

The Case for Face-to-Face Research

Abstract

This paper makes the case for face-to-face qualitative work, which I feel is increasingly undervalued and lacking in methodological development. In doing so, I have elaborated the principles of my personal practice and set these alongside new psychological thinking from fields like behavioural economics and neuroimaging. To get back to basics, I outline my understanding of the origins of psychological methods and the consequences of these foundations. I have also tried to set face-to-face work in an appropriate psycho-social context because I feel it can play such a key role in sustaining democratically based commercial growth and innovation in the UK and elsewhere.

I. My Experience of Qualitative Work (1970-1990)

I am conscious of having fought for many years to gain acceptance for qualitative methods as having both utility and validity. The validity was of a different type than that found in quantitative studies, where validity is often based on statistical formulae which confer robustness on results, being more a face-validity derived from working beneath the surface to understand how products and services interacted with needs and the circumstances of people's lives - but no less true nor valuable for that.

All through the 1970's and into the 80's qualitative work gradually became accepted industry wide as a tool for learning about customers. By the mid-eighties, working with my friend Wendy Gordon, we had already come up with a development of qualitative group discussions which we called New Qualitative Research – containing as it did much more flexibility and expressive work, designed to refresh the already emerging formulaic nature of much qualitative endeavour¹. In those days, the maxim, 'two groups in the North, two in the South', was joked about as the standard template for many so-called qualitative inquiries. Regrettably too, the use of this type of work had already by 1985 evolved from the more insightful 'discovery' studies into 'evaluation' projects where groups were used to weigh up the virtues of one approach to communication over others.

Other things were growing alongside this burgeoning focus group industry that added to the bureaucratic and formulaic nature of the work. Viewing facilities with their mock-casual sitting rooms, animatics companies who produced partially animated versions of commercials and video-hire companies who delivered the playback equipment to your venue were all doing brisk business. Gradually and invisibly, what was once a unique and bold method of inquiry became more pedestrian, driven by the systematisation adopted by researchers and clients alike – 90 minute focus groups with tight topic guides containing far too many questions about the product - and far too few opportunities for people to share about their lives and the role of goods or services within them.

My approach has always centred on creating time, space and encouragement to participants to bring themselves more fully to research proceedings, and to allow them to introduce themselves from their interests and concerns – and then to move to the

role of goods and services within these lives. In general practice it was more commonplace to kick off with a five-minutes of brief introductions, followed by plunging in great detail into every conceivable ramification of product or communications that might or might not be of interest to participants. It is of little surprise to me that many clients and researchers alike feel that the superficial proceedings of the bog-standard focus group can be replaced by online sessions or by a newfound interest like Behavioural Economics or Neuropsychology.

I believe that twenty years on from the 1990's (when I launched my first co-creation projects, starting in 1991) and at the end of the Noughties, we have reached a point where the search for fresh vitality and efficacy in research has arisen again. In terms of novelty, cost per respondent and some undoubted elements of new theoretical ideas, things like online research, behavioural economics and neuropsychology all seem to offer refreshment both of process and principles. It falls perhaps to me with my history and vested interest in the science of authentic contact to make an impassioned plea for the restoration of good face-to-face practice.

Are Behavioural Economics² & Neuropsychology³ new voices in Psychology?

In the past year I have attended and participated in a variety of gatherings and discussions focused on new developments in market research. Many of these have had a principle in common: they have relied upon means of observing or measuring people using systems that are largely invisible to those people or respondents as we refer to them in market research procedures. Some of these systems use technologies from medicine (fMRI or EEG or other Neuropsychology tools), while others use the matched sampling techniques favoured by social psychology or RCT'S (Randomised Controlled Trials⁴) – in which the individual members of the sample cannot see or are not shown the results across the various conditions.

At no time have I heard an impassioned plea for the special value of face-to-face contact with members of the public, whether in large or small groups or one-to-one. I am saddened by the sudden clamour for methods that favour the objectification of our respondents rather than those that depend on building fruitful and revelatory relationships with them. This paper is a plea to renew our faith, our skills and our ingenuity in building such relationships and generally for the value of face-to-face contact as a means of coming to know about people.

There is, as you might expect, a long tradition of tension between the relational schools⁵ and the so called 'objective' tradition and as part of my plea I would like to remind readers of a little of that history.

For most of the 20th Century two dissenting voices shaped the discourse about human nature and how to set about exploring it. The first, originating in the USA, is a general theory of psychology based in learning theory and has the following characteristics:

1. An emphasis on objectivism, and avoidance of the subjective as evidence

2. Dedication to experimental procedures for hypothesis forming and testing
3. Reductionist principles in interpretation – the idea that complex matters are best explained by breaking them down or simplifying them
4. An attitude of hard-headedness or rationality in approach

In essence this approach boils down to a theory of human nature as something that arises out of learning experiences and these, at their most simple, are best seen as variations on operant conditioning – where the principles of punishment, reward & repetition shape what is learned – and that new learning or re-education is simply a matter of re or de-conditioning the human subject⁶.

This trend has behind it a huge weight of supporting attitudes in American psychology and business. As I see it the underlying principle is: 'Let's get away from the vague and philosophical towards a more practical, defined and specific science of behaviour.'

In such views we ourselves are nothing more than subjects who are moulded by conditioning circumstances. The future is determined by the past. Proponents of this approach include Watson, Skinner and Hull and the applications of it are far reaching, from learning theory applied to teaching in schools to Cognitive Behavioural Therapy. For many decades this has been the primary force in American – and to some extent British - psychology.

Where do Behavioural Economics & Neuropsychology Fit?

I believe that in spite of protestations by their supporters that these are practices that take into account the states of minds of people, both Behavioural Economics and Neuropsychology are firmly in the first, American Rationalist camp. How do I know this? Well, read any behavioural economic or neuropsychology texts and you will find interesting and exciting ideas, **but you won't meet any people there**. I suggest too, that at the end of the book you will feel that you have been on a stretching course in statistics, experimental methods and analytical procedures but you won't know your real self any better or have any genuine improvement in your empathy with others.

Colleagues who have opted for Behavioural Economics or Neuropsychology as an alternative to face to face contact have largely, I believe, bought into the belief that people don't know why they do what they do, when in reality, those people have simply not conducted an appropriate journey towards 'inward sight' or insight to discover their deeper motivations. Correspondingly while insight has been a buzzword for the past fifteen years, many do not perceive it as a function of inward sight, but merely as a discovery of new information. It is, I believe, the poor quality of most qualitative inquiries, denatured as they have been by bureaucracy and formulaic procedures that has led to this sense of disappointment and the need for a 'new' solution. You can get an idea of the hunger for insight if you count the number of Insight Directors, Managers and Departments around our business community, not to mention the sheer number of research practitioners who offer insight as their core capability.

However, virtually the entire text of Behavioural Economics is based on studies done with university students or by university departments, where it is feasible to obtain matched samples or to repeat studies under different conditions. These methods are very difficult to replicate among real populations – requiring as they do the level of design sophistication and commitment, mixed with not a little patience - which I am trying to bring to the extended qualitative encounters that we have developed under the name of Breakthrough Psychology⁷. Exactly the same, with slightly different methodological boundaries can be said for Neuropsychology. As a family who has experienced more than its fair share of EEG procedures, we are only too aware both of the discomfort and distortion of the experimental conditions and the difficulties in interpretation.

Haven't we been this way before?

As a psychologist and qualitative practitioner of some years experience, I have seen lots of 'new' fashions appear over the decades. Neuro-linguistic Programming and Transactional Analysis are two examples which I took up myself with great enthusiasm in earlier years. The attraction to these schools lasted a few years in both cases, but eventually I came to see that their theories and ideas could no more be stretched to cover all circumstances than could Freudianism or Jung's archetypes.

Among the new fashions, let us take as an example, Behavioural Economics, arguably the hottest flavour of the season. What are its key ideas and are they new?

The history of progress is the history of new language. With its new terms and its own jargon, Behavioural Economics brings a refreshing vigour and new vitality to cognitive social psychology. But before we embrace the new language wholeheartedly, it might be worth a moment's pause to see if these ideas are things we have visited before, albeit in slightly different words.

Heuristics – originally a part of phenomenology as distinguished by Husserl⁸, heuristics falls firmly into the relational school of psychology, with its focus on subjective process. But is it new? We have been drawing mind maps, decision trees and customer journeys for a long time and trying in our way to portray the routes and short cuts that people take in perceiving and deciding. Choice Architecture is the stylish title given by Behavioural Economics to the naming of heuristics.

Satisficing and Maximising – originating from work done by Simon in 1956⁹ – this is exactly what the supermarkets created with DOBs (Dealers Own Brands) from the 1960's onwards. It was these supermarkets that taught us to buy good enough, cheaper products rather than premium ones. Satisficing is learned behaviour and we have been practicing it in increasing measure for many years. While we might 'satisfice' ourselves on a daily basis, each one of us occasionally buys premium products once in a while in an attempt to 'maximise'.

Framing – we have been stressing the importance of context and the relevance of products and services to the things that matter to customers for years. Similar to framing is reframing – a technique used for revitalizing or repositioning goods

and services for years – for an example look at the work on Lucozade from the 1980's¹⁰.

Loss aversion – insurance companies have long understood and used this lever in their advertising: "We won't make a drama out of a crisis!" (Commercial Union) and 'Get the strength of the insurance companies around you' - insurance industry sponsored campaigns - are good examples. It is good to see the extent to which we will go to avoid losses – even imagined rather than real ones - and here the Behavioural Economists have done some original quantification.

These are the main ideas being put forward, at least for the moment by proponents of Behavioural Economics. While the new language has happily drawn us to reconsider and re-evaluate these four cognitive tendencies of human beings, I do not think these can be considered as original ideas, although some of the empirical demonstrations are impressive.

What is the alternative?

In Europe, which was not as affected by scientism, there arose a different perspective. The prevailing belief is that *human* behaviour is in significant ways, something more than the behaviour of laboratory animals. This has led, particularly in the hands of the existentialists, to a view of human nature that is quite different from that of the learning theorists. Because that view is less familiar and less easy to condense into a paragraph, I would like to outline the principles that underpin it and differentiate it from the experimentalists – because it is this perspective which form the basis of my practices in creating relational depth in face-to-face studies:

1. Every person's experience of living is centred in themselves. Any opportunity or threat to that centre will be experienced as a challenge to the self. Much of what we are is driven by attempts to avoid or ward off threats to our established centre. Many of our dilemmas arise out of indecision about whether or how to seize opportunities to expand our centre. Goods and services offer some avenues for either expansion or defence. Most of these processes are invisible to others, who have their own, personal versions of them.
2. Thus, every living person has the characteristic of self-affirmation – formed out of the need to preserve his centredness. From this place, each of us builds an identity. This identity is not a fixed set of traits or behaviours; it is continually moulded and updated by circumstances, although defensive (mal)adaptive characteristics persist in all of us.
3. All people have the need to go out from that centredness to participate with others.
4. The subjective side of centredness is self-awareness. It is within this awareness that we live from moment-to-moment as we make our way in the world.
5. The uniquely human form of self-awareness is *self-consciousness*. This consciousness is the basis of our capacity to transcend the immediate situation *and*

live in terms of the possible. This in turn constitutes the basis of psychological freedom. It means that the future is not the past, but a place of possibility.

6. Self-consciousness is also the basis of insight, which can be best described as 'inward sight'. Insight is the precursor of new possibilities. It is also the path to better explanations of existing behaviour.
7. The inescapable consequence of self-consciousness is *anxiety*. That is something that every person must live with. Nearly every person is prone to ask in the hours of the night questions they would avoid during the day. Anxiety arises primarily out of the choice of whether and how to stand up for one's own potential. "Shall I stay here, where it seems safe or venture out into something more unknown?" Again, goods and services offer opportunities both for security or adventure.
8. The evolution of more complex states – like that of self-awareness – means that things cannot be seen any longer as the sum of the earlier more primitive elements. They must now all be viewed through the lens of the new complex level, as a gestalt, where self-consciousness is often in the driving seat.¹¹

It is in these 8 points that I believe we find the reasons why people can be mysteries to themselves, why their reasons or explanations for their behaviour are sometimes provably inaccurate. My explanation goes like this: because people are anxious both about what challenges might do to them and their need to preserve the centredness they have achieved (e.g. the semblance of sensible, grown-up rational adults that they present to the world), they will often conflate or invent spurious rationales so that others cannot witness the turbulence and protectionism – including adherence to habits and ideas that are clearly sub-optimal, yet originate from powerful sources – that often dominate their choices and decisions. For such reasons someone can, for example, cling to a primitive belief because their mother or father impressed it on them as a vital strategy for coping in the world: for example, "Don't talk to strangers."

I believe firmly in the value of creating the conditions for authentic contact and relational depth and that in doing so we can produce a micro-culture¹² that is rich in insight and exploration of things that are superficially mysterious to us. After 20 years of practicing in this mode, I have ample evidence of successes in insight and innovation from the practice of spending time in building relationships that permit deeper enquiries and inward-sight.

For me, then, the core of qualitative research has always been authentic contact. I would like now to offer my thoughts on how to create that.

Part of the failure of in-depth approaches is the conflict between the various schools of understanding [Freudians, Gestalt, NLP, Transactional Analysis, Adlerians to mention just a few – there are more than 450 'schools' of psychotherapy each with its own proclaimed techniques and method of interpretation¹³] resulting in a refusal to boil their principles down into a usable guide for practitioners and clients alike. One school values transference, another Ego States while a third talks of the Inferiority Complex and the

power of status. Each uses its own jargon; each clings to a different model of causes and effects. Just as do Behavioural Economics & Neuropsychology.

If we could get round these factions with their conflicts, ***what would a formulation of central principles for a valid in-depth psychological approach be, based upon the 8 founding observations about human nature described earlier?***

First, I would like to draw your attention to something that I have noticed in my years of trying to make contact with others. Gradually, I noticed that I was more effective if I could create a climate in which people could undertake much of the work themselves, to explore, analyze, understand and generate new hypotheses to explain things.

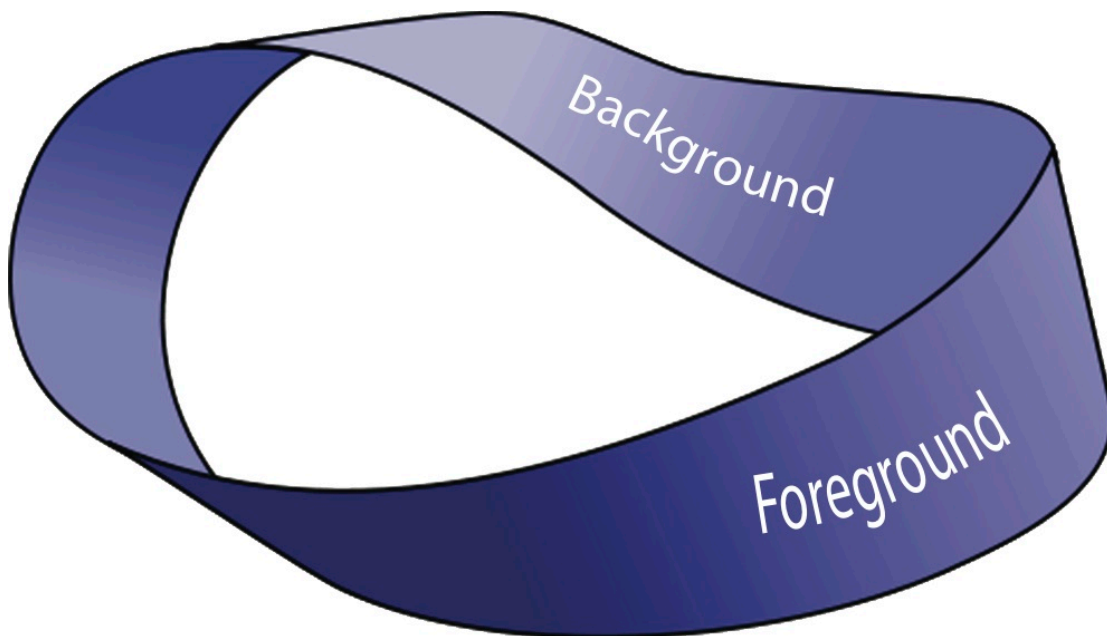
In recent years I have come to realize that my own biggest asset in creating such climates was the degree to which I was *real* myself. That only when I am a transparently real person, and can be perceived as such by my respondents, can they discover what is real in them. When I fail in research it is as a result of a failure to be what I deeply am. Inevitably modern research's preoccupation with structure and bureaucracy in the form of topic guides, detail and the paraphernalia of recruitment, viewing facilities, observing people seen or unseen, all contribute to the distortion of the ability to be real and open around each other. These artifacts, each defensible in its own right, add up to a distortion of natural rapport that is then covered up by a *pretence* that we are all relaxed, being ourselves, answering truthfully.

Second, why on earth would people want you to know what is really going on inside them? Especially if those same people are engaged with you in some encounter, the end game of which is to influence them to buy or use more, or do something different. For the participants the reward may be fifty, even a hundred pounds, but for the sponsoring client, the reward might be many millions in improved sales. Their defensiveness may also be heightened by the fact that once you scrape the surface, many of our motivations are not very noble. We are driven by needs for status, greed, lust, suspicion, antagonism or competitiveness as much as by any higher motives. To reveal these and, at the same time, render ourselves and our families more susceptible to influence for a few quid may not seem like a very fair exchange.

For this reason, part of what appears to be lack of self-awareness is simply the covering up we all do to avoid being seen as what George Bernard Shaw called: *'a feverish little clod of ailments and grievances, complaining that the world will not make you happy.'*

Third, it is risky enough, even in a loving environment to reveal what I call the Background Voice – that continual, sub-vocal presence that occurs as a voice in the head, that accompanies every moment of consciousness. It says such unpredictable things. And the more under pressure you feel the more bizarre, aggressive, defensive, disrespectful it becomes. It makes lustful pronouncements, hostile attacks, self-critical condemnations and what appear to be random non-sequiturs. Who can easily admit to having a cross between a four year old, a sex addict and a tyrannical maniac in the centre of their heads?

Here is what I consider to be an accurate representation of human consciousness as it operates on a moment-to-moment basis.



The Foreground includes everything that you say or do out loud, or in the public space so to speak, while the background runs a continual commentary on events, you, others and the world. It has become common to regard this background as hidden, but my experience is that it is much nearer the surface at every moment than any of us can easily admit, and that the smallest trigger can bring it to the surface. It is this interlocking feature that the Möbius strip represents well. Part of what well designed in-depth work can do is to create a safe environment to illuminate and explore this inner world of our Background Voice.

This brings me to my **fourth** principle: there is a set of activities and an ontology (way of being you can adopt) that hugely increases people's willingness to uncover, examine and reveal their background voices.

And from here, number **five**: I have found that when people reveal elements of their background dialogue, that underlying beliefs, values and motives swim into view. In other words that when you open the box and take a few things out, all sorts of new things become visible in turn.

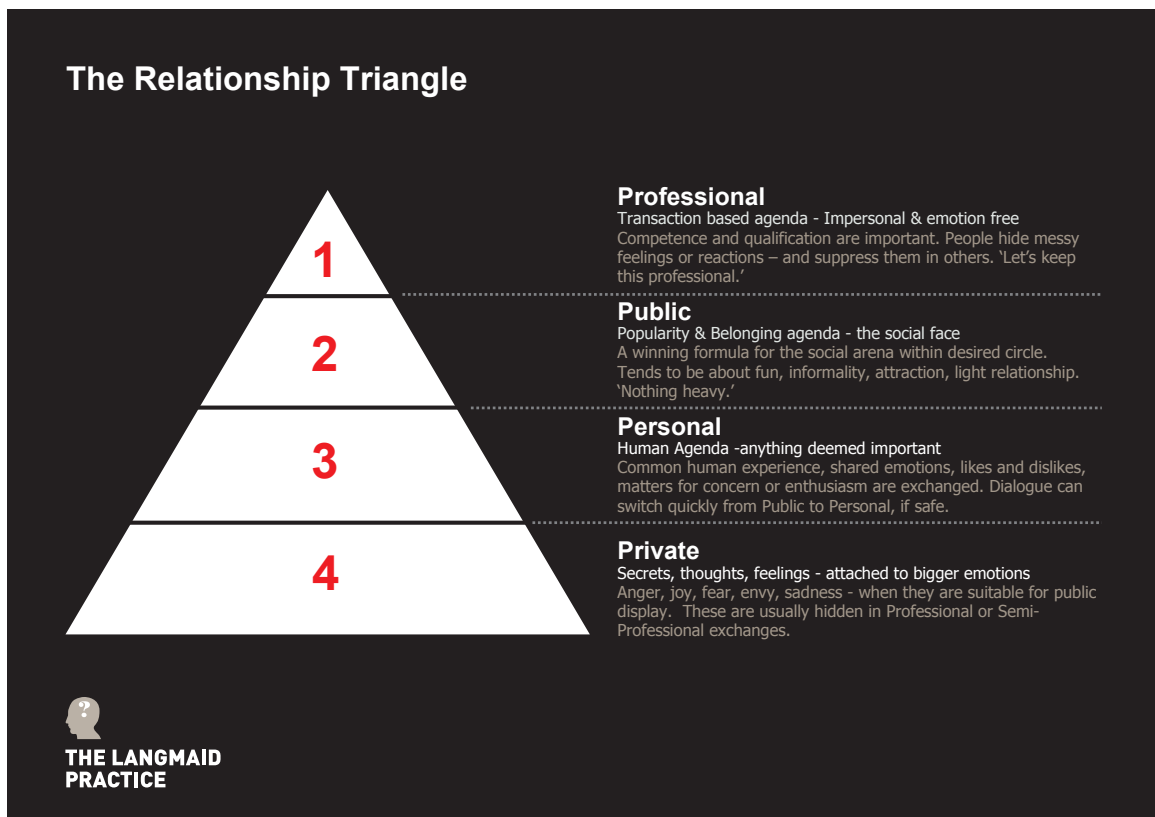
Sixth, we have, I believe, discovered processes and empirically validated a set of steps that make this journey towards 'inward sight' a path that while less travelled, can be followed. Here are the steps followed by a brief discussion of each in turn:

1. A Powerful Invitation

What you are invited to makes a huge difference to the state of mind in which you show up. You should aim for invitations that are both truthful and exciting. Invite people both to talk about their lives, what matters to them or concerns them and to invent new possibilities, whether for new or existing things. "Come and help us invent the future of flying" is one example.

2. Creating Relationship

You cannot uncover deep background material in Professional or Public relationships. You have to venture into Personal, even Private ones. These can be created as part of the opening procedures of in-depth sessions. The Relational Triangle featured below – and how to move between levels is part of what we practice in our face-to-face work and teach in our facilitation courses.



I am indebted to my friend and co-author Mac Andrews for his invention & development of this model and the distinctions within it. My suggestion is that you should familiarise yourself with these levels and how they operate in everyday life, paying attention to the conditions that facilitate or inhibit transitions between levels so that you can facilitate these in your work.

. For a fuller explanation of this diagram I have made a short film describing this model. You can find it here: <http://www.langmaidpractice.com/blog/435/>

3. Creating Safety & Boundaries

People will not long tolerate open environments and encounters unless they feel safe. Safety and boundaries must be put in place with simple, understandable rules that people sign up to. As a facilitator or moderator, you must enforce these agreements.

4. Creating Permission

Even with all the above in place, people still need permission to step 'out of the box' – so strong are the traditions and inhibitions of culture in everyday life. Simple ways of creating permission must be included so that the group can experience new permission together.

5. Providing and creating resources

If you want people to improve, invent, articulate, improvise or otherwise build things based upon insight you must provide them with the relevant materials and time to manifest such things. You can see a short video of passengers and staff building the mock cabins that eventually became the First Class Suites on the Singapore Airlines Airbus380 here: www.langmaidpractice.com

You can also view what I believe is the insight spoken by a respondent that led to the first market research driven example of co-creation (1997), here: www.langmaidpractice.com

6. Practicing Inward Sight

You need to have at your disposal a number of procedures for helping people to look within themselves. These need to use different accessing mechanisms – for example visualisation, emotion, metaphor, game playing, story telling and so on.

7. Sharing Discoveries

Insights tend not to happen to order or in routine manner – and are often the product of a single mind working in the group. Through sharing the insights of the group can be disseminated, built on and realized. Thus the group can participate in the insights of single members.

8. Building New Perspectives

New insights create new occurring. How does the world change in the presence of our insights? This is a process of building possibility.

9. Trying out new possibilities

What would we do/think/feel differently once the new insights had been implemented?

10. Completion and Implementation

This is an important step to conclude and thank people – and to give them truthful information about what you will do as a result of their work and inspiration.

Of course, going through these steps takes time – and a ninety-minute session simply will not suffice. Two days is optimal in my experience, but one day will suffice if you are in a hurry. Ask yourself, are you willing to put that much time into getting to know people, being willing to disclose yourself and build trusting relationships rich in possibility? Is it our reluctance to devote this much commitment, time and energy to a single group of people that inhibits our insight seeking?

The Inevitability of Errors

We are all reluctant to admit how big a role our errors in foresight play in everyday life. Partly perhaps because such errors fuel our anxiety by demonstrating that luck or circumstance continue to play as large a part in our fates as our well-laid plans and partly because we simply overestimate our ability to calculate probability.

Whichever style of inquiry you pursue, qual or quant, there will be errors in your results – especially if these contain an element of that perennial source of uncertainty – human states of mind. If you follow quantitative procedures, you may be able to reduce the likelihood of error within your sample space, but you will need to narrow down that sample space and the scope of your measurements in order to make your algorithms reliable. In so doing you may easily miss an important factor from outside your sample space – a life event like unemployment or loss of a spouse – or an unexpected new invention from another arena, like email, which swept away the fax or the cellular phone which seems likely to do the same to land lines. By narrowing the odds in this way you may reduce likelihood of error within the sample space, but you risk making such space unreliably reflective of real lives.

At the qualitative end of the spectrum, the issue is that of a sample space which is too large – in which too many factors are vying for attention – as so often happens in decisions in real life. In our 10 Step methodology, above, we have attempted both to permit the large sample space by inviting whole persons into our space and also to facilitate their participation so that they narrow this space down for themselves by reflecting on events and circumstances in both their inner and external worlds.

Nonetheless, whichever road you choose – even if you opt for a blend of these methods – you will face the fact that you are susceptible to errors in prediction. But as you will discover if you persist as a practitioner, the difference between a successful and unsuccessful practitioner is more to do with not giving up than it is with tools, tricks or techniques. It might surprise you to learn that JK Rowling received twelve rejections before Bloomsbury accepted the first Harry Potter manuscript¹⁴.

Summary: the primary importance of self-consciousness

The group of scientists and researchers who favour reductionism, either via essentialism or experimentalism – and these include all forms of segmentation, trait analysis and personality typologies – choose to ignore one vital piece of information; *the presence of self-consciousness changes everything*.

In short, *self-consciousness, acts as the lens through which all of our behaviour – especially in front of others, but even in front of the internal judgment of our own conscience – is filtered*. We will withhold aspects of our behaviour that embarrass, shame us, make us vulnerable, or that reveal less noble desires, much as a stammerer tries desperately to hide her stammer, a paunchy person his tummy or a short person his lack of height. Thus what we show to each other is entirely modified by what we think others might think of us. As Mark Earls suggests in the brilliant 'Herd'¹⁵ we are socially conditioned and socially determined to a much higher degree than we find it

comfortable to admit. We continually suppress our Background Voice lest it should embarrass, reveal or humiliate us.

It was Freud's genius to notice that this self-consciously driven withholding of information even extended to our own selves – we will hide from our own sight recognition of some of our motives and desires almost as much as from others. But we are aware at some level of all of these defensive, adaptive manoeuvres, as the whole industry of psychotherapy has shown; it is possible to mount a fruitful enquiry into the architecture of our wishes, hopes and fears.

But therapy itself is full of much humbug and fakery. All of the research into psychotherapy reveals that the school of therapy or the system of interpretation makes no difference in the outcomes to therapy, nor even does the length of experience or practice of the therapist. The factors which count towards a successful therapeutic outcome are:

1. the level of empathy of the therapist (throughout this list the word therapist is exchangeable for facilitator or 'moderator' in market research and the word client is replaced by respondent).
2. the quality and strength of the collaborative relationship between the therapist and the client.
3. the level of agreement on the goals of the process.
4. the level of positive regard that the therapist has for his client.
5. the therapist's congruence or authenticity.
6. the therapists level of self-disclosure
7. the willingness and preparedness to overcome or repair breakdowns in relatedness.

These are exactly the factors that we attempt to replicate in our face-to-face qualitative work. Make no mistake, we are not fooling ourselves that we are therapists – therapists themselves already do too much of that – we are simply using empirical evidence to create the most fruitful conditions for inward sight or insight.

Among those conditions for successful therapy, some are essential for the best results in commercial qualitative practice. The two key components for research that gets beneath the defences of self-consciousness are:

- a. the presence of empathic others
- b. viewing participants as creative, capable, fully formed human beings and regarding them positively – as if you are sure that their efforts to discover or uncover things will reap rewards.

Perhaps it would be lovely if we could measure and predict each other by holding rulers or scales up to each other, but I do not think it would do much more than make life more predictable and formulaic. It is a fact of life that even with the mirror of others and their characters around us, it still requires effort to see beyond the veil of convention, culture and manners and glimpse the real drivers of our behaviour.

Conclusions

The importance of face-to-face contact – in every walk of life.

I have tried to tell it as I see it and explain the basis of my own practice. I hope I have managed to convince some of you that the practice of face-to-face work in depth is founded at best on a robust model of human nature. I would be short-changing readers were I not to make it clear that I do not think the deliberations here are of interest only to market researchers. It goes deeper than that, because the type of contact and interactions that are in favour are the building blocks of our culture and its possibilities. It is not just that face-to-face contact is more methodologically sound: here in the 21st century in the developed world where capitalism rules the day, the ownership of property - from the largest mansion to the smallest packet of pins - and the distribution of resources is the single most obvious determinant of status and means of taking steps up the ladder to a better standard of living.

That means, whether we like it or not, *consumer matters are political matters* since politics is the place where the laws governing ownership, taxes, distribution of resources and benefits or penalties for citizens are decided. It is also the arena where fundamental choices about health, education, transport and infrastructure are made – and these affect all of us, whether we are on the ascent or declining. It is among these things that the gateways and barriers to progress are to be found.

As a researcher, I am convinced by the worldwide study and analysis of the vastly different outcomes between more and less equal societies conducted by Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett and published as '*The Spirit Level*'⁴⁶. Here the authors argue that more equal societies – or societies where wealth and resources are more evenly distributed – are happier, more functional societies on a whole battery of measures. From the late 19th Century until the 1970's the advanced societies of the West were all becoming less unequal. And then it changed. In the US and the UK, the wealthy today are defined by their financial transactions rather than their production of goods and the gap between the well-off and the less well-off is growing. You might be surprised to learn that in the developed world on all of the indices below, more equal societies perform better than unequal ones – where equality is defined by the distribution of incomes.

1. Infant mortality
2. Life expectancy
3. Crime rates
4. Mental illness
5. Unemployment
6. Obesity
7. Malnutrition
8. Drug abuse
9. Teenage pregnancy
10. Personal Debt
11. Anxiety – more unequal societies are more anxious.

This is enough to convince me, alongside my own wish for a society determined by fairness and equality of opportunity and which values looking out for each other as much as looking out for ourselves, that authentic contact between members of that society is never less than valuable – and if not conducted on a regular basis, quickly leads to imbalance, where the wealthy and powerful objectify their ‘customers’ - us ordinary citizens – and are tempted to employ sophisticated techniques to manipulate us via prurient research, contracts, promises and enticements and find workarounds that circumvent our reasonable defences.

It has been my fortune to play my part in constructing a level playing field in society through the medium of consumer research – and here, I have always insisted that the lowliest consumer, be she single mum, disabled widower or tongue tied teenager has as much right to, and – with skillful facilitation – as much access to insight as the jet-setter or CEO. I have been profoundly changed by listening to others and I hope those changes have made me a wiser and better counsel in my turn.

We must, I believe, embrace the wisdom that is inherent in each of us, wisdom of life experience or the streets as much as the lessons from the classroom, and by listening to each other talk authentically about our trials and joys, hopes and fears, let everyone play a part in the development of goods, services and institutions that will benefit us all. There is no better setting for this activity than the informed participation of people in face-to-face contact struggling to achieve insight as part of the journey to new possibilities.

Bibliography

1. Gordon, W and Langmaid, R, *New Qualitative Research – A Course for the Association of Qualitative Practitioners, AQRP*, 1987.
2. There are a couple of classics of Behavioural Economics for my money and these are, in order of date ‘*Nudge*’ by Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein, Caravan Books, 2008 and ‘*Predictably Irrational*’ by Dan Ariely Harper Collins, 2008. I think Ariely’s book is a better read.
3. There are an increasing number of books on Neuropsychology as interest grows. My three favourites are: ‘*Mapping the Mind*’ by Rita Carter, Wiedenfeld & Nicolson 1998, ‘*The Brain and the Inner World*’, by Mark Solms & Oliver Turnbull, Karnac Books, 2002, and a strangely self-congratulatory text with virtually no data but huge claims by Martin Lindstrom, called *Buy-o-logy*.
4. RCT’s or Randomised Controlled Trials are considered by many to be the ‘gold standard’ of research. They rely upon the principle of randomization through which participants in the trial are randomly assigned to experimental groups. They are particularly prevalent in the pharmaceutical industry. At any time a staggering number of clinical trials are under way. In 2001 in the USA there were more than 80,000. (*The Truth about the Drug Companies*, Marcia Angell, MD, Random House, 2004).

5. The Relational Schools is a term borrowed from psychotherapeutic practice. It was first applied to the practices of Carl Rogers, the founder of humanistic therapy, where focus was applied for the first time to the qualities of the relationship between therapist and client – much as I am advocating focus on the quality of relationship between researchers, respondents and clients.
6. For a decent introduction to behaviourism, try '*Psychology for the Classroom, Behaviourism*' by John Woollard, Routledge 2010. Or you could try one of the originals, like John B Watson's '*Behaviourism*' or Skinner's '*Beyond Freedom and Dignity*'. A good critique of behaviourism is to be found in Erich Fromm's masterpiece, '*The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*,' Pimlico, 1997, (pp62-107). Don't be put off by the title; this book is a compassionate, wise exploration of the darker sides of human nature.
7. Many of the principles of Breakthrough Psychology are to be found in this paper. I started to develop my thinking about it in the 1990's when I noticed that most psychology texts had absolutely nothing to say about love, power, fear, will, money or trust – things which concern most of us every day. I have done some more work on iterating these principles over the summer of 2011 and will soon publish a charter on Breakthrough Psychology. For the moment, you will find more here: <http://www.langmaidpractice.com/breakthrough-psychology/>
8. Try '*An Introduction to Phenomenology*' by Dermot Moran, Routledge, 2000.
9. Simon, H. A, (1956). "*Rational choice and the structure of the environment*". *Psychological Review*, Vol. 63 No. 2, 129-138. (page 129: "Evidently, organisms adapt well enough to 'satisfice'; they do not, in general, 'optimize'."; page 136: "A 'satisficing' path, a path that will permit satisfaction at some specified level of all its needs.")
10. You will find a mention here: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lucozade>. Let me know if you would like to know more about both this and Guinness as examples of Reframing.
11. It would be great had I been clever enough to figure these out for myself, but I'm not! I have adapted and added to work pioneered by Rollo May and reported in a wonderful little book: '*Existential Psychology*', Edited by Rollo May, McGraw Hill 1969. I hope that I have managed in my adaptation to show how these components of human nature are relevant to the pursuit of consumer insight.
12. You can read more about creating a micro-culture, rich in creative potential here: *International Journal of Market Research* Vol. 52 Issue 1. '*Start listening, stop asking.*'
13. For a fantastic review of the facts and figures surrounding psychotherapy and an analysis of all the meta-studies that show what works to help/change people – and how it works, see: '*Essential Findings in Psychotherapy and Counselling – the Facts are Friendly*', by Mick Cooper, Sage 2008. Mick is a tireless investigator of the

science of human contact and his books and leadership at the University of Strathclyde provide an academic model of the path we committed qualitative researchers might well follow.

14. Press accounts of the number of rejection she received vary from nine to twelve. You can find more about it here: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/J._K._Rowling
15. Earls, Mark, '*Herd – how to change mass behaviour by harnessing our true nature*', John Wiley and Sons, 2007.
16. Wilkinson R and Prickett K, '*The Spirit Level*', Penguin Books, 2009.