CHAPTER 2

THE SEDUCTIVE QUALITIES OF CREATIVE METHODS: CRITICAL AWARENESS

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OVERVIEW

- **Researching respectfully, ethically and responsibly**
- **Methodological awareness**
- **Critical self-awareness and reflexivity**
- **Collaborative awareness**
- **Ethical awareness**
- **Critical data awareness and validity**
- **Conclusion**
- **Discussion questions**
- **Further reading**

This chapter is about researching respectfully, ethically and responsibly. The use of creative methods suggests a set of researcher responsibilities, capacities and sets of critical awareness about methodology, self in the research process, the researcher/participant relationship, ethics, and about the nature of the data that may be generated. These five forms of awareness together enable the researcher to build a capacity for critical consciousness about what she or he is doing through all stages of the research. We discuss the types of researcher capacity that we feel are necessary in the management of creative and collaborative research relationships, and examine the notion of researcher reflexivity. This capacity, and the associated forms of awareness, will apply to any form of research, whether or not creative methods are used. But, just as other means of getting data require their own particular sets of responsibilities, disciplines, and rigour – consider the processes involved in gathering and validating statistical data, for example – so creative approaches make their own special demands on the researcher.

Creative methods have the potential to uncover some powerful emotions, stories and dramas, and therefore this chapter discusses how we may work with participants responsibly. Thus, we continue the process begun in chapter 1 by dealing with some further principles about the use of creative methods in organizational research. Further, we continue to share our own learning journey about these topics, processes and capacities. In the chapters that follow, we will be pointing out specific implications that apply to a particular creative method.

METHODOLOGICAL AWARENESS

Decisions about methodology are fundamental. Ontological and epistemological assumptions play a key role in arriving at these decisions. Easterby-Smith *et al.* (2004, p. 27) suggest that there are three reasons why an understanding of research philosophical issues is important:

- because such an understanding can clarify research designs;
- it helps the researcher to recognize which designs work or do not work;
- it may help the researcher to identify or create designs that may be outside his or her past experiences.

We suggest that critically aware organizational or management researchers try to work consciously with the 'baggage' and biases that shape our assumptions. In these ways they can put themselves into a position where they can defend their methodological decisions. We suggested in chapter 1 that creative methods sit uneasily within a positivist paradigm, and much of the researcher's methodological awareness will most likely flow from an elemental inclination to work within an interpretivist methodology (Crotty, 1998). Alvesson and Deetz (2000, pp. 33–34) add some useful additional pointers about the nature of interpretivist research. For such researchers:

- The organization is a social site – the emphasis is on the social rather than the economic
- People are not considered to be objects, but rather active sense-makers along with the researcher
- Key conceptions and understandings (theory) are worked out with the research participants who can 'collaborate in displaying key features of their world' (Alvesson and Deetz, 2000, p. 34)
- The aim is to see how people's realities are socially produced
- The purpose of research is to capture a complex and creative 'life form' 'that may be lost to modern, instrumental life or overlooked by it' (Alvesson and Deetz, 2000, p. 34).

Methodological awareness enables us to account for ourselves as researchers, and this is the purpose of methodology chapters in dissertations, theses and research reports. We need to be able to 'show our hand', and give as transparent an explanation as possible about our methodological decisions and assumptions. This applies to all research, but what we need to examine are the special implications of choosing a creative approach.

Mike's story

See it from the research supervisor's point of view. A student comes to see you one day with an idea for her dissertation. She has a gleam in her eye, and is clearly full of enthusiasm: 'Yes', she says. 'I know what I'm going to do now – I want to use poetry and stories'. 'Great', you say, 'Why?' 'I like poetry and stories! Besides they seem like fun ways of doing research'. 'OK, let's talk …'.

Confining ourselves for the moment to the research student and supervisor relationship, research supervisors are alert to the possible paradoxes that lie underneath the student's enthusiasm for creative methods in organizational and management research. On one hand, the student's enthusiasm may be based in a well-meaning innocence and inexperience, where anticipation of the 'fun element' masks the care that is required in using these approaches. On the other hand, a student's enthusiasm needs to be welcomed and nourished. Undertaking a research study that in any way requires a sustained level of commitment and energy needs at least some curiosity about the phenomena to be studied, and about the methodologies and methods to be employed. Certainly if the study is going to be a prolonged affair, requiring a long-term commitment over a few months or even years – like undertaking a PhD – some passion about the topic is required.

The main danger of being seduced by the supposed 'fun element', for example, is that the researcher may employ creative methods in an unaware and uncritical way. Such methods have a lot going for them. They may be really engaging for both the researcher and research participant alike. They represent potentially powerful methods for accessing data concerning emotions and other complex manifestations of lived experience. It might appeal that their use is still relatively unusual, particularly given the continuing authority that is ascribed to methods based in positivism. And creative approaches may hold some consonance with one's aesthetic or artistic inclinations.

Thus, the seductive nature of the approaches is both their strength and their weakness. Earlier in this section, the reader may have been struck by the language that we used about undertaking research – describing it as an *affair* that requires *commitment* underpinned by *passion*. Seduction contains the prospect of both something different and enticing, but also of the danger of being beguiled into an abandonment of principles. This is what the researcher needs to be alert to, and what this chapter will concentrate on. The main message is – by all means be seduced, but do so with a critical eye open!

CRITICAL SELF-AWARENESS AND REFLEXIVITY

The importance of reflexivity in research continues to be discussed and argued about in a number of intellectual streams concerned with social research, including feminist and psychosocial research. The capacity for *reflexivity* lies at the heart of critical self-awareness.

Easterby-Smith and Malina (1999) thought that the starting point for understanding reflexivity was the idea that it is not possible for social researchers to be detached from what they are observing. This will be clear from our earlier exploration about the researcher – participant relationship (a matter that we develop in this chapter). To be reflexive requires us to be critical of the assumptions that we may hold, and to be open to learning, possibility and surprise. These kinds of ideas have found expression in feminist and race studies, in which the right of researchers to impose frameworks on less-powerful groups has been challenged (see, for example, Eichler, 1988). Similarly, Easterby-Smith *et al.* (2004, p. 59) have observed that most empirical research in the social sciences has been carried out on members of society who are less powerful than the researchers. The fact that organizational researchers working in the interpretivist paradigm are encouraged to work in a reflexive way with their own experience and their own power when they engage with an organization and the people who belong to it, calls into question our ability to remain value-free and detached.

Etherington suggests that there is a range of ways in which reflexivity can be thought about. She argues (2004, p. 31) that for some researchers, reflexivity is little more than a means of checking for biases in the conduct of research. For others, reflexivity becomes the primary methodological vehicle for inquiry, e.g. in autoethnographic and autobiographical inquiries. Etherington thus demonstrates that we cannot talk simply about reflexivity, but about *reflexivities*. She herself thinks of researcher reflexivity as:

> the capacity of the researcher to acknowledge how their own experiences and contexts (which may be fluid and changing) inform the process and outcomes of inquiry.
>
> (Etherington, 2004, pp. 31–32)

Essentially, the capacity for critical self-awareness and reflexivity in the research process challenges the researcher to be transparent about where she or he is coming from, and to work explicitly and in an 'unsettling' way (Pollner, 1991) with her or his presuppositions or 'baggage'. We are also attracted to Jessop's (2002) notion of reflexivity as being:

> the ability and commitment to uncover and make explicit to oneself the nature of one's intentions, projects, and actions and their conditions of possibility; and, in this context, to learn about them, critique them, and act upon any lessons that have been learnt
>
> (Jessop, 2002, p. 1)

The research supervision or mentoring process may be a good way to tease out these factors, including critically reflecting on the researcher's previous experiences (e.g. career, life experiences, previous research experiences), ethical stances, political beliefs, and attachments to the proposed topic or site of inquiry. His or her knowledge of, and commitment to, a set of epistemological and methodological assumptions will be important facets of critical

self-awareness. The researcher's personal history may contain experiences that she or he brings consciously or unconsciously to the study. We share here a potent experience which contributed significantly to our own learning about researcher awareness. A co-researcher had been deeply and personally affected by earlier experiences of being bullied in an organization. Our research unexpectedly threw up difficult data about bullying in the organizations that took part in our study. The colleague's earlier experiences clearly had the potential to affect our analysis of the data. The fact that he could be explicit with co-researchers about these experiences of being bullied enabled us to work together effectively on the sometimes painful data that we were getting about bullying. What we learned from this episode was that the idea is not to censor out our attachments and earlier experiences, but to put them on the table, and to recognize that it is not always possible for researchers to be unaffected by what they are observing. We are, after all, only human. In general, the purpose of critical self-awareness is to be able to be clear to oneself, to the readers or clients of the eventual publication, thesis or research report, and (most importantly) to your research participants, about what the researcher brings to the research.

As we have said, the organizational and management researcher may have leanings towards creative approaches because of an earlier or current interest in poetry, in art and so on. She or he may have been 'good at … art/poetry/literature/drama' at school, and may take an ontological position that there is such a thing as an aesthetic value that can form part of our belief system along with other views about the world. This belief system may dispose the researcher towards an attitude about works of art (of whatever kind), and even about how people *should* view art. This may be all well and good, but a self-aware researcher may ask his or herself if she or he is entitled to impose such values, and inquiry processes based on these, on potential research participants. Such leanings or attachments will form part of the material needed to engage in a process of reflexive self-analysis. During our own process of writing this book – in which we set out our enthusiasm for creative methods – we have had to remind ourselves from time to time about the presuppositions and belief systems that lie at the basis of our arguments. We also have had to take the occasional reflexive turn and remember that, firstly, not everyone shares our enthusiasm, and secondly, that there are other ways of researching the human experience of organizations. Finally, we might consider that we are writing this book, and conducting our research, in a particular culture and social milieu, and that there may be different assumptions about the world and how facets of it may be expressed aesthetically in different cultures.

COLLABORATIVE AWARENESS

We have argued that a collaborative relationship with research participants is a prerequisite for using creative methods. This is not just a methodological issue, important as this is. Just as important is that the nature of the relationship between the researcher and participant is

an expression of value – to carry out research *with* people rather than *on* them. As Marshall and Reason (1998, p. 234) put it:

> Collaborative practice demands … an integration of authentic, vulnerable author-ity with respect for individual autonomy and choice. It is not an easy formula to apply, but requires much skilled attention.

Having established this underlying assumption, we turn now to an exploration of a range of factors that together build a picture of this third aspect of a researcher's critical consciousness. The development of collaborative relations with participants and their organizations requires a sophisticated process that includes attending to:

- The researcher's *leadership* of, and *power* in, the research process; and,
- The *politics* involved in gaining access to organizations and developing a relationship with participants.

Taken together, these two aspects present the researcher with a number of paradoxes which require a developed capacity for critical awareness as we attempt to steer through the questions that arise about our role. For example, as we examine the first of these – the researcher's leadership role and power – we are presented by an interesting question: how can we square the notion of adopting a collaborative approach with the fact that the researcher may have initiated the research? Is it possible to acknowledge one's leadership and power in the process without negating research participants' rights and interpretations? Even when we begin with the intention of researching in a collaborative relationship, the assumption of primacy of our knowledge can emerge. Subtle pressures can grow in the moments of interaction between the researcher and participant or group of participants. Something can happen that leads us, perhaps unconsciously, to diminish the participant's role in the inquiry. For example, Blumberg and Golembiewski (discussing group experiential learning) talked about the 'real danger' in our encounters with participants that:

> when we bring a person up to a point of discovery, and just as he [sic] is about to make the discovery, we tell him what it is. We deny him the discovery experience
> (Blumberg and Golembiewski, 1976, p. 30)

The collaborative nature of the relationship comes into question – we begin to do research 'on' people. This is an issue of power – the power to define what is knowledge and whose reality is the right or best reality. The result is that research becomes 'objective', 'outsider' research that privileges the knowledge and interpretations of the 'expert researcher'.

Therefore the effective management of power and knowledge with participants is central to the development of an effective relationship. We will argue later that our aim in this kind of research is to maintain a dialogic state with participants, so that we do not just see the research output consisting solely of the interpretations and meanings

arrived at by the researcher, but to work simultaneously and iteratively with participants' interpretations; the impact of the experience upon them; and what they take away from the experience of participating in the research. Researching with people thus requires us to maintain a reflexive capacity; to always hold in view the relationship between power and knowledge; and to find our role and sense of validity in the process without denying the role and validity of others. As Marshall and Reason (1998) implied, there are no easy answers to such questions, but we suggest that the very fact of asking such questions of oneself, making these paradoxes explicit, for example, in sessions with a research supervisor and with participants themselves, shows a capacity for critical awareness.

Another call on the researcher's potential leadership of a research process is that the research may, to begin with, create anxiety among potential research participants. This anxiety needs to be worked with in the researcher –participant relationship. If this is not attended to, it is possible that the researcher (and participants) 'lose the plot' altogether. Paul's story illustrates the kinds of binds that we can get into if we lose our sense of role and do not effectively manage the relationship with the research group.

Paul's story

On the day of the second research workshop, I was presented with a misunderstanding by the manager about the purpose of the workshop. He introduced it as one in which 'Paul will give us feedback on his research so far, and bring us up-to-date on the latest thinking about the management of change' (or some such phrase – his introduction took place before I had got agreement to turn the tape-recorder on). In fact, I thought I had made it clear, both at the time of the first workshop and then in writing, that this second event formed part of the data-gathering phase, and wasn't a review of the whole project as he had thought. When I said that I did not see the workshop in the way he saw it at all, the manager became angry, and even though after a while he grudgingly allowed me to proceed with the workshop as planned, the formerly co-operative relationship I had with participants was contaminated by this misunderstanding and the anxiety it provoked in everyone present. My anxiety about the manager's anger stuck, and I found myself trying to deal with this anxiety as well as the research task. The way I tried to manage this was to offer (too many) views and comments on what was being said, in a hopeless attempt to appease the manager, e.g. stating how this compared with the other participating organizations, references to theory, and the like. This was a doubly unskilled thing to do, since it became clear that participants, including the manager, were beginning to achieve the objectives of this second workshop in their engagement with each other. My losing clarity about my role and purpose on the day, and my confused behaviour as a result of the surprise the manager had presented, led me to think at the time that this workshop

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> was dreadfully ineffective. Having said that, my re-reading of the transcript some weeks later – after the pain and embarrassment had subsided somewhat – revealed some good data, but this wasn't an experience I wanted to repeat.

This leads us to consider the second facet of what we are calling collaborative awareness: the politics involved in gaining access to organizations, starting the project and developing a relationship with participants. We will not go into the procedures that are involved in gaining access to organizations in any depth: the reader may wish to consult a text such as Maylor and Blackmon (2005, pp. 268–272), who give a comprehensive account about using contacts and networks to secure access to a research site. We are more concerned here to argue that an appreciation of the political properties of establishing relationships with organizations and research participants, and indeed of research itself, is an important contributor to the researcher's critical consciousness. As discussed in chapter 1, it cannot be assumed that all organizational gatekeepers of research will be sympathetic to giving access in the first place, and may be especially suspicious of research approaches that entail using creative methods. The good news however is that it is just as likely that gatekeepers will be intrigued by the novelty of creative methods, and that this may result in a desire to know more – a potentially good platform for establishing a sound relationship with the fieldwork site. This is a reality that we need to face from time to time. Many maintain that politics suffuse all social research (Guba and Lincoln, 1989; Punch, 1998) and this ranges from the micro-politics of relations with people in organizations through to the visible and invisible power of the system to put constraints, or not, on your research. Pam's and Mike's story illustrates the power of the system to either encourage or discourage support for a study.

Pam's and Mike's story

We may best introduce our initial experiences of the politics of gender research by outlining some of the discouraging messages we received. On some occasions we were discouraged by those who held reservations or who downplayed the potential importance of the study [a study of the experiences of women chief executives in UK local government]. It took us a long time to obtain funding from organizations that we regarded as obvious sources. We 'felt' the occasional covert disapproval coming from some of the power structures within the system. At times, it felt 'risky' to talk about the research. Not everybody was in favour of the research. Some of the more commonly expressed views included:

- There was no need for the study: women were being appointed in greater numbers and, in fact, you were now more likely to be appointed if you were a woman

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> - Such a study ran the risk of making women's experiences worse rather than better, by replacing old stereotypes with new ones
> - Because the power-holders in local authorities are largely male, the study could alienate them and produce a 'male backlash'
> - The experience of women is not substantially different from that of their male counterparts, and therefore there were no issues to be studied.
>
> It was understandable that we would receive a mixture of expressions of both ardent support, but also of doubt and even hostility. For example, Pam was accused at one stage of being 'a bigoted old feminist' and Mike was sent a message that he had 'overstepped the mark'. However the expressions of encouragement far outweighed instances of negativity.
>
> (Broussine and Fox, 2003, pp. 29–30)

Some of the political factors that have an impact on qualitative research in general, and fieldwork in particular, have been discussed by Punch (1998, pp. 162–166), who noted, incidentally, that these aspects have been under-discussed generally in research accounts. Consideration of these factors, including quite practical issues that they throw up, would in themselves help to develop the researcher's critical consciousness, including a consideration of:

- Researcher personality – his or her approach, commitments, abilities
- Geographical proximity
- Nature of the research site, e.g. the organization
- Researcher's institutional background – may be of importance in trying to gain access
- Gatekeepers – the need to understand their needs, resources and roles
- Status of the researcher – age, ethnic background, gender.

Taking the last of these factors, Punch (1998) discusses how the race and/or gender of the researcher may preclude or open up access to research sites. On the one hand, he gives an account of a female researcher who failed to get into a masculine world (the policemen's locker room is cited). Similarly, another white, female, educated outsider found that her identity made it difficult to develop rapport and trust with research participants. On the other hand, Punch suggests (p. 165) a young student may be seen as less of a 'threat' than an older researcher.

Our purpose in outlining some of these anticipated problems is by no means to discourage the reader from contemplating the use of creative methods. Rather it is, again, to encourage and to suggest pointers that may help in the development of critical awareness that we are arguing is necessary in seeking access and developing relationships with people in organizations. Another way to see these factors, and the other aspects of critical awareness that we deal with in this chapter, is that these aspects need to be worked with even when access has been secured, and the study has begun. It would be naïve to assume, for example,

that our gender, race, age and other aspects of identity will not affect our relationship with participants.

ETHICAL AWARENESS

We have learned that creative approaches suggest special ethical challenges. Brewerton and Millward (2001) provide a useful outline of the main ethical considerations that should apply to any management or organizational research. They discuss the dangers of involving people in research without their knowledge; of coercing participation; of withholding the true nature of research from participants; of deceiving participants; of leading participants into acts that diminish their self-respect; of exposing them to physical or psychological distress; of invading participants' privacy; and of withholding the potential benefits of the research from control groups (Brewerton and Millward, 2001, pp. 61–65). In addition, organizational researchers might be aware that the advent of 'research governance' in some institutional settings, for example, the UK public services, now demands a detailed knowledge of, and adherence to, ethical approval procedures (see 'Graham's Story' in chapter 1, and Department of Health, 2006). Whether on moral and/or legal grounds, researchers cannot ignore ethical considerations.

There are three ways in which we need to consider ethics as we use creative methods. The first concerns working with research participants' feelings, emotions, recollections, stories and personal experiences as empirical data. The second is to do with the vividness of the research experience for participants who produce drawings, work with poetry, stories, drama and dialogue in the inquiry. The third focuses on the need to withhold some information about the inquiry process from the prospective research participants in order to engage them spontaneously.

Turning to the first of these considerations, a question that the researcher might want to ask is: 'What right do I have to access participants' lived experience?' After all, it is conceivable that participants may reveal to the researcher (and to others like colleagues in a team and organizational setting) thoughts and feelings that they had up until then kept private, and perhaps not even admitted to themselves. The potential for harm or embarrassment is apparent. The data can be poignant, difficult and emotional. Of course, that is also the strength of creative methods, because they enable us to access data that sometimes lie deep in organizational settings. However, the potential power of the approaches obliges us to be ethically aware. One could imagine a nightmare scenario, in which the researcher, having elicited much data at some emotional cost to participants, leaves the site of inquiry with all the data captured, but the participants in a mess. The ethically aware, and collaborative, researcher will realize the importance of his or her obligations to participants in terms of initial clarity about the aims of the proposed study; promises of confidentiality and anonymity; assurances that individuals will not be identifiable in any reports of her study; choice about whether to take part or not; information about follow-up events; and opportunities for participants to see and amend draft accounts of the research and analyses of data.

Our second consideration concerns the potentially vivid nature of the experience of being researched through creative methods. In our experience, people who take part in research where they were asked to produce drawings which expressed their feelings; or where masks were employed; or where poetry was generated, can remember the experience in great detail some years later. The events, whether in inquiry groups, workshops or one-to-one encounters with the researcher, tend to be memorable. When we use creative methods, our relationship with research participants is likely to be intense − even intimate. In a positive sense, the vividness of the experience can shape their lives, because of the insights and learning that they may have gained from the experience. However, the potential negative side of this coin is that research participants remember the experience for quite different reasons − that they felt abandoned, betrayed, abused and manipulated.

Finally, we reach a knotty issue that applies to many of the creative methods that we deal with − that of asking participants to work spontaneously with us. This problem is particularly testing in collaborative forms of research. Of necessity, sometimes we cannot be completely open with participants about the aims of the research or our method. For example, a research student of ours recently inquired into the psycho-dynamics of bullying in organizations. He wanted to examine the phenomenon not just from the victim's point of view, but as part of a systemic and complex set of relationships which included the alleged bullies. This necessitated interviewing the bully as well as the victim. It is apparent in this example that to have asked people outright why they bullied their staff would not be a viable option. Instead, he needed to approach the topic obliquely, not mentioning bullying at all, but giving the ostensible topic as 'organizational leadership'. It is important to add in this case that he had been open with senior representatives of the host organization, e.g. human resources directors, who understood and endorsed the approach. Punch (1998) gives another example − that of participant observation. Here the researcher may have to 'pose' as a member of a particular organization while not actually being one − having to act out a role. He reported his experience of conducting research as a participant observer with the Amsterdam police for six years, and concluded that this method necessarily entailed some secrecy. At the time he found 'all this genuinely distressing and confusing' (Punch, 1998, p. 178).

One of our assumptions is that subjective and personal data that are generated through spontaneous self-expression are valid. The degree of spontaneity will vary from project to project, and from method to method. For example, our experience is that the effectiveness of researching through the medium of drawings and art is enhanced when there is an element of participant surprise (we look at the implications of this in some detail in chapter 4). The same is true of the use of masks (chapter 7). Spontaneous expression, where required, asks the researcher to deliberately break a commonly accepted precept of ethical research mentioned earlier, that of not withholding the true nature of research process from participants. Partly, this question is to do with timing: there comes a point early in the encounter with research participants where the researcher will need to explain what is to be done; what process will be employed; and what their roles are in the process. However, if spontaneity is essential, then this briefing will happen only very shortly before one invites participation in the method. This requires preconditions of co-operation, respect and trust to have been

generated between the researcher, participants and sponsoring organizations. Such a platform for implementation of the research will need to have been built earlier through the prior assurances and promises about the ethical treatment of research participants that we discussed above. In addition, however, there will be a need to be up-front (and ethical) about *not* telling participants what exactly will be demanded of them, and why. It is as well to be aware, however, that the advice that we have just given can be contested. Some researchers might consider that withholding *any* information about our research approaches is inimical to the proper treatment of research participants. So, in the end, as critically aware researchers, we are faced with dilemmas and choices, and these choices are at least partially to do with our political and moral stances. In such dilemmas are contained both the difficulty and the fascination of carrying out creative organizational research.

CRITICAL AWARENESS AND VALIDITY IN WORKING WITH DATA

We now discuss some of the challenges and dilemmas involved in working with data that emerge from the use of creative methods. Each of the subsequent chapters will deal with the special properties of the data generated by the particular method covered. In one way or another, they all produce relatively unorthodox data and, taken together, a wide range of types of data such as drawings, poems, stories or metaphors is possible. They provide data sets of words, texts and symbols – the things that people have shared about their experiences of organizational life. The question arises about what meaning and validity can be ascribed to this data. Is it giving an insight into the authentic lived experience in the social system being investigated, or is it what the participant wants the researcher to hear? To a researcher who is concerned to access the underlying and sometimes unconscious meanings of what research participants communicate, these are critical questions. Coming to research from an interpretivist paradigm, the researcher will be curious to know what these words, texts and symbols mean. For example, what is revealed about the underlying unspoken principles that people hold (but maybe cannot articulate) about organizing; about power and gender relations; about the implicit rules that are operating; or about their roles? A big challenge facing us when we employ a creative approach to inquiry is to find ways of understanding what lies beneath the surface of what people communicate to us, while seeking to address our research question.

We will begin by tackling the issue of *validity* of data gained and interpreted through creative methods. The notion of validity here is quite different to scientific notions of validity that tend to rely on statistical tests. Here we are dealing with subjective accounts of lived experience, and the idea of validity is therefore more problematic. Questions of validity of qualitative methods generally apply to creative methods in organizational research, and Guba and Lincoln call paradigm differences about validity an 'extended controversy' (Guba and Lincoln, 2005, p. 205):

> Validity is not like objectivity. There are fairly strong theoretical, philosophical, and pragmatic rationales for examining the concept of objectivity and finding it

wanting. Even within positivist frameworks it is viewed as conceptually flawed. But validity is a more irritating construct, one neither easily dismissed nor readily configured by new-paradigm practitioners.

Easterby-Smith *et al.* suggest that there is an underlying anxiety among researchers that their research will not stand up to outside scrutiny, and they show how notions of validity (and reliability and generalizability) vary considerably between different research paradigms (Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 2004, pp. 52–53). Thus, they suggest that from a social constructionist point of view, *validity* is seen as the extent to which the study clearly gains access to the experiences of those in the research setting; *reliability* is seen as the extent to which there is transparency in how sense was made from the raw data; and *generalizability* is seen as the extent to which the concepts and constructs derived from the study have relevance to other settings. Such propositions add to the creative researcher's capacity for critical awareness in analysing and interpreting data. Nonetheless, it would not be surprising if the researcher was left with some anxiety of the type that Easterby-Smith *et al.* speak of, i.e. about being able to defend one's study in terms of its legitimacy and rigour, particularly when employing less-orthodox methods. We suggest that the critically aware researcher will not try to suppress this anxiety, but rather work with it as a means of remaining alert to crucial questions about the data that have emerged from one's study. We will return in chapter 8 to questions about legitimacy and rigour, once we have completed our journey of learning about the range of creative methods in this book.

Our five forms of awareness that we are discussing in this chapter overlap to a considerable extent. A strong confirmation is made by advocates of collaborative forms of research for critical selfawareness or critical subjectivity, and crucially that this reflexive awareness is central to the processes of analysing and interpreting data and therefore to validity in collaborative approaches to inquiry (Reason and Rowan, 1981). For example we need to develop our capacities for noticing our 'unaware projections' – our ability to self-deceive – that can contaminate both the choice of methodology and the interpretation of data, by allowing one's own fears, defensiveness and biases to skew the research endeavour.

In addition to considerations of validity, the management and organizational researcher needs to wrestle with a dilemma about how he or she works with data. On the one hand we are interested in creative methods of research because they can enable the expression of participants' feelings and stories. Therefore our inclination is to want to allow this voice to be heard with little or no imposition of others' (including the researcher's) mediating influences or meanings. We are inclined, in other words, to let participants speak for themselves. On the other hand, the researcher is invariably challenged by results that contain a high degree of complexity, ambiguity and contradiction. Organizations are not the rational places that orthodox texts suggest, and we have to accept that we will need to organize our data in order to make sense of it. This dilemma itself invites the researcher to work in a critically aware way.

There is a range of available theories and ideas that suggest ways in which we can consider our data in all its contextual richness. For example, organizational psychoanalytical theory is

centrally concerned with unconscious processes at work (see, for example, Gabriel, 1999), while; organizational culture theory is concerned with sets of basic assumptions, norms and shared values held by organizational members (see, for example, Schein, 1992). Set alongside such theoretical frameworks – and this is less-good news if you want to look at it that way – the wide range of approaches to data analysis can be bewildering. Denzin (1998) reviews a range of interpretive styles and practices, including grounded theory, constructivism, critical approaches, and post-structural interpretive styles. Each of these may be seen as lenses through which we might detect situated meanings that lie behind the drawings, poems, dialogue scripts, stories and metaphors that research participants share with us.

As the researcher works with data, he or she will need to hold an awareness that, while research participants may express a rich and multifaceted account of their lived experiences, these expressions are taking place in a context of which they are both part of and simultaneously creating, or enacting (Weick, 1979). Creative methods are inherently beguiling, and the data that they produce – drawings, stories, poems, tales, dramas – full of meaning. This is their power, but the researcher also needs to be sensitive to the situated nature of the data as indicative of individual and collective meanings beyond, behind and beneath the individual's or group's expression – through whatever method that has been used to enable that expression. In other words, the interpretivist paradigm in which these creative methods sit opens us to more understanding about social systems and people within them than we might at first imagine.

There is no one best way of analysing data that are gained using creative methods. We are attracted to Denzin's (1998) view that the interpretation of data is an *art* or *craft*, and that the qualitative researcher is invariably confronted by the difficult task of making sense of the data. With creative approaches, we may say that the researcher needs to make sense of participants' sense-making. The art that Denzin speaks of is that of the researcher as *bricoleur* (French for 'handyman', someone good with their hands), which derives from the French verb *bricoler* 'to do odd jobs', or 'to potter or tinker about'. In other words, the task of the researcher is to immerse her or himself in the data; work with the data inductively and reflexively; play and wrestle with the data; and seek useful meanings and categories. The researcher 'fashions meaning and interpretation out of ongoing experience' (Denzin, 1998, p. 315). Denzin and Lincoln (2005) have recently elaborated on the notion of the *bricoleur*. They argue that the qualitative researcher as *bricoleur* 'stitches together' (rather like a quilt-maker); or assembles images as a montage (rather like a film-maker); or blends different voices and sounds (rather like in jazz improvisation), in order to create representations of complex situations. This leads to the proposition that the qualitative researcher may utilize or develop methodological practices to suit the needs of particular inquiries. Thus:

> If the researcher needs to invent, or piece together, new tools and techniques, he or she will do so. Choices regarding which interpretive practices to employ are not necessarily made in advance. … These interpretive practices involve aesthetic issues, an aesthetic of representation that goes beyond the pragmatic or practical
> (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005, p. 4)

CONCLUSION

We have argued that effective use of creative methods in organizational or management research requires five critical 'awarenesses' – methodological, critical self-, collaborative, ethical, and data validity awareness. The cumulative effect of developing these types of awareness is to encourage the researcher in her or his task of developing what we described as a capacity for critical consciousness through the whole inquiry process. Research into people's lived experiences, narratives, emotions and recollections invariably generates an important by-product, that of learning about ourselves. We would go so far as to say that this self-learning is not just an incidental benefit of engaging in studies and inquiries of the kinds that we look at here; rather it is an intrinsic part of taking up our roles as creative organizational researchers with authority and integrity. The process of undertaking a challenging inquiry can be transformative, in that the development of critical consciousness in the process can frequently challenge our basic assumptions and values about knowledge, people, social systems and ourselves. In chapters 3 to 7, we will show how the researcher may be creative in research. But the good thing about the approaches is that, along the way, we will learn about the phenomenon that will be of great interest to us – ourselves.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why is it important that the researcher has awareness of the philosophical (ontological and epistemological) bases of his or her proposed study?
2. Why is researcher reflexivity so important in the effective use of creative inquiry methods in organizational and management research?
3. Is all qualitative research political?
4. What are the special ethical considerations involved in creative approaches to organizational research?
5. How may creative methods be seen as seductive?

FURTHER READING

The Denzin and Lincoln (2005) handbook, together with Easterby-Smith *et al.*'s 2004 book are useful companions to this chapter (and book) in their different ways. For example, Guba and Lincoln's (2005) chapter 8 in *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research* (third edition) provides, among other analyses, an accessible problematization of the notion of validity in qualitative research (pp. 205–209). This chapter in the *Handbook* is one of 44 that deal with different aspects of qualitative research, including discussions about research paradigms; methods of collecting and analysing empirical materials; and the art and practices of interpretation and presentation. The book is therefore a major tome, but the researcher will be rewarded by finding there a wide range of insights into the theoretical and

practical challenges involved in qualitative research. Mark Easterby-Smith's and colleagues' introduction to management research provides the reader with an additional (and shorter!) resource that specifically addresses the needs of the management researcher 'who is actually doing some research' (Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 2004, p. xi), i.e. starting management research, designing it and doing it. They argue that 'management research is both more complex and more simple than is normally implied by the text books' (Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 2004, p. xi).

We have argued in this chapter how critical subjectivity and reflexivity are central to the researcher's capacity to employ creative methods effectively, and Kim Etherington's 2004 book provides a third accompanying text for the reader who wishes to go further into this important topic. The book represents the author's own journey, which is characterized by reflections on her own research and encounters with a range of other researchers' stories as they become reflexive researchers.

Denzin, N.K. and Lincoln, Y.S. (Eds) (2005) *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research* (third edition), Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications

Easterby-Smith, M., Thorpe, R. and Lowe, A. (2004) *Management Research – An Introduction*, London: Sage Publications

Etherington, K. (2004) *Becoming a Reflexive Researcher*, London: Jessica King Publishers