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Curiosity and Serendipity in Qualitative Research

Abstract This presentation argues that we seldom speak of our findings in qualitative research as serendipitous, although we have splendid possibilities to make surprising findings. In order to enhance the chances and sharpen our analyses we have to read broadly but also pay attention to details in our data. We should avoid societal or scholarly conventionality, even be disobedient to recommendations, if this blinds us to new meanings of our findings. The value of serendipitous findings lies in the fact that they diverge from conventionally held knowledge. Thus, we have to retain our curiosity, with the "strange intoxication" or passion that Max Weber wrote about in *Science as Vocation*.

Keywords Serendipity; Qualitative Methods; Curiosity

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While preparing this talk on curiosity and serendipity, the theme of the qualitative network, European Sociological Association conference in Lund, I discovered that there were many books on serendipity using natural science, the Nobel prizes, et cetera, as illustrations (Meyers 2007; Norrby 2010). I came to wonder whether and how serendipity is relevant for social sciences and concluded that, yes, it is, but is not always presented as such, as I will elaborate later.

Strategies to enhance serendipity while acknowledging some of the hindrances in qualitative social science will be discussed. Some of these dimensions are similar to those in the natural sciences, but some are unique to social sciences. Curiosity is regarded as a necessary but not sufficient ingredient for both discovering and researching one's serendipitous findings; scientific curiosity is thus, something we must cherish and court. Furthermore, we must learn from natural science in not being too shy in describing our research in terms of "findings." As mentioned above, in natural sciences, there is an abundance of examples of serendipitous findings.

Fleming's discovery of penicillin is a case in point, perhaps the most well-known illustration of success in natural science coming to a researcher by chance, "happy accident," or serendipity. His serendipity was sneezing into his Petri dish (a plastic bowel that chemists keep and grow their bacteria in), which led to his discovery of lysozymes.[1]

The life and work of another great scientist, Carl von Linnaeus, provide another example. He was the 18th century botanist who developed the classification system of binomial nomenclature that we – or at least some of us – still use today. Linnaeus is a good example because he began his university education at Lund University, in 1727.

Linnaeus created his famous classification of plants according to their pistils and stamens. One day, he found a mutated butter-and-eggs (*Linaria vulgaris*) flower, which he could not place in his regular classification system.

He could have discarded his finding or even concealed it because it called his already-published system into question. He did not choose this way; instead, he was thrilled and curious because this finding challenged his earlier opinion that species were constant and that all species had been created in the form that they currently existed. Thus, he published his findings.

This publication, in turn, led to an intense scientific debate in Europe.[2] In time, it also led to Darwin's theory of evolution.

What Can Be Learned?

Unexpected happenings are not, of course, all that is required. We need a benevolent context, space, and time for studies. It is important to give time to process and digest the unexpected. But, today, the politics of science carries elements of the opposite, with an emphasis on fast results and counting, and quantifying publications; indeed, paper content appears less interesting than their number. Furthermore, large, so-called "excellence grants" are given to established male researchers who publish more of the same, but fewer publications, according to a recent Swedish report entitled "His Excellency" (Sandström et al. 2010).

The unexpected, it is true, rests on a past: past knowledge, results, a trained eye for what is truly an unexpected finding. In the words of Pasteur, who is also known for his serendipitous results concerning bacteria: "Where observation is concerned, chance favors the prepared mind."

Observations alone are not enough. To transform observations into "findings," one needs curiosity and a will to take findings seriously, to keep on working with the meaning of the unexpected.

[1] In some descriptions it was a tear of his that fell into the Petri dish.

[2] See: http://fof.se/tidning/2007/1/blomman-som-kunde-gjort-linne-till-darwin, retrieved March 28, 2012.

At the time he found the butter-and-eggs plant, Linnaeus was an established researcher. Still, he was looking for new data, comparing them to his old findings, and revising his old schema of interpretation. This approach, then, resembles an interest in negative cases, as used in analytic induction (Katz 2001).

Strategies to Enhance Serendipity in Qualitative Social Science Research

Naturally, several dimensions may support serendipity. Here, I discuss five: 1) the wide perspective, 2) the detailed study, 3) disobedience, 4) avoid being trapped by conventionality, and 5) remain loyal to the moral of *science* (and not to other agendas).

1) The wide perspective

In a recent book, *Happy Accidents*, on serendipity in modern medical breakthroughs, the author, Morton Meyers, notes the risks of being stuck in established modes of inquiry; the answer, he writes, may lie in a different direction that can be seen only when perception is altered. Meyers uses the example of the Russian painter Kandinsky, known as the "father of abstract art," who late one night, on returning to his dark studio, found that he could not make out the subject on his easel, but was deeply moved by the shapes and colors. It was only later that he discovered that the painting was resting on its side. Nevertheless, this experience led him down the path of emphasizing the importance of forms and colors and deciding that "depicting objects was not necessary in my paintings and could indeed even harm them" (as cited in Andel 1994:637). Meyers then suggests that too-close attention to detail may obscure the view of the whole. "Certainly, if one's perspective is too tightly focused, gross distortion may result" (Meyers 2007:10).[3]

A way to enhance a wide perspective may be to read broadly, as the Swedish sociologists Christofer Edling and Jens Rydberg have illustrated in *Sociological Insights of Great Thinkers* by letting various sociologists write about how Shakespeare, Zola, Orwell, Strindberg, Kafka, and others can inspire us on themes such as stratification, consumption, and interaction. We can also read social scientists who are not necessarily in our own fields. A case in point is Harvey Sacks, who often referred to social anthropologists; a closer interpretation would perhaps be that he relied only on sociologists like Harold Garfinkel and Erving Goffman. The lesson to learn is that specializing in a narrow body of literature probably works against chances of serendipity. Rather, it is a broad and "lustful" reading list that helps, one that does not necessarily respect conventional boundaries.

2) The detailed study

A broader view or different perspective, however, is not the whole picture. A focus on *details* may also be quite fruitful for serendipity. Returning to Linnaeus, the focused study of the butter-and-eggs plant, homing in on pistils and stamens, was quite rewarding. For us, as social scientists, a case in point is, of course, the detailed study of conversation analysis in which something as ephemeral as a 5-second silence can be quite powerful. Readers of Harvey Sacks (2005) are probably struck by his repeated re-analyses. Examples such as "The baby cried. The mommy picked it up" are used so many times that one might get the impression of analytic mania, but the detail adds to successively more complex reasoning. Thus, the wide and broad view, as recommended by Meyers in his Kandinsky example and the minute observations of a Linnaeus, can both encourage serendipity.

[3] Which can be compared to Richard Swedberg's (2012) recent advice on generating theory, one of the many indications of theory and methodology not seldom being parallel enterprises.

3) Disobedience

Moreover, in reading books recently published on serendipity, it becomes clear that even if you need to know your field, there may also be benefits *in not being too obedient* to the recommendations taught by its authorities. Let me present what is, to me at least, an unexpected finding from my own research.[4] My disobedience came from not being very much in the field myself and running up against one of the basic assumptions of ethnographic work, that "you have to be there." The research concerned an evaluation of a large, extremely expensive youth care project. This evaluation involved employed youth care coordinators (social workers by training). Due to a lack of time, I mainly relied on my co-workers' field notes and interviews. The coordinators (or case managers) were presented as practical, person-oriented, "state-employed parents," closely oriented to the youngsters and to their parents. From the field notes and interviews, however, it became clear that meetings, documents, rules, and regulations were central and inspired engaged talk among the professionals in the field, while the formal objects of their work, the youngsters, were obscured in a discursive shadow. Meetings for these coordinators were where "the Action is" (Goffman 1982), a context where they could test their skills and competence in competition with other bureaucrats. That meetings were central for this category was indicated by the many meeting names and references that came up in an examination of the textualized data (Table 1). This cultural concern was similar to other naming practices noted in studies of varieties of rice (Brown 1965) or taxonomies among drug addicts (Agar 1994:73-88), for example.

[4] The results are published in Basic, Thelander, and Åkerström (2009), and discussed in Åkerström (2011).

Table 1. Varieties of Meetings.

Varieties of Meetings
Workgroup meeting
Extra meeting
Morning meeting
Pre-meeting
Group meeting
Information meeting
Enrolment meeting
Local work group meeting
Mid-meeting
Network or family meeting
Staff meeting
Planning meeting
Reference group meeting
Recommendation meeting
School meeting
Soc-meeting [the social services]
Team meeting
Task meeting
Treatment meeting
Follow-up meeting
Week meeting
Video meeting
"Hand over" or referral meeting

Source: Åkerström (2011).

Apart from these, there were other references to meetings in the notes (Table 2).

Table 2. References to Meetings.

Meetings referring to each other
Last meeting
Next meeting
Meetings coming up
"Meetings with" referring to various categories of people or institutions
Meeting with social authorities
Meeting with parents
Old and new forms of meetings
Video meetings as opposed to "regular meetings"
Time and place indicators
Meeting room, meeting places
Frequency of meetings, meeting times

Source: Åkerström (2011).

An image of the case-managers as *Homo Administrativus* emerged, something that my collaborators had not noticed, possibly because they were too occupied by the daily tasks of this very intense evaluation, which involved lots of data collecting, as well as being emotionally intense because of the many sad stories concerning youngsters and parents. Indeed, one of my co-workers had more trouble sleeping at night than he had had after his war experiences in the Balkans. My collaborators published excellent work, but did not note this particular meetings-focused trait. I am not arguing for the general benefits of being an "armchair ethnographer," but in some cases, it may be possible – and at times rewarding – if you are not researching in a very foreign context. In this case, as a university employee, I knew quite well the contexts and meanings of meetings.

The English philosopher, Francis Bacon, used the metaphor of the hunt when analyzing scientific investigation. To this metaphor, one may add that "if the game presents itself when we are looking for it, it may also present itself when we are not looking for it, or when we are looking for game of another kind" (Andel 1994:635). In my case, "meetings" was something I stumbled over when hunting for other phenomena in my material.

4) Avoid being trapped by conventionality

One risk we face is that we stifle ourselves by being too conventional, in the form of trying to seek a safe haven in terms of contemporary debates on how to collect and analyze data. Such conventionality can arise from several sources. We might be caught intellectually by internal social science rhetoric of privileging qualitative studies over quantitative, policing ourselves in not using the latter, while quantitative data may be very useful for us. We may be persuaded by qualitative scholars privileging "naturally occurring data," while others defend the use of unstructured interviews, others prefer discourse studies of texts and documents. In grant proposals, you sometimes see an allusion to a certain software program for analyzing qualitative data, as rhetoric in itself, with no further arguments on what to feed the programs with.

There are also ways of analyzing that are in fashion. For a while, most dissertations and many articles assured us that they had used grounded theory. Now, with the popularity of the language turn, much is done on narratives and on discourse instead. But, even the new will eventually be in jeopardy, as evidenced in the title of an upcoming symposium: "Matter Matters: The Social Sciences Beyond the Linguistic Turn."[5] Quite often, the new is rhetorically contrasted with the old, without any further arguments or illustrations of what new discoveries have been made by the new perspective or may be made with the new. This is not to say that new perspectives are not necessary. They are needed, but to me, many fail to address the newness' potentials in discovering or in illuminating.

Furthermore, a lot of effort is made and rhetoric produced on an almost ideological level where social scientists get their identities; they hook up or marry one perspective or another. A social scientist can thus, come to be known as the "quantitative guy," an ethnographer, or a "CA woman." Instead of being known as someone who explains a social phenomenon, for example, gifts, divorces, having pets, et cetera. Catherine Kohler Riessman is more known for her narrative analyses than for her studies of childless women, masculinity and illness, and divorces. Kathy Charmaz is more known for her grounded theory than for her work on illness and identity.

Such identifying divisions are not common among historians, for instance, who talk about themselves, for example, as being "pre-medieval, medieval, or modern historians," or as being interested in women's history or in court history. Medical researchers may talk about themselves as scholars studying specific organs, such as the eyes or heart, or specific proteins.

Another observation: conventionality is integrated and propelled by modern research politics. As early as 1961, U.S. President, Dwight Eisenhower, who is known for coining the phrase "the military-industrial complex" in his farewell speech, spoke in the same speech about another important situation where academic research can be too dependent on – and thus, shaped by – government grants, "where a government grant becomes virtually a substitute for intellectual curiosity."[6] This tendency seems to have accelerated, now we are not only congratulated for bringing in grants; our bosses may report on how much money this or that person got, but not always on what the grant was intended to research.

5) Remain loyal to the moral of science (and not to other agendas)

Retaining curiosity with the "strange intoxication" or passion that Max Weber wrote about in *Science as Vocation*, and keeping the passion for the unexpected may not always be easy. Fighting off conventionality is only one risk.

[5] The announcement "A symposium to be held at the Faculty of the Social Sciences Lund University, October 15-16, 2012" explains: "For all their differences, theoretical orientations, such as constructivism, deconstruction, discourse analysis, and conceptual history, share the underlying assumption that the study of linguistic entities holds the key to knowledge of the sociopolitical world. Yet, there is a growing concern that the linguistic turn has unduly limited the domain of inquiry, and now has exhausted most of its potential. In the ensuing efforts to escape the prison of language, many scholars have been tempted to speak of an ongoing material turn or new materialism within the social sciences" (see: http://www.lu.se/o.o.i.s?id=29592&list_mode=id&calendar_id=10308, retrieved September 10, 2012).

[6] See: http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/dwightdeisenhowerfarewell.html, retrieved June 27, 2012.

The intrinsic value of serendipity findings lies in their going against commonly held knowledge. The history of natural sciences is full of examples of heroic people who were derided, but stayed on course.[7] One example is the treatment of the researchers who discovered that bacteria cause stomach ulcers in a time when the accepted dogma was that stress or other factors caused the problem.

We, social scientists, may not always be met by scorn from our colleagues when presenting our results; in fact, there may be too few scientific debates on social science results. But, in our case, as social scientists, we may have to wrestle with our own and others' beliefs in current socio-political or other types of societal trends. Many social scientists tend to be married to political beliefs, some are even activists, or at least, they have difficulties in separating science from reform agendas. If we are stuck in such lines of agendas, our research might be guided by these aims rather than driven by curiosity; we might even censure our curiosity if findings do not fit the current wisdom in a political field.

Publishing findings that run against such commonly held beliefs may, in some cases, be painful in ways that natural scientists do not experience; viruses cannot talk back, so to say, and they cannot blame a researcher for being heartless, racist, or conservative.

Many of the studies I have been involved in have evoked such responses. One illustration is a study of how staff at nursing homes talked about and dealt with elderly patients who were violent (Åkerström 2002), which invoked critique from colleagues, reviewers of articles, and from the audience when presenting talks; I was morally questioned on the subject: Why had I not written about *the elderly*? *They* were the ones who were abused, according to many media scandals. Another example concerns ethnicity. In a series of recent studies of policing ethnicity, we faced many instances where the researchers had difficulties not only in getting past gate-keepers in schools and institutions but also in writing up our findings, and presenting them at seminars. "Ethnicity," we were told, "is a very delicate subject."[8] A more well-known case in Sweden concerns the Swedish sociologist, Eva Kärfve, who was attacked by psychiatrists, patients, the Child Ombudsman, and many others for questioning the scientific bases of medical diagnoses of DAMP and ADHD (Kärfve 2000); and a well-known international example is the responses to Hanna Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*.

The Strength of Qualitative Studies in Generating Serendipity

This is a qualitative methods conference. As researchers using such methods, we are in a splendid position of making surprising findings. But, what is serendipity? It might be easier to define for natural science: their results can be clearer, unequivocal. Furthermore, these researchers pursue their work in a cumulative manner. For us, cumulative work might not always be possible, or at least, not always desirable. Still, we have to be prepared because "chance favors the prepared mind," but not blinded by earlier results and common understandings.

Serendipity, I propose, for social scientists is the sum of those findings that are unexpected and contrast with earlier "social knowledge," whether this knowledge is derived from the social sciences or based on commonly held cultural assumptions. Many of the classic ethnographic works have become classics because they provide us with a new way of understanding a local culture, profession, or social phenomenon. Some were contrasts to established social science knowledge, as, to use a minor classic, Whyte did in *Street Corner Society*. He showed that the slum was socially organized, not disorganized, which ran against established truths among social scientists at the time. At other times, findings can contrast with more general societal assumptions, as did Humphreys' *Tea Room Trade*, which questioned current understandings held by policemen and the public about homosexuals.

The major strength of qualitative studies is the basic openness they provide. In general, we are not in the business of trying to test hypotheses that already exist or have locked in our questions in the grid of a questionnaire, and we are not locked in by data provided by a database. So, we have to work to retain our curiosity and look out for interesting findings while we try to clear our mindsets of too many buzzwords or engage in applying for grants for their own sake. Whether we find our data in new material or through re-analyses of earlier collected material, we are – in our qualitative tradition – *apt* to make some surprising and lucky discovery, and the trick must be to make the research as open as possible to achieving this.

My point is that this ESA conference's theme, Curiosity and Serendipity, should be devoted to openness, in terms of being interested in various methods, techniques, and concepts that help us analyze our material and in being interested in – and enjoying – the new findings presented here. There are, as I mentioned initially, many books and articles on serendipity in natural science, describing the "happy accidents" of those who won Nobel Prizes, and so on. We seldom speak, however, of our findings in qualitative social sciences as serendipitous. I hope that this conference will be devoted to the awe and wonder of the magic of discovery.

[7] For illustrations, see, for instance: http://www.foresight.org/news/negativeComments.html; http://amasci.com/weird/vindac.html, retrieved July 16, 2012.

[8] The studies are carried out within the program *Policing Ethnicity in a Diversified Sweden*, grant no. 2009-0011, supported by the Swedish Council for Working Life and Social Research (Peterson, Abby, and Åkerström).

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