Getting to Grips with Bricolage: A Personal Account

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This paper presents a personal account of how a PhD supervisor came to an understanding of an approach to research that was unfamiliar to him. Additionally it addresses the question of what makes the approach, in this case bricolage, an acceptable format for academic work and in particular PhD study. Bricolage is a relatively little used approach to research; therefore, researchers utilizing bricolage as a research design have less exemplary texts to draw on in coming to their own understanding of this approach to research. This paper presents an account of getting to grips with bricolage as a way of undertaking research, of potential interest as an exemplar generally (and specifically in relation to bricolage) to supervisors, examiners and students alike. Key Words: Bricolage, Research Design, Doctoral Study.

Students undertaking PhD research are increasingly looking beyond the more standard traditions of quantitative and qualitative study design – drawing on an ever widening range of approaches or "sub-approaches" to research. How then, does the PhD research supervisor/examiner, or in fact the student themselves, get to grips with approaches that they are less familiar with than the standard traditions? In this paper I present my own account of getting to grips with what was, to me, an unfamiliar approach to research (bricolage) and how I came to characterize what, for me, were key elements of that approach. Some may think it contentious, that supervisors should supervise beyond their own area of methodological expertise; but supervisors should, in my view, be both able and willing to extend their expertise. Such willingness avoids the trap of supervisors merely reproducing clones of themselves and is also in the spirit of lifelong learning. Additionally as Pearson and Brew (2002) note (whilst considering the wider education and training needs of Research Degree Students) it is important that

> … supervisors expand their repertoire of skills … enabling supervisors to become adaptable … Supervisors have to extend their understanding of the nature of research and supervisory practice in order to deal with variations in … learning and career goals of different students. (p. 143)

This paper relates to the extension of a supervisor's understanding of research– specifically the way in which bricolage can be used as an emergent research design; it does not explore any changes in supervisory practice.

I have been involved in the education of a range of health and social care practitioners for over 20 years although the account is not contingent upon this. However, I would suggest that bricolage is particularly suitable, as an approach, for practitioners within health, social care and education – especially those studying part time at doctoral level. The emergent nature of bricolage allows for bite-size chunks of research to be carried out that have individual meaning for practice, which can then be pieced together

to create a more meaningful whole. It has also been suggested that many health, social care and other practitioners develop practice knowledge through bricolage (Freeman, 2007; Warne & McAndrew, 2009). Thus it could also be suggested that the use of bricolage as a research approach is a natural progression for such practitioners.

The account that follows, is that of a PhD supervisor/examiner attempting to develop a working understanding of a relatively little used and even somewhat novel approach to research, that of bricolage. It uses a number of excerpts from the literature (existing material) to piece together a personal account of getting to grips with bricolage; which can, from these accounts, be seen to be in the tradition of bricolage itself. Ultimately the account is left to speak for itself, so that the reader can make of it what they will; this too, being consistent with some of the examples of bricolage discussed below.

This paper does not purport to be a comprehensive critical review of studies that have utilised bricolage, but a personal reflective account of what I considered to be influential studies. It draws on the ethos of Brewer and Hunter (2006) who note that:

> …selection of methods is more likely to reflect researchers' different conceptions of what constitutes a *good* piece of finished social research – and although one might admire and praise the techniques of a different practitioner – the responsive inner smile to a *good* piece of research is more likely to be evoked by those styles that resonate with one's own methodological predilections. (p. 13 emphasis in original)

Thus it considers only examples of bricolage that I considered to be of interest, as they were important in my own emergent understanding of bricolage at the time of writing this paper (i.e., they were exemplary books and articles in relation to getting to grips with bricolage). It is proposed that such an account will be of interest to: supervisors, examiners and students of post-graduate research degrees as an exemplar of understanding an unfamiliar approach to research; as well as those interested in adopting bricolage as an approach to research.

Getting To Grips with Bricolage: The Supervisor's Story

With hindsight I can see that I have been interested in aspects of bricolage for some time. It could even be argued that my academic background has been something of a bricolage, being a natural scientist turned social scientist I have drawn inspiration from diverse sources. However, the trigger to get to grips with bricolage as a way of presenting and designing (or perhaps "retro-designing") research came when a cluster of students I was supervising or examining, expressed at least a passing interest in pursuing bricolage as a "research approach". These students cited, as a key initial source, Denzin and Lincoln's (2000; 2005) introduction to *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*.

A second text known to students (but not necessarily read) was Kincheloe and Berry (2004). However, in encouraging students to explore a particular research approach, research tradition, or strategy of inquiry, I have often read them an extract from a medieval bestiary (Barber 1992) – which describes a badger in a way that is far from accurate. From this account it is obvious that the author of the bestiary has never seen an

"actual badger" but has drawn on hearsay to develop the account. The point being that text book descriptions of approaches to / traditions of research, can often lead to misunderstandings or misconceptions of what an approach "looks like" as a "product", just as second hand descriptions of badgers can be misleading. Thus, I encourage students to go out and find some "actual badgers" so to speak. So the question arises as to what a bricolage (especially as opposed to the process of being a bricoleur or producing a bricolage) looks like. Perhaps an appropriate starting point, in the tradition of bricolage (as will become evident below) would be to start with what is at hand / what is available.

A text, often cited by those writing or talking about bricolage is Levi-Strauss' (1972) *The Savage Mind*. This text explores parallels between mythical/primitive thought and bricolage (or the processes employed by the bricoleur). Thus in one sense Levi-Strauss' discussion has closer parallels to considerations of those who use bricolage and the bricoleur as a metaphor for the ways in which people construct and make sense of their "knowing" (see Freeman, 2007; Hester, 2005; Warne & McAndrew, 2009) than to considerations of bricolage as an approach to research. However, there is some relevance of Levi-Strauss' material to discussion of bricolage as method. This relevance lies in that he identifies bricolage as referring to both tools and materials, and that in relation to the bricoleur "the rules of his game are always to make do with whatever is at hand" (Levi-Strauss, 1972, p. 17). Levi-Strauss suggests that this latter point means using what is already in existence and reconstructing such material; stating that "… the materials of the bricoleur, are elements which can be defined by two criteria: they have had a use … and they can be used again" (p. 35). Thus I place a different emphasis on Levi-Strauss' work than others may have done, as it is often the tradition of being a "Jack of All Trades" that is emphasized when referring to his work (see for example Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; 2005; Warne & McAndrew, 2009).

Thus my starting point was to look at some of the examples cited by Denzin and Lincoln (2000, 2005). On reading and re-reading the appropriate sections of the introduction to their handbook, I liked the sound of a book by Lather and Smithies (1997) called *Troubling the Angels*, about which they state "Using multiple voices, different textual formats and various typefaces" they "weave a complex text about women who are HIV+ and women with AIDS" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 5).

Lather and Smithies (1997), themselves, talk about different layers or sources of data: including information about HIV/AIDS, researcher reflections, women's stories and angel intertexts – this latter data (about Angels) they suggest provides a detour and "is intended both as a breathing space from the women's stories and a place to bring snapshots from poetry, fiction, sociology, history, art and philosophy together to bear on understanding the work of living with HIV/AIDS" (Lather & Smithies, 1997, p. 47).

These different sources of data or materials are, Lather and Smithies (1997) acknowledge, deliberately ordered and placed within the book, but still result in "an ensemble of fragments waiting for the alchemy of response from readers" (Lather & Smithies, 1997, p. 201). Previously they have noted that the purpose of such presentation is "about not finding one's way into making a sense that maps easily onto our usual ways of making sense" (Lather & Smithies, 1997, p. 52).

Having read *Troubling the Angels*, I was reminded of a book I had on my shelves by Mol (2002) called *The body Multiple: Ontology in Medical Practice*, which reports on

fieldwork undertaken in a Dutch hospital, relating to the medical practice of the diagnosis and treatment of atherosclerosis. She notes that the book:

> … draws on a variety of literatures: in philosophy, anthropology, science and technology studies, feminist theory, sociology, political theory. This is the present state of theoretical work: disciplinary boundaries get blurred. And yet I wanted to give you, the reader, a good sense of where this book is situated. I wanted to ground it not only in empirical 'material', but also in the intellectual traditions of which it is a product. After hesitating for quite a while about how to do this, I have turned this question into a topic. Throughout this book you will find a subtext, in which I relate to the literature (or more exactly to exemplary books and articles) while self-reflexively wondering what it is to do so. (Mol, 2002, p. ix)

Going back to Denzin and Lincoln (2000) as a source, I also liked the sound of Wolf's (1992) text, *A Thrice Told Tale*; although the title possibly gave me more ideas than the description of what it was about. Denzin and Lincoln (2000) note "Wolf uses fiction, field notes and a scientific article to give an account of the same set of experiences in a native village" (p. 5). This set of experiences relates to the aberrant behavior of a young mother, and the debate in the village about the reason for such behavior. Wolf (1992) herself suggests:

> I now have three texts describing in different ways what happened in the little village of Peihotein some thirty years ago. One is a piece of fiction written by me alone, another consists of unanalyzed fieldnotes recording interviews and observations collected by any of several members of the field staff; and the third is entirely in my voice, written in a style acceptable to referees chosen by the American Ethnologist. Each text takes a different perspective, is written in a different style and has different 'outcomes', yet all three involve the same set of events. (p. 7)

Two of the three texts, included in Wolf's (1992) bricolage, were written some thirty years before the third text; additionally organized around these texts are "discussions of the postmodernist critiques of ethnography and the feminist critiques of anthropology and postmodernism" (Wolf, 1992, p. vii). So the "core" texts are separated in time, by authorship and by the intended audience. Whilst the first and third pieces are authored solely by Wolf, she also draws attention to the way her view of herself (and therefore herself as author) had changed over time. She further notes that the final book.

> … could have been a simple project, but as I reviewed the old fieldnotes and mused over the short story that contradicted both some of the 'facts' and some of the anthropological attitudes recorded there, I was also catching up on my general reading. I found myself enmeshed in the debates set off by the collection of articles edited by James Clifford and George Marcus (*Writing Culture*, 1986) and in the postmodernist critiques

of ethnography generally, and the feminist critiques of postmodernism specifically. (Wolf, 1992, p. 3)

Thus, as with Mol's (2002) *The Body Multiple*, in Wolf's bricolage the scholarly literature itself becomes data alongside other data collected for the study.

A final example of bricolage that I took from Denzin and Lincoln (2000) was Diversi's (1998) article, "Glimpses of Street Life: An Example" (see also parts of both Brogden, 2006; Denzin, 2008) of a bricolage which consists of the reworking of material into a different (and "artistic") form, whether this be fiction, poetry, drama and/or visual imagery. The paper itself consists largely of four short stories—some very short, almost story fragments—which provide "portraits" of street life as experienced by children in Brazil; which when patched together "attempt to experiment with ways of writing … that show, instead of tell, these kids' search for humanization" (Diversi, 1998, p. 134). The stories are prefaced by a rationale for using short stories to represent the lived experience of these children and young people, along with a brief explanation of how they were written. In this bricolage, data is both drawn together within and across each of the four stories but also fragmented across the short stories (so for example the same character, Tito, appears across three of the four stories).

Additionally studies were obtained through citation searches of the above examples of bricolage, and searches of scholarly databases and other sources (Google, Amazon.co.uk) using the terms bricolage and metaphors utilized for bricolage (quilting, montage, collage). This search identified texts about bricolage (e.g., Hammersley, 1999; Kincheloe, 2001, 2005) as well as papers that, as noted above, use bricolage as a metaphor (Freeman, 2007; Hester, 2005; Warne & McAndrew, 2009). Few studies utilizing bricolage, as an approach to research, were identified, only two of which (Markham, 2005; Haw 2005) I considered to be of note for my own personal emergent understanding of bricolage.

Markham's (2005) study, entitled *Go Ugly Early: Fragmented Narrative and Bricolage as Interpretive Method*, presents findings from an ethnographic study into the way that the phrase "go ugly early" was lived, within the cultural context of a group of young college men attempting to pair off with women in bars. Markham presents a bricolage based on the ordering of extracts from: research journal narratives; scholarly literature; research participants' talk, from interviews and recorded conversations; data recorded in fieldnotes; and fiction. This ordering, Markham suggests, results in the juxtapositioning of extracts to produce a consciously constructed product – with the result that "multiple accounts splinter the dogmatism of a single tale" (Grummet, 1991, cited by Markham, 2005, p. 832). Reflexive comments also become an important part of the data in this form of bricolage, especially in the way that they were used to provide some form of a link between the other fragments of data.

Haw's (2005) book, *The Brooklyn Bridge A Cultural History*, aims to be "not a history of the bridge per se, but of the representation of the Brooklyn Bridge" (Haw, 2005, p. 7) exploring what people have made of the Brooklyn Bridge in various cultural forms including photographic and artistic still images, film, music, literature and also in relation to politics. The front cover (and one of the first still images presented in the text) utilizes Hockney's photographic montage / collage of Brooklyn Bridge; Haw noting that "Hockney's bridge, like the Brooklyn Bridge of culture, is fashioned from myriad

juxtaposed images each somehow in conflict yet also in accord with the others" (Haw, 2005, p. 7). Of another image he presents, Stella's painting of Brooklyn Bridge, Haw notes it "resembles not stained but smashed glass" (Haw, 2005, p. 75).

So what emerges from examination of these "actual badgers" and what can I conclude about what a bricolage looks like, based on these studies? It can be said, on the basis of the studies cited, that bricolage brings together, in some form, different sources of data (usually a relatively diverse range of data, to include multiple perspectives). In terms of bringing this data together, further reflection on Haw's comment that Stella's painting of Brooklyn Bridge "resembles not stained but smashed glass" (Haw, 2005, p. 75) may prove useful. A range of metaphors can be used to describe the process of producing the bricolage: weaving; sewing; quilting (both patchwork and embroidered); montage; and collage – the fragments of data or different materials, can though, be thought of as either being drawn into an ordered whole (stained glass) or left disjointed and jarring against each other (smashed glass). Both products, however, are the result of a deliberate process that follows on from "made decisions"; with this positioning, potentially influencing the way in which meaning is constructed by the reader. The materials or data drawn on do, often, include that collected for the purpose of the study; thus, as a research approach bricolage does not always follow the tradition of using just what is "already in existence ... reconstructing such material" (Levi-Strauss, 1972, p. 35). In a number of the examples of bricolage noted above, the existing scholarly literature and/or researcher reflexive commentary form important components of the bricolage; however, this does not always need to be the case.

The question arises though, as to what makes bricolage an acceptable format for academic work generally and in particular a PhD dissertation (given that the initial trigger for my interest was as a PhD supervisor / examiner). Paradoxically this question may be best answered, at least initially, by exploring an example of bricolage from the genre of popular science. David Shenk's (2003) *The Forgetting* is composed of a number of strands which, when bound together, form "a biography" of the disease. The strands used are: the illness trajectory of Ralph Waldo Emerson, interspersed with those of other historical figures (Jonathan Swift, Ronald Reagan, Willem de Kooning); the history of senility and Alzheimer's; commentary on conferences attended and people that Shenk met at such conferences; exchanges from a support group; along with personal narrative. Thus a diverse range of material is utilized, and there is obviously conscious organization of this material within the text; what differentiates this as popular science as opposed to academic work though, is that this ordering is not explicated, discussed and so made transparent to any great extent. With academic bricolage, I would argue, the consideration of the process by which the bricolage is built – however emergent – is an important aspect of the overall work. This process must be articulated, both in terms of the "mechanisms" of production and also in terms of any philosophical approach underpinning its production (e.g., pragmatism, constructivism, critical theory or post-positivism). This material (methodological argument) could be separated out or set alongside other material in the bricolage (juxtaposed) or be incorporated within the overall bricolage. The inclusion of such material though (providing what might be considered an audit trail of sorts) must be, in my view, an essential and central part of an academic bricolage.

I am aware that this discussion of bricolage focuses on the product or outcome of bricolage and so has not covered in any depth the process of, or ways of processing research data to produce a bricolage. I make no apology for this, as my interest in bricolage at present is in the outcome; I would however, like to add as a final comment a quick note that addresses the issue of process. I would suggest that the planning of research through the development of bricolage has less to do with employing a relatively inflexible protocol, template or framework (which then shapes, or even determines a specific outcome) and more to do with engaging in a process, out of which numerous outcomes can potentially emerge. Thus, as suggested above, it is an approach that should suit the part-time doctoral student, given that such an approach allows the research product to emerge over time.

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