

Reflections on “Qualitative Research as Activism”

3rd European Congress of Qualitative Inquiry

Edinburgh, 13th - 15th February 2019

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Volume 2

Issue 1

Spring 2019

Keywords:

ECQI, qualitative research, qualitative inquiry, research as activism, systemic inquiry

Citation Link

Prologue

We offer some reflections from our own perspectives as attendees and presenters at the European Congress of Qualitative Inquiry (ECQI).

But first, a few words about this conference. Qualitative Inquiry is a term used by those developing qualitative research which attends to post-positivist theory, embraces reflexivity and bias, which renders visible the often hidden political and cultural influences on research and professional practice, embraces first person and community knowledge and know-how, and understands research as a form of social activism. The first two conferences took place in Leuven, Belgium and arose out of a European need to have parallel conference to the International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry at the University of Illinois which attracts so many of our European cousins. At this conference, some of the keynote speakers made it back across the pond. ECQI is establishing itself as an alternative knowledge generation and practice event attracting an increasing number of counsellors, psychotherapists and social workers alongside artists, performance artists and others experimenting with more useful ways of generating and understanding knowledge from within the wider academy.

We were pleased to be asked to offer an account of the conference for Murmurations: Journal of Transformative Systemic Practice and we wanted to enter into the spirit of collaboration by writing a joint piece. We played with some different ways of doing this and opted to each share a personal account with some points of connection. Time permitting, we might have played some more until we could present as a fully collaborative piece. We were aware of a tension between attempting a single, coherent voice as a composite author while maintaining the polyvocality and unique contributions of different experiences, especially in presenting an account of a conference where so many parallel events were on offer and could never all be attended. So we offer here four pieces of writing which reflect some of our differing experiences of ECQI with points of connection to end.

ECQI 2019 website: <https://kuleuvencongres.be/ecqi2019>

Marilena

What matter matters in qualitative inquiry? For me this was the question that stayed in my mind following the conference. The energy that prevailed not only during the sessions and presentations, but also in the corridors and the hallways, was stunning!

It was the first time I have attended ECQI and it was a wonderful source of inspiration. Maybe because I am engrossed in my own doctoral research into my practice as a systemic therapist, I noticed I was making multiple connections between the presentations, my research, theory and practice. I found learning and inspiration in every corner of the conference space and I had interesting talks with colleagues and critical friends.

Between presentations I had the chance to meet people whose books and articles I have read, and I shared food, drinks and ideas with trusted friends. Of course, significant learning and inspiration took place *during* presentations and workshops as well.



From the first day, in her keynote speech about embodied activism, D. Soyini Madison talked about flow and truth; energy and rhythms. Then, Elizabeth St. Pierre stressed how important it is to invent new methodologies for qualitative inquiry, to view no methodology as a given. On becoming academics and professionals (or not), the stories we tell contribute to our narrative capital and help us be human. On this note, Edgar Rodriguez-Dorans challenged the humanity in all of us, in the role of director of a brilliant key note performance. The play, entitled “Heavier than air”, was a thought-provoking inquiry into the implied force that is required to lift into the air objects that are heavier than air, such as aeroplanes. The play, based on research with LGBTQ+ teachers, gave voice to marginalised stories and highlighted experiences of prejudice and abuse.

In our effort to construct our stories, we have our bodies to create ourselves anew, but how do we make sense of the experience of having a human body? In their key note speech, Anne Harris, in person, and Stacy Holman, via Skype (the two authors of “Heavier than air”) playfully disrupted notions of being human by entering into dialogue with each other through the voice of their pet dogs,

exploring life and death from a canine perspective. Their presentation, alongside challenging anthropocentric viewpoints, was also a vivid example of the interconnectedness of technology and humans, and how technological advances allow for human connection in space and time.

In my own presentation, I used stories from within my practice to link my research of the relational space in systemic psychotherapy to the concept of activism. Although a bit nervous, I was immersed in the experience of talking to an engaged audience and felt euphoric afterwards.

Going back to the question I asked in the beginning, I don't have a definite answer. If, as Wanda Pillow mentioned in her presentation, quoting Donna Haraway (2004, video presentation) "We have never been Human", then maybe we should start thinking what matter really matters for humanity. Opportunities like the ECQI give us space to think about how matter really matters in our systemic practices.

Mark

With regards to writing about this year's ECQI I am in danger of falling off from either side of a tight rope walk. Writing predominantly (or only) about the events (workshops, symposia...) that I contributed to (and that I am of course excited about) on one side and on the other side only writing about events that I did not contribute to but observed. The latter might be more humble but would not give a full account of my experience. Both types of experience influenced each other / are influencing each other and that is interesting to me.

Since last year's ECQI in Leuven, Sarah and I have become part of a group of people who started to call ourselves the "bodies collective" (Bodies Collective 2019, in progress). This group is collectively exploring something strongly linked to my own research context – the place of the body in academia.

On Tuesday evening, at the pre-conference event, we were warmly welcomed by the conference organisers from the University of Edinburgh. A book launch and drinks reception offered a good opportunity to mingle and create relationships with fellow researchers before the conference started in earnest. The conference was opened by Jonathan Wyatt and Rosie Stenhouse of the Centre for Creative-Relational Inquiry (CCRI) who welcomed us as a conference collective before we individually went off to the first parallel sessions, making choices about what we attended.

To begin, I attended a symposium entitled "grumbles from the left coast" that was themed around difficulties within academia, in particular the question of "what counts as research" and "what gets published?" Within this theme were diverse presentations – from how an article about female ejaculation got lost in the peer reviewing process (Alys Mendus) to how one man's "whiteness" would not have been understood by his Irish and Greek Cypriot ancestors as privilege (Arte Artemiou). Particularly the latter impressed me in its reflexivity. The presenter had managed to speak about the shifting sands of privilege whilst attending to whiteness effectively. This was a good start to proceedings which was followed by a key note presentation by D. Soyini Madison.

With her insights into "affect" and "performativity", Soyini wove specific links into the conference theme of activism, highlighting important aspects within the field of "posthuman" or "new materialist" thought. I found myself thinking that maybe this area of theory is underdeveloped or underused within systemic theory and practice.

In my own workshop we explored the embodied materiality of the self beyond the word. Using the neutral mask, a theatrical training tool developed by Jacques Lecoq (1997) we experienced

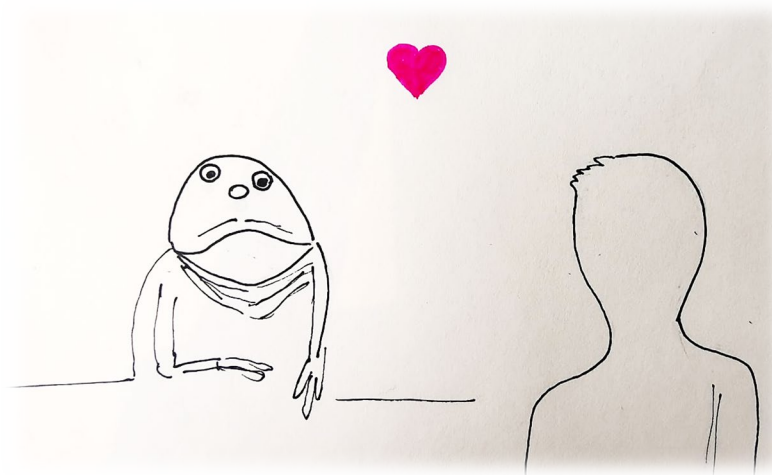
relationality differently. Participants were asked not to speak and were given leather masks to wear that, of themselves, do not suggest a particular character or emotion. As the wearing of the mask deprives the wearer of voice and the use of facial gestures, our focus moves to how the body (our positioning, breathing etc.) communicates.

I stayed in the theatrical realm attending a workshop (with Alexandra Markati) about using various embodied theatrical techniques to work with text for performance. These workshops were in many ways explorative - generating research and knowledge.

The next day followed on from this with the keynote performance particularly making me think about how research might be “re-presented”. As mentioned by Marilena, “Heavier than air” (directed by Edgar Rodriguez-Dorans) was based on the interviews of teachers from LGBTQ+ communities and their experiences of teaching in schools. This is probably where performance, activism (the theme of the conference) and qualitative research combine to actually move ‘something’. I was certainly moved. I could not help thinking, again, that affect had something to do with that.

Later, in a symposium by the Bodies Collective, we talked about the process (since last year) of what we have been engaged in - collaborative writing and other aspects of physicality. Davina Kirkpatrick spoke about the physicality of pain and how this might be translated into (and transformed by) art. Sarah Helps spoke about the body of the researcher / systemic psychotherapist that is brought into the interview process and is transformed. I showed a video of myself interviewing puppets about their experience as material and as performers. I had always been fascinated by the puppet, an assemblage of materials, at least seemingly having a voice and being able speak or perform (bring into being) their own self in front of an audience. This (more traditionally organised) symposium was maybe a counterbalance to the following morning’s Bodies Collective workshop that invited participants to “run” the workshop. Within this there were several mini-workshops or explorations, from witnessing the same physical act of drinking water, but writing very differently about it, to physically exploring ‘becoming animal’.

Amongst all this activity maybe it was helpful that there were also voices reminding us of the limits of words like activism. In the paper presentation by Phiona Stanley, questioning what she described as “voluntourism”, (volunteers from rich countries improving their CVs in developing countries in what could be seen as a (neo-)colonial action) I was challenged to think about what activism means to me.



Mark Huhnen interviewing Timrek, the hat-frog. Illustration by Claudia Canella

Leah

I thought I would share more of my overall sense of the conference with you in a trail of words that may or may not capture some of what I learnt and experienced through the three days. This was my first time at an ECQI event and I found it inspiring but also exhausting. It was intense and heady!

Grappling with methodologies - new and old; courageous and reliable - alongside sitting with the theme of activism meant that I did not stay in a headspace for long; my body (as if that were separate to my head) too was affected and infected with rage, passion, hope and fear.

There were numerous presentations (as described) that were usually pulled together under a particular theme with up to four to five different speakers reading their papers or reflecting on their research within a ninety minute frame. You had to buckle up and breathe hard to keep pace within this fast-moving ride.

Movement of people, ageing and dying, detainment without trial, plastic pollution, abuse towards women, abuse towards transgender men and women, the violence of psychopathology, victim-blaming, quests for belonging; these were all themes that captured my attention, drew me into the workshops and left me looking for answers, during and after.

The question and answer slots at the end of each ninety minutes did not always do the subjects justice. We were destined to fail, with too much to take in and respond to. Questions I asked fell short of what I wanted to ask, to say and my own presentation did the same. I prepared a paper and the obligatory PowerPoint but used neither. It did not seem to fit. Sarah Helps and I also presented together and in this space, too, we were somewhat irreverent, playful, improvisational, but also perhaps falling short of where we could have taken it. We took some risks, but also (arguably) still held back. Risk-taking was within the spirit of the conference, but there were still restraints. I was left thinking that we might still have some way to go to, not just celebrate a diversity of ideas, but to *embody* that in how we engage with and present our practice and our research. I will take this away with me, taking encouragement from some of the presentations that moved me to consider taking more risks, to be more creative, engage more in performativity.

At times I was fired up and swept away with the momentum of this conference and other times I was longing for some form that I could grab a hold of to settle me down. The key note presentations offered some such grounding. They were intelligent, thought-provoking, rich, human *and* post-human; and they offered a punctuation in the proceedings - a purposeful way to settle us all down perhaps. It helped, I needed some space to take it all in.



Answering that call was an opportunity to leave your mark on an art wall or to create your own personal art work inspired by the themes of the conference. I took the opportunity to pause, reflect and splash some paint around in a room and I enjoyed the experience. I took my time washing the paint from my hands.

I *will* take away from the conference the invitation to performativity in research and to look for ways to engage with a wider audience, not just the odd academic reader of a way too large, dusty old thesis. I think I will look back on the conference

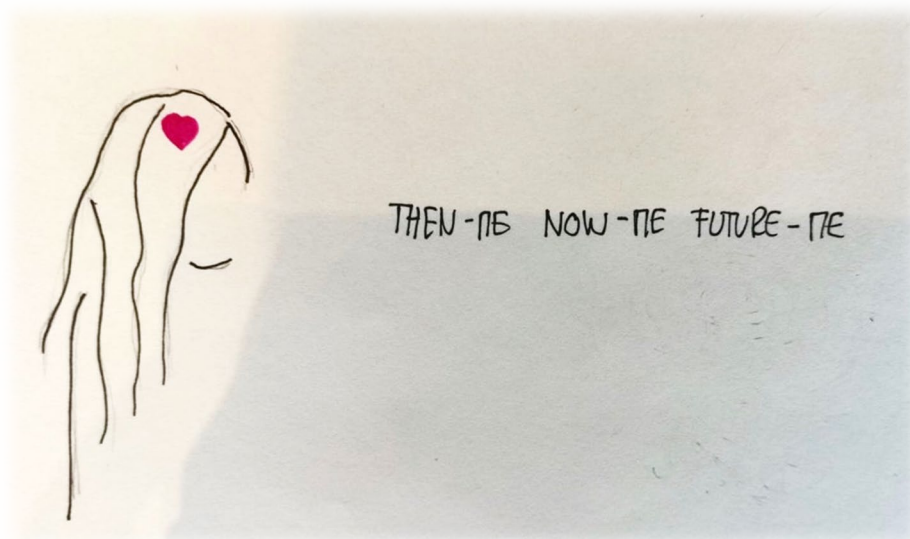
as an experience that moved my practice and research on, pushed me forward. Not bad for a three day excursion.

Sarah

I find academic conferences to be strange and exciting temporary spaces, separate from the day-job but also intersected, woven into (or intruded upon) by day-job tasks and maintaining contact with home. Conferences provide me with space to think, to play, to engage, to show (off) my own work and to think in ways that can feel squeezed out in (my) everyday life. Conference pacing is something I am learning – balancing intellectual nurturance with time to process and critique; for me two short runs across the week provided the bi-lateral stimulation to enable some thoughts to crystallise.

Having committed to presenting two papers and two other “things” at the conference, I spent slightly more time doing and presenting than listening to others. Getting a balance between presenting my own work, together with the rich dialogue that followed, soaking in others’ ideas was therefore finely balanced. I was most pleased with the reception of my paper *Then-me, Now-Me, Future-Me*. In this I explored my evolving relationship to research material and to my researcher-body and positionality over three decades. The privilege of reading one’s work aloud to attentive others, to allow it both to circulate, influence and develop is profound.

My learning developed in the keynote plenary sessions, in panel sessions that I stumbled into, on the walks and talks between presentations, around dinner and in the pub. Proper dialogue with researchers from different practice fields with such different content foci but with similar theoretical influences (including Deleuze, Barad, Braidotti, Haraway, Manning, Gale, Wyatt, Speedy), all trying to make a meaningful difference was a joy.



Then-me, Now-Me, Future-Me by Sarah Helps. Illustration by Claudia Canella

As well as appreciating the beautiful, performative ways in research findings can be communicated, whether by songs (Kitrina Douglas and David Carless) or film (in the keynotes) my unexpected pleasures included a workshop on NVivo (which led to some conversations about how it might be

used in a both-and way in the context of practitioner research); a paper by Vivienne Bozalek and colleagues on Response-able (peer) reviewing in higher education, suggesting a more affirmative, transparent, dialogical approach to peer review; and a powerfully moving set of autoethnographies including one by Reena Shah addressing the coming together of therapist and client when both are survivors of sexual abuse.

Playing around with ideas of hierarchy, of how to become our own academic heroes, of how to work collaboratively whilst accepting that we all need publications / grants / academic recognition was part of the workshop and paper session of the Bodies Collective - a group (of which I am a part) of mainly early career researchers who are interested in researching with and through the body and showing the body up in research outputs.

Overall, I was struck by the collegiality, friendship, sensory overload, moments of anxiety, professional rivalry, collaboration and love that circulated. It can be hard in so many ways (time, money, professional support, family commitments) to get to a conference and to feel part of it. The work undertaken by the conference team to create a safe-enough inclusive space to take risks and to play with ideas in the service of opening space for progress and difference seemed huge and paid off.

My overall take home message was not only the importance of doing research that matters, but of making sure that the results / findings / stories / messages of our research are communicated in clear ways, with and to people whose lives they might impact.

Some connections

Having read four different perspectives on the same conference you are likely to have formed yet another story - *your* story - of what the conference might have been like. Naturally, as we have different interests, the four of *us* were drawn to different presentations and workshops and we missed many others. We had different experiences of Edinburgh also and different experiences of coming together with other people, ideas, places. We all enjoyed the conference, although we were also all challenged in different ways, both intellectually as well and physically - with the reality of our bodies going through a conference, being seated too long, being geographically away from its usual environment etc. This is part of a story of conference-going and (perhaps unusually) has been made visible through these reflections. Ultimately, we were challenged to think anew and question what we knew.

A common theme for us seems to have been the body – its physical intra-active manifestation as matter, as materiality. Although this was not a conference that was billed as systemic, we all found connections to our own systemic practice and research; presenting “out of” this context and “into” a context that was heavy with post-human new materialist, affective and aesthetic research *as* activism. Does this mean perhaps that post-human and new materialist thinking might enrich our stories of who we think we are, as systemic practitioners and how we are moved to act? We will leave that open for you to consider for yourselves. Perhaps you will join us as presenters and participants in 2010 at ECQI.

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Citation

Karamatsouki, Marilena; Huhnen, Mark; Salter, Leah & Helps, Sarah (2019). Reflections on "Qualitative Research as Activism", the 3rd European Congress of Qualitative Inquiry, Edinburgh, February 2019. *Murmurations: Journal of Transformative Systemic Practice*, 2, 1, 81-88. <https://doi.org/10.28963/2.1.10>