

Thinking with method: qualitative research in human geography

Area has been around for 50 years. One of the biggest changes over that time has been human geography's discovery and embrace of qualitative research. Qualitative methods -- in the United Kingdom at least, things are different elsewhere -- have gone from peripheral to being the dominant way of doing human geographic research. *Area* has played a key role in this. It has been an important site for the publication of all sorts of methodological conversations. It is a journal open to methodological newness, prepared to take risks with novel, challenging, ways of doing and presenting geographical research. We want *Area* to continue to be a place where human geographers come to think about how the discipline works with qualitative methods. But given the hegemony of qualitative research within much of contemporary human geography it is also worth thinking more broadly about what we talk about when we talk about method.

Qualitative research in human geography is dominated by interviews and ethnography -- although an argument might also be made for adding discourse analysis to that short list. And, yet when we come to talk about doing qualitative research in journal publications most attention is paid to radically novel approaches to doing research. Of course, there is a vibrant literature introducing student human geographers into the world of qualitative research. When we graduate to the level of proficient, published, academic researchers sustained reflection on the how and why of using and working with interview or ethnographic material dries up. It is striking that there is no journal of human geography methods. Reading through the most highly cited journals it would seem that human geographers think through theory rather than method. Questions about precisely how interviews were carried out and analysed, for example, or what was involved in an ethnography are frequently black boxed -- treated as self-evident, not worthy of detailed explanation (Hitchings and Latham 2020a; 2020b; 2020c).

Except, of course, human geographers do think with method -- and not just in terms of practical questions like what to ask respondents or how to gain access to a research setting. Thinking through and with method is crucial to the best qualitative work in human geography. The problem is that not enough of this thinking about method makes its way into the pages of published journals -- instead it remains in the realm of tacit or folk knowledge, passed along by

word of mouth from supervisor to student, as geeky conference gossip, the topic of tweets or blogs. This is unfortunate. There is a great deal we might learn from each other about a whole range of qualitative methods if only we wrote more about how we did our research.

At *Area* we want to encourage more discussion and debate about what we think about when we think about method. And not just in pursuit of new-ness. We want more papers that talk about the nitty gritty of research. Papers that focus on the fine grained detail -- for example -- of interview encounters. Papers that question how human geographers analyse qualitative research material. Papers that aren't afraid to open up about the limitations of the research techniques they are discussing. We want *Area* to be a forum where human geographers open up the black boxes of established qualitative methods -- so we can learn from each other and become better researchers.

To nudge human geographers to write more about established qualitative methods, and the ways they think with these, we will be introducing a series of method focused special sections. Each will focus on a distinctive dimension of doing qualitative research. The first of these will focus on working with the spoken word. But we are interested in hearing suggestions for other themes that readers think should be addressed. It would be useful to learn more, for example, about how researchers became proficient in particular qualitative techniques. Was proficiency gained through the guidance of a mentor, the careful practicing of techniques before starting a research project, or simply through mucking in and learning whilst doing research? The method special sections will encourage *Area's* readers to discuss and debate the norms around how human geography as a discipline talks about and works with qualitative research material. We hope also the sections will demonstrate the ways thinking with method can open all kinds of productive ways for expanding the research horizons of human geography.

Acknowledgments

The ideas presented in this editorial come from an on-going conversation with Russell Hitchings. A more in-depth exploration of some of the key themes discussed here can be found a series of progress reports on qualitative methods recently published in *Progress in Human Geography* (Hitchings and Latham 2020a, 2020b, 2020c).

References

Hitchings, R. and Latham, A. (2020a) Qualitative methods I: On current conventions in interview research. *Progress in Human Geography*, 44, 2: 389-98.

Hitchings, R. and Latham, A. (2020b) Qualitative methods II: On the presentation of 'geographical ethnography'. *Progress in Human Geography*, 44, 5. 972-80.

Hitchings, R. and Latham, A. (2020c) Qualitative methods III: On different ways of describing our work. *Progress in Human Geography*. On-line prepub.

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