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Stewart R. Clegg &
Ralph Stablein

Arne Carlsen and Jane E. Dutton (Eds)

Research Alive:
Exploring Generative
Moments in Doing
Qualitative Research

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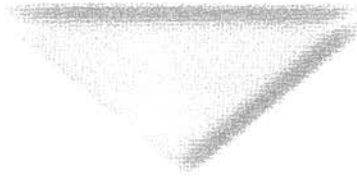
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Part 1

INTRODUCTION



Research Alive: The Call for Generativity¹

Arne Carlsen and Jane E. Dutton

I was struck by how much was captured – a whole summer of excitement and energy – by just a few words. I felt like Alice must have when she opened the tiny door looking out into the garden in Wonderland. ... there it was, an entire world existing through that little door and she must have felt that same sense of breathless excitement and wonder when she first glimpsed it.

Michelle Barton (this volume)

I am generative when I am moved by the desire to give back to the conversation that which I have taken from it. These conversational moments are “deep” moments, they become a part of who I am, and I can return to them time and time again to draw from them, like a deep well, more thoughts of further consequence.

Haridimos Tsoukas (this volume)

I felt deeply connected to this group [of vendors] and had moments of shame that I had been afraid others would think I was like them. It was a wall of fear built up to separate the realm of my life from that of my research participants’ lives, and when it was broken down through their generosity, it also broke a barrier inhibiting my ability to understand them.

Julka Almquist (this volume)

¹ We are grateful to Kjersti Bjørkeng and Karen Golden-Biddle for insightful comments on this chapter.

Tuning in to life

What makes qualitative research really worth doing? When do we feel most alive and energized in our research? Those questions are seldom asked in the literature on qualitative research and the answers to them are not obvious. As previewed in the opening excerpts from researchers' accounts, qualitative research can be a profoundly rewarding endeavor that brings breathless excitement, wonder, moving conversations and a sense of deep connection to researchers. These are qualities of the researcher experience that may not only explain what draws people to our craft but also impact researchers' ability to do their craft well. Yet, we know little about these aspects of researchers' experience and how to access them as means of cultivating a capacity to conduct qualitative research. Typically, the primary attention of research method books is on philosophies of science, strategies of inquiry and aspects of technique. Such foci are necessary but not sufficient to understand what brings deep engagement and movement in imagination to researchers. Learning the art and craft of doing qualitative research extends beyond mere skill acquisition and beyond doing detached and objective analysis.

Method alone cannot explain how the doing of research can be enlivened by nurturing relationships, cannot make us fathom how mysteries are born and a sense of wonder is activated in people, and will never be sufficient to appreciate why some learning experiences have the power to radically expand our thinking and transform the entire way we come to research. To grasp these dimensions of the research experience, we need to tune in to manifestations of *life* in research and how *life* is generated. By life we reference the life of researchers and life of ideas, which are marked by experiences of vitality, awakening, opening, growing – all imperfect manifestations of the animate existence of human beings who are participating in the research process.

Tuning in to life means tuning in to moments. We become researchers through the accumulation of experienced moments. Many of these moments are marked by hardship and standstill. Researchers may feel lost in data, isolated, and experience self-doubt. Our research findings are often hard-wrung, emergent and fraught with interpretive anxiety. Then there are those moments of deep inspiration, connectedness, bursts of insight and expansion of thought, moments when researchers feel alive in their research – moments that are *generative*. These are moments when researchers sense growth and wonder, moments that often follow in tandem with or are preceded by moments of hardship; moments containing important wisdom about the doing of qualitative research. Despite their importance, they are given surprisingly little attention in qualitative research books.

This book is about the doing of qualitative research, the becoming of qualitative researchers and the life in qualitative research as revealed through stories of generative research experiences. We are inspired in partic-

ular by two previous books about qualitative research edited by Peter Frost and Ralph Stablein: *Doing Exemplary Research* (Frost & Stablein, 1992) and *Renewing Research Practice* (Stablein & Frost, 2004). With those two books we share a mission to approach the messy realities of research practice and provide guidance and reassurance through reflexive accounts about lived experience. Our book deviates from and complements the previous two in pursuing a format that a) is not a reflection over a whole “journey” or “research practice”, but one or more “moments”, and b) inviting new as well as experienced scholars to do the reflecting. Focusing on generative moments broadens the bases for the kinds of lived experience we choose to learn from, while at the same time broadening our action repertoires for how to deal with the setbacks, challenges and opportunities arising during the research process.

This book project was birthed in a series of conversations that took place at the Center for Positive Organizational Scholarship at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, Michigan, USA during the spring of 2009. We had gathered a group of scholars, most of them PhD students and Post Docs, to share stories about moments that were generative in some way, at first focusing on the experiences of interviewing. We quickly realized that we had stepped into a river whose currents ran deeper and stronger than we had foreseen. Stories have the unique ability to link past happenings with present ones and cast both into an array of possibilities (Kearney, 2002). The stories of these first conversations around our university bonfire lit new bonfires in the imagination of the listeners. Hearing them told was in itself a generative experience that expanded our understanding of what qualitative research can be like and what makes it really worth doing.

Spurred by the inspiration of the initial story-sharing experiences, this book represents an effort to enlarge the circle of sharing by inviting a broad spectrum of qualitative researchers to write about their generative research experiences in a condensed format. The contributors are both junior and senior scholars, many of whom have themselves written highly acclaimed accounts about the doing of qualitative research. The contributors come from a variety of backgrounds within anthropology, sociology, psychology, philosophy and educational research, but all share a home within organizations studies. As such, they share the features of an interdisciplinary field that invites researchers into the tension of contributing to theory development and the world of research practice. Such a duality is also reflected in the aims of this book as we hope to stimulate imagination in both how to enable generative moments in one’s own research and to enlist readers in theoretical imagination.

In order to tune in to life in research and bolster imagination about the generative, we offer 40 personal and insightful stories about how researchers have experienced generative moments in doing research. The stories

cover the full arc of the research process, from initial idea conception to publication and other forms of interaction with users of research. They are personal, back-stage accounts of everyday challenges in research and their resolutions, some of which are derived from action research, some from ethnographies, and others from more historical studies. These accounts provide readers with insights about the micro-moments that compose the doing of qualitative research, that are typically invisible, not discussed and yet are wellsprings of motivation and insight that sustain qualitative researchers. From these stories readers will gain critical new insights about research practice and acquire important perspectives that are an inherent part of developing as a research scholar.

Why generativity? Why now?

We define generativity broadly as the qualities of processes and abilities of being generative in research. Doing so, we let “generativity” relate to being “generative” and “generate” like “creativity” relates to “being creative” and “create”. More precisely, generativity² can be thought of as strips of experience that bring a feeling of energy and aliveness to people and also have the potential to produce more enduring expansive and transformative consequences with regards to 1) the development of ideas, 2) the development of researchers, their practices and relationships, and 3) the thought-action repertoires of people in the researched organizations. Our primary focus will be on what is generative of ideas and researchers³, and we shall deepen and qualify this definition as we go.

Aspects of generativity in qualitative research have been approached with several intellectual traditions. Narrative theory has dealt with the generative properties of richness in how empirical material is analyzed and written up (e.g. Bruner, 1986; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Appreciative inquiry,

² From Random House Dictionary – generate (n.d.). Dictionary.com Unabridged. Retrieved September 23, 2010, from Dictionary.com website: <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/generate>:

–verb (used with object)

1. to bring into existence; cause to be; produce.
2. to create by a vital or natural process.
3. to create and distribute vitally and profusely: He generates ideas that we all should consider.
A good diplomat generates good will.
4. to reproduce; procreate.

Origin: 1350–1400; ME < L generātus produced, ptp. of generāre to beget.

³ By this we acknowledge that the stories focus more on the co-movement of ideas and researchers than what is generative for people in the researched organizations. In the stories, people from the field figure as central in bringing about new understanding and being generative for research, but few of the stories dwell on how research can be a transformational power that makes a difference to third parties.

including its sources of inspiration (Gergen, 1978), has attended to processes that unlock generativity in organizational development and in theorizing (e.g. Cooperrider & Srivastava, 1987; Avital & Te'eni, 2009; Bushe, 2010). The focus on theory generation has been considerably strengthened and broadened in recent years through scholars' efforts to pry open the largely unexplored processes of discovery and imagination in interpretation (e.g. Weick, 1989; Anderson, 2005; Locke, Golden-Biddle & Feldman, 2008).

Another antecedent is the work of Erik Erikson (1950/1995: 240–241) who talked about generativity as care for establishing and guiding the next generation. That use of the term generativity has been refined and extended by one of the leading figures in narrative psychology, Dan McAdams, as well as colleagues, through a range of quantitative surveys and qualitative analyses of life stories (see McAdams, 1993; McAdams, Diamond, St. Aubin & Mansfield, 1997; Bauer & McAdams, 2004; McAdams, 2006). These studies point to generativity as an identity motive that emerges strongly in mid-life and gains importance as people grow older. People who are creative and productive often frame their lives in commitment stories where positive contributions to the next generation are emphasized. The narrative psychology version of generativity points to research as a site for the production of personal legacies, and the importance of the life of ideas outside the time-bound context of research projects. In this line of research (see also Kotre, 1996), to be generative is ultimately to produce something of value to society that transcends one's inevitable death.

While being mindful of these previous contributions, our book seeks to unpack more fully generativity as an agentic phenomenon in the doing of research and as a source of life, literally the life of ideas produced by research (Gergen, 1978) and, metaphorically, the life of people involved in research (Dutton, 2003). We shall talk of these forms of life as co-evolving. Acts of generative research practice are acts of becoming (Carlsen, 2006) in the sense that research may not only birth new ideas but also seed vocation and build researchers' identities. Generative experiences are moments of aliveness and transition that also have the power to shape researchers' engagement and spur human growth. Life experienced in the conduct of research is a process of development (Joas, 1996) that includes both dimensions. Furthermore, this process of development will necessarily include acts of imagination, a human capacity to transcend limitations and convert "absence into presence, actuality into potentiality, what-is into something-other-than-it-is" (Kearney, 1998: 4). The generative imagination that is key to life in research thrives on beliefs about the open-ended possibilities of existence and, as such, presupposes *daring* to venture into the unknown.

Our focus on agency and life invites consideration of a fundamental duality in generative research experiences. On the one hand, new meaning is generated through specific modes of human action whereby individual

researchers face challenges and grab the will to believe in themselves and the future. Thus, understanding the range of opportunities for generative moments may expand researchers' repertoires of effective research-related actions. On the other hand, as researchers we find ourselves in circumstances not entirely of our own making, and moments of generativity are always socially-situated, in the historicity of a social field of ideas as well as a social research practice. The life of ideas may be viewed as taking temporary housing in individuals, ideas possessing people and working through them rather than people creating ideas (Välíkangas & Sevón, 2010). Likewise, social life may be considered a phenomenon that is irreducibly collective and is manifest in the lighting up in individuals (Sandelands, 2003). Thus, attending to generativity means not only the heralding of individual agency in research but also taking a receptive stance towards streams of life that have many origins, purposes and possibilities.

The book also has a more personal origin: we share a longstanding and deep-seated interest in questions of positively deviant human experiences and human growth at work. Jane has, for example, explored questions of growth in relationships (Dutton & Ragins, 2007), in positive identity construction (Roberts & Dutton, 2009; Dutton, Roberts & Bednar, 2010) and, lately in positive social change (Golden-Biddle & Dutton, 2011). Much of Arne's research has emerged from a series of questions about origins of deep engagement in work and the relationship between practice and identity construction (Carlsen, 2006; 2008; Carlsen, Landsverk Hagen & Mortensen, 2011). Through this book we are turning our analytical lenses towards our own field, enabling us to more fully see how growth happens in moments of research experience and reflection. We find that our wonder about the research experience, as part of our own growth as researchers, is expanding each time we read the authors' contributions. We can only imagine what might be revealed if moments of generativity were explored for other forms of idea work beyond qualitative research.

Overall, we postulate three sets of arguments for focusing on generative research experiences. The three arguments reflect a three-fold value of tuning in to life in research in terms of serving a descriptive, an enabling, and an invitational function.

Descriptive: provide a fuller account of the researcher experience. By eliciting stories of generative moments in research we venture to go behind the curtains of declarative knowledge and turn towards aspects of research experiences that are seldom given attention in research write-ups. Processes of imagination in research still constitute black boxes of inquiry (Weick, 1989; 1999). Methodologies of research do not include modes of sensing and feeling (Heshusius & Ballard, 1996). Demands for transparency and replicability in research have led to a significant downplaying, or ignoring, of forms of researcher knowing that is affective, participative, somatic or implicit

(Heshusius, 1994; Gudmundsdottir, 1996), though recent theoretical contributions on abductive reasoning (Anderson, 2005; Alvesson & Kärremann, 2007; Locke, Golden-Biddle & Feldman, 2008) do start honoring such knowledge. Our book seeks to be part of rectifying this imbalance. Through engagement with a variety of narratives of generative research experiences we try to capture some of the tacit and embodied knowing involved in the doing of qualitative research. Moreover, by tuning in to social life as well as life of ideas in research, we also aim to understand more of how researchers develop in tandem with their research efforts. Some of the stories presented speak of deeply personal and transformative moments, experiences where vocations and passion are seeded. Turning to generative research experiences thus also means beginning to unpack how identity and engagement take shape in and through evolving research practice. As such, our approach follows research traditions that seek to understand the phenomenon of human growth as a dialectic of transformative experiences and resource-building (Fredrickson, 1998; Roberts et al., 2005; Carlsen, 2006).

Enabling: building developmental resources. By attending to the generation of life in research we do not seek to merely discover and register aspects of research that are unquestionably there. Our role is not that of distanced observers dissecting random samples of research accounts. Rather, we seek to be participant theorists in creating the basis for more generative research behavior – i.e. aspiring to build generative capacity (Gergen, 1978) in the distributed community of qualitative researchers in organizational studies. We have purposely invited researcher colleagues to recollect aspects of their research experiences as a basis for opening up new spaces of possibilities for other researchers. We think of those spaces as representing both a variety of distinct modes of situated agency and a repertoire for recognizing sources of life in research. Ultimately we hope these accounts will help to seed inspiration, hope and empathy, and thus be psychologically strengthening for researchers facing the increasingly daunting tasks required for the conduct of high-quality research. Stories of generative moments can function as social models for research behavior (Bandura, 1997), build psychological capital (Luthans, Youssef & Avilio, 2007) and, hopefully, stimulate reflection on research practice in ways more prescriptive accounts will not be able to do. Doing this, our book represents an application of positive organizational scholarship (e.g. Cameron, Dutton & Quinn, 2003; Cameron & Spreitzer, 2011) and appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider, Sorensen, Whitney & Yeager, 1999) to the practice of doing research. Sampling and appreciating positively deviant researcher experience serves the function of prying open aspects of research given little attention previously while simultaneously being mindful of challenges and sources of hardship.

Invitational: imagining life. In writing this book we also seek to install a continued search for life in research both in the practice of doing research

and as a phenomenon worthy of theoretical investigation. Imagination of generativity in qualitative research is the sought outcome. Paraphrasing the opening quote from Tsoukas, we seek to further bolster a conversation that started in Ann Arbor with the hope that others are moved to give back to it. For our ideas to live outside this text, generate new ideas and contribute toward shaping researcher practice, they must enter into a dialogic relationship (Bakhtin, 1986: 88) with the ideas of others. We have sought to accomplish such a dialog by making the format evocative and accessible in terms of providing many condensed stories rather than a few lengthy ones. Each of the stories has the potential to be a metaphorical resource (Cornelissen, 2006) that may spark imagination of what generative research may look like in the practice of readers. We have tried to further inspire imagining and possibilities from the stories using the images of generativity associated with each story. We hired an artist, Carol Anderson, to capture an aspect, a thread of the generativity in each story through an image designed to enlarge and enrich how a reader might encounter or interpret the story. Ideally, the stories, in combination with the images, would enlist readers in play; an expansion and possible explosion of meaning achieved by a serial movement of dislocations and associations (Barthes, 1981). The thematically large variation of the stories indicates that we are far from reaching saturation. Therefore, installing further imagination of life in research means trying to enhance receptivity to forms of generative research experiences that may not necessarily be described within the covers of this book.

Charles Sanders Peirce (Peirce, 1931–1958 (CP) 1.46; 2.641–644; 5.171–195) talked of the impossibility of controlling or predicting the leaps of imagination that are key to abductive reasoning. One can only try to install habits that will increase their likely occurrence, what Anderson (2005) unpacked as the “esthetic attitude” of abduction: adeptness in perception, creativity in imagination and receptivity to the insistence of ideas. Receptivity revolves around appreciating a feeling of beauty associated with moments of transition and breakthrough. In parallel, more important than any singular instance or story of generative moments is the seeding of a sense of wonder about life in research – that is ultimately our quest.

Turning to stories of moments

The focus on stories of moments in this book rests on three sets of basic assumptions about the phenomenon of generativity, whether in research or other forms of explorative work. First, generativity is best understood as being deeply *processual*. Our focus on moments takes its inspiration from pragmatism in giving primacy to experience (James, 1890/1950: 1904/1977; Dewey, 1925/1958). Generativity is first of all a quality of experiencing, not stable dispositions of actors. As such a quality of experiencing, gen-

erative moments do not come pre-packed and labeled with clear attention signs. Rather, opportunities for generativity are enmeshed in the “halo and penumbra” (James, 1890/1950: vol. 2: 255) of streams of researcher experience and need to be selected and enacted to reap their potential. Blink and you’ll miss them, as Karen Golden-Biddle so well points out (this volume). By evoking a strong process theory, we follow Sztompka (1991) in his theorizing of social becoming to say that generativity does not exist independently of human acts and interactions. A parallel treatment is carried out by Sandelands (2003: 9) who depicts social life as only existing in moments of continuous activity. Thus, turning to moments represents a turning to the roots of the phenomenon and, strictly speaking, outside these moments, neither generativity nor life exists.

Second, generativity is a *holistic* phenomenon. In the flow of experiencing during the “doing of research”, generative moments should not be understood simply as cognitive or individual accomplishments. They should also be seen as including embodied, affective, aesthetic and relational dimensions. We believe this distinction is more than a meta-theoretical point. It is a core belief that to get a proper phenomenological grip on generativity we need to capture instances of others’ lived experience as seen through the eyes of researchers in all their plurality, messy ambiguities and possibilities. As we shall dwell on in the summary chapter of this book, generative research experiences are moments variably thick on dimensions of seeing, feeling, daring, relating and playing. So, reflecting on, let’s say, the relating aspects of some generative moments should not stop us from considering the daring aspects of others. They are dimensions of the same whole in terms of how people make connections within experience to produce meaning and facilitate action.

Third, acts of generativity are *historically-situated*. Historicity is necessary for recognizing the hermeneutical nature of interpretation and the inescapable temporal character of the experiencing of selves in such practice. Acts of generating something new always take place within a historical present, from a given stance at a given time, infused by remembering and anticipation. Likewise, the research practices of actors are sites of temporal tensions: the structural determination of the past versus the open-ended nature of the future and the creative will of agents (Sztompka, 1991). Moments will, to varying degrees, flow over with such historicity – some seeming like stand-alone happenings, others as only making sense when part of a tight chain of events.

Given our attendance to the processual, holistic and historical qualities of generativity, a narrative approach to the inquiry into the phenomenon is inevitable. From a processual point of view, stories connect sequences of human doings and intentions over time (Sarbin, 1986) and form the primary way that people make sense of their experiences and tell others about them

(Bruner, 1986; Polkinghorne, 1988). From a holistic perspective, using a narrative form, we also aim to preserve richness and connectedness between dimensions of experience in the research process that are often abstracted away into isolated techniques and methods. From the perspective of historicity, stories of generative moments capture an intersection of the temporal patterns of inquiry and those of researchers. Capturing such temporality is the specialty of narratives (Crites, 1971; Ricoeur, 1981).

Our choice of stories as a format is also grounded in our aims to enable and invite. Throughout his writing, Bruner (e.g. 1986; 1990) underlined the power of narrative to forge links between the exceptional and the ordinary and repeatedly borrowed the phrase “epiphanies of the ordinary” from Joyce to underline this point. The stories presented in this book are meant as such epiphanies of everyday research. While full-fledged heroic journeys or years of ethnographic work will require more lengthy formats to do justice to the intricacies of researcher experience, glimpses of the generative can do so with less. Short stories are ideally suited as a medium that both captures and conveys small puzzles of everyday experiences, experiences that have not necessarily resulted in grand achievements. Each story takes a set of ordinary events in the experience of researchers and casts them into estrangement by presenting them and reflecting on them as examples of generativity. The contributors talk about their research experiences in a personal, narrative format – resulting in a rich but condensed array of provocative insights. Our aim is to emphasize ambiguous potentialities as much as causal actualities, the evocative as much as the descriptive. We use stories to facilitate imagination by comparison, within the experience of contributors, between stories, and with the experience of readers.

Together, we believe that the personal stories of generative moments and the accompanying reflections will help to illuminate a variety of new insights about effective research practice. Such insights would not be visible if we were looking at “grand-stroke research techniques” as opposed to micro-moments. The stories themselves are meant to be generative for the development of readers as researchers, extending their impact beyond mere skills acquisition. The 40 short stories presented here – 40 units of potential imagination by comparison – set the book apart from both lengthy ethnographies and traditional and more prescriptive method books.

Organization of the book

In line with our focus on life and what generates life in research, we have organized the stories into three sections that speak to three types of moments of life in research: birthing, growing and harvesting. The section on birthing contains stories of moments when researchers are recruited into new research areas, when engagement is born, when new lines of inquiry are un-

earthed, or when the seeds for such new or greatly invigorated research are planted. The section on growing contains stories of moments with the substantial development of ideas and researchers in established lines of inquiry, as manifested, for example, in analytical breakthroughs, vastly improved data collection, growing confidence, or the deepening of relations in the field. The section on harvesting contains stories of moments that typically occur during the parts of the research process when one is trying to bring one's research to the wider world (e.g. when publishing, presenting, running workshops etc). Harvesting also speaks to moments when researchers experience the fact that ideas produced in qualitative research take on a life of their own beyond the research project as a time-bound event. Thus, what constitute harvesting for some researchers may be the seeds of birth for others, with some of the stories in this section speaking to both. Each section of the book includes an invited commentary where wise and seasoned qualitative researchers – Calvin Morrill, Ann Cunliffe and Joanne Martin – share their interpretations of the themes and inspirations spawned by each collection of stories.

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