

The struggle to research in the living present: abduction as activism

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In a world that calls for increasingly robust evaluative approaches to justify the allocation of resources, working with experiential research that honours experience and uncertainty can feel daunting. In a similar way, academic institutions are increasingly under pressure to perform well in an array of league tables and other structures like the Research Excellence Framework (REF). This evaluation is driven by dominant theoretical approaches that draw on linear, systems-based methods, where the transience and inevitability of what is happening in the 'here and now' of the present is often lost. This has meant that work that takes a radically social approach remains in the minority and the dearth of research in management education that draws on experience, reflection, and reflexive practice, tells its own story. Yet how often do we as researchers openly reflect on what it means to be a researcher under these conditions? Recognising the enabling-constraints of the academic games that we are caught up in reflects the idea of 'habitus' (Bourdieu, 1990, Elias, 2001) where from this perspective playing the game can be understood as a tendency to act that cannot be explained in terms of conscious rational action.

This paper addresses a gap in the literature and introduces an exploration into methodology that supports a 'radically reflective narrative' approach to research (Andrews 2018) taking place in a continuously evolving 'living present'. Working in this way questions whether narrative research is becoming a source of activism in its own right as it holds a metaphorical mirror up to explore the choices we make. The legitimacy of undertaking practice-based, narrative research can be challenged when writing about experience from 'within' experience, and yet this engagement can provide a more reality-congruent perspective on making decisions on what to do next as managers, reflective researchers and teaching practitioners. This is particularly important when researching the complexity of social contexts, as they typically have less tendency for repetition, are not open to direct observation and have greater variability and where it is also difficult to isolate phenomena within them (Levin-Rozalis, 2000). This is best understood within the pragmatist notion of 'inquiry' (Dewey, 1938). Drawing on an abductive process infers a best explanation at a particular time (Simpson, 2009) offering further exploration and explanation of the evolving nature of

practice and the fallibility of any particular conclusion (Thomas 2010). However, it is important to recognise, as Mowles (2015:168) points out, that reflexivity does not automatically lead to the good and 'can also disrupt, provoking feelings of shame, guilt, and anxiety'. In researching practice, complex ideas relating to recognition, co-construction of identity, shifting power-relating and the emergence of ethics will be used as a conceptual framework from which to explore this from a radically social perspective.

Question: In neoliberal times, is narrative research a source of activism in its own right?

Key words: living present, radically reflective narrative, abduction, recognition, identity, power, ethics

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