

Methodological Mud Wrestling

“Where are you going?” I called, as my husband veered off in the other direction. “Avoiding the mud” came his reply. Squelch! I looked down as my feet sank. Seems he had taken the sensible approach to our walk, whilst I once again found myself ankle deep in sludge. Wrestling myself free, I determinedly forged ahead through the mud to rejoin my husband as our paths converged once more on drier land. “What a wonderful metaphor for my research!” I proclaimed to him. There was no need for words; his face said it all ‘Here we go again!’

My husband is a natural scientist, an ecologist with a positivist approach to research; he professes bewilderment at my perpetual battles with epistemology and ontology, yet patiently listens as I attempt to explain my predicament to him. I used to be like him: I started my academic life within natural science and was successful at this. It has taken me longer to get to grips with the social side of science – it is so much more complicated, with so many decisions to make. Methodology is a critical component of research. So how do I make it work for me? Am I interpreting or constructing? Is it realism or relativism? Can I be pragmatic about real world research? How on earth do I choose between ethnography and phenomenology – one is slightly easier to pronounce and less likely to induce a ‘Muppet moment’! Is that a valid and reliable research decision?

What about action research? I like the sound of that – it sounds like actually *doing* something real and implies a purpose and reason for my research. Can I combine that with ethnography? Yes, Ethnographic Action Research and the acronym is EAR – I really like that, it combines well with using the Listening Guide for analysis and with my focus on ‘voice’. Feel I’m making progress here. Now it is time to add some participants to the mix. I am interested in the views of young people, what they think about outdoor experiences. However to gain a full understanding I also need to talk with the practitioners who facilitate these experiences: the two strands of voices need to be entwined somehow. Then there’s me: where do I fit in all this? I was a young person, and I loved being outside. As a parent and a practitioner, I have continued to love being outside. Now I’m a researcher – is it different? Hmm...a third strand to weave in, and something else to ponder and explore.

Splash! Squish! Lost in thought I had walked straight into a muddy puddle. “That’s a deep one,” my husband laughed, “You really should look where you are going!” I grinned back at him and replied “the story of my life, eh?” My desire to focus on the voice of young people has come close to miring me in the methodological mud: which young people do I talk with? It would be very easy to talk to those in school, or college or university: the articulate, eloquent ones, with well developed opinions and an informed approach to the subject. Why doesn’t that appeal to me? Why do I instead feel the need to seek out the more ‘hidden’, quieter ones, those silenced by more conventional research? My perversity brings a number of challenges and ethical dilemmas: for example, how do I ‘hear’ the voice of those who are unable to talk? A valiant search through the literature looking for answers; none seem to fit. I am just going to have to trust my instinct, stay vigilant and true to my values as a youth worker. Talking to others may help; perhaps we can explore the challenges together.

The literature provides the academic voices that form a strengthening thread (the warp), the foundational structure for the three strands (the weft) that interlace with the warp to form the weave of my research. One year in to my PhD research and I’m beginning to feel like more like a carpet weaver than a researcher! And yet I need to find a way of explaining this in a way that recognises that the process is as important as the destination. It is necessary to record and explain my decisions, the choices I have made, the metaphorical places I have been. I need to show the trail of footprints on my research carpet: something that is so much easier when my feet are covered in mud!