

EPINOR 2021
The Art of Scientific Investigation
«Imagination is more than knowledge»

Subjectivity

A unique master tool and source of knowledge
for qualitative research

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Who am I?

- MD, GP, seeing patients 35 years
 - The essential source and recipient of my research knowledge
- Professor Emerita PhD
 - Women's health – Medically unexplained symptoms
 - Vulnerable groups – experiences encountering primary health care
 - Clinical communication – clinical knowledge – **diagnostic knowing**
 - Dept of Global Health and Primary Health Care with epidemiology & much more
 - Qualitative research methods – theory of science - **subjectivity**
- Privileged from multiple interdisciplinary collaboration experiences



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Sherlock Holmes about detective work

“You did not know where to look,
and so you missed all that was
important.

I can never bring you to realize the
importance of sleeves, the
suggestiveness of thumb nails, or
the great issues that may hang from
a boot lace.”



Conan Doyle. A Case of Identity (1891)

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Subjectivity

- I – me
 - as a human being, individual, person
- Experiences
- Thoughts
- Sensations
- Observations
- Something valuable in its own right – knowledge about people
- Beyond the ugly opposition of the nice **objectivity**
 - Under certain conditions: even in research



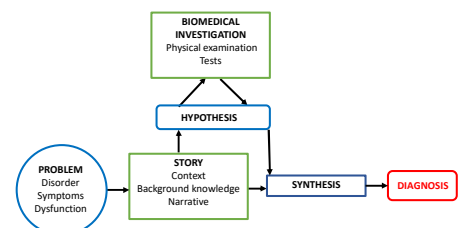
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My talk today – a journey through knowing

- Reaching a medical diagnosis – complex knowing
- Subjectivity in research – a minor taste of qualitative methods
- **A problem - a creative breakthrough moment**
- Crafting a map - making a plan
- Managing subjectivity – towards research knowledge

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Reaching a medical diagnosis



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Diagnostic knowing

- **Hypothetico-deductive reasoning**
 - Checking probabilities by objective findings (pulmonary blood clot)
- **Pattern recognition**
 - Been there before – no need for thinking (shingles)
- **General practice: Also contextualized, interpretative knowing**
 - Unique patients - undifferentiated, multiple and complex problems
 - Group based knowledge or established diagnoses often do not fit
 - Processing complex information - a wide range of sources
- Intuition – gut feeling – art of medicine – or something else?



Malterud & al. *Scand J Prim Health Care* (2019)

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Ursus Wehrli. *The Art of Clean Up* (2011)



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Qualitative research methods

(Very tiny crash course – please accept the assumptions ☺)

- Empirical data - sample
 - Text from interviews, conversations, observation, written
- Analysis
 - Interpretation of content and meaning by systematic methods
- Researcher role
 - **Subjectivity** acknowledged (imagination) - reflexivity needed (tidy up)
- Relevance - to get at something new - **creativity**
 - Attitude to be developed – skills to be trained



Malterud K. *Lancet* (2001)

Malterud K. *Kvalitative forskningsmetoder for medisin og helsefag* (2017)

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General practitioners' strategies to identify alcohol problems

- WHO: BSI
- GPs (12)
- Two focus group interviews
- Audio recording, transcription
- Qualitative analysis (systematic text condensation)

- Acting on a hunch or a cue
- Routinely taking or creating an opportunity to explore
- Confronting the patient
- Does it really matter at all?

• **PRAGMATIC CASE-FINDING**

Lid & Malterud, *Scand J Prim Health* (2012)

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Studying the world around us

• ONTOLOGY

- How we understand the world and reality
 - For example: clinical practice
 - unique patients, complex health problems

• EPISTEMOLOGY

- Advancing knowledge about the world and reality and the study setting
 - For example qualitative research methods, studying medical interaction
 - Interpretation – subjectivity - particulars

- **Consistency** between ontology and epistemology
 - a logical prerequisite for scientific knowledge



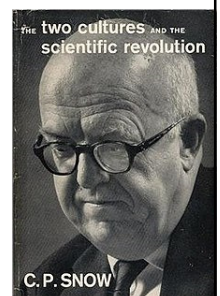
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Knowledge cultures

- The two cultures
 - The gap between natural science and humanities in the academic world

Snow CP. (1959)
- Scientific paradigms
 - Taken-for-granted assumptions
 - Fundamental beliefs about the world and knowledge
 - A larger concept than meanings, attitudes and ideologies
 - Positivist and interpretative paradigms

Kuhn TS. (1962)
- Differences, but also similarities



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The researcher role in different paradigms

MINER (positivist paradigm)

- Knowledge is buried metal and the interviewer is a miner who unearths the valuable metal – essential and objective meaning, waiting to be uncovered, uncontaminated by the miner.

TRAVELLER (interpretative paradigm)

- Knowledge is a tale to be told upon returning home after a journey through a process of interaction and reflection leading to new ways of understanding.



Kvale S. InterViews (1996)

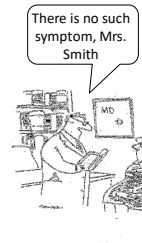
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A creative journey during the 1980s

- Medically unexplained symptoms
- Young GP encountering woman (72) – foot pain

- An unexpected and very simple breakthrough
- Surprise creates ideas and maybe even solutions

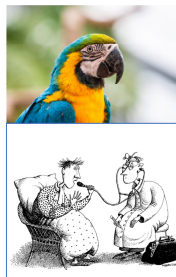
- What happened – what did the doctor say?
- Hatching and digesting the particular experience
- Deciding to focus on the communicative aspects
- Reflecting on my own practice



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The Idea – pushing me into the creative journey

- What I said, made a surprising difference – creating a major breakthrough
- How could such a simple and unique success be repeated, without me becoming a parrot?
- Pragmatic and systematic process of elaborating my expression (speech acts)



KEY QUESTIONS

- suitable for other patients with other problems
- Inviting patients to share their knowledge

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Key questions

A clinical communicative method

DEVELOPMENT

- A focused and problem-oriented speech act
- End point of a procedure based on the clinician-researcher's previous successful communicative experiences with the topic in question

PURPOSE

- Invite the patient to share her knowledge with the doctor
- Empowerment of women patients with medically unexplained symptoms

APPLICATION

- Which were the outcomes of using the key question with different patients with different problems?



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Key questions

Transforming tacit skills into a clinical method

- Problem definition
«What would you really most of all want me to do for you today?»
- Understanding of causality
«What do you yourself think is the reasons for x? ... Yes, we'll certainly find out about that – but I am sure you have been thinking of what might be the causes of x.»
- Expectations of the doctor's actions
«What do you think I should do with x – I'm sure you have thought about that before you came here -?»
- Experiences of management tried so far
«What have you so far found to be the best way of managing the illness?»



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Awareness and development of skills and concepts

KEY QUESTIONS

Intended to reveal the patient's

- Problem definition
- Understanding of causality
- Expectations of the doctor's actions
- Experiences of management tried so far
- (Personal health resources)



«The encounter between the general practitioner and the female patients» (1990)

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From subjectivity to creativity to research

- Experiencing a problem or a challenge
- A surprising major breakthrough
- **What happened? – Unpacking a unique experience**
- Can this happen again?
- Approaching a level of knowing which can be contested and shared?
- Research project – empirical data
- Development of methodology coherent with the breakthrough idea



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Creative driving forces Dialogue with an artist

- Curiosity
- Understanding - problem solving
- Breakthrough experiences
- I realized I had understood something I wanted to elaborate and share
- Having fun while doing it
- Contribute with something new and awesome
- Relevance



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What is research?

- A systematic and reflective process
- for development of knowledge
- which in some way can be contested and shared
- with ambitions of transferability beyond the local study context

Malterud K. Lancet 2001; 358: 483-88

Qualitative research series

Lancet 2001; 358: 483-88

Qualitative research: standards, challenges, and guidelines

Kirsti Malterud

Qualitative research methods could help us to improve our understanding of medicine. Rather than thinking of qualitative and quantitative strategies as incompatible, they should be seen as complementary. Although procedures for textual interpretation differ from those of statistical analysis, because of the different type of data used and questions to be answered, the underlying principles are much the same. In this article I propose relevance, validity, and reflexivity as overall standards for qualitative inquiry. I will discuss the specific challenges in relation to reflexivity, transferability, and shared assumptions of interpretation, which are met by medical researchers who do this type of research, and I will propose guidelines for qualitative inquiry.

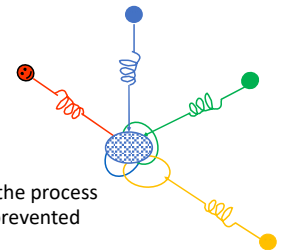
A view from nowhere or a view from somewhere?

The question is not

- whether the researcher affects the process
- whether such an effect can be prevented

Reflexivity implies

- taking responsibility for the chosen position of interpretation
- considering why and so what



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Why are interview studies so boring to read?

- Long, obtuse*) verbatim quotes
- Presented in a fragmented way
- Primitive categorizations
- Not seldom at inflated length
- Qualitative hyperempiricism
- Without knowing the 'what' and the 'why' of the story, the 'how' becomes problematic

*) Norwegian: treg, vanskelig å forstå

Kvale S. InterViews (1996)

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From subjectivity and creativity to research knowledge

- Qualitative methods - an appropriate diving board to approach creativity
- Subjectivity - an acknowledged and essential element
- The presented journey – atypical and exceptional research project
- A contradiction?
 - Structuring experiences into systematic and reflexive action
 - Methodology – skills to be learnt but not exaggerated



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Balancing rigour and creativity

• METHODOLOGY

- the privileging of methodological concerns over other considerations in qualitative health research

Chamberlain (2000)

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Lonergan BHR.

Insight. A study of human understanding (1992)

• PRESENTATION - IMAGE

- Outer experience (sense)
- Inner experience (consciousness)

• UNDERSTANDING

- Question for understanding
- Insight
- Concept

• JUDGMENT

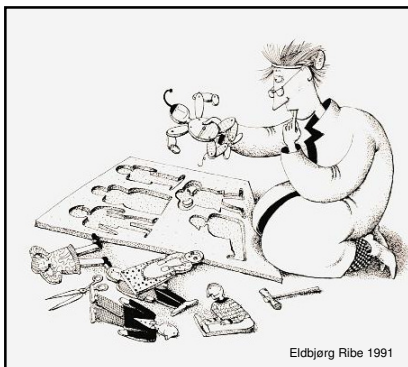
- Question for reflection
- Reflective insight
- Judgment

Tekippe T.J. (1996)



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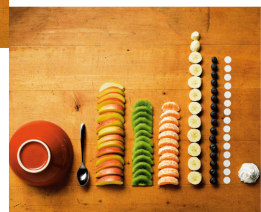
Solving the puzzle?



Eldbjørg Ribe 1991

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Ursus Wehrli. The Art of Clean Up (2011)



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