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Changing Research, Research for Change: Exploring the Perspectives of Complexity Science

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Introduction

In our introduction, we editors write about the indivisible relationship between research and the societies within which research is undertaken. It is our contention that researchers should aim to reflect upon this relationship throughout the research process. It is my contention that this should include reflection on the roles of researchers and our influence on research relationships. My epistemological position draws from that of critical and feminist theorists in viewing research as a means of questioning, challenging, and changing ‘what is’, rather than merely describing it (Habermas, 1973; Harding, 1986; Smith, 1999).

One of the challenges for qualitative researchers in the twenty-first century is how to maintain our commitment to understanding relationship, dialogue, uncertainty and learning, and enabling disparate voices to be heard, when within many national and global contexts the emphasis is on categorical statements, knowledge, agreement, and unity. Also, how might qualitative social researchers challenge the ‘taken-for-grantedness’ of the activities of transnational capital and its multiple damaging effects on lives and relationships through their commodification; how might we contest the discourses of individual achievement which disguise much of the hollowness of contemporary life in the richer countries of the world; how can we stay focused on what matters and how to continue to care that some things do not; that safety and security are not rights enjoyed by all.
That there is a need for us to maintain a permanent critical engagement with the social world should not be doubted. Among others, Walkerdine notes: 'the place of research within the apparatuses of social regulation' and that

Social science has been central in the management of populations, and so we have a responsibility in taking apart those truths to construct narratives of our own, no matter how difficult that might be. (Walkerdine, 1997, p. 76)

A corollary of this requirement for permanent critical engagement is a sense of moral responsibility on the part of social scientists and qualitative social researchers (Scambler, 1998) to respond to societal injustice. I would like social scientists and researchers to respond regularly as a group or groupings to inequality, injustice, and the misapplication of political power both here in the United Kingdom and elsewhere in the world: see, for example, Andrews (2001); Denzin and Lincoln (2003a); Lincoln (1995); Steele (2004); Stanley (2000). Poulos (2003) notes the importance of 'compassion, responsibility and commitment' (p. 241), all attitudes which are relevant for a critically engaged emancipatory research practice.

In their preface to Collecting and Interpreting Qualitative Materials, Denzin and Lincoln (2003b) assert:

There is a pressing need to show how the practices of qualitative research can help change the world in positive ways. So at the beginning of the twenty first century, it is necessary to re-engage the promise of qualitative research as a generative form of inquiry (Peshkin, 1993) and as a form of radical democratic practice...to show how the discourses of qualitative research can be used to help imagine and create a free, democratic society. (p. xi)

In this chapter, I analyse the contribution of complexity science to praxis and processes in qualitative research, focusing mainly on the UK context. Concepts from complexity science can be applied to developing a particular epistemological approach to qualitative research, one which centralizes learnings rather than knowledge acquisition; as I see it there is potential in its application to research endeavours, which can further the initiation of social change. It is my opinion that the application of complexity science enables us to think differently about research and to establish new conceptualizations and emancipatory praxes.