Moving Toward Third Space: Reflections on the Tensions with/in Qualitative Research

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Abstract: This reflective essay examines some of the dialectical tensions that can emerge with/in qualitative research and that can result in internal and external conflicts and a wide range of emotions and feelings for researchers. It is important to notice and examine these tensions as many art educators use qualitative research design and methods. Subsequently, more attention is needed to recognizing research as an emotional and often conflicted process. Informing this inquiry is the work of multi-disciplinary scholars who discuss the concept of 'in-between' and 'Third Space' as integral to disrupting binary thinking. Additionally, other strategies are presented that support relational thinking in qualitative research and the creation of rhizomatic research cultures.

Keywords: Qualitative research; Dialectical tensions; Third Space; Rhizomatic thinking.

Arts educators embrace many methodologies of qualitative research or inquiry,[i] such as, but not limited to: A/r/tography (Triggs, Irwin, & O'Donoghue, 2014), arts-based research (Butler-Kisber, 2008; Cahnmann-Taylor & Siegesmund, 2008; Knowles & Cole, 2008; Leavy, 2015; Rolling, 2018; Scotti & Chilton, 2017; Sullivan, 2010), embodied (Janesick, 2015), ethnography (Staidikis, 2014), feminist (Keifer-Boyd, 2014), narrative (Butler-Kisber, 2010; Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007), performative (Garoian, 1999), and phenomenology (Ellett, 2011; Thompson, 2014). The community of qualitative research is diverse and further complicated by the multiple identities, experiences and contexts of researchers, and the evolving nature of the field of qualitative research.

Findings from a study about published research in art education report that there is a wide usage of qualitative methods in art education research (Milbrandt, Miraglia & Zimmerman, 2018, p. 51). While texts on qualitative research methods primarily focus on techniques and strategies for data collection and analysis (Knowles & Cole, 2008), more attention is needed to recognize qualitative research as an emotionally-laden experience (Brennan, 2014; Mitchell & Irvine, 2008; Scott, 2018) that can be marked by conflict and contradiction, "conflicting values, ideas and beliefs" (Keating, 2012, p. 10), "confusion, estrangement, loneliness, wonder, and annoyance" (deJong, Kamsteeg, & Ybema 2009, p. 4), anxiety and dread (Dickson-Swift et al., 2009), as well as fatigue, guilt, anger, and frustration (Johnson, 2009, p. 95). While qualitative research methodologies more recently address the role of the body (Janesick, 2015) and empathy in research (Bresler, 2013; Saldaña, 2015), "graduate courses do little to address feelings evoked through the research process and how to handle them" (Collins & Cooper, 2014, p. 88).

Subsequently, many qualitative researchers may experience "researcher-related discomfort" (Rimando et. al, 2015) and "either deny their feelings, or struggle to identify those feelings [of discomfort]" (Collins & Cooper, 2014, p. 88). In addition, researchers "may find ourselves [themselves] attending to feelings, ambiguities, temporal sequences, [and] blurred experiences" (Richardson, 2000, p. 931) without clear answers. As a qualitative researcher and an instructor of graduate research methods, it is important to call attention to the ways in which the qualitative research process can become 'stuck,' frustrating, and overwhelming. Additionally,

it is equally important for both novice and experienced researchers to have strategies for breaking through and out of patterns of polarized thinking that may limit capacities for making necessary connections and decisions.

The process of qualitative research can elicit states of conflict and feelings of discomfort arising from the occurrence of experiences and junctures in research that call attention to binaries. Binaries, as polemic relationships, stress difference and exclusion. Subsequently, encountering these relationships can result in binary thinking, and the privileging of one polemic over another. This reflective essay examines the nature of binary thinking and the subsequent tensions that can emerge within qualitative research. Looking to the areas of psychology (Elbow, 1993; Furhnam & Marks, 2013; Jung, 1957/1986; Wood & Petriglieri, 2005) may help explain the relationship of binary thinking to decision making. Several strategies for disrupting binary thinking are explored, such as, 'in-between,' 'Third Space' and relational thinking (Aoki, 1991/2005; Brabha, 1990; Soja, 1996) that support 'both/and' thinking and movement between polemic structures. Along these lines, Saldaña's (2015) approaches to qualitative thinking offer strategies for non-linear thinking. Visualization and intuition are also discussed as strategies for lessening the grip on binary thinking. Finally, I draw upon the work of Deleuze & Guattari (1980/1988) to inform the concept of rhizomes, and the applications for rhizomatic ways of thinking within research spaces and cultures (Guerin, 2013).

Binary thinking

Binary thinking is described as the "path of least resistance for human perceiving, thinking, and for linguistic structures…. the simplest path is in terms of simple opposition" (Elbow, 1993, p. 24). The neurological basis for binary, dualistic and polarized thinking is rooted in neural underpinnings and in the way that our brains process stimuli in *two* directions (LeDoux, 1994 as cited in Wood & Petriglieri, 2005, p. 31). Stimuli are processed in the cerebral cortex that mediates cognition, while in a second pathway, stimuli are routed to the amygdala to determine danger (Wood & Petriglieri, 2005). This instinctive, but "ancient pattern of perception" and reductive thinking is needed for survival (p. 31). Wood & Petrigleri explain:

> When the brain reacts in a binary way, it leads to quick, irrational decisions and
> action; when a dialogue is engaged between the emotional and rational parts of
> the brain, the 'tension of the opposites' stimulates a more sophisticated
> exploration of the environment and furthers subsequent individual development.
> (2005, p. 32)

While childhood and adolescence are clearly marked by "increasing differentiation" and analytical cognitive processing (Wood & Petrigleri, 2005, p. 32), dialectical or binary thinking is inextricably woven into the fabric of religious, educational, and social structures resulting in the formulation of 'us/them' paradigms and relationships. It is, therefore, not surprising that most adults still engage in binary and oppositional thinking patterns (Taylor and Elias, 2012) and oppositional (us/them) ways of relating in groups and organizations (Simmel, 1923/1950). The problematic nature of binary thinking is that it encourages rigid and narrow responses to problems, while prohibiting the cultivation of nuanced thinking and interrelationships that are required for research. For qualitative researchers, nuance is central to decision-making and the cultivation of rich interpretations of research data.

Tensions with/in qualitative research

A binary may also be described as a *dialectical tension* that contains two polarized positions, or views, that are reflected by a sharp contrast between alternatives and position a researcher "between familiarity and strangeness" (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995, p.112). The

dialectical tensions within research relate to a wide range of issues inherent in the research process and these competing "tensions can elicit strong emotions" (Smith & Lewis, 2011, p. 392). When confronting these tensions, researchers may often resort to "attention to the poles rather than to the space between" (Harrison, Gentile, & Harrison, 2009, p. 6). To put it simply, dialectical structures are anchored in 'either/or' thinking and decision-making. It is important to understand and identify the kinds and types of tensions that may occur in qualitative research. In addition, many of these tensions can co-exist at the same time, and often overlap in the research process. Finally, some dialectical tensions may be salient or latent (Smith & Lewis, 2011) in some research processes, but emerge in others.

Ambiguity / Clarity

Researcher Colleen McLaughlin (2003) reports:
The researcher needs to live with the ambiguity and lack of clarity long enough
to formulate a specific focus to the research. If the threat [or discomfort] is too
great there is a tendency to become defensive, or to close down prematurely (p.
70).
Ambiguity is part of the research process and may occur in any phase of research. Likewise, clarity may be achieved in some phases of research, but not all. Sometimes clarity may not be achieved at all, for example, when more questions than answers are raised. Living with ambiguity can be stressful for researchers. Research supports that people with a low tolerance for ambiguity have "aversive reactions to ambiguous situations for the lack of information makes it difficult to assess risk and correctly make a decision" (Furnham & Marks, 2013, p. 718). Reactions to ambiguity can thus impede one's ability to explore, question, and make decisions. Perhaps more important than achieving clarity, in the context of qualitative research is to develop one's tolerance for ambiguity, and to be more comfortable with *not knowing* all the answers.

Fear / Trust

Fear is an emotion felt by many researchers within the research process. Fear can invade the research process, and impact participants, outcomes, and a researcher's sense of agency. Fear often breeds doubt in oneself and in one's abilities; it can manifest in the "tugs and aches, and should and oughts" (Myers et. al, 2017, p. 318). While feelings of failure may be attributed to lack of experience with research (Rimando et.al, 2015), fear is an emotion that can be experienced by many researchers at all levels. Trust emerges from experience and trusting oneself is critical in confidently moving through the research process.

Individual / Collaborative

In doing collaborative research, tensions exist as a "group experience generates emotions" (McLaughlin, 2003, p. 71). Researchers who collaborate, for example, can have varying skills in research and writing, commitments to the research project, different communication styles and perspective taking abilities, varying professional identities and inclinations toward polarized thinking. Intersubjectivity "broadly speaks to shared interpretations among and between a researcher and participants that are socially constructed through the research process" (Klein, 2012, p. 6). However, interpretations among collaborators may differ, and result in tensions and conflict amongst researchers. Other tensions may exist in groups relative to factors of collaboration, competition, homogeneity and distinction (Smith & Lewis, 2011, p. 383).

Linear / Non-Linear

The tension between the linear and non-linear in qualitative research is central to the issue of reporting and dissemination. Doctoral students and prospective authors must satisfy institutional and publishing requirements and constraints while remaining true to the integrity of their research design. Since images play a pivotal role in arts-based research (Bresler, 2013; Leavy, 2015) tensions surrounding the juxtaposition of images and text can emerge as researchers struggle with the balance, interpretation and integration of images and text.

Non-Disclosure / Transparency

Ethical responsibilities and protection of research participants remain paramount in qualitative research. Professional obligations, however, require the reporting of researcher bias, research decisions, unanticipated changes that occur within a research process, the researcher's positionality, the historical context of the research (time, place, and setting of research), and instances of problematic relations. To what extent and in what ways researchers disclose are important issues for qualitative researchers. With more and more online publishing venues, qualitative researchers will continue to grapple with issues of transparency and non-disclosure. As researcher Carolyn Ellis reminds us, we must take care in "protecting those we write about" (Ellis, 2009, p.16), including ourselves. The issue of self-disclosure is also important within "sensitive research, as it allows the participants to know that the researcher already has a sense of what they [participants] are talking about, and in some cases has been there too, as well as showing respect, openness, honesty, empathy" (Johnson, 2009, p.199). However, the degree to which researchers can, or will, be open about research creates other tensions such as, open / private, and professional-obligation/self-protection.

Subjective / Objective Stance(s)

In qualitative research, researchers typically move back and forth between participants and data in a process of viewing that requires both distance and immersion as "distance is equally as important as 'closeness' for an adequate understanding of subjects, and places" (Ybema & Kamsteg, 2009). Close viewing allows for subjectivity, while distance allows for objectivity. Both afford observation from different and often conflicting perspectives. Immersion and distance can be problematic if taken to the extreme. Researchers can get lost in data (deJong, Kamsteg & Ybema, 2009, p. 2), or in over-empathizing with the subjects one is researching (2009, p.7). The often dual roles of researchers, that of insider and outsider (Duijnhoven & Roessingh, 2006), require both a 'zooming in' and 'zooming out' (Nicolini, 2009) with insights garnered from these multiple perspectives. For qualitative researchers, the tensions of subjectivity/objectivity and distance/immersion can be resolved through multiple perspective taking and the use of multiple viewpoints (Bresler, 2013). In addition, embracing "intuition, emotions and hunches" (Leavy, 2015, p. 28) in the process of multiple perspective taking is key to disrupting the polarized tensions of subjectivity/objectivity and distance/immersion.

Perfection / Imperfection

The aesthetic principle of *wabi-sabi* is associated with Zen Japanese art forms (Juniper, 2003) and can inform the practice of qualitative research. *Wabi-sabi* is a Zen aesthetic that speaks to qualities of *imperfection, impermanence,* and *incompleteness* (Koren, 2008, p. 7). Long associated with the Japanese tea ceremony, it includes the use of pottery, movement, tea preparation, and flower arranging and is most notably described in Kakuzo Okakura's *The Book of Tea* (1906/1989). *Wabi-sabi* is an aesthetic applicable to qualitative research because the research process is inherently imperfect, impermanent, and incomplete. Qualitative researchers

must holistically make sense out of disparate parts and fragments, and data that does not often make sense, or fit into pre-existing categories.

Furthermore, research is always incomplete in the sense that our understanding of a subject, participants, and/or a phenomenon is only partial and dependent upon a specific time and place for inquiry. Additionally, the research process is never really complete as new questions emerge as the research progresses and research outcomes and insights often lead to new research questions.

Beginnings / Endings

Beginnings and endings of research often cause a wide range of emotions and feelings, which include anxiety and fear. Knowing when to stop in the process of data collection and analyses, for example, or in the report writing begs the question: "Should I stop now or go on?" (Pelias, 2017, p. 271) Furthermore, the ending of research is likely to be the beginning of new and related research, and the resolution of many dialectical tensions and research decisions.

Research as decision-making

The qualitative research process includes many junctures for problems to arise with solutions that are needed to continue and complete the research. The research process is essentially a problem-solving process that requires skills in the assessment of research situations, and decision-making that necessitates the resolution to conflicts and tensions. How researchers make and implement decisions has short and long-term implications for research.

Research into human decision-making behavior reveals that the increase in the complexity of a decision situation results in decision makers resorting to "choice heuristics [trial/error/elimination] in an effort to reduce cognitive strain" (Payne, 1976, p. 384), recognizing that there are "important individual differences in information processing in decision making" (Payne, 1976, p. 385). Perkins (2009) suggests that decision-making is not a linear, totally rational or a consistent process, and may be more likened to an "artful self-regulation responsive to the circumstances, sometimes more analytic, sometimes more intuitive, sometimes making checklists, [and] sometimes telling stories" (p. 2).

Depending on the academic discipline, many qualitative researchers have in the past, and continue to work in a 'silo' research culture, that is, working as a lone researcher, and/or working in a silo discipline, where:

> researchers could perhaps be characterized as experts in fields where the core content knowledge is agreed and known by other experts in the field; they deal with reliable content in predictable contexts; they might conceive of their work as separate from other disciplines, (Guerin, 2013, p. 146).

As such, researchers would likely encounter and resolve research problems alone relying upon a combination of strategies that may include choice heuristics, rational thinking, intuition, and/or consulting with others.

The increase of collaborative research and new approaches toward doctoral and post-doctoral education point to the need for researchers to embrace *relational* thinking skills and collaborative problem solving that are required for researching in complex environments and across disciplines (Guerin, 2013). The following strategies offer ways for disrupting binary thinking and dialectical tensions that support relational, flexible, 'and/both' ways of thinking.

Strategies for disrupting dialectical tensions

The works of scholars across numerous disciplines (Aoki, 2005; Brabha, 1990; Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/1988; Elbow, 1993; Jung, 1957/1986; Soja, 1996) draw attention to concepts

and structures of binary thinking and the subsequent need for more networked, flexible and relational thinking. Elbow (1993) summarizes that dialectical tensions can be disrupted in "a compromise or a dialectical synthesis, i.e., finding a third term" (p. 24). Similarly, Jung (1957/1986) suggests that binaries can result in a "confrontation of the two positions [that] generates a tension charged with energy and creates a living, third thing." (p. 189) The notion of a 'third thing' is reiterated in the concept of 'Third Space' and extended in the work of geographer Edward Soja (1996). Drawing on the works of French philosopher Henri Lefebvre (1974/1992), Soja (1996) articulates 'Third Space' as a means to open up thinking, where "the original binary choice is not dismissed entirely, but is subjected to a creative process of restructuring that draws selectively and strategically from the two opposing categories to open new alternatives" (p. 5). Canadian curriculum theorist Aoki (2005) refers to a 'Third Space' between polarities in that "it is not so much a matter of overcoming the tensionality but more a matter of dwelling aright within it" (p. 163). In this sense, a 'Third Space' is likened to a zone to be inhabited and experienced; it is a living space between two polarities that can become a hybrid space "for negotiation of incommensurable differences" (Brabha, 1990 as cited in Johnson & Richardson, 2012, p. 122).

Using the botanical metaphor of rhizome, Deleuze & Guattari (1980/1988) contrast fixed and linear knowledge structures with a rhizome model that supports knowledge as non-hierarchical and non-dualistic as "there are no points or positions in a rhizome" (p. 8). While the rhizome serves as a metaphor and a lens for exploring academic research identities in doctoral research programs (Guerin, 2013), it also can be a metaphor and a lens for *thinking-in-research* that can allow for multi-directionality, connectivity, and relationality in research decision making.

Strategies for relational thinking

Art educators as qualitative researchers need to be aware as to how they engage in dialectical and binary thinking in research. The following strategies support the restructuring of binary thinking and the resolution of dialectical tensions with/in qualitative research. These strategies may assist researchers to move towards a middle space, a 'Third Space,' to lead away from either/or alternatives.

Extending qualitative thinking

Saldaña (2015) outlines numerous ways to think *qualitatively*: thinking *connectively, complexly, emotionally, empathically, intuitively, interpretively,* and *artistically,* emphasizing that "there is no *one* [author emphasis] way to think qualitatively" (p.3). Analytical thinking cannot solve all dilemmas. Non-linear thinking, or qualitative thinking, can assist researchers to generate deeper understandings of both sides of a duality, and to find connections "in a process of connection, synthesis, or crystallization" (Saldaña, 2015, p.3).

Utilizing visualization

Visualization methods can foster awareness and the processing of emotions and feelings in ways that honor the messiness of qualitative research and can assist qualitative researchers to process dialectical tensions. Journaling and collage (Butler-Kisber, 2008; Scotti & Chilton, 2017) are often used by researchers to create visual renderings of that which is occurring within the research process. Other renderings can take the form of data visualizations such as, concept maps, drawings, and sketches that allow researchers to process ideas, brainstorm alternatives and problems, analyze data, and express feelings about research.

Accessing wisdom and intuition

Most qualitative researchers would agree that "knowledge is socially constructed and research findings are influenced by the social and political situations of researchers and participants" (van Niekerk & Savin-Baden, 2010, p. 36). How we come 'to know' is based on many intersectional factors that influence our researcher identity and lenses (Belenky et. al, 1986; Ropers-Huilman & Winters, 2010; Saldaña, 2015). Knowledge is generally aligned with methods that yield empirical data and logical/rational analysis. Yet, knowing is also achieved through *intuition* and *wisdom* attained through insights from direct experience, and making connections from past to present experiences. Intuition is the "perception that comes to us through gut feelings or flashes of insight" (Klein, 2008, p. 113) and is acknowledged in educator decision-making (Atkinson & Claxton, 2000; Johannson & Kroksmark, 2004; Palmer, 2007). Wisdom, as the knowing that comes through deep reflection on experience, is often marginalized in the teaching of research methods (Savin-Baden & Howell-Major, 2010). Intuition appears in the context of qualitative research with 'hunches,' or receiving ideas or solutions through feelings rather than logic. Janesick (2011) observes that in qualitative research knowing can occur through these important moments of "informed hunches, intuition, and serendipitous occurrences" (p. 148). Qualitative research requires that a researcher perceive and process "hard data and soft intuition, individual insight and communal sifting and winnowing" (Palmer & Zajonc, 2010, p. 22). The disruption of dialectical tensions in qualitative research can be fostered through allowing and trusting messages garnered through intuitive knowing and wisdom from experience.

Creating rhizomatic research cultures

Rhizomatic research cultures are groups that are conceptually constructed with the intent of cross-pollination of ideas; they are multidisciplinary, dialogic, and committed to thinking broadly (Guerin, 2013). Recently, the concept of rhizomes has been applied to the development of rhizomatic research cultures within doctoral, post-doctoral and/or professional development research communities that can support "proliferation, flexibility, non-linearity, connection, and non-hierarchical networks" (p. 139). While all researchers may not be able to participate in a rhizomatic research culture, they can embrace rhizomatic and relational thinking that characterizes rhizomatic research cultures such as: forming alliances across disciplines; increasing one's comfort level for difference, uncertainty, ambiguity, and middle spaces; sitting with uncertainty vs. rushing to end it; and using qualitative thinking, visualization, intuition and the *wabi-sabi* aesthetic as helpful guides for navigating uncertain spaces in research.

Concluding thoughts

There are numerous kinds of dialectical tensions within qualitative research that can present challenges and frustration for qualitative researchers. The tendency toward binary thinking and privileging one polarized position can minimize a researcher's capacity to resolve tensions, make decisions and explore alternatives. Qualitative researchers need strategies for encountering the varying kinds of dialectical tensions and for moving toward 'Third Space' and relational (and/or) thinking. As qualitative research studies and contexts vary, there simply is not one solution, or resolution, of dialectical tensions. How dialectical tensions are acknowledged and resolved depend a great deal on the researcher and their abilities to deal with ambiguity, their "openness to contradictions" (Smith & Lewis, 2011, p. 392), and their tolerance for tension.

The theme of place has been widely recognized in curriculum scholarship (Aoki, 2005; Reynolds, 2017) with an emphasis upon the notion of displacement, and spaces that are 'in-between' (Aoki, 2005; Hasebe-Ludt & Hurren, 2003). The 'Third Space,' as a space that lays

'in-between' polarities, can be likened to a liminal space. It is a space uncertainty, but potent with new understandings. Moving toward middle spaces of dialectical tensions will allow researchers to be "unstuck in the tundra of the binary freeze" (Harrison, Gentile & Harrison, 2009, p. 8). Strategies that embrace and afford a motion between binaries can help move researchers from silo research thinking to rhizomatic thinking and the emergence of both/and answers to tensions with/in the landscape of qualitative research practices. Ultimately, dialectical tensions within research can serve as thresholds, and liminal spaces, for both departure (from) and arrival (to) new insights and spaces for understanding.

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[i] The evolving nature and sheer number of examples of qualitative research inquiry in arts education prohibit any comprehensive in-text listing of researchers, models, or methods. *Studies in Art Education,* the *International Journal of Qualitative Inquiry*, the *Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research* (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017*)* and the *International Handbook of Research in Arts Education* (Bresler, 2007) are a few of the numerous arts education and qualitative research publications that offer a comprehensive overview of current qualitative inquiry, methods, and issues.