

Time Travelling with Ron Chenail, Sally St. George, Dan Wulff, and David Denborough:

An Interview About the Connecting Histories of Family Therapy, Narrative Therapy, and Qualitative Research

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Dear Readers, we have a question for you: Do you know about the origins and history of the journals you decide to submit your manuscripts to for publication? We are most pleased to present to you an interview with the three Co-Editors-in-Chief of *TQR* (Ron Chenail, Sally St. George, and Dan Wulff) and David Denborough of Dulwich Centre delving into the origins of *TQR* in the early 1990s. The roots of *TQR* were intertwined with family therapy authors and practitioners (Tom Andersen, Michael White, and many others) and that continues today. We think that you will find these historical relationships and influences to be fascinating and instructive in understanding how one qualitative research journal came into being and how it is positioning itself to go forward. We are using this interview to introduce our special issue on narrative therapy and research.

DD: It can be quite hard to convey how, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, feminist challenges to gender relations and the patriarchal family, family therapy's determination to move beyond individualizing therapies, the interpretive turn and poststructuralist challenge in the social sciences, and the emergence of narrative practice and qualitative research are all interconnected. It's a task too big for this interview! But I am so happy to have the chance to talk with the three of you about some of this!

Ron, there was a lot of energy and conversation in the late 1980s and early 1990s in relation to family therapy, research, and the qualitative turn. You launched this journal, *The Qualitative Report*, in 1990. Links and synergies and differences between family therapy and research were leading to all sorts of debates. This was taking place against a backdrop of a broader struggle for qualitative approaches to be taken seriously in many different disciplines. Can you take us back to those years. How were you drawn to these realms? Can you paint a bit of a picture of your experience within those early family therapy research discussions?

Ron: Thank you for the opportunity to talk about this. I very much enjoy travelling through time. Let's jump in the TARDIS, Doctor Who-like, and see how far back we can go!

I first started in the family therapy field in Texas in the late 1980s. It was a really generative and exciting time when there was an affinity between the conversations and challenges that were going on in anthropology and other social sciences, and what was occurring in the field of family therapy. Postmodernism, deconstruction, and challenging the primacy of the outsider expert researcher/knower along with influential feminist ideas of the time spurred many questions. This brought excitement to the field of systemic family therapy, which had its own underdog outsider status from mainstream therapy and psychology.

Dan: Yes, for readers not familiar with the history of family therapy, from my reading it's a field that has always gone against the current—it created alternatives to the idea of seeing only individuals in therapy, brought greater transparency through the sharing of video tapes of sessions, and was a field open to questioning and risk-taking.

Ron: In the late 1980s and early 1990s there was a kind of a network through which everyone would energetically share each other's papers. The intellectual borders seemed more open then. A paper would arrive on the shores of the Ackerman Institute in New York City, then make its way over to the Galveston Institute in Houston, and up to the Brief Family Therapy Centre in Milwaukee—ideas would ripple outwards. It was a time of connection and experimentation. Lynn Hoffman seemed to be the ringleader. She'd get a paper that she worked on with Tom Andersen from Norway, or with Gianfranco Cecchin from Milan, Italy, and there just seemed to be a lot of experimentation and interesting things going on. I was fascinated with Tom Andersen's use of reflecting teams and observers. It was a time of playfulness, and I think the whole postmodern aspect of those times was really encouraging.

In terms of how this linked to research, Sally St. George, Dan Wulff, and I are now working on a chapter called "Postmodern therapies research." The first wave of this research involved

intense case studies and observations done in Australia and New Zealand by narrative therapists Michael White and David Epston, and with Steve de Shazer and Insoo Kim Berg in relation to solution-focused practice in the US. These intense case studies were shaped by observations and simple questions: What seems to work? What seems to work from the perspective of the client? What works for the therapist? With a postmodernist ethos there wasn't a search for truth or a master narrative; instead, the first wave of research was observational, looking at the talk and what worked. The use of video recording therapy sessions was pretty prevalent in family therapy and the recordings became data. Therapists were able to call the people who were in the video recordings and ask, "Did the session work for you? And if so, what was helpful?" This was the first wave of postmodern therapies research.

DD: I also remember the story of Michael White asking David Epston, after David had sat behind the screen of Michael's family therapy sessions for a day, to tell him what he noticed that Michael was doing differently since the last time they had met. This seemed to be another sort of research project—researching innovations in practice, what they were doing differently, and what practices they were creating. This sort of collaborative practice research between Michael and David seems to have been one of the factors that led to the development of narrative family therapy. But tell me what you see as the second wave of postmodern therapies research.

Ron: In the 1990s, those of us postmodern family therapists who were starting to enter graduate programs came into contact with postmodern researchers. The second wave involved a marriage between these two groups! Friends of mine like Jerry Gale at the University of Georgia were excited to play with these ideas and to conjure new forms of practice and new forms of research at the same time.

Dan: You've made me recall those times, Ron, of that early marriage between family therapy and qualitative research. Many of us who started our PhD programs in the early 90s were therapy practitioners already, so we came into the academy with some knowledge about family therapy. When the academy tried to push quantitative research upon us as the only form of legitimate research, we looked back at them and said this isn't relevant to us. This practitioner voice put pressure back on the academy to measure up. They were not dealing now with students who were inexperienced, they were dealing with some serious practitioners who made convincing arguments to legitimize qualitative research. Ron was one of the key influencers in this.

Ron: I was a Kardashian before the Kardashians, is that what you're saying?

Sally: [laughs]

DD: That's definitely what I heard, yeah! What you are saying, Dan, reminds me of a research proposal I came across in Michael White's archive at Dulwich Centre in Australia, from back in the early 1990s:

It is important to think about research as discourse. Now many of the people who consult me have been subject to research, particularly those who have “psychiatric histories,” and given the choice, very few of these people would volunteer for more of it. I have no doubt that they would like to reverse the gaze and study those systems that they have been subjects in—to research the taken-for-granted (e.g., ward rounds), the ways that they are spoken to and spoken of, how consumers are characteristically treated, and so on. This would assist in distinguishing for service providers acknowledging practices from degrading practices, and would assist in a general elevation of the notion of ethics. I know a number of people who would like to do research into research committees, and into the so-called ethics of ethics committees.

Others would like to do research into the notions or constructions of research outcome, which is invariably informed by the dominant ethic of control in Western culture. They would like to question the ethics of control groups, the extent to which they are informed, etc.

There is a huge but relatively passive resistance out there in the community of therapists to these constructions of research outcome. And there are many possibilities for these therapists to bring their voices together in this work. And recently I attended the inaugural meeting of the Great Southern Lands’ Society for Research Resisters.

I can appreciate the “push back” you are describing from therapists and the wish to construct forms of research that will be meaningful to practitioners and those who consult them. Ron, in the midst of this, you then created this journal—*The Qualitative Report*. Can you say a little about how this came about?

Ron: I recall many of the early meetings between researchers and therapists. There was a particular meeting at AAMFT (Association for Marriage and Family Therapy) where I first met Michael White and Cheryl White, and then at a later conference I met Tom Andersen in Norway. Their work was very influential to me and from these conversations came the idea for a journal.

Psychology or counseling journals of that era were not publishing qualitative research. SAGE had just started *Qualitative Health Research* and the only qualitative journals here in the US were in sociology, anthropology, or education. I met with one of the vice presidents of SAGE and put together a proposal for an interdisciplinary qualitative research journal in psychology and social work and other related fields. They loved the proposal, but the accountants turned us down and said it would be way too expensive to market a journal across disciplines or across professions. So I said, “To hell with that, I’ll start my own damn journal.”

DD: It’s a fantastic story. I’m a big believer in journals and publishing, to create and sustain communities. Can you tell me more about why you knew a journal was important?

Ron: When I was an undergraduate, I was a periodical librarian. I worked in the library and became fascinated by all the journals. I remember bringing them downstairs to the bindery

and immersing myself in them. One of my other responsibilities was to conduct the library orientation for new graduate students, because I was “that guy.” I was just curious about those things. So as we started to try to bring together the worlds of qualitative researchers and family therapists, I knew there was a community out there, and the question was how to connect the community. I knew a journal could play that role of building community.

Originally scholarly journals were created by learned societies, communities already formed. But with the internet there was a chance to create an open access journal and then the journal creates the community. So that’s how it started, and it resonated. People in isolated places could join and that’s how it grew. I had benefited too from various people who were supportive, Tom Andersen, Mary Gergen, and Ken Gergen for instance, who were all on the original editorial board.

All the way along there were synergies with the community that Dulwich Centre had created. You folks have gone off and created things, with passion. We all helped each other through those earlier years. Knowing that there were times when you might be the only voice in the room, it’s nice to have at least one other voice that you can connect with.

DD: Speaking of connections, the three of you have also kept exploring commonalities between therapy and research. Sally, in the paper you wrote with Dan and Karl Tomm, “Research As Daily Practice” (2015), you wrote about how both endeavors involve “pursuing curiosities” (p. 7) and linked this to the influential work of Milan family therapist Gianfranco Cecchin’s concept of curiosity.

Sally: Yes, in the spirit of seeking commonalities, we believe that the enterprises of practice and research are upheld by the stance of curiosity. We’ve also tried to articulate other common elements between therapy and research, all underpinned by an active pursuit of curiosities.

DD: I got a sense of other synergies between family therapy and qualitative research when I looked back and read some of the early issues of *The Qualitative Report*. I really appreciated their skillful playfulness. For instance, your editorial, Ron, “Before You Give Up on Research or Please Re-search This” (1991a), which was then followed by your paper “Provocations for Researching Clinicians and Clinical Researchers” (1991b), I think are fantastic pieces. Within that second paper, you made so many different invitations/provocations:

- When did therapy and research become so different from life?
- Have you ever heard of artistic qualitative research?
- Work on developing some interesting questions about therapy and ask them.
- Realize as a clinician that you already have ways of knowing and doing: If you can research in therapy, you can research therapy.
- Can family therapy have a human-ities face?

When you look back at that paper, did you have a favorite provocation?

Ron: My favorite one is “Create your own research class and take it for credit!”

DD: I liked that one too ... let me quote from it:

Believe it or not, but research files are a diverse, vibrant, and ever growing and expanding lot. Keeping up with, and exploring these new frontiers is a massive and intimidating undertaking. What also makes a study of this expanded view of research is that most of this expanse was probably not covered or even mentioned in your formal research training. Strange and exotic qualitative research worlds like hermeneutics and phenomenology, and equally mysterious realms such as action and/or participatory research ... can be profitable for clinicians and researchers alike only if their “secrets” can be unlocked. One way to do this is to create your own research curriculum and try it out. Lisa Hoshmand’s (1989) paper, “Alterative research paradigms: A review and teaching proposal,” is a good starter for any would-be research explorer. Other ways to delve into this are to journey into the deepest, darkest corners of the library, “Scan the stacks” of journals and books, pick a new journal or shelf each day to study, just peruse the pages, and slowly but surely, you will begin to familiarise yourself with these new worlds of research ... (Chenail, 1991b, p. 4)

Ron: The playfulness in that piece owes something to Brad Keeney who was very playful and encouraged me in this. He also took play and playfulness seriously. I remember him talking about carefully watching children play and recognizing that it’s hard work. They put a lot of effort into play. Playfulness was very important to him and that was very liberating for me.

DD: One of my other favorites was

Have you tried action research, participatory research, participatory action research, action science, or emancipatory research? (Chenail, 1991b, p. 4)

Which you then described as,

Rather than studying “subjects” these researchers attempt to design studies which foster emancipatory possibilities for all involved in the study (Lather, 1986). The balancing of rigor and imagination with relevancy in these types of research certainly offers many new research avenues for researchers and therapists. (Chenail, 1991b, p. 4)

“The balancing of rigor and imagination with relevancy” is a great phrase and really evokes the synergies between practice and research realms. One of the things that the three of you have done for some decades now is to encourage practitioners to develop their own forms of research that are congruent with their particular practice and philosophical perspectives. That to me is sparkling and energizing. Ron, does this determination go back to those early days?

Ron: I guess it goes back to a phrase that I used to hear a lot, “If you only have one tool in the toolbox, that’s all you’re going to use.” So, what I’ve always been fascinated with is to ask

practitioners, “What are you trying to do in your counseling conversations? How can we find a way to enhance this, to make this better? And what are other things that you would be interested in exploring?” Through these questions new research questions and then methods can be developed, new tools for the toolbox.

DD: In your 1992 paper, “A Case for Clinical Qualitative Research,” you describe the possibilities of developing research from an “emergent stance” through which unique methods of reflection can emerge from “close, extended, and direct observations of a particular therapist’s particular style of clinical work” (p. 5). I really liked the sound of this “create-a-method enquiry” (p. 8)!

In our Master of Narrative Therapy and Community Work program (University of Melbourne/Dulwich Centre) in the last subject, participants need to develop a practice innovation, a local form of practice. Participants are from many different countries and contexts, including a significant number of First Nations folks. They then have to propose what forms of research could further enhance this practice innovation, and a number have then gone on to do their PhD research in relation to this. Sally and Dan have been extremely influential in supporting this, and one thing that Sally and Dan keep asking is “How are they going to innovate within their research, what’s their methodological innovation going to be, and how is it going to be congruent with both their political/social context and also their practice philosophy?” In reading “A Case for Clinical Qualitative Research,” I can see the lineage of this determination to develop emergent forms of clinical research methodologies out of their practice. I am grateful for this.

But there’s another paper I want to mention, also from *The Qualitative Report* early days, which was written by the friend of yours you mentioned earlier, Jerry Gale. The paper was called “When Research Interviews are More Therapeutic than Therapy Interviews” (1992) and it takes this conversation between therapists and researchers to a whole other place, doesn’t it?

Ron: Yeah. We love drawing a distinction between professions and practices, but there’s a separating that comes with that, and we’re always interested in reconnections. Jerry and I first met when we started the doctoral program together at Texas Tech. We could see that there was plenty of literature within quantitative studies in which researchers do the debriefing at the end of the therapy because they were worried that the debriefing could confound the effectiveness measures. But we believed that these interviews and debriefings were both part of the “treatment,” and their value shouldn’t be discounted.

So that paper by Jerry showed that in one study in relation to marital therapy, the interviews that were conducted as part of the research were experienced as having greater therapeutic impact than the therapy. And the factors that led to this included the contextualization of the research talk, the clarifying procedures used by the researchers, and the relationship of the couple to the researcher.

DD: That's so interesting, Ron. I'm really fascinated by how significant it often is for people to experience making contributions to the lives of others. I guess in that instance the couples were making a contribution to research and the researcher in a different way than they were to the therapist, and I wonder if that was also a factor. Sally, this also reminds me of hearing you talk about how you have brought your therapy principles into play in how you work with authors.

Sally: The connections across research, therapy, and teaching have worked in multiple directions. We have tried to bring our qualitative research skills into our family therapy practice, through what we call "Research As Daily Practice" (St. George et al., 2015) and a lot of the things I learnt along the way with *The Qualitative Report* have shaped my teaching. At the same time, I do bring many therapeutic skills into play in the editing process. For instance, we speak about how we accept every author, while not necessarily every paper, and we have tried to develop respectful, transparent, collaborative review and editing processes that are congruent with family therapy ethics.

I think we need to keep broadening what we consider as therapy, as teaching, and as research. We are exploring ways of solving real world social problems that we're living in and family therapy, researching, publishing, and teaching are all connected in this.

Ron: I remember when I was back in Houston, Norm Kagan came in talking about interpersonal process recall. Now, what the hell was that? We couldn't figure out whether it was a research thing, or whether it was a therapy thing, or whether it was a combination thing. But it was cool! And I loved it. [laughs]

Dan: And I echo what Sally's saying about seeking to respond to real world social problems. Within our teaching about research and about therapy, we don't want students to become as one of our colleagues described it, "status quotitians."

DD: [laughs] That's a good description.

Sally: It's great when we see students pushing the envelope. I think the field is always best when it's on the cusp of something.

DD: Well, as we're on the cusp of launching the Narrative Practice Research Network and its collaboration with you all at *TQR*, it's been just wonderful to jump in that TARDIS with you three and travel across time in the ways this conversation has. The energy, openness, creativity, rigor, and spark of those early years seems very much still present to me. I look forward to the conversations, provocations. and collaborations continuing!

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