

Article

## A Place for Theoretical *In*consistency

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### Abstract

The current article articulates how the expectation of theoretical consistency can be constraining for qualitative researchers. The author considers the origins of the tradition of theoretical consistency, and suggests that postmodern research – particularly that which focuses on social justice – might in fact be served by considering possibilities that emerge from *multiple* theoretical perspectives. To illustrate the application and contribution of theoretical inconsistency, three concrete examples of how these ideas have been applied within qualitative studies are discussed. By pragmatically drawing connections across theoretical differences, it is hoped that researchers will engage critically with their own theoretical commitments and assumptions, thus opening themselves up to new possibilities and to new and creative ways of coming together.

**Keywords:** possibilities; postmodernism; qualitative research; social justice; theoretical consistency

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I recently received feedback from a reviewer who recommended I pay more attention to theoretical consistency. This is something I have been told before, and I understand the importance of it – to a degree. That said, I find myself necessarily inconsistent, theoretically speaking, in order to consistently support my ideas in other ways. The current article is an effort to articulate how the expectation of theoretical consistency can be constraining, and why I continue to find myself ‘cherry picking’ rather than loyally toeing one particular theoretical line.

### **The Tradition of Choosing a Theory and Sticking to It**

According to Corbin and Holt (2005), theory is “a set of concepts that are integrated throughout a series of relational statements” (p. 49). With this concise definition, it is clear that theory is indeed significant for all research – what research can occur without conceptualizing and considering relational dynamics? That said, there are numerous (and often contradictory) views of what constitutes theory – for instance, is it socially constructed, or does it ‘emerge’ from empirical reality?

In general, regardless of which position is taken on these matters, researchers are often instructed to understand – and make explicit - their theoretical orientation in order to ensure theoretical consistency is maintained throughout the study. Silverman (2005) states definitively in a twelve point guide for researchers of all levels of experience that it is important to “find a settled theoretical orientation ... to provide a settled basis for inference and data analysis” (p. 39). Given that vastly different theoretical orientations exist – and that our positions among them are not necessarily static - where does this tradition come from and why is it considered to be universal?

Although it is widely recognized that different theories reflect different understandings of ‘truth,’ the tradition of consistently aligning with one theory is in fact closely related with a particular notion of truth, which in turn is closely related with a particular goal of research. To state it frankly, I will quote Taylor (2007) who says, “the number one problem of modern social science has been modernity itself” (p. 1). Allow me to elaborate.

According to Taylor (2007), modernist assumptions have become so ‘true’ to most of us that we rarely consider that they are in fact one collection of options among many, and that they emerged out of particular social and political conditions. These modernist assumptions include such beliefs as the following: the rights of individuals, the privileging of human beings over all else, and – importantly for the current discussion – the idea of order which has “become more and more central to our notions of society and polity, remaking them in the process” (p. 6). In this way, the idea of order (as we now know it) has shifted from a theory that existed in the minds of a handful of elites to become “an imperative prescription” (p. 7).

It can be argued that the prescription of order emerged from a desire among these elites to control the masses (Rose, 1998), but according to Taylor (2007) this was likely an opportunity that was seized later on. In his estimation, this process was largely altruistic in its aims, and emerged from an important societal shift commonly referred to as Disenchantment. Disenchantment refers to the emphasis on empirical evidence over magic and spirituality (which previously determined the ‘world order’ as it was). Prior to Disenchantment there were those who possessed power (due to birth, largely), and those who did not. It was a hopeful belief that Disenchantment could contribute to conditions of greater equality among individuals by removing the privilege from those (elites) who were considered closer to God or gifted.

Disenchantment did not entirely succeed, but it continues to have an impact. Along with a matrix of contextual factors, it shifted modern worldviews to such an extent that citizens have come to

view society as comprised of co-existing and cooperating individuals – that which is emotional, spiritual, and beyond the immediately visible realm has been dismissed as unscientific or irrational. This emphasis on individual agency contributed to what Taylor (2007) calls the “great disembedding” (p. 49) as we began prioritizing our individual selves over the collective in an unprecedented way. At the same time, it contributed to bureaucratic structuring by which people became valued for the role they play, rather than their inherent personal qualities – the value of individuals became much more utilitarian than ever before. This was also interpreted as a potentially equalizing systemic adjustment, in that no longer were some people simply born to hold power. Now everyone (theoretically) was given the opportunity to work their way to the top, if only they went through the proper channels along the way. Again, the effectiveness in achieving these aims can be disputed, but the impact of these shifts continues to be felt.

These new understandings of how the world works did not only influence the structures within society, but – as is central to Taylor’s (2007) argument – they altered ‘social imaginaries’ in ways that inform not only what we see as desirable, but also what we see as possible. That is, they established a foundation for a new Truth which was a drastic departure from what was understood before. Recognizing the historical emergence of these modernist notions is important, because “once we are installed in the modern social imaginary, it seems the only possible one, the only one that makes sense” (p. 17).

But now, here we are, “installed” as Taylor might say, in a Truth system that requires order be established and adhered to in all our endeavours. Inherent in this modernist worldview are positivist assumptions of objectivity, rationality, and an emphasis on mastery and self-determination. As Frost and colleagues (2010) observe, “qualitative research has largely implicitly adhered to positivist epistemology” (p. 457), limiting possibilities for pluralism within inquiry. Because of this embeddedness within a presumed ordered reality, it has become the responsibility of researchers to glean what that order is. In other words, as a researcher, as long as all my ducks are in a row and I am clear to myself and my audience as to how my study is theoretically guided, I should avoid the risk of things falling apart along the way. As Taylor (2007) suggests: from such a perspective, “if things go wrong, it’s always someone’s fault” (p. 130). There is no room in this modern social imaginary for a dis-ordered world; there is only room for individuals who don’t do due diligence in tapping into its inherent order (ie. truth). From within this positivist paradigm, the tradition of theoretical consistency makes sense.

So, while current developments in qualitative research open up multiple possibilities regarding which theoretical orientation a researcher might draw from (Frost et al., 2010), there remains an underlying norm of singularity in the expectation that the key to a coherent study is theoretical consistency.

### **Qualitative Research and Social Justice**

In many of the resources available to researchers in the preparation for inquiry, the issue of theoretical consistency is highlighted. Researchers are warned that inconsistency in the early stages of conceptualization can lead to difficulties later on. This is indeed a significant consideration, and let it be known that I am not arguing here for haphazard conceptualization. I have appreciated the guidance I have received from supervisors and mentors in this regard. In fact, it is out of my respect for *overall* consistency that I fear consistency in a strictly theoretical sense may create an unnecessary tension within my own research.

Particularly after the postmodern turn, research is understood by many not only as a tool by which things can be proved or disproved, but as a tool by which change can actually be

accomplished (Fortun & Bernstein, 1998). Many qualitative researchers have involved themselves in the search for theories and methodologies that facilitate concrete social change. In so doing, they have contributed to rich dialogue, knowledge-generation, and interventions that fall outside the boundaries of tradition (see Barry, 1996; Berikoff, 2006; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Ellis, 1994; Etmanski & Pant, 2007; Hertz, 1997; Kvale, 1996; Lee & De Finney, 2004; Polkinghorne, 2007). These researchers have inventively paved their own paths by embracing (and oftentimes creating) approaches to research that reflect the complex worlds in which they are embedded, including such movements as Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperrider & Whitney, 1999), participatory research (Hall, 2005), and action research (Reason & Bradbury, 2001). As Bochner (2000) says:

...we know that the phenomena we study are messy, complicated, uncertain and soft. Somewhere along the line, we became convinced that these qualities were signs of inferiority, which we should not expose. It appeared safer to keep the untidiness of our work to ourselves. (p. 267)

In a recent volume entitled *Qualitative Inquiry and Social Justice*, the efforts of a diverse range of researchers committed to issues of justice are compiled to demonstrate this shift in priority from 'showing' to 'doing' (Denzin & Giardina, 2009). While the approaches exemplified in the volume range from performance pieces, to critique, to generative knowledge production, the overall emphasis is not so much on the 'truth' of research, but on its pragmatic function in society at large. Denzin and Giardina (2009) explicitly state their intentions in the introduction of this volume by asserting that as researchers, "We are no longer called to just *interpret* the world ... Today, we are called to *change* the world and to change it in ways that resist injustice while celebrating freedom and full, inclusive, participatory, democracy" (p. 13, emphasis in original).

Central to this move for research to contribute to social justice is an emphasis on multiplicity rather than a single, hegemonic truth (Denzin, 2010). Todd (2008) insists that "it is pluralism and difference that needs to be made meaningful in creating possibilities for a better future" (p. 16). Indeed, intentionally folding in multiple perspectives and approaches to research practices has been described as a necessary shift in "the inquiry infrastructure" in that "it better serves a system of democratic values" (Fortun & Bernstein, 1998, p. 111). In this way, might inviting multiple perspectives, rather than loyally adhering to one, be seen as an valuable aspect of research that seeks to alter the current state of affairs?

### **How Theoretical Consistency May Be ... Inconsistent**

As with many of the taken-for-granted aspects of research practice, theoretical consistency makes perfect sense from within a particular positivist tradition. However, when asked to be more theoretically consistent, I experience a tension that I find somewhat difficult to place. Upon further reflection, I have come to realize it is the *inconsistency* of such a request that compels me to resist.

Richardson's (2000) recommendation that we consider the implications of how research is written makes space for critical engagement with this tradition of theoretical consistency, accepting it as one possible approach to inquiry, but not the only one. In interpretive inquiry, for example, strictly adhering to one mode of interpretation can be restrictive and even misleading. It can control the analytic process by ensuring the 'findings' are intelligible within the favoured theoretical line of thinking, thus limiting the ability of researchers to creatively consider new possibilities. Alternatively, considering what *multiple* theories might have to offer in a particular inquiry can free researchers up to follow the various threads that may emerge and to dialogue

with others across seemingly incommensurable theoretical differences.

Drawing from multiple traditions is currently recognized as a legitimate and valuable approach to *methodology*, particularly when working from a postmodern perspective. One very concrete example of this is an approach commonly referred to as bricolage. Bricolage is an interdisciplinary approach to qualitative research that draws greatly from both social constructionism and hermeneutics. It considers phenomena in relation to their particular contexts and in light of the processes under which they may be socially or relationally constructed. It is also highly perspectival, placing great emphasis on the value of multiple interpretations. As a result, bricolage researchers often find themselves drawing from philosophical research extensively. Its name comes from the French word, *bricoleur*, which “describes a handyman or handywoman who makes use of the tools available to complete a task” (Kincheloe, 2001, p. 680). But as an approach to inquiry, it means much more than that.

The fuzzy term ‘interdisciplinary’ is as much a social construction as anything else, but in general, Kincheloe (2001) describes interdisciplinarity as “a process where disciplinary boundaries are crossed and the analytical frames of more than one discipline are employed by the researcher” (p. 685). As such, bricolage is “boundary work” (p. 691) which does not only tolerate difference, but *cultivates* it “as a spark to researcher creativity” (p. 687). Intentionally working in and around boundaries enables researchers to critically engage with what is by drawing lessons from across boundaries, pulling old ideas into new contexts, and considering alternative constructions and their implications, thereby pushing the limits of knowledge. This can contribute to innovation rather than replication, privileging possibilities rather than certainty. Bricolage acknowledges that “no research act or interpretive task begins on virgin territory. Countless acts of meaning making have already shaped the terrain that researchers explore” (Kincheloe, 2005, p. 332). Taking this as the starting place, the purpose of this interdisciplinary approach is to account for such complexity and begin to work against the socially constructed constraints that limit our sense of what may be (Kincheloe, 2005).

Methodologically, bricolage has been embraced, but my experience tells me that the value of such an approach has not been equally recognized *theoretically*. Caputo (1993) reminds us of the promise of letting “many flowers bloom ... advocat[ing] pluralisation and novelty, experimentation and innovation” (p. 39), and Fortun and Bernstein (1998) offer that “... it is better to err on the side of openness and multiplicity than on the side of monologic consensus” (p. 134). I will accept these generous assertions as support for the possibility that theoretical *inconsistency* may in fact be *consistent* with a postmodern orientation to inquiry.

Of course, I am not the first to suggest this. Clarke (2005), for example, hints at the possibility of “theoretical sampling” (p. 167) by which researchers can discern throughout the inquiry process when new perspectives might be necessary to incorporate along the way, in order to deepen the analytic process. And Alvesson and Skoldberg (2009) insist that “many difficulties in the social sciences appear to be caused by importing a positivist view of how science ‘should’ be practiced” (p. 22) and that this view is based on an “erroneous picture of how the natural sciences really work” (p. 22). Allowing for the fact that in ‘reality’ things can “fly apart at any minute” (Fortun & Bernstein, 1998, p. 201), why do we not allow this risk in our endeavours to inquire into our reality?

A study on pluralism in qualitative research (Frost et al., 2010) indicates that different methodological approaches bring about significantly different results, and acknowledges that consideration of pluralism is significant. Although the authors call for further investigation of this aspect of research, their study considers only methodological pluralism *among* researchers

without recognizing that polyvocality (Gergen & Gergen, 2000) exists *within* a researcher's approach as well. I believe honest inclusion of this aspect of research can open space for the possibilities that might emerge from multiple *theoretical* considerations within qualitative studies as well.

There is one more reason I believe doing so might sometimes be a very pragmatic choice. This is directly related to the previous discussion about qualitative inquiry and social justice. If I, as a researcher, wish to contribute something to the world beyond my own desk - that is, if I am committed to the ideals of social justice as articulated above - then I must realize that not everyone will share my view of what this looks like. I must accept the fact that there will be readers who view my research from a drastically different theoretical orientation than my own. And if I wish to dialogue across the expanse that lies between our worldviews, then my work must hold some relevance to their own lives and work. If I can strive to understand how that which I am advocating through my research can be supported through multiple theoretical lenses, then perhaps the gulf between us may in fact be lessened. While we may not come to adopt each other's 'theories' as complete packages, we may come to see that the differences between us do not extend to every aspect of life and work. And this may in turn create space for important generative dialogues and collaborations that previously did not take place, contributing to the potential of positive social change. Indeed, as Denzin and Giardina (2009) state, "the principle of inclusion has a democratic dimension, ensuring that insofar as it is possible, all relevant voices are heard" (p. 24). With this in mind, perhaps it behoves me to consider my loyalty as a researcher to lie with *this* aspect of inquiry, and challenge myself to consider my work through multiple theoretical lenses, rather than neatly aligning with a particular theoretical school of thought.

### **Why I Love Picking Cherries**

There is nothing that makes me squirm more than a polarized division that has developed around a dinner table during conversations over political matters: right or left, conservative or liberal, sustainability or development. The conversation becomes neither interesting nor productive when people's identities are so intertwined with the camp to which they assign themselves that they can no longer hear anything outside of it. Is this not how wars begin?

By the same token, there is nothing that excites and impresses me more than someone who can simultaneously speak many languages, pulling disparate groups into the same room together, and speak with - and listen to - them all with equal respect. How is it, for example, that John Caputo (2004) can speak of religion to a diverse group comprised of both atheists and those who hold various spiritual beliefs, and the issue of his own 'religious location' does not have to be addressed? Nobody seems concerned with what he or anyone else in the room 'believes in' personally. The gathering is about open exchange of ideas, and about moving towards hopeful possibilities which may draw from multiple spiritual realities in a way that requires none to be more right (or wrong) than any other.

Gergen, McNamee, and Barrett (2001) point to the importance of such 'transformative dialogue,' by suggesting it is through (often uncomfortable) open dialogue across differences that "contentious realities" can be effectively addressed (p. 698). As a concrete example, they point to 'the Public Conversations Project' in which individuals representing seemingly incommensurable differences (such as pro-life and pro-choice) are brought together to share food and eventually dialogue throughout an evening. The results include a deeper understanding of complexities of the issue, the cultivation of compassion, and, in turn, the potential for less violent reactions to differences when it comes to the issue of abortion.

In the same way, intentionally drawing from disparate theoretical traditions offers the hopeful possibility of communicating across what otherwise may feel like incommensurable ideological differences. By stating my theoretical orientation and adhering to it dogmatically, am I not setting myself up to be dismissed by anyone who does not share my inclinations? And perhaps more importantly, am I not setting myself up to dismiss valuable ideas that may exist outside of my particular 'club,' but which may, nonetheless, have something valuable to contribute to my learning?

In fact it is this aspect of theoretical inconsistency that I find most useful and productive. As an example: I recently co-wrote an article in which we wished to articulate our distress with the current service model of care. Our concern was with the tendency to locate *social* problems within individuals and then 'treat' them as if they are *individual* problems (such as diagnosing and treating depression, without responding to the social dysfunctions that contributed to the onset of depressive 'symptoms'). In order to support our point, we *could have* loyally drawn from one particular approach, and present a deep analysis of the applicability of this approach to our research interest. Thomas Szasz (2002), for instance, has done a great deal of work to resist the tendency towards diagnosis. While this may be accepted by some (likely those who already know and appreciate Szasz's work), it will also be rejected by some (such as our reviewer, who clearly does not appreciate Szasz's work on the basis of his broader theoretical and political alignments).

Alternatively, we decided to articulate our distress with the current service model of care by drawing from such disparate thinkers as Foucauldian's (such as Rose), Marxists (such as Friere), and social constructionists (such as Gergen). Of course this immediately paves the way for charges of theoretical inconsistency. But might it also be fruitful? If we can draw from across theoretical divides to support the fact that we see an injustice occurring, then might this theoretical inconsistency actually contribute to an important societal shift that those of various minds can get behind? Denzin and Giardina (2009) argue, in fact, that the "proliferation, intermingling, and confluence of paradigms" can contribute to a much-needed politics of hope (p. 34).

### **Allowing for Theoretical Inconsistency within Qualitative Inquiry**

My intention thus far has been to open space for multiplicity within interpretive inquiry by presenting the possibility that at times theoretical inconsistency may make sense. With this in mind it would not logically follow for me to either a) insist on it at all times, or b) provide definitive recommendations as to how this should be done. Perhaps, then, the most appropriate way for me to demonstrate how these ideas *may* play out in research would be to offer some cases in point from my own experience. Because I am specifically speaking to research which is responsive (regarding 'what is') and generative (in terms of 'what may be'), then these are to be read merely as examples that emerged within particular research contexts. They are not intended to be universalized, but simply to ground the previous discussion in something concrete.

### **Reinterpreting data through different theoretical lenses**

I suggested previously that there is a democratic element to inviting multiple perspectives – including theoretical perspectives – into the research process. Doing so can contribute to the generative function of qualitative research by moving us out of entrenched practices towards alternative ways of being. It can sometimes even facilitate speaking and listening across seemingly incommensurable ideological expanses (Gergen et al., 2001). I would add here that it is also fruitful to consider multiple perspectives in that it can thicken understandings by

contributing additional relevant considerations to the situation. From this perspective, rather than seeing any particular theoretical perspective as inaccurate, they might instead be understood as incomplete (Sen, 2009). ‘Trying on’ additional (even seemingly conflicting) theoretical lenses can deepen a researcher’s understanding of the phenomenon under study by adding layers of consideration to the study.

An example of this from my own experience is a study entitled *Even now: Ongoing and experiential interpretations of childhood loss* (Newbury, 2007). In this study, I interviewed three adult participants (all siblings) about their experiences of multiple losses in their childhoods. These participants were also my family members, so I was very concerned about simplifying representations of their experiences; I wanted to acknowledge the complexities and contradictions within them. Ultimately, and as stated in my abstract, I hoped to “achieve a richer understanding of ongoing experiences of childhood loss” (p. iii). Even though my three participants had endured the same losses, they did not interpret or experience them in the same ways. In order to honour their diverse experiences, and in order to draw from the vast body of literature on childhood loss (also often contradictory), I decided that rather than sticking with one theoretical orientation, I would experiment by reinterpreting the same data through four different lenses.

The four lenses that I felt were relevant to this study (based on the literature, the discourses employed by my participants, and my own theoretical perspectives) were: developmental psychology, a cultural perspective, social constructionism, and hermeneutics. Thus, I went about deeply engaging in a literature review, an analysis, and a discussion of my ‘findings’ based on *each* of these four lenses. I referred to them as lenses throughout the study because I was genuinely attempting to ‘try them on’ in order to more openly engage with each perspective. If instead I had grounded myself firmly in the theoretical orientation with which I most readily identified at the time, this process may not have been as rich and at times I am sure I would have moved too quickly to critique. Trying the lenses on as if I was putting on a pair of glasses, on the other hand, I was more able to acknowledge the contributions of these various perspectives (while still critically engaging with them), as well as the important impacts they had on the meaning my participants made of their experiences with loss.

This was not about impartiality; it was, rather, an exercise in role playing. At the end of each section I wrote a reflexive piece in which I engaged with my experience of trying on that particular lens. This exercise in theoretical *inconsistency* was not about finally settling on the ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ interpretation of or response to childhood loss. It was about recognizing that “even with participants I know well, share history with, and feel deep care towards, it was necessary to open myself up to their stories and be willing to adjust my presuppositions throughout the conversations” (p. 120).

In the end, I felt – and still maintain – that this process of theoretical experimentation facilitated an openness that can precipitate approaches to both support and inquiry that are more responsive and less prescriptive. This can be valuable both in research *and* practice which involves living, breathing human subjects.

### **Second-guessing findings as responsible research practice**

As noted earlier, theoretical inconsistency is reasonable in part due to the fact that as individual researchers we are all polyvocal (not singular) in our orientations and influences. As polyvocal beings (Gergen & Gergen, 2000) who are influenced not only by our chosen theoretical orientations, but also by relational experiences, discursive practices, embodied understandings, and new information (among countless other dimensions of experience), we may in fact, from one

moment to the next, unwittingly experience our theoretical leanings shift beneath us.

In a study with adolescent girls who use crystal methamphetamine, Dr. Marie Hoskins and I found ourselves in a situation in which theoretical single-mindedness very nearly steered us in a direction that was *inconsistent* with our overall intention of contributing to the cultivation of more just counselling practices for young people with addictions. Our desire to glean findings that (we thought) followed neatly from the social constructionist theoretical orientation with which we had publically identified had begun to drive our process of analysis. This temporarily blinded us to multiple other relevant factors that were at play – both for us and for our young participants.

Through reflexive dialogue with each other, we caught ourselves making assumptions about our participants' experiences with crystal methamphetamine. These assumptions were based in our own prior understandings of addiction, informed in part by social constructionist interpretations of identity and meaning making (Newbury & Hoskins, 2010a). It was only by being willing to critically engage with our own theoretical commitments (and assumptions about those commitments) that we were able to open ourselves up to the possibility that more was at play. We noted,

... we too are constantly engaged in discursive practices—in our field and more generally in society—that tend toward individualization. ... It was only when reflecting on our own tendencies to locate problems within individuals that space was made for alternatives. Challenging these pathologizing discourses does not only require critiquing dominant practices but, perhaps more importantly, it requires a commitment to critically engage with our own practices. (p. 19)

Dogmatic insistence on theoretical loyalty might have precluded such insights and would, in turn, have compromised the potential contribution of the research in which we were engaged. As it turned out, I believe the learning we ultimately shared from this study *better* reflects a social constructionist orientation than did our initial 'findings' (see Newbury & Hoskins, 2010a, 2010b, and 2010c). The fact remains, however, that had we not been at least willing to re-engage with our own assumptions (theoretical or otherwise), this would have been a less rigorous inquiry process.

### **Moving in unanticipated directions by 'writing through'**

The difference between research that aims to shed light on 'what is' and research that hopes to carve out new directions for 'what may be' is this: those of us who are engaging in the latter have no idea (really) where we're going. The purpose of research that aims to *do* rather than *show* (Denzin & Giardina, 2009) is to bring us to places that we likely could not have gone otherwise (or at least, likely would not have). Thus, when engaging in inquiry of this kind there needs to be at least a willingness to move in unanticipated directions, to be open to surprises, and to be reflexive enough to recognize surprises if they do indeed come along. This includes an openness to consider theoretical perspectives which may not have previously been part of one's repertoire.

I am currently embarking on a PhD entitled *Contextualizing care: Alternatives to the individualization of struggles and support*. Striving not to restrict myself before the inquiry unfolded, I aimed to incorporate these ideas about the possibility of theoretical inconsistency into my research process from the beginning. This has been no easy feat, and space does not allow me to go into all the details of it here. What has been immensely useful for me as a tool in this endeavour, however, has been the notion that *writing* itself can be understood as a meaningful research method. When intentionally employed as such, writing invites movement in

unanticipated directions (including *theoretical* directions), which is what I am advocating in this discussion.

In order to engage with my inquiry in an interpretive way, and to explore outside of that which has been naturalized as ‘the’ way to do research (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2009), I have realized that for me, writing cannot merely be a matter of documenting after the fact. Importantly, Richardson (2000) recommends that attention be paid not only to what we write, but how. St. Pierre (1997) agrees and refers to the process of incorporating writing (and with it, analysis) throughout the entirety of a research process, as ‘reflexive nomadic writing.’ She describes this as an ethical research practice in part because of its transparency. But more importantly, it is ethical because it enables research to move outside of the expected, to push the limits of the taken-for-granted trappings of order, systems, distinct fields of study, and the quest for outcomes. She describes nomadic writing as follows:

This kind of writing is antihierarchical ... It stalls, gets stuck, thumbs its nose at order, goes someplace the author did not know existed ahead of time, stumbles over its self, spins around its middle foregoing ends, wraps idea around idea in some overloaded imbrications that flies out of control into a place of no return. (p. 414)

Used as a tool to invite the unexpected, it is not written by its authors; nomadic writing “write its authors” (St. Pierre, 1997, p. 414). Haphazard as this may sound, research requires a degree of chaos. Without letting go of control, nothing new would be learned; we would simply prove and re-prove what we expected from the beginning.

With this in mind, every time I think I have nailed down my direction, it is necessary for me to remind myself to remain open enough to change it (or even scrap it) when my learning suggests I should – and ‘writing through’ facilitates this process of discernment as well. Since the focus of my study is human service systems, which exist to support children and families in constantly changing social conditions, the learning that comes from the moments of tension within this inquiry process is hugely significant for my work.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

To conclude, I would like to return to the opening discussion about the origins of theoretical consistency as an expectation in research. If the purpose of research is to prove a singular truth, then yes: adhering to the one ‘true’ interpretive framework makes sense, as far as consistency is concerned. But if the purpose of research is to contribute to concrete changes in the social world, then demonstrating how multiple theories might inform such a shift makes sense as far as consistency is concerned.

It is for this reason that I am convinced that there are times when theoretical consistency can restrict our ability to move beyond “polarization and elitism” and limit the possibilities for constructive dialogue “between personal and interpretive communities,” as called for by Denzin and Giardina (2009, p. 35). Perhaps it is this very form of uncomfortable dialogue that might contribute to a greater openness when it comes to ideas which might, in turn, enable researchers to finally “*imagine new ways of what we do*” (Taylor, 2007, p. 15, emphasis in original) – and enact those *new* ‘social imaginaries.’

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