

The Craft of Knowledge

Experiences of Living with Data

Edited by

Carol Smart, Jenny Hockey and
Allison James



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*For the community of scholars from whom each of us learned
our craft of knowledge*

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Foreword

Qualitative methods books tend to come thick and fast these days, but a book on the craft of knowledge is a rarer beast, and that is one reason why I am so delighted to see this book emerge. The book offers a timely reflection on some of the most crucial and difficult questions that we engage with when we try to generate and craft knowledge from research and scholarship.

Perhaps even more importantly though, the book captures the spirit of enthusiasm, vibrancy, and creative thinking and practice in qualitative methods that I think has characterised the field in the last couple of decades. The book puts qualitative approaches at centre stage, and in my view this could not be more timely or important. We are living in an era when institutional and governmental concerns about a supposed quantitative skills deficit in a competitive international market could come to define the methodological enterprise, were it not for the enthusiasm of researchers keen to pursue the craft of knowledge. There is quite a tide of creative, enthusiastic and innovative qualitative practice happening out there. This book reminds us why we need to continue to find inventive ways to generate resonant and evocative insights about the fascinating experience of living in our multi-dimensional world.

I think there are two distinctive things about this book, and the contributions that comprise it, that in combination make it quite unique. The first is that it does not only treat the engagement with difficult questions about crafting knowledge as an intellectual matter, in a clinical fashion (although there is plenty of intellect in it), but instead it has a real body and soul to it. It makes the craft of knowledge *real*, although not in a simplistic or crudely realist sense, but instead in the sense that it gets at what really matters, what really happens and what the real issues are that need our attention. Apart from anything else this makes it a very good read. But also, across the pages of the different contributions, the reader starts to really *feel* the messy, mesmerising and consuming reality through which insights are drawn and resonant knowledge can be created. It shows us that research, and the craft of knowledge, are *lived* experiences. The second distinctive thing is that the clever combination of disciplinary orientations, perspectives and epistemological conundrums that the editors have brought together in their choice of contributors, along with the sheer weight of experience that the book brings together, creates the sense for the

reader of being invited into celebrated company for a significant conversation and being urged to continue the dialogue.

I think that idea of an interdisciplinary methodological conversation is a crucial one to carry us forward in the current and future research climate. We need to be genuinely interested and curious to learn about other ways of doing and seeing the methodological enterprise, so that we retain and evolve the ability to keep surprising ourselves and others with new insights. We need to keep having methodological conversations about our craft, so that we do not become overly focussed on creating ever more sophisticated silos of specialist technique, yet lose sight of the importance of resonant and authentic knowledge. To draw from my personal experience in organising conferences on the theme of 'Vital Signs' at the University of Manchester, there is nothing better than interdisciplinary methodological conversations, often with 'unexpected' others rather than our usual associates, to stimulate and engage research imaginations. At those conferences, an interdisciplinary group of participants, most of whom had not been brought together before, engaged in the most fascinating and stimulating of methodological conversations. These took place around themes such as 'Real Lives in the Street', or 'Senses, Evocation and Histories', or 'Nature and the Social' or 'Competing Epistemologies', or 'Capturing the In/tangible', or 'Life, Death and the Virtual'. The themes were distilled from the interests and agendas that the participants brought into the conversation. Indeed many of the contributors to this book contributed to those conversations, as presenters, keynote speakers or participants.

Those of us who have been around qualitative methodology for a long time know that qualitative approaches have always led the way in getting us to focus in practical ways on crucial philosophical questions about *how* we know, and *what we can* know. But the new methodological enthusiasm makes it clear that qualitatively orientated researchers are not complacent about their craft. Instead we keep having new and creative ideas about the craft of knowledge. Enthusiasm is infectious, and the whole field feels very vibrant and alive. It is thus very exciting to see this book emerge now. It captures all the enthusiasm and creativity of the qualitative research imagination and makes us pause and wonder about the nature of knowledge at a crucial time when we are facing pressures for a rather different kind of academic enterprise.

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Notes on Contributors

Simone Abram is Reader at Leeds Metropolitan University and the University of Durham. Her research interests include anthropological approaches to urban and rural planning, reflected in publications such as *Culture and Planning* (2011), *Elusive Promises: Planning in the Contemporary World* (2012), *Rationalities of Planning* (2002) and *Anthropological Perspectives on Local Development* (1998). She has also worked on questions of tourism and heritage, edited *Tourists and Tourism* (1997) and published a number of articles on related issues. Her current research brings together concerns about tourism and energy through a focus on Arctic travel/writing. She has carried out ethnographic fieldwork in Britain, Norway and France and taught research methods at the University of Sheffield and Leeds Metropolitan University over a number of years.

Les Back is Professor of Sociology at Goldsmiths, University of London. His main fields of interest are the sociology of racism, popular culture and city life. His work attempts to create a sensuous or live sociology committed to searching for new modes of sociological writing and representation. This approach is outlined in his book *The Art of Listening* (2007). He also writes journalism and has made documentary films. In 2011, he published a free online book titled *Academic Diary* that argues for the values of scholarship and teaching in the face of austerity and the attacks on the university.

Jenny Hockey is Emeritus Professor of Sociology at the University of Sheffield. Trained as an anthropologist, she has carried out extensive research and publication on death-related topics such as hospice and bereavement care, funerals, cremation, natural burial and exorcism. Her key theoretical focuses have been material culture, gender, ageing and the life course. Her recent publications include *The Matter of Death: Space, Place and Materiality* (2010, co-edited with C. Komaromy and K. Woodthorpe), *Masculinities in Transition* (2011, co-authored with V. Robinson) and *Natural Burial: Different Perspectives on the Meanings and Realities of These New Sacred Landscapes* (2015, co-authored with A. Clayden, T. Green and M. Powell). She was the president of the Association for the Study of Death and Society (2009–2013) and is a member of the editorial board of the journal *Mortality*.

Allison James is Professor of Sociology at the University of Sheffield and Professor 2 at the Norwegian Centre of Child Research, NTNU, Trondheim. She has worked in the sociology/anthropology of childhood since the late 1970s and has helped pioneer the theoretical and methodological approaches to research with children which are central to the new childhood studies. Her work focuses on children as social actors and her research has included exploring children's language and culture in relation to theories of socialisation, children's attitudes towards sickness and bodily difference and children's experiences of everyday life at home and at school. Her recent funded research has examined children's experiences of hospital space. Her key publications include *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood* (1990, with A. Prout), *Theorising Childhood* (1998, with C. Jenks and A. Prout), *Research with Children* (2000, with P. Christensen), *Constructing Childhood: Theory, Policy and Social Practice* (2004, with A. L. James) and *Socialising Children* (2013).

Jennifer Mason is Professor of Sociology at the University of Manchester and Co-Director of the Morgan Centre for the Study of Relationships and Personal Life. Her research interests span the fields of family, kinship, relationships and everyday life. She also has a strong and long-standing interest in methodology and in how social science can rise to the challenge of generating knowledge about the everyday world that is resonant and compelling. Between 2005 and 2011 she directed the 'Real Life Methods' and 'Realities' Nodes of the UK National Centre for Research Methods. Her books include *Understanding Social Research* (2011, co-edited with A. Dale), *Qualitative Researching* (2002), *Passing on: Kinship and Inheritance in England* (2000, co-authored with J. Finch) and *Affinities: Potent Connections in Everyday Life* (forthcoming, Cambridge: Polity).

Nigel Rapport is Professor of Anthropological and Philosophical Studies at the University of St Andrews, Scotland, where he is Founding Director of the Centre for Cosmopolitan Studies. He has also held the Canada Research Chair in Globalization, Citizenship and Justice at Concordia University of Montreal. He has been elected Fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh. Nigel Rapport has undertaken four pieces of participant-observation fieldwork: among farmers and tourists in a rural English village (1980–1981); among the transient population of a Newfoundland city and suburb (1984–1985); among new immigrants in an Israeli development-town (1988–1999); and among health-care professionals and patients in a Scottish hospital (2000–2001). His research interests include social theory, phenomenology, identity and

individuality, community, conversation analysis, and links between anthropology, literature and philosophy. Recent books include *Of Orderlies and Men: Hospital Porters Achieving Wellness at Work* (2008), *Anyone, the Cosmopolitan Subject of Anthropology* (2012), *Community, Cosmopolitanism and the Problem of Human commonality* (2012) and *Human Nature as Capacity: Transcending Discourse and Classification* (2010, editor).

Carol Smart is Professor Emerita of Sociology in the Morgan Centre for the Study of Everyday Lives at the University of Manchester, UK. She is also part-time professor of sociology at the University of Oslo and has held visiting positions at the universities of British Columbia, Cork, La Trobe, Melbourne, Osgood Hall Law School (at York, Toronto) and Utrecht. Her publications include *Personal Life* (2007), *Relative Strangers: Family Life, Genes and Donor Conception* (2014, with P. Nordqvist) and *Same-Sex Marriages* (2013, with B. Heaphy and A. Einarsdottir). In 2012 she was winner of the Sage prize for excellence and innovation for her article in *Sociology* entitled 'Families, Secrets and Memories' (2011, 45(4): 539–553) and in 2009 she was awarded an honorary Doctorate of Laws from the University of Kent.

Carolyn Steedman is Emeritus Professor of History at the University of Warwick. Her publications include *An Everyday Life of the English Working Class* (2013), *Labours Lost: Domestic Service and the Making of Modern England* (2009), 'Sights Unseen, Cries Unheard: Writing the Eighteenth-century Metropolis', *Representations*, 118 (2012), 'On a Horse', *PMLA*, 27:4 (2012), 'Reading Rancière', in Oliver Davis (ed.), *Rancière Now* (2013) and 'Nobody's Place: On Eighteenth-century Kitchens', in Penny Sparke and Anne Massey (eds), *Biography, Identity and the Modern Interior* (2013). In her new-found writing freedom she is working on the uses of law in everyday life and on the poetics of history-writing. She hopes that the last project will result in a book called *Poetry for Historians*.

Rachel Thomson is a feminist sociologist working in the interdisciplinary fields of child, youth and family studies. She is a professor at the University of Sussex where she established CIRCY (the Centre for Innovation and Research in Childhood and Youth). Her research interests span many issues including life transitions (between childhood and youth and between youth and adulthood), gender and sexuality and the challenge of understanding and engaging with the relationship between historical, cultural and personal change. Her key recent publications include *Researching Social Change: Qualitative Approaches* (2009, with

Julie McLeod), *Making Modern Mothers* (2011) and *Unfolding Lives: Youth, Identity and Change* (2009). She is part of the team who developed and archived the 15-year qualitative longitudinal study of 100 young people's lives called 'Inventing Adulthoods' which is now available for secondary analysis.

Kath Woodward is Professor of Sociology at the Open University where she works on feminist, critical theories and psychosocial approaches to embodiment and affect, mostly within the field of sport. Her recent books include *Sex Power and the Games* (2012) on the explanatory reach of sex gender and the concept of enfleshed selves, *Sporting Times* (2012) on temporalities in sport using the 'real time' of the 2012 Olympics. Her approach to feminisms has been developed in the cross-generational feminist conversation, *Why Feminism Matters* (2009, with Sophie Woodward). She has worked extensively on boxing, *Boxing, Masculinity and Identity: The 'I' of the Tiger* (2006) and *Globalizing Boxing* (2014). She has taught sociology and women's studies at undergraduate and postgraduate levels and first-year introductory interdisciplinary social sciences. *Social Science: The Big Issues* (2013) is in its third edition. She is an editor of the British Sociological Association (BSA) journal *Sociology* and is currently principal investigator on the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) funded project on the psychosocial dimensions of 'being in the zone'.

Introduction

Jenny Hockey, Allison James and Carol Smart

The early seeds for this book were sown in our joint recognition of the changes that have occurred in the research environment of UK universities which each of us, now at the end of our careers, have experienced over the years with a mixture of growing alarm, disbelief and anger. As dedicated researchers in our various fields of interest we felt increasingly dismayed that the things we valued most about the process of doing research seemed to have become devalued and that there were fewer and fewer opportunities for us to do the kinds of research we wished. One conversation led to another and eventually to this book. We have gathered together here, therefore, a group of authors – sociologists, anthropologists and historians – who, on the one hand, share our concerns and give them their own eloquent voice and, on the other, offer powerful illustrations of the valuable contribution that qualitative research can make to our understandings of the social world.

This book is offered as a contribution to the practice of research – the crafting of knowledge. Although it is not a ‘methods book’, either in the sense of being a how-to manual or a critique of methods that, as Simone Abram (Chapter 1) says ‘challenges the epistemology of data and re-situates ontologies’, it nonetheless addresses both these elements within the contemporary research methods literature. What the book provides is an exploration of research practice by academics who bring their experiences of and facility with that practice to bear on the preoccupations that have constituted their careers; for example, reflexivity, social and political context, memory, imagination and contemplation, and analysis – methodological resources that are all key to high-quality research. In this way contributors scrutinise their projects and practices in a bid to pause the relentless treadmill of grant capture, data collection, coding and quick fire publication. They consider the puzzles, the

hauntings and the imagined conversations that have challenged and energised them across the last 30 years or so, demonstrating a repertoire of orientations and skills that they are committed to sustaining and indeed to revitalising.

This book represents, therefore, a moment of reflection. We hope it will cause others to pause too and consider not only what we may further risk losing but also to think of ways in which we can reclaim the ground that has been lost. Its title – *The Craft of Knowledge* – tries to capture this sense of loss since, as the chapters collectively demonstrate, doing research requires much more than using a set of techniques to gather data about the world. It is a creative process that involves not only forms of apprenticeship but also the development of particular embodied skills that can only become finely honed through practice. Here, though, we also wish to remain alert to an alternative reading of craft: the cunning deceit that might be needed to ensure that, in the current political context, good social research retains the kind of intellectual rigour and vitality that has long been its hallmark.

The changing politics and context of research

Universities' relationship with UK governments across the last 50 years has had varying implications for the research experience of all our contributors, depending on when they were developing their careers. In the wake of the 1963 Robbins Report, the expanded provision of university education initially had less impact on research undertaken at traditional universities. Since local vocational or specialist colleges absorbed the increase in student numbers, universities were able to achieve 'a broad equilibrium between teaching and research, between elite formation and democratic selection, between state funding and university autonomy' (Anderson <http://pearsonblueskies.com/2011/british-universities-past-present-and-future-convergence-and-divergence/>). However, with the end of the binary divide between universities and polytechnics in 1992, in addition to a subsequent doubling of student numbers between 1992 and the present day, the tension between the cost of teaching and research has intensified. Similar tensions, albeit of varying degrees of intensity, are also manifesting themselves in universities across the globe. As Collini (2013) has observed

[d]eep changes in the structure and dominant attitude of contemporary market democracies are everywhere putting pressure on the

values that have sustained the ideals of public higher education. Unfortunately, the UK has put itself in charge of the pilot experiment in how to respond to these changes. Other countries are looking on with a mixture of regret and apprehension: regret because the university system in this country has been widely admired for so long, apprehension because they fear similar policies may soon be coming their way. In many parts of the world English higher education is, to change the metaphor, seen less as a useful pilot experiment and more as the canary in the mine’.

In parallel with these shifts in the research context, financial decision-making also changed in character with the demise of the University Grants Committee in 1989, following the 1988 Education Reform Act for England, Wales and Northern Ireland introduced by Kenneth Baker, Margaret Thatcher’s education secretary. As a buffer between universities and government, the University Grants Committee had previously assumed a strategic, as well as financial role, during the post-war period. Once it was abolished, universities became directly accountable to government and therefore party to neoliberal, free-market models which posited competition as a mechanism for resolving tensions and inequalities. Academics, Collini notes, ‘now spend a considerable, and increasing, part of their working day accounting for their activities in the managers’ terms’, with the result that ‘malaise, stress and disenchantment’ have become pervasive, expressions of ‘the alienation from oneself that is experienced by those who are forced to describe their activities in misleading terms’ (Collini 2013).

If researchers are now bemused as to how they have allowed a practice they value so passionately to succumb to these external constraints, the answer may partly lie in their membership of a society where the virtues of a ‘business-like’ approach are unquestioned, where ‘getting down to business’ implies serious endeavour and where ‘my business’ is my proper concern – and not yours. What is arguably the higher moral ground occupied by ‘business’ thus helps sustain the business model which has the minds, if not hearts, of the UK’s neoliberal democracy in thrall. That said, in a global environment where much of British business is no longer competitive, its universities do nonetheless retain a distinctive international status. Little wonder, then, that those outside the UK who continue to value a British degree are bemused by academia’s apparent collusion with the imposition of a business model on them. As Collini (2013) speculates, future historians ‘will at least record that, alongside its many other achievements, the coalition government

took the decisive steps in helping to turn some first-rate universities into third-rate companies’.

In addition to these pressures, however, three specific issues have had a profound impact on research. First, a new form of accountability has emerged in the UK in the form of the high-fee-paying student and the consequent need for universities to compete by providing the most appealing ‘student experience’.¹ This has had the effect of further squeezing research time as needing to ‘do well’ in the National Student Survey (NSS) becomes yet another pressing teaching demand. Second, the regular auditing of research via the Higher Education Funding Council in England, together with its Scottish and Welsh partners, has worked to radically shape the research context. Beginning with the establishment of the Research Assessment Exercise in 1986, and following at approximately five yearly intervals until the shift to the even more demanding Research Excellence Framework in 2014, the research element of the funding given to universities by government has become firmly pegged to rankings achieved. In turn, gaining a top place in this beauty parade is now seen by university managers as an attractive, even essential, asset, with which to tempt those high-fee-paying students. And, third, with respect to our research participants, the proliferating categories of vulnerability and risk generated by ethics committees, alongside the rewards that funding councils promise for the co-production and transfer of knowledge, exacerbate long-standing issues as to how closely we might relate to the people whose lives we explore.

It is this combination of heightened competition for scarce resources, the pitting of research against teaching commitments, the demands of (technical) accountability and an increasingly ambiguous relationship with our participants which has so radically changed the contemporary research environment and unleashed what Collini (2013) refers to as the ‘pervasive sense of malaise, stress and disenchantment’. And it was precisely these feelings, as noted earlier, that served as the initial prompt for this book when, as editors, we reflected on what we valued as researchers and what we felt had been whittled away over the years. It seems we were not alone in our fears since, collectively, the book’s contributors have set out to articulate a set of values they see as being at risk; they explore the implications of contemporary conditions of research; and they identify the possibilities that remain or may still be discovered despite the changed political context of research.

To an extent, however, these are voices from the margins. Some contributors have retired from their university posts – others would like to. Yet they address critical research issues and experiences which otherwise

would pass without reflection, pushed as they are to the periphery of discussion or indeed thought, by the pressing contemporary need to translate research aspirations and achievements into a second language, that of business and accountability. And yet, these are not wistful echoes harking back to the past; rather, together they offer an important restatement of some core research values and practices.

If these are the politics which overshadow the contemporary research process, what of the research context itself? Here, some contributors have given weight to technologies that were unthinkable at the time of the Robbins Report. Les Back in Chapter 3, for example, refers to the 'open access' academic life where connectivity's benefits for the restless writer, who cannot settle at just one desk, come at the cost of 'seemingly endless queries about meetings, essays and deadlines' mediated by the Internet and the laptop computer. This technological context is powerfully enmeshed with academia's political context, as Back explains in his discussion of the 'audit culture'. His argument amplifies Collini's reference to 'the fallacy of uniformly measurable performance' where '[t]he logic of punitive quantification is to reduce all activity to a common managerial metric' (2013). The result of this process of reduction – as evidenced in the UK's Research Excellence Framework and its powerful financial entailment – is, Back says, '[t]imidity, conservatism and hyper-specialisation' in research and writing; a shift fuelled by the new demand to demonstrate that one's research has identifiable impact for the public good. There is, these days, little room left for the kinds of blue skies research that through its wanderings and meanderings just might – and often did – produce radical outcomes.

While Back's chapter thus decries a professionalism that values instrumentality over adventure, technology remains writing's double-edged context. For its practitioner, the social media that technology supports is a site at which to sustain an appetite for creativity and risk, as well as to acquire sympathetic companionship. That said, what gets written needs to derive from reflexive and engaged responsiveness on the part of the researcher if, in Back's view, the reader is to be led into the 'somewhere' where something telling has happened. Over reliance on technological recording of words and images can mean a neglect of this most human of resources.

In this respect both Simone Abram and Kath Woodward underscore the continued importance of the embodied nature of research practices. Contrasting three different research contexts Abram demonstrates the clear water that exists between what she calls 'quick and clean' research, that requires little personal engagement or intellectual investment from