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Methods we live by: Proceduralism, process, and pedagogy

Michael Stevenson & Tamara Witschge

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Abstract

This article contributes to ongoing conversations about how we relate to methods and the implications of the ‘methods turn’ for the different epistemic communities that comprise media studies. We argue that methods are increasingly valued as scientific capital and educational capital, leading to further formalisation of methodologies (or theoretical perspectives) as ordered and sequenced research methods. Although intended to make research more transparent and accessible, such formalisation obfuscates the research process when it hinges on the notion of methods as ‘ordered procedure’. Against this way of imagining and talking about methods, we draw on process theory, which provides a language for understanding research as improvisational and creative, and reconsider what it means to do research skilfully. Understanding methods as process opens up new ways to talk about and teach methods that connect to our inherent capacity for curiosity and to embodied sense-making practices – in other words, it allows for a reframing of research methods as ‘methods we live by’.

Keywords: cultural techniques, practice theory, research methods, scientific capital, wayfinding

Introduction

How we value methods and how we understand the research process are intertwined and contribute to a range of issues around research methods that currently face researchers and educators – questions about the relative worth of certain knowledge traditions, the demarcations between these traditions,

and the nature and purpose of education in the humanities. As this special issue demonstrates, these questions around method are of particular importance in the interdisciplinary context of media studies.

Research (sub)disciplines can be identified as interpretative communities which each have their own ways in which they research and speak about society.[1] This is not a problem in and of itself, but it becomes a problem when methods become a means by which we set ourselves apart from others. There are those who oppose or dismiss methods in the humanities, those who call for a further embrace of scientific and quantitative methods in the humanities, and there are those who view methods as a way to gain reputation, legitimacy, or a 'transferable skill'. Each of these are instrumental ways of relating to methods, in the sense that methods serve a social purpose of legitimisation or distinction. How might we reconnect methods to their more fundamental value of serving curiosity?

In this article, we argue that what is fuelling the methods turn in media studies – defined as growing interest and occasionally conflict around the place and worth of methods within research and education – is that stakeholders ranging from grant organisations and administrators to teachers and students increasingly value methods as scientific and educational capital in the humanities. This places method at the centre of tensions between different knowledge traditions and epistemic communities in media studies, an effect of which is a growing incentive to formalise methodologies and practices of hermeneutic interpretation as the 'ordered procedures' of research methods. Although many would argue that such formalisation increases the accessibility and transparency of research in the humanities, we caution here that formalisation also serves to hide or obfuscate the research process, and can unnecessarily add to feelings among researchers and students that they are 'doing it wrong'.

In place of the conventional notion of method as ordered procedure and the related assumption that research relies 'on conscious intention and goal-orientation', we draw on process theory to define research as 'micro-practices' of 'everyday practical coping' and 'ongoing sensemaking' in which 'contingency, emergence, creativity and complexity' are at the heart.[2] We conclude by arguing that a process-based understanding of research will help us reclaim methods as a way to be curious. We thus seek to counter the preference for that which is 'substantive and precise' and build on the 'fundamental and all-too-often neglected element of what it means to be a human being', which is curiosity.[3]

Engaging methods in service of curiosity and acknowledging its messy, not necessarily linear or goal-oriented nature, we argue will allow us to talk about methods more akin to how we practice research, which comes with the added benefit that we are able to better teach methods. By talking about methods in service of curiosity and as embodied, sense-making operations that are fundamental to human experience and action, our aim is to offer an alternative to the tendency to externally reference the value of methods as capital or legitimacy. We note that further exploration of research as process is due and can benefit from concepts and discussions within media studies, including the notion of ‘cultural techniques’ as material-semiotic operations for producing and knowing the real.[4] In this way, we aim to highlight that research methods are also ‘methods we live by’.

Methods as capital and the methods turn in media studies

Research methods are increasingly emphasised in research and education in both the humanities and the social sciences, and media studies is no exception. What drives these changes, in which methods are given a more prominent role in graduate and undergraduate programs and in applications for research funding?[5] What does it mean for researchers, teachers, and students who relate differently to methods, in particular those who focus on interpreting cultural artefacts in the hermeneutic tradition and tend to downplay the utility of established social science methods for their work?

Here we argue that methods are increasingly valued in the arts and humanities both as scientific capital and as educational capital – in other words, as a focus and marker of reputation among humanities scholars and as a ‘transferable skill’ that legitimises an education in the humanities. These developments create tensions relevant to the interdisciplinary context of media studies, which incorporates epistemic communities stemming from sociology and mass communications on the one hand, and from an arts and humanities tradition (in particular film and television studies) on the other.

Before looking at the roles methods play within epistemic communities and the significance of the current emphasis on method within media studies and the broader humanities, we first need to address how research methods are conventionally defined within the social sciences and humanities.[6] This is not a simple matter, and the difficulties involved provide clues as to how methods are defined and valued in different epistemic communities.

Seeking to make a pragmatic contribution that addresses the ‘history of silence’ around methods in certain disciplines within the arts and humanities, Griffin makes the distinction between research skills, research methods, and methodologies.[7] Skills are ‘techniques for handling material’ such as library searching or bibliographic skills, while methodology refers to the ‘the perspectives one brings to bear on one’s research, such as feminist or postcolonialist ones’.[8] This leaves research methods in the middle of an ontology that moves from mundane material practice to abstract philosophical perspectives on knowledge, power, social structure, agency and historical change, to name a few. Research methods are then ‘concerned with how one carries out one’s research’ and, Griffin implies, consist of a recognisable set or ‘catalogue’ of established methods (and a few novel ones) such as textual analysis, discourse analysis and oral history.

Griffin recognises that the distinction between skills, methods, and methodologies is somewhat ‘artificial’ and thus strategic, and that the research process will normally involve several methods.[9] In this way, her understanding of method aligns with that displayed in prominent methods textbooks used in media studies, which likewise most often do not explicitly provide a precise definition of method and (also) imply a tautological understanding of method as a matter of *choosing* from a set of existing qualitative and quantitative methods.[10] Later we ask whether alternative ontologies are useful, but for now Griffin’s definitions and distinctions help us pinpoint as much as possible *what* is being emphasised when policymakers and administrators call for a stronger focus on research methods, or when methods form a point of contention or dialogue between different epistemic communities within media studies.

While methods refer in the first instance to how research is carried out, we can draw on the sociology of science and the ‘sociology of attachment’ to understand methods and methodologies in a different light, as a key focus within social processes of distinction and a means to accumulate what Bourdieu calls scientific capital. Bourdieu defines scientific capital as an intellectual renown among peers in the form of (for example) prestigious positions, grants, and awards, one that equates to a power to steer the intellectual development of a discipline.[11] Whether viewed along with Bourdieu as a structural process of class reproduction, or alternatively as collective practices of attachment, we can see strong ties between methods, normative ac-

counts of methods akin to ‘tastemaking’ and the various subdisciplines, research groups and ‘schools of thought’ that make up the wider academic field.[12]

For example, in Bourdieu’s analysis of the French university field circa 1968, he argues that Roland Barthes’ accumulated scientific capital was tied to his association with the popular ‘new’ methods and theories from the social sciences and his rejection of establishment approaches to literary criticism grounded in the traditional exegesis of canonical texts.[13] Regarding Barthes as a ‘consecrated heretic’, Bourdieu writes:

[D]eliberately esoteric, flaunting all the external signs of scientificity, making liberal and often approximate borrowings from the combined lexicons of linguistics, psychoanalysis and anthropology, he proclaims on high his intention to ‘subvert’.[14]

In this way methods are not just difficult to extract from methodologies (among the new methods Bourdieu refers to are De Saussure’s semiotics and Marxist political economy), but they are also intertwined with style and emotion. It should be noted that this link between method and aesthetics, pleasure and passion, not only holds for the arts and more interpretive forms of analysis but also for seemingly dispassionate, formalised disciplines like mathematics.[15]

For Bourdieu, methods and passionate attachment to them are ultimately embedded in questions of institutional power (themselves a form of class struggle), and he argues that the embrace of the language of science in the avant-garde ‘structuralist’ methodologies necessarily occurred at a key historical moment in which the natural sciences were on the rise and traditional disciplines (literature, philosophy, philology) were on the decline in terms of social status and in decision-making power in the university field.[16] Perhaps we are seeing a continuation of that historical moment today, with the irony that it is structuralism and postmodernism that have become the disavowed ‘methods’ in favour of new schools of thought. For example, the rise of the digital humanities as a focus for grant-funding demonstrates how prestige is currently gained by importing methods and methodologies from domains on the rise (e.g. computer science, cognitive science, artificial intelligence, and some social sciences). Anecdotally, both authors of this paper have experienced the prestige effects of their own associations with ‘virtual methods’ and ‘digital methods’, schools of thought around methods and new media that arose in the early 2000s – which at various points in our careers helped open up doors to particular jobs or to speak in various venues about

'methods' more generally. This is not to take away from the substantive intellectual and material contributions such schools of thought make, but to recognise that it is often also the case that, as Travers argues, 'even though the equipment might be new, the fundamental considerations and theoretical choices involved in conducting qualitative research have not changed significantly since the 1960s'.[17] In whatever way novelty is articulated around method – and the use of methods from other disciplines is only one way – such an articulation is incredibly important within a 'crowded marketplace' for grants that exacerbates funding initiatives' focus on innovation.[18]

Methods are not just emphasised by grant organisations seeking to identify innovative research, but also by administrators seeking to make social science and humanities programs more attractive to the marketplace of students (and their parents). Research methods courses, once the preserve of PhD training, now routinely appear in undergraduate programs, with the rationale being that research skills and methods are transferable to the learners' future occupation and in their personal lives.[19] An emphasis on methods also aligns with the pedagogy of 'active learning,' as opposed to ostensibly passive individual activities like reading theory and history. One can imagine how the emphasis on methods in research also filters into education, with teachers prioritising methods in education because they are increasingly expected to do so in their own research.

What are the effects of these developments – what we might call the 'methods turn' – in media studies, in particular departments with a tradition of hermeneutic interpretation? This is not a question we can answer definitively here, but based on the interdisciplinary nature of media studies, the institutional dynamics involved as explicated in models such as Bourdieu's field theory, as well as our own observations while designing programs and courses with colleagues from different epistemic communities, we suggest it involves resolving the tension between sociological and hermeneutic conventions around method.

One possible resolution of the methods turn in media studies could involve further division, competition, and specialisation, based around explicit or implicit agreements that hermeneutic interpretation and social science are mutually exclusive enterprises, with separate research schools and teaching staff alongside an entrenchment and reification of the different epistemic communities' stances towards method expressed at conferences, in journals, and so on. In simpler terms: more specialisation and conservatism. Another potential resolution, one we believe more likely to occur on a broad scale, is

akin to assimilation and convergence in the direction of the dominant hierarchy. This would mean that hermeneutic epistemic communities will take on the aesthetics and conventions recognisable from social science-leaning epistemic communities, if not always their methods. Imagine, for example, graduate students delivering their interpretative analyses in a style of academic writing that moves subtly closer to the research report format, as opposed to the associative and exploratory turns of an essay, with additional focus on justifying the chosen object of study and articulating rigorous ‘steps’ in their analysis for the sake of reproducibility.

Relatedly, one might see further formalisation of interpretive methodologies – an act of translation that turns the perspectives we bring to bear on our object of study into something resembling the established qualitative research methods for gathering and analysing data. This can (and we would argue already does) occur in various ways, from grant application processes where explicit procedure-like methods are expected to the design of programs, courses, and associated materials such as grading rubrics for undergraduate and graduate theses. Formalisation is also the key feature of a textbook like Gillian Rose’s *Visual Methodologies*, which goes quite some way in formalising *methodologies* like psychoanalysis and discourse analysis so they are accessible to students and researchers as *methods*, i.e. sets of procedures or principles for gathering and analysing content.

As much as we and our students may benefit from textbooks like Rose’s that manage to condense complex intellectual discourses into helpful guides for the research process, in the next section we argue that such formalisation of methodologies – in concert with the increasing emphasis on (innovative) method as a means to legitimise one’s research – may also contribute to a blackboxing of method and the research process.

Blackboxing method

So far we have outlined the value of methods as scientific and educational capital in the social sciences and the arts and humanities, and how we can identify methods as a matter of taste or convention in different epistemic communities. We have explored what we may call a ‘methods turn’ in the humanities and in media studies specifically, which may lead to various pressures not just to import methods from other disciplines. Moreover, this may

also lead to a formalisation of the broad theoretical perspectives or methodologies, and more generally to adopt the form and style of neutral-sounding research methods as defined in the tradition of empirical sociology. Although there are benefits to such formalisation, here we argue there is more at stake.

Formalisation is never a neutral translation, and we can identify several ways in which formalised methods can obfuscate rather than explicate the research process. In the same way that “raw data” is an oxymoron’, we must realise that formalised research methods with fixed labels and numbered steps may appear neutral but necessarily draw on assumptions about the nature of the world and our ability to know it.[20] Such epistemological issues are considered at length in textbooks about research methods and in philosophy of science courses. A second, related effect of formalisation is the hiding or closing off of controversy. For example, ‘discourse analysis’ may mean very different things to different researchers – even those who broadly share epistemological assumptions – but reproducing every perspective and nuance in a textbook or the writeup of on one’s own application of the method is impossible, and this is one of the main reasons references and ‘further reading’ sections of methods textbooks are important.

A third effect of formalisation, which we would like to focus on, is how the ordered procedures of research methods obscure or hide what Bryman calls the ‘messiness’ inherent to the research process, which he argues is ‘often a lot less smooth than the accounts’ suggested by textbooks such as his own *Social Research Methods*[21]. This effect is also present in the writeups of method in research articles, which by convention are brief and do not cover the ‘ups and downs’ of research. Bryman argues it is not true that ‘social researchers deceive us’ in these writeups, but that they follow ‘implicit’ conventions and preferences.[22] Though not meant to deceive, these implicit conventions do certainly have a cost and they play a role in the legitimising function of method and its place within struggles for scientific capital.

It is not surprising then, that the typical methods writeup ‘intentionally excludes details and omits justifications’, and that its purpose is sometimes less to instruct peers than ‘to defend the author from the reviewers or the dissertation committee’.[23] Regardless of intent, the formalised writeup has led to calls for more transparency, such as in the genre of ‘confessional accounts of the research process’, which should benefit other (aspiring) researchers.[24]

Even when this effect of formalisation is addressed in textbooks or in the confessional research account, we suggest that there are deeper assumptions

that operate upon how we think and talk about methods, assumptions that also impact questions of legitimacy and pedagogy, setting expectations for what 'good' research looks like. For example, Bryman's discussion of the messiness of research assumes a 'research plan' that turns contingencies into 'false starts, blind alleys, mistakes, and enforced changes'.^[25] The primacy of the plan and goal-oriented action is also apparent in his defense of formalising the principles and procedures of method, which draws on the metaphor of construction:

Many years ago, I was involved in several studies of construction projects. One of the recurring themes in the findings was the different ways that such projects could be knocked off their course: unpredictable weather, sudden shortages of key supplies, illness [...] any of these could produce significant interruptions to even the best-planned construction project. But never was it suggested that the principles of construction and of construction management should be abandoned. Without such principles project managers would be at an even greater loss to know how to proceed. Much the same is true of research projects.^[26]

Construction and construction management are powerful and instructive analogies, however they also invite us to consider alternatives. What if we did not assume a research plan (even one that is continually revised)? Or what if research is more like practicing architecture, a more clearly and avowedly cultural production that involves aesthetics, inspiration, and emotion alongside a range of practical and technical issues? In the next section, we continue to question this notion of method as ordered procedure, and ask whether other definitions and metaphors can be beneficial to calls for transparency and improved pedagogy.

A process understanding of research

We have argued that method is obscured in different ways in the epistemic communities that comprise media studies, either through relative omission in research and teaching that focuses instead on theory and methodology, or through formalisation and reduction in the communities in which methods are central. Though there appears to be a widely-shared desire for more explication of method and transparency in research, this is not the same as questioning the notion of method as 'ordered procedure'. Adopting a process-oriented approach to research, we highlight some of the key features of research that counter the rational-cognitivist, proceduralist view of research,

in which methods are deemed ‘a discrete, specialized, realm of technical knowledge’.[27] Highlighting features of a process understanding of research allows us to do more justice to the actual messiness, complexity, and creativity involved, and leads us to a conceptualisation of the research process as wayfinding.

Research as effective coping

Perceiving methods as procedure with clearly identifiable, discrete, and intentional steps that can be planned purposefully is most often based in an overly rational-cognitivist view of knowledge, in which action is deemed governed by planning and design.[28] In this view the researcher masters or is at least to some extent deemed in control of the situation. This is particularly the case when we look at how we write up the research process or how we propose our methodological approach in grant proposals. We may limit our explanations of methods to a paragraph or two, or in some cases devote an extensive section to our methods and a rigorous examination of alternatives, limitations, and issues of reliability and validity. However, even when we qualify our methods in such ways, there remains a strong sense of us as rational actors *choosing* one method over others, and moving from one clear step within a protocol to another in a logical fashion.

This style of thinking and writing, we suggest, is not just a convention limited to methods writeups, but a more pervasive collective attachment to achieving order that finds different forms in different epistemic communities – what Law calls the ‘desire for certainty’ in our ‘methodological habits’.[29] As Chia writes in the context of organisation studies, such a rational-cognitivist view may also be understood as cultural bias when it comes to making sense of practical affairs:

A penchant for the direct, the dramatic and the spectacular remains an overwhelming feature of the West in its dealings in the world of practical affairs. (...) This popular and romantic imagery of heroism in action derives from an inherited Western propensity to favour direct-causal, rational-calculative and high-profile actions over more discreet, indirect and at times understated gestures or responses in engendering a desired outcome.[30]

The recent practice turn in organisational studies and entrepreneurship studies provides alternative insight into the basis of action. Similar to how research and research methods are predominantly understood, entrepreneurship, organisational behaviour, and organisational learning are generally

treated as ‘an intentionally planned and dramatically staged activity that characterizes rationalistic approaches’.[31] Counter to this, researchers taking a practice view study and foreground the ‘existence of irrationalities, such as passion and emotion, immediacy and improvisation’ that is inherent to all practices, be they entrepreneurship, organisational management, or research in media studies, as is our focus here.[32]

Practice theory asks us to understand the research process as an ‘(every-day) hands-on practice, including routines as well as improvisation in order to cope with coincidence’.[33] Understanding methods through a practice lens thus focuses our attention on the *process* that is research, the reality of which is ‘perpetually fluxing, changing and *Becoming*’.[34] This provides us with a way of seeing how people ‘respond to environmental demands without overly relying on conscious cognition’.[35] This helps us see how as researchers we are not only operating from deliberate decisions, but are part of the environment we operate from as well as how we act from other centres of intelligence.

Recalling Bryman’s construction metaphor, we can link the ‘procedures and principles’ understanding of research methods to what Chia argues is an overreliance ‘on cognitively articulated plans, detailed execution strategies and clear road maps for “navigating” the uncertain waters of environmental changes’.[36] By analogy to how entrepreneurs tend to rationalise their action post-hoc, we can see how formalisation of the research process translates methods into neatly defined, discrete steps or procedures.[37] These are discursively constructed as intentional activities aimed at a certain goal (of obtaining results or insight). They most often are then detailed *retrospectively* in a coherent, neat narrative identifying the choices and decisions. The challenge is to question ‘intentional and goal-oriented action’ and see how research is ‘fundamentally contingent, the possibilities arbitrary, and the guiding logic can be that of dumb luck and surprising fortune’.[38]

Contrary to how we tend to write up methodology sections (whether in hindsight in publications, or proactively in grant applications), in research processes we are faced time and time again with uncertainty and must adapt our actions to the varying and changing environments. This could be a counter-intuitive interpretation of a survey question by respondents, the appearance of archive material that twists a historical narrative we are building, or inspiration from an unexpected source. We would argue that researchers respond adequately when ‘sensing, improvising and adapting as they go’, or in other words, they rely on ‘practice-acquired sensitivities and dispositions to

help them cope, adjust and adapt effectively'.[39] This 'view invites different modes of coping with an ambiguous environment' when doing research.[40] There is a need to be able to change and respond creatively to what the research environment offers at specific moments, and this to a certain extent asks for 'intuitive action triggered by emotional forces as well as by cognitive capabilities'.[41]

Researching skilfully: Creative imitation

Such an understanding of methods also has repercussions for how we view methodological skill and what it means to research skilfully. One predominant criteria for research has long been reproducibility, and related the reliability, which has been a way to legitimise the focus on method. Within more interpretative frameworks, such as that of hermeneutic interpretation, but also more broadly, this has been questioned. Equally, perhaps more fundamentally, a process-understanding of research challenges the requirements of reliability and reproducibility; it suggests that doing research is always an interaction between researcher and the environment and that to research skilfully means to improvise, which poses challenges to the idea of reproducing research.

From a process-based understanding, we could view the use of methods as 'creative imitation', which implies 'that something that is of one's own and new is added to what already exists and is copied, transformed to a new setting'.[42] The application or employment of methods is then not so much the following a blueprint (which suggests there is an *a priori* procedure followed) but can be explained through retrospective rationality:

Retrospective rationality explains how practices emerge through the constant improvisation that changes their execution but maintains their form. The repetition of practices is not mechanical, just as every execution of the same piece of jazz is not identical to the previous one.[43]

We understand that the use of words like improvisation to describe our actions in research are rather challenging in light of the procedure-focused, logical, and rational-cognitive understanding of methods. It may seem indeed that we favour a humanities approach that downplays or denounces method. This is not what we suggest. Crucially, this understanding pertains to how we understand skill and the practices in which skill is employed.

What does it mean to master a method ‘skilfully’? When are you able to carry out a good survey, ethnography, or digital research inquiry? Ask anyone who is teaching methods and see how they struggle with how to teach and assess methods skills: can a methods course be purely ‘theoretical’, without doing hands-on work? Do students need to work with data that they have themselves collected, or is it sufficient to work with databases of others? Or do we – as the authors have experimented with in some courses they teach – settle for having students write a research proposal, rather than carry out data collection and analysis? What does it mean for ourselves, as researchers, whether ‘junior’ or ‘senior’, to master method as a skill? And of particular interest in light of the ‘methods turn’ in media studies: what does it mean that research methods are taught by those who are self-taught in that particular method, or perhaps do not even use that method in their own research?[44]

In the process-oriented, practice-theory understanding, at the heart of any skilful practice there is creative improvisation that helps us address complexity: ‘generation of the unpredictable, the unusual, the unforeseen, within the pre-existing structures’.[45] But to be able to improvise adequately suggests mastery at the highest level. At this level, Dreyfus reminds us, our actions become intuitive: ‘through learning and practice, I become attuned to the world in such a way that the situation presents itself to me “reasons” for action that immediately draw on my body, soliciting a response’.[46] Thus ‘skilful coping is sustained, not by the weighing and examining of beliefs, desires, and reasons, but by the withdrawal of deliberative activity and the silencing of reasons’.[47]

One of the hard truths – one that does not fit with the proceduralist view of method – is that mastery is not distinguished by deliberate action, intentionality, or purpose-driven activities. Actually, as put by Ingold: ‘A seasoned practitioner knows that to embark on any venture means pushing the boat out into the stream of a volatile and ever-changing environment, with no knowing what will transpire.’[48] Ironically, this means that where we do gain capital from selling our methods skills, as we have indicated in the above, at the same time a certain humbleness is needed to truly master it:

You have to be patient, to wait for things to fall into place in a way that affords follow-through, rather than jumping in front with your own intentions and expecting everything to fall into line behind. Or in a word, it is necessary to submit. Mastery and submission, agency and patience, and strength and vulnerability are two sides of the same coin.[49]

Such an understanding of what it means to be a skilful master asks us to reconsider how we operate within the research process.

Research as wayfinding

This understanding of methodological practice and what it means to be skilful within this highlights once more that it is not research methods *per se* that we take issue with. We rather seek to address the ‘distorted image of the research process’, which results from ‘representing our research project as single uninterrupted progress without junctions, difficulties or failures’.[50] As Springgay and Truman contend, the problem:

isn't the types of methods researchers use, or that new methods need to be invented. There is already an abundance of methods and experimental practices of doing research! We approach methods propositionally, speculatively, and experimentally and maintain that it is the *logic of procedure and extraction* that needs undoing.[51]

Citing McCormack, they argue that we need to understand methods relationally where methods become ‘a distributed, immanent field of sensible processuality within which creative variations give rise to modifications and movements of thinking’.[52] A process understanding of research asks us to speak about how ‘research methods become a practice of being inside a research event’ of ‘becoming entangled in relations’.[53]

Seeing methods as the way in which we are inside a research event acknowledges that ‘the world does not appear pre-ordered or “ready-made” but comes into being through our actions and practices’ – what Heidegger calls our *dwelling* in the world.[54] Dwelling, rather than the intentional and cognitive action-oriented *building* is what enables researchers to draw ‘on what is immediately available to deal effectively with the predicaments and obstacles he/she immediately faces from within the specific set of circumstances he/she finds him/herself in’.[55]

We could then liken the process of doing research with wayfinding and wayfaring, in which the practitioner ‘relies primarily on its repertoire of practices generated from past experiences, its refined sensitivities and on habituated ways of responding to tentatively negotiate its way through an as-yet uncharted terrain’.[56] Making or growing knowledge ‘is not a construction, governed by cognitive mechanisms of one sort or another, but an improvisatory movement – of “going along” or wayfaring – that is open-ended

and knows no final destination'.[57] 'Knowing as we go' entails an appreciation of 'the real possibility of surprises, fortuitous discoveries and the uncovering of hidden potentialities that are associated with an opportunity-seeking orientation', and putting forth this way of understanding research methods implies we need to reconsider how we talk about and teach them.[58]

Curiosity, cultural techniques, and methods we live by

Interestingly, despite the fact that methods courses are most often deemed hard to teach, 'literature reviews have highlighted the sparse nature of the pedagogic culture around the teaching of research methods'.[59] The literature that is there points to the need for what is generally called 'active learning approaches' that 'provides hands-on exposure to research methods'.[60] Though this is in line with the understanding of research as wayfinding as we have highlighted here, our point is more fundamental: a process view of research provides insight into the reality of research as a complex, wayfaring, messy process, and hence opens up the blackbox to students (amongst others).

Although active learning techniques and critical reflection can certainly help, this does not solve the conception of research methods as externalised and ordered procedure. What happens when the student tries and fails, or feels constrained by a plan or procedure and loses interest? This is particularly pertinent given that, as research shows, 'students are not necessarily coming into the course with positive emotions, attitudes, conceptions, or views regarding research methods'.[61] Hiding our own messy research processes will not help students grow in confidence. Nor will it help them grow in competency: unless we start acknowledging that research is not necessarily an orderly affair, students will keep thinking that they are doing it wrongly – until they either give up, or come out on the other side, much like we have, understanding that apparently we were not doing it so badly after all, but had just been mistaken about how it 'should' be.

Alongside important pedagogical practices like sharing work from previous students as examples, we as teachers and mentors can benefit from remembering that all of us have undertaken research that was never 'completed' or had 'failed' by conventional standards, and that that which is published is only very limited and should not set the standard.[62] As pointed out by John Wakeford:

the teacher [of research methods] is handicapped by the dearth of published accounts of uncompleted and unsuccessful research. In research monographs strategies seem nearly always to have been appropriate and outcomes profitable. But it is as instructive to examine some of that not inconsiderable body of research that has been prevented, deflected, abandoned, remains incomplete, indefinitely postponed, unpublished, suppressed, discredited or emasculated.[63]

Here, we would like to stress that not only is examining failures instructive, but the former category – the supposedly completed and successful research that *is* published – often misrepresents the research process.

How, then, can we talk about methods differently? Again, this is not about dismissing methods or giving up on increasing transparency in our research. The way out, we argue, is to show the process that is research. Opening up about how we research as *human beings* – flawed, emotional, and embodied – allows us to use methods for what they are best at: to serve curiosity that is inherent in all of us, students and researchers alike. As Gregory Bateson articulated:

We social scientists would do well to hold back our eagerness to control that world which we so imperfectly understand. The fact of our imperfect understanding should not be allowed to feed our anxiety and so increase the need to control. Rather, our studies could be inspired by a more ancient, but today less honored motive: a curiosity about the world of which we are part. The rewards of such work are not power but beauty.[64]

Curiosity can be defined as ‘a desire to see, to understand, and to know’ and has been ‘most consistently and richly considered in relationship to the sciences’.[65] And yet, though the connection between curiosity and science is apparent in popular narratives, and in celebrations of inventors and pioneers, such an inherent relationship between science and curiosity seems to be lacking when methods are discussed, taught, and followed in the proceduralist understanding. Having been burdened (or co-opted) by the need to persuade people and legitimise our work, this primary value of method has been snowed under.

Perhaps it is indeed the ‘capaciousness of curiosity [that] paradoxically produces its own constraints’, resulting in the ‘interminable struggle between forces that liberate curiosity and forces that discipline and direct it’.[66] Much like the notion of wayfinding, the idea of curiosity may be rather upsetting to the proceduralist way of thinking about method as it implies something ‘inherently dynamic and expansive, jumping from one sphere of inquiry to

another, one detail or vantage point to another' and emphasises the 'interdeterminacy, contingency, and heterogeneity of knowledge production'.[67] But opening up the blackbox in favour of giving more insight into the actual practices of research, and using methods as a way to serve curiosity allow us to start talking about research differently – and arguably in ways that allow students to feel more competent and confident in their own processes.

A process-based understanding of research is not meant to feed a potentially 'nihilistic and cynical view of methodologies as artificial and arbitrary categories whose only or primary functions are to police knowledge', but rather to find new ways to talk about methods and their role in the research process.[68] Indeed, let us not throw out the baby with the bathwater: explicating our methods and finding ways to refer to them acknowledges 'the importance of having a shared vocabulary in order to efficiently convey one's scholarly intentions and actions'.[69]

Still, we need to be aware of how providing shorthand labels like 'qualitative content analysis' or presenting the research process as ordered procedure helps create the false impression of methods as a 'discrete, specialized, realm of technical knowledge'.[70] Rather than talk about methods as 'a thing out there' and blackbox the process as a way of legitimising ourselves and our research, we believe further exploration and theorisation of methods as something natural to us is in order, and that media theory can play a role in further interrogation of research as process.

One helpful starting point from media theory is the notion of 'cultural techniques', defined as fundamental material-symbolic operations that precede discourse and representation.[71] The term refers to a range of operations such as writing or numerical notation through which human and non-human actors are co-constituted and, as Siegert argues, constitutes 'articulations of the real'. The concept has recently also been employed to understand the material dimension of human culture and the agency of technical objects such as algorithms.[72] In this way, the theory of cultural techniques can shed further light on the entanglement of methods and the various technologies and media we rely on to do research.[73] Most important for our argument though, the concept also turns our attention to *techne* as a fundamentally human gesture, which following Heidegger may be interpreted as 'a form of knowing'.[74] Rather than mystifying methods as something extraordinary that sets us apart from others, cultural techniques remind us of the basic human ways in which we come to know the world, or 'research'.

And thus we arrive at the real problem with any treatment of methods as an external, technical object. Methods to know the world are those fundamental material-semiotic operations that are both embodied and networked with our nonhuman environment.[75] They are sensory and sense-making operations like listening, counting, classifying, tasting, comparing, sorting, writing, drawing, playing, shaping, and conversing alongside a range of other movements and gestures that appear in processes by which we gain new perspectives, explore objects and ideas, or confirm our suspicions. Even as these operations are translated and reified in technical objects, taking on in some sense a life of their own through technological evolution, they remain quite literally methods we live by.

While a fuller exploration of how media theory might open up new ways of understanding method as a process ‘close to home’ must wait, we hope this brief example provides some inspiration for carrying on the conversation, in particular around how we might approach teaching methods differently. Rather than start a course on methods with abstract discussions of methodology, scientific legitimacy, or the primacy of the research plan, we could start with an appreciation of methods for knowing the world in a wider and more fundamental sense.

Reframing research methods as process and as ‘methods we live by’ means at least temporarily bracketing epistemological debates and the norms specific to particular epistemic communities. It is to own that the research process is one in which we are present and where we improvise. To help us to counter notions of research methods as idealised principles or orderly procedures that become the basis for distinguishing between legitimate and illegitimate knowledge, we need to ‘reappear’ in the research process, with our failures, pleasures, curiosities, and distinctly human manners of finding things out along the way.

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Notes

- [1] Becker 2007.
- [2] Chia 2017, p. 107; Nayak & Chia 2011, p.283.
- [3] Grossman & Jackson 2020, pp. vii, ix.
- [4] Siegert 2015.
- [5] Bourner & Heath & Rospigliosi 2014; Travers 2009.
- [6] Bourdieu 1988.
- [7] Griffin 2011.

- [8] Ibid., p. 95.
- [9] Ibid., p. 96.
- [10] Ibid.
- [11] Bourdieu 1988.
- [12] Ibid.; Gherardi 2009.
- [13] Bourdieu 1988, p. 115.
- [14] Ibid., pp. 105, 117.
- [15] Landri 2007.
- [16] Bourdieu 1988, pp. 120-121.
- [17] Travers 2009, pp. 171-182; for the contributions of virtual methods and digital methods, see e.g. Hine 2005, Rogers 2013.
- [18] Traver 2009.
- [19] Bourner & Heath & Rospigliosi 2014.
- [20] Gitelman 2013.
- [21] Bryman 2016, p. 13.
- [22] Ibid., p. 14.
- [23] Sandvig & Hargittai 2015, pp. 2-3
- [24] Bryman 2016, p. 13.
- [25] Ibid.
- [26] Ibid., p. 14.
- [27] Wakeford 1981, pp. 511-512.
- [28] Gherardi 2009.
- [29] Law 2004, p. 9.
- [30] Chia 2013, p. 667.
- [31] Johannisson 2011, p. 136.
- [32] Ibid.
- [33] Ibid.
- [34] Chia 2017, p. 110.
- [35] Ibid., p. 108.
- [36] Bryman 2016; Chia 2017, p. 108.
- [37] Görling & Rehn 2008, p. 96.
- [38] Ibid., p. 94.
- [39] Chia 2017, p. 108.
- [40] Johannisson 2011, p. 135.
- [41] Ibid., p. 140.
- [42] Ibid.

- [43] Gherardi 2009, p. 546.
- [44] For the specific issues that this raises see Crooks & Castleden & Tromp-van Meerveld 2010.
- [45] Montuori 2003, p. 239.
- [46] Quoted in Wrathall 2014, p. 3.
- [47] Ibid.
- [48] Ingold 2018, p. 261.
- [49] Ibid.
- [50] Mutlu 2015, p. 938.
- [51] Springgay & Truman 2018, p. 204. *Italics in original.*
- [52] Ibid.
- [53] Ibid.
- [54] Chia 2017, p. 112.
- [55] Ibid.
- [56] Ibid, p. 115; Ingold 2010.
- [57] Ingold 2010, p. 122.
- [58] Chia 2017, p. 115.
- [59] Nind & Lewthwaite 2018, p. 399.
- [60] Earley 2014, p. 248.
- [61] Ibid.
- [62] See also Bryman 2016, Mutlu 2015, and Sandvig & Haggitai 2015.
- [63] Wakeford 1981, p. 510.
- [64] Quoted in Montuori 2003, p. 237.
- [65] Zurn & Shankar 2020, p. xviii.
- [66] Ibid.
- [67] Ibid., pp. xvi, xviii.
- [68] Howard & Brady 2015, p. 521.
- [69] Ibid.
- [70] Wakeford 1981, pp. 511-512.
- [71] Siegert 2015.
- [72] Karppi 2018; Rieder 2020.
- [73] Sayers 2018.
- [74] See discussion of Heidegger's 'techne' in Rieder 2020, p. 104.
- [75] See also Springgay & Truman 2018.