of methods that can be defined as wholly new is a rare event (Alasuutari, 2007). In this sense, the claims made by authors may have been overstated (at least according to our interpretations) but this does not mean that innovation has not occurred. The innovations claimed in these papers appeared driven largely by technology or interdisciplinary factors (see also Xenitidou and Gilbert, 2009; Travers, 2009). This study indicates the majority of these developments (or innovations) involve adapting methods either to meet the needs of a particular project or to meet some moral, ethical or theoretical standpoint. In some cases these can be seen as 'routine' innovations involving the 'repair and maintenance' of existing social research methods (Taylor and Coffey, 2008) but in others more significant innovation occurred involving transferring and adapting methods from other disciplines. Nevertheless, the great majority of innovations that are achieved draw on the traditions of existing methods, either inside or outside of social science. We argue that there is little evidence of paradigmatic shifts in qualitative research methods within these innovations but rather that qualitative researchers draw on existing traditions to develop methods and that these developments are articulated in terms of innovation. However, these 'innovations' do have the potential to make an important contribution to qualitative research practice. Alasuutari's (2007: p.154) notion of a 'collectively owned toolbox' of research methods (across disciplines) in which 'each user leaves their mark on the tools that they use' is a particularly apposite description of innovation that emerges from this project.

The areas in which innovation is claimed reflect the trends towards, and the current popularity of, particular types of methods and approaches, particularly performative methods, visual methods and online or e-research methods. This reflects the findings of other research in this area (Forbes, 2003; Travers, 2009). It is interesting to note that innovations at the interface with arts-based approaches appear to dominate. For some researchers there is an excitement about being an 'early adopter' of methods that are perceived as new and 'cutting edge'; such developments can take on a life of their own so that researchers who do not engage with these methods end up feeling (and perhaps are perceived as) 'out of date' and, in Rogers' (2003) terminology, as 'laggards'. As such, it is of little surprise that these topics are sites for innovation and the areas in which claims to innovation were identified. As we have noted, these innovations appeared to be those developed, in the main, by early adopters of such approaches rather than specific innovators.

Although these innovations are largely adaptations of existing methods, we have noted they nevertheless have the potential to make a contribution to social research practice. As such the issue of diffusion is an important one. Much of the 'routine' innovations involving adaptations to tried and tested methods to meet the needs of a specific project are communicated through dissemination of the research and horizontal diffusion through interpersonal networks. These innovations are unlikely to be subject to classic 'top-down' diffusion strategies; whether or not a researcher hears about such 'innovations' is likely to be largely a matter of chance. Indeed, it is likely that some innovations remain undocumented, as Platt (1996) noted in her review

of American sociological research between 1920-1960. This may mean that researchers get caught in a process of 'reinventing the wheel' as they attempt to adapt research tools to their needs; certainly there was evidence here of researchers claiming innovation for methods or techniques with which other researchers are familiar. How such developments or innovations can be better shared within the research community to avoid this problem is an unresolved issue. We concur with Taylor and Coffey's (2008; 2009) argument for the need for funding to enable the testing, experimentation and evaluation of methodological innovations. Innovations that fit into broader methodological approaches that have achieved what Rogers (2003) terms a 'critical mass', such as performative, visual and narrative approaches, are subject to greater possibilities for diffusion through champions and opinion leaders for such approaches as well as through networks. Even relatively small innovations within these approaches can achieve broader diffusion because of the wider interest within the research community of such approaches and the associated opportunities for discussing and disseminating innovations. This may help to explain the number of claims for innovation being made in these topic areas. It also indicates that innovations in these areas are likely to be a continued focus of qualitative social science research rather than developments at the interface with quantitative methods.

Research on methodological innovation tends to take an approach that focuses largely on the 'developed world' or at least, the English-speaking world. Alasuutari (2007) notes that globalisation has resulted in increased knowledge and circulation of research 'tools' developed in different parts of



the World. This does not mean only that the so called 'developing world' adapt approaches from the developed world for use in their local context – though this in itself comprises innovation – but also that the tools they have developed are taken up, used and adapted by researchers in Europe, North America and Australasia. Further research exploring innovations in social science methodology taking place in the countries of the majority world in Africa, Latin America and Asia is needed.

Another area in need of further investigation relates to the benefits of innovations. Methodological innovations are useful and appropriate only if they improve our methods of exploration or of understanding the social world. The question of whether what people claim as innovations do actually achieve this has been raised (Hammersley, 2008; Travers, 2009). Certainly these innovations provide social researchers with different ways of researching (even if these methods are largely adapted from existing ones in social science or other disciplines), and different topics to research but *different* is not necessarily *better*. While 'early adopters' of innovative methods may view 'traditional' methods as out of date, the notion that the history of research methods is one of progress is debatable (Alasuutari, 2007). Researchers have always developed methods (or innovated) in order to address research questions in ways they view as appropriate but whether or not innovations provide better research methods is a moot point that needs to be subjected to detailed exploration and demonstration over time. It is unlikely that all the innovations reported in the period 2000-2009 on which this paper has focused will become mainstream methods in the coming decades.

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