

Qualitative Research Methods Symposium 2021

On 15th April 2021, we held the annual University of East Anglia (UEA) Qualitative Research Methods Symposium. This year the event was on the theme of trust – “What can qualitative methods tell us about building trust with experiences and experts?” Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, this symposium was held online. <https://www.uea.ac.uk/web/groups-and-centres/a-z/qualitative-research-methods/symposium/2021>

Last year’s symposium attracted its best number of registrations at 150, a number which was beaten this year with a total of 204 people signing up. This number included 138 attenders from outside UEA, who represented 80 different organisations reaching across 23 different countries. Of the 66 UEA attenders, these came from 14 schools with 24 students registered. The online aspect of the event has continued to enable us to attract a much more widespread audience.

This year’s event aimed to respond to doubts and challenges now radically affecting how research and researchers can be presented, and discussed. This revolution in the framing of “research” makes it vital for qualitative researchers to use and adapt their skills to examine their own position and practices. This symposium was planned to provide an overview and improved understanding of what qualitative research can and should do, to discover how trust in expertise operates and, where appropriate, to promote trust as a basis for re-building new understandings. We set out to question what qualitative expertise can tell us about the complex relationships between experience and expertise, including the expert status of qualitative researchers and the role of formal qualitative methodology in supporting claims to expertise?

The symposium was opened by Professor Eylem Atakav who then introduced the first keynote speaker Professor Ben Garrod, an evolutionary biologist and primate conservationist. He argued that trust was central to being able to engage well as a scientist with children and communities engaging in different ways with forest flora and fauna. His experiences of working with local and international communities and exploring innovative ways of presenting scientific content helped him pose and partly answer questions about why there is a disconnect between the public and the scientific community and what can be done to resolve this partly through using qualitative methods to respect others’ experiences and views.



Video can be found at <https://vimeo.com/562838730>

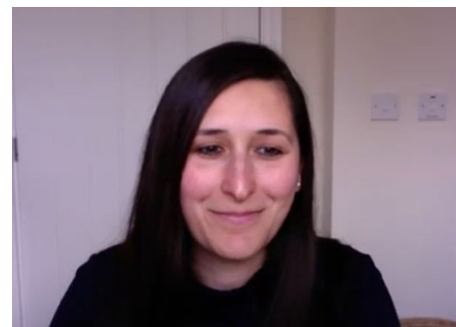
The second session of the day was a panel discussion led by Professor Fiona Poland. Three UEA academics were on the panel – Professor Eylem Atakav (AMA), Dr Harry Dyer (EDU) and Dr Jamie Murdoch (HSC).

Jamie Murdoch articulated the meaning of trust in qualitative research to highlight how researchers must engage with important epistemological challenges if they are to accurately and equitably represent stakeholders' voices. We must therefore attend to how 'data' are 'made', through the situated framings and social practices of researchers and participants; in negotiating the intimate relationship between ethics and knowledge production within the research process; and how far we can contextualise interpretations within their claimed social historical contexts.



Harry approached the panel as a useful interdisciplinary space to explore the tensions between theory and practice, teasing out how we as researchers, practitioners, and educators deal with issues around 'truth' in our work. He saw it as particularly useful to see how we approached the idea of truth from different angles, thinking about issues of positionality, rigor, and mixed-methods research. He joined the conversation especially trying to tease out where the distrust of experts arose in public discourse, and where scientists and researchers should exercise their responsibility to think about how to communicate their work more effectively to aid scientific literacy.

Eylem reflected on what trust means for a scholar who has expertise in film and filmmaking/ digital storytelling on issues around violence against women. She problematised visualising research as now having more power to travel than more traditional research outputs, but posing distinctive ethical and trust challenges. She discussed this in relation to her documentary, *Growing-Up Married* (2016), about recollections of four women from Turkey, forced to marry as children. She shared how she had not felt enabled to make the film publicly available on online platforms given her awareness of her responsibility to protect the lives of the women who bravely and kindly spoke about their experiences of extreme violence and domestic abuse. This, in a context in Turkey, where many women are killed in the name of 'honour'. Trust issues here moved way beyond signing consent forms and ethical clearance applications and beyond the end of the research project.



Video can be found at <https://vimeo.com/562838428>

Dr Ron Iphofen, a Fellow of the UK Academy of Social Sciences, the Higher Education Academy and



the Royal Society of Medicine gave our final talk. Ron emphasised that disinterestedness is not in the qualitative researcher's toolbox. He powerfully exemplified ways in which emotional, political and personal responsiveness must follow from the researcher's immersion in others' lives, not captured by terms like 'reflexivity'. Managing and reporting their research engagement in trustworthy ways is essential to produce expertise and evidence that can make a difference. But we must also take current debates and concerns

into account for people to decide how and how far qualitative research may be trusted

Video can be found at <https://vimeo.com/562838119>

Overarching messages from the symposium.

Reflections and reviews of all the discussions and materials generated through the symposium highlighted three important themes on qualitative understandings of the relationship between trust, truth-telling and truth claims.

One emerging theme was: the relationship between **trust and ethics**. This included ethics as a **process administered through universities; ethical challenges** in doing qualitative research (when signatures on consent forms may offer no protection to participants); and **trust between researchers and universities**.

A second emerging theme was: **Story-telling** – the role of story-telling in human culture, “good” stories, stories and truth, and how meanings change every time one tells a story and calls “objective facts” into question. **Purity vs authenticity** – the desire for purity and the messiness of reality regarding research and knowledge, and links to labels like validity, reliability and trustworthiness. **Trust related to people vs protocols**, links to trust in machines vs people, AI, driverless cars, removing humans from industries as machines are more reliable, efficient and make fewer errors.

A third emergent theme was a tension between **affect and proofs** in regards to truth. Emotional and less tangible aspects of our ongoing relationships with truth(s) emerge through discussions of '**empathy**', '**stories**', '**connections**' and '**feelings**'. This is juxtaposed against discussions of '**knowledge(s)**', '**numbers**', '**evidence**', and '**science**'. Such tensions highlight the possible need to consider truth beyond a singular fixed externality in line with Kantian ideas of the noumenon, and to instead explore truth(s) as process, affect, and narrative.

OUR THANKS TO MANY PEOPLE WHO MADE THIS SYMPOSIUM POSSIBLE

Finally, we warmly thank the UEA Schools and Faculties which made the event possible: Social Sciences Faculty, Arts and Humanities Faculty, Sciences Faculty and the Health Sciences School. We would also like to thank members of the cross-schools Organising Group: Eylem Atakav, James Cornford, Harry Dyer, Chi-He Elder and Nigel Lambert. Many thanks also go to Kevin Sides, Motoko Akashi, Paul Wright, Scott Steward-Smith and Stephen Amiss for their planning and technical assistance.

