



## Facet Methodology: the case for an inventive research orientation

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### Abstract

This article puts the case for a new and evolving research approach or orientation - 'facet methodology', developed in collaborative team based working at *Realities* at the Morgan Centre, a 'Node' of the UK National Centre for Research Methods. Research fields are seen as constructed through combinations and constellations of *facets* as we might see in a cut gemstone, where facets refract and intensify light, taking up the background, and creating flashes of depth and colour as well as patches of shadow. In facet methodology, the gemstone is the overall research question or problematic, and facets are conceived as different methodological-substantive planes and surfaces, which are designed to be capable of casting and refracting light in a variety of ways that help to define the overall object of concern by creating flashes of insight. Facets involve different lines of enquiry, and different ways of seeing. The approach aims to create a strategically illuminating set of facets in relation to specific research concerns and questions. The rigour of the approach comes ultimately from researcher skill, inventiveness, creativity, insight and imagination – in deciding how best to carve the facets so that they catch the light in the best possible way. The paper argues that facet methodology can make a contribution to debates about the 'politics of method', especially in relation to its emphasis on the significance of flashes of insight rather than the production of 'maximum data' of a descriptive kind.

**Keywords:** Facet methodology, mixed methods, metaphors in research, gemstone, facets, insight, politics of method, inventiveness

### Introduction

In this article I want to make the case for a new approach to researching the multi-dimensionality of lived experience, namely *facet methodology*, that colleagues and I have been developing. We think facet methodology represents a new mode of practicing and thinking about social science research that may be useful for others to know about, and critically engage with. We see it as an evolving approach, and would be pleased to stimulate debate about it, the new possibilities for social research it might open up, and innovative ways of carrying it forward.

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I shall say something briefly about its provenance, and then focus on the visual metaphor of the gemstone/facet, explaining why we believe it is helpful to think in terms of a metaphor at all, and why this specific metaphor. I shall then outline what we see as the defining principles of facet methodology, before discussing some practicalities of using this approach. I want to emphasise from the start that we see facet methodology as an *orientation* and an approach, rather than a set of procedures that can be encapsulated in a framework or a recipe for research. As an orientation, it requires and celebrates researcher creativity, inventiveness, a ‘playful’ approach to epistemology, and the pursuit of flashes of insight. In the conclusion, I shall consider facet methodology, and the place of ‘insight’, in the wider context of trends in social research and the ‘politics of method’.

### **Provenance**

We have begun to develop our thinking about facet methodology in various team based projects we have been carrying out in ‘Realities at the Morgan Centre’, a ‘Node’ of the ESRC National Centre for Research Methods<sup>1</sup>. Specifically, the facet methodology approach was created collaboratively by Katherine Davies, Carol Smart, Brian Heaphy, and I<sup>2</sup>. Our aim has been to develop methods and approaches that capture the combination of vital, tangible and intangible dynamics in the way that personal relationships and relationalities are lived. Two of our projects in particular have fed very directly into the development of facet methodology: *Living Resemblances* and *Critical Associations*<sup>3</sup>. *Living Resemblances* has been exploring how people make sense of, live with and theorise about family resemblances: in other words, how resemblances are lived or are alive. In *Critical Associations* we are exploring personal associations (for example with friends, acquaintances, colleagues and neighbours) that are critical in people’s lives, in both positive and negative ways, rather than, for example, a study of friendships. In both cases, the names of the projects are already conceptual in that they indicate something of the research problematic – what might be interesting and puzzling about it - rather than just the topic under study. I shall go on to show why that is an important part of facet methodology.

In both projects, our aim was to design a study that involved a set of perspectives on key elements of living resemblances, and critical associations. We recognised that there were many different angles and approaches to our research problematics, but also we began (and continued) to evolve a set of priorities about these – different lines of investigation that we wanted to follow, driven by our ideas, existing knowledge and theory, and our evolving research itself. The driving question in each case was ‘how can we get hold of some really interesting, important, and pivotal things about family resemblances, or critical associations? How can we step outside or beyond existing ways of thinking about these things?’ The result in each case was a set of mini studies using different clusters of methods. We have come to think of these as facets. This whole collaborative process has been crucial in the development of our methodology, and the metaphors that we are using to guide our thinking.

In *Living Resemblances*, the example I shall use mostly in this article, these mini studies or facets included: creative interview encounters around questions about the living of resemblances in family life; experimental methods exploring different ways in which resemblances are perceived and measured in a variety of contexts; a small set of expert interviews; and a photo shoot combined with ‘vox pop’ encounters to observe the performance of resemblances in public (see Mason and Davies, 2011 for further details of the *Living Resemblances* project, and Davies and Heaphy, this issue, for an elaboration of our use of facet methodology in the *Critical Associations* project).

### **The gemstone and its facets: a visual metaphor**

The methodology we are developing involves envisioning research fields as constructed through combinations and constellations of *facets* as we might see in a cut gemstone.

**Figure 1: Cut gemstones and their facets**

The facets in a cut gemstone reflect, refract and intensify light, taking up the background, and creating flashes of depth and colour as well as patches of shadow. It is in the way the light is cast and plays in the facets that we come to perceive and appreciate the distinctive character of the gemstone. The facets are different shapes and sizes, and they catch and cast the light differently, depending on the direction and strength of the illumination as well as which planes and depths are left in shadow. It is important to note that sometimes it is the smallest facets that create particularly intense or brilliant shafts of light and colour.

Now imagine that the gemstone encapsulates the thing we want to understand and explore – living resemblances or critical associations for example. In facet methodology, the facets in the gemstone are conceived as different methodological-substantive planes and surfaces, which are designed to be capable of casting and refracting light in a variety of ways that help to define the overall object of concern. They will involve different lines of enquiry, and different ways of seeing. What we see or come to know or to understand through the facets is thus always a combination of what we are looking at (the thing itself, the ontology), and how we are looking (how we use our methods to perceive it, the epistemology). The aim of our facet methodology approach is to *create a strategically illuminating set of facets in relation to specific research concerns and questions*: not a random set, or an eclectic set, or a representative set, or a total set. The rigour of the approach comes ultimately from researcher skill, inventiveness, insight and imagination – in deciding how best to carve the facets so that they catch the light in the best possible way.

The idea of the researcher as ‘facet carver’ has some parallels with John Berger’s notion of storytellers as ‘lens grinders’. He says:

*‘The time, and therefore the story, belongs to them (the characters in the story). Yet the meaning of the story, what makes it worthy of being told, is what we can see and what inspires us because we are beyond its time. Those who read or listen to our stories see everything as through a lens. This lens is the secret of narration, and it is ground anew in every story...’ (Berger 2005: 31)4.*

We have found gemstones, facets and the way the light is cast and plays to be valuable concepts to think with. As I shall show, they help us to express some of the aims and principles of our approach. However, they do not express everything about it, and equally there are elements of gemstones and facets that do not work as metaphors for us – for example their solidity, their sharply defined edges, their inertness, their self-contained nature, and of course the fact that they are literally gemstones and we are dealing with social science knowledge. We are also aware of some dangers in the use of metaphors which, as Laurel Richardson comments (acknowledging the irony) are the ‘backbone of social science writing’. The dangers are that metaphors can ‘prefigure the analysis with a “truth-value” code belonging to another domain’ (Richardson 2000: 927) and that this can insidiously create or imply mistaken or overblown claims and generalisations, as well as ‘constraining the way we think’ (Rose 2005: 52). I am also conscious that we are using visual metaphors, when in fact our own approach to research, and that of others whom we admire, encourages using a full sensory register (see Thurnell-Read, this issue). We certainly do not mean to imply a preference for visual over other sensory methods, for example (Mason and Davies 2009).

To avoid these dangers we are trying to use these metaphors in a ‘gentle’ and ‘suggestive’ way. We are not trying to shoehorn everything we think about research into the idea of a gemstone, or to get carried away with finding parallels between the physics of light and refraction, and our own research practices. Ultimately we have found, as long as we do not try to push them too far, these visual metaphors have helped us keep in sight what we are *are* trying to do with and say about knowledge and our approach to generating it. They also help to distinguish it from other approaches that, on the face of it, look similar but which are different in key ways, notably ‘the bricolage’ on the one hand (elaborated by Kincheloe 2005; Kincheloe and Berry 2004), or an integrated mixed methods approach on the other (Brannen, 2005; Mason 2006b). Being able to picture a gemstone and its facets, at various points in the research process, has been tremendously helpful to us, allowing us to orientate and anchor ourselves, epistemologically and ontologically at various moments in the research.

### **From metaphor to methodology: defining principles**

In our approach the object of enquiry is envisioned as a gemstone with potentially any number of facets. Here I want to expand on this – to open up the metaphor so to speak - by exploring what this means in terms of ontological and epistemological orientations and research practices. I have identified six defining principles which I think characterise the approach that we are calling facet methodology.

#### *1. Multidimensionality of the ‘lived world’: a connective ontology*

The first principle is to do with ontology and the nature of the world about which we seek to generate knowledge. Facet methodology assumes that the world and what we seek to understand about it is not only lived and experienced, but is multi-dimensional, contingent, relationally implicated and entwined. Facet methodology therefore operates with a connective and a strongly anti-reductionist ontology (see Rose 2005 for an excellent critique of reductionism). Of course there are different versions of what such entwinings might consist of and look like, and this is the stuff of heated debate in the philosophy of the social sciences<sup>5</sup>. In my own take on this, I have been strongly influenced by approaches that are interested in understanding the active business of living relationally in surroundings and contexts as expressed in, for example, Ingold’s notion of ‘involvement in the world’ and the ‘entanglement of things’ (Ingold 2000: 258; 2011), or

Kincheloe's 'lived world' (Kincheloe 2005: 327). In describing the development of his own particular 'relational-ecological-developmental synthesis', Ingold explains that:

*'Instead of trying to reconstruct the complete human being from two separate but complementary components, respectively biophysical and sociocultural, held together with a film of psychological cement, it struck me that we should be trying to find a way of talking about human life that eliminates the need to slice it up into these different layers'. (Ingold 2000: 3)*

The lived world can involve socio-cultural, economic, spatial, temporal, historical, biophysical, natural, animal, spiritual, material, visible, audible, olfactory, haptic, climatic and non-human things, surroundings and environments - and undoubtedly others besides. Even what we call these things and the way we define them, betrays our ontological stance so that, for example, an 'actor network theorist' will argue against the validity of the domain of 'the social' (see Nimmo, this issue), and a macro economist will take issue with the 'socio-cultural'.

For the facet methodologist, whatever these things are seen to be, a primary interest will be in understanding how they are connected and entwined. This means that it is not enough simply to produce and be aware of long lists of 'layers' or dimensions of the world<sup>6</sup>, and neither is it helpful to retreat into easy dualisms like social/natural, macro/micro, structure/agency. In different ways, creating lists or dualisms can lead to the slicing that Ingold decries, instead of helping us to understand and theorise how the lived world connects and relationally implicates the things we think constitute it. In facet methodology, the aim is to create facets that *seek out* the entwinements and contingencies, instead of approaching the world as though these things are separate, or as though the different registers of scale that social scientists sometimes like to apply analytically (e.g. micro/macro) are self evidently meaningful in the experience of living.

In the Living Resemblances project for example we tried to design facets that would direct scrutiny towards the rather complex ways in which family resemblances might be biological, or genetic, or socially constructed, or fixed, or negotiated, or all of those things simultaneously, or ambiguously, or not really quite any of them. Our facets in different ways enabled us to explore how these things might be entwined or relationally implicated.

Facet methodology does not require adherence to one particular version of a connective ontology<sup>7</sup>, so much as to the *ideas* of contingency, implication, entwinement and multi-dimensionality, and to seeing these as central to the research problematic and thus to the gemstone and our choice of facets. This is a crucial point, and denotes one way in which facet methodology differs from straightforward mixed methods designs or even 'the bricolage' approach, where a concern with 'entwinement' (for short) is not a requirement.

## *2. Facets are always both methodological and substantive*

Facets are strategically and artfully designed *investigations* into particular aspects of the object of concern, the gemstone. We have conceptualised them as planes and surfaces that reflect and refract light, to help to make the point that we look through, with and at them, in working out what it is that we are seeing. Ontology and epistemology are closely bound together in the facets and this means that facets are not simply discrete *topics* of study (as indeed the gemstone is not simply a topic of study), or mini sub-studies which are part of an overall bigger topic. Nor are they simply *mixes of method*, even though they may very well involve mixing methods.

Instead, facets are mini investigations that involve clusters of methods focussed on strategically and artfully selected sets of related questions, puzzles and problematics. Each facet represents a way or ways of looking at and investigating *something* that is theoretically interesting or puzzling in relation to the overall enquiry and each seeks out particular instances or versions of the kinds of entwinements and contingencies that are thought to be characteristic of the object of concern in some way. In this sense, ontology and epistemology are always held in relation in the facet/gemstone nexus: substance is always also epistemological, and method is always also substantive.

Facets can thus be very different shapes and sizes, and some might be very small – there is no predefined minimum size for a facet, because it is always dependent on the particularities of its line of investigation and hence its methodological-substantive plane.

### 3. *Flashes of insight*

Facets are designed with the aim of producing insights. This means generating knowledge that is ‘telling’ (Savage 2011) in relation to the substantive questions and puzzles under investigation. They are purposefully created in relation to existing background knowledge and theoretical debate to create flashes of insight with striking or revealing effects.

In focussing on insights we want to distinguish the facet based approach from one which aims for comprehensive all-round descriptive knowledge of a research topic. If one is seeking out the most telling flashes of insight into conceptual issues that already problematise the entwined and contingent nature of the world, the strategy will be different than if one is seeking maximum coverage. Indeed, one of the aspects of the gemstone and facets metaphors that appeals to me is that, as mentioned earlier, it is sometimes the smallest facets that create particularly intense light and colour. Facet methodology works on the basis that insight does not emerge in direct relation to the size of the study. As an example, in the Living Resemblances project, our photo shoot and vox pop encounters were completed in a single afternoon, although they produced striking insights (see Mason and Davies 2011). Conversely, there is no guarantee that the bigger the study the more the insight, and indeed there is no necessary relation between the two. Instead insight is to do with how skilfully and inventively facets are imagined, carved and interpreted.

Generally, in our projects, we have focussed on how to generate insights that tell us something exciting, challenging, unsettling, pivotal or resonant about the entwined nature of the world in relation to particular questions and lines of investigation. These investigations are about already-conceptual and already-entwined issues, for example about critical associations rather than friendships (see Davies and Heaphy, this issue), or living resemblances rather than genetic heritability.

The pursuit of flashes of insight means that facet methodology requires a blend of scientific and artistic or artful thinking, involving not only *deductive* but also *imaginative, inventive, creative and intuitive* reasoning. These latter requirements are impossible to specify as procedures within conventional rationalistic methodological social scientific discourse, (although they are of course familiar in the arts), and hence are easily dismissed as unscientific and lacking in objectivity or rigour. Yet I want to argue they are vital: if we want to create flashes of insight we need researchers to be active and imaginative agents. The researcher needs their intellectual and creative energies and skills honed<sup>8</sup> when they ask themselves how they can get hold of some pivotal, incisive, crucial or vital things about, in our case for example, living resemblances or critical associations. They need to make inventive and even ingenious decisions about which might be particularly compelling lines of enquiry and this cannot be done with deductive reasoning and following predefined methodological procedures alone. Facet methodology explicitly draws imagination, creativity, inventiveness and intuition into research practice.

### 4. *Casting and refracting the light: constellation and association*

Light based metaphors – illumination for example - are so common in (and outside) the social sciences that we hardly notice that they are metaphors anymore and treat them as virtually literal (Richardson 2000). ‘To illuminate’ with its etymological origins in the Latin *illuminare* (from in-‘upon’ + *lumen* - ‘light’) – has come to mean ‘to clarify or illustrate’ (of course these are also metaphors). Whilst these are certainly elements in what we want the knowledge produced through facet methodology to do, I think it is better to express our dominant metaphors as ‘casting light’ and ‘refraction’, not least because these suggest an always partial, angled, illumination, but one that can nonetheless be very vivid.

'To cast' is defined in the Oxford Dictionary of English as 'to throw (something) forcefully in a specific direction, from the old Norse 'kasta' to cast or throw, and 'to refract' is 'to make a ray of light change direction when it enters at an angle' from the Latin 'refract', broken up. The agentic and purposeful casting of light fits well with our idea that facets are designed, both strategically and artfully, to produce insights, rather than the more passive idea of our object of interest being illuminated by the collection of maximum data. And refraction invites the possibility that light can bend, intensify, take on vibrant colour, and shine in unexpected and multiple ways, depending in part upon the angle of entry. Indeed, both of these ideas work with two important notions for us. The first is that what is illuminated, what it looks like – is contingent at least in part on how the light is cast. The second is that what we see is not the totality but instead a constellation or an association of flashes created by the facets, in which some elements shine particularly brightly or intensely. This helps us to perceive the distinctive character of what we are looking at.

The metaphors of casting the light, and refraction, create a particular sense of how the facets might work in relation to each other as well, which we find helpful in making sense of our research practice – namely through processes of constellation and association. This is because facet methodology aims to create a *strategically illuminating set of facets in relation to specific research concerns*, such as how resemblances are lived, how and which associations are critical. This is different from procedures of integrating or triangulating methods and data, which are commonly applied in 'mixed methods' studies. In these, the guiding principle tends to be either one of 'fit' between the different component parts of a study, or between the different methods used on the one hand, or 'corroboration' of different findings or methods, achieved through the strategic use of different forms of measurement on the other hand.

Constellation and association between facets need to be part of the thinking in how a study using facet methodology is designed, but they also, crucially, need to be achieved in the processes of interpretation, analysis and writing. Instead of integrating the parts of an empirical study in a formulaic and predesigned kind of way, this involves researchers thinking, imagining and writing their way across and through different facets and clusters of facets as they follow particular lines of enquiry, and chasing the flashes of insight where they seem to appear. This involves, each and every time (like Berger's 'lens grinder'), working out what kinds of *telling* knowledge – namely, telling about what, and on what basis – are created through individual facets (remembering that these are methodological-substantive). Then it involves going on to explore facets-in-relation through different associations and constellations, all the time looking for the flashes of insight in relation to the overall problematic.

For example, how can particularly revealing or telling insights about the performance of family resemblances in public, and about the various ways in which resemblances get perceived and measured in different contexts, and about the ways in which scientists and non-scientists think genetics work, be brought into association to tell us something distinctive about living resemblances? These are epistemological questions that facet methodology requires researchers to work through in relation to particular lines of enquiry, rather than there being a once and for all fit or form of integration between the parts, or mode of corroboration of one element of the study by the other, as one might see in an integrated mixed methods study. This strategic and artful way of envisioning the association between facets also differentiates the approach from 'the bricolage' where the logic is more of a democratic assemblage of different elements of knowledge (Kincheloe 2005), or something more eclectic.

Because facets are methodological-substantive, these processes always involve problematising not only what facets tell us, but how they do this – in other words what explanatory capacities they have, why we think they have them, and why we think this is a convincing explanation. This kind of hermeneutic circle (Kincheloe 2005) is crucial if researchers are to follow innovative and sophisticated lines of reasoning outside the box of the normal rules of method, without simply parading fanciful notions or shoddy analyses as though they were incisive insights. Facets are not just 'there', existing as silos of knowledge or data to be taken up or absorbed, but are brought into being through the critical and imaginative practice of epistemologically-ontologically astute researchers, and this must show - or be allowed to shine through - in the knowledge they create. This means that as well as developing new ways of generating and substantiating knowledge, researchers will also

draw – critically and questioningly - on many of the tried and tested ‘normal rules’ associated with the epistemological approaches they have deployed in their facets, to make and substantiate their claims. The point is that their knowledge claims need to be true to the epistemologies from which they are derived.

##### 5. *New ways of seeing: ‘troubling’ existing categories and assumptions*

Our aim has been to develop an approach that helps us to do research that can create new ways of seeing, that can ‘trouble’ existing categories, and that can shift prior assumptions. This aim has guided our thinking in how we have conceived of our original research problematics, how we have designed facets, and how we have started to analyse and make sense of the varying forms of data and knowledge that we think they are producing. This is different from a more straightforward aspiration to add more information to the stock of knowledge around broad questions, and it is one that is particularly suited to our faceted approach where we can effectively target our investigations in key areas where we think existing assumptions need unsettling. It is important to say that we cannot know in advance of empirical enquiry, nor when we are designing facets to generate data for example, exactly which categories and assumptions the knowledge we produce will ‘trouble’, and of course we may end up concurring with rather than overturning existing knowledge. But I think that facet methodology is guided by the aspiration to shift assumptions, and this is crucial in working out what the facets should look like.

So, for example, in our own projects, we began by wanting to trouble the idea that genetics explains resemblance, or that ‘critical associations’ were the same thing as significant friendships. Inevitably, this involves some degree of experimentation and risk-taking. Facet methodology can do this by providing empirically substantiated ideas to aid the processes of thinking differently and reconceptualisation.

##### 6. *Playing with epistemologies: astuteness, openness, empathy and humility*

Facet methodology is not contained within any one methodological tradition, or paradigm, and on the contrary it encourages creative engagement across epistemologies. In our own work, we have drawn on blends of methods whose provenance is a range of epistemological and methodological traditions<sup>9</sup>. Facets can draw different epistemologies into critical contrast and this process in itself can produce sparks of creativity that feed into the arts of thinking differently and troubling existing knowledge. As well as a sustained interest in the different ways in which methods and approaches produce knowledge, and what kinds of knowledge, there needs to be an enthusiastic willingness to ‘listen on all channels’ (Clark and Moss 2001) or to engage in the gentle ‘art of listening’ (Back 2007), to the complexities, the nuances and the entwinements of the world. This involves thinking both skilfully and inventively about the kinds of methods and data that will enable appropriate and animated knowledge about the lived world to flourish, and being willing to engage with alternative epistemological positions.

This has led us to get interested in, to dabble in, and to seek out skills or expertise in, methods and approaches that are beyond our comfort zones, but which have the potential either individually or in combination to help us create flashes of insight. This involves a conscious ‘playing’ with epistemologies – trying them out, experimenting with them, looking at the world through the radically different lenses of different approaches, drawing them into critical contrasts, and so on. As a practice, this requires a high degree of epistemological *astuteness* – to identify and deploy different epistemologies; *openness* – to be willing to try them and see what they can produce, suspending disbelief rather than starting with an excessively defensive or inflexible stance; *empathy* – to be willing to think through and imagine how the world looks and feels through different epistemological eyes; and *humility* (Back 2007) – to be prepared to accept that one’s own longstanding ways of doing things are unlikely to be perfect, and that there are limits to what social scientists know and can know.

This is likely to result in researchers using a range of methods and techniques to generate data and knowledge. For example, in our projects we have used creative interview encounters, narratives and diary methods, participant observation, photo shoot and vox pop encounters, photo and object elicitation, psychological experiments, era memory workshops (Davies and Heaphy, this issue), survey methods, documentary and online methods, methods that engage critically with the senses, methods that use different units of scrutiny

and analysis, methods that experiment with time and so on. We have also developed what Heath calls ‘crossover’ and ‘hybrid’ methods, using transformations and combinations of existing methods (Heath and Walker 2011; Mason and Davies 2011)

### Using facet methodology: some practical questions

Having outlined what I see as the defining principles of our approach, in this final section I want to start to explore some of the more practical issues in using facet methodology. I have argued that the idea of an approach, represented in a set of visual metaphors, is more useful than a set of procedures and rules, and that we do not see facet methodology as a procedural doctrine, so much as an orientation. The idea – the point of devising a methodology, and identifying a metaphor – is to stimulate active, critical and reflexive engagement around the principles identified above. This is why I have emphasised researcher creativity, agency, inventiveness, imagination, intuition, skill and astuteness, rather than the capacity to conduct complex procedures. What I want to discuss here therefore is a range of issues that need tackling if one is pursuing a facet methodology approach.

*1. Is facet methodology only about data generation? Does it apply to other parts of the research process, and in what ways?*

Thinking in terms of facets applies not only in research design and in generating data, but also in analysing data, processes of writing, representation and argumentation, and in how we generalise or make wider claims on the basis of our research. I want to argue that facet methodology is a *methodology*, in that it is ontologically and epistemologically orientated, and that means that it is implicated in all stages of research, including how we theorise from or with data. As well as designing facets in certain ways, the researcher thus needs to use different modes of analysis, sensitive to the different forms of data and the lines of investigation being followed, both within and between facets. Data are interrogated along question-driven or insight-driven ‘routes’ across and between the facets<sup>10</sup>. And because the concern is to create flashes of insight, the processes of writing, representation and argumentation are driven by ideas about how different facets, and facets in combination, can tell us about the entwined problematic – rather than, for example, a more descriptive, ‘maximum coverage’, ‘summary of findings’ logic.

*2. At what point are facets decided upon?*

Facets are designed in relation to existing theoretical and conceptual knowledge, as well as the researcher’s ideas and imagination, and some of this activity can and should take place in advance of new empirical research. Facets – as I have argued – are always simultaneously methodological and substantive, and are directed towards puzzles about the entwinement, contingencies, and multi-dimensionality of the world. This means that we are unlikely to enter any research engagement with data and the world without having crafted some facets to guide us. But facets will also be shaped and changed throughout the process, as new insights develop, new theories and concepts take shape, and new lines of investigation start to emerge. Researchers can have bright ideas, eureka moments and make imaginative and inventive leaps at any stage as they engage with their research problematics in grounded and informed ways. Facet methodology is a *responsively and creatively evolving* approach that can be used to take advantage of this. This means that facets can potentially be developed and remoulded at any stage<sup>11</sup>.

*3. Does facet methodology require the use of a particular set of methods, data or expertise?*

I have indicated that facet methodology requires a willingness to play with epistemologies, and that this is likely to result in the use of a range of methods in the process of bringing together contrasting epistemologies. But facet methodology does not require a specific set or mix of methods, or data. Instead, I think what is more fitting is a *pluralist disposition* in relation to method: a willingness to cross conventional boundaries and to bring together alternative ways of generating knowledge. The point is to maintain an ‘investigative epistemology’ in the process (Mason 2007). This involves being greedy in the search for data, knowledge and insight - not ruling out any potential data source in an *a priori* way, or because one’s sensibilities are offended

by the particular methods used - whilst also being epistemologically and ethically astute and critical in how different forms of data can (or cannot) be used in different kinds of knowledge claim.

In speaking of a pluralist disposition I have specifically avoided saying that facet methodology is a 'mixed methods' approach for a number of reasons<sup>12</sup>.

Firstly, as I have argued, facets are always simultaneously epistemological and substantive, so facet methodology is not *any* kind of approach to *methods alone*, mixed or otherwise. Secondly, there are some who claim that 'mixed methods' is a new paradigm and has to involve mixing qualitative and quantitative methods (Burke Johnson et al, 2007, see Morgan 2007 for a critique), and whilst I strongly disagree, this idea does nevertheless hold some sway in common research parlance. But facet methodology does not require that qualitative and quantitative methods are used in combination, even though in practice it may often involve using methods and data that could be located at either end of that conceptual spectrum. Equally, it can involve using a range of methods and data that defy easy categorisation as qualitative or quantitative, or that sit solely on one side or the other of that divide<sup>13</sup>. Thirdly, I wanted to avoid the presumption that what we do with the data generated from our facets is either a kind of 'mixed salad' eclecticism, or a methods-driven integration or triangulation, where methods and their products are 'fitted together' in a predetermined or hierarchical way. Whilst there are many excellent examples of 'mixed methods research' that do neither of these things, or see it in more complex ways than I have rather crudely expressed here (for example Edwards and Crossley 2009; Elliott 2005; Duncan and Edwards 1999; Irwin 2009; Salway et al 2011), for current purposes I find it more comfortable to steer away from the 'mixed methods' terminology in order to avoid confusion.

So, although there is not a predefined set of methods related skills in particular, the pluralist disposition implies a researcher who is widely skilled in and appreciative of different methods and techniques. The epistemological astuteness, openness and empathy that I have described all require a voracious accumulation of knowledge and experience of different methods. And epistemological humility requires that we do not start from a position of prejudice that the methods we 'grew up with' and know best are always superior or the most appropriate. Facet methodologists need to be able to select from a broad palette of methods and data, and sometimes refashion them into hybrids, or create new versions, and this means they have to know about, or be prepared to find out about, and engage imaginatively with, the many ways in which research is done otherwise. I think this means that facet methodologists need an inter- or trans-disciplinary, as well as a pluralist, disposition.

But what about expertise? Do we have to be experts in all the methods we choose to deploy? This is a difficult question, not least because of the impossibility of any researcher becoming expert in all methods on the one hand, and the unsatisfactory idea of complete novices getting it wrong and making simple mistakes on the other. But I think there is a sense in which it is good for *methods* when researchers with other expertise start to engage with them. I think there needs to be a degree of engagement across methods divides and silos of expertise, to enliven methods themselves and to prevent them from becoming heavily doctrinaire and ultimately dogmatic, exclusive or self-satisfying. This means that facet methodologists should not simply seek to get 'skilled up' by learning how to follow new procedures, but that some intelligent 'dabbling' in other methods that might even result in an unsettling or reshaping of them, if guided by genuine epistemological interest and engagement, can be highly productive and invigorating for research, researcher, method and data.

Overall, what is most important for the facet methodologist is to be an epistemologically-ontologically astute researcher who is insightful and full of good ideas and questions about the world. I like Coffey and Atkinson's concept of the researcher as someone who 'has and uses ideas' (Coffey and Atkinson 1996) because it does not sidestep or duck the reality that good research needs to be done by researchers who are not only skilled and trained, but who are also creative agents, who have and use ideas. This is vital, especially in an approach like facet methodology which does not have a set of rules and procedures to follow.

The idea of an agentic researcher with a pluralist disposition in relation to method can work well in research conducted in teams, where dialogue and collaborative exchange can be very productive, but also can be achieved in a single researcher project. In the latter case, the researcher may have to work harder in their

engagement with a range of methods, approaches and epistemologies than in an interdisciplinary team, but there are many ways in which this can be done<sup>14</sup>

#### 4. How is it possible to ensure and demonstrate the quality of the insights?

Given that facet methodology involves ‘a connective ontology’ and ‘playing with epistemologies’, and given also that it does not contain a set of procedural rules to be followed, it is perhaps not surprising that it also does not contain a recipe for ensuring quality. Such a recipe would imply, amongst other things, a single mode of legitimation, but this cannot be meaningful in facet methodology. We cannot say, for example, that a rigorous random sample, or a particular statistical significance test, nor even a thoroughgoing theoretical sample, or strictly applied procedures of analytic induction, can produce or guarantee quality of insight across facets.

Many have criticised the idea that we compromise in our research when we decide to ‘measure’ only what we can substantiate using conventional scientific procedures, especially standardisation and quantification, because a connective ontology defies such reductive practices. For example, Kincheloe decries ‘monological knowledge’ because it ‘reduces human life to its objectifiable dimensions’, ultimately confusing ‘narrow-mindedness with high standards’ (Kincheloe 2005, 341). Facet methodology encourages social science researchers to try to gain flashes of insight into complexities and the entwinements rather than editing them out of view. The challenge of course is to use the imagination and inventiveness that I have emphasised in ways that produce insights and knowledge that are genuine, meaningful and incisive, rather than fictitious, fanciful, or misleading.

This requires honest and responsible thinking and practice not just in generating the insights therefore, but in working out and showing why and how they are convincing insights into that thing in particular that you are seeking to understand, and why you should be believed. It requires a constant, critical and practical engagement with the philosophies of knowledge that you are working with, throughout the research process, along the lines of Kincheloe’s version of the ‘hermeneutic circle’ (Kincheloe 2005). Of course this will involve drawing on some conventional procedures such as those listed above for ensuring robustness or authenticity and so on (the motifs are different in different approaches), where these are appropriate to the methods used and the lines of enquiry followed in particular facets. But it will also involve a great deal of imaginative effort in working out and showing where your insights have come from, how you have tried to test and challenge them, where and how you have looked for alternatives, on what basis you find them convincing, and why others should do the same. And it will involve showing how constellations and associations within and between your facets (and your lines of enquiry) link them in different ways to provide the most revealing sets of insights into the issues in question: to return to the metaphor, the most brilliant and colourful version of the gemstone. This will involve thinking about generalisation as an art as much as a science, where part of the test is the extent to which our insights are evocative and resonant. I think this is and has to be a tough challenge for facet methodology to rise to. It is never enough to say our insights are meaningful just because we say they are<sup>15</sup>

I think the most important point to emphasise here is that, once again, epistemology and ontology are intricately bound together. This means that you do not just follow a procedure that legitimates your claim to *cast light* as a general property of the method, rigorously deployed (that is, legitimating the analysis through the methods). Rather you use your epistemological-ontological energies, insight and resources creatively to *cast light on the thing that you are investigating*, and to develop a convincing case that you have done so (legitimating the analysis epistemologically *and* ontologically).

#### Conclusion

I have used this article to set out some principles and practicalities in an evolving approach we have called facet methodology. I am not seeking to claim, and would not want to (as a methodological pluralist myself), that facet methodology is the only way to do research. But I hope it offers an innovative<sup>16</sup> and perhaps even an exciting way forward in the contemporary research context. More than that, I think there are certain

challenges in the contemporary context that facet methodology can help with, particularly in relation to concerns about the changing value of different approaches and forms of method and data. In my conclusion, therefore, I want to consider briefly how facet methodology might contribute to or extend debate about the current 'politics of method'.

Mike Savage and Roger Burrows initiated an important recent turn in this debate, in their influential and provocative article on the 'Coming Crisis of Empirical Sociology' (Savage and Burrows 2007 and 2009). They argue that sociologists (for which we might read social researchers more generally) need to sit up and take notice of the plethora of digital 'transactional' data that are generated in the processes of 'knowing capitalism'<sup>17</sup>. There is of course also a plethora of 'administrative data', owned or controlled by various agencies and organisations. Social researchers do not routinely have access to these data, and many show little interest in them. But Savage and Burrows argue that this lack of interest is problematic, not least because if capitalism is busy knowing itself we should show a critical interest in the data and classifications it is producing, as well as how it is doing it. Furthermore though, transactional data are usually complete records of all transactions – rather than interviews or questionnaires conducted with samples of respondents of the kind social researchers are used to working with, whether generated randomly or otherwise. This gives the owners of transactional data a claim to authority that it is dangerous simply to dismiss. In contrast to the social researcher, for example, Amazon.com can:

*'bypass the principles of inference altogether and work directly with the real, complete, data derived from all the transactions within their system' (Savage and Burrows 2007: 891).*

Savage and Burrows see an uncertain future for the traditions of survey methods and qualitative interviews under a 'knowing capitalism' which 'wants to "know everything"' (Savage and Burrows 2009: 766). They make a strong and convincing case for social researchers to engage critically with (and hence to seek to gain access to and use) transactional data in a process involving 'a radical mixture of methods coupled with renewed critical reflection' (2007: 896). This, they argue, would constitute a 'descriptive sociology', that would celebrate rather than be embarrassed by the ideas of description and classification, and that would be a little less obsessed with the problem of causality than some sociologists, at least, have tended to be. In their words,

*'Such a call for a descriptive sociology does not involve sole reliance on narrative but seeks to link narrative, numbers, and images in ways that engage with, and critique, the kinds of routine transactional analyses that now proliferate' (Savage and Burrows 2007: 896)*

I think this characterisation of recent trends is interesting and important, and I support Savage and Burrows' call for social researchers to engage critically with new forms of data and knowledge, as well as the methodological pluralism they hint at. Indeed, facet methodology is an approach that is ideally suited to doing exactly these things, through its constantly epistemological-ontological critical stance. The idea that inventive and skilled researchers carve (or grind) facets that can use a range of forms of method and data (including transactional), without being *defined* by them, sits very easily with Savage and Burrows' call. I would go further though and push the boundaries beyond sociology, not least because – as I have argued – facet methodology requires a trans- or inter-disciplinary disposition, and epistemological openness.

However, I think facet methodology can contribute a rather different point to the debate as well, and one which in some ways challenges Savage and Burrows' call for sociologists/social researchers essentially to *describe better*, or to out-describe the faulty or crass descriptions used in routine transactional analyses. Basically my point is that instead of putting all our energies into championing and reclaiming the notion of description, *we need to focus on and value the idea of flashes of insight*, and especially insights into the kinds of entwinements and multi-dimensionality that I have discussed.

The two key problems with pursuing description as our ideal seem to me to be these. Firstly, if Savage and Burrows are right then this is precisely what 'knowing capitalism' is up to, and we may become disadvantaged by semantics if we want to use the same term to denote something radically different. Second,

and more importantly, there is a danger that description becomes equated with, and is seen to value, 'maximum knowledge' over insight. But the mechanisms that are in place for the pursuit of maximum knowledge in the current climate seem likely to augur against rather than to facilitate flashes of insight.

In our new age of austerity, as research funders are drastically reducing their budgets, there is the beginnings of a trend for what funding remains to be concentrated on the accumulation of large, 'descriptive', longitudinal data sets, supplemented by smaller studies and secondary analysis projects that can attach to them or fall in with their epistemological logic. Funding for arguably more imaginative and hence higher risk projects is falling away almost completely, certainly in the UK context. Such large scale longitudinal data collection projects are of course important and valuable, and certainly can be drawn on alongside other forms of data and method in a facet methodology approach.

But we should remember that they represent only one way of doing research, characterised by one dominant research logic, and a rather methodologically conservative one at that. They are not usually grounded in a connective ontology, nor poised to explore questions about entwinements and multi-dimensionality of the kind I have discussed. The kind of description such studies allow cannot by itself *be*, even though it may *contribute to*, the blend of radically mixed methods and critical reflection that Savage and Burrows call for in their descriptive sociology. But my concern is that it does go by the name of *description* nonetheless, not least because it is characterised by a strong impetus to collect 'maximum data'.

So partly the problem is semantics again, because Savage and Burrows' version of 'description' is much more of a 'thick description' than this implies. But also the problem is about the politics of research funding, because whilst there is no issue with this 'thinner' version of description existing as *one in a plural and diverse society* of funded research, there is much more of a problem if this version comes to be *the only one* in a radically diminished landscape.

Conversely, I want to argue that facet methodology is potentially a vehicle whereby it is possible to argue for the significance of *insight* not just (or even) description, and to do so even in a climate of austerity. It constitutes an intellectually rigorous way of extending the reach and impact of incisively focused research, which does not of necessity have to be conducted on a large scale (although it can draw on large scale data) and it does not seek simply to accumulate maximum data. Consequently it avoids the possible danger of generating *only* large masses or silos of bland 'descriptive' data in a relatively unthinking way, either because of the vagaries of knowing capitalism or conservative responses to swingeing cuts in the budgets of research funders.

Our facet methodology approach is not settled, and hopefully will continue to evolve. I have described how it started, in the collaborative practice of researching real issues and questions, and how we then found metaphors that helped us to talk to each other about what we meant and what we were doing. This enabled us to debate – through both practice and philosophical reflection – the epistemological and ontological questions that were at stake for us, and to move ultimately back and forth between metaphor, methodology, and practice. This kind of dialogic and collaborative process is, in my view, the best way for a methodology to develop. I am offering it here in that spirit, and in the hope that by doing so I might be able to invite further engagement and discussion around some of the issues raised. I would like facet methodology to raise a new set of possibilities for social research, and to help extend debate about its value.

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<sup>1</sup> Our development of facet methodology spans the life of our two 'Nodes'. Real Life Methods, 2005-2008 RES576255017, and Realities, 2008-2011 RES576250022. These were both funded by ESRC as part of its National Centre for Research Methods.

<sup>2</sup> The creation of facet methodology has been very much a collaborative effort and although I have elaborated, written about it and further developed it here (and take full responsibility for any failings and misrepresentations), its provenance should be recognised as the workings and dialogues of this team. Other Realities/Morgan Centre colleagues who have also been involved in the further development of the approach are Vanessa May, Sue Heath, Stewart Muir and James Nazroo.

<sup>3</sup> See [www.socialsciences.manchester.ac.uk/realities/research/resemblances/](http://www.socialsciences.manchester.ac.uk/realities/research/resemblances/) and [www.manchester.ac.uk/realities/research/associations/](http://www.manchester.ac.uk/realities/research/associations/)

<sup>4</sup> I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer of this paper for this connection with John Berger.

<sup>5</sup> As well as those I have cited here, see Back 2007, Smart 2007, Law 2004, for strong examples of different versions of a connective epistemology.

<sup>6</sup> This is a risk, although not an inevitability, in ‘bricolage’ approaches to research (eg Kincheloe 2001, 2005; Kincheloe and Berry 2004)

<sup>7</sup> Indeed, my colleagues and I do not, in all probability, share one ontological outlook.

<sup>8</sup> See also Guy and Karvonen, 2011: 126, and Mason and Dale, 2011: 20-21, for a discussion of the importance of the engagement of an ‘agentic researcher’.

<sup>9</sup> These include: ethnography, symbolic interactionism, interpretive sociology, actor network theory (Latour 2005), material-semiotics (Law 2004), ecological anthropology (Ingold 2010), sensory methodology (Pink 2005, Mason and Davies 2009), ‘bricolage’ (Kincheloe 2005, Denzin and Lincoln 2000), mobile methodologies (Fincham et al 2010) survey methodology, metaphor-led discourse analysis (Cameron and Stelma 2004), qualitatively-driven mixed methods (Mason 2006a), experimental psychology.

<sup>10</sup> This can involve data generated by the researcher, but also it can include ‘secondary’ analysis of existing data sets, documents, digital and ‘transactional data’, and so on. Indeed, I agree with Niamh Moore when she argues that instead of thinking of secondary analysis or ‘reuse’ of (qualitative) data as a completely separate and new activity, we should recognise that it involves (or should) similarly reflexive and analytical practices as the use of ‘primary’ data, and that the boundaries between these two are uncertain (Moore 2007). Facets, as methodological-substantive planes, can certainly involve lines of investigation that are pursued through both existing and newly generated data.

<sup>11</sup> This is subject to practical matters, not least the constraints of ethical approval procedures which are not always designed to be sensitive to the kind of contingent and responsively-evolving approach I am describing.

<sup>12</sup> Even though I consider myself to be a something of a ‘mixed methods’ enthusiast.

<sup>13</sup> Decisions about whether methods and data are qualitative or quantitative can be somewhat of a distraction, especially when one is using ‘hybrid’ and ‘crossover’ methods that defy such easy categorisations (Heath and Walker 2011). But also, to see qualitative and quantitative as the only possible components in a mix represents a very impoverished view of the range of methods out there, and the myriad dimensions of difference between them. Although theoretically speaking facet methodology can involve clusters of methods that sit on either side of the supposed qualitative/quantitative divide, in practice some of its principles – including for example the entwined, contingent and connective ontology, the concept of flashes of insight, the importance of writing as method – derive more strongly from ‘qualitative thinking’ (Mason 2006a) so that it is unlikely although not impossible that all the methods chosen will sit at the quantitative end of that particular divide.

<sup>14</sup> For example, single researchers can engage in or even create fora for the exchange of ideas, skills and knowledge outside of their familiar territory, or across epistemological boundaries. They can also attend some of the many training courses in different methods and techniques that are now on offer, to develop their skills base, although these will not in

themselves usually require them to engage with the epistemological issues. It is also important to point out that team working is not a necessary panacea, especially where members of the team ‘represent’ different silos of expertise and are responsible for different parts of the research programme, without any real epistemological exchange and engagement (for a discussion of this see O’Cathain et al 2008; May and Burke 2010). Epistemological astuteness, openness, empathy and humility need to be present, and engagement around these issues needs to be explicitly part of the aims of the research and the team itself.

<sup>15</sup> There is of course much debate about how to substantiate knowledge that is derived from creative methods. See Sparkes 2009, Richardson 2000, Denzin and Lincoln 2000.

<sup>16</sup> I agree with writers who have pointed to the dangers of ‘overclaiming’ the innovative nature of one’s methods, and to the insidious effects of the current research and funding climate in making this a temptation sometimes too hard to resist (Travers 2009; Wiles et al 2011). As a Node of the ESRC National Centre for Research Methods charged with innovating in the field of methods we have of course been far from immune to such pressures. I have tried to be quite careful with my vocabulary in this respect, and in particular I have emphasised that facet methodology is intended to be an ‘inventive’ approach. As an approach that draws on many methods and forms of data, facet methodology can clearly involve traditional as well as novel techniques and practices, and I would not want to claim that everything about it is or should be new. But in developing this approach I think we are issuing an invitation to researchers and methodologists to think differently and inventively about the kinds of issues identified in the six defining principles, and to see ‘thinking differently’ as a valuable practice. There are dangers in slipping back into the very assumptions and modes of thought that facet methodology wishes to challenge, so I think it is worth talking, carefully, of inventiveness and newness as a reminder that different modes of thought are required.

<sup>17</sup> This term was coined by Thrift to denote a context where capitalism has begun to ‘consider its own practices on a continuous basis’ (2005: 1).

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## Biography

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