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## Qualitative Methodology Discussion

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# CHAPTER 11

## QUALITATIVE METHODOLOGY

### DISCUSSION

**Discussants: Marian Crowley-Henry, Paddy Dolan,  
Paul Donnelly, Olivia Freeman, Conor Horan  
& Brendan O'Rourke**

**Transcribed & Edited: John Hogan & Brendan K. O'Rourke**

#### INTRODUCTION

During the writing of this book, we, the contributors, found ourselves discussing and debating the best way for students to conduct qualitative research-based dissertations, especially if it was their first time conducting such research. In these debates, we learned a lot from each other, as we each came at methodology from a different disciplinary perspective, with different training and bodies of literature behind us. Such conversations made us aware of how we differed on many issues. However, we also came to agree upon a great many points, recognising the common ground that exists between our various disciplines. Many of the lessons resulting from these conversations are sprinkled throughout the various chapters of this volume. However, we felt that readers might gain a more immediate and fresher perspective by having access to some of our conversations on qualitative research. This chapter tries to provide such an insight, by reproducing a conversation among seven of the contributors.

#### THE CONVERSATION

**John Hogan (Moderator): How should a student begin to do research?**

**Brendan O'Rourke:** I think, for academic research, the student should begin with a passionate interest in one of their courses, or one of their lecture series. Where they get a sense that there is something interesting

happening in the literature and that they want to contribute to that. Or, they are excited by a particular debate in the literature. I think students should have a feeling of entering a conversation.

**Paul Donnelly:** Looking at this slightly differently, students could look to faculty and see what their research interests are. This could overlap with courses they've taken and with what interests them. If a student is to link up with a faculty member who has an interest in her research, she is potentially going to benefit more from the experience. This kind of contact could lead on to postgraduate, and potentially PhD, research.

**Paddy Dolan:** I think one of the problems is that students often change their thesis topics quite late in the process. I think that this is because they just lose interest. They need to be excited by the substantive area, not just the theory. They have to pick something they love, whether it is football, or music, or ... whatever, it doesn't really matter. So they can combine their interest in the object, with some of the theory they have come across through their various lectures.

**Paul Donnelly:** Perhaps, by linking up with a faculty member, students' loss of interest in their chosen research topic could be prevented. Whereas, if left to their own devices, interest can diminish. If students think that they are under pressure – they've got nine months – and a more interesting topic comes to their attention, they can think 'I've seen more literature on that'. Whereas, if they are working with a faculty member, they can be shown that there is a lot of literature out there on their initial choice.

**Conor Horan:** I find that, when taught masters students, who've come through from undergrad, are looking for a dissertation topic, they tend to rely upon academic sources. Whereas, MBA students tend to rely upon a managerial source that interests them. My advice to the MBA student, or the practitioner-type student, coming into a masters course – is that, in order to get a balance, they have to go back to the academic literature and understand how academics discuss managerial problems. Whereas, with the undergrads, I recommend that they go in the other direction. They have to discover why this is an important issue in practice, because most of their background is academic. The advice varies then for the different types of students. For me, it's trying to get to the conversation, because it highlights understanding the language that's used in both fields. So, whatever angle you're coming at it from, getting the right balance is what the students have to do in the first stages of the process.

**Marian Crowley-Henry:** I think that being interested in a subject area is where the research starts from. If that interest wanes, maybe the faculty can help re-invigorate it by feeding in their own research interest(s). But, an interest in the subject is important.

**Conor Horan:** Academic guidance is critical.

**Brendan O'Rourke:** I'm a little nervous of the kind of interest / excitement thing, which admittedly I do talk a lot about myself. This is because students sometimes experience a feeling that they have to bring incredible originality when undertaking research. Yes, sure they need to be excited about it, but, they need to get it done as well, as it's usually a course requirement.

**Paddy Dolan:** I think if they're excited about their research, they look forward to doing it in their free time.

**Brendan O'Rourke:** Yes.

**Paddy Dolan:** We should make a distinction between being excited and being original.

**Brendan O'Rourke:** Absolutely, maybe that's a better distinction.

**Paul Donnelly:** It's all to do with doability then?

**Conor Horan:** Often, in the methodology books, it says that the researcher has to add fresh insight and, when students read that, they get really afraid. Well, fresh insight can be a tweaking of a theory, or an application of a theory in a new context, and that can be enough. I think some of the textbooks with these requirements can be really scary for students. Students end up feeling that they have to come up with a completely new theory, and this scares them off.

**Paul Donnelly:** Something to go along with the issue of interest is that of ownership. Research is something that students should own as a process.

**Brendan O'Rourke:** Absolutely.

**Paul Donnelly:** As opposed to going along to a supervisor and it's the supervisor who owns the idea.

**Paddy Dolan:** Yes.

**Paul Donnelly:** Having ownership brings with it a sense of responsibility. This can help the student in general.

**Paddy Dolan:** I think that it is a balance between the student claiming ownership and following the research interests of potential supervisors. There is a balancing act there because, if the student looks to the supervisor as the source of all ideas, this can lead to uncertainty as to how to proceed.

**Conor Horan:** The student has to come up with the research objectives. The danger is where the supervisor puts in place a set of objectives. But, if the student is not writing their own objectives, following their own path in the general area, then that can be very dangerous.

**Brendan O'Rourke:** It's a delicate balance for the students, between saying: 'I have to do something for the course requirements, I need to do this; and I want to follow my passion'. But, there is also a limited amount of resources available. They should be coming to the supervisor in terms of what can they get out of this limited resource – like most supervisors are – rather than coming in a very abstract way with a vague interest. It has to be something that they're building themselves, and that they're using the supervisor as a resource.

**John Hogan (Moderator):** How should the student balance interest in the topic and its doability?

**Paul Donnelly:** That's where working with a supervisor provides the understanding that it's a nine-month process for the final year undergrads or taught postgrads; whereas, if it's an MPhil student, then there is more time involved and more room for manoeuvre. Some students come along with brilliant ideas; others with a whole kitchen sink of things. Then, through discussion with their supervisor, they funnel that down to something that can be done in the time available.

**Marian Crowley-Henry:** I'd say for undergrads more emphasis should be placed on the thesis being done in the nine months that are provided. Whereas, if it's a research masters, or a PhD, and you have to keep it going for a period of years, then there is more room to manoeuvre in terms of balancing this longer timeframe with the project's doability. However, even in this case, doability is still the essential factor.

**Olivia Freeman:** I think one of the things that undergrads need to do, at the beginning of the process, is read complete articles that have empirical components. Because many of them won't have done that.

**Paul Donnelly:** Even though, of course, they should have.

**Brendan O'Rourke:** They might go to the library and have a look at some finished dissertations, and scan through them. But, I think that if they have an area of interest, they need to go and find five or six peer-reviewed articles, coming from different methodological approaches to that area of research. This will allow them say that they are interested in this area, and 'out of all of the approaches, this particular one by John Smith, or whoever, is probably the one that's most doable for me, and that I'm most interested in'. Most of my students do qualitative research. But I don't think there is anything wrong with what quantitative researchers would call a replication study. This would involve the student taking a fairly interesting article that they would have liked to do themselves, and essentially retrying it in a different context. Citing it fully, and following it, and learning from it. If they are interested in an area, and they come across an empirical-based article, like Olivia was saying, I think that's a brilliant way to balance doability and interest.

**Paddy Dolan:** This is because it has been done already, and they can see it in the article. I think one of the problems we have with a lot of undergraduates is that they have confused ideas about the nature of theory. This is particularly prevalent in business subjects, which can be quite managerialist, and understandably so. Business subjects can be quite prescriptive: 'this is what you should do to run a proper business - this is what you should do in order to design advertising'. Some students see that as theory. But, very often those kinds of prescriptive theories, or even moral theories, can't really be examined through empirical data. They are just models of what we should be doing. There can be ways of translating them into questions that require empirical data, but that requires a lot of work. So, what I always try and say to the students, particularly the undergraduates, is that they should avoid prescriptive and normative theories about telling people what they should be doing because you cannot answer these by getting data.

**Brendan O'Rourke:** I think it is useful sometimes to use the distinction between pure and applied research. I think that if you steer students with experience towards the pure academic research, it can be easier research. Whereas, for those students without experience, particularly undergraduate students, as opposed to MBA students, they are so anxious to get their career going that, if they're working in a business and they come across a practical problem, they're almost dying to solve that practical problem.

**Conor Horan:** I think that when a student comes in trying to solve an actual problem in industry, solving that problem can be enormous within the given timeframe. I tell them that they have only nine months, and I'm going to assume that they have no time and no resources. So, within those constraints, a relevance issue kicks in. They have to make practical shortcuts along the way to some degree. I find what's useful for me is to revert back to a cause and effect-type argument, as they tend to have a complex and muddled view of the world. It's not that they will go and measure cause and effect between two variables, but they might want to try and understand it. Or they might want to look at how these variables are related in some shape or form. Even though we tend to talk about qualitative research, for me that's a great grounding for them to start from. To get them thinking that way is useful at the beginning. I know that, when I get students to write the thesis proposal, I nearly have to force them. It's a deductive structure and, if you look at the chapter that's in the typical methodology textbook, it's very much 'here's a research topic, now how do you refine it?'. But, once that proposal is in, then let them mould it, and go back into more qualitative issues. I find from teaching it that structure is helpful. Now, I'm sure there are philosophical positions as to biasing of a student in their research process, if you want to get into that type of discussion. But, for me, that's how I would break it down for them, and get them to narrow and focus in on something that they can do within a nine month timeframe.

**Brendan O'Rourke:** I think that can be useful, but the trouble is it's not the only way.

**Conor Horan:** There are a variety of ways.

**Brendan O'Rourke:** There isn't one right way. There are many different traditions of research, and that is what I think is very useful about Olivia's suggestion that the students go away and they read journal articles, and see what they are attracted to. Because there are so many different ways of looking at an issue, and you are joining in a particular conversation.

**Conor Horan:** Yes.

**Brendan O'Rourke:** Any particular academic conversation will have norms and traditions and priorities within it, and I think that it is important to engage with the research conversation.

**Conor Horan:** If they don't engage in the conversation, they're not building up their research skills. And that's something we tend not to talk



about – that the process over the nine months is a skill-building exercise. How to do research is an analytical skill that you have to build. You don't get that unless you engage with the seminal articles, and look at different things, and different approaches.

**John Hogan (Moderator): What skills are needed in order for a student to undertake a dissertation?**

**Olivia Freeman:** I think the most important skill is time management. A lot of undergraduate theses are very structured, and I think that there's a tendency, especially with such a short timeframe, to say I'll have a lit review done by this date, and a methodology by that date, and the analysis by the final date. I guide my students through it that way, but I emphasise the importance of thinking about the methodology as one progresses with the literature review. So, I think there needs to be a huge amount of time put in at the beginning. Then the students can probably take a step back timewise, before dedicating another large chunk of time towards the end. But, it's getting across the importance of spending the first six weeks of the timeframe reading a huge amount of material, that you're not necessarily going to use. That is difficult.

**Conor Horan:** I think what happens is that students are told 'go read literature'. But, they translate this as meaning they have to go and do their literature reviews. But that's not the correct way of doing it from my point of view, in that you have to go and examine the seminal articles. What I tell my students is to find out what these research articles say. Why have they asked the particular questions that they have. From that, you'll have a conversation with the literature where you pull out the objectives. But I see students spending two or three months writing. They're told 'write 7,000 words on this topic', and they come back with a piece of work that looks like a textbook, and students often expect that this translates into a dissertation. You'll see them in the library writing, and they've no research objectives! As far as I'm concerned, that's a wasted two months. Yes, they've informed themselves, but not in a way that is contributing to what research questions should be asked.

**Paddy Dolan:** But, I think the need to think critically, and to be able to evaluate different explanations, really can't be separated from the other skills that are needed. From the beginning I think students need to think of the literature review as an explanation. They need to judge different

theories in that context, and come up with explanations that either support, refute, modify, extend, or whatever, existing explanations.

**Conor Horan:** Whereas, if you're just reading for two months ...

**Paddy Dolan:** Well, that's the thing, that task is just filling in space.

**Conor Horan:** Yes.

**Olivia Freeman:** What's needed is immersion really, the student deciding that they are going to completely immerse themselves in the literature.

**Paul Donnelly:** It is equally a skill of identifying what are the seminal articles, then reading past the whole Wikipedia thing, and getting into what is there at the heart of the matter. Judicious selection requires critical skills in terms of thinking things through. It means reading recent articles that seem to be very strong, looking at the bibliography, the reference section, and getting a sense of patterns – which articles seem to be coming up all the time. Then going and getting those articles and immersing yourself in them. It's a matter of developing skills in terms of searching and selectivity. What are the key words that seem to be important so they can be searched on library databases, Google™ Scholar, etc. It's also a matter of being able to avoid stuff that's out there masquerading as research of merit. So, it's about developing a range of skills.

**Olivia Freeman:** I think one of the things you said there is probably the most important of all, that is, getting students to read the references at the end of an academic article. An article does not finish with that last full stop in the conclusion section.

**Paul Donnelly:** In terms of their relationship with their supervisors, students can ask questions and build up a sense of owning the process. Students should prepare in advance for meetings with supervisors, so that they've got questions ready, to get as much out of the limited time that's available to them. So, there's a skill in managing the relationship with the supervisor, to get the best out of it.

**Brendan O'Rourke:** It's true that it's often the case that you pick up a literature review that the students have spent a lot of time on, and it reads like a textbook, or a general survey of the area, when what we want to see is a thesis that is making an argument from a critical point of view, and that will contribute to the academic conversation by making that argument. We often get the same thing in the students' methodology

chapters. These chapters read like somebody giving us a course in methodology.

**Conor Horan:** Yes, rather than employing what they are learning.

**Brendan O'Rourke:** Rather than employing their learning and using it in the process of making their own contribution to the conversation. It's interesting that we're asking what skills students need to do research, and what skills they'll get, and the answers seem to be the same.

**Paddy Dolan:** Yes.

**Brendan O'Rourke:** This sounds very tough for a novice researcher. I think that there is an iterative process going on: finding an article, being impressed by it, then realising that it isn't peer-reviewed. Going away and looking up a reference, and realising, actually, that most of the ideas in the article you've just read come from that original source, and there's little new in the article you'd been reading. I think that somebody listening to our conversation, who hasn't done research before, could be scared by the idea that they need to know how to do research before they ever start to do research.

**Paul Donnelly:** But, that equally points back to whatever preparation they may have gotten in previous years: doing research for projects and learning through faculty members to differentiate between a trade journal-type article and a more academic piece. So, it involves building on, and going back to, what they will have done in previous years, and taking from that.

**Paddy Dolan:** I don't think we can ever expect that the dissertation will teach them everything they need in order to do a dissertation.

**Paul Donnelly:** Because there is reflection as well.

**Paddy Dolan:** Yes, this occurs in the final year of programmes.

**Paul Donnelly:** Paddy's absolutely right. One of the main objectives of most courses would be to develop critical thinking skills. So students should have moved a fair distance by their dissertation year.

**Marian Crowley-Henry:** I'd agree. I think the critical thinking is vital. I've had students hand up article reviews, as opposed to what they were asked for – a critique of the key elements within the article.

**Paddy Dolan:** And sometimes only a series of summaries of articles.

**Marian Crowley-Henry:** It takes a while for students to actually realise that, instead of giving summaries, they have to pick out critical elements.

**John Hogan (Moderator):** What do students learn from dissertation work?

**Paddy Dolan:** There is a need for the student to think about the skills they have in order to undertake qualitative research, particularly important are interviewing techniques and focus group skills. I think that some students, for whatever reason, are better suited to having structured questionnaires compared to the kind of flexibility and reflexive interviewing that's required of open-ended questioning.

**Brendan O'Rourke:** One of the things I try to say to my students is that they might be good at qualitative research, if they are getting good marks in discursive subjects.

**Paddy Dolan:** Very often students don't get much training in qualitative methods. There is a huge emphasis on statistics, quantitative methods. Marketing research is mostly sampling theory, etc.

**Paul Donnelly:** Yes.

**Paddy Dolan:** Students learn qualitative methods by trial and error.

**Conor Horan:** But, I find that when students get into the realm of doing a dissertation, it's as if the knowledge they've accumulated over the previous years in college, including statistical methods, is packaged away, and pushed into a corner somewhere. They can't translate what they've previously learned into the process of doing research. I've seen that in many cases, because a lot of the statistical analysis I've examined tends to be poor. They've done factor analysis, regression, etc. and I can't understand why they didn't apply this.

**Paddy Dolan:** They learn a style of questioning from doing quantitative methods. You really have to think hard to get out of that. Very often, when I ask my students to write a topic guide, they'll come back with 20-odd questions, mostly closed-ended, because it's what they're used to. And if you're an interviewee faced with that, I think that you're going to help the student out. Because, it appears to the interviewee as if the student just wants to get through the interview quickly with their closed-ended questions. Students need to learn how to think on their feet, to rephrase or delete questions instantly during an interview, and make those decisions on the spot. It's a difficult skill to master.

**Brendan O'Rourke:** Students also need to be critically reflective of having done that, or not having done that, afterwards.

**Paddy Dolan:** But, I think an interview has to feel like a conversation from the interviewee's perspective. Whereas, very often, novice qualitative researchers impose a certain style of, you could hardly call it conversation, a style of interaction that is not ideal.

**Conor Horan:** Or students expect an interviewee to fill in all the pregnant pauses they've created.

**Marian Crowley-Henry:** Conducting pilot interviews is useful for students to transcribe and see what material they end up with. Then they should discuss with their supervisor the issues they may have encountered in trying to get the respondents to open up. I find that, unless they go out and see for themselves how the interview worked (or didn't), any interview preparation discussion they may have with a supervisor just seems too remote to them.

**Olivia Freeman:** Yes, I agree with Marian and to get back to John's question as to what do students learn from dissertation work, I think the answer very much depends on the student's level of engagement with the task. I believe it is possible to learn very little from the dissertation process, particularly if the student compartmentalises it into three or four discrete tasks – lit review, methodology, industry review, analysis – and essentially works on these in isolation before pasting them together. If, however, the student immerses themselves in a field of literature, comes up with an interesting angle of exploration into that field and an appropriate way of gaining access to the data required and, if they then place that data under an analytical lens and actually see patterns emerge that they can write up as insights, I think this can be a very satisfying experience. I think the student who experiences this learns about long-term project planning, how to deal with the challenges and frustrations that come with long deadlines and, perhaps, most importantly, how perseverance and attention to detail pays off as the finished product demonstrates a rigorous commitment to the task.

**John Hogan (Moderator):** How can the supervisor and student ensure that a good working relationship is maintained throughout the research process?

**Paddy Dolan:** Listening to your supervisor is the most important thing.

**Paul Donnelly:** Come to meetings prepared.

**Marian Crowley-Henry:** Yes, the responsibility is on the student.

**Paddy Dolan:** One of the things that annoys supervisors is when they email dissertation students feedback, and advice, adding comments to Word files, and provide the most up-to-date style guide. I also write supervisory notes, for all my students, of what I expect from them, and then they obviously don't read any of these. You get new material back that's not referenced properly, and doesn't even have a list of references at the end. This is so easy to do – just to read the feedback. There's no excuse for not doing it.

**Conor Horan:** This is true, because it unfortunately has an influence on the relationship. You look at this person who's coming in completely unprepared, or doesn't have any work done, and they sit there and go 'Ok, tell me what to do?'

**Paddy Dolan:** We know far more than the students about how to write successful dissertations. So they should listen to us!

**Olivia Freeman:** Another colleague came up with this diary, weekly reports, that a few of us are using. The students fill in the number of hours they've worked, what they've read, what they've achieved, and what they felt was difficult. It actually gives an agenda to every supervision meeting. It enables students to face the fact that they may not be managing their time well. It makes us face the fact that they've read loads and we need to be on top of it.

**Paul Donnelly:** They send that at the start of the meeting?

**Olivia Freeman:** They send it the day before, ideally.

**Paul Donnelly:** That goes back to the whole thing of ownership ...

**Conor Horan:** But, this also comes back to the style of supervision ...

**Paul Donnelly:** Owning the process.

**Conor Horan:** ... that you want to engage in. I know we all have very different styles.

**Olivia Freeman:** I think supervisors should be prepared to commit to a Word document feedback on draft material. Not every single week, because you can't ... it's ...

**Paddy Dolan:** Dissertation students won't write every week.

**Olivia Freeman:** You don't want drafts coming back with an extra three lines that you're supposed to magically figure out are the new bit. For a dissertation project, say beginning in September and submitting in June, I would have a deadline in November by which they have to send me 3,000 words, and another in January. I have an agreement with them in September that, on receiving the 3,000 words, I will do detailed comments on it, and email it back to them. The whole thing is electronically recorded. So it's not just them coming in and getting a bit of a chat from me saying 'I think you're getting on grand'. It's more detailed than that. It's all set out at the beginning. It's communication really, so that the two of you – supervisor and novice researcher – have an agreement on what will work.

**Paul Donnelly:** For a project with that timing, I suggest a completed literature review by December. What Marian, John and I do is a slight variation on what you are doing, Olivia. At the end of every meeting, the students write up a summary of what they did up to the previous week, what was discussed in the meeting, and what are the deliverables for the next meeting. Then, of course, a supervisor can read over that and see, well, did the student understand what we covered in the meeting and you can correct any misunderstandings. Plus, it's a record, no different to what you have, of what's happening at every meeting. It's something that the student can look over and see, 'Well, gosh, I haven't really been doing an awful lot', it's there on paper, or 'I have been doing a lot'. The summary of the meeting is about ownership, the students owning the process.

**Marian Crowley-Henry:** What's important is having these milestones. It gives the students some guidance on their progress.

**Paul Donnelly:** They can build on what they've already done.

**Brendan O'Rourke:** I generally have an idea of what I expect them to do across the period of the dissertation – a rule of thumb – if you will. But, it does vary with the methodology, and it does vary with the particular student.

**Paul Donnelly:** Absolutely.

**Brendan O'Rourke:** I was going to take up a theme that Paul's been talking about – ownership – because it's so important. In some ways, I'm not sure that the relationship between supervisor and supervisee is that important. I think sometimes students overestimate the importance of the relationship. Sure, you'd be an idiot to be a supervisee who doesn't take

account of the fact that you're facing your judge and examiner, to some extent, and you have to be appropriately cognisant of that. Sure, you'd be an idiot of a supervisee not to listen to someone who's been through this process and guided others through the process before. But, I think, sometimes, you see very good students engage in a kind of game of pleasing their supervisor from week to week, instead of really owning the document, and realising that they have to produce this. I'm a good supervisor, but my two minutes of thought about a problem they've been working on for a week doesn't always exceed their effort, and I think they should have a sense of ownership about that. Sure, it's nice to have a working relationship, and I think I've certainly become friends with some of my supervisees, and I'm sure lots of us have over the years. And that's nice, that's lovely. But I think it should be product-focused – 'friend or not, produce the dissertation!'.

**Paul Donnelly:** But, I feel, in order to have that product focus, there has to be a good working relationship. Fostering such a relationship is incumbent upon both parties.

**Brendan O'Rourke:** I've had troubled, argumentative, relationships with some brilliant supervisees. I felt they were grossly mismanaging their time, and, as it turned out, they delivered at the end of the day. They used me in a way that, I think, was most useful for themselves, and that is fair enough if they produce the document. I do feel, particularly with some better students, that they are often trying to please you too much.

**Paul Donnelly:** That's something we must look out for as well, and tell the students that they are not in the business of pleasing us. We have respect for the relationship, but, get out there and do the work, and if there's something we disagree on, well, let's have a discussion.

**Conor Horan:** Could I come back to the issue of milestones? I know we tend to be focusing a lot on undergraduates. With most of the master's courses, with a 12-month dissertation period, what I do as the methodology lecturer, is to have a definite milestone in week 8. It's like Olivia was saying, they are required to answer how have other researchers researched my topic. They have to submit two pieces, a literature review and a methodology. Then, in January, they submit their dissertation proposals. That really starts the conversation off with their supervisors, as my role as methodology lecturer is completed. I'm intrigued by that structure, because you have a methodology lecturer for the first part of the course, and then the supervisor system in the second part. It's a much



bigger process, and we rarely talk about it. We just talk about the student and the supervisor. I think discussion of that bigger process would be something I'd like to see more of. Such as, see how the relationship of staff to students is managed. If you want to get good research out of final year undergrads and masters students setting milestones, and good student / staff relationships, are important.

**John Hogan (Moderator):** This volume addresses qualitative research, what is the relationship between qualitative and quantitative research?

**Conor Horan:** You can use quantitative and qualitative approaches in all paradigms, and I think this divide between qualitative and quantitative approaches is talked about too much. I see it in the methodology sections of the dissertations in the library, and to me those bits of methodology sections shouldn't be there.

**Paddy Dolan:** I agree with you, I don't think philosophy is the answer.

**Conor Horan:** But, there's an overemphasis on this division!

**Paddy Dolan:** Yes and no. I agree that there is an overemphasis on the idea that these approaches are thought of philosophically as distinct and separate. But, I think they are, in themselves, quite distinct methods, and are useful for different purposes.

**Conor Horan:** Right, yes.

**Paddy Dolan:** The problem is where people start to think there's no difference, and you can use them any way you want. I think that's quite dangerous. There are very clear reasons why you might follow an ethnographic approach, for example. That does make a real difference. I mean, you can't then start counting things. You have to observe how people behave.

**Conor Horan:** Like doing six interviews and saying, 'Oh well, four people said this, thus it must be two thirds of the respondents-type thing'.

**Paddy Dolan:** If you're doing organisational research, it's quite possible you could distribute a survey to all the employees. If it's a large organisation, you might have hundreds of respondents. But, if you have the same research questions, and adopt a qualitative approach, whether it be ethnographic, an interviewing approach, or even get them to do focus groups, you'll have very different answers.

**Brendan O'Rourke:** I totally agree with Conor and Paddy that the distinction between the approaches is not at all philosophical. For me, there are three components to research. There's the literature, the methodology, and the context you work in. One of the questions I ask students who are particularly clueless about what they're going to do is – what were their results in quantitative subjects and what were their results in discursive subjects? So, I think the qualitative *versus* quantitative distinction is very handy for a beginning researcher, trying to see what general approach they might begin to take, provided you don't take it too seriously.

**Conor Horan:** It's true!

**Brendan O'Rourke:** I think there's a kind of natural division. When you are arguing qualitatively, you do quite different things from when you are using quantitative techniques; consequently, I think, for novice researchers, it's really silly to try and mix methods in anything but a very small case study. Therefore, I think this qual / quant divide is useful, but, a very rough distinction.

**Paddy Dolan:** If you're doing quantitative research, it's usually on the basis that you're going to empirically generalise to some population. That's not the purpose of qualitative research. I think there are very clear differences. I think it's important that researchers understand that the approach we pick is not simply down to a matter of opinion. Certain problems require quantitative data, and certain other problems require qualitative data.

**Olivia Freeman:** I'm at a point now in my own research where, having used only qualitative methods for so long, I am now using some very basic quant research. For me, the whole thing about analysing this quantitative data is about patterns, about exploring the patterns and clusters in the data that I'm finding.

**Conor Horan:** I think there is the danger if you're doing qualitative research that you completely ignore any kind of numbers coming in. Sometimes, people get locked into a qualitative or quantitative mindset to the detriment of their research.

**Paddy Dolan:** I'd agree with that. It really all just depends on what you're trying to find out.

**Conor Horan:** Absolutely.

**Paul Donnelly:** It's the same thing for those who are very quantitatively-minded. Sometimes, they will engage with some qualitative work to try and build up a sense of what they might need to inform a questionnaire.

**Conor Horan:** Yes, but I think in a complex world you have to know that the positivist is looking for statistics, for very structured patterns.

**Marian Crowley-Henry:** It's all about what it is that you want to find out.

**Paul Donnelly:** It's understanding in different ways.

**Paddy Dolan:** The qualitative approach is also quite suited to looking for structure, within organisations, within other social groups, and looking for relations. I think that, if you have a multiple regression equation, for example, it's like adding up the components of particular variables to a particular outcome, but it doesn't really get to grips with the structure of the relationships of the people involved.

**Conor Horan:** I was looking at a paper at a conference a number of years ago, where this lady had measured 56 different variables within business-to-business relationships. But, when you asked her anything about the relationships, she couldn't describe them, because all she was looking at were cause and effects, regression. She couldn't tell you anything about the meaning, or the meat in the relationships in terms of the day-to-day process of it. It sounded bizarre to me.

**Olivia Freeman:** That's made me think of something else that's really important in terms of undergrads doing research. A lot of the time, whether they do adopt a qualitative, or quantitative approach, all they end up doing is describing. They never even attempt an explanation. It's important that novice researchers think from the outset that they have to try to explain something.

**Brendan O'Rourke:** It's the critical thinking and insight again that one is looking for. I think, ultimately, qual and quant are not different philosophies. I think that skilled researchers can meld them quite well. However, novice researchers need to understand that there are different questions that are answered by numbers than are answered by words.

**Paddy Dolan:** Yes, but some things are fine to measure by numbers.

**Brendan O'Rourke:** Absolutely. But, I think that for a novice researcher, who is beginning to undertake primary research, it is very hard to do both at the same time, and so I do think that the distinction is useful.

**Paddy Dolan:** But, I think that the way Potter & Wetherell (1987) deal with attitudes, compared to Fishbein & Ajzen (1975), is great, as it brilliantly summarises the advantages of qualitative research compared to quantitative. In Fishbein & Ajzen (1975), there was a particular way of measuring attitudes that became popular. They decided that ordinal data could be called metric by labelling it near interval. How near, who knows, near enough? They treated attitude as if it's a property of each individual, so every individual has a certain amount of attitude towards a particular object, or activity, or whatever. So we all have attitudes within us.

**Olivia Freeman:** Positive or negative, isn't it?

**Paddy Dolan:** Exactly, attitudes have a certain valence. But, that's not tested by any theory, or any data generation, it's just assumed. Then, you see, depending on how much of this property you have, whether you are more likely to perform a certain act. Like, in consumer behaviour, will you buy something or not. It's a methodologically individualistic approach to social phenomena.

**Olivia Freeman:** Whereas Potter & Wetherell (1987) would say that attitude is not a fixed entity. It's something that is constructed, through interactions, and functions for somebody in a particular context, at a particular moment.

**Paddy Dolan:** Attitude is context-specific.

**Olivia Freeman:** Yes, it can entirely change from one situation to another.

**Brendan O'Rourke:** So, we have two ways of thinking about attitudes. In one, the Fishbein & Ajzen (1975) way, there is this thing inside individuals that can be measured through surveys. It's seen as fixed for individuals across situations, it's measurable, and all of the same type. That may not be a bad assumption in some work, when you're asking some type of questions, but it's an awful assumption if you're trying to understand how things like attitudes are constructed where the Potter & Wetherell (1987) way of looking at things is much more insightful.

**Paddy Dolan:** Norbert Elias talked about attitudes, decades ago, and said the important thing about attitudes is not that you have them, but that they have history, they have been formed through social interaction and interdependence. So, if you want to understand this thing that you understand to be an entity and object, you have to translate it into a process, because that's actually what it is. So, again it's quite a fundamental difference.

**John Hogan (Moderator):** There is much talk about methodological and philosophical issues, is this important in research?

**Paddy Dolan:** Well, I think methodological issues are! I think it's somewhere in the purpose of this book!

GENERAL LAUGHTER

**Paddy Dolan:** I don't think philosophy is. Traditionally speaking, philosophers don't generate and analyse empirical data.

**Conor Horan:** I think a student getting into philosophy can fall into a pit of philosophical discussion, and never get on with doing the empirical research work. I direct students to get on with their research, and reflect on their position using philosophy. With undergrads, I wouldn't get into it too deeply, but with some of the masters students I get into it a little bit more, in terms of just understanding how other researchers might actually look at their research, particularly if that other researcher is coming from a different philosophical stance. In this way, it gives students a grounding as to grouping bodies of literature, and an understanding of what philosophical approach that body of literature is coming from. I do think it's a good way of opening your mind. But, to start off a piece of research by saying I'm a positivist, a postpositivist, a critical realist, etc. is damaging. That's because, by declaring your philosophical position, you immediately close the doors on all other paradigms. You have immediately boxed yourself in to one way of thinking. I think that the whole process of doing a dissertation, a PhD, research, or whatever, is a journey.

**Paul Donnelly:** There's a journey that can be taken through philosophy, in terms of getting a sense of where do I feel comfortable, and how do I see the world.

**Conor Horan:** I'm not saying that you should leave philosophy reading until the end. I think you should open your mind philosophically as you go through your process. I don't think you should just read philosophy at the end of your research, and reflect back in that structured way. I think it's always good that you expose yourself to the basics of philosophy. Use it to open your mind, look at other things, but don't fall into the hole of philosophy.

**Paul Donnelly:** Little did I realise that, during my own PhD research, I was coming to it from a very managerialist perspective. Having worked in

an organisation, that's how I was thinking. But, when I was exposed to various philosophies, suddenly, so many different ways of thinking about the world opened up to me. Then, it was a matter of trying to figure out 'where do I feel comfortable philosophically?'. I certainly moved away from a managerialist position. I grew to understand that all reality is constructed; we construct it through interaction. You start thinking about it and realise that you've got an affinity with that.

**Conor Horan:** Let me rephrase what I'm saying in terms of an ongoing reflection. I think it's an ongoing reflection on where you are and your extant position.

**Paul Donnelly:** Absolutely.

**Conor Horan:** Not reflection at the end of the process.

**Paul Donnelly:** To be opened up to philosophical reflection is a great help, because that can help in terms of how you want to do research, what sort of questions do you have, and what sort of questions can you now explore that you didn't before.

**Conor Horan:** So, do you think this makes sense in the context of undergraduate students, who've a short time to come to grips with the basics of research?

**Paul Donnelly:** Absolutely, as it starts the process of opening their minds, and can continue long after the dissertation is completed. I'd see it as part of the whole experience of being.

**Olivia Freeman:** I don't think that an undergraduate student will necessarily come to that point that you talk about. But, I think that they need to engage with, or be aware of, the fact that there are all these 'isms', and that they have consequences.

**Paul Donnelly:** I'll just give you a quick example. One of our research students was very stuck in a quantitative approach. She was resisting getting into any area that could be described as philosophy, thinking about ontology, and so on. However, when she was exposed to it, her mind opened up immensely. She first redefined herself as an interpretivist and then a critical realist. She may find feminism, for example. Who knows? But, she's on a learning journey, and she really appreciates that journey.

**Conor Horan:** I was observing some PhD students, one of whom had a completely managerial approach to research, just as you were mentioning. However, after a couple of days attending a course on philosophy, he'd

completely opened up. He said, 'Wow, I'm seeing this whole new spectrum of life'. I think it's lovely to see that in someone.

**Brendan O'Rourke:** I think philosophy is very useful for opening up your mind. But, I also think there is a danger that it can close minds. If you take Burrell & Morgan (1979), for instance, they lay out four basic philosophic positions. You've essentially got to assume an isolationist strategy where you adopt one of these. I think this approach was probably useful in the late 1970s when there was so little toleration for different philosophical or methodological points of view. But, I think it's dangerous now, and can be an excuse for not answering an argument.

**Paul Donnelly:** That book came out at a particular moment in time, but the thinking has moved on since then.

**Conor Horan:** I've used Burrell & Morgan (1979) in the past and found it helpful.

**Paul Donnelly:** It's an entrée.

**Brendan O'Rourke:** Mike Reed (1985) has some really good criticisms of the isolationist strategy of Burrell & Morgan (1979)

**Conor Horan:** I found it good in presenting a body of literature that was coherent. It can be a good introduction.

**Brendan O'Rourke:** An advantage of understanding the basics of philosophy is it stops you making what we'd call 'schoolboy errors'. That is, taking bits from various approaches that are mutually contradictory and ending up making a fool of yourself. I think the way to overcome that is through engaging with the literature into which your contribution, your research, fits. If you engage in the literature, and listen to that conversation, you won't make those mistakes, because you'll be within that conversation.

**Paddy Dolan:** People can learn how to do methodology from the kind of articles that Olivia was talking about. Rather than reading say the German philosopher Martin Heidegger on the nature of being and time, and seeing how Heidegger might solve some empirical problem, better to engage with the work of those who are empirically engaging with some research problem and see how they are doing it.

**Conor Horan:** I think that a lot of the knowledge on methodology and philosophy should be employed, not just described. Students should use it

as a way to inform their thinking, to inform a decision-making process regarding whatever problem, or whatever extraneous affair, has to be handled.

**John Hogan (Moderator): On that note, we will draw our conversation to a conclusion. Thank you all very much.**

## CONCLUSION

From the above conversation, we can see some commonalities in the advice that the various participants would give to novice researchers. Novice researchers should combine their personal passions with research work they find in the literature. They should try to join in the conversation of researchers looking at a particular area. They should study some research philosophy to open themselves to broader vistas, but they should immerse themselves in studies of the matter they are interested in. They should take ownership of their dissertations and, all agreed, they should draw on, and listen to, their supervisors wisely! Evident, too, in the conversation were the differences in viewpoints among these researchers who have worked so closely together. This is the world that the novice researcher is entering into when taking on research and, while a challenge, we hope that this conversation conveys the sense of excitement and fun most feel when engaged in research.

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