



SAGE Research Methods Video

Researching Innovation in Qualitative Research Using In-depth Case Studies

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My name's Melanie Nind, and I'm a professor of education at the University of Southampton and also the co-director of the National Centre for Research Methods and today I'm talking about innovation in research methods and that comes from a piece of research I did on that theme with my colleague, Rose Wiles within the center.

In the tutorial, I'm going to talk you through four things. Firstly, how you go about researching innovation, innovation in research methods. Secondly the nature of innovation, what it means to innovate. Thirdly, how innovation happens, the process, the journey of innovation. And, lastly, why researchers innovate.

Why do they do it? So when my colleagues and I decided to research innovation, we had to narrow some parameters. So the innovation in research methods that I'm talking about today is innovation in qualitative methods only and within the social sciences.

One of the interesting things, really, is that we didn't go about researching innovation in very innovative ways. When we were advertising and interviewing for a researcher, researchers were coming along and saying, I do it this way and this way and coming up with all kinds of weird and wonderful methods. But us rather long in the tooth researchers, we know that actually to get to grips within innovation,

we needed, one, first of all, to engage with the literature. And all those people who write their articles starting with, This was an innovation that I did. Or, we use this innovative method. So to analyze the literature for innovation claims, and secondly, to just do some really good in depth case studies of who's claiming, why they're claiming,

what other people think of their innovation, how that innovation became accepted by others so the research question around the nature of innovation ironically didn't require very innovative research methods. So fitness for purpose is a theme that every research methods teacher will always emphasize,

and it mattered to this project too. For the literature part of the study, we were looking for papers where people self-identified innovation, and we did that looking for keywords in the title or the abstract. And those were innovation, new, novel, and emerging. What looking at the literature showed

us was that there were ultimately three main kinds of claims to innovation. The first one is inception, this claim to have genuinely found or developed something that's absolutely new. The second one is adaptation. So they claim to have taken something and adapted it to such an extent that what has been developed

is, in essence, new, whether it came from something else. And the third type is adoption, and that's where, say, social science researchers, sociologists will take something from the arts, the use of photographs or video, for instance, in the arts, and use that as a research method in social policy

research. So it's adopting something from a different context for a new purpose and thereby creating a claim for innovation on novelty. And in terms of the in depth case studies, we chose three. We chose to look at Robert Kozinets work on netnography,

and netnography is a way of doing ethnography or immersing yourself in a culture. But for him, this was a culture on the net, the internet culture or Facebook or any kind of online interaction really. The second case study was Mary Kellett who was doing innovation in terms of child-led research.

So lots of people had been involving children in research, but Mary's innovation was to say that the children should lead that research. They should be the ones in charge. So it wasn't so much a method but an approach involving a collection of methods. And the third one we selected was David

Gauntlett's creative methods.

He's written a book about creative methods, and his particular innovation was around using LEGO, LEGO serious play, in which the LEGO was the tool for the research participants to say something about themselves. So he did stuff around build yourself a LEGO model that depicts your identity or who you are.

So he had these very kind of creative LEGO based methods. So in all of this, looking at the case studies, looking at the literature, we had to really work up our own definition of innovation in methods as well as engage with the definitions that people themselves that we were talking to and reading

about were using. And I think the most important kind of definition or thing is that innovation doesn't equate with gimmick. Innovation is something that you're doing that is new but for a real genuine purpose, not just for the sake of it being new. Also in terms of our definition, we were concerned with innovation as being something

that comes out of complex social situations which generate that kind of desire to innovate. Lastly, I think for our terms today, innovation can be about establishing absolutely new methods, or it can be about adapting methods for new purposes, new context, new situations.

Not everybody is absolutely in agreement, of course, about what makes innovation. One of the big debates is how far the innovation has to have become established. So I always argue that lots of students who are doing master's degrees or PhDs, they're innovative with their methods. They're quite creative.

But if they just do something new and it's only ever them that does it and nothing else ever happens to that method, lots of people would say that isn't an innovation. That an innovation is something that other people take on. And then, of course, comes the question about when does an innovation stop being an innovation and start being mainstream?

So we were trying to capture methods that had gone beyond the individual, but hadn't become just so box standard that you would no longer apply that term to them. So if we turn to the actual process of innovation, I'm going to read to you a few snippets from the data because I think they bring this alive.

So one of our participants said. "I didn't set out to invent a method." And another described it as a kind of "accidental discovery." So we're talking about an organic process going on here. The people we talked with, as well, and this was the innovators themselves, people who'd taken up use of their method,

people who'd reviewed their methods, so a range of voices. But people were talking about the role of support and encouragement in an innovation. So one of the people talked about senior colleagues encouraged them to develop their method further. There was talk about academic champions, people

who championed that method. "You should definitely keep doing that," one professor told one of the people. So there's this idea that innovations actually need feeding and nurturing. And another really strong theme in our data was that innovation and research methods go on a journey really and the innovators go on a journey.

Mary talks about, "A journey from an abyss of cynicism all the way to academic legitimation." So what are you talking about children as researchers, you're having a lot of, yes, we can talk to them, but they can't lead a project, to actually at the end getting a joint publication with three

ten-year-olds. So a real range, this real journey. So what constitutes an innovation? It goes through this process. What matters about the innovation in the long term? One of the key things we found

was coining a name for the innovation. Netnography without a doubt did as well

as it did because it had a very good name. There's also something about setting out some procedural guidelines. Kozinets, Kellett, Gauntlett, all of them have written books that say this is the step-by-step guide to my method. So if you want your method to be known as an innovation, you have to specify it. You have to lay out the procedures for that method.

All of our innovations in our case studies involved the innovators in developing training materials, manuals, and going around in a way selling their wears, talking to people about their innovative method. There is also the issue of academic approval. An innovation is only an innovation, in some ways,

if other academics think it's worthwhile and useful and you get good reviews about it. If it doesn't hold weight within the academic community, then it is very easily a fad. And, lastly, there is take up. If other people aren't interested in and don't take up the innovation, then it fades and dies.

So if we turn now to why researchers innovate in their research methods. It's a really important question because there are a lot of research methods out there. You've only got to look at the textbooks. Hundreds and hundreds of research methods to choose from. So why on Earth do these people want to bring about new ones? The first thing to say, and this was very powerful in our data,

is because research councils, the people who fund research, who publish research, value innovation. There's hunger from them for innovation. Another reason is that the world is a complex thing, and it's changing and fast changing. So some of our innovators were responding to the changing world. Netnography, there weren't methods around that ten years

previously because that complex, online phenomenon just wasn't there. Children as researchers, two decades ago, children were to be seen and not heard. The whole movement towards children's voice, meant a different climate, a different culture, in which children could be researchers and we might need methods that enable

children to be researchers. There's also this culture of methodological pluralism, this idea of lots of different methods is good. You rarely see a research project that just says, I interviewed some people, full stop. I ran some stats, full stop. People like to combine methods together. There's this development, this widening out of methods.

So that's the kind of context in which new methods can blossom if, you like. There's also the affordances of new technologies. We can do things now that we couldn't do before, and there's nothing like a new piece of care to encourage researchers to say, what can I do with that? What can I do with that tool? how> can I make that tool facilitate richer, more complex research.

And the last thing we found was that researchers who innovate do so because they're feeling a gap in some way. The methods that are out there don't just quite fit and serve the purpose of this project. And, therefore, there was a need to find something new. One of the most kind of interesting and surprising

findings for us was that they were filling a gap around doing something ethically. There's lots of talk now that ethics committees in universities hold research back. They stop people being adventurous and taking risks and doing new things in research. But our methods, innovators who we interviewed,

actually were trying to solve an ethical problem sometimes. Kozinets's work is all about how do we immerse ourselves in these online cultures? And at the same time, make our presence known and make sure that the data is collected in ways in which people's anonymity is protected, that they know what's going on.

So ethics, surprisingly, was one of the drivers for innovation. So just to conclude and tie things together, innovations are at the same time-- let me just read Coffey on this cause she's better than me. "Celebrated and abhorred in seemingly equal measure."

So there's this idea, yes, yes, innovate. Innovate. We want to see innovation. And then there's this big thing about, oh, crazy innovation, just trying things out for the sake of it. So innovation is seen as both good and bad. One of the criticisms is this mindless pursuit of the new. Max Travers writes about this.

But in our research, we tried to kind of get beyond this good/bad dichotomy. And I think, although in the literature there's an awful lot of over-claiming about innovation and innovation can do different things. Ultimately, methodological innovation

is meeting a research need.